



3 Simple Tests To Finding Your Authentic Self

By Neil Pasricha

Authenticity is all the rage.

Be you, be true, and be cool, they say.

But how?

It's not as easy as it sounds.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

So let's say you're confident. Not always. But often. You're not always there but you've gotten there before and you can get there again.

Now you want to listen to yourself a bit. You want to find your authentic passion. You want to be authentic. How do you search your heart and mind to find your authentic self?

After sifting through Harvard visioning exercises and attending endless executive corporate retreats and paging through dusty leadership textbooks I have found what I consider the three best tests to finding and aligning your authentic self. I have shared these tests with countless leaders and use them on myself at least once every year.

Here they are:

1. The Saturday Morning Test

What do you do on a Saturday morning when you have nothing to do? Your authentic self should go toward that...

2. The Bench Test

How do you feel when you put yourself in a new situation? Your authentic self will lead you toward that...

3. The Five People Test

Who are the five people closest to you in the things you love most? Your authentic self is an average of those people . . .



The Saturday Morning Test

Let's start with a horrible question.

“What do you want to do when you grow up?”

I worry about that question because it sits invisibly over much of our lives. Professional designations. Business cards. Résumés with job titles and bullet points. These are great things! But the downside to this filtering and organizing is that so many people grow up stuffing their textured, layered, complex selves into narrow buckets that don't allow room for individuality.

Nobody knows what they want to do with their entire life. Nobody. Nobody is born with a single unifying sense of purpose that they strive toward forever. Have people at your work ever said “I just backed into this job!” or “I never said I wanted to do this when I was younger. I didn't know it existed!”? My point is it just doesn't happen. Having one giant purpose that you strive toward forever isn't the goal.

What is?

An *ikigai*.

A current aim.

A reason to get out of bed in the morning.

The Saturday Morning Test helps find an authentic passion and check if you're letting that passion be as big a part of your life as it could be.

The Saturday Morning Test is your answer to one simple question:

What do you do on Saturday morning when you have nothing to do?

Ask yourself that one crucial question, think about it for a second, and answer it out loud. What do you do on Saturday morning when you have nothing to do? Do you go to the gym? Do you record yourself playing guitar? Take whatever answer you have and then wildly brainstorm ways you can pursue opportunities that naturally spew from that passion.

There will be hundreds.

Love going to the gym? Personal training, coaching a baseball team, volunteering for a walking group, running a yoga studio, teaching phys ed, starting a supplements company. And it goes on. Love recording yourself playing guitar? How about teaching guitar online, editing music, learning to DJ, starting up an instrument company? One of the happiest people I've met was a high school music teacher who decided to start importing, selling, and teaching the ukulele.

Your true self will be drawn to these ideas.

They make you richer, stronger, and happier in your work life, too.

Dale Carnegie said, “Are you bored with life? Then throw yourself into some work you



believe in with all your heart, live for it, die for it, and you will find happiness that you had thought could never be yours.”

The Saturday Morning Test asks you to lean in to your natural passion to enrich your work and personal lives.

The Bench Test

I met Fred Thate in July 1998 in the SHAD program.

Vancouver was our home during this month-long summer camp for teenage nerds as we bounced between astrophysics lectures, particle accelerator field trips, and long conversations on the oceanside campus of the University of British Columbia.

Geniuses are hard to spot, but Fred was a certified genius in my book—crisp thoughts, sharp observations, a piercingly insightful view of the world. I knew he was going far, but I was eighteen, he was seventeen, and our masking-tape-stuck friendship got tossed on the shelf when we went to different colleges and got immersed in our own lives.

Years later I Googled him and saw he worked as an investment banker in New York City. I cold-called the place and politely asked for Frederic Thate, please. When he answered his desk line, I said “Hey Fred, it’s Neil Pasricha,” and it was a mini–telephone reunion. I planned a trip down to New York to hang out with him for a weekend.

I spent four years at Queen’s, he spent four years at Princeton, and we were eager to hear about each other’s experiences. We spent an hour searching for the blue whale in the Museum of Natural History as we caught up.

“So how’d you pick Princeton, anyway?” I started. “I mean, I knew you were smart and all, but why not Harvard or Yale or Cornell or Columbia?”

“Well, I was lucky, I had some options,” he humbly mumbled. “I didn’t know where to go, so I made a test to figure it out. I called it The Bench Test.

“Basically, I figured I could rent a Jeep for a week for two hundred dollars. And I knew making this decision was worth more than two hundred dollars. So I rented a Jeep and visited Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and Columbia. At each campus I walked around until I found a bench near the middle of campus. Then I sat in the bench for an hour and listened. I watched the students and listened to all the conversations around me. I listened to what was important to them, how they talked to each other, what they were excited about.”

“How’d you decide to do that?”

“Well,” Fred continued, “I figured most of my time over the next four years would be spent doing exactly what I was listening to. Going to classes was twenty or thirty hours a week, tops. The rest is making friends, chatting on the way to class, figuring out plans. Basically, my experience was going to be the sum of all the conversations I had over four years. So I tried to hear those conversations and figure out if they were a good fit for me. I tried listening to my authentic self and letting it lead me toward the right decision.”



