

The three most important questions that affect your financial future (that have nothing to do with money)

By Thomas Twombly, President & Co-founder

November and December are among the busiest months of the year, not only because we will travel, eat, shop, and entertain, but because the end-of-year also brings deadlines, decisions, obligations and responsibilities. We often feel both the opportunity and the pressure to make changes in our own lives, and also to make a difference in the lives of others. We may be moved to volunteer more of our time; to give more of our money; or to cross a great distance to be with the people we love. It can be a challenge.

While the spirit of the season may carry us through, practical matters interrupt us, and there may be little time for reflection. Decisions we face today may affect our plans for all of next year, and we make these decisions under the pressure of a deadline. Donate now. Pay property taxes now for the deduction. Take the distribution, or realize the gain / loss before the close of business on the 31st. Is this really the most wonderful time of the year?

I've been talking to people about money for over half of my life. My favorite conversations do not center on rebalancing portfolios, year-end income shifting opportunities, tax loss harvesting, or last-minute Required Minimum Distributions. Those conversations are obviously important, but they lend little to the far more meaningful issue of knowing the true purpose of your money, and crafting a long-term, completely individualized blueprint for achieving that purpose.

In fact, the true craftsmanship in our work lies in helping people know themselves. It lies in creating an environment where they can relax, think deeply, and explore their most heart-felt motivations. It's not primarily about providing correct technical answers, but about asking questions, and challenging people to explore issues and areas of their lives that they wouldn't explore on their own. Exploring these areas can sometimes elicit strong emotions, but that's ok. In fact, the most grounded people understand that it's important to know what those motivations are, especially if they lie hidden beneath the surface.

My favorite conversations begin with three questions – and you may want to pose them to your family and friends this holiday season. With all credit to George Kinder, here are the three most important questions that affect your financial future – and that have nothing to do with money.

1. Suppose that you learned today that for the rest of your life you would have plenty of money. No worries, no shortages. What would you change about your life? What would you do differently?

2. Suppose you learned today that you have only five years left to live. That's it. The good news is that period of time will be easy and pain-free. The bad news is that five years from today it ends. What would you change about your life? What would you do differently?

3. Now let's suppose that you found out that today was the last day of your life. What would you regret? What would you most wish you had done?

And a fourth question of my own:

4. How do you want to be remembered? This question is for people of all ages. I even ask this of my kids: how do you want to be remembered by your teacher? Your coach? Your friends?

The best part of these questions is that there are no wrong answers. The worst part: they are hard.

People who take the time to consider them build a tremendous foundation for their financial future and other acts of faith.

Yes, acts of faith -- right up there with getting married, having children, building a business or pursuing a dream: investing is ultimately an act of faith. Considering your purpose helps you to affirm the right role for your money, which is ultimately this: at your service. Are your resources *serv*ing you, or are they *controlling* you? Are they serving you in the best way possible? When your money is your servant, and not your master, you will find a true sense of stewardship. And that may be the greatest peace on earth.