

Postcards from a Runaway

Place
Stamp
Here

Essays on
Purpose and
Our F*ck up
Priorities, from
One Mad
Escapee

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Bill Magill
Provence
Chronicles Vol. 1



Postcards from a Runaway

Essays on purpose and our fkd-up priorities, by one mad escapee.

Provence Chronicles
Volume 1
2011-2013

Bill Magill

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Forward

Have you imagined running away from it all; away from the job, spouse, mortgage, from all the commitments and trappings (trap being the key syllable) of your predictable existence, and losing yourself in a secluded village on the Amalfi coast or Greek island? Maybe you open a small café or learn to paint. Mornings are late, served on the sea-facing balcony with croissants and a rich espresso. Afternoons are dressed in cool white linen, shaded from the high sun in your workshop atelier, shutters drawn and brush in hand. Warm evenings are shared with a beautiful new friend, half your age and twice as wise, over simple bowls of steamed mussels, crusty bread, and bottles of chilled rosé. He or she is helping you learn the language and certain other local customs, shared late in your room and cooled by a soft Mediterranean breeze.

At age 50 I parted Silicon Valley for the lavender fields and turquoise sea of the south of France. In a toast to the reckless bolt I left behind all possessions, obligations, and emotional entanglements; away from a life of adult expectations and convention to seek out the deep end in the pool of meaning. My strategy was a simple 2 steps: (1) just go, and (2) figure it out when you get there.

A big step 3 soon joined the list: self-therapy administered through a diary of my days. The plume was to be my brush and Aix-en-Provence – the Cezanne city of fountains and art – the elegant setting. *Postcards from a Runaway* was created as public airing of my personal irresponsibility, thoughts and observations on what really matters in life, and lessons learned along the way. It was meant to challenge the orthodoxy of our adult principles on career, commitment, and compromise; the compliance that bounds what is possible in this miracle we call life. Essays (*postcards*) have been published monthly at my personal blog starting in 2011 and a collection of the more lucid entries through mid-2013 have been organized and offered here.

Each *postcard* commences with music and drink suggestions that complement the essay's theme. To enjoy these pieces most fully, consider starting with the drink (I am happy to serve as excuse for your first evening cocktail), putting on the music (most can be accessed without charge through YouTube), then on to paragraph 1.

Happy reading,

Bill

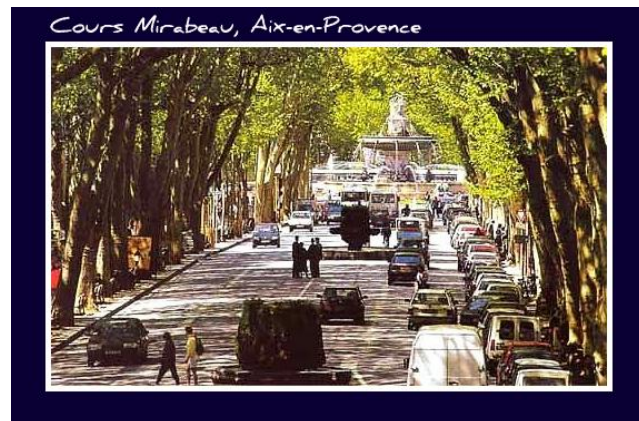
Passion Plans? Yes, and You?

Music suggestion: [It's My Life](#), The Animals

Drink suggestion: [Pastis Henri Bardouin](#)

Do you ever dream of doing something radically different? Are there nagging suspicions that your life/career trajectory is on a path of its own, with you as a passenger not pilot? Do the words escape and renewal find particular resonance? If no, then chapeau to your good fortune. If yes, then join the club.

The sense of entrapment took serious root as I approached the age of 50. It was a snare of my own making, and one that I felt empowered to break, albeit not without disruption. I simply wanted to pursue my own passions, and so I have. This blog is created for others who feel that passion pull, too often lost in dreams of adventures not pursued, destinations not explored, and stuck in rut that has been dutifully dug with one's own shovel. Whether on a new path of your design or still in the career closet, you are invited to subscribe to this blog and join my Passion Plan Alliance. Through mutual encouragement and support, this alliance can lead to greater confidence in all of us to pursue and realize our personal Missions.



So here I sit, a chilled glass of pastis for inspiration, at the end of another sunny day in the south of France. I feel a lifetime away from my decision point 3 years ago in bustling San Francisco. Little things have changed: just the where, what, and with whoms of everyday life. I have adjusted relationships, changed my career, moved across an ocean, and dragged my oldest son Jess along for ballast. Before leaving San Francisco I sold my beloved Miata and abandoned all worldly possessions, save my

guitar and prized Laguiole cork puller. We've settled into a noble 18th century flat in the historic center of Aix-en-Provence, one of the most charming cities in Europe (humble opinions permitted). This venture is incredibly stimulating, incredibly challenging, and conducted often in a second language. Yes, there is also the overhanging threat of total implosion, my pirate ship splintered upon the rocks. But I wake every morning not quite believing that my favorite place in the world is abuzz just outside the window, I have time to plan and organize my encore career, and most importantly I am in control of my heading.

And now you. Is it time to join the club, to journey forth upon your Mission? Even if obligations – real or perceived – prevent the launch today, begin to consider your Passion Plan; the map that will guide you across the sea of change. To be clear, I am not talking about conventional career motivations. Salary and title should play no part in your personal Mission. I've promoted myself from overcompensated venture capitalist to underpaid academic and aspiring life coach, and am ecstatic. Restaurateur, writer,

winemaker, ceramist, bed and breakfast owner; none of these will likely bring you prestige and fortune. But they, or whatever occupation or craft you crave to pursue, can bring deep and profound fulfillment.

If you die tomorrow, will your purpose have been realized? Will your funeral remembrance capture the life you were meant to live, reflect your true gifts, your personal genius? Okay, that is depressing; let's say you don't die tomorrow. Instead you wake up and have to pinch yourself from the joy of what you are doing, where you are living, and whom you are with. What does that life look like? Paint that vision in your mind's eye. Nothing stops you from putting the first step in place now, today, towards enabling that dream.

Through this blog I will be recording experiences and observations from the field, from my new center of operations – the local cafe – in Provence. It will also provide the anchor for the Passion Plan Alliance, a platform for readers to solicit help and share ideas, ambitions, contacts, and advice about the pursuits of their personal Missions. We'll need a better exchange for that as readership grows. Any suggestions would be appreciated. Finally, this blog will serve as resource center, with links and references to the latest thinking on happiness and fulfillment by Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and other thought leaders in this emerging area of study. Please feel free to contribute when ready and inspired. Not inspired yet? Well, try the pastis.

Published initially on February 2, 2011

Of Football and the Multiverse

Music Suggestion: [Across the Universe](#), The Beatles

Drink Suggestion: [Anchor Steam Liberty Ale](#) (Unfortunately, Anchor Steam closed its doors in 2023.)

Every Monday morning I rise at 4 a.m. to catch the first train for Paris and then on to Fontainebleau, where I spend 2 days on campus. On Super Bowl Monday (in France) I was up even earlier. The siren call of the big game dragged me from slumber at 3:15 as the fourth quarter was getting under way, and I enjoyed the final 15 minutes of play over a bowl of Cornflakes and glass of Provence apple juice. My son Jess will tell you “dude, that stuff totally kills,” which is a good thing. To say that the French love American football is grossly untrue, but the game was live on national television, much to my amazement, starting at midnight. It was also playing in a few bars around Aix-en-Provence, which has just enough Americans to warrant the effort. Given the early hour it may have made more sense to bypass the bed, watch the game over a few pints at the Wohoo Bar, then sleep them off on the train north. Alas my head was clear and sober as I made my way down Cours Mirabeau in the early hours before dawn, unlike a few bleary-eyed revelers stumbling home in the chill air. Getting older can be a mixed blessing: less fun, better feeling.

You may be surprised to learn that France has an American football league, and we are blessed to have a club – the [Argonauts](#) – right here in Aix. Jess and I joined the small throng of loyal if not slightly confused fans on opening day at their small home stadium. American football in France is a different experience. No, brats and beers in the parking lot are not replaced with brie and white wine. In fact there was no tailgating at all, which is a great missed opportunity given the French love affair with food and impressive picnics. Music was blaring constantly during gameplay, including a heavy rotation of AC/DC (always stirring when blasted at max volume through a stadium sound system). The announcer made no pretense of impartiality, leading the crowd through throaty cheers of DEFENSE (clap clap clap), DEFENSE (clap clap clap), and playing the Florida State Seminoles war theme as fans broke out the tomahawk chop. What the hell? This required a timeout and fact check with my history expert – Jess – who is obsessed with all things Greek and Roman at the moment (a little math obsession wouldn't hurt). Any thread connecting the mythical Greek Argonauts (450 BC) to the Seminole Indians (1800s)? No, none that he was aware of (this after a 5 minute lecture on the golden fleece, Jason, and the historical distortion of his voyage as presented by the Hollywood film). Okay, back to the game.



In French American football running backs are coureurs, a down is a tentative, and referees are arbitres. Many of the terms are similar however: ballon (ball) and receveur (receiver) are logical enough, and

quarterback and touchdown are unchanged. Even the linguistically challenged can follow along easily ...or so I've been told.

Seattle native Adam Kruse is the quarterback of the Argonauts, starting his second season this year. He had a stellar college career at University of Mary (NCAA Division II) before joining the Tacoma Cobras (PDFL) as a stepping stone to the NFL. He's an impressive athlete, throwing the ball on a wire with laser accuracy or tucking it on for an evasive scramble up the field. Adam was unstoppable that Sunday, as evidenced by the final score: 44 to 0 for an Argonauts win. I was curious to know more about his motivation to pilot a French football team so offered a beer as trade for an interview at the Wohoo the following week. Fascinated as I am with the whys, whats, and wheres of career fulfillment, I hoped for some pearls of young wisdom about aspirations and limitations.

One key to a sense of fulfillment is success and a key to success is the setting in which one thrives. All too often we shoehorn ambitions into a box of convenience bounded by where we live and what we do now, and what we consider possible. Fall into this rigid frame of thinking and you may spend more than a few sleepless nights anxious about the future, unhappy with professional and personal situations, and at a loss for new options. Sound familiar? We get anchored by family, home, job, and the material things that accumulate. Anchors are great for mooring us in place, a heavy drag when under sail. When I felt compelled to sail I didn't just raise the anchor, I cut the chain.

Refuse to be tied to place or role (personal or professional) and a world of new possibilities open up. You don't have to cross an ocean, but be open to leaving your haven of safety. There is indeed value in enjoying a comfortable life near family and friends, parents and grandchildren, but there is greater value, I believe, in finding your Mission and making the most of your potential; exhausting your well of resources while still operating at peak. In fact, at ages 50 or 60 you are better set to tackle a Passion Plan than at 25. Experience and maturity play to your favor, and the engine remains strong with some attention to diet and fitness. The world benefits from each of us excelling, not simply sacrificing our ambitions for others and letting ourselves out to pasture. J.S. Bach had 20 children and was still breaking new musical ground at 65 when he passed away. What a loss to us all had he decided to live through the many accomplishments of his talented kids. Great people take deep dives into their personal genius to achieve great things and we are all the richer. Isn't it worth asking the question: what is my personal genius? Isn't it an obligation?

Picasso's belief, that every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction, is not required in all situations. When contemplating an encore career, consider porting your skills and experience to an adjacent universe, one defined by laws more amenable to your natural lifestyle (hours, uniform, pressures, possibilities, etc.). You don't have to become a potter, painter, or poet, unless the Milton or Neruda inside is aching for expression. I know a burnt-out banker who loves the relaxed mentoring of university life, whose reward is no longer the year-end 7 digit bonus but the reverence of students. I met a career mathematics professor who felt stifled, under-challenged, and under-compensated, and who now thrives in the pressure cooker and possibilities of a high-frequency quant trading firm. Neither job is

better by definition. Both individuals made late-career transitions to adjacent universes defined by very different laws, but did not involve a complete reinvention of self. The moves were not seamless, but possible without undo upheaval. The individuals have transferred their experiences to a new dimension and as a result are blooming.

Change of location offers a similar opportunity to break from the anchor. A good friend has taken his considerable talents as venture investor from Silicon Valley – where he felt undistinguishable from the hundreds of hypercompetitive and accomplished (or hoping to be) investors – to a city in the Midwest, where his valley experience is greatly appreciated by and singular amongst his peers. He didn't hate his profession, he hated feeling mediocre. Don't we all? As mentioned above, I believe that a key to happiness is success, the opportunity to demonstrate excellence. But to realize that success one needs to operate in the right universe.

Physicist Brian Greene – a pioneer in string theory and author of a new book on the multiverse – *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* – discussed in an NPR/Fresh Air interview recently that the cosmos can be imagined as an infinitely large loaf of bread, with each slice representing a different universe, similar in many aspects but governed by very different laws of nature. The way I see it, as the years tick by and we pass through that membrane of core careers to what comes next, we may need to operate under a very different set of laws to flourish. A change in universe may be warranted, to a universe whose laws are more amenable to our maturing ambitions and the challenges of meeting them. When we feel sandwiched between the needs of kids (soccer practice, college tuition), parents (doctor's visits, grandchildren time), and spouse (his/her career, personal pampering), it is easy to compromise our own goals. As children move on and parents pass on (and you decide on the spouse part), there is a liberation effect. Does your universe and the laws that define it feed that liberation?



The Wohoo is filled to capacity on Wednesday at midnight. Given its tiny size, the Wohoo is probably close to capacity when it's just the staff setting up. The street level bar entry is smaller than my bedroom, and the downstairs cavern is divided into 2 cramped spaces that appear carved out of the rock. It's here that I find Adam holding court after an evening Argonauts practice. He is what my mother would have called "a very nice young man:" courteous, well spoken, engaging, and interesting. Why is he playing American football for a small French audience? Simple, he loves to play football and he loves to travel. The Argonauts pay him a modest salary, he gets in 5 months of play during the US offseason, and if the team does well it will look good on his scouting report. As to my 2

burning questions of momentous import: the tomahawk chop??? He has no idea either, but anything that gets the fans involved in the game is a good thing. The multiverse? Well, we didn't get to the multiverse, but Adam would probably find that all a bunch of high-minded horseshit. He just likes playing football and living in the south of France. I can't argue with that.

Postscript: perhaps somewhere in another universe, a universe parallel to our own, a slice next to our slice, Seminole Indians watch a Grecian ship break the horizon. Who knows?

Published initially on February 18, 2011

More, Bigger, Faster: The Pornographers of Consumption

Music suggestion: [All This and More](#), The Dead Boys

Drink suggestion: [Louis Roederer Cristal Champagne](#)

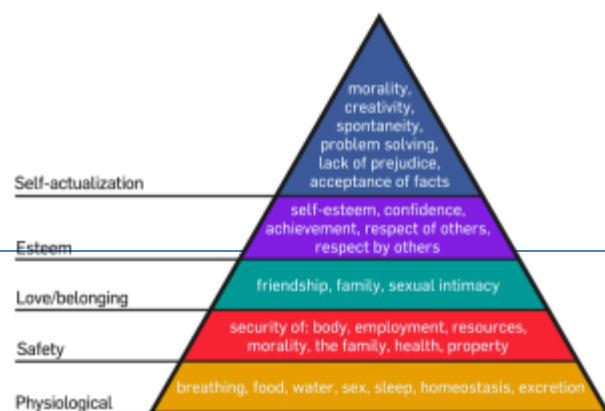
Fair warning: my grandfather was a Scotts-Irish preacher and has been clearly channeled in this postcard. If you don't want a sermon, skip it.

I am posting a short card this week, as I am on the road and spending time with family in San Francisco. It is eye opening to visit the US after months away. Stepping off a plane, the striking impression is one of dimension. We live at 4/3 scale. Large people driving big cars to huge homes. We shop in warehouses, drink in gallons (the 20 oz. Big Gulp has graduated to the 44 oz. Super Gulp, the 64 oz. Double Gulp, and now the truly staggering 128 oz. Team Gulp), and drive in urban tanks that evoke testosterone-driven power and adventure (Ram, Hummer, Excursion). For foreigners who shop at local farmers markets, sip 1 oz. espressos, and squeeze into tin cans with names reflecting small size and economy (Ecomotive, Smart, Mini) it can be overwhelming. To truly appreciate the heft of our culture, spend a few months elsewhere, anywhere.

I am no social anthropologist, but the desire to define ourselves through the things we acquire seems almost universal. We don't have a monopoly on materialism in America, we just work harder at it, are prouder of it. In fact, we are the world's pornographers of consumption, in my opinion, shameless of our accumulation of toys and accessories whose true redeemable value is self-aggrandizement. The grand monuments we build to ourselves, and curious we cram into them, validate the little lies we repeat about our self-importance.

I struggle to exorcise this fetish myself and am a hypocrite to preach otherwise. All things equal, I prefer bigger to smaller, more to less, faster to slower. I lived in a comfortable 2,000 sq. ft. home in San Francisco. Yet, every time I walked through the neighboring upscale community of St. Francis Woods, I imagined the beautiful life in one of those Mediterranean style mansions. I still miss my Mercedes sedan, and now carless look enviously at the new models gliding past. Our modest apartment in France has a compact fridge that holds perhaps a 2 days' supply of groceries, a small clothes washer tucked under the kitchen counter, and no room for a dryer or dishwasher. Do I do miss my American comforts? Absolutely, but I also appreciate that the low-maintenance, nimble lifestyle for which I've traded these accumulations away is permitting a far richer experience. We do become slaves to our possessions, which limits our options and bounds the possibilities for what comes next.

Maslow famously portrayed the hierarchy of human needs in his pyramid, and we can witness its ascent now by the emerging middle classes in China and other high-growth economies.



Regrettably, the attainment of self-actualization – of realizing one’s full potential – is most commonly viewed through the American lens of buying bigger, faster, more lavish stuff; an outward display of prosperity, not personal development. Heft is our most pervasive export, and our newly-prosperous neighbors who covet the American lifestyle are sucking up more oil, eating more beef, driving more cars, building bigger homes, and on and on, to live the image that we have so magnificently framed over the past 50 years. This ballooning demand is sending shivers down the backs of climate scientists and natural resource managers.



To believe that the pursuit of pleasure through materialism will diminish, that the tendency to establish one’s caste through the possession of bigger, faster stuff than can be attained by the lower castes who mow our lawns and wait our tables, is as foolish as imagining an end to pornography. But we don’t flaunt our indulgence in porno (Charlie Sheen excepted). Imagine a world in which giddy, gratuitous purchases of superfluous stuff, mostly done to show friends and neighbors that we are loaded enough (hence, deserving enough) to purchase this stuff, carried the same stigma as a download of Debbie Does Dallas. It might not stop us from doing it, but we certainly wouldn’t boast about it.

What about American exceptionalism? Are we still capable of great things? Could it extend to fresh thinking about global responsibility and how one flourishes in a new sustainable manner? In an era of rising temperatures, falling fish stocks, dwindling water resources, and the spread of the McWestern diet (and corresponding diabetes and heart disease, fat bottoms and big bellies), is it possible that we could once again lead by example? Churchill observed, “you can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they’ve tried everything else.” What do you think?

Published initially on March 6, 2011

From Semis to Sushi

Music suggestion: [Changes](#), David Bowie

Drink suggestion: [Sapporo Premium beer](#)

Have you ever dreamed of opening a restaurant? It's a common fantasy for many of us foodies I believe. For this postcard I interviewed the owner of a new restaurant in Aix with a very uncommon background for a restaurateur. And, because we are discussing the food business, I thought I would share with you the food on my lunch table today, fresh from the open air market behind my flat: a small baked tart of spinach and local goat cheese, sun dried tomato tapenade spread on warm baguette slices, local green olives marinated in garlic, a small side dish of mache (lamb's lettuce) mixed with my secret vinaigrette (happy to swap recipes), a sweet clementine from Corsica (the best!), a wedge of creamy Tome de Provence (goats milk cheese), and a glass of white wine from the Burgundy region (chardonnay). Food for thought and inspiration.

I first noticed the [Naruto Japanese Restaurant](#) last autumn while wandering the narrow back streets near my favorite hotel in Aix-en-Provence. I was making regular weekend excursions here from Fontainebleau at the time to look at apartments, and got a quick chuckle from the restaurant name. For readers without kids, Naruto is a popular Japanese Manga series that approaches cult status amongst adolescent boys, and both of my sons have passed through the obsession. Looking for your 11 year old? Chances are good he is at the Borders with his hoodlum friends, planted on wooden benches with pages pulled open over their knees, plowing through Naruto paperbacks one by one.



I made a mental note at the time to try Naruto when back in Aix more permanently with Jess and so we did. The backstory on the small restaurant is interesting, and I have decided to introduce its owner – Koiche Kunibe – as my first Passion in Action profile. I am curious about the personal missions others pursue, like to hear about their challenges and triumphs, and learn what I can from their experiences. I look forward to sharing more of these profiles with you through the Postcards blog.

Koiche Kunibe was born and raised in Osaka, Japan. He earned a degree in chemical engineering there and like many ambitious Japanese moved post-graduation to Tokyo where he was hired by Fujitsu, a global conglomerate and leading supplier of semiconductors and electronic systems. Koiche continued his career in semiconductors with Tokyo Electric, which also built the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station that has been occupying the news.

Koiche was a successful European business manager for Tokyo Electric and would spend 90 days at a time, as much as his travel visas would permit, on the continent living out of hotels. Under the strain of this transient life, he requested and received a permanent transfer to the south of France, an active centre for the semis industry, in 2000.

We sat down for a chat over espressos last week, just before opening hour at Naruto. I anticipated a tortured story of young ambitions denied and mid-life chances taken, a gutsy tale of sacrifice and perseverance. What I learned was less quixotic, but equally bold and impressive. Koiche did not grow up harboring dreams of being a famous restaurateur. Rather, he was frustrated with lack of promotional head room in his engineering career. He is ambitious and was not finding the space to accomplish, and get rewarded for, his ambitions within the conformist structure of Tokyo Electric. The French countryside is dotted with beautiful old estates and Koiche would love to be a lord of the manor someday in a grand bastide. This was unlikely to happen on his engineer's salary, but Naruto offered that possibility, if successful.

Why a restaurant? Well, why not? Koiche had a close friend with a Chinese restaurant in the area and his business was flourishing. The more they spoke the more Koiche considered the logic of a new Japanese restaurant in Aix, a city with many walk-ups offering mediocre sushi take-out, but few quality Japanese restaurants also offering donburi, yakitori, udon, and other traditional Japanese selections. What did Koiche know about the food business? Absolutely nothing (say it again). But there is little that plenty of careful planning, focused training, and a pair of big cahones cannot accomplish.

In an earlier postcard I wrote about the need for a Passion Plan before embarking on our personal Missions. A well thought-out timeline of milestones that provides a map from now, time 0, to one's target second-life destination. Koiche had such a plan. He first needed to learn the restaurant business from the bottom up, so took an entry-level job with a Japanese restaurant in Marseille, washing dishes, serving customers, and finally preparing sushi in the kitchen. Hearing about this "career transition," I imagined his wife's face when explaining that he was giving up his comfortable, stable engineering position to take a minimum wage job waiting tables. Come again? He considers the year spent at the Marseille restaurant a painful but necessary internship.

Koiche also needed an understanding of French rules and regulations around restaurant ownership and management, and an idea of the food chain in the food business: where to buy what from whom and under what terms and prices. He got some of this information from his Marseille experience, some from his friend, and much from plain trial and error.

Koiche will tell you that setting up his business was a struggle, he made many mistakes, and was manipulated and taken advantage of more than a few times. He has a good laugh when friends, envious of his success with Naruto, suggest with a certain glib dismissiveness that maybe now they will open their own restaurants as well.



I find Koiche's story particularly inspiring. He took a daring leap of faith into an unfamiliar sea because he refused to accept a lesser (albeit comfortable) life. I too believe that sometimes we just need to jump. Fear of change and paralysis by analysis often gets in the way of dreams being pursued, much less realized.

This was one hell of a risky move on his part, with a wife and 2 young children under 10 to support. Koiche insists that his wife was incredibly supportive from day one. The kids? Personally, I think it's an invaluable life lesson to see one's parents pursue their dreams, even if they fail, and not just tread water for the comfort of their children. Consider this question: if your own children's potential and ambitions were compromised by them having kids, would you still want them to have kids? Are you paying for their private schools, piano lessons, and college extortion (I mean tuition) so that they can

self-limit and underachieve? Do you counsel them to temper expectations about what is possible and prioritize instead around family comfort and well-being? Is this responsible parenting, or bounding their potential? If we don't want our children to hold back, why do we hold back? This gets to a bigger question that I struggle with: what is our responsibility to our children when it comes to pursuing passions and living to the fullest? I'd love to get comments on this question.

Koiche thought outside the box and made a dogged commitment to his goal. Who amongst us would consider a career move from chemical engineer to restaurant waiter sane? This was the first painful step along his Passion Plan. He realized he needed a better feel for how restaurants operated, and there is no better teacher than experience. Still, the move must have required lots of explaining. We can be swayed by the opinions and advice from friends, family, and coworkers. It's easy to be worn down by a relentless tide of "what, are you crazy?" and "here's what you need to do", particularly when making changes as radical as Koiche's. In the end, we will be remembered by the actions we took, not by the advice we followed.

It is 9 pm on a Friday evening at Naruto. The small space is full and customers without reservations are being turned away. And I am not surprised. My udon vegetable soup is savory and hot and the 2 tempura shrimp sitting at the bowl's edge are light and fresh, perfect with my frosty tall Sapporo. Jess has the larger sampler plate – being a growing teen – and says Naruto has just made the "place we bring friends" list. Check it out, we think you'll love it.

Naruto is located at 19, rue de la Verrerie, 13100 Aix-en-Provence

Postscript: If you knew your death date, how would this knowledge affect your ambitions and sense of urgency? Obviously, what is done is done, the past is written. What about the future years, months, days, and moments left? Let me give you a reasonable date if you are an American and 40-50 years old: your 80th birthday plus 6 months (men subtract a year, women add a year; on average people live a half a year beyond their final birthday). Find that date and day of the week, write it on a piece of paper, place it in front of you, and take a look. Now, who is going determine the remaining content of your life story between this moment and that date?

Published initially on March 18, 2011

The Upside of Hard Times

Music suggestion: [Hard Times](#), Woody Guthrie

Drink suggestion: [Prohibition Ale](#), Speakeasy Ales & Lagers

I first published this essay in 2009 through the INSEAD Knowledge series (hence, the references to that year). I thought it was worth a reprint, given the employment challenges with which many of us continue to grapple despite the economic recovery supposedly underway.

This could be the best year of your life; a year of discovery, correction, clearance, and enlightenment. 2009 could be the year that started all wrong and ended so right. Twenty years from now, when sharing life's lessons over a bottle of wine with friends, you might reflect on 2009 as your year of real change; that barrier year between who you were and who you became.

Yes, we are talking about the same 2009. The year of global recession and record unemployment. The year of depressing retirement account balances and even more distressing home foreclosures. The year your cushy job disappeared, leaving you in dismay and wondering who would cover the mortgage. The one you proudly flaunted like a scar among sailors – “so you think your monthly is big?” – but is now costing you twice the swooning value of the home. It is only March, but the year looks frightening.

With savings melting faster than the Larsen ice shelf, this could be the year your kids learn the name of the neighbourhood public or state school; the year you learn to use a metro pass. With that generous company expense tab gone, you may have to forgo “business” dinners (with your still-employed friends) and the inevitable \$100 charges; damn that French wine. 2009 will be a memorable year.

This is a time of upheaval for many of us. But whether it is constructive upheaval or devastating chaos is your choice; fully 100 per cent your choice. Consider a home knocked from its foundation by an earthquake, its frame askew and doors queerly misaligned. Leaving it crippled on the lot is not an option. Do you restore to its former condition, or do you pull it down, given a valid excuse to rebuild to a better blueprint? This year you may indeed have that choice. You may have been avoiding this unwelcome decision. In 2009 the choice may find you.



But all is not lost, nothing is inevitable, and hopelessness need not reign. Consider, if you will, the world of physics. Momentum is a key and indispensable force in the physical world. It carries a five-ounce baseball speeding over the plate and helps a 4,000 ton train down the tracks. Barry Bonds could reverse that momentum in a single crushing swing, but even Superman struggled to slow the lumbering train. And the man of steel was impotent against the momentum of life, wrestling with the

demands of his calling. That was his true kryptonite, the bonds of predestination that would never break.

We, fortunately, have no such binds locking us down. It may feel that way, however. How does one change a career, fix or flee a marriage, chart a new course? With the wind at your back, why ask tough questions? With dead air in your face, the questions may become painfully persistent and unavoidable. There may no longer be a job to lose or a relationship to save.

Money and motion can be numbing and their absence can be sobering. Under the bare light of a quiet day, in the absence of tense adrenalin from work commitments, festering annoyances that have been endured through distraction suddenly become untenable. In your unemployed calm, a greater sense of import and urgency over these irritations may surface. The outcome may be confrontation, but also resolution.

Seek liberation in this upheaval. Before instinctively sending out your resume in a blast mailing and chasing down every lead that looks remotely interesting, take one step back. Get in touch with your true Mission. What were you put on earth to contribute? Each of us can do at least one thing better than anyone else on the planet. The blend of our genetic gifts and formative experiences yield a unique cocktail. For Mozart or Einstein or Michael Jordan the gifts were obvious. For the rest of us it may not be so clear, but is no less true. Deep down we each understand our talents and passions. Marry the two and you will set the world ablaze.

Now is the time to get right with yourself. A transition year is ripe for big questions and interesting answers. But getting right with yourself demands first a simple, but possibly unsettling, realization: This Is Your Life. Your conception was a miracle. Your Mission is unique and precious. It must be revered and protected. Your Mission is not surrendered to someone else's journey; not those of your spouse or boss. You have permission to deny the expectations of friends, co-workers, and neighbors. On your deathbed – and there is one on order – you will answer only to yourself. It will be wholly unfair and highly unsatisfying on that day to assign blame to others for your regrets.

If any of this is finding resonance, I offer three simple steps that may help you gain perspective on where you are and where you want to go.

Step 1: Find a quiet place, take a deep breath, relax, and imagine your golden role: the role that best exploits your strengths and passions; your Mission. This can be challenging when stressed by immediate concerns over job loss and bills. But it is exactly at this time that the exercise is most valuable. Take a day or a week if necessary, and contemplate the perfect work/life situation at age 50 or 60. If you are close to 60, then project out 10 more years. In this economy, no one is retiring, right? Imagine what are you doing professionally, where are you living, and who is with you. Stay rooted in reality – you won't become a professional boxer or world-class soprano – but avoid compromising the options. Think outside the box and let your ambitions stretch.

Step 2: Sketch your career arc from now until that golden role. What two or three interim steps are required to get there from a professional prospective? What additional education, training, and experiences are needed? Again, do not constrain the options, but think credibly. It is critical to draft a plan that is immune to the inertia of your career and personal decisions to date; one that is void of concerns over feelings or unexpected consequences. Dangerous thinking, yes? But with little to lose, don't be timid, be a pirate.

Step 3: Take an inventory of all major people and objects of gravity in your life. When navigating across your career arc to the golden role, these will be either anchors or sails. Your home, cars, spouse, lover, club memberships, designer wardrobe, wine collection, time share, sailboat, and everything else that orbits your world today as massive planets, consuming your energy to stay in motion. Anchors or sails? Some categorizations are easy; others may be painful and perilous. But it's a good year for unsettling considerations. If not now, when?



The rest should be obvious. Once you understand your Mission and hold the map for navigation, outfit the vessel with your best sails and jettison the rest. Simple, right? No, for most of us life is more complicated. But I find this exercise highly illuminating, uplifting, and energizing. It is a structure for positive reflection and provides a sense of control over an unruly situation. You may be caught up in the perfect storm, but at least you are at the helm. And the possibility of popping out on the other side of this economic vortex with a clearer head, a lighter load, and a better direction is exhilarating. This could be a very good year; the best year of your life. Let's toast to that.

Published at the Postcards from a Runaway blog initially on April 1, 2011

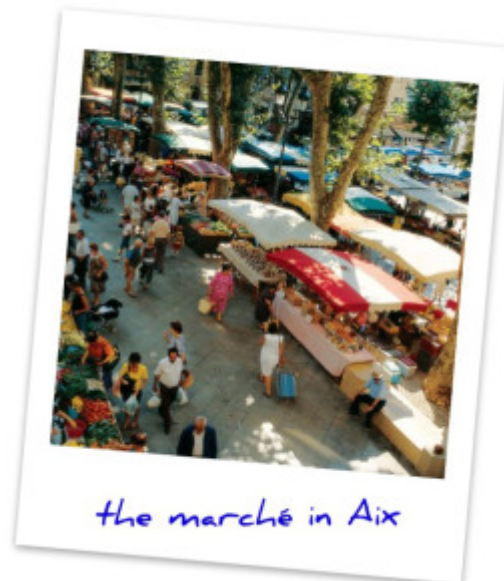
The Value of our Rituals

Music Suggestion: [Tradition](#), Fiddler on the Roof

Drink Suggestion: [2009 Côte du Py, Morgon](#)

One of the many things I love about France is the cultural significance of a properly hosted dinner party. There is a protocol to the evening, a proper order to the many servings, both food and drink, and it makes for a thoroughly enjoyable, wine soaked memory. I have a dinner party to plan for this weekend, and the pressure is on. Our invited friends will expect a certain adherence to the *dîner rituel français*, and while I have enjoyed many an incredible French meal, hosting one is another story. A collective prayer, please.

I was at the market this morning to generate ideas about the Saturday menu and to pick up a few things for today's lunch and dinner. Aix-en-Provence has a number of daily open air markets, but the largest is behind my flat at the Place des Prêcheurs plaza. Shopping at the local farmers' market has nothing in common with the typical American grocery run. A local market visit cannot be rushed, nothing is prepackaged into "convenient serving sizes," the produce reflects the season, and patience is required. I have my "favorites list" with regards to certain vendors, but still prefer to start with a slow tour of the stalls to see what looks good. Provence is famous for its fruits and berries, and this being April local strawberries have begun to appear. I did some berry sampling this morning on my inspection lap (okay, Costco does sampling too: Chef Boyardee, tiny hotdogs wrapped in pastry, ...) to see if they were worth buying at this early point in the season. Frankly, tasting wasn't required; the perfume of the ripe red berries was intoxicating. Resistance was futile.



Céline has the best salads, the bent old man with the LA Dodgers cap (has no idea who they are, I asked) offers the most savory tomatoes, I prefer my chèvre frais from a local goat farmer with the small card table, bread only from Farinomanfou (a couple from Quebec, completely fou [crazy] about their selections of flour), apples and apple juice from the orchard outside Venelles (son and daughter work the stall), and the best butcher – Pagni, the Italian – operates from a white stepvan at the market's edge. He calls me l'américaine and dreams of visiting New York and watching a baseball "match" in Yankee Stadium. *Ahhh, magnifique!*

Today I was in Pagni's line behind 2 ladies of 74 and 82 (we were exchanging ages for reasons I didn't understand), and during the course of slicing this and grinding that, Pagni (56) was expounding on his 3 marriages. Why 3? Because he loves younger women and his wives keep growing older! He then looked

to me for support on the universal truth that younger is always better when it comes to females. I was at a loss for my French vocabulary. There was an R rated discussion of his sexual prowess, which left the women pink cheeked and clucking with laughter, and a 5 minute ramble about a recent trip to the hospital; I followed perhaps half of that. It took me 20 minutes to buy 4 sausages and a slice of ham. The bill for the meat – 7 euros – the price of the wait – well, priceless.



Rituals and traditions are critical in our lives, particularly at the hectic pace we maintain. The world seems to spin faster now than when I was a kid, spending afternoons at the little league field and sketching race cars for hours. My own children suffer (enjoy) a continuous bombardment of new gadgets, video games, and distractions that are form fitted to their 140 characters-or-less attention spans. Forget writing a letter with pen and paper, kids today cannot sit through an email. That would require the crafting of actual sentences (subject, verb, object, ...remember?) and the use of capital

letters, punctuation, and possibly even (horror of all horrors) paragraphs. They tweet through short bursts of symbols, smiley faces, abbreviations, and puzzling acronyms like IRL, LMK, LMAO, and my son's favorite, LMFAO. Explain please.

All of us, children and adults alike, have less time to exhale and reflect these days. Rituals provide a moment for reflection and remembrance, and a link to our family, ancestors and traditions. Changes are unsettling and rituals remind us of the familiar; the things that are comforting. Particularly when in transition – professional, geographic, emotional – we need our rituals and traditions for ballast, to keep us stable and connected. Quoting from a 1992 Family Circle article, "Family rituals are an important means of binding the individual to the group; they give us a 'we.' Rituals and traditions speak volumes about a family's inner life. Taken together, they are a family's thumbprint, its metaphor of intimacy. Even when a ritual passes out of constant usage, its residue remains." This is beautifully said.

Rituals around food and the meal played important roles in our childhood home. One of my favorite memories was the Sunday lunch, because my grandmother always joined us after church. She loved to decide who amongst the 5 grandkids would say grace, hearing about our activities for the past week, amusing us with tales of my dad's childhood, and rousing everyone for a relaxing walk around the farm property after the huge meal. Rituals around food and the meal play important roles in my own home as well. We have replaced grace with statements of gratitude and the walk through the fields with a stroll around town, but meal time remains cherished family time, not to be violated.

I took a course on the power and value of rituals and traditions this past year that was fascinating. Rituals are used universally, across all cultures to honor and celebrate, heal, provide transition, and

bring order to chaos. We explored various approaches, including the construction of small altars and memorials, the burning or burying of notes (my kids loved doing this at home), jewelry (we made African “wish necklaces,” I think mine worked!), and rites of passage.

I am curious which rituals others enjoy as well, as it is fun to try the new as well as revive the old. Was there a ritual maker in your family, and what roles do you play today in continuing or creating traditions for your own family, or yourself? If interested in experimenting with traditions and rituals, consider the timing (beginning, middle and end) and placement, participants, and purpose. And above all, note that rituals should benefit everyone involved and harm none. Feel free to post your own thoughts and experiences with rituals and traditions on the blog.



So, a week has passed since I started this entry, and the dinner party was – for the most part – a success. Local black and green olives provided a simple but traditional starter, along with a lively champagne (Louis de Sasy). The main course of seared Mediterranean tuna was laid on a bed of sliced heirloom tomatoes, chopped fresh onions, and basil (all sautéed briefly), which was light and perfect for a warm spring evening in Provence. My wine guy, Yves, who runs Cave d’Yves at the corner, talked me out of a white

wine for the tuna, pointing instead to a Beaujolais (2009 Cote du Py from Morgon) that perfectly complemented the fish/tomato combo. The thick, deep green asparagus spears that I had selected that morning from Céline were roasting in the oven for about 15 minutes (and a glass of champagne) beyond their cook time; an “oh shit” moment. So,we also enjoyed a few over-cooked mushy spears with crunchy tips. I was redeemed, possibly, by the fromage tray – a selection of chèvre (goat), reblochon (cow), and brebis (sheep) cheeses – followed by a sweet pear tart, sprinkled with pecans and offered with coffee.

A true French host would have offered a post dessert digestif – an Armagnac or limoncello, perhaps – and opened a box of chocolates to end the evening. Always room for improvement, as my grandmother would say, always room for improvement.

Published initially on April 15, 2011

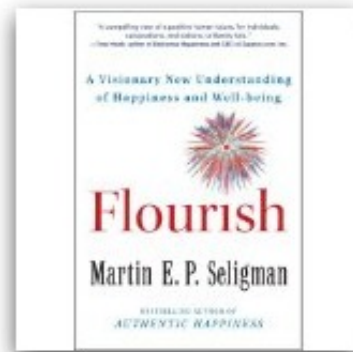
The End of All Happiness

Song Suggestion: [Happy](#), Rolling Stones

Drink Suggestion: [AIX Rosé 2010, Coteaux de Aix-en-Provence](#)

Martin E.P. Seligman is the uncontested high priest of the Happiness movement since publishing his seminal work on the science of well-being – [Authentic Happiness](#) – in 2002. For Seligman acolytes, which include most leading psychologists, educators, counselors and coaches of positive psychology worldwide (and an equal number of lagging nobodies, such as your blogger), the anticipation preceding Seligman’s new book – [Flourish](#) – compares to the fervor around a new Beatles album or J.K. Rowling’s next Harry Potter installment.

Flourish starts with a startling admission: he hates happiness. Well, that is not true exactly (but it’s a gripping leader to keep you reading). He hates the word “happiness”, and that pleases me immensely. I too have struggled with the happiness concept in the context of my search for greater fulfillment and well-being. I can be perfectly happy relaxing on the terrace at Les Deux Garçons, drinking rosé, chatting with friends and watching tourists snap photos along Cours Mirabeau all afternoon long. Is this improving my well-being, giving life more meaning? Offer my kids an Xbox and a dark television room and you’ll not hear a peep (ah, tranquility at last!). Are they happy? Absolutely. Being well? Our opinions would differ on that answer.



That he would start *Flourish* by dissing his earlier masterpiece, considered by many a bible of the movement, reflects much about what separates Seligman from self-help gurus. Notice that I didn’t say other self-help gurus, because his not a member of that clutch. Seligman doesn’t tap into mystical forces, promise spiritual enlightenment, or proscribe an expedient list of x steps (where $3 < x < 12$, depending on your guru du jour) to radically fix your shortcomings.

Seligman is serious academic who founded and runs the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and has been a professor of the discipline for the past 40 plus years. He is a former president of the American Psychological Association and in Haggblooms’ “The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century” from the *Review of General Psychology*, Seligman is listed at number 31. In Silicon Valley parlance, he is a BSD in his field (Big Swinging Dick, sorry).

His proposals around a life lived more fully are based on years of rigorous, peer reviewed research and statistically-significant findings and analysis. His website (see my blog links) is an extensive resource center for teachers, coaches, students, and the merely curious about positive psychology, containing the latest publications and a battery of self-tests, as well as findings, conferences and links. A word of caution: before entering this site block out the next 4 hours of your day. If you too are fascinated by the science of positive psychology, entering Seligman’s site is a slide down the rabbit hole.

Whereas Seligman's intention with *Authentic Happiness* was to increase the reader's life satisfaction, the goal of *Flourish* is to provide greater insight into factors affecting positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment, or what he calls PERMA. His recounting of experiences with children and adults, enthusiasts and depressives, as well as soldiers returning from the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan reflects the effectiveness of his toolkit (at loss for a better word) in real-world situations. The book's greatest gift, however, is the set of practical exercises and practices scattered throughout that are intended to bring more PERMA into the reader's life. A sample few of these include:

- The uplift from writing gratitude notes
- Keeping a 3-things-that-went-well-today journal
- Taking the VIA signature strengths test and understanding the results
- The art of active and constructive responding
- The GRIT test and what it reveals

If you feel a resonance with the concepts of PERMA and a student of best practices in the field of positive psychology, *Flourish* is necessary reading and deserves a spot on your Kindle list. In lieu of a more thorough and deserved review (I simply don't have the time this week) I provide a list of the book's chapters for a better sense of its content:

1. What is Well-Being?
2. Creating Your Happiness: Positive Psychology Exercises that Work
3. The Dirty Little Secret of Drugs and Therapy
4. Teaching Well-Being: The Magic of MAPP
5. Positive Education: Teaching Well-Being to Young People
6. GRIT, Character, and Achievement: A New Theory of Intelligence
7. Army Strong: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness
8. Turning Trauma into Growth
9. Positive Physical Health: The Biology of Optimism
10. The Politics and Economics of Well-Being

I welcome any and all comments on *Flourish* or any other pieces you are reading in this topical area. More to that point, my initial intention with *Postcards* was to serve more as a resource center on midlife fulfillment and continued engagement, less as a platform for ramblings by Bill Magill. I simply love writing and so this it has become. If you are interested in posting your own essays and experiences to *Postcards*, please let me know.

Published initially on May 4, 2011

The Power of our Networks

Song suggestion: [Connected](#), Katharine McPhee

Drink suggestion: [Melopepo](#) (melon and almond infusion for cordials), Liquoristerie de Provence

The Bar Forbin reopened this week at the corner of rue Italie and Cours Mirabeau. A lovely renovation has transformed this once faded beauty into favored destination for late afternoon drinks in Aix-en-Provence for my son Jess and me. To see the cafe bar restored, after having sat derelict, graffitied and trash strewn for the past 3 years, was immensely gratifying. It also left me with a tinge of disappointment.

I had taken coffees regularly at the Bar Forbin years ago when it was a dump. I put up with the shady regulars (who probably felt the same way about me), tobacco stained walls and tattered furniture because the drinks were cheap and I liked the feel of the place. “I should buy this cafe and fix it up,” I murmured many times over chipped cups of espresso, with its great location and fine architectural lines. I mentioned it often to friends when back in the States over late-night beers and discussions about the bosses we endured, the dream careers we imagined, and the desire (no, absolute NEED) to open a bar. “I know the perfect place! It’s squared by two of the busiest streets in Aix, has a great open layout, and is probably available on the cheap.”



Well, someone with more cahones than me saw the same potential and acted on it. The Forbin has been outfitted with a new bar, beautifully retiled floor, freshly painted walls, modern recessed lights, refurbished sliding iron and glass doors, burgundy awnings, and all new outdoor furniture for the deck chairs and tables. Gorgeous, dammit!

I’m a rich talker and a poor doer. My only solace is the company I keep; many of us suffer from the daydreamers’ affliction. I have written in earlier blogs – #5 (The Upside of Hard Times) in particular – about finding one’s Mission and designing a Passion Plan to achieve it. This technique helps me resolve (perhaps a better phrase is “avoid again”) the frustration I feel over too many missed opportunities.

Perhaps my luck with the bar would have turned out better had I sketched out a plan and connected more quickly with the right people in Aix (rather than fantasizing with friends in San Francisco). The greater the things we try to achieve, the more challenging it is to achieve them alone. Tapping into the knowledge, experience and connections of our contacts (and their contacts, and their contacts-of-contacts) expands what is possible and turbocharges the pace at which we move forward.

Meetings, both professional and personal, in the past week have reminded me of the value of networking. On Friday I had 2 appointments in Marseille, the first to introduce myself to a new possible client, the second to follow up on a consulting proposal. The introduction probably won't turn into a client and the proposal is stalled (what's new?), but in both cases I came away with unexpected and invaluable connections for my INSEAD classes, where I rely heavily on industry professionals for classroom speaking, student mentoring, and business plan judging. It is so common to go into a meeting seeking "A" and coming out with "B + C."

Just as unexpected were the outcomes of personal gatherings recently. A fellow student in my weekly French class turns out to be a top selling author and serial entrepreneur; another great speaker for my classes. On the flip side, my friend and a budding entrepreneur Kate turns out to be a certified life coach, with a rolodex of great contacts for me in the coaching world around Europe. This I learn over lunch last Tuesday to discuss her latest start-up idea, neither of us aware of the common interest in positive psychology. Evidence again that the value of our networks is manifested most often in ways we don't expect or remotely anticipate. We benefit not only from a larger network, but one that cuts across a multiverse of personal interests and professional pursuits.



Too often we stagnate with age, particularly at midlife as we approach the end of Phase 1, our core careers. Why continue to put ourselves into new and often uncomfortable situations, thrown in with strange people, if our small circle of friends will suffice for relaxing afternoons on the links? Well, if afternoons on the links are all you seek, then bore yourself, in both senses of the word, into your tiny 18th hole on earth and atrophy away. If you want Phase 2, your encore career, to reflect more than a lower handicap, then reinvention and the expansion of your social and professional webs into new dimensions is crucial.

A final thought. The word "network" has always sounded impersonal and detached to me, as if its members, the "contacts," existed solely for harvesting and exploitation. While I preach the value of working one's network to death to my students, I've always struggled to separate business contacts from friends, and it's hard to say how this has impacted my career over the many years. I seek out pleasant people and don't pursue connections with difficult Type As, even when the value in doing so is unquestionable. If you want to work me to your own profitable ends, by all means call. But I'll likely be as curious about your family and hobbies as your business, and we may indeed end up with cocktails if it's late afternoon. The Bar Forbin perhaps?

Published initially on May 15, 2011

Of Anchovies and Olives and Spiritual Entrepreneurship

Suggested Song: [What Do You Want From Life](#), The Tubes

Suggested Drink: a light and fruity [sangria](#)

It has been a fun but long few weeks of business travel and tumbles into personal time sinks. A more gifted writer would have managed to keep the pen active, late nights or early mornings. I'll blame the past month's inactivity on my twins, who arrived in May and have been soaking up all spare minutes, blissfully. We've been dogged in our search for the best café in town serving one round of drinks – defined as a peach syrup (Stella), Coke (Shane), and tap beer (me) – for less than 6 euros. Happy hour at the Café du Palais, conveniently located just a block from our flat, has not yet been bested. There have also been more than a few laps around the Monopoly board since May. We love this French version with Paris properties like Avenue des Champs-Élysées and Boulevard Saint Michel. Fun times.

It is summer in Provence and this or that friend has been finding his or her way to Aix for a sun-kissed week or two. After a full day of local exploring under cloudless skies and the summer heat, returning to my place for cool aperos and a late lingering dinner is the usual plan. And lingering we do. Case in point, this past Thursday we started with appetizers of green olives wrapped in anchovies and marinated in olive oil (spotted at the morning marché, I couldn't resist) and melon wedges wrapped in prosciutto. Local Cavaillon melons, considered



by many to be the best in France, are peaking now, and the fruit stands are abuzz with honeybees, drawn by their sweet perfume. For drinks we had the choice of pastis over ice, a Provence rosé, or a fizzy artisanal lemonade that my kids discovered and love. The apartment has no air-conditioning, so to avoid the kitchen oven I decided on an impromptu *salade niçoise* for the main course, with a *mesclun* mix, ripe heirloom tomato wedges, green beans and small potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, onion and pepper slices (both red), local black olives, and seared tuna strips. All were marinated in a vinaigrette of olive oil, white wine vinegar, crushed garlic, mustard and lemon. My neighborhood sommelier Yves of Cave d'Yves had suggested a white wine from Cassis, a small village on the Mediterranean coast, which was the perfect accompaniment. No French dinner is complete without a cheese plate, and we went with wedges of Pyrenees, Tomme de Savoie, and a blue (but not Roquefort, and I wish I had written the name) that was both creamy and intense. But the evening highlight was prepared by my daughter Stella,

who filled high-ball glasses with cut ripe strawberries and apricots, bathed them in orange juice and topped the cocktail with whipped cream. Sweet dreams.

My June was a month of events around the theme of entrepreneurship. We had a Global Entrepreneurship Forum at INSEAD where I teach, some colleagues and I met with an EC commissioner in Brussels to discuss entrepreneurship's role in economic growth, and I spent a week participating in BizBarcelona, an innovation forum that brought together aspiring entrepreneurs and early-stage investors from around the globe. BizBarcelona is a fun annual event that offers more than the usual format of speakers and panel discussions (it has those too). With a focus on "speed dating" and investor/investee networking, the forum gives me the chance every June to meet dozens of interesting people developing brilliantly creative ideas. And it's in Barcelona; Gaudi and sangria and in this author's opinion the yummiest small-plates gastronomy on the planet.

The innovations being promoted at this year's forum ranged from novel energy storage devices and printable batteries to next-gen women's shoes (taking the pain out of fashion) and intelligent contact lenses for glaucoma sufferers. A favorite of mine was smart-phone games for children with autism and other developmental challenges. The passion that drives these entrepreneurs to invest long hours and days and months and every family centime to realize their ambitions is in a word inspiring. Was the next Edison, Gates or Zuckerberg at the show this year? Impossible to say, but some of the attending hopefuls will certainly flourish and develop their ideas into impressive start-ups. Also as certainly many will fail.



Readers of this blog know my fixation in the ideals of personal fulfillment, self-realization and self-determination as one passes through the membrane of mid-life. These same ideals induce entrepreneurs to work impossibly long hours for little pay and great risk to the family treasury for the uncertain (many would say unlikely) possibility of creating a successful company. In fact, most start-up companies fail. Still, the possibility of building something truly great and under one's own design and direction motivates entrepreneurs to disregard the odds and press hard ahead.

Inspiring is the word I chose earlier. Indeed they are, and can inspire us to pursue these ideals of fulfillment and achievement in our post-50 years, similarly excited by the possibilities but exposed to the uncertain outcome of our pursuits. Business entrepreneurs measure success mainly by the market demand for their ideas. With social entrepreneurship, a more recent phenomenon, success is measured as equally by the ability to make a sustainable impact on the

customers' qualities of life, most often in the developing world. In both categories the efforts direct outward, at the end users of these products and services.

We spiritual entrepreneurs face inward, focused on the creation and development of our individual talents and abilities. As with our distant cousins above, we are energized by the possibility to conceive something deeply meaningful and under our own design, but the platform for realization is personal development, not product development. The spiritual entrepreneur's energies target positive engagement with life, not markets (although the 2 are not mutually exclusive). Perhaps most critically, we share an allergy to the mundane, the routine, and the rust that settles in when we coast and the gears stop spinning.

To be clear, the "spirit" in spiritual entrepreneurship must be self-defined and not affiliated with religion in general or for that matter any specific belief system, other than a deep commitment to and belief in one self.

I am intrigued by this concept of spiritual entrepreneurship and will write more on it in the coming months. I would be interested to know how you define the term, what traits are common across the cohort, ...and if you are joining us for the anchovies and olives.

Postscript: I first heard the term "spiritual entrepreneur" coined by Dipak Jain, the (former) dean at INSEAD, during his keynote speech at a forum on entrepreneurship this summer. Dipak is a more elegant speaker than I am writer and I wasn't taking notes, but his point was essentially this: if the past 50 years were marked by the rise of the business entrepreneur – Bill Gates v1 – and the past 10 by the emergence of social impact entrepreneurship – Bill Gates v2 (with wife Melinda) – then the first ripple of a wave of spiritual entrepreneurship – a focus on individual development to attain more meaningful personal fulfillment, and through this a deeper engagement with the world around us – is appearing now. Amen.

Published initially on July 24, 2012

Nap King v. Meditation Master

Music suggestion: [Lotus](#), R.E.M.

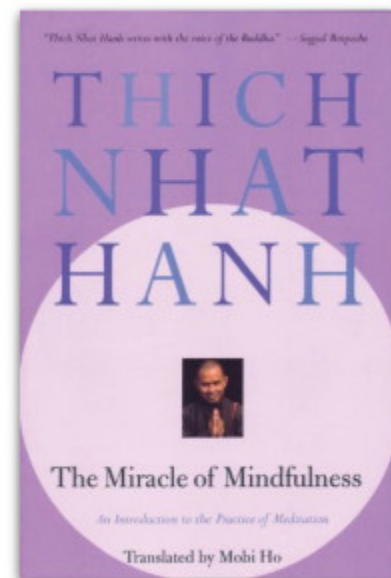
Drink suggestion: [Lemon balm tea](#) (considered good for stress relief)

I'm a napper. I need them and I don't mean hyper-brief power naps. I love lazy uninterrupted afternoon snoozes, best served immediately post lunch. If an hour is too long, 15 minutes is too short. Your dark bedroom is too insular, the public park too exposed. No place is better than the living room sofa, so soft and familiar, yet lumpy enough to discourage a slumber overdose. After 30 years of professional life and creative napping "sur place" I have become adept at the *Herman Miller Aeron* siesta as well, tucked into some discrete corner of my office that offers the fewest views from curious passers-by. My various great assistants over the years, and I have been blessed with the absolute best, knew not to knock between 1:00 and 2:00. Bill is busy.

Today was a perfect nap day. My liver cried uncle after a weekend of wine infusion and a restorative late Sunday afternoon kip was self-prescribed. Friday night started mid-day with a guided afternoon tour of two premier Provence wineries. Along for the outing was my sister Cathy, our expert guide, and a couple from New York who on this warm day shared our preference for dark, cool wine cellars to the white hot Provence sun. The pours were generous and at some point I felt inspired to prepare dinner for our new friends, just married and honeymooning in Europe. I recall plenty of newlywed toasts, a long meal, great conversation and lots of wine. Today there was a Sunday foire aux vins with dozens of the Provence's best vignobles pouring their top vintages along Aix's central promenade, Cours Mirabeau. Three euros bought a commemorative glass and all the grape one can endure on a shimmering summer afternoon, strolling under the esplanade's leafy sycamore trees, fanned by an easy Mediterranean breeze. I found the shade-tree-and-breeze setting particularly inspiring for an afternoon indulgence, and consequent nap. Now I write.

Thich Nhat Hanh argues that naps aren't particularly restive; one's mind isn't calm and the body is twisting and turning. What does he know? Okay, so he may be considered one of the greatest Buddhist teachers of our time, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, heralded champion of rights for post-war Vietnamese peasants, best-selling author on engaged Buddhism and meditation (I could go on and on and on), but couch surfer? Unlikely. Send him to the old Magill family farm for one of our traditional Thanksgiving-feast-then-college-football-afternoons and he'll be claiming first dibs on one of the precious well-worn sofas for a late day nap; at least that's my bet.

I have been reading Thich Nhat Hanh's classic [The Miracle of Mindfulness](#) for tips on meditation. I am by nature a low stress



person, but even the most zen amongst us thump into the occasional pothole. My much beloved afternoon nap can help recharge the mental battery, but I will concede to Master Hanh on this point: the nap lift decays quickly in the face of a persistent source of tension. Sometimes what we really need is a lower idle rate.

There is no shortage of stresses nipping at the heels for many of us this summer. Beyond the baseline concerns over parents and children and how the local ball team is playing, the job front is moving from weak to weaker, the outlooks for our retirement accounts are slipping from a concern to anxiety, and our leaders, both political and professional, have become pathetically ineffective and frighteningly disinterested in shielding us from “the worst that can happen.”

If you are unfamiliar with but curious about mediation, like me, here are a few simple steps *from The Miracle of Mindfulness*:

- Sit upright, either in the lotus or half-lotus position (feet placed on opposing thighs), or Japanese position (knees bent and resting on their two legs). Use pillows as necessary to be comfortable and stable.
- Keep your back straight and your head and neck aligned with your spinal column.
- Focus your eyes one to two yards ahead of you and maintain a half smile, which will allow the facial muscles to relax.
- Concentrate on your breathing. Take in a slow long breath, then let out all of the breath from your lungs deeply. Repeat and concentrate on the breaths, being quiet with and mindful of each one.
- Place your left hand palm-side up in your right palm and let all of your muscles relax. “Be like the water-plants which flow with the current, while beneath the surface the riverbed remains motionless.” Another image he mentions as useful is a pebble tossed into a river, falling slowly to the bottom.
- For beginners, you may want to limit yourself in this position to 20-30 minutes.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that within 15 minutes one should be able to attain a deep quiet if focused on watching one’s breath, keeping the posture, and letting everything else go. He adds that relaxation from meditation is simply the point of departure for a deeper tranquility and a clearer mind.

I realize that with age the practices that allow an effective charge and discharge, both physically and mentally, must evolve. Running has been my main workout for the past 30 years and an excellent way to clear the head. But these 53-year-old knees are now imploring me to adopt a lower impact workout like yoga, and my early experiments with meditation have been promising for the stress relief. If any of you have other suggestions to improve mental and physical health please share them. I remain open to all. Just don’t suggest I give up my nap.

Published initially on August 19, 2011

Back to the Plume

Music suggestion: [Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis](#), Tom Waits

Drink suggestion: [Fleur de Geisha](#), Japanese green tea

Last week marked la rentrée in France, when public schools across the country opened their doors anew to their summer-worn charges for the year. The pack of students and moms crowding the entrance to the neighborhood's middle school could be heard blocks away, the children abuzz on a blend of anxious exuberance, loud with the mission of finding friends and figuring out class lineups; the parents keen for some serenity once again in their daytime hours. *Off you go my little darlings.*

Collège Mignet is famed for 2 of its former students: Paul Cezanne and Emile Zola. These icons-to-be ran the hallways together in the 1850s and were reportedly inseparable. Today this public school is celebrated as much for its international section, with some classes in English and a language support program for kids not yet fully fluent in French. You can imagine its popularity with the local expat community.

Hopefully the creative spirits of Mignet continue to haunt its corridors and enthuse its occupants, particularly Zola. Casual writing has become a lost art. It is most noticeably absent from the lives of the young, who have devolved from letters to emails to chats to tweets (Darwin, please explain). But, they are not alone in embracing the informality and ease of electronic messaging. Be it through our Gmail or iPhones or Facebook accounts, the keyboard and screen have permanently displaced the pen and paper for most of us.

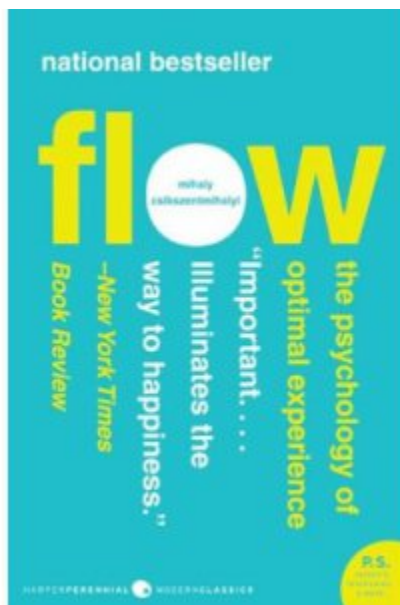
The composition anarchy of texting and tweeting (no punctuation, conjugation, or tense agreement required, ...*Strunk & White* begone!) doesn't disturb me as much as the absence of soul and warmth that comes with a pen-scribed card or letter. The digital domain is perfect for reminding the spouse about that bottle of Bordeaux on the shopping list – Dnt 4gt wine, thx! – but is a coolly detached medium for connecting with loved ones.

It is also selectively deceitful. Facebook allows us to create and present a personal image through an electronic collage of profile pictures and likes and posts that reflect our flawless, funny selves, but not our authentic selves. Life would be beautiful if we could airbrush our looks and our lives like the aging celebrities on a Vanity Fair Magazine cover. Oh wait, now we can!



I am a member of Facebook because there is no better way to track my children's activities (and they could give a damn about the evils of social media), it's a good place to post *Postcards* (for me, the optimum airbrush), and I too have enjoyed the unexpected reconnections with old friends from time to time. On the surface, there is little harm in a digital community hall. My worry is the insular and simulated life it engenders. It is fun to exchange a few brief lines with a high-school friend one hasn't seen in 30 years, but the lift is fleeting. Wouldn't it be infinitely more rewarding to actually meet over coffee or lunch, or to write a letter? Of course this would require time and effort, so why try when the keyboard and screen are right there? Because the time and effort invested are what that makes the connection so gratifying, both to the writer and reader.

I am writing more letters this year and find the practice uplifting and meditative. Letter writing is a rich with flow; for that hour of indulgence I am absorbed solely on the enjoyable task at hand, time stops and all else is forgotten. Zen.



Writing is an art and like all art improves with practice and process. And for motivation you have my permission – my encouragement, actually – to splurge on some good tools. I did and it helped. So let me present you with Bill's top 5 tips for enjoyable letter writing:

- Invest in a good fountain pen. A Waterman, Parker other quality pen may cost \$50 or more, but if you enjoy writing you won't regret it, and the investment will help you feel committed. You can't create inspired food with cheap knives; you can't write inspired letters with disposable pens.
- Buy quality stationary. It is not expensive and you will appreciate the look and feel, and good

stationary often comes with matching envelopes. I like the 6x8 sheet, which is bigger than a card but no too daunting to fill. Yellow tablet paper doesn't quite capture the mood we're going for here.

- Find a comfortable writing space. I prefer a table by one of the tall windows in my flat, with natural light and enough movement in the street below to stimulate but not distract. Choose your favorite corner of the home, somewhere quiet where you love to sit and relax.
- Prepare tea. The warmth is relaxing and de-stressing, particularly green tea. I benefit from a wealth of tea shops in Aix with incredibly large assortments from around the world. If you spend an extra dollar on quality tea then your writing hour becomes a luxury, a private pleasure.
- Make a date. As with all hobbies it helps to have a fixed day and time, otherwise it gets squeezed out by truly critical chores like Costco runs and laundry.

To whom does one write? Well only you know that. But if you are looking for a few practice sessions then my address (the one without an @ sign) is 7 rue Manuel, 13100, Aix-en-Provence, France. I love getting letters and promise to write back.

For more about the concept of flow, read [Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#), by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2008. On a completely different note:

“Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.” – Steve Jobs, Stanford University Commencement address, 2005

It was widely reported this summer that Steve Jobs was stepping down from his operational role as CEO of Apple. If anyone hoped that his decision was simply a natural step for an aging executive planning to spend the next decades relaxed on a sunny beach, the photos that surfaced on the internet soon after his announcement suggested otherwise. If you knew that there was no afterlife, no reincarnation, no heaven, no continuance of consciousness in any form or manner, would you live differently now?

Published initially on September 11, 2011

Of Wealth and Worth

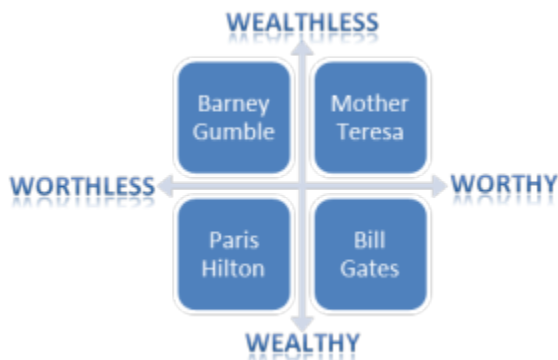
Music suggestion: [\(Out on the road to\) Shambala](#), Three Dog Night

Drink suggestion: [Sam Adams Utopias beer](#)

Wealth is what we reserve for ourselves, worth is what we offer to the world.

What are you worth? This question typically evokes a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation involving the sum of our home equity, bank accounts, retirement funds, stock portfolio, a few expensive items that might attract buyers in a pinch, minus our financial obligations. But this is wealth, not worth, which in all other cases is a reflection of value to others.

Why is Apple Inc. worth over \$360 billion? Because its unique products (and the hip lifestyle they imply) are desired by millions (billions?) of consumers worldwide. The price of an iPad reflects little on its costs of components and assembly, lots on what the market will bear. Similarly, the price of a renovated apartment in Paris's 16th arrondissement or a reconditioned 1963 Corvette says little about the materials and hours involved in their construction and restorations, and everything about their perceived value to interested buyers (many) and availability (few).



The San Francisco Chronicle heralded (remember that word) the Bay Area's 25 richest individuals recently, and the list was heavily populated by founders of technology companies: Larry Ellison, Gordon Moore, and Steve Jobs to highlight a few household names. Most on the list could be labeled fairly as both worthy and wealthy, if just for the numbers their companies' employ and positive impact to economic growth through the years enabled by their ingenuity and hard work.

But, one doesn't have to be wealthy to demonstrate incredible worth. First responders on 9/11 come to mind. So does Margaret Finley. She fostered our 3 children and thousands of others as the principal of our neighborhood primary/middle school in San Francisco.

When I first met Margaret on a *gottafindmykidsagreatschoolinSF_shititpossible* expedition in 2005 she of course extolled the virtues of her West Portal Lutheran School – imagine wholesome and freckled, God-fearing University of Wisconsin graduates [just off the boat and wondering what the heck brought them to this Gomorrah-by-the-Bay] teaching over-coddled, wound-up Chinese kids [2nd generation and wondering why the hell mom keeps packing their lunch bags with sautéed bok choy in egg noodles and not PBJ sandwiches]) in San Francisco's outer fog belt – Margaret spent 30 minutes with me describing other private schools in the area that she admired and went so far as to provide their

brochures and school rankings (something she admitted her employer frowned upon) so that I could find truly the best match for my 3. Wow, sold!

Margaret wasn't just any school administrator. She had an incredible talent for connection – with students and parents alike – and a kind-but-competent leadership style that would have inspired the best business barons of Silicon Valley (including the vaunted names above). Each morning that my kids left for the school campus I felt an invaluable relief that at least this part of my parenting job – getting them a great education – was covered for now. Any parent understands what this is worth. Somewhere in that ethereal space in space where star dust swirls and babies are imagined, Margaret's god was holding her destiny wand and watching the assembly belt of passing souls-to-be: *hmm not sure, nope not clear on that one either, darn it no freaking clue, ...oh my, now for this one I have some very special plans.*

Of course for every Margaret Finley there is a Snooky, Kardashian (pick any K) or Hilton: individuals with immense wealth and no discernible worth. Spend 5 minutes on TMZ to get many more fine examples of this privileged breed. At least Barney Gumble, daily denizen of Moe's and Homer Simpson's burping bar buddy, is not confused about his true value to the world.



This topic brings out the old crank in me, I admit it, probably more so since moving to France, where the discussion of one's wealth or income is considered vulgar to the extreme. Dinner conversations don't revolve around investments or the price of that BMW in the driveway, but rather the butcher shop that sold you this wonderful lamb,and how was it prepared, ...and oh that is fascinating, let me tell you MY recipe. You won't be reading an article in Le Monde heralding (there's that word again) the 25 richest people in Paris, unless guillotines are being sharpened. Wouldn't it be interesting to read a list of the 25 *worthiest* people in the Bay Area? What are the chances?

I've distanced myself from the school of happiness-through-wealth since turning 50 and because of this I am more comfortable discussing recipes and butcher shops, not home values or anything preceded by a dollar sign. Perhaps I feel inadequate in this topical area now, I am not sure honestly, but there is less pressure to impress with intangibles such as wealth and more interest in exploring authentic worth. I think this is healthy; I know it is more interesting.

There is nothing wrong with enjoying one's just rewards, but we have become a nation so obsessed with money – amassing it, displaying it, and defining ourselves through it – that the definitions of worth and wealth have become intractably entangled. If there is reason for hope it is with our young, many of

whom are showing a greater interest in altruism and less obsession with affluence than did my generation. (I just read a fascinating article to this effect but cannot find the source. If you happen to come across similar articles, please share.) We are leaving them a world of rising temperatures and falling employment. Perhaps they realize that the toll road to Shambala is paid not with flaunted wealth but with valued worth. What do you think?

A quick word on a different topic. Maurice Sendak – *Where the Wild Things Are* – was interviewed this week by Terry Gross on her NPR program, *Fresh Air*. Sendak is in his 80s now and not in great health, and he provided a fascinating conversation about his work, the value of relationships, and his thoughts on life. To Terry's question on what really matters, he responded simply, "be in love with the world." This reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's observation that miracles are not found in magic men walking on water, but in ourselves walking on earth.

Published initially on September 29, 2011

Start You Up

Music Suggestion: [Start Me Up](#), Rolling Stones

Drink Suggestion: [Van Gogh Dutch Caramel Vodka](#)

INSEAD is a fun, rewarding place to work. After many exhilarating years hustling alongside hard-charging super achievers in venture capital and investment banking, it is a joy to again work with incredibly smart, accomplished and driven people, minus the god complex (sorry, that is harsh). At the Maag Centre for Entrepreneurship we give courses and workshops, guide and mentor, make introductions and advise on careers; in essence do everything possible to instill the fundamentals of entrepreneurship in our gifted students, then unleash them onto the world.

I have been teaching an 8-week workshop on technology commercialization this Fall, and in the course of developing its modules I had a pair of realizations (considered *truly staggering insights* in my former professional personas). One, I myself am a startup. As I pass through this mid-life phase of re-invention I weigh certain considerations that any emerging company must resolve: defining purpose and worth and how to make it happen. Two, outlining my personal plan through the lens of a business plan – the likes of which my students are expected to create – is incredibly beneficial. There is a process to developing great ideas that matter, then making the leap from concept to market. Working through that process and setting the emergent strategy is equally beneficial for applied personal development, or what I labeled Spiritual Entrepreneurship in a previous blog ([Of Anchovies and Olives and Spiritual Entrepreneurship](#)).

I also realize that the word “entrepreneurship” in the context of Spiritual Entrepreneurship is improper. Despite our former US president’s jab that the French have no word for entrepreneurship, it is of course a French word, the first syllable “entre” meaning “between,” as in the development of value between a creator and her market. In the realm of applied personal development, conversely, value creation is firstly internal; hence, a more appropriate French syllable would be “intér”. Personally, I like sticking with French syllables because they involve accents, which look so sexy and urbane (and I am so not a sexy urbanite). So henceforth we go with Spiritual Intépreneurship.

If you also feel the start-up within, or in your author’s case the restart within, then a framework is needed for constructing your applied personal plan. A tour of the self-help aisle at your local bookstore will reveal dozens of options. But, why not exploit a system that is logical, proven, and applied daily by aspiring entrepreneurs in the course of building the next Google or Apple? A robust intépreneurial effort needs answers to these fundamental entrepreneurial start-up questions:

- What is my intellectual property (IP)? Start-ups are built on invention and imagination, on a base of core intelligence that defines their promise and bounds the possibilities until additional intelligence is developed or acquired. What is your personal IP? It is your base of core strengths and assimilated talents and knowledge. On this foundation you imagine what is possible. And, just as shrewd start-ups continue to build on their IP to sustain competitive position, you too

should build on your base of intellect and skills to expand the possibilities. What are you good at; what do you want to be good at?

- What is my product definition? A start-up's IP foundation enables many possible directions in product form and features, but the finished offering must align tightly with unmet market needs to be successful. Not so for you. Your personal product, that *life passion* you are committed to realizing, need only satisfy your unmet needs for the principal litmus test of suitability. And this realization is liberating. Write a book on multi-generational farm families of central Pennsylvania; renovate and run a historic B&B in Savannah; study the art of lutherie and open a guitar design and repair shop? What if the market is small? Who cares? When explaining your mission to a friend do you feel an electric surge of purpose? Okay, now you know you're on to something. The success of int rpreneurial endeavors is measured firstly by the satisfaction they induce inside. How will you define success: personal gratification and respect, absolutely; profit and fame, maybe. The collage of success is unique to each of us. The time to question and explore your personal passions, ambitions, and objectives is now, during this product definition stage. These taken together will help define your mission and formulate an execution plan. Onward.
- What is my go-to-market strategy? A start-up is wind-down quickly if its product cannot be realized and grab the customer's attention. The most exciting idea in the world has zero value when it is just that, an idea. How do you become relevant? The same way a start-up becomes relevant; by executing effectively on the dream and exploiting its greatest value for the customer. In the case of int rpreneurship, the passion product may target many, may target a few, or may target one. Regardless, an execution plan is essential. I like the Murphy process, taught by Joe Murphy of San Francisco State University's Core Strengths Coaching program. Sketch an arc starting at time zero (today) and ending with your achievement point; 2, 5, perhaps 10 years out. Break the arc into key milestones and those milestones into smaller markers of progress. Getting the arc right takes time, but provides an excellent system for thinking through and setting structure to your strategy. You know your IP and product at this point, the arc will provide the passion plan; your go-to-market strategy.
- How do I last? Macy's has been operating for over 150 years and Faber-Castell (which makes exquisite pens, see [Back to the Plume](#)) was a start-up 250 years ago. How do they remain so relevant for so long? Corporate longevity is not by accident, but accomplished through a deliberate sustainability strategy. Int rpreneurship is not about dabbling with hobbies through a tranquil retirement. Int rpreneurs want to achieve something of real passion. This takes real time and real energy. We're not as robust post-50 as we were pre-30 and attention to diet and fitness is critical. I am neither a dietician nor fitness coach, but can make this testimonial: since crossing the 50 barrier I have pursued the holy health trinity of mind, body, and soul and it helps considerably. Meditation (see [Nap King v Meditation Master](#)) and a work-out emphasizing balance and flexibility through yoga (I remain an awkward novice at both) work for me in the mind and body department, and the simple avoidance of processed foods and indulgence in home cheffing is doing wonders for my soul. Flow-inducing rituals (see [The Value of our Rituals](#)

for a few examples) also help with my mental balance and positive attitude. You can find many YouTube videos and on-line blogs about fitness routines. I cherry pick amongst them to find the optimal regime for my interests and schedule. When one isn't working, swapping for another has zero marginal cost. The beauty of the internet.

- How do I give back? Corporate philanthropy / community involvement is not universal and clearly not a requisite for a company's success and long-term prosperity. Still, the most admired companies develop programs around corporate responsibility, and most of us want to be admired for being a net positive force on the world around us. Whether you choose to include this type of activity in your mission is solely a personal decision, but one worth considering as you piece together the passion plan discussed above.

If you apply the start-up system to your own personal ambitions please let me know. All comments and suggestion are appreciated, as always with my Postcards.

Tip for the day: If called late by good friend seeking bar buddy and enticed to join (let's imagine that you're just getting back to Aix from Paris, it's been a long week, and a couple of drinks sound awfully inviting, ...all hypothetical of course), and after bouncing around a couple of pubs find a comfortable spot with good music and great Guinness (still with me?), and the annoying drunk guys next to you who look like frat house rejects (which is unlikely, because France doesn't do frats) turn out to be newly minted nuclear physicists telling fascinating tales of work and dreams of entrepreneurship, and your remarkable new friends are sharing generous shots of caramel vodka, (now here's the tip part) channel your inner adult, should it be possible to unearth at this point, and refrain.

Published initially on October 26, 2011

\$10 Million Buys What?

Music Suggestion: [Imagine](#), John Lennon

Drink Suggestion: [Sierra Nevada Big Little Thing Ale](#)

It has been a tough autumn for Kim Kardashian. First, she was disparaged in this widely read blog (see [Of Wealth and Worth](#)) and now news of her divorce after just 10 weeks of marriage. My heart goes out to Kim. I cannot imagine suffering through this type of personal anguish in the public glare, and after a high-profile wedding that was rivaled in glamour and celebrity only by the royal to-do in April. How embarrassing.

The price tag of her big day again (divorce #1 in 2004) was estimated at \$10 million. Even for a Kardashian – safely in the 1% club – that must illicit a wince. To be fair she did get some bang for her buck, including 3 Vera Wang wedding dresses (yes, she needed 3) that are now safely boxed away for eternity and Wolfgang Puck manning the kitchen for her 440 guests. But \$10 million? With that check she could have bought a large renovated manor and its 54 hectares (133 acres) of prime land in the Cote d’Azur or Picasso’s “The Rescue.” Heck, for the \$2 million Kris Humphries dropped on her engagement ring he could at this moment be tinkling the ivories of John Lennon’s piano; the one on which he composed “Imagine.” I wonder how Mr. Humphries feels about that trade-off. 72 days? I hope it was good.



The timing of the Kim’s grandiose display of wealth and entitlement in light of current world turmoil is awkward. It’s her money of course, but with rubber bullets flying in Oakland and street fires in Rome it doesn’t take an oracle to sense a dark shift in the public mood. The 99% crowd seems to be losing its awe of the affluent. And being an entertainer (let’s agree to be generous) she must pander to this public to stay relevant and loved. It is a lesson Marie Antoinette came late to appreciate. At 31 Kim is Marie’s junior by 7 years and has time to mature. I for one am rooting for her.

As you can likely tell, Kim and this wedding fiasco has been on my mind lately. It’s dinged her repute with accusations of profiteering from the gift pile and worse,

orchestrating the whole thing for reality show ratings. Imagine. I see two problems here: (1) her happiness after this heart-wrenching breakup and (2) her reputation, and I may have a single solution that resolves both: a USO tour to Afghanistan. If she can afford Vera Wang gowns for herself (3, remember?) and her bridesmaids, and for her mother, surely a first class ticket to Kabul should be no problem. The family did rake in a reported \$65 million last year. Khloé and Kourtney could join as well, perhaps even her gal-pal Paris Hilton. The whole shebang would make for a great episode or two of *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. And perhaps most importantly, it could help move Kim to a more favorable quadrant of my Wealth v Worth diagram, shown in the fore-mentioned *Postcard* blog.

