

At 35, I'm still single; my once unspoken goals -- to marry at 30 and have kids by 34 or so -- haven't been achieved. Of course, now that my life has veered off that path, I'm free to ponder the 10,000 other possibilities.

To help me sort through my choices, I went to see Eileen Lawlor, a clinical social worker at the Canyon Ranch Health Resort in Lenox, Massachusetts. She runs its Lifemapping workshops, based on a technique that business and lifestyle guru Tony Buzan developed. "We're going to design your perfect life," she told me. My mind flooded with fantasies of book awards, movie deals and maybe even an Oscar nomination for the screenplay of my (still far from finished) novel. **Map out your life**

Put key goals within your grasp with this Lifemapping exercise. To start, you'll need some paper and crayons or markers.

- Imagine an idyllic few minutes in your past (say, a moonlit stroll on a beach). Keep that feeling in mind as you go.
- Write "my perfect life" in a circle in the center of the page.
- Draw spokes outward from the circle, writing an element of your perfect life along each spoke (such as "hiking" or "red convertible").
- From each spoke, draw branches labeled with your feelings and thoughts about that primary goal (for "vice president" you might list "prestige").
- Highlight similar ideas and goals in the same color. The dominant hues are the aims and emotions you should focus on.

But before I could get too caught up in my acceptance speech, Lawlor asked me to recall a few moments in my life when I'd felt completely happy. I conjured up a white farmhouse in upstate New York, where I'd visited friends a few years ago. I remembered the scent of apple pie, sitting barefoot on the front porch and sipping coffee on that bright fall day. When I opened my eyes, Lawlor unscrolled a sheet of paper and asked me to draw a symbol of that feeling; I drew an orange circle -- orange for autumn and warmth; the circle for softness. According to Lawlor, this was the feeling I was seeking, and she told me to keep it in mind while creating my map.

Next, she had me write "my perfect life" in the middle of the page, then jot down all the things that included, extending out from the center like spokes on a wheel. (To make your own map,

see "Map Out Your Life, page 166.) I scribbled "house," "husband," "children" and "novel," then drew branches from the spokes, each labeled a different association or feeling. From "novel," I drew a line and wrote "teaching position," "creating something of value" and "screenplay." From "teaching position" I wrote "rewarding"; from "screenplay" I wrote "money". (After all, perfect white farmhouses don't come cheap.) From "husband" I wrote "conversation," "long walks" and "understanding."

Next, Lawlor had me choose a crayon and highlight similar ideas with the same color. Soon, my map was dotted with aquamarine, magenta and periwinkle along with several aqua swatches representing my desire for money and bits of kelly green for "awards" and "prestige." Although my yearning for fame and fortune was undeniable, lavender dominated the page, the color that, for me, represented connection. "Meeting girlfriends for dinner," "meditation" and "talking with my child" were all lavender. In fact, almost every spoke on my map -- novel, spirituality, friends -- had the idea of connection somewhere on it.

I realized that by asking me to focus on the feeling I was after (the white farmhouse) rather than the goals (that Oscar statue), Lawlor made it easier to distinguish what truly makes me happy from what I think should make me happy. "We get hooked on the goal, but underneath, we have to ask, 'What's the fulfillment?'" Lawlor said. "Too often, we think, If I just get the new job or house, then everything will be great. But it may not be."

At the end of our session, Lawlor asked how I might get closer to my perfect life. I said I needed to earn more from freelance writing so I could work on my book (and have the cash to buy property). I also want to meet someone to love. I didn't leave with specific strategies for attaining those goals, but I did feel more aware of my need for connection.

Above all, the session helped me see how many white-farmhouse moments I experience every day, whether a walk through my Brooklyn neighborhood, an unexpected flirtation with a stranger on an airplane or when I meet my favorite girlfriend at a restaurant, and she sinks into her chair and says, "I have so much to tell you!" These are the moments I cherish, the ones I'll always have, whatever my age. In many ways, I realize, I may already be living my perfect life.

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Self Magazine

May 2002

