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Living Life On Purpose

By: Bill Clinton

When I was a young man just out of law school and eager to get on with my life, on a whim I briefly put aside my reading preference for fiction and history and bought one of those how-to-books: *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*, by Alan Lakein.

The book's main point was the necessity of listing short-, medium-, and long-term life goals, then categorizing them in order of their importance, with the A group being the most important, the B group next, and the C the last, then listing under each goal specific activities designed to achieve them. I still have the paperback book, now almost thirty years old. And I'm sure I have that old list somewhere buried in my papers, though I can't find it. However, I do remember the A list. I wanted to be a good man, have a good marriage and children, have good friends, make a successful political life, and write a great book.

Whether I'm a good man is, of course, for God to judge. I know that I am not as good as my strongest supporters believe or as I hope to become, nor as bad as my harshest critics assert. I have been graced beyond measure by my family life with Hillary and Chelsea. Like all families' lives, ours is not perfect, but it has been wonderful. Its flaws, as all the world knows, are mostly mine, and its continuing promise is grounded in their love. No person I know ever had more or better friends. Indeed, a strong case can be made that I rose to the presidency on the shoulders of my personal friends, the now legendary FOBs.

My life in politics was a joy. I love campaigns and I loved governing. I always tried to keep things moving in the right direction, to give more people a chance to live their dreams, to lift people's spirits, and to bring them together. That's the way I kept score.

When I left the White House, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life giving my time, money, and skills to worthwhile endeavors where I could make a difference. I didn't know exactly what I would do, but I wanted to help save lives, solve important problems, and give more young people the chance to live their dreams.

I felt obligated to do it because of the wonderful, improbable life I'd been given by the American people and because politics, which consumed so much of my life, is a "getting" business. You have to get support, contributions, and votes, over and over again. If you serve well, it's probably a fair trade, but no sensible person can do it as long as I did without thinking you still have to give more to balance the scales.

Besides, I thought I'd enjoy it. Like many people who are fortunate to live full, rewarding lives, I reached a point in my journey where, apart from taking care of my family and being with them and my friends, what I cared most about was doing what I could to make sure people younger than me don't die



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before their time and aren't denied the chance to find their own fulfillment. After I narrowly escaped what could have been a fatal heart attack in 2004, I felt that way even more strongly.

This drive has led me into a wide variety of service projects. It has also given me a far greater appreciation of the countless acts of giving I have witnessed all my life and sometimes have taken for granted.

And it has convinced me that almost everyone—regardless of income, available time, age, and skills—can do something useful for others and, in the process, strengthen the fabric of our shared humanity.

Like most Americans of my generation, I first learned about giving in my church, where we were taught to tithe. Most kids my age also gave small amounts to the March of Dimes crusade against polio. After Billy Graham spoke to a racially integrated crusade in Little Rock when Central High School was closed in the fight over desegregation in the 1958, I sent a small portion of my allowance to his ministry for a few months. In my teens, I did the usual volunteer work associated with school activities and helping the needy around Thanksgiving and Christmas.

When I was in my first year of college, I gave a little time to a community project Georgetown University ran in poor neighbourhoods in Washington, D.C., and contributed to the occasional good cause, but I dedicated most of my free time to friends and campus activities. During my last two years of college at Oxford, and at Yale Law School, I became obsessed with politics and gave very little time or money to anything else.

After I went home to Arkansas to teach law, I did some pro bono work and began to make small contributions to causes I was interested in. During the years I served as governor, I tried to set aside 10 percent of my income for giving: for my church, my alma maters, and worthy local projects like a shelter for abused women and children in our neighbourhood. Because I was involved in politics from 1974, on I didn't give much time to other things.

Now that I do public services as a private citizen, it's the human impact that I find most rewarding.

When I left the White House in 2001, I hoped that through my foundation I could make a difference and keep working to move our nation and the world away from poverty, disease, conflict, and climate change. I wanted to use my time, experience, and contacts to help in saving lives, solving problems, and empowering more people to achieve their goals.

For example, in 2002 the Clinton Foundation launched an HIV/AIDS initiative (CHAI), to help developing nations deal with AIDS by setting up effective health systems, including diagnosis, care, and treatment, and by providing vital antiretroviral medicines and essential testing at the lowest costs in the world.

Our program now works in twenty-five countries to diagnose, test, and care for people with HIV/AIDS, and forty-four more nations are able to buy low-cost drugs and testing materials under our contract. As of mid-2007, about 750,000 more people are receiving treatment purchased under CHAI agreements, representing about a third of all those in the developing world receiving treatment today.

Since the end of the Cold War, most of the world's political violence within and between nations has involved people of different religious, ethnic, and tribal groups. While there are always underlying grievances of varying degrees of legitimacy, political leaders have exploited them to harden group identities



and demonize, even dehumanize, the “others”, in order to increase popular support in their struggle for power, land, or resources.

Regardless of the root causes, once violence driven by group hatred begins, the vast majority of the victims are civilians, often women and children. They have been subject to military assaults, suicide bombings, rape, dismemberment, torture, starvations, and mass slaughter.

In the aftermath, even the most open-minded people find it difficult not to become hard-hearted. Yet in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Rwanda, or any other place torn apart by group violence, the ability to see the “others” as people—to respect them, communicate with them, work with them, live alongside them, and yes forgive them—is essential to putting broken communities back together and moving on with life.

In 2005 I established the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI). Its main purpose is to bring together global leaders to devise and implement innovative solutions to some of the world’s most pressing challenges.

The forum explores ways that leading CEOs are successfully integrating corporate social responsibility and sustainability programs into their core business in ways that enhance the bottom line. The panelists call on other major CEOs to follow suit, and provide examples of how major multinational companies are utilizing innovative practices to increase profits, reduce costs, and simultaneously fight climate change, increase educational opportunities, and reduce poverty.

Since 2005, CGI Annual Meetings have brought together more than 100 current and former heads of state, 14 Nobel Peace Prize laureates, hundreds of leading CEOs, heads of foundations, major philanthropists, directors of the most effective nongovernmental organizations, and prominent members of the media.

These CGI members have made more than 1,400 commitments valued at \$46 billion, which have already improved the lives of 200 million people in 150 countries.

Commitments made at the 2008 Annual Meeting are expected to affect almost 160 million people. The CGI community also includes CGI University (CGI U), a forum to engage college students in global citizenship; CGI Asia; and MyCommitment.org, an online portal where anybody can make their own Commitment to Action.

In May of this year, Harvard Kennedy School and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation released a new study on The Coca-Cola Company’s Manual Distribution Centers (MDCs). The study demonstrated “the potential of large corporations to build economically viable business linkages with small enterprises in their value chains, which can also have development benefits.” The MDCs account for over 80 percent of the company’s sales in East Africa while creating small-business ownership opportunities and jobs for an increasing number of first-time entrepreneurs and women. To date, the Coca-Cola system has created over 2,500 MDCs in Africa employing over 12,000 people and generating over \$500 million in annual revenues.

The perception that businesses must choose between turning a profit and improving the communities where they operate is outdated and irrelevant in our interdependent world.

Hundreds of commitments are made by some of the world’s leading companies, demonstrating that investments in social and environmental programs in local communities and on other continents benefit both society and the bottom line.

CGI's Fifth Annual Meeting will be taking place in New York City September 22-25, 2009. In a departure from past years, CGI plans to address climate change, education, global health and poverty alleviation in ways that will help businesses engage on these great global challenges. These Action Areas will be: Harnessing Innovation for Development; Strengthening Infrastructure; Developing Human Capital; and Financing a Sustainable Future.

While we don't all have the same amount of money, we do have access to the same twenty-four hours in every day. Though some people have much less free time than others, nearly everyone can carve out some opportunity for giving.

The gift of time can sometimes be more satisfying and more valuable than money, as Americans will tell you who have volunteered at a homeless shelter or center for troubled families, brought meals on wheels to seniors or gone to the grocery store for an elderly neighbour, helped with non-medical tasks in hospitals, tutored young students in reading or math, mentored kids from poor neighbourhoods to help them prepare for college and succeed in life, served as an Ameri-Corps volunteer, or stacked sandbags during a flood.

What you do with your time-giving depends on how much you have to give, what you know, and most of all, what you really care about. A treasured few give a lifetime of service to others. A few more give a year or two, usually early in life or after years of work or in retirement. Still more give a few weeks a year. Many step up in the aftermath of a natural disaster. And millions of people give an hour or so a week.

I encourage you to give whatever you can, because everyone can give something. And there's so much to be done, down the street and around the world. It's never too late or too early to start.