A Manner of Speaking

I am learning about job satisfaction from Penny — a friend, preschool teacher, and fellow quilter.

My general approach to a project has always been to work feverishly to completion, do a cursory evaluation, then move on to the next task. But Penny works differently. As she quilts she sets short term goals — vantage points from which she will enjoy what she has accomplished. She sets thread and needle aside and spreads the quilt to savor it visually. Her hands smooth the surface, as she relishes the tactile pleasures of her art. This is how Penny quilts; it is also how she puts up wallpaper (she says it takes her forever because she pauses after each strip to see what a wonderful job she has done), how she spends time with a friend, and how she works with young children.

At Exchange Press, we seldom do that — sit back and enjoy a job well done. So I decided to institute a post-issue session Penny-style. My expectation was that our staff would carefully turn pages, commenting on the quality of a photo, an inciteful idea, a new layout design. But we didn’t do that at all. Rather, we searched for the mistakes, bemoaned our errors, and focused on what we would work to improve in future issues. Necessary and helpful, yes — but as an ego booster it was a real disaster.

But maybe that’s because I wasn’t really hearing what Penny had to say. Penny doesn’t wait until the job is done to enjoy what she is doing. She takes her pleasure as she goes.

We cannot wait until an issue is done, the fiscal year is over, a fundraiser is complete to look at what we have done and sigh with pleasure. We cannot wait until a child grows up to feel good about our impact on that life. It is the day-to-day process of caring for children, of working on projects with people who share our vision, of making a million little decisions that affect the lives of families — that is our reward. It comes from vantage points we set along the way, from short term goals that focus our attention.

It is the process, then, rather than the achievement of the goal that provides the greater satisfaction. The goal itself spurs us onward but has little real value of its own.

“. . . the goal doesn’t mean so much once it is reached; the reward is not so rewarding once it has been given. If we add up all the rewards in our lives, we won’t have very much. But if we add up the spaces between the rewards, we’ll come up with quite a bit. And if we add up the rewards and the spaces, then we’ll have everything — every minute of the time that we spent . . . . That doesn’t mean that the goals we have don’t count. They do, mostly because they cause us to go through the process, and it’s the process that makes us wise, happy, or whatever.” (The Tao of Pooh, Benjamin Hoff, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1982, page 111)

And besides, every day we do many things well, whereas in our business plan we may have only five major goals for the year. Sheer numbers indicate that we must enjoy our jobs as we go — therein lies the greater satisfaction.

Goals, then, give us direction, but it is the process that gives us meaning. And this is what the children in Penny’s class are learning. They are learning that the finished art project is nice to display as a reminder of what went into its creation. But Penny is teaching them to exclaim over the curve of a line, the flow of paint from the brush, the brilliancy of the color — these pleasures are what life is about.

Thank you, Penny, for teaching us all.

Bonnie Neugebauer, March 1992