

What Matters Most in Life¹

“People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.” – Thomas Merton

Dr. Anthony Campolo described a sociological study of 50 people over the age of 95 where they were asked one question. “If you could live your life again, what would you do differently?”

It was an open-ended question about regret, yet three answers consistently emerged:

- If I had to do it over again, I would reflect more.
- If I had to do it over again, I would risk more.
- If I had to do it over again, I would do more things that would live on after I am dead.

“The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.” – William James

Reflect More

Life is a blur as we hurry from one thing to the next. “Most people are absent when they’re present” Dr. Campolo elaborated as he discussed this study. What we often fail to recognize is that without reflection we end up being busy but not necessarily fulfilled. The people who were 95 and older in this study said they would reflect more if given a life do-over. They would “stop, think and consider with intensity” the things they took for granted the first time around and that people fail to focus on or reflect upon the things that have real personal significance.

[Ask:] What is something of real personal significance you have taken for granted in your life?

Action steps: Take the time to stop, listen, pay attention and see that there is much more to cherish in life – including your family!

Risk More

The 95-year-olds in the study didn’t examine their lives in terms of successes or failures. Why didn’t they mention success or failures?

Illustrating how risk is a way of living life to the fullest, Dr. Campolo uses the Star Trek mantra that people, whether young, old, or at a pivotal crossroads life, should “boldly go where no one has gone



¹ A product of the SAVHS Character Education Program. References to study by John Maxwell and Dr. Anthony Campolo. Original source of study unknown. Special thanks to Joe Ehrmann the lesson’s inspiration. Contact: troy@insideoutinitiative.org

before.” You can’t have friends without risk. You can’t engage in relationships without risk. You can’t have a fulfilling career or purpose without risk.

How is risk a necessary aspect of building and maintaining authentic relationships?

Action steps: Be bold and courageous - live out your dreams and visions! Do exciting things with your life!

Do More Things That Will Live on After You’re Dead

The last most common answer in the survey of those at an advanced age in life was about doing more things that would live on after they were gone – making a difference that outlasts their earthly life. We want to live for things that last beyond our life but too often we find ourselves only thinking about tomorrow.

As Dr. Campolo explained, “What are people going to put on your gravestone? Are they going to talk about the titles you held or are they going to stand around your grave and recall how you made a difference in their lives?”

At the end of your life what do you want your epitaph (the message on your tombstone) to read?

Action steps: Don’t let life pass you by. Life is not a contest. Live life to the fullest and follow your dreams. Make a difference – it doesn’t need to be spectacular, you just need to positively influence someone else’s life and do your best to leave the world a better place!