

RESOLUTIONS 2023

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Rebel and I

received the best Christmas present we could ask for. Jackson and his wife Raya came to spend Christmas-New Year's with us, and to deliver the news: Rebel and I are going to be grandparents! At last!

The picture you see is Rebel, Jackson, and me standing in front of our Christmas tree, with Rebel holding a 1992 photo of Jackson being held by us on his first Christmas at six months old. He's now 30, six-foot-two, and soon to be a father himself.

The years pass by so quickly. You look back on them and they seem to have gone by at light speed. That's why I always advise parents of young children to treasure every day with them – for the day will come so fast when they will be grown and gone.

That's why each one of us no matter how old should treasure every day we are still alive on this Earth – for the day will come when we will be gone, and that day can come at any moment.

That's why every January 1st, I renew my two most fundamental Resolutions for the coming year.

The first is: *to live in gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of existence.* To exist, to be part of this incredible world, of this Earth, of this Universe, to be part of humanity and its history, is such an unfathomable privilege, rather than never to have been born and existed at all.

To be grateful for my Mom and Dad for giving me life, for raising me with care and love; grateful for the endless blessings my life has had, grateful for my friends and my TTPers, grateful for my sons, grateful for the greatest honor ever bestowed upon me: that the most special woman I have ever known has chosen to spend her life with me.

I express this and more, fill my soul with it, early every morning on the balcony of our home. I'd like to suggest you do something similar regarding what you are grateful for in your particular life.

I find it never fails to fill my body and spirit with the pure joy of simply being alive – and what a great way to start the day. I think you'll feel the same.

Now for my second most fundamental Resolution for the coming year: *novelty, new experiences*. Which brings us to seahorses.

Actually, a structure in our brains that looks like a seahorse – it's the *hippocampus*, the Greek name for "seahorse."

The hippocampus is the human brain's filing clerk. It's responsible for transforming short-term memories into long-term memories, so it has to know if those fleeting impulses are important to be stored in the first place, and if so, where do they go in the brain for long-term storage.

Failure or impairment of this task is one of the clearest signs of Alzheimer's or dementia. As the medical journal *Neurology* reports: Shrinking Hippocampus Signals Early Alzheimer's:

"People who have lost brain cells in the hippocampus area of the brain are more likely to develop dementia... shrinkage of the brain, particularly in the hippocampal area, may be an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, occurring years before obvious memory loss and other symptoms appear."

Get that? *Years before*. Clearly, stopping this *years in advance* is a critical way to keep your brain young and functioning optimally. How do you do this? One word: *novelty*.

The older you get, the more our lives can get bogged down in routine. We do the same things at work, the same

chores at home, play the same games at play. We get used to the usual – and the perception of time speeds up as we keep doing the same things.

With this, the hippocampus gets bored, lazy – and shrinks with so little to do. We need to correct this – by *doingsomething* new. The word is in italics because of this study in the science journal *Nature*: Only watching others making their experiences is insufficient to enhance adult neurogenesis.

The hippocampus plays a critical role in visual-spatial memory. So in order for it to grow new neurons – “neurogenesis” – you’ve got to be physically engaged (visually-spatially) in doing, learning, and experiencing something novel and new.

You can *rewire your hippocampus making your brain younger* by learning and engaging in a new physical sport or activity. A university brain researcher once told me what she did was take up square dancing – meet new friends and learn a physical activity at the same time.

Where were we when we talked about this? Hiking in the Chilbo Mountains of North Korea. She was in my group I took there in 2012. She explained:

“This – exploring North Korea – is a perfect example of how to promote hippocampal neurogenesis, Jack. You can’t get much more novel than exploring here! We are exploring, doing, seeing, learning about a country and culture that’s about as strange and different as you’re going to get.”

I mentioned that this is what I do for a living. She gave me a huge smile. “You’ve got a *very happy* hippocampus, Jack.”

It’s a fond memory of mine – one I recall every New Year’s since, reminding me to commit anew to novel experiences for the coming year.

I’d like to suggest that you make this commitment for 2023, for you will be physically making your brain younger – and you will be *mentally younger* as well. You’ll be regaining that boundless curiosity, that joy of learning and doing new things, you had years ago.

Of course, I think the best way for you is to go on an adventure with me to some cool remote place in the world. That’s my business.

However, you are surrounded by alternatives. Live in or near a big city with buildings of interesting architecture? Visit one – preferably with a kid or grandkid of yours – and ask to see the building engineer to find out how it was built, how it’s maintained. Odds are he’ll be delighted to give you a tour.

Public utilities like your local water treatment plant often give public tours. Finding out what it takes to keep our water clean and protect us from sewage is a revelatory learning experience. Same with a power plant. Or a mine if you’re in a more rural area.

Naturally, you’ll want to visit a new place of nature and real outdoors to hike in and explore.

Whatever you choose, *get out into the world and commit yourself to novel visual-spatial learning experiences* from now on. The older we get, the more our brains need these.

Your hippocampus will thank you, and will reward your body and soul very generously.

So here's to our having 2023 filled with gratitude, joy, and marvelous new experiences making our brains younger than they are now!

And in case you're asking... here are Jackson and Raya, a very happy couple-



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