

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY TURNING A WISH INTO A TRIUMPH

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[Note by Jack Wheeler: I always find Joel's

wisdom valuable, and this week especially so. He explains why, for example, women who fantasize about losing weight end up losing less weight than women who don't! To learn why and a lot more, read on...]

Have you ever watched the downhill skiers in the Winter Olympics before a race, visualizing the run, moving and swaying their bodies as though they're on the run itself? They all do this now, because the visualization is a powerfully effective strategy for bringing out their best.

But they aren't picturing themselves with the gold medal and the national anthem playing. They're crouched down in a skiing stance, imagining how they'll negotiate the challenges of the run, practicing the specific skills that will *get them to* that gold medal.

Much is made these days of having a compelling future vision. Picturing yourself on the winner's block, or with that book published, or that wonderful relationship; imagining a future that you can step into... The pop psychology literature is chock full of advice for seeing yourself *having* accomplished your goals.

But the pop psychology literature on this is wrong.

When we imagine having *already* achieved our goals, part of what happens is we *feel* like we've already achieved our goals; and because we feel the reward of the accomplishment already, our motivation to do the inevitable hard work required for any meaningful goal fades.

Dreams that matter are not easy; they take time and considerable effort.

Imagine you have a big goal that means a lot to you, you're willing and expect to work very hard for it. Let's imagine for fun that it's a mountain that you want to summit. You've trained, you've prepared, and you've struggled physically and mentally to finally make it to the top.

Hooray! You've done it!

Now, how would you feel if having felt this amazing achievement, you suddenly discover you've only just started the climb, and you still have a very long ways to go?

I think most of us would feel disheartened, disappointed, let down. We also would have a hard time gathering up the same intensity of desire and focus that we initially had. We may still get there, but it would be more of a hard slog at that point, and less of an invigorating triumph.

This is exactly what we do to ourselves psychologically when we spend time *just* imagining what it will be like when we've already reached our goals. It saps our energy, and undermines our motivation.

But it *is* relaxing and comforting *in the moment*; which is why we do it... and why all those pop psychology authors have advised it.

When Gabriele Oettingen, professor of psychology at New York University and The University of Hamburg, and author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking* first discovered this, she was disappointed. She had hoped that dreaming about success could help people who were struggling to more easily reach their goals. Finding that it did the opposite made it hard for her to continue to study such fantasies.

Then she asked the interesting question:

"I wondered if there was anything I could do to the process of dreaming to turn things around and make dreams more helpful for achieving wishes. In particular, since positive fantasies tended to relax people, was there a way that I could use dreaming to wake them up, get them into gear, and motivate them to succeed?"

What she found was if she asked people to dream of their success, which caused them to relax, *then* confronted them right away with the obstacles in the way of reaching their success, that would get them energized and ready to dive into the tasks that would lead to their success.

She calls this "*Mental Contrasting*," and it can give us huge leverage in achieving the success we dream of.

But, only if what we dream of is attainable in reality.

Let's say we're on that mountain, we've trained and prepared, so we actually have the skills and knowledge to summit the mountain. Seeing ourselves at the top *for a moment* and then identifying all the challenges between here and there that we must face, will get us fired up and ready to climb.

That's exactly what those Olympic skiers are doing before their runs.

On the other hand, if we have *not* trained and prepared, and don't actually have the skills and knowledge to climb that mountain, seeing the reality of the challenges will sap our energy and make it very hard to get going. That's a *good* thing. We don't want to find ourselves facing a mountain we can't climb! That would not only be disheartening, it could be extremely dangerous.

In other words, if we have a dream, and we want to achieve that dream, *reality has to be our friend*.

Have the dream, envision the life you want to attain, but then identify what you actually need to overcome to reach that dream, *for real*.

If summing that mountain has enough meaning for you, and you could do it with a lot of training and

preparation, then mental contrasting can help you to get to work. If you don't have the ability no matter how much work you do, then it's important to let it go, and make room for other things you can actually do.

Here are some of the things Oettingen discovered in her earlier research:

- Women who fantasized about losing weight lost less weight than women who didn't
- Women who fantasized about getting a great job out of college got fewer job offers, put fewer applications out and were worse off than those who didn't.
- People with hip replacements, after two weeks of only positive fantasies, had a harder and longer recovery than those who had a realistic sense of what they were in for
- Students did less well on exams when they dwelt on just the positive
- Students who fantasized their happy future felt less depressed in the moment, while they enjoyed the fantasy, but more depressed over time, as they were discouraged by the actual challenges

When we dwell on positive futures, our blood pressure goes down, and we feel less energized. We feel lower levels of motivation, and we don't have the energy or desire to overcome the real challenges that any meaningful goal requires.

We want to *start* with the dream, we need the inspiration of a meaningful vision to draw us toward action; but then we need to shift our focus, and go right to what the challenges are, what needs to be done.

Imagine the future, and imagine the obstacles. Doing so connects, within us, the future with the obstacles, and connects the obstacles with the means we must cultivate to overcome those obstacles. This sets up an automatic process of sorting out what we can and cannot do, and provides the energy we need to focus on actually reaching our goals.

Those Olympic skiers know exactly why they're there. They want to achieve their absolute best performance, and, hopefully, earn a place in history. But their focus is not on the gold medal; their focus is on what they have to do to get there. That simple shift of focus can make the difference between a wish and a triumph.

PS: *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible; and my new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you grow a deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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