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Make a difference: Put your talents to work

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TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST
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Mature people want to improve the world they inherited.

For our children, people will say. For our grandchildren. What most also mean is: For humanity.

By midlife most of us are aware that we and our kin are connected to everything and everyone to the planet and the family of humankind.

It's a normal life stage. From our mid-40s to our mid-60s, we gradually move from a developmental period focused on self, competitiveness and obligation to one centered on care about others.

We've mastered a lot about life. We want to share -- with purpose, passion, creativity and adventure -- what we've learned and experienced.

Just think about yourself for a moment: Isn't there something big you care about? Making sure everybody knows how to read, perhaps? Protecting the environment? Preserving constitutional rights? Ensuring safety from abuse and exploitation?

Then teach someone to read. Pick up neighborhood trash and teach others to join you. Stay informed; get involved in civic action. Speak out about injustice; push lawmakers to act.

Look around. You run into people all the time who give back. Most don't make the news.

Some do: Willie Dell, the first black woman on Richmond City Council, goes every winter to Haiti to work with children so poor they lack childhood's fundamental necessities: safety and someone to trust.

Chip Snead cares deeply about bringing well-paying business to Alleghany County, where he's the interim administrator, so his people won't have to leave home for good jobs.

Don Cowles came out of early retirement to put his legal, organizational and people skills to use as the new national executive director of Initiatives of Change-USA, parent group of Hope in the Cities, which seeks to bridge divisions in communities. Another Richmonder, Rob Corcoran, who has worked four decades for racial reconciliation, is its national director.

Your true talents draw you to what you care passionately about. Failing to use them brings feelings of impotence, anxiety and failure.

I often hear seniors say, "Our problems are so huge, what can one person do?" Well, everything. When you begin a work you care about, others will join you: "A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said.

Choose one thing, small or large, that really matters to you, and commit to doing it. The goal should be possible, but just slightly out of reach so you'll have to stretch to attain it.

I learned this years ago in a workshop in Manhattan with Dr. Ari Kiev, a psychoanalyst who outlines the process in a little book called "A Strategy for Daily Living."

It's an antidote to despair: Choose one thing bigger than yourself. Do it.

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