

Don't assume that you know why you are here.

Thom Rutledge, author of *Embracing Fear*

Gillian said, "If I'm not Mother Teresa, then what good am I?" She was joking -- sort of. The truth is that she really does set this kind of standard for herself. Like many others I have worked with in therapy, Gillian has a strong need to feel purposeful, but she makes achieving that goal impossible by constantly raising the bar. "If I can just achieve [fill in the blank], then I can have some peace of mind," we tell ourselves. But even though we achieve the goal, the associated peace of mind keeps disappearing like a mirage in the hot desert.

Gillian is insightful and can explain this as well -- or better -- than I can. She knows that whatever goal she has set in the past for herself has never met with her expectations once achieved, and she knows that the goals she sets for herself today will most likely be tomorrow's disappointments.

If this sounds familiar, consider the following story.

Richard died and went to the great press conference in the sky. You know, the few minutes we all hope to have with God so we can ask our questions. Should I have gone into advertising rather than law? Did I miss my opportunity for love when I broke up with my college boyfriend? Exactly what was the point of that lousy investment I made that bankrupted me? Oh yes, and what is the meaning of life?

Richard's questions were about purpose. More than anything, he wanted all his life to know that what he was doing mattered, that his life was important. He lived his life in pursuit of purpose, and as a result he did much good in his 68 years on the planet.

God, knowing all this about Richard, reviewed with him many of the good things he had accomplished.

Richard said, "God, I appreciate your awareness of the positive nature of my life, but what I want to know -- what I REALLY want to know -- is what was THE purpose of my life?"

God said, "Well, Rich, we have just talked about all the positive things you were able to accomplish. You lived a very purposeful life. Your intent from an early age was to have a purpose and you certainly accomplished that many times over."

Richard was quiet, still waiting for something more.

So God added, "I'm proud of you, Rich. Very proud."

"Thanks, God, but that's not exactly what I am asking," Richard said. "I want to know what THE purpose of my life was. Why was I sent to earth in the first place?"

"Oh ---- that," God said with furrowed brow.

"Yes, THAT," Richard said a little more aggressively than was necessary.

God stared right into the center of Richard's soul. "Are you sure you want to know that?"

His response was immediate. "Yes, I do."

"Well, Rich," God began, "you probably don't even remember this, but there was a day -- -- in November of 1984 if I am remembering correctly --- when you owned a pair of topsiders. You know, those shoes that are so difficult to keep tied."

"What does this have to do with the purpose of my life?" Richard was irritated with God, but that was OK. God was used to it.

"I'm getting to it. Patience was never one of your strengths, was it?"

Richard shrugged, showing a little humility, and sat back in his chair.

God continued. "Anyway, on one particular November day you were walking in downtown Detroit. I think you were going to meet a realtor or maybe to meet a friend for drinks. I'm not sure."

"YOU'RE not sure?"

"It's not really important. The point is one of your topsiders was untied and you knelt down to tie it. There was a young woman walking just behind you who, not paying attention, almost ran right into you."

"Oh my God, I was supposed to meet and marry her, wasn't I?"

"No."

"Then what?!" Richard asked, jumping out of his chair.

Still very patient, God said, "I'm getting to it, Rich, I'm getting to it."

Richard sat back down -- again.

"Okay, Rich, I'm probably beating around the bush here because I don't think you are going to like this. But here it is. Had you not bent to tie your shoe, that young woman

who was not paying attention that day would have not been delayed the 3 or 4 seconds it took her to stop and step around you, and she would have been run over and killed by a bus at the next curb.”

Strangely Richard recalled the moment exactly, including the bus that had been moving much too fast and the young woman who stopped just short of stepping into its path.

“My purpose was connected to that woman?” Richard was now more curious than irritated.

“Sort of,” God said. “That young woman went on to introduce a couple of her friends to each other -- maybe 6 or 7 years later -- and those two friends married and have had a daughter who will, in turn, have a daughter, if all continues to go according to plan, who will become a very significant world leader many years from now. This woman will be instrumental in transforming humankind’s understanding of the need for the establishment of a global community that transcends national pride and loyalty. She really will make a tremendous difference. Really.”

Richard sat completely still, very quiet.

“And so,” God said, “you see, you did have a very important purpose, Richard. And you successfully fulfilled your divine mission. You should be very proud.”

Richard didn’t move.

Finally God said, “Well, you asked, Rich. What do you think?”

After several more seconds of complete silence, Richard finally spoke. “I hated those shoes,” he said.

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist, author and co-host of the weekly podcast, Start Right HERE. Thom’s work has been featured on NBC’s Today Show, CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360, Australia’s Channel 10 and has consulted with The Dr. Phil Show. For more information, visit www.thomrutledge.com.