

RENEWAL

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MAKING TIME FOR YOUR IDEAL LIFE

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN RAT-RACING, WHEEL-SPINNING AND SCHEDULE-JUGGLING WHILE LONGING FOR SOMETHING BETTER? KICK THE “SOMEDAY” HABIT, AND REDISCOVER THE ART OF MAKING REAL CHOICES.

By DAVE WONDRA

I'VE LIVED MUCH OF MY LIFE WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS. I often dreamed about how I wanted my life to be different. Take my career for example. After an investment of graduate school, seven jobs, and a pile of frequent flyer miles, I made it into an executive position. What more could I want?

Apparently, a lot. I wanted more time to explore the woods and tend to my prairie restoration project. I wanted to tag along on school field trips with my daughters. While I loved some parts of my work, much of it didn't fit me anymore. I wanted different work. I wanted to spend less time in the office and more time living. I choked back these dreams because they didn't seem practical given the major investment I made in my career. After all, I had a 401(k) plan to consider! And what if my bonus really paid out big next year? Leaving those possibilities behind seemed impractical. Yet my dreams persisted. I was starved to find the real me, the ideal me, my ideal life.

I felt like I was caught in a never-ending conversation with myself. In the absence of a better plan, I opted to defer my decisions for another day. Trouble is, waiting for another day can literally last a lifetime. Besides, I had convinced myself that it was too late to change. After all, I would retire in about fifteen years anyway, so why not wait until then to begin living my ideal life? While this rationale worked for a while, my life eventually began to feel like lying in a bed full of cracker crumbs. I just couldn't take it anymore.

The following three years marked a period of transition for me. I changed my work, created ways to spend more time with my family, and incorporated nature back into my daily life. I will always need to diligently manage my choices about time, but today I'm living my life more consciously. I'm making deliberate choices instead of letting the choices choose themselves. Here are some of the important realizations that made a difference in my journey.

MAKE CHOICES, NOT DECISIONS

Have you ever lost yourself in a decision? Once I asked a number of friends to give me advice on what color to paint my office. If I had mixed together all of their color ideas, I probably would have ended up with black walls. Decisions can be like that. We try to add up all of the external data and incorporate it into one end result, a final decision. Often, we lose the vivid choice we could have made and end up with a generic, watered-down mess. Trying to decide can also lead to never-ending analysis. We can lose ourselves in the search for that last, definitive piece of information. I've been known to use Excel spreadsheets in an attempt to analyze major life decisions. While my final spreadsheets look impressive, I usually end up deleting them in frustration after hours of staring at all of the data, overwhelmed.



Choices are different. Choosing comes from the heart and is a reflection of personal values, character and identity. Rather than being based on external data and logic, a choice is a clear act of personal willpower. A choice is a clear declaration of either “I will” or “I will not.” For five years I was stuck in trying to decide whether or not to leave my 18-year investment in a human resources career. When I spoke about it with friends, I often used words like “maybe, possibly, I think I might.” Once I moved from deciding to choosing, I made my declaration in less than one week.

ASK COMPELLING QUESTIONS

Another way to move out of the molasses is to change the questions you ask yourself. Two questions to consider:

1) Will I choose to live a life of no regrets?

I suspect that most people, given the choice, would prefer a life without regrets. But good intentions can turn into regrets all too quickly. My grandpa died when I was 19 years old. The week before he died I drove by his house and thought about stopping in, but didn't. I thought I'd visit him another time. I regret that I put off the choice to see him. I had good intentions, but I didn't make a choice and now that choice is gone for good.

Are you on a path that will lead to future regrets? Is it time to convert good intentions into action? Here's a journaling exercise to help you consider these questions: [Imagining that you are near the end of your life, write a life summary. What parts of your life were ideal? What parts of your life \(if they stayed on their current path\) led to regrets? Areas to consider include relationships, work, spirituality, community, and health.](#)

If you identified any areas that are leading to future regrets, now is the time to choose what you will or will not do to change that potential outcome. What actions will you choose today to live a life of no regrets?

2) What time tradeoffs am I willing to make to get the life I want?

Whether you're aware of it or not, you do have a plan for spending your time. While your plan is likely influenced by others, you are the one who makes your feet, hands, mouth, and mind move in certain directions, thousands of times a day.

Frederic Hudson, an international expert on adult change, says that we divide our time among five primary areas, or social systems:

- Personal** – time devoted to the care and feeding of yourself
- Couple** – focused time with a partner or best friend

Family and Friends – being with and caring for children, parents, and close friends

Work – your efforts at making a living or finding meaning within a work system

Community – your involvement in community organizations and activities

One way to become more conscious of how you spend your time is to work through the following exercise. To begin, estimate the hours you currently allocate among the five social systems, assuming 100 awake hours in a week.

Next, create a future time allocation, placing hours where you need them in order to live a life of no regrets. Keep in mind that adding time to one area requires taking it from somewhere else. The gaps between your current and future time allocations represent areas where you need to make choices. What are — and aren't — you willing to trade to live your ideal life, a life of no regrets? Is what you want compelling enough to take time from other parts of your life?

Most of these social systems involve at least one other person, so remember to talk about each other's interests so that you can create solutions that meet each other's needs.

RESISTING CHANGE IS NATURAL

Two weeks after I made the choice to change my work I started to question myself, loudly: “You are going to do WHAT?” As my doubt grew, I felt in danger of slipping back into my old life.

George Leonard, Aikido master, tells us that everyone resists significant change, whether it's for the worse or for the better. Our body, brain and behavior have a built-in tendency to stay the same, and to snap back when changed in any way. This resistance to change is called homeostasis.

So what do you do about it? Expect it. In fact, when your internal sirens start to sound, take it as confirmation that you are beginning to move through the process of change that you wanted in the first place.

It helps to have a support system to shore you up when you get the urge to give up your new ways. Talking with others helps keep negative self-talk in check. Keep in mind that the best support groups are made up of people who have successfully achieved change in their own lives.

The important thing is to stick with your plan long enough that your new patterns get established, and the forces of homeostasis begin to protect your “ideal life” as your normal way of living. Will you continue to dream about your ideal life, or will you live it? The choice is yours. ●

RESOURCES

LifeLaunch — A Passionate Guide to the Rest of Your Life by Frederic M. Hudson & Pamela D. McLean • A process for creating a plan for the next chapter of your life.

Mastery — The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment by George Leonard • Leonard describes how to achieve and sustain mastery in any aspect of your life.

Repacking Your Bags — Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life by Richard J. Leider & David Shapiro • A process for assessing all aspects of your current life, and deciding how you will repack it for the future.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby • Bauby, the editor of French *Elle*, was paralyzed by a stroke in 1995, after which he wrote a memoir speaking of the simple gift of consciousness.

I Will Not Die an Unlived Life — Reclaiming Purpose and Passion by Dawna Markova • Markova recounts her story of slowing down and moving to a cabin in Utah to take time to find her ideal life.

Whistle While you Work — Heeding Your Life's Calling by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro • A resource to help you uncover your life-calling, which will help you make compelling choices.

Man's Search for Meaning by Victor E. Frankl • A Nazi concentration camp survivor, Frankl describes the one human freedom that can never be taken away, our ability to choose hope for the future.

Dave Wondra is a professional coach based in Minneapolis. You can visit him at www.prairieassociates.com.