The tour could do wonders to dismiss the taint of narcissism trailing Kim's over-the-top wedding setting, effectively nipping any suspicions of self-serving nuptial duplicity in the bud. There are few better ways of showing America one's selfless side than supporting the troops. She would be in great company. Jessica Simpson, Kid Rock, 50 Cent, Robin Williams, and of course the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders have made USO treks to the region in the past few years, along with many other entertainers.

Imagine the personal positive uplift that would result from giving the troops some good ol' American entertainment from home. The happiness gained from a gift is enjoyed most profoundly by the giver, this we know to be true. Kim has just experienced a crushing blow. Surely this would be a great start to again finding joy in her life.

Kim, if you're reading this blog, Wayne Newton runs the USO's talent recruiting effort – the long time role of Bob Hope – and can be contacted at <http://www.uso.org/how-to-tour.aspx>. Our troops need you and you need our troops right about now! Consider it.

Oh, one more thing. Did you know that \$10 million can pay for:

- 1 million insecticide-treated bed nets for Africa, where malaria is killing a child every 45 seconds.
- "Eco-filter" water systems for 220 thousand homes in Guatemala, where the simple problem of contaminated water is the leading cause of death amongst children.
- 10 million chlorine tablets for treating drinking water in Haiti, where the world's largest cholera epidemic is in full bloom and has infected 455 thousand people (5% of the population). It could also build 17 thousand permanent "happy homes" for Haitians remaining without shelter, now 22 months after the 2010 earthquake.
- School lunches for the entire year for almost all of the orphans in Zambia who have lost parents to HIV. They represent over half of the 1.2 million orphans now in the country, and most are missing an education because of the cost of the lunch program.



- A year's supply of medication for 5,000 sufferers of Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) in the US. Without treatment, AMD can progress rapidly and cause irreversible loss of vision within weeks. Our own epidemic sadly seems to be Americans without health insurance.

Just imagine.

For more information on the charitable opportunities listed above, see [GreaterGood.org](#), [NothingButNets.net](#), [va.gov](#), and the [PanFoundation.org](#).

Published initially on November 3, 2011.

The Dead and the Dying

Music suggestion: [My My, Hey Hey \(Out of the Blue\)](#), Neil Young

Drink suggestion: [Beaujolais Nouveau](#)

The Beaujolais Nouveau is in and being enjoyed across France. This seriously unserious red wine is bottled just 2 months after harvest, often with whimsical labels, and is fun, light and fruity. It's not meant to be stored away in the cave or over discussed; should always be cheap. Serve Beaujolais Nouveau slightly chilled with a selection of cheeses, like the gloriously ripe Camembert that is currently making my kitchen in Aix smell like a wet hay bale.

Onto a slightly less cheerful topic, I am making 2 reflections on death in this postcard, and the first involves rock & roll. Stick the nails in the coffin, because we are done here. Some great music is still being made, but the fact is it doesn't matter. The young, and it is through them solely that the brand is defined, no longer live through their favorite bands. This I know to be true, as I have 3 specimens of the teen variety.

They cannot be blamed. Key elements necessary for rock's great seduction have disappeared: the learned radio DJs, guiding us like enthusiastic museum curators; the brilliant and committed artists, evolving with each new album; the album itself, providing the artist space to expand on a theme beyond the 3 minute single; and rock & roll magazines covering just that: rock & roll.

Who is to blame? There are plenty of culprits, but in the end the art form simply played itself out, losing its sense of freshness and rebellion, and unable to withstand the internet assault. Great rock could both impress with its creativity and worry our parents sick (think Exile on Main Street or Never Mind the Bollocks). Which album of the past 10 years has done either? I love Green Day and consider American Idiot a solid record, but having grown up with the blurred androgyny of David Bowie and the self-destructive mayhem of Iggy Pop there is little in Billy Joe's antics, eye liner, or music that frighten me as a parent. I complain more about my kids' time with the PS3 than their music selections, ...and this is their great loss. As a pent-up and desperate 15 year-old, the fact that *my folks just didn't get it* – even better *HATED IT* – was manna for my unruly soul.

The interest is still there, but the distractions offered to today's youth simply cannot be countered by the current crop of predictably derivative artists. There is enough dazzle to get kids' attention, but insufficient gravity to hold them in orbit. My 12-year olds (ah, what a great age) have just entered that rock star fascination stage; un-jaded and ripe for the musical taking. Their bedroom walls are covered



with cut-out photos, their favorite songs on endless loop in the earbuds. But the infatuation will dilute by 14, pulled by the allure of Facebook banter and Call of Duty bombast.

Conversely, our bored-out-of-our-skulls teen years were spent debating the meaning of *Pet Sounds* or *Dark Side of the Moon*, of Elvis versus Jerry Lee, the Beatles versus the Stones versus the Doors, of Clapton versus Hendrix, of New York versus London punk, of how Woodie Guthrie begat Dylan begat Springsteen.



Born to Run was released in August 1975, 2 months after my high-school graduation. In 8 brilliant songs it captured the pure essence of my teen confusion, righteous convictions and roaming imagination. And with subsequent albums we grew together, Bruce the developing artist and me the maturing adult.

Who has the genius to keep kids close for more than a moment today? Female entertainers (I wouldn't consider them all musicians) are getting the most attention. Lady Gaga makes a lot of noise. I admire the energy, but she is a hyper-brand, not an artist (essentially Madonna 2.0, and Madonna wasn't an artist). Amy Winehouse was the real deal – an incredible talent replete in her Ronettes

beehive and Suicide Girls tattoos (mom definitely wouldn't want you bringing Amy home) – but needed mentoring from the likes of a Keith Richards on how survive the excess. The terminally cute Taylor Swift? My daughter adores her now, but unless Swift graduates from the adolescent *Romeo and Juliette* phase, in the way the Beatles moved from *I Want to Hold Your Hand* to *Help!*, she's going to lose Stella in the next 12 months. Adele is the last great hope, but one bright star does not a galaxy make any more than a sole painter in Giverny prolongs the Impressionists era. At some point the masses move on.

Why do I bring this up? Because, the thought of someone else selecting the soundtrack of my life, the set list for my wake, is as troubling as a stranger writing my epitaph. This gets to my second point about death. An ongoing theme in my essays is the right to draft one's own life story, to decide on what bearing is true north and not deviate for others' expectations. Our stories may be shorter than anticipated, will certainly be for some, for we all are dying, we of the mid-life crowd. All the more important, then, to realize the highlights of our lives, particularly our second lives, post-50, now. Don't fear the reaper, just get on with it.

Day by day, year by year, we wane bit by bit. We are not supernovas, peaking to a spectacular, blinding flash. Our own sun is a better analogy, losing its mighty glow slowly but measurably, in gradual decay. We are like spinning tops, in full motion and balanced elegantly, and then the little wobbles begin.

My children grow taller, smarter, more agile and capable. They crawl, walk, run, effortlessly master challenges that require coordination and new skills. Each day they are more adept and able than the day before, ...living. Our skin sags, hair falls, knees ache, shoulders slump, and certain delicate parts begin to operate erratically. Entropy takes root, rust sets in and the top starts to wobble, ...dying.

The average life expectancy for the western world is 80, give or take a 12 months or so depending on one's gender and geography. The last 5 may not be pretty, which whittles us down to 75 years of true flourish. We would all like to think differently. *I'll be in full bloom well into my 90s.* Don't count on it.

Okay enough, so where am I going with this glum theme? One, this is the time to pursue your personal passions, to put a spectacular stamp on your life story (and that is the point, right?). It will be harder tomorrow and even harder the day after that, and at some point it won't be possible. Someone who loved you will read your eulogy and they'll want it to be great. Make their job easy.

Two, don't let someone else decide how to color your life musically, especially if music has played an elemental role in your life. Select those songs that you love, have always loved, and want playing in the background when the toasts are raised and stories shared.

To that end, here are my top 10:

1. [Love Reign O'er Me](#) – The Who
2. [White Sandy Beach Of Hawai'i](#) – IZ
3. [Racing in the Street](#) – Bruce Springsteen
4. [One](#) – U2
5. [Tonight](#) – Bernstein, West Side Story
6. [Don't Worry Baby](#) – Beach Boys
7. [Help!](#) – Beatles
8. [Downtown Train](#) – Tom Waits
9. [San Francisco](#) – Scott McKensie
10. [Can't Help Falling in Love](#) – Elvis

My post-party top 10 list is decidedly rowdier, and I am happy to share them as well if interested. I would truly love to see others' selections. It is excruciatingly painful to cull my favorites to 10 and allow that some choices will swap in and out with time.

Published initially on November 30, 2011.

Hallelujah

Song Suggestion: [Hallelujah](#), Leonard Cohen (I love this Jeff Buckley version [])

Drink Suggestion: [warm Christmas mulled wine](#)

Hallelujah, my computer has died. I got the dreaded blue screen of death yesterday and after spending too many precious holiday hours since then seeking out a simple fix, have surrendered and called a tech.

Meanwhile, I am typing this postcard on my ancient Dell, weighing in at two tons and sporting a busted screen hinge, lazy processor, and without a wi-fi adapter. It hasn't seen the light of day for at least 2 years and perhaps thrilled to feel the electrons surge through the gates once again, but showing its considerable age. I have now joined the ranks of the unconnected.

I am grateful that my laptop died frankly, grateful to lose the distraction while my kids are here for the holiday break. The pull of the internet is addictive, even (or especially) during our supposed down time. Patterns set in that any smoker would recognize, the just out of bed fix, then just after breakfast, right before preparing lunch, and on and on through the day. And each dose can linger indefinitely, depending on the fascinating news items to be found. *What, Snooki lost 10 pounds on the cookie diet?* The cigarette habit is hard to break because the association of a lit smoke with those recurring moments of our daily routines is a constant reminder of the craving. I find the call of the internet equally difficult to refuse.

The internet has changed Christmas forever, particularly the shopping part. Who wants to stand in line with the masses? It is infinitely easier to browse the web looking for just the right gift, and now even possible from the mobile phone. Add credit card number and shipping address, and in a relaxing hour or two on a slow night (and with a glass or 3 of warm mulled wine for inspiration), voila, Santa's bag is full.

Yes, it is certainly easier to make our gift selections through Amazon, iTunes and other digital storefronts, but it also makes gift buying less genuine, more perfunctory. I wonder if our great grandparents made similar remarks in years past, when handmade gifts yielded to department store buying. Papa spends 2 months in the shed cutting, shaping, sanding, gluing, nailing, painting, and accessorizing junior's hobby horse, only to see his kid pine for the more polished factory-assembled horse in Macy's Christmas display window. Dammit!



New Years is just at the corner so it's time to consider resolutions. Mine come in the perennial and annual varieties.

A recurring pledge involves running (doing more of it) and drinking (doing less of it). Success varies. Last year I also resolved to start a blog where I could publish essays on the art of thriving post-50, personal

happiness, and life in my much-loved Aix-en-Provence. This last entry for 2011 marks my 16th postcard for the year. I hope that you have enjoyed them, perhaps even found some nuggets of value in them.

For 2012 I am targeting music, of getting back to songwriting and recording. The postcards will continue but alternate with a new posted recording monthly; at least this is the resolution. I also want to be more diligent with my gratitude journal this year and ask my kids for the same. It is an effective daily ritual for celebrating our good fortunes, not commiserating our misfortunes. If you have rituals for addressing the promise of a new year I would love to hear about them. The possibility of transformation is a key element of happiness and I am interested in different approaches to personal reinvention. The good lord knows well the work remaining at my end. Perhaps I will be her personal project for the year!

Published initially on December 27, 2011

View from the Aging Edge

Music Suggestion: [My Generation](#), The Who

Drink Suggestion: [Four Roses Bourbon](#)

Yet a day comes when a man notices thathe belongs to time and by the horror that seizes him he recognizes his worst enemy, tomorrow. – Albert Camus.

“Do something to make your parents proud.” Unsaid but implicit in this directive was the coda, “for a change.” My grandmother was a spritely 99 when she wished me good luck upon my first extended move away from home, to begin my young college days in Texas some 35 years ago. Born in 1878 (just imagine), Grammy was a wise and wrinkled sage who had seen much of the world, living in the Sudan, Puerto Rico, and up and down the East Coast, accompanying my grandfather, the stern Scots-Irish minister, as he wandered the globe tending the flock. She suffered fools (like her grandson) with patience but was not shy to offer advice. Unfortunately, I too quickly dismissed advice like this from Grammy, from my parents, from anyone not of *My Generation*.

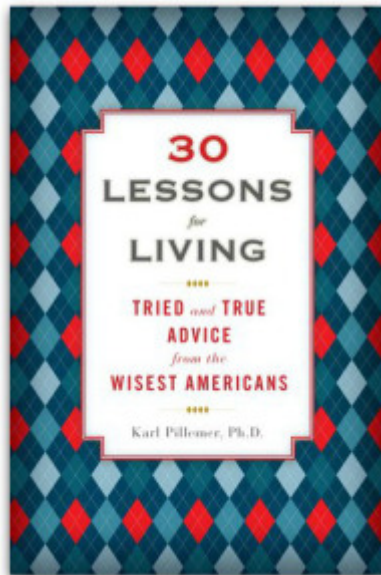
It is our loss that the advice of elders is not more regularly sought or highly valued. Only they can speak from experience on things like family, regrets, happiness, career choices, and the value of good health and well-being. Karl Pillemer shares this sentiment and set out to document the opinions and advice of older Americans, seeking common threads in the guidance they proffered. Pillemer is a Professor of Gerontology in Medicine at the Weill Cornell Medical College and directs the [Cornell Legacy Project](#). He also authored [30 Lessons for Living, Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans](#).



To copy/paste Amazon’s introduction of the book:

After a chance encounter with an extraordinary ninety-year-old woman, renowned gerontologist Karl Pillemer began to wonder what older people know about life that the rest of us don’t. His quest led him to interview more than one thousand Americans over the age of sixty-five to seek their counsel on all the big issues- children, marriage, money, career, aging. Their moving stories and uncompromisingly honest answers often surprised him. And he found that he consistently heard advice that pointed to these thirty lessons for living. Here he weaves their personal recollections of difficulties overcome and lives well lived into a timeless book filled with the hard-won advice these older Americans wish someone had given them when they were young.

I enjoyed reading *30 Lessons for Living* and was struck by the alignment of lessons therein – common sense opinions from very common people – with principles on happiness routinely proposed by the better-known gurus and academics in the field. Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Chopra, all respected thought leaders in the business of happiness, preach deeper fulfillment through small moments and the savoring of simple pleasures, not extravagance and grandiosity. Gratitude, lifelong personal development, self-determination, respect for one’s health, networking, and the pursuit of one’s passions now are all themes shared amongst these giants in the field (and touched on occasionally in these postcards by your blogger).



Here is Csikszentmihalyi, writing about happiness and its attainment in his seminal piece *Flow*, through the appreciation of simple things: sight, taste, music, and mastering one’s body (sex and yoga being good avenues). There is Csikszentmihalyi again, introducing his readers to the deeply fulfilled *autotelic worker*, who is internally driven to succeed, not externally driven to make money. Now some Chopra telling us about the power of gratitude and its connection to the soul. And Chopra’s law of Dharma: “Seek your higher Self. Discover your unique talents”.

Seligman cites that every person (save 1) in the top 10% of happiness in his highly-respected research on the topic was involved in a romantic relationship, that happier people have significantly richer social lives than their glummer counterparts. More Seligman, this time on the deception of the *hedonic treadmill*; the more we

attain, the more our expectations rise. The things we worked so hard to acquire no longer satisfy. In the words of my favorite narcissist of this generation, Homer Simpson, “more please.”

There was general consensus amongst Pillemer’s study participants on a number of themes (which he boiled down to the 30 lessons). For example on happiness: time is short so act on it now; do those things that are important now. Happiness is a choice. Stop wasting time worrying. Don’t stress (“this too will pass” was a favorite saying of my mother’s when I would call to complain about the kids or share other annoyances). Think small and be grateful for the small things you can enjoy. Savor life’s daily moments. Focus on the short term, not long term. Understand how much is enough, and the difference between wants and needs. Walk on your tiptoes and look for the “aha” moments in everyday life, not the big things.

