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Q&A: Mansfield native on 'Naked Idealism'

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MANSFIELD -- Dark hours of doubt. The vision -- once grand, happy, colorful, fulfilling -- grows unfocused and distant as rebels squabble over how to overcome the overwhelming obstacles of the status quo.

If you've ever been an activist or a youth, you know that wanting good things for everyone -- peace, social justice, a clean environment, a diversity of species, economic opportunity -- can feel joyless against little evidence of incremental progress.

It's tempting to dial down the idealism and fill the void with what's doable, with things like creature comforts, memberships, addictions, stuff.

Mansfield native Dave Wheatner knows all this. He headed for upscale schools on the East Coast when he left town at age 17. To an Ivy League education he added worthy work, both paid and unpaid. Somewhere along the way he learned a critical lesson.

Before you can save the world, you must become yourself.

That tidbit is on the back of his book, "Naked Idealism: Expose your Authentic Side and Create a Sustainable Life and World," a manual to help well-intentioned folks understand their strengths and live their values.

Wheatner's book prepares readers for a journey towards authenticity. It offers exercises to help you get clear about what's most alive and essential in you (being), and develop your capacity to choose action steps that come out of that creative energy (doing). From this being-driven doing comes having -- that is, relationships with people and things in a world of shared abundance.

In a phone interview a few days ago, Wheatner answered a few of my questions about "getting naked" and being authentic.

What happened when you left near-poverty in Mansfield and went to schools -- East Coast schools -- with kids from wealthy families?

Answer: Seeing that disparity has fueled a lot of my thinking about helping people understand their potential and being open to different viewpoints. I had been in one environment for 17 years, then was in another. That was just the beginning of a longer series of events where I recognized the struggles of being where you are a misfit outside the norm. Being outside of your comfort zone really pushes you to

take action to adapt and create change for yourself. Once I took control into my own hands, I felt much more comfortable.

I met a number of people throughout my schooling with backgrounds very different from my own, but the struggles were fairly common. We had a lot more in common than I realized. The themes were "Who am I?" and "How can I live a more fulfilled life?"

Sometimes it takes extra work to become aligned with who we authentically are, but when we don't act in accordance with our authentic selves it has other consequences. Taking the time to find out who we are and acting in line with that is really core to sustainable life and a more sustainable world.

Is that why you wrote "Naked Idealism"?

A: Yeah.

How long had this book been bugging you?

A: (Laugh.) I really didn't see it in the form of a book until I taught it as a course to graduate students in community leadership in Spring 2007. When I started seeing how they were able to utilize some of these ideas, I decided I really wanted to reach a lot more people.

What do you mean by "naked" and why that is such a rich metaphor for you?

A: "Naked" means authentic. The word nakedness often startles people. It means being ourselves in settings where people aren't always ... Boldly putting ourselves out there.

What are some common misunderstandings about the process you describe in the book.

A: Readers confuse life coaching, which is really about defining and moving toward the future, with certain types of therapy that are about deeply analyzing one's past. Coaching doesn't involve a whole lot of going back and asking why am I the way I am.

Is there common thinking you've identified that prevents people from moving forward into nakedness?

A: One piece is that people are afraid to give themselves permission to do things that are enjoyable in life. There's this assumption that once you're grown up, everything has to be serious, that life can no longer be fun. We take ourselves too seriously if we think deeply about things. We place too much of a burden upon ourselves.

Another big piece is that we often invest a lot of time and money and energy into getting where we are and we sometimes need to let go of a lot of that to get to where we really want to go. If I'm not happy with where I'm at, why am I spinning my wheels in the same direction?

There's a range of common fears that get in the way and we allow fear to hold us back. We react based on fear instead of defining what we want. We don't take the time to define what we really want out of life and condemn ourselves to living in a fear-based mode.

What part of the process do people get stuck in?

A: It varies by individual. Some already know what they want to achieve. Others need to step back to be more honest with themselves. The biggest shift for some is to accept that it's OK to give themselves permission to decide what it is they want, to be the boss of (their own) lives.

What have we to gain?

A: Increased personal happiness. Greater impact on the world. More connected communities. More progress and less conflict.

Is there anything a person has to give up to get naked (other than clothes)?

A: This process requires forgiving yourself and forgiving others. What often stands in our way is it's easy to become angry and spend a lot of time spinning our wheels. We have to give up any kind of blame or anger we have relating to any time or energy we may have spent that didn't get us to where we now want to go.

(Getting naked can impact) financial security, alter different relationships that we have, lead into new work places, social settings, etc., that relate to the visions we've created for where we want to move to. We need to be willing to give up the same old, same old and that can be scary and exciting at the same time. If we're moving forward, we're going to find ourselves doing that fairly consistently.

We need to be willing to give up constant acceptance from people because as we do things differently, we're going to face criticism. But at the same time we're going to attract people and resources that will help us.

What did you gain growing up in Mansfield?

A: What I realize (now) is that a lot of people are looking for that greater sense of connectedness. People have become detached from one another. Mansfield certainly had an impact because of the sense of community I had growing up there that I took for granted until later in life. ... Sometimes communities go through the same things that individuals go through. In response to sudden change communities choose to adapt and try different things to move forward or they cycle through the same actions for a while until someone comes along and helps them define a way to move forward.

What about being naked in public?

A: The way we think about and manage our individual lives also expresses itself in our public lives and leadership. "Being naked" changes the way we behave as citizens. We don't expect leaders to come and rescue us -- then the next election cycle comes, the tide shifts, the expected miracles don't happen and there's hopelessness.

I do think that leaders play a very important role (in change), but there still has to be that element of personal drive and motivation and it really has to be in line with who we really are (on the part of both leaders and citizens). When we're really in touch with who we are and pursuing what's generally important to us, it focuses us on what we really want to create in the world and our lives, and redirects our energy.

E-mail News Journal Community Conversation Editor Holly Harman Fackler at hfackler@gannett.com with your "future biography." Put "biography" in the subject line. You may also reach her at 419-521-7232 or write her at News Journal, P.O. Box 25, Mansfield, OH 44901.

At a Glance

"Naked Idealism: Expose your Authentic Side and Create a Sustainable Life and World."

Author: Dave Wheatner

Cost: \$19.95

Find it: In the self-help section of Barnes & Noble or your favorite bookstore.

On the Web: nakedidealism.com, idealistcoach.com

Write Your Future Biography

An excerpt from "Naked Idealism": How many biographies have you read that focus only upon an individual's past? Most that you've seen probably fit this description, right? This is somewhat ironic when we consider a common purpose of biographies: to attract individuals with whom we may have mutually beneficial relationships -- business relationships, friendships, romantic relationship, and so on.

In an attempt to achieve these ends, we inform others about who we are via our previous experiences and accomplishments. While this is often useful, it is only part of the picture. What if we want to create a future that is very different from our past, and thus need to attract very different people to support that? Wouldn't a future biography convey a fuller and more honest depiction of who we really are? Let's get started:

Find a relaxing location where you can clear your mind.

Imagine what you'd like your life to look like a year or five years from now, focusing upon whatever areas of your life stand out as being most important.

Spend half an hour to an hour writing or typing a vivid description of your ideal life. If you have difficulty, don't force it; just set it aside and return to it later.

Consider including an overall description of the future life you've just created, as well as a description of something specific you've created as part of it.

Include as much detail as possible, including what you're doing, how you feel, and who is around you.

Write in the first-person and present tense.

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