

Wrapped In Stillness

A Personal Retreat Guide



"The truth of what
one says lies in
what one does."

~ Bernhard Schlink
German Author (b. 1944) in
Der Vorleser (tr. The Reader)

Define Yourself

One day, while watching a television interview, I heard someone say, “I am going to take back what defines me.” I no longer remember the show or what the interview was about, but I am intrigued by the concept of defining oneself. We regularly consult dictionaries to look up the timeless definitions of words and rely on their accuracy and consistency. By contrast, our personal definition changes throughout the stages of our lives. I created a short list to define myself at each major milestone of my life, from birth to present day. When completed, I reviewed the list and experienced a wash of positive emotion.

I noticed all of my defining titles were roles I filled: friend, wife, mother, coworker—not definitions of *who I really am*. How do I define myself today? After several weeks of mulling this over, I still wasn’t coming up with a decent response, so I decided to take the question to the streets. I asked this question of many people: “If I were to look up (insert their name) in the dictionary, what would it say?” I heard lots of great answers, but my favorite came from a wonderful woman named Sharon Carter, a friend and professional speaker from Arkansas. When I asked her the question, she gave it ten seconds of thoughtful reflection and then, with her beautiful southern twang, she said,

“Sharon Carter is a builder of people.”

What a great statement. I had defined myself by a list of roles rather than the value of my actions, but she had defined herself using a fantastic personal attribute—*builder of people*. It turned my thinking upside down and challenged

me to process the question again from a different viewpoint. I believe that if a dictionary of this kind of definition existed and you looked up my name, it would say, "Laurie Guest is an experiencer of life." (I know experiencer isn't even a real word, but it should be.) I have had lots of interesting experiences because I maintain a "life list."

Most everyone has heard the term "bucket list," made popular by a 1997 movie directed by Rob Reiner about two old men who create a list of things to do before they die. It's a catchy phrase and it is a list I believe everyone should make. Have you? Sure, there are things you would like to do someday, but have you taken the time to complete a written life list? Actively working my life list has been one of the great joys of my existence. How many of us are guilty of saying things like, "That's something I have always wanted to do." Or, "I'd like to do such-and-such someday." But what if someday never comes?

Years ago, a neighbor of mine who had three small girls fought a five-year battle against cancer. I was told by those closest to her that once she knew the diagnosis was terminal, she began writing letters to each of her girls designed to be opened on the milestone days of their lives, the big days that she wouldn't witness. First dates, graduations, wedding days and the birth of their children are the types of events I imagine she included. I was so moved by her generosity of spirit and the strength it must have taken for her to complete this task that when I saw Cathy for the last time I could not express myself adequately. I would have liked to tell Cathy that her behavior influenced my conduct in regards to my own life, that is, it caused me to take charge of making things happen instead of waiting for *someday* when these things would be more affordable, easier, or less subject to the pressure of competing obligations. Cathy was forty-two years old when she passed away, and she is often in the back of my mind reminding me to love better and live better.

It was shortly after her passing that I wrote down some of the things I wanted to do "someday," and I got to the work of making them happen. Some of the things on my life list are 100% in my control and can be

accomplished with relative ease. Trips to Yellowstone, taking a photography class, and learning to play piano are just a few examples. The next level of activities includes things that are doable, but they will take a little more time to complete. For example, publish a book and invent a game that sells in the marketplace. And then there is the top tier of my life list. These are the dream ideas, the ones that are mostly out of my control and unlikely to happen. One such example was my desire to see a live taping of the Oprah Winfrey Show. Since I live only about an hour outside of Chicago, I was eligible to have my name on a standby list for last minute audience calls. Years came and went and there wasn't ever a request for my butt in the seat at Oprah.

My niece Lauren is one of the people I love most in the world, and she also maintains a life list. Seeing the Oprah Winfrey Show live is one of the items that appeared on both of our lists. When we heard that 2011 would be the last year the Oprah Winfrey Show would air, we knew the odds of getting tickets were slim. Instead of being discouraged, we compromised by attending her "Live Your Best Life Weekend" in New York City. This was an event connected to her magazine rather than the show. As luck would have it, we ended up in the front row and saw her in person no more than twenty yards away. That had to count as good enough for the life list and I crossed it off, but I felt like a cheat because it wasn't the same as seeing the show.

In May of 2011, Oprah was winding up her long TV run with quite a bit of fanfare. There were special guests on the show all year long and a star-studded tribute to her at the United Center. We tried to get tickets, but failed. Then, four days before the final taping, Lauren called to tell me she had scored Oprah tickets for the final show. I assumed she was a victim of a hoax and did not join in her enthusiasm. The odds of getting a ticket to this once-in-a-lifetime event were like winning the lottery. After trying on a regular basis for a quarter of a century, I found it impossible to believe the hottest tickets in the country landed in her hands. I agreed to accompany her to the studio on the specific date but warned her not to be too disappointed if, when we

got there, the doors to the studio were locked. I was sure the final taping had been done the week before and didn't believe this was an actual opportunity.

We left early that morning and arrived at the studio to find a line of people waiting for standby tickets. I started to think this might be real. We waited. We wondered. We hoped.

More people with tickets began to arrive and with them came an anticipation that was palpable. Of all the life list activities I have completed, I must say this one had the most excitement brewing around it. The slim chance of us achieving this goal, coupled with the fact the final taping was a television milestone, created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Before I knew it the studio doors opened and we were invited in to witness history. Whether you are an Oprah fan or not, one cannot deny the awe of a poor girl from Mississippi navigating a career of influence the way O has done. To watch her skillfully monologue an hour-long program from the heart was like watching a famous artist paint a canvas. It made me feel *fortunate* to be there. To listen to her craft words into sentences that spoke to each of us differently was like listening to a musician play a concerto, and it made me feel *peaceful*. But most of all, I experienced an "in the moment" feeling like none I have ever felt before.

We were not allowed to have cell phones or cameras in the studio, so instead of trying to peek through a camera lens, I truly experienced the moment and logged it into memory, which is powerful. No one in the audience considered talking during the taping or moving about. There were no distractions. The energy in the room was focused and on high-octane. The studio only holds about 350 people, so the setting was intimate and every person felt privileged to be there.

We would have experienced none of this if Lauren and I hadn't been working our life lists. Have you given any thought to what you would like to include on your life list? Each of our lists are unique to us but what we have in common is the fun of creating the list and working it. The things on

my bucket list are *how* I experience and enjoy life. If I chose not to work my list, I'm afraid one day would blend into the next until the opportunities has passed me by. So, I define myself as an experiencer of life.

*“Gratitude is the single greatest treasure I will
take with me from this experience.”*

*Oprah Winfrey
From her final show, May 25, 2011*

ask yourself...

If I discovered my name in the dictionary, how would I be defined, as of today?

What do I want the definition to be?

What do I want on my life list, my “bucket list”?

How will I turn wishes into action for the experiences I most want?