According to Pillemer, “not a single person out of a thousand—said that to be happy you should try to work as hard as you can to make money to buy the things you want. No one—not a single person—said it’s important to be at least as wealthy as the people around you, and if you have more than they do it’s real success. No one—not a single person—said you should choose your work based on your desired future earning power.”

I don't have your attention long enough to review the full 30 lessons list here, but offer this: if you are overwhelmed by the volume of self-help tomes on the bookstore shelves today – Pillemer claims that over 30,000 have been published – you may want to opt for his beautifully simple addition. Also, the [Legacy Project website](#) at Cornell is updated daily with new stories and interviews. There is no agenda amongst his contributors to be edgy or conformist, to grab your attention and sell books and advice. They are simply telling it the way they see it after many moons on this earth, many joys lived and mistakes made.

I will close out with favorite quote from one of Pillemer's many interviewees:

I came into this world with nothing, my experiences are only mine and I will leave this world with nothing. The only one I can change is myself.

Amen to that.

Oh, a final note on my Grammy. She liked to keep a bottle of Four Roses bourbon in the freezer for her nightly nip. My saintly mother, the small-town doctor's wife and teetotaling church deacon, would slip discretely down the alleyway behind Grammy's apartment to the local liquor store and pick up Grammy's favored tippie. *Yes, and in a heavy paper bag please.*

Published initially on January 28, 2012

The Gods Must be Crazy

Song Suggestion: [Disco Inferno](#), Trammps

Drink Suggestion: [Greek Revolution](#) (ouzo, grenadine, galliano)

It's been a cold February in Provence, damn cold. The famous fountains of Aix are dripping in icicles, school bus routes have been suspended, and if the mercury cracks above 273° kelvin it is for just a few blessed hours. What the hell is all this nonsense about a warming globe?

With the weather as inspiration I prepared a tartiflette for friends on Saturday evening. This casserole comes from the French Alps region and is in a word, hearty. Potatoes, onion, bacon and cheese are the foundation of a great winter meal no matter how they are combined or prepared. In a [tartiflette recipe](#) they are pure magic. Looking to stick some skin on your bones, you won't go wrong with a tartiflette.

The marché crowd in Aix on Saturday morning was thin, no doubt intimidated by the weather. The merchants were using long plastic sheets to protect their fruits and vegetables from the chill. Many were in fingerless gloves and rocking on their heels to keep the blood flowing, but in good humor. "C'est l'hiver, c'est normal!" was the prevailing attitude. I have a favorite fish guy at the market and for the first time this winter he admitted to cold fingers. Gutting, scaling, and rinsing slippery poisson in sub-freezing weather cannot be fun. He was smiling, but it looked like an effort.



It's been a relief to feel the chill. I was starting to worry that Al Gore was on to something, with his fear-mongering about CO2 levels on the rise and melting ice shelves. But he's gone underground now, Al and his gaggle of grant-seeking science conspirators. There's been little noise about climate concerns over the past many months, not in the press (makes for boring copy), not from my brethren in the investment community (makes for poor returns), and not from the megaphone of presidential candidates, be they here in France or there in the US.

White House hopefuls are framing the national issues of relevance at the moment, with their state-to-state Republican pub crawl in full bloom. In the sacred well of righteous intentions – compassion, equality, and the right to self-determination – they have taken a death-defying, gloves-off, teeth-bared slither to the bottom. Truly stirring. I give the democrats fewer points for expressing callousness in prime time, but am impressed with their ability to avoid the gaze of Helios, Greek god of the sun (well technically he was a Titan, but let's not split hairs here) and solder forward with more pressing concerns

than saving the planet for all mankind. Oh, I almost forgot, that stuff about polar bear extinctions and Manhattan under water was all made up.

So what is going on here? Why all the fuss about climate change just a few short years ago ([An Inconvenient Truth](#) was released in 2006), and now a sudden black hole in the national dialog? Perhaps we can blame it on the gods (yes, Santorum cowers to an inquisition-inspired deity, but I figure it's safer to cover one's bets through the Greek committee system; taking it way back here folks). On modern day Mount Olympus (not up on your Greek mythology? [click here](#)) Ares (Mars to the Romans) has controlled the floor since 9/11, sharing more recently with Hermes (god of commerce; love those fantastic winged sandals) and his take on the floundering economy. But Helios (great crown, no wings) and Artemis (goddess of nature with some wicked arrows; no crowns, no wings) have been shut out of the conversation, and why shouldn't they be, when more urgent fears demand our gods' attentions.



How urgent you ask? Well, over \$3.5 trillion dollars urgent (a [Brown University report](#) [actually puts the estimate at \$3.7 trillion), invested wisely in Iraq and Afghanistan. And look at the hearts and minds we've gained in return. This is probably a tough pill for Hermes in particular to swallow. After all, a few trillion could have put a dent in the current housing crisis, which is definitely his domain. According to Bloomberg 35% of all US homes sold in January were under distressed conditions (at a price below the mortgage balance or in complete foreclosure). Consider that for a moment; over 1/3 of all homes sold. Do you think that a \$30,000 check tax free to every American household (115 million at last count)

may have saved a few struggling families from distress? I imagine so, but priorities, priorities.

\$3.5 trillion might have also done some good for the planet. But, why solve the riddle to a cheaper solar panel, develop a killer battery for electric vehicles, or modernize America's antiquated electric grid (a Sinatra era relic) when 225,000 deaths and 7.8 million refugees are attainable (Brown University's estimates of the human impact of the 2 wars). Helios and Artemis would surely pitch the benefits of competing with the Chinese in clean energy markets like solar (that will generate tens of millions of jobs for their citizens over next few decades) while helping the planet, but again, they don't have the floor right now. The Chinese have missed the boat on this one big time, investing billions upon billions in new university programs (committing at least 1.5% of its GDP by this [Yale University estimate](#) and core R&D to develop long-term domestic growth built on emerging industries, rather than shock-and-awe nation building in desert lands 7 thousand miles away. What in god's name are they thinking?

Published initially on February 28, 2012

A Simple Truth

Song suggestion: [Under My Wheels](#), Alice Cooper

Drink suggestion: [Domain de Saint Hilaire rosé, Coteaux d'Aix](#)

It has been a year now since I published my first *postcard*. A year of exploring, testing, learning, of savoring a few small victories and suffering a few (and then some) humbling failures. Did someone say, “if we aren’t failing we aren’t learning,” or did I just imagine that? Either way, I am getting an Ivy League education here in the south of France.

My infatuation with Aix-en-Provence has matured into a deep appreciation over this past year. I continue to marvel at the splendors of this Roman city, with its 101 fountains, its bountiful outdoor markets, its elegant 18th century architecture cast in the soft pastels of the Provence sun, and its easy Mediterranean character. A warm breeze at twilight, café chatter and a chilled glass of rosé with friends, and in a moment of wonder you try to recall the shooting star, rabbit’s foot, 4-leaf clover, or incredibly selfless deed that brought you all of this good fortune. It is like that.

My life is simpler here. This I value and this I have learned: simple is better. It is hard to find simplicity in a life bounded by possessions and fueled with a heavy dose of consumption. We are remembered for what we create, not what we consume; what we share, not what we possess. The centrifuge of stuff spinning around our daily lives is exhausting to maintain and distracting to manage. Do you ever feel like a whirling hammer thrower in the Olympics? Well let that hammer go. It is one hell of a release.



If you share my suspicions of consumerism as a hobby consider pairing back to the essentials. Feed the desires that bring you sustainable joy and personal definition, or perhaps defined you many years ago, and let the rest go. Our apartment in Aix is not monastic but certainly basic. The few furnishings we have are nice, but there aren’t many. I’ve invested happily in those essentials that feed the soul: for me, things like great pots and pans, an antique desk at which to write, a good stereo system, a new guitar and a decent piano. My 16-year-old son has a great guitar as well, a gift from his generous uncle, and the usual teenage kit: cell phone, iPod, laptop, PS3 system for gaming. I got my soul, he’s got his soul. We’re all good.

One decision that I don’t regret was to become carless. I’ve had my own wheels since the dented and scraped Opel station-wagon I bought for \$50 in 1975, and quite often I have had 2 money sinks sitting in the driveway. An encyclopedia of American muscle cars has pole position on my living room table, and I

still love checking out beautiful automobiles, almost as much as watching *les belles femmes d'Aix* glide along Cours Mirabeau in their light summer dresses (but I digress). Yes, I am a serious car guy, but I don't miss owning one.

There is a good public transport system in much of France (your eyes are rolling), and the network of busses and trains around Aix is truly impressive. Why drive to Marseille, for example, when a bus leaves every 10 minutes, makes 2 quick stops en route, then takes the same auto route that you would be following in your car? There are no worries about finding parking, getting lost, having an accident, or pairing that lunch with a nice glass of wine.



When public transportation doesn't work I take a taxi. If I really need a car for a day or a week then there is an Avis center 3 blocks from home. When I get out of the cab or turn in the car, I am done. Imagine not having to deal with registration fees, emissions tests, insurance premiums, gas prices, accidents, recalls, repairs, monthly payments, oil changes, dot dot dot. Is there any single possession – other than a home, perhaps – that consumes more of our energy?

There are 2 tradeoffs to a life without wheels: it's an urban life and it's a life amongst the masses (as in *mass transportation*). If you are a city person like me then #1 won't be a problem. #2 is a thornier challenge. We are conditioned to avoid exposure to people beyond our safe bubble of friends and family and the automobile is the perfect cocoon; our own little isolation tank on wheels. We get all the creature comforts of home – leather seats, 6 speaker stereo with an iPod port, telephone and even internet hookups – and with the finely filtered climate control systems that keep us at a perfect 72° F (22° C [295° K {inside joke, see my previous essay}]), we don't even share air with the grubby multitudes around us. Love it!

Actually, I don't love it. I am bored by it. Try the bus or the train. People are fascinating, people of all color, age and stripe, not just the antiseptic middle and upper classes with whom you and I mostly associate. I am no Mother Theresa. I've had to change seats more than once when a soap-challenged bus passenger plants nearby. But we humans are endlessly curious creatures, intriguing to watch and titillating to eavesdrop on. Why isolate oneself from all of this fascinating diversity? To listen to the mono-dimensions of Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern? Personally, I love NPR's Terry Gross, and with my archaic gen 1 iPod in hand (worth about what I paid for that Opel wagon in 1975) there is no need for a \$30,000 car radio to get my Fresh Air fix.

The blind ache to see a human face, the deaf ache to hear a human voice, and the dying don't want to die alone. When faced with the loss of human connection, we value nothing more. Why then do we try so hard and spend so much to avoid it?

Published initially on April 2, 2012

Teach Your Children Well

Song Suggestion: [Teach Your Children](#), Crosby Stills Nash & Young

Drink Suggestion: Italian Soda with caramel syrup (my daughter's favorite)

I am in San Francisco for two weeks, picking up my twins who will spend the summer in Aix-en-Provence. It is wonderful to be back in *Bagdad by the Bay*, as coined by the late, great SF Chronicle columnist Herb Caen. The impossibly steep hills and colorfully painted Victorian homes, the vintage street cars rumbling down Market Street and [Rice-a-Roni](#) cable cars ("[a San Francisco treat!](#)") being pulled up Powell, all cloaked in the mystery of a cool Pacific fog. Sitting at the Lone Palm in the Mission last Saturday night, I crossed paths with a reformed venture capitalist now placing social investments in Ghana. His girlfriend showed us her magnificent new dragon tattoo that stretched from hip to knee cap with great pride. *Another round please*. San Francisco is like that.

My kids will have great memories of their San Francisco youth. They take the underground metro each morning to the Powell Street station, lug their backpacks past the Union Square shops and through the heart of Chinatown before arriving at their campus on Pine. Some days they jump on a cable car leaving the turnaround on Market, gliding up Nob Hill to the clang of the conductor's bell. All just a bit more exciting than the rural school bus rides I endured as a boy in Pennsylvania.

Like all parents I often question if I am a good parent. What matters most? Who is the gold standard? How do I make an impression? What is the level of personal investment, support and sacrifice truly required? Do I have boundaries? Am I a bad parent for asking these questions?

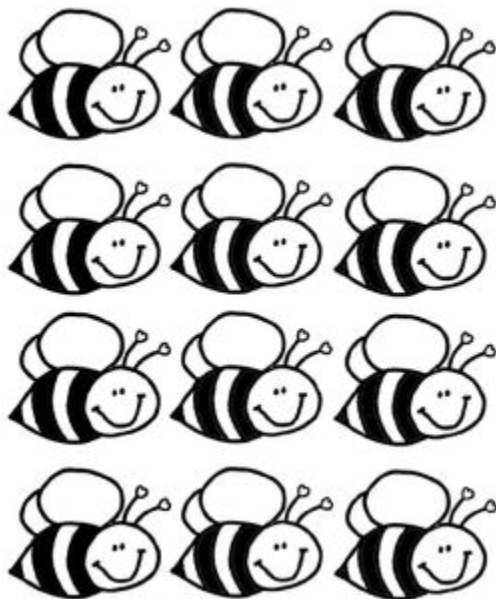
Of this I am certain: there is no proven recipe for successful parenting; it cannot be reduced to 7 sacred steps (but wouldn't that be wonderful?). Each child comes with a unique basket of gifts and challenges, as do we, the parents. Each challenge and every gift must be attended and nurtured in a manner that resonates most effectively, and finding that host of frequencies (which are unique to each kid and change with age) is an exercise in trial and error. Overcoming our own deficiencies is equally exciting.

Of this I suspect: to lead by example is the low hanging fruit. We are all born naked and wrap ourselves in the fashion of conduct and beliefs that mimics our most inspiring idols. These would be our parents, ...until the teen-age years of course. And at this phase, when the great distinction between passive hearing and active listening is most truly crystalized, the examples we set become perhaps the sharpest tools in our parenting kit.



Of this I believe: we do a great disservice to our kids by emphasizing the limitless sacrifices we are prepared to make on their behalf. Their own futures are without bound, the possibilities without limit, gated only by individual levels of ambition. All parents must surely feel this way. I want each of my 3 kids to fully explore and realize their personal genius – to “put a dent in the universe,” to quote Steve Jobs – and will be frustrated in the extreme to see their dreams surrendered to self-imposed constraints, for there will be plenty enough outside the voluntary sphere.

Women face the most challenge, equally from external gender bias and their own skew to self-sacrifice. For those of you with a determined young daughter, would you be happy to hear that all has been shelved to support her husband’s journey or raise kids? Being a spouse and mom is rewarding and demands compromise. But, to what level, this is the issue. This will be her personal decision; one influenced heavily by the examples you as mom are setting now. So, is this a good lesson: *my talented mother sacrificed all for me so that I could flourish in the world; I sacrificed that for you, my child, so you could flourish in the world; you should be prepared to sacrifice that for your children so they can flourish in the world, ad infinitum?* Who the hell gets to actually flourish in the world under this model? Is this a better lesson: *my mother was a remarkable success (or at least gave it a damn good try) who inspired me every day to reach for the stars without limit; I am working hard to be a remarkable success and role model who inspires you to reach for the stars without limit (and yes some nights we eat Rice-a-Roni because I just don’t have time to do better, deal with it), and you can hand this lesson down to your own children, ad infinitum. By the way, did I tell you today that I love you?*



For parents (moms or dads) whose principal sense of worth and pleasure is based on their children’s fulfillment, god bless. You are a good worker bee, teaching your kids who can teach their kids to also become good worker bees, focused on the spawn and filling a virtuous role. But amongst you and your daughters there may well be a Marie Curie or Joni Mitchell, Amelia Earhart or Julia Child toiling indistinguishable from the rest in the hive. And at this challenged moment in time – environmentally, artistically, economically, politically – do we need more convention or inspired disruption? Is it better to be less the dutiful parent or spouse, more the accomplished individual? Would we prefer that Marie or Joni, both moms of questionable parenting repute, had just stayed the hell home?

There is a wide blur between selfish and selfless, particularly in the parenting domain, and both are unhealthy at the extremes. I struggle to find the optimum balance point, and for many other parents committed to self-discovery and fulfillment this is an ongoing struggle. Of this I know: I am a more complete man for having had children, and for this I am grateful, as self-discovery has become a central preoccupation to my middle age. But I think it is too easy to temper

our ambitions, to bound what is possible with kids as the pretext. Frankly, we get tired (dare I say lazy?) and they become an easy out. Our society is biased towards family obligation over individual rebellion, which makes it all the more easy. All for the hive! Shall we leave that to the bees?

Published initially on June 15, 2012

Live & Unplugged

Suggested Song: [Pastures of Plenty](#), Woody Guthrie

Suggested Drink: [Peach Diabolo](#). (A favorite amongst my kids.)

En route to Paris the countryside zips past at 200 mph. It is a summer trip to my brother's farmhouse in the French heartland that has us gliding north from Provence on a lightning fast bullet train. Through fields of lavender and sun flowers, over broad rivers and lazy canals, past charming villages and large farms, cows and hay bales and hillsides of grape vines in their trellised rows. It is no surprise that Impressionism originated in France, for the countryside is in a word captivating; perfect for Monet's dreamy lillie ponds or Pissarro's rich landscapes of rural life.

A holiday trip is perfect for detachment from the routine, from work and other daily distractions. And I am on *Unplugged Day #5*, liberated and leaning towards permanent uncoupling from the mobile realm. Family holidays are sacrosanct, they are the really good stuff that lingers in our minds long after the summer heat has faded and the flip flops are boxed away. No distractions beyond a great summer book. Definitely no mobile phone.



Does the phone-only wireless phone still exist? The newer models are truly computers for your pocket.

With my antiquated Samsung (going on 2 years now and oh so "yesterday") I can browse the web, check my email, take photos and videos, look at maps and get my coordinates, order train tickets, listen to the radio, correct my bad French translations, get a beep and description each time I pass by a historic monument in Aix-en-Provence, and those are just the few things I actually use. The new iPhone 4S has over 500,000 apps that Apple offers for your amusement (and holiday intrusion).

What can be wrong with so much great innovation? Where is the downside of this communal dive into the world of super smart and oh-so-cool mobile devices? For those of you whose principle source of joy is solitary digital absorption, there are no worries. Life is getting more beautiful with each new generation of phones and waves of apps. For those of us seeking deeper fulfillment and engagement with family, friends, and the occasional fascinating stranger there is cause for concern.

- **Distraction:** With so many cool gizmos at our bored little fingertips, why engage with the rest of the world? Engagement requires eye contact and active listening, an exhaustive venture outside our bubble of 1. Navigating a city sidewalk these days requires constant vigilance, with so many pedestrians walking on auto pilot while squinting at emails or typing an SMS. How many times have you watched a couple noncommunicating over coffees or dinner, him or her or both with phones securely planted in hand and tapping away? *Did you say something dear?* Or we see dad

responding self-importantly to that urgent Saturday text (*btw, whole milk or 2%? lv u ☺*) while his son Jimmy kicks the winning goal at his weekend soccer match.

Many thanks to Apple/Google/AT&T and their industry cabal for making this lost family moment possible. Ah, but a bit of self-discipline is all that one needs, right? Right, but the truth is I am weak, most of us are weak. Each new app adds a voice to the chorus of calls singing, *Get me out, play with me!* Do you disagree?

- **Expense:** “Hey, my cell phone is cheap and my apps are free,” you say. Ah, but two cans do not a phone connection make. You gotta have the string (in this case microwaves)! Let’s do a little math. Per the AT&T website, the cheapest iPhone 4S (16 Gb) runs \$200 (I’m rounding up by 1 penny for easier cypherin’); amortizing over 24 months (2 year service plan) gets us to \$8/month (the 64 Gb iPhone we really want is twice that price, but let’s be thrifty with the numbers). Now, add another \$60/month for the calling plan (nationwide unlimited) plus \$30 for the data plan (the minimum plan they recommended for video and audio apps). All in we are sending AT&T \$98 per month for the pleasure of unlimited distraction (see bullet #1).

Is it worth it? What is the opportunity cost of \$98/month? That depends entirely on your priorities. For parents like me, one could consider applying the savings to more rewarding moments with the kids (than twiddling away on your 4S while Jimmy celebrates with his teammates). As an example, \$98/month would pay for a family membership (\$10/month) to both of San Francisco’s finest museums— the de Young and Legion of Honor – that have numerous events and exhibitions for kids, PLUS a monthly movie outing to the West Portal Theater (\$26 for 4 with the early bird special), PLUS treats for all after the show at Shaw’s ice cream parlor across the street (another \$16), PLUS a Sony SLR camera to capture these family moments (the SLT-A37 lists for \$598 [\$50/month if amortized over 1 year, which is wildly conservative]). Despite all pronouncements by Apple acolytes to the contrary, the 4S’s camera features and flexibility, while impressive for a phone, do not come close to a decent mid-priced SLR.

- **Compromise:** I appreciate that smart phone devices are truly impressive in terms of big utility in a small package in the way I appreciate that the Swiss make one hell of an army knife. For backpacking into the wilds it’s great. But I rarely (never actually) backpack into the wilds, and when I need scissors, tweezers, pliers, a fingernail file, corkscrew, screwdriver, saw blade, can opener, or knife for that matter I reach for one of the single function gadgets in my drawer at home. Similarly, I don’t want to watch videos on a 3.5 inch screen or capture my precious family moments with cell phone-grade optics. Convenience factor: HIGH; quality factor: LOW.

Apple isn't losing sleep over my concerns. It knows well and accepts that I am old school and just don't get it. Its target customers are my kids, the younger generation. Are they happy to watch videos on a 3.5 inch screen: YES; do they believe that the iPhone camera quality is as good as any decent SLR: YES; do they consider song quality off a microchip perfectly fine: YES (because they grew up with tinny iPods); do they agree with Apple that Dad *just doesn't get it*: YES. And this leads me to the final bullet.



- Control: Everyone I know wants an iPhone, iMac, or iPad including me. We KNOW they are the most aesthetically beautiful, functionally elegant, pure extensions of our own uncorrupted souls and that Steve Jobs was a profound genius, now in some distant mystic dimension and debating with his creative equals, the likes of Da Vinci and Disney. I need more Apple in my life according to my 12 year-old daughter, specifically an iPhone (and she'd like one as well while I am at it). Why? Well, the backing argument isn't yet firmed up, but just believe her on this. If I go to the Apple store then I will see. If I buy one then I will understand. Everyone has become an Apple disciple it seems, and it pushes me to resist even more my own digital desires. I would like to have an iPad, but one thing that really gets my antennas twisting is blind allegiance. Can we agree that Apple and their wireless device brethren makes some pretty cool stuff that can be useful for work and fun for play? Can we also agree that who we are, what we stand for, and where we derive happiness and fulfillment should not be defined by the brands we consume? It is unfair to single out Apple on this peeve, but it is the poster child of the moment. *What, you're not an Apple guy? Are you not experienced?*

"We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of pure ideology, where each worker may bloom secure from the pests of contradictory and confusing truths." This seems ironic now, Apple's 1984 Macintosh commercial ([click here to watch](#)) exhorting the masses to break their chains and question group think.

"Il faut profiter de la vie" was how my table neighbor phrased it, and I understood well his meaning: "We must enjoy moments like this, cannot take them for granted." We were sitting with my kids and a dozen or so friends and family at a long wooden table in the French countryside. The sun was warm but there was a helpful breeze and the shade tree overhead was broad. It was a late Saturday lunch of salmon tartare, diced beets in garlic and cumin, soft boiled egg whites with homemade mayonnaise, a garden tomato and cucumber salad in vinaigrette, tuna rillettes (or was that crab?) spread on thin

baguette slices, a delicious selection of goat, sheep and cow cheeses, and frozen sorbets as the cool finale on a gorgeous August day. Of course there was plenty of champagne to serve it all up and wines to wash it all down, followed by small tumblers of local cognac to aid the digestion (just before hammock time).

No smart phones sat on the table, no one was tapping on a keypad, everyone was enjoying the moment and any disruption would have seemed irreverent and cheap. It is the kind of moment that lingers for weeks in our memories. It is an afternoon that deserves our full investment. It is what truly matters, right?

Published initially on August 18, 2012

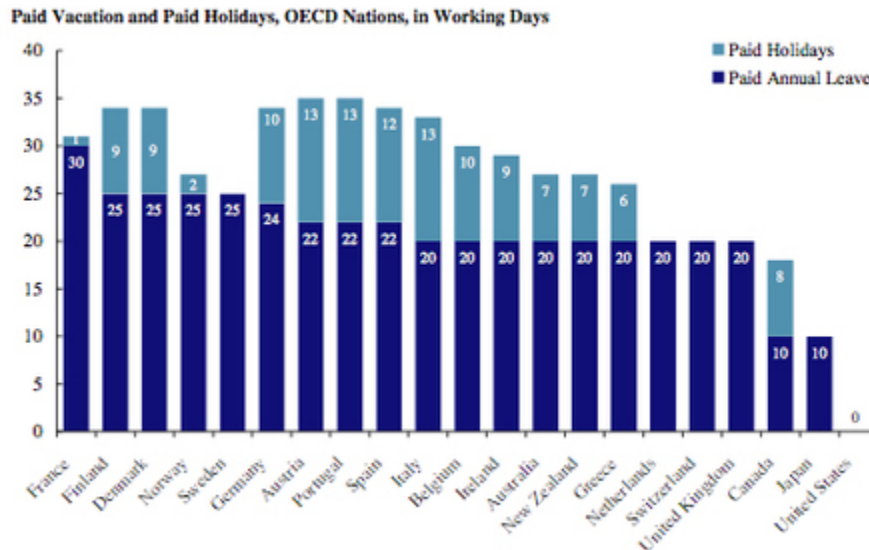
The Art of Doing Nothing

Song suggestion: [She Works Hard For The Money](#), Donna Summers

Drink suggestion: [Lazy Daze cocktail](#)

Good news on the state of our health and contentment. Americans are working harder and wearing out sooner than any time in the past 50 years. Why good news? I'll get to that in a moment, first consider this:

- Just prior to the “big recession” of 2007/08 the average US worker put in more than three full-time weeks per year than the average Brit, six weeks more than the average French worker and nine weeks more than the industrious German. In fact, more hours – at 1,804 for 2006 – than the average worker anywhere else in the world, ...anywhere. This according to [The Big Squeeze](#), a recent book by *New York Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse on US work conditions. (On an aside, the US is the only country in the industrialized world without a mandatory vacation law and the only holdout without mandatory paid maternity/paternity leave.)



He adds that productivity has surged in the recent employment downturn – GDP continues to grow, albeit with fewer workers – but income and wages are not keeping up. “If the median household income had kept pace with the economy since 1970, it would now be nearly \$92,000, not \$50,000.” Corporate executives (whose incomes have managed to keep pace and then some) and their shareholders much appreciate the effort. Chapeau!

- A 2011 report from the University of Washington and Imperial College London revealed that while the world’s leading industrialized countries (including those lazy Brits, French and Germans mentioned above) continue to trend up in life expectancy, 80% of the counties in the US have slipped further behind the average of the globe’s top performers. The CIA now places

the US at #51 globally in life expectancy, behind Puerto Rico, Jordan and Guam (in case you are curious). According to the UofW report, life expectancy in many US counties is now about where the leading western world stood in 1957.

So what is up with the US health challenge? Most researchers point to higher obesity rates and diabetes as a key concern, but stress has long been known as a leading cause of health problems, both mental and physical, and Americans are under a lot of stress, working harder and earning less in real dollars. This is particularly harmful to whichever parent is considered the home and family manager: typically mom. In the majority of married households, she is the partner who pays the bills and takes on the family planning. This on top of her salaried work, as few households get by on a single paycheck any more. Not surprising then, that according to the UofW report cited earlier, life expectancies for women declined alarmingly between 1997 and 2007 in almost a quarter of US counties. The researchers added that “setbacks on this scale have not been seen in the US since the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918.”

Consider that there will be about 3 billion more Chinese entering the middle class by 2040; 3 billion more consumers of iPads, automobiles, family homes, and La-Z-Boy recliners. *At the current pace of population growth and global consumption we'll need a second earth of resources in the just 30 years.* This unsettling claim I overheard in a meeting at the European Commission in Brussels last week. Okay, so where is the good news? Getting to it.

Given that a new planet is unlikely, the existing middle class needs to downshift on our side of the ledger because the new arrivals are definitely upshifting on theirs. Fewer people will help of course, hence the silver lining in the American life expectancy numbers. Someone has to step up and lay down (6 feet down) in a world of dwindling resources, rising temperatures, and ballooning consumption, and once again the US seems to be heeding the call.

I am of course being morbid and flippant. The key to accommodating the growing class of global consumers is to curtail our existing consumption compulsion. Couldn't we all survive with fewer things, smaller cars (or better yet, go carless), more modest homes, and a pivot to simpler, more meaningful experiences that require quality time, not money and stuff? Can we expect the newly minted middle class in China and elsewhere to live frugally in light of growing concerns over climate and resources, when we ourselves are unwilling to cut back?



We've mastered the art of working hard, the art of generating wealth, and the art of spending our fortunes big and small on gifts grand and modest to ourselves (our increasingly big selves) and loved ones. Perhaps instead it's time to learn the art of doing nothing?

Funny that you mention it. I recently bought [The Art of Doing Nothing](#) by Véronique Vienne, first

published in 1998. As she writes in the liner notes, this is “a practical guide to rest and relaxation, ...where ‘being’ is more compelling than ‘doing’.” Rather than gives us 7 steps to creating a new business or achieving financial freedom, Vienne gives us the art of procrastinating, lounging, napping (my favorite), listening, and more. None require a penny of investment; none consume an ounce of the earth. Feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment? I highly recommend it.

Published initially on September 30, 2012

The New and Nasty Normal

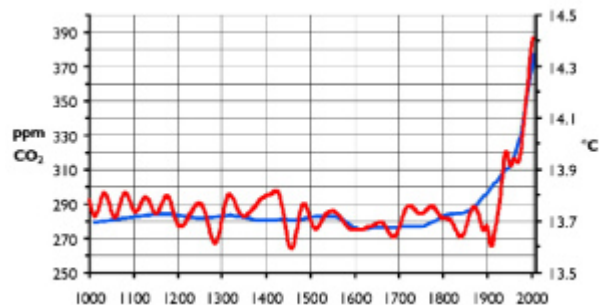
Song Suggestion: [The Road to Hell](#), Chris Rea

Drink Suggestion: [Passport to Hell cocktail](#)

I don't know what is more depressing: the destruction left in Sandy's wake or the teachable moment lost through the storm grates. The "C-word" (Climate) has replaced the "N-word" during this presidential run as the nastiest of national slurs, and pox on the lips from whom it spews. It's as if we have entered the world of Hogwarts and *things that must not be named*. Neither candidate has used this opportunity to show real leadership on the very real problem of climate weirdness. It was no different in France, by the way, during the presidential elections there earlier this year. *Crise climatique, c'est quoi ça?*

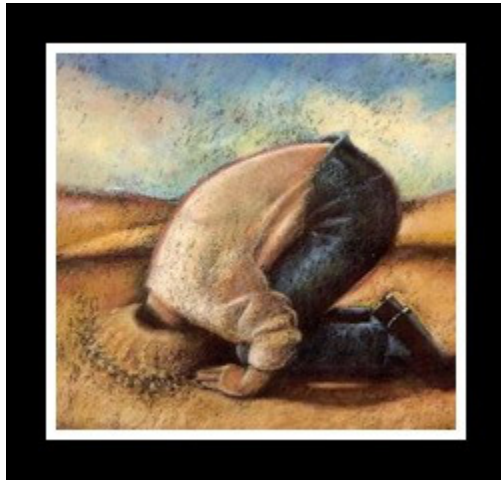
Romney deserves credit for ducking the issue with the greatest temerity. When a heckler at his Virginia rally this week shouted "climate change caused Sandy!" and flashed a sign reading "End Climate Silence," Romney responded with 2 minutes of clueless silence and blank (but brilliant) smile that seemed to say, "can anyