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Motivation

Just after the turn of the new year, several of you told me about an app I should really get for my phone. It's called "We Croak." Available in the App Store for ninety-nine cents, it promises to remind us at random times, five times a day, that we're going to die. With one exception, in every group in which this was discussed, there was a mix of curiosity and horror — mostly horror. The exception was a large gathering of Unitarian Universalist clergy, who immediately all pulled out their phones. You can think about that. Also worth thinking about is the inspiration for this app: In Bhutan, a country that measures its wealth in Gross National Happiness and that is, indeed, the happiest country in the world, it is said that contemplating our death five times daily brings happiness.

There's something about contemplating the limit of our time on earth that can be profoundly motivating, in the no-time-to-waste/no-time-like-the-present/let's-get-going kind of way. We might ask just where we're going, and that would be good. We should also be asking what's going to motivate and sustain us on the journey.

At one time or another, most of us have almost certainly been encouraged to picture in our mind's eye something we thought we wanted — the feel of warm, white sand between our toes, a cold drink with a little umbrella in our hand, and an expanse of Caribbean blue ocean before us; a fast car or a beautiful home; the way we'd look walking the runway or the red carpet; or whatever felt lovely but far away at that moment. Alas, there's bad news about visualization. The research is in: although visualizing our future might make us feel good, "the technique is, at best, ineffective."¹

In one of many studies, in the time leading up to an important exam, some students were asked to spend just a few minutes each day visualizing getting a high

¹ Richard Wiseman, *59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot*, p. 80. Thanks to Richard Wiseman, all research cited in this sermon is published in his book.

grade and imagining how great that would feel. The control group went about business as usual, preparing for the exam. Students in both groups noted how many hours they studied each day.

As it turned out, the daydreamers studied less and made lower grades. Ugh.²

In another study, students were directed to fantasize about getting their dream job after college. Two years later, those who had imagined their success “had submitted fewer job applications, received a lower number of job offers,” and were making significantly smaller salaries than their classmates. Ugh.³

One more. This one’s about one of America’s favorite obsessions: losing weight. A group of women taking part in a weight-loss program was asked to imagine how they would respond to various scenarios of being tempted with tasty, high-calorie foods. One year later, those who had imagined themselves as resisting and abstaining were compared with those who imagined themselves eating, well, everything in sight. Those with more positive fantasies had lost, on average, twenty-six pounds less than those with negative fantasies. Ugh.⁴

I’m sorry to say these studies go on and on, and it’s not pretty. Visualization seems like it should work, doesn’t it? No one really seems to know where the problem lies. Maybe it’s that when we’re lost in our daydreams about how fabulous it’s going to be, we aren’t building the muscles for the inevitable setbacks in achieving our dreams. Or maybe visualization is just escapism, derailing us from putting in the hard work required to get somewhere wonderful. I’m not sure it’s all bad — visualization could certainly make us feel better in the moment — but it’s definitely not a way to transform our lives.

So what is? Now what?

British psychologist Richard Wiseman conducted a really interesting, long-term study of motivation. More than five thousand people from around the world

² Lien Pham and Shelley Taylor (University of California, 1999), “From thought to action: Effects of process- versus outcome-based mental simulations on performance” in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, pp. 250-260

³ Gabriele Oettingen in Wiseman, *op cit*, p. 80

⁴ Gabriele Oettingen and Thomas Wadden (University of Pennsylvania, 1991), “Expectation, fantasy, and weight loss: Is the impact of positive thinking always positive?” in *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 15, pp. 167-175

signed up to change their lives. At the beginning of the project, almost everyone was confident that they could achieve the goal they set for themselves — the usual suspects such as losing weight, quitting smoking, embarking on a new career, falling in love, etc. At the end, only ten percent were successful.

Everyone was asked to describe the techniques they had used. Here are the ten top responses:

1. Make a step-by-step plan.
2. Focus on someone I admire for their achievement — a celebrity or a great leader.
3. Tell others about my goal.
4. Think about the bad things that will happen if I don't make my goal.
5. Think about the good things that will happen if I make my goal.
6. Try to suppress unhelpful thoughts; avoid thinking about smoking, overeating, or otherwise failing.
7. Reward myself for progress.
8. Rely on willpower.
9. Record my progress using a journal or a chart.
10. Fantasize about how great my life will be when I make my goal.⁵

We already know that one doesn't work. Actually, it turns out only half of these will work. Let's start with the losers:

* It turns out that aspiring to be like a movie star or a world leader doesn't make an appreciable difference in achieving that status.

* If you know anything about addiction and recovery, you know that willpower is grossly overrated.

* Using thought suppression is a fail, as is daydreaming.

All of these are motivational myths; none of them will enable us to take control of our lives.

Now to the winners. Here are the top three:

First, have a plan. Salesman and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar was famous for saying that we don't tend to just wander around and then suddenly find ourselves on top of Mount Everest. Aimlessness is problematic. The trick is to break down our goal into a series of manageable steps. In 12-step programs, we

⁵ Wiseman, *op cit*, pp. 82-83

say, “One day at a time.” We want to torch the fear and hesitation that might be associated with taking on a daunting challenge.

The best plans are made of concrete, measurable, and scheduled steps. In Richard Wiseman’s study, although many participants said they wanted to enjoy life more, the successful ones made a calendar, setting aside time to be with friends two evenings a week, and making plans to travel once a year. Interestingly, writing it down boosts our chances of success.

Second, tell someone. Actually, tell everyone. When we want to make a change but keep our plans to ourselves, it’s too easy to drift back to our old habits. Go public. The more amplified our declaration, the more motivated we are. And people can support us, then, when the road gets rough.

One study proved that having friends by our side makes life seem easier. This is very sweet: people were taken to the bottom of a hill and asked to estimate how steep it was and how hard it would be to climb. When a friend went with them, their estimates were fifteen percent lower than when they were on their own. In fact, just thinking about a friend as they gazed at the hill made it seem far more surmountable.

Third, focus on the benefits and think *rewards*. A reward doesn’t have to be big, and it should never conflict with the major goal — as in, don’t eat a whole cake to celebrate a week of healthy eating — but giving ourselves something to look forward to can be inspirational, and reinforces what we’ve already achieved.

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Let’s circle back to visualization, because it turns out, if deployed effectively, our imagination really is our friend.

While daydreaming about success without a plan for how we’re going to get there is a non-starter, it turns out that visualizing each step of the way can be very powerful: getting down to business with a clear roadmap before us and literally imagining ourselves traveling it. In the case of the students who were facing a big exam, those who visualized the process of study — when, where, what, and how — were in the best shape of all. The theory is that it made the workload seem more manageable and reduced test anxiety. This translated to athletes, as well; tennis players and golfers benefitted not from imagining themselves winning, but from imagining themselves training.

Researcher Gabriele Oettingen at U. Penn has concluded that, ideally, we are at our best when we can both be *optimistic* about our goal and, at the same time, *realistic* about the hurdles we may need to clear. This is counterintuitive, but the science is in. Dr. Oettingen's seven steps are included in your order of service, if you'd like to take them home and reflect on them. Here's the ideal:

First, think of something you want to achieve.

Second, fantasize about reaching that goal. Note your top two benefits associated with it.

Third, think about what's standing in your way. Note your top two roadblocks to success.

Fourth, return to the first benefit. How will it make you happier?

Fifth, return to the first roadblock. What will you do when you come to it?

Sixth, return to the second benefit. How will it make you happier?

And seventh, return to the second roadblock. What will you do when you come to it?⁶

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Circling back to "We Croak:" Many of you very kindly wrote to me after the January 17th death of poet Mary Oliver, as if I — as if all of us — had lost a family member. I would say we have, and I miss her already, though she has left us a treasure trove of clear instructions for living a deeply spiritual and exalted life. It was a line of her poetry, actually, that inspired this sermon on motivation; she wrote, "I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

Here's the end of that poem, called *When Death Comes*.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

⁶ For more information, please see Oettingen, G., Pat, H., and Schnetter, K. (2001) "Self-regulation of goal setting: Turning free fantasies about the filter into binding goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, pp. 736-753; Oettingen, G. (2000) "Expectancy effects on behavior depend on self-regulatory thought," *Social Cognition*, 18, pp. 101-129; Oettingen, G. And Gollwitzer, P.M. (2002) "Self-regulation of goal pursuit: *Turning hope thoughts into behavior*, *Social Cognition* 18, pp. 304-307

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.⁷

And in closing, my beloved spiritual companions, I'll give you the end of another of Mary Oliver's poems — one you may know by heart, and if you don't, you'll want to. Here's how she finishes *The Summer Day*.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?⁸

Amen.

⁷ Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," in *New and Selected Poems*

⁸ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems*