

A Conversation with Richard Leider

By Roger Breisch

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Roger: You've been an executive coach since long before it was popular. How did you discover that was your passion?

Richard: My background is counseling psychology. When I got out of graduate school I worked in human resources and found myself helping people look at their future and bring more of who they are to what they do. Now it's called coaching, but that's what I've been doing my entire professional life.

Roger: So coaching came naturally.

Richard: I've been interested in people's stories since I was a kid. How did they make the choices they made? Why did they stick with things when they should have gotten out?

My father was a corporate executive, but his real passion was helping people. He had a ministry. He said if he could go back and do it over, he would have been an Episcopal priest. He would bring people home just to listen and help—people from all walks of life. He would have me listen, even when I thought it was the stupidest thing. I learned that everybody has a story. In spite of what we think they're about on the outside, on the inside they may be hurting, confused or empty. So I learned in natural, familial ways about people's stories.

Roger: What are some ways you help people get in touch with their stories?

Richard: By taking them to Africa on what I call inventure expeditions—internal and external odysseys. I do it through public speaking, one-on-one coaching, workshops and writing. All my work is about helping people live into their own questions and find their own answers. No matter the form, it's about bringing out the authentic you and having the courage to bring that into the world.

Roger: So what has your journey taught you about who you are?

Richard: First, I make a distinction between purpose and calling. Purpose is our reason for being; calling is the vocational expression of that purpose. What I've got is the gift of helping people uncover callings. You can cut that many ways, but it has taken me a long time to say it that simply and clearly. Who I am is somebody who loves to listen to people's stories and help them find their vocation. The notion of vocare, to call, is that you're here on earth to do work God put you here to do. I believe that. We choose the form based on our gifts and what we're passionate about.

Roger: Along the way do you help people uncover purpose as well as callings?

Richard: If you follow the trajectory of my work you'll see that it's one view of life peeled back many times. The *Inventurers* was a book that helped people look at their talents, values and passions, but it was at one level. After interviewing thousands of people, particularly older adults, I found that the bottom line is to do something meaningful with your life—to "inventure" for a reason. I call that reason purpose. So I wrote *The Power of Purpose*. Then I discovered a spiritual dimension to purpose, so *Whistle While You Work* is about deepening the conversation—looking at gifts and callings as part of a larger purpose.

Roger: What is it about humans that drives us to find a purpose for our lives?

Richard: I think we have an innate need to contribute to life. We feel best about ourselves when we're serving—giving of ourselves in some way. We feel less when we're taking.

I've looked at purpose and callings from many perspectives—theological, anthropological, psychological. All the great works say the same thing. We're here for a reason and that reason is something greater than we are. I've coached many people who have wealth, but are emotionally bankrupt. What's missing from their life is a rich inner life. That means getting outside of yourself and contributing to life. I call that purpose and I think it's innate to us as humans.

Roger: I sometimes wonder if my search for a role is really the search for immortality—a way to be remembered.

Richard: I use the statement "Life =" and then a blank line. You fill in the blank. I say "Life = To die happy." I think we're after happiness—an inner and outer happiness. We feel alive and happy when we're using our gifts to contribute to others. That's when people are absorbed, connected and engaged in life. If it ends up being a legacy, so be it. But if they're doing it just to get a plaque on the wall or a building named after them, it's more about ego and what they're getting.

There's a foundation in Africa called the Dorobo Fund for Tanzania that I co-founded. We help young people from the Maasai and Hadza tribes—particularly women—become leaders. I'm not there daily to see it or be part of it, but when I hear the stories, I feel great about every buck I raise, or every time somebody sees it and says, "I'd like to do something as well." My name's not on anything, and yet I get as much fulfillment out of that as just about anything else I do. Is it my legacy? I don't know. But I'm happy doing it and that makes it some of the best work.

Roger: Isn't finding purpose a lifetime journey, along an often-circuitous path?

Richard: It's a lifetime evolution. We're looking for ways to contribute our gifts from cradle to grave. One of the reasons people do poorly in retirement is they stop giving

their gifts when they stop getting paid to give their gifts. They shut down to life—become disengaged. You can only play so many rounds of golf before you begin to feel there's got to be something more.

Purpose is re-ignited and re-clarified over and over. Like with callings, we bring it to our jobs, we don't find it in our jobs. You can be who you are as a taxi driver or security guard. We continue to find new forms of expression for who we are.

After September 11, people dove back inside themselves. They quit jobs, got married or unmarried, and made other priority decisions. I think crisis is one of our great teachers. When we're in crisis we go inside to rediscover our true values. My mentor, Dick Bolles, who wrote *What Color is Your Parachute?*, puts it differently. "In times of crisis," he says, "we go higher and we go deeper." Higher means purpose—we look at what's possible with our lives. When we go deeper we look at our priorities everyday and make more definitive choices.

Roger: Are people asking different questions since September 11?

Richard: They're not asking different questions, but they're more serious about acting on them. People are no longer willing to sleepwalk through their lives. Life is short. I'm penciled in here for a short time; I'm going to step up to what's really important.

My work is with corporate executives. They're asking what really matters, not only to me but also to us in our organizations, governments and communities. What's behind that is a core set of values and purposes that people are reconnecting with. What you notice when you connect with purpose is tremendous focus—sense of direction. Where was all this focus before September 11? It's always been there, but things that cause us to reflect re-ignite it.

Roger: You said that crisis is a great teacher. Can we learn about purpose and calling in other ways, or is crisis the best?

Richard: I don't think it's the best or the only way, but it's the most dramatic and can cause the fastest transformation.

We have to have life experiences in order to make these kinds of choices. We learn by trial and error what fits us, and what doesn't. People in their thirties and early forties tell me, "I thought making money and building a life system would satisfy me. But there's something missing." They can't respond to that without some experience of what they don't like. Crisis can force it, but so can other things.

In Africa people go through rituals where they learn about their place in the world, their purpose. In the Maasai tribe there's a reason to be a warrior—the society needs scouts and protectors. They learn by trial and error, but they are also coached, if you will, by elders. They get guidance that this is the time in your life when you're supposed to be scouting and learning. At some point they become junior elders and then senior elders.

In our culture we tend to go it alone, and gain wisdom along the way. Wisdom, for me, is seeing the big picture and knowing what weight to give things. As we age and learn from our experiences, we increasingly see the big picture and what's important. Post-September 11, people suddenly saw a bigger picture. A world picture—a vulnerability—they hadn't seen before. So they're making different choices about what's important.

Roger: What kinds of rituals in our culture would help us on our journey?

Richard: At one time the Peace Corp was a type of ritual that allowed people to open up to a broader world. Visiting a third world country that's beyond—larger and deeper in many ways—where you live is a ritual we ought to mandate. Learning another language as part of that is important.

My greatest teacher has been death. I would have everybody spend time working in a hospice. Looking at the end of life while you're in the beginning or middle is an important way to learn about the sacredness, fragility and vulnerability of life. I've gone through the dying process with a number of friends—been at their bedside as they died.

My mother died in my arms at the age of 78. She was in intensive care when I arrived late in the evening from out of town. I picked her up and held her, I didn't know what else to do. She was obviously on her final breaths. I said to her, "It's time to go. You've done a great job. Thank you." She opened her eyes, looked at me, closed her eyes, took two more breaths and died. In one second there was a human being in my arms who had lived a life, who had raised me. In the next, her spirit was gone. I could sense it leaving and yet it didn't weigh anything. That was when I realized that this work I'm interested in—uncovering callings—doesn't weigh anything either. You can't see it, you can't measure it, but when it's not there you know. You know when you're with someone who is on purpose—contributing his or her gifts. You can't see it but you know. And you know when you have it in yourself.

One of my original partners, Jim Harding, died of cancer at 55. I will never forget a day or two before he died sitting with him on a bench. He was a bag of bones—nothing left of him. He said, "Don't give up. Keep asking people the big questions. It's the right thing to do." He was a day away from dying, but he was so clear that in a short life you need to ask and answer the big questions.

Roger: Do we live in a culture where few people become elders?

Richard: We're trained to get a good game going and replicate it, rather than grow and learn. We need our elders to be coaches. Who do we learn from? Who do we learn with? People who are right in there, asking questions, holding our feet to the fire, holding us accountable to our own magnificence. From cradle to grave the elders in the Maasai and Hadza tribes are part of the culture. They have earned the right for others to care for them and come to them for wisdom. They're not off in a retirement home some place. As a thank you for creating the Dorobo Fund, the Maasai made me an elder.

Roger: Who are the elders in your life?

Richard: Dick Bolles, who wrote *What Color is Your Parachute?*, is seventy-five. He has always held the line on mission, purpose and calling in terms of what this work is really about. He makes me think about how I live my life by questioning me directly and through the choices he makes. Part of good "eldering" is modeling. Not modeling as imposing, but modeling as living your life authentically. Carl Jung said the greatest damage you can do to another human being, especially a child, is not heeding your own calling. Parents tell me, "I'm making these lousy choices so my kids can make better ones." What are they teaching their children? By not being themselves, they're teaching them not to be themselves. Elders teach integrity.

Another is a guy named Rollie Larson. He is one of the most beautiful human beings I've ever met. He's eighty-two, I'm fifty-eight. I'm his mentor. He's mine. Age is irrelevant. He is a gifted listener. One of the greatest gifts you can give another human being is to care enough to listen to their story. Ultimately all you've got is your story. Whenever I have a crisis, challenge or opportunity, he's one of my first calls. I know he's not going to fix me. He's going to help me sort it out by listening deeply. He's generous. Another big part of eldering is generosity.

Roger: Would you share a story of personal crisis and what you learned?

Richard: One of the biggest crises for me was my divorce. But first some background. I always considered myself a great father. I took parenting seriously—I wanted to be there for my kids. I've always traveled and taken time to write and reflect—taken care of my professional side—but when my children were young, I would take every summer off. We had a cabin on a lake in northern Wisconsin—a 115-year-old log cabin with kerosene lamps, a pump for water, an outhouse and a sauna. We lived there for three months every summer. My one concession to work was that I wrote every morning. I would wake up early, make coffee and go over to my antique desk looking out at the lake. My kids would leave me alone, because they knew that after 9 or 10 I was all theirs. I had more joy out of that, and my kids had more learning and connection, than anything else I did. So parenting—being part of a family—was critical to me.

My wife chose another lifestyle. She came to the kids and me, out of the blue, and said she was leaving. Suddenly I was a single parent. It was tough because I really believed in families and making those kinds of choices. All of a sudden I didn't have that choice; it was out of my hands. I was a best-selling author who couldn't keep his own life—his own family—together. I was embarrassed. I was in deep pain. After my kids went to bed I would go to the basement sobbing. For years I didn't have time for anything other than "hold it together at work and hold it together at home." The children were young—thirteen and fifteen—and in the middle of their own angst about life. I think one of my crowning achievements was to hold it together. But it was painful.

Roger: What were the lessons for you?

Richard: As a speaker and coach I had lived a fairly charmed life. I had been through the death of my father, but I had a successful practice, a successful marriage and two beautiful children. By any standards I had a rich life. Then my world fell apart and I understood what real pain feels like. It sensitized my antenna to what people go through. There are experiences—like the death of loved ones—that I understand, and wouldn't if I hadn't moved through those experiences myself.

My wife, Sally, was recently diagnosed with malignant melanoma. It was caught early and it's out, but I understand the fear. I get it. I might not be the best, but I understand it in a different and wiser way.

Roger: Can you tell me more about what Africa has to teach?

Richard: People ask me why I keep going back. I love Africa so why not go back to where you love? But it's more than that. My trip is called "Back to the Rhythm." The life we're living—with all the technology and speed—is unnatural. For 99% of our evolutionary history, people lived with the rhythm of the sun, moon, resources of food and the rest of life. They fit in as part of that rather than trying to control it. I tell participants, "You're going to feel that rhythm again. It will take a few days, but when it sneaks up on you it's going to shock you, because you're going to realize what all this busyness is really about." Three to five days into the safari you see people's faces change—the lines go away. They're relaxed, sleeping differently, moving at a different pace. All the busyness drops away and they start to really get what it feels like to live on the earth, present with what's around them. It's a visceral insight that never leaves them.

Roger: How difficult is it for people to return to the life they left behind?

Richard: Very difficult. Most everyone goes back with new priorities and practices. I do a reentry briefing at the end of the trip, but some people never make a full transition back to their old selves. They make new choices. They say, "I don't want to be that person anymore."

When we sit around the campfire with the Hadza—hunter-gatherers who own nothing other than a bow, poison arrows and a knife—it's like I'm bringing a bunch of "fully packed" people. In Repacking parlance, the Hadza are totally unpacked. There is a richness and generosity to their lives, and a joy of conversation. People see that it's nice to own things, but it isn't it. In fact we're trading most of our life energy to get stuff that's making us dead. That's a huge revelation.

Roger: Is it difficult for you to live in this culture where so few people get that?

Richard: No. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning. I feel like a messenger. I have lots of flat sides and flaws, but I think I really get how much is enough. And I think I get what causes true happiness for people.

I make a living doing what I love. I'm able to travel places I should never be able to go—into the boardrooms of corporate America and in front of thousands of people, and it's fun!

