



UNSATISFIED

FINDING THE LIFE YOU CAN'T STOP LOOKING FOR

SEAN VOLLENDORF

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My Search for Satisfaction

Underneath everything in your life, there's that thing, that forever empty (spot). Everybody has it.

— COMEDIAN LOUIS C.K.

I GREW UP IN BRECKENRIDGE, COLORADO.

One of my friends from back in the day was a guy named Eric. I'll always remember Eric because he lived in a ski area parking lot in his VW bus for most of the winter. And the dude was in high school! He had parents who had a house and loved him and wanted him home. But that's how much he loved skiing. He took the back seats out of the bus and put in a hammock. He even had this small boulder on the floor between the front seats he called "cruise control." I never knew why, so one day while I was riding with him, I asked him. He looks at me, takes his foot off the gas, and puts the rock onto the pedal. Then he kicks his feet up in the air, turns his head my way and goes, "Cruise control, baby."

Eric and I (and all our friends really) were all about what skiers and snowboarders call powder days. A few feet of light, fluffy snow would fall, and we would kick it at the slopes, with each one of us trying to be the first to cut fresh tracks. One day I was skiing with Eric in Utah, and snow piled so high we

were able to jump from the ski lift down onto our favorite run thirty feet below. I loved the feeling of flying through the air with nothing to hold me back.

My dream was to become an Olympic ski racer. By the age of fourteen, I was on track to make my dream a reality. I traveled across the country chasing my dream. I skied the Sierra Nevadas in California, the Cascades of Oregon, the Rockies in Idaho, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico, the Adirondacks of New England. I won ski races and ranked in the top three nationally among junior racers. I was given a Colorado Gold Card. With that card, I could ski any resort in Colorado for free. I loved hurtling down the slopes at eighty miles an hour.

One year at Breckenridge, I didn't have prom tickets for my date and myself, and I didn't have the money to buy them, so I bet one of my teammates the price of the tickets that I could jump over a chairlift cable thirty feet in the air. After spending an entire afternoon building a jump big enough to shoot me over the cable (while none of my friends helped!) I hiked up the mountain and began my descent. I had this incredibly nervous feeling in my stomach as I flew down the mountain with increasing speed, and I had one thought, "What the heck am I doing?!" But it was too late to stop.

I approached the jump and before I could change my mind, shot up into the air. All I could see in my line of sight was the cable. Just as I thought I would clear it, I stopped elevating. The cable slammed square in my chest, dropped me straight to the ground, and knocked me out cold. When I woke up, I had wet my pants and temporarily forgotten my name.

But minor setbacks like these never slowed me down. Fast was never fast enough, and dangerous was never dangerous enough. Sometimes my friends and I would hike the back-country to ski runs almost no one in the general public had access to. But the thrill came with a cost. During a short period,

five of my friends died in five separate ski accidents, all skiing slopes I had skied, seeking the same thrills I had sought. One of my friends died because he was skiing out of bounds and dropped unexpectedly eighty feet into an abandoned mine-shaft. These guys were all just like me, except for one thing: their pursuit of satisfaction cost them their lives. Their deaths sobered me, but at the same time I too was addicted to the lures of adrenaline rush, speed, and risk. And like most addictions, the highs wore off quickly, and I found myself on a never-ending pursuit of the ultimate jump, the ultimate run, the ultimate day. Skiing was a thrill, but when the thrill dissipated, so did the fleeting satisfaction. I began thinking something else would have to satisfy me.

I started wondering if the right girl would give me what I was looking for. I dated several, always looking for the one who would bring me what I wanted. Eventually, I buried myself in a three-year relationship. She was sweet and cute, and she supported me in everything. But still, something was missing. I couldn't figure out what it was. The girl I thought I wanted wasn't giving me what I wanted. So one night, after watching a drive-in movie on the hood of my truck, we broke up.

I started to think maybe money would be the answer to my soul search. I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit, so my senior year of high school I started a small business with a friend. Surprisingly, it was quickly successful, and I had more money than all of my friends. Having money did something to me I didn't expect; it triggered a hunger to have more. What I had never seemed to be enough. As my bank account grew, I began to dream of the things money could do for me. Around that time I visited my uncle, and he said something that stirred those dreams. He told me it wasn't money I should seek after, but what money could buy — power. Ironically, he had money, possessions, and power, yet he didn't seem any more satisfied

than I was. Even at a young age, I started to see none of these things could fulfill me. But what would? Maybe winning?

Growing up, my heroes were always professional athletes. To me, they were living the dream life. They had seemingly limitless amounts of money, women, influence, recognition, and success. I would daydream about being a professional athlete and I wondered, could athletic success satisfy me? I soon got my answer.

After winning a junior Olympic ski race, the pinnacle of my junior career and something I had worked years for, I rode home, staring out the window. I was shocked by the question on my mind: "Is this all there is?" I couldn't help but wonder if Olympic champions ask the same question. Then I got the phone call.

