

*Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.*

## **Get in Touch with your Inner Teenager**

Get in touch with your inner teenager and rebel against mindless conformity!

How much joy is sacrificed because we walk around on auto-pilot, enduring a boring existence? Instead of steering our own course, many of us tend to follow the herd—sometimes right over the cliff.

That's what happened to Drake's brother, Clay.

"I'm worried about him—he's falling apart," Drake said. "And it's no wonder. He has one of those meaningless, plastic jobs that lack substance. I told him, 'You've got to find out what you love doing and do it!'"

Drake's on to something. Plastic isn't life-sustaining for body or spirit. Both require nourishment, and too often we feed the former and ignore the latter.

Well-being is the reward for doing the things that feed our spirit. When something blocks that from happening, we need to very quickly tackle it to the ground. Every day we struggle for our life. Not necessarily because we might die—at least not physically. Our essential self—that spark within each of us—fights to stay alive.

Bud, a client, also struggles with a non-fulfilling career. When he was 19, he conformed to his father's wishes and went into farming. That was 36 years ago, and for the first several years the undertaking actually gave him some small sense of satisfaction. It put food on the table and allowed him to send his children off to college. And there were sentimental rewards.

With moist eyes, Bud said, "That farm contains many warm memories."

But in terms of deep personal gratification, farming didn't do it for him. Besides, it has increasingly become a burden. Physically, he can't keep up with the demands, and economically it's no longer feasible.

"The farm is draining me," he said.

At his core, he's always wanted to go into carpentry—his real love.

I asked him about switching occupations but he said he would feel like a failure—a quitter. I pointed out that there's a difference between quitting and deciding to take a different direction. Mindlessly following a joyless path is a hollow existence.

Another client, Jane, has sacrificed joy for duty. She was raised that way. In our counseling session, she rattled off her long list of involvements and obligations. Besides her job, she serves on a variety of boards and committees. And if a friend or family member needs her, she's there. Only on rare occasions does she use the word "no."

Ironically, despite her busy lifestyle, she describes herself as bored. "I have nothing to look forward to," she lamented. "Something's missing. How do I become excited about my life again?"

I responded: "How about doing things that don't fall into the duty category? What would an 'exciting' day look like to you?"

Her eyes lit up as she described a day of sipping tea, reading, and ignoring the phone.

"Jane, you need to give that to yourself," I said. "What's stopping you?"

She said it would seem like selfishness and self-indulgence on her part.

I emphasized how a jam-packed schedule leaves the soul dry. When planting a garden, we should leave spaces between each seed. Overcrowding chokes gardens. The same applies to human beings. We need breathing room—times to refresh.

“That’s not selfish or self-indulgent,” I said, “It’s called relishing life!”

Garth, another client, put it perfectly: “I don’t want to feel unalive anymore.” He’s weary of playing it safe in his reclusive and predictable little world. One could say he’s lived his life, so far, conformed to a lifelong pattern.

For years Garth has longed to have a female companion, but because he was afraid of risking, he settled for a flat and flavorless existence. He’s ready now to step out and turn his settled-for existence into an adventure.

I’m reminded of an animated movie called *Up*. The main character—an elderly man—was an adventurer in his boyhood but had let that spirit fade in his adult years. Like so many of us, his inquisitive sense of wonder was slowly replaced with the tick-tock of everyday conventionality.

At his lowest point, the main character in the movie catches fire again. Breaking free of the norm, he uproots his house and turns it into a balloon-powered air ship, immediately embarking on an amazing high-flying adventure.

The lesson? We need to recapture that risk-taking mentality so intrinsic to the teenage spirit, or risk being trapped in gray plastic lives. And is that really living? The teenage spirit embraces newness while radically departing from the frozen molds of social convention.

So, yes, get in touch with your inner teenager.