

Exploring the Unlived Life  
Marla Estes, M.A.

"The unexamined life is not worth living." ~ Socrates

But is the unlived life worth examining?

Many of us arrive at mid-life with a sense of wistfulness, or even regret, for the road we haven't taken. Robert Johnson, in his book *Living Your Unlived Life*, writes, "When you choose one thing, you always 'unchoose' something else. The unchosen thing is what causes the trouble. If you don't do something with the unchosen it [might] set up a minor infection somewhere in the unconscious and later take its revenge on you." It's impossible to live out all our potentials, but it's important to review and come to terms with our unlived lives. We can experience those parts either literally or symbolically, or see that they don't really fit us any more, or we can grieve what has not been and will never be.

Sometimes we become aware of the "unchosen" by a vague feeling of discontent or sorrow that crops up, or by a desire to do things we've never done before. We are all familiar with the stereotype of someone in a "mid-life crisis," acting out the things they feel they missed out on and making a mess of their lives. There are others who end up bitter as they grow old.

What determines what we choose and don't choose? Our early home, school or religious environments establish guidelines that may or may not match up to what is truly of value to us as adults. Part of the exploration of our unlived lives is found in looking at our history, and coming to an understanding of why we took certain paths and not others.

What might stop us from living our unlived lives? First might be the desire to be "normal," which Johnson defines as "a commitment to stability at the expense of authenticity." The pull to conform is supported by many elements. We fear the unknown and giving up the status quo, both of which cause anxiety. The "inner critic" can keep us small and corralled. Fear of failure can stop us from trying out our unused parts. Often shame for our hidden parts can prohibit us from daring to explore our dreams. A child who was labeled as untalented, at say art, may keep herself from exploring her creativity.

How do we even develop awareness of what is unlived in us? There are many avenues to examine; one of them is found in dreams we may have had as a child. In the Woody Allen movie "Alice", our heroine always wanted to be like Mother Teresa. In mid-life, she goes to Calcutta for a year to work with her idol. Much of the time we can't live these dreams out like Alice did, yet we can find ways to create a symbolic experience for ourselves. For example, if I'd always dreamed of being a ballerina, there is no way that I could achieve that at mid-age. However, I could mentor or support someone with those same aspirations.

In examining our unlived lives, we may also discover that we've outgrown certain dreams and not known it. Back to Alice, she also wants to become a writer, so she takes a writing class and gives it a try. She realizes in fact that it's not for her and is able to put that fantasy to rest, instead of continually longing for something she believes she wants.

There is value in playing with our unlived aspects and trying them on for size. We can sort through these aspects and either live them out literally or symbolically, or see that they are no longer what we want and let go of them. Sometimes what's called for is simply to grieve for what cannot be. By reviewing our unlived lives, we may find that something alluring is knocking at our door ~ perhaps not very loudly, but if we listen carefully, it just may reveal itself.

*Marla Estes, MA, Ashland teacher, workshop facilitator and writer, is giving a one-day workshop "Exploring the Unlived Life" Saturday, March 17<sup>th</sup>. For more info, contact her: marla16@charter.net or 541- 482-4948. Visit her website [www.marlaestes.com](http://www.marlaestes.com)*