October of my senior year, the head soccer coach for a top five Division 1 program called me. He was calling to offer me a scholarship. I couldn't believe it. So over the next ten months, I continued to train with incredible intensity and work ethic. Maybe college athletic success would fill the void. But when I arrived on campus, I quickly learned there is always someone better. I struggled during two-a-days. I played worse than I had in years. On the fifth day of practice, before we started, the coach called me aside and told me he was releasing me from the team. Once again my search for satisfaction ended early. And something deep down told me that even if I had become the star of the team, I wouldn't be satisfied.

Companies use thousands of slogans to appeal to our desire for satisfaction. Most of them end with the same empty promise: Satisfaction Guaranteed. Why? Because marketers know everyone is searching for fulfillment. From the entertainer who thinks millions of people staring at her beauty will bring happiness, to the depressed person who makes the tragic, irre-

versible decision to commit suicide, all of us pursue the things we think will fulfill us.

The search for gratification can lead to a host of obsessions. Our culture is a greenhouse for growing addictions. I know a guy who can't quit getting tattoos. He spends most of his paycheck on overdone body art. I know a girl who's a "tanorexic." She keeps overdoing it at the tanning beds. She subjects her body to abuse, thinking the right skin tone will bring contentment. Teenagers and twenty somethings keep hooking up, even with the risk of disease and emotional pain. The use of painkillers is epidemic. Alcohol, food, sex, social media, video games, and more have become widespread medications for a deeper need, the need for inner satisfaction.

A girl I know just got plastic surgery. She's not alone. Record numbers of Americans are getting plastic surgery. Recently, elective operations surged over twenty million per year.¹ Do this many people really have serious cosmetic issues? Or is something deeper behind the drive to correct perceived physical flaws? I believe there is. Vast numbers of healthy people think if they had a smaller nose or smoother skin or more prominent cheeks or any other number of "adjustments," they'd be satisfied.

I saw Jeff, a college student, in the gym the other day. He was going on and on about his protein heavy diet and how much he's working out. I asked him why he was going through all of that. He didn't hesitate in his answer: "Spring break, man!" He was counting on his physique to bring him attention. If you're seeking a certain body shape to fulfill you, you might want to take a harder look at all the "beautiful" people and ask yourself, "Are they really content?"

A few weeks ago, I played a game of pickup basketball with a bunch of college guys at a local gym. I got on a team with

Shelby. Shelby is a beast. He is a great player, athletic, tall, and well-built. Between games, I asked Shelby about his life.

He was from Seattle, twenty-two years old, and said he didn't have much direction.

"How'd you end up in the Midwest from Seattle?" I asked.

"I had a girlfriend back in Seattle who started taking me to a bunch of farm parties."

He kept telling his story, but I got caught up by the phrase "farm parties." "Wait. Farm party?" I laughed. "What do you do at a farm party?"

"Oh, a farm party is actually a *pharm* party, a pharmacy party, where everyone brings pills from their home medicine cabinets to get high together."

I started cracking up. "Shelby, I was sitting here thinking, 'Kinda weird, but I guess farmers gotta party too!'"

Shelby smiled and shook his head. "A bunch of us got addicted to cotton."

I was lost again. I smiled as I pictured a bunch of farmers standing around in a barn smoking cotton.

He shook his head. "Not cotton, cotton, man. OxyContin. I ultimately got addicted to heroin. It cost me my job, my apartment, and my girlfriend. My grades tanked, so I left college and moved here, to the Midwest."

The longer we talked, the more I realized we were very similar, though we lived in different worlds. I was married with kids and had a job. He was single, broke, and broken. But we had both spent a good portion of our lives looking for the same elusive thing — satisfaction.

I work on a college campus and spend most of my time with fraternity guys. One question I like to ask the young men is, "After a weekend of partying, have you ever thought to yourself, 'Man, that was fun and all, but is that it? I mean, is that all there is?'" Almost always they will begin to admit, "Bro, I think

that all the time.” “Dude, me too!” “Wow, I thought I was the only one.”

What does it mean to be satisfied? “To satisfy” is to quench, to adequately gratify. If something satisfies, it fulfills. It meets expectations. Whether we consciously know it or not, everyone’s looking for something to meet our expectations. We’re all looking to be gratified, to feel fulfilled, to find satisfaction. Yet how many people do you know who truly find it? Most don’t. But everyone wants to. If you could bottle lasting fulfillment, you’d make millions overnight.

You are going to college in a time when there are more things to do, there’s more entertainment to take in, more cool stuff to watch, more mind blowing experiences, and more money to enjoy (when you graduate, of course)—than any culture or generation before you. But I gotta ask you a question: With everything that’s available to you, will you find satisfaction? I know I couldn’t.