

The 20-year test

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the things you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. . . . Explore. Dream.” -- Mark Twain

Some years ago, I listened to an audio book by Herb Cohen, who bills himself as "The World's Greatest Negotiator." The book was great, and as Herb summed it all up, he stated that most of us wind up regretting the things we didn't do, not the things we did.

So when I saw the Twain quote above the other day, it reminded me that for most of us, daring to dream and daring to act are far more of a problem than what we do when we actually dream and actually act.

For most of us, I'm sorry to say, life has a hollow quality. We don't choose to dream big -- in fact, most of us never dream at all. We see others who seem to go through a life full of wonder and growth -- and we secretly wish we had the guts to take the kind of chances they seem to take so easily.

So, for those of us who fall into that area, let me suggest asking the "twenty year" question: "If i do this, how will it make me feel in 20 years -- and if I don't do it, what will I feel then?"

It's just a quick question -- and for many circumstances, the answer is going to be "How the heck do I know," but for some answers, it's going to be obvious. For example:

"If I decide to go on a diet and lose all the weight, how will it make me feel in 20 years? If I don't, how will I feel then?"

"If I take the promotion, how will I feel in 20 years? If I don't?"

"If I go back to school....?"

"If I back down from climbing that mountain...?"

"If I give in to his bullying...?"

"If I keep thinking in this negative fashion...?"

"If I follow my dreams...?"

You can see that this is one of those questions that can easily bring out the reality of our situations. Truth be told, many of the worst decisions we make are those that keep us from challenging ourselves -- the ones that don't really stretch our abilities, or choose the easier path. Seen from a 20-year vantage point, these decisions easily can be life-devastating, or life-enabling.

Some decisions are, of course, hard to predict. We usually don't know where technology will take us in 20 years, and few of us can predict what our health concerns may be, or what kind of job we'll have. But it's usually better to take the chance, follow the dream, and take action than it is to shy away from doing something that would make our lives better in the long run.

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