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They shout. I follow

by Rich Heffern

NCR Today

My oldest friend Paige was always fascinated by the sea, its lure and lore. When he was a kid, model ships cluttered his room, posters of sail and nautical charts decorated the walls. He read every book he could find about sailing and would rhapsodize about this passionate love and his dreams until we, his friends, got the picture.

It looked like this: Paige on the slippery deck of a battered but sturdy sailboat making its way slowly through an agitated sea under a dark, threatening sky. He is busy reefing sails and securing thick, sodden lines on the deck, making the vessel ready to endure the storm. One arm flung across the sun-cracked paint on the mast, his hands wrapped in the rigging, he surveys the heaving surface of the sea ahead with steady, glittering eyes.

As happens to us all, adult responsibilities eroded his passion to a hobby. But a persistent lament for his unrealized vision of living life to the fullest broke shackles. He ached for the opportunity now and then for the blood to sing in his veins, for his heart to pound and strain against rawborn winds and tides, for his courage and resourcefulness to be tested out in the cloud-shrouded Pacific dark. So one day he ordered plans by mail, rented space at the marina in Oakland, Calif. where he lived, bought materials, then, in his spare time, built a 26-foot ocean-cruising trimaran. He named her *Heart of Gold* after a Neil Young song. He could sail only on weekends, but sail her he did.

That's not the end of the story. Today Paige earns his living as a ship builder and, I believe, he's a fortunate man.

"By the time many people are 14 or 15," mused science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, "they have been divested of their loves, their ancient and intuitive tastes, one by one, until they reach maturity, and there is no fun left, no zest, no gusto, no flavor." Reflecting on his long career as a writer, Bradbury claimed zest,

gusto and flavor were alive and kicking in his life because he was above all a hostage -- hostage to his passion and love. "You see, my stories have led me through my life. They shout. I follow. They run up and bite me on the leg ... Then, when I finish, the idea lets go and runs off."

The end result was a life lived as a fascinating adventure.

"Follow your bliss," advised Joseph Campbell in his famous interviews with Bill Moyers, stressing the importance to the spiritual life of cultivating our unique interests, passions and loves. In what do you most delight? Where is your heart of hearts? To what does your body and soul most wholeheartedly want you to go? What keeps you fresh and eager? What makes you most enthusiastic?

Campbell's bliss happened to be studying world mythologies. Paige's is sailing. Yours might be growing orchids, reading good mysteries, quilt making, home schooling your kids, union organizing, mastering the dulcimer, playing in a bluegrass band, teaching fourth grade, grassroots political activism, your ministry, photography, achieving justice in your community, gardening, eating fiery Cajun dishes, cooking -- you name it. You know what it is.

Campbell compared what happens when one follows one's heart to a favorite image from the Middle Ages, that of the wheel of fortune. "There's the hub of the wheel," he said, "and there is the revolving rim. If you are attached to the rim of the wheel, you will be either always above going down or at the bottom coming up. But if you are at the hub, you are in the same place all the time, at the center."

That center where dwell our enthusiasms and deep gladness is unique for each of us. When we find and poke at it, that touch is like probing a fat, throbbing nerve crammed with joy and energy.

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