

A Heightened Level of Existence

By Jessica Farley

I have come to realize the longing for excitement; risk, feeling and action often flow from a desire to live at a heightened level of existence, characterized by discovery and personal transformation. I have had this yearning all of my life. I believe most of us have this goal to some degree, though the seekers in this world may pursue it with greater intent.

Desire is a loaded word, and frequently implies an attachment to worldly pleasure, especially when connected to concepts like stimulation and intensity. These feelings do affect our bodies as gratifying impulses travel to the brain and trigger the release of hormones. But, such sensations can also indicate progress and meaningful dynamism in the context of growth and change. Therefore, the desire for such vitality and stimulation suggests a proclivity towards personal expansion.

The inner call to adventure may lead you to hitchhike cross-country, have a midlife crisis, make a career move, or join the Navy. It may even result in depression when unfulfilled or answered with hollow action. It is part of being human. Within that yearning is the knowledge that life should be exciting and something of value should always be happening. This is similar to Viktor Frankl's idea that humans cannot find happiness without a sense of meaning, but it also includes our need for intensity, even if it comes in the form of a profound serenity. Life should be invigorating; growing, expanding, being challenged, and finding purpose make it an incredible event.

I used to deny my desire for those peaks. I thought it was the fruit of imbalance and a search for selfish satisfaction. I feared it might be some kind of Thanatos.¹ I now recognize it, in purest form, as an acknowledgement of the miracle of our being. The quest for a heightened level is often spurred by the truest part of the spirit; it arises from a voice inside that tells us "This life is not enough. What I am doing is not enough. I want to be brighter. I want to stretch my bounds. I want to be closer to the divine."

The expression of this pursuit does not have to take the form of blind excitement or emotional instability. It can actually be exercised through a consistent focus on connecting to your True Heart, contributing to others, being productive, and seeking transformative experience. We can learn to understand the impetus behind our desire and elevate our lives.

I began thinking about this issue when I ran into a friend of mine from college during the winter holidays. Our meeting was pure serendipity and kismet. I walked into a bookstore in Washington, D.C. amidst a collection of serious looking people clad in grays, browns, and black and saw my friend Nick for the first time in three years! I thought he was lost in Central or South America forever, but there he was, shining with happiness. We talked about his job in Colombia. He does accompaniment work, meaning that he intervenes between the military and people they are planning to massacre. He acts as a mediator. During the down-time, he participates in educational programs for local children. He and his friends created an awesome organization called International Peace Observatory (www.peaceobservatory.org). He is living at a heightened level of existence where the stakes are high and his contributions are palpable.

I am not recommending that we all travel to war-torn countries for peace-work, because it is not everyone's solution. Each person has a different purpose in life and we cannot force it. But, whatever our mission may be, we are usually happiest when life tests our limits and our work is energizing.

¹ Thanatos is a Freudian concept of the "death instinct," namely a desire to return to a state of non-existence. Freud believed this to be a driving force for our actions.

I recently met a young man in the U.S. military. I asked him why he joined. He told me he had reflected upon his life as a lawyer with a stable income and found it unfulfilling. He wanted to do "something that had glory in it, to do something cool while he still had the chance." While this reasoning may be a little scary coming from someone in the military, I think that it might be a common motivation for many. But this soldier was certainly not a psycho or sociopath who wanted to kill people for kicks. He was a good person. And, when he explained his viewpoint I understood completely because I cannot imagine a life worth living that isn't fed with real fire.

Philosopher, veteran, and author J. Glenn Gray wrote about the "lust of the eye" and how human beings seek to feed a hedonistic exhilaration. I believe he was referring to a perverted, though perhaps ubiquitous, version of the desire to live at a heightened level. This is precisely the reason that I thought a longing for intensity was shallow, irreverent, and really indicated that you wanted to run away from life and just get high. Sometimes this is true. We may not know how to tap into real stimulation that offers us the growth, transcendence, and tests we require. So, we settle for an excitement less significant. We do not know how to "follow our bliss", as Joseph Campbell would say. As a result, we get lost in fantasy, chase empty thrills, harm ourselves or become numb. We need something genuine.

In *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* J. Glenn Gray cites this conversation he had with a Frenchwoman who had suffered horribly during WWII, but afterwards moved into a comfortable upper-middle class life:

"We reviewed the misadventures of those war days, and then she confessed to me with great earnestness that, despite everything, those times had been more satisfying than the present. 'My life is so terribly boring nowadays!' she cried out. 'Anything is better than to have nothing at all happen day after day. You know that I do not love war or want it to return. But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt before or since.'"

Gray continues:

"A few days later I listened to a strikingly similar report from a German friend. Overweight, and with an expensive cigar in his mouth, he spoke of our earlier days together at the close of the war, when he was shivering and hungry and harried with anxieties about keeping his wife and children from too great want. 'Sometimes I think those were happier times than these,' he concluded, and there was something like despair in his eyes. Neither one of these people was accustomed to such a confession; it came from both spontaneously and because I had known them in distress and in prosperity. They were not longing for the old days in sentimental nostalgia; they were confessing their disillusionment with a sterile present. Peace exposed a void in them that war's excitement had enabled them to keep covered up."

I was easily lost within the whims of my yearning before I began practicing Tao and found a context for realizing my potential. I followed my feelings, living on the "leash of my senses, as Diane Ackerman would say." I went to extremes without maintaining my own heart. The wish was legitimate, but my lack of wisdom made it difficult. Such a longing without direction can lead one to crave anything that might sate it. I dabbled in all kinds of spiritual practices and exposed myself to the dark and indulgent just so I could feel something was really *happening*. However, meaningless intensity does not have transformative power and leaves one still feeling hungry, like the woman and man in the above stories. So, it is crucial to keep our intentions clear as we pursue a life less ordinary, illuminated with change and elevation. In the Tao practice we call this maintaining "stillness of heart."

Our need for challenge and risk is a magnificent thing. It is out of the muck that the lotus blooms as it reaches to the Sun. Through obstacle and trial we can express, exercise, and develop the best parts of us. However, it is a focused heart that can direct this desire and make it useful.

As for me, it is my spiritual practice that offers a heightened level of existence. It presents priceless meaning and informs my life holistically. It also results in ever-surprising and provoking experiences, providing something palpable and stimulating that brings me closer to myself. It has allowed me to see how important it is to nourish life with movement, to participate, to say "yes" to this journey and open our hearts; this opens the door to a heightened level of existence.



photo by Jacqui Depas