I was impressed.

I knew hundreds of people who went to university. I knew the majority spent time paging through websites, going on campus tours, and visiting the library stacks—researching for hours the pros and cons from the books. That’s what I did.

But The Bench Test was so much simpler than all that. Fred didn’t ask anybody where he should go to school, because he knew their opinions were based on their experiences. Not his. He didn’t bother with campus tours highlighting famous statues and state-of-the-art treadmills. He didn’t sift through campus demographics and SAT score sheets in university guidebooks.

He didn’t care.

He just went to campus and sat on a bench.

The Bench Test worked for Fred because he immersed himself in the new situation he wanted to test and then patiently observed his authentic reaction to that situation. That’s what The Bench Test is about. Really putting yourself into something new for a short time to test it.

Can you use The Bench Test in other places? Absolutely! Just call it The Office Tour Test during your job interview, The Sidewalk Test when you’re looking for a home, The Treadmill and Shower Test when you’re looking for a gym.

Think about going for an interview at a new company. You’re desperate to learn about the company culture and the workplace. Should you ask, “What’s the culture like?” No! I get asked that so often in interviews. But that’s like reading about school in a book or learning to drive a car in a classroom. You need to get into the office. You need to feel the culture.

How?

The Office Tour Test.

Ask for a five-minute walk around the place after your interview.

You may not be able to sit on a bench, but you’ll see everything you need to know.

I’ll never forget my first tour of the Walmart Home Office during my job interview.

Sitting on cheap, wobbly, garage-sale chairs in the humming front reception, I watched a motley crew of smiling fifty-somethings, flashy thirty-year-olds, and baby-faced college grads quick-walking in and out of the place. It was like an animated Office Diversity poster. Nobody was dressed up. People were all ages. Nobody was using big words.

The walls were full, too!

I walked past the company mission in block letters: we save people money so they can live better. I liked that they knew what they were doing and talked about doing it. There was a flow-chart of the company’s history. Rankings of the “Top 5 and Bottom 5 Vendors.” And a cutout sign with “Today’s Share Price” listed and the sentence “Tomorrow depends on you!”



I walked around with my interviewer Antoinette as she led me down a long hallway and up a flight of stairs. On the way she said hi to every single person by name and they said hi to her by name, too. I felt like we were on a red carpet. “With a thousand people working here, how do you know everyone?” I asked her.

“Easy,” she replied. “We have the ten-foot rule. You say hi to everybody within ten feet of you. It’s based on asking customers how you can help in a store. Our name badges have our names printed in big letters and we hang them on our shirt collars so they’re easy to read. It’s like those hello my name is stickers at parties. Except we wear them all the time.”

The culture wasn’t for everybody.

But I loved it immediately.

The Bench Test is immersing yourself in a new situation and observing your reaction to make sure your decision is aligned with your authentic self.

The Five People Test

“The company is the five people you sit beside.”

My leadership professor at Harvard said this all the time. What did he mean? The five people on your team, the five people you eat lunch with every day, the five people telling you all about the company—they are the company. They create and help articulate your view of the company.

[“Are your friends making you fat?”](#) asked *The New York Times*, with an article and research studies concluding that even our weight may be based on the weight of our friends. Hang out with fat people? You become fat. What if they hang out with fat people? They become fat. Then you become fat. Sad but true. Some studies have even suggested you’re the average of your friends’ height and their attractiveness. Makes sense when you see old married couples that look the same. Or people who look like their dogs!

Researchers Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler write in their bestselling book *Connected*: “We discovered that if your friend’s friend’s friend gained weight, you gained weight. We discovered that if your friend’s friend’s friend stopped smoking, you stopped smoking. And we discovered that if your friend’s friend’s friend became happy, you became happy.”

Bestselling author James Altucher took the idea even further in the main points of his “The Power of Five” article: “You are the average of the five people around you...You are the average of the five things that inspire you the most...My thoughts are the average of the five things I think about...My body and mind are the average of the five things I ‘eat.’...I am the average of the five things I do to help people each day.”



Remember this: You are the average of the five people around you! You're the average of their intelligence, you're the average of their looks, you're the average of their positivity, you're the average of their creativity, you're the average of their ambition.

So what's The Five People Test?

Take a look at the five people closest to you and remember you're the average of them.

There's you in the middle.

Want to know how positive you are? Average the attitude of the five people you spend time with most.

Want to know how strong a leader you are? Average the leadership qualities of your five closest peers.

Want to know how confident you are? Average the confidence of the five people you hang out with most.

Sure, it's an approximation, but The Five-People Test shows us who we are...to ourselves. It's one of the three tests you can use to find your authentic self.

As American philosopher William James said, "Wherever you are it is your own friends who make your world."

Neil Pasricha is Director of The Institute for Global Happiness and New York Times bestselling-author of the [*The Happiness Equation*](#), a 300-page letter he wrote to his unborn son, which shares the nine step-by-step [*secrets to happiness*](#).