Purpose has got me. It has got me and I can't help it. I'm bothered by a lot of things in our society, but the best I can do is get up everyday and try to make a dent. I'm not trying to save the world, but I am trying to do something worth doing.

Roger: Some self-help books seem to suggest we can "reduce the cycle time" to gaining wisdom. David Shapiro, your co-author, after his circuitous path to what he loves, asks, "Couldn't I have gotten here sooner with less confusion?" Can the path to wisdom be shortened?

Richard: Everyone has their own trajectory—everybody's an experiment of one. People will read something I've written and it has no impact. Then, when they hear me speak, they hear the same thing, but they're different. They're ready. I don't know what I can do to cause readiness, but the universal truths come back to us over and over again. The earlier we can understand them the better, but if it takes a lifetime, then that's the way it is. Part of the job of an elder is to help us wake up. If we don't have elders we're without that attention, and we have to make it up along the way. Everybody remembers a teacher who made a tremendous difference in their lives. It was never about content—it was always about helping us notice something about ourselves we wouldn't have seen otherwise.

I'm amazed at how resistant business people are to the "soft stuff." And yet it's where all the power is. It's bringing your whole self to what you do. That's what elders help us do.

Roger: The word that comes to me in this context is witnessing.

Richard: And courage. It's helping people be courageous with what they know about themselves, and with their gifts and passions. In 1979 I began interviewing people over 65 and I always discover the same three things. They wish they would have been more reflective and seen the big picture earlier. They wish they had been more courageous in work and love. The third is about purpose. "What really brings true happiness is contributing." As people get older, many discover the wisdom of being generous.

Roger: Does our culture suggest less courage? Are others more courageous?

Richard: I think we live in a consensus trance, but other cultures do too. Even in Africa, to go outside the village—to go into town and get a job, for example—is something most elders would disapprove of. But even in the most primitive tribes everybody has gifts and they are honored differently. What enables choice is the courage of our own voice. And that voice takes place through what we do, what we say and how we show up in whatever tribe we're in.

Roger: How can we create tribes or communities that honor our gifts?

Richard: I'm not sure I know. My work is helping individuals. One early insight for me was noticing how many people didn't choose their work—it chose them. I make a distinction between decisions and choices. Decisions are based on evidence, logic and rationale. A choice comes from information and logic, but also from an inner knowing about your gifts and boundaries. We're filling people with information, but they don't know what to do with it—how to bring it into their lives in ways that are useful. Choosing is a life skill we're not teaching. It's no wonder people wake up in the middle of their life hating what they do—they never chose it in the first place!

I've talked to thousands of people who chose careers because it looked like a good way to make a living. Who they were on the inside was something else entirely. But they lived with that non-choice for thirty years. Then, when they've made enough money or had enough pain to re-choose, they're clueless about how to go about it. They know they hate this, but don't know how to choose that. My work is about the power of choice—from the inside out. Choice comes from awareness and the courage to explore.

In vocational choices it's usually easier to discover careers that are not suitable than to find one that's right. This is my big challenge as a coach.

Roger: Where is your journey taking you next?

Richard: Two years ago I decided to become a student of purpose at another level. I was accepted at the United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities. I go part-time. It's Christian, but it has a very diverse theological population. I wanted a place where the dialogue was rich and courageous conversation was encouraged. That has forced me to dig deeper into what would be easy for me not to dig deeper into. I've had success; I could keep writing and speaking. But I'm hungry to understand more about my call and the callings of others.

Roger: So your journey is spiritual.

Richard: Totally spiritual. In Africa, everything knows what to do—everything has a place. I'm a bird watcher. My first question is why is this bird here? Then I start to notice that its life is connected to everything around it. It's not in isolation. How could it be different for us? We have choice, but we need to use it to figure out our place in the world, our purpose in the pattern. And when we do, miracles happen. Energy comes to us. Joy comes to us.

My happiness comes from the feeling that I'm playing my part in the pattern. How do you know when you are? There is a felt sense. You can tell when you're around people who are answering their call. You can feel it in the way they are—see it in their eyes and in their bodies, and hear it in the way they speak. Everyone has a vocation; the gift is the call.

Can everybody find their vocation? Viktor Frankl found it in a Nazi concentration camp. I can't think of a place with less choice. Yet he could choose to wake up every day and give someone a slice of bread, a hug or a kind word. When you lost that sense of generosity or contribution to life, you lost your will to live. I see people in our culture who have lost the will to live. They're in concentration camps of their own making—jobs they hate, or families and communities they don't want to be in. The courage of freedom and responsibility is what the human experiment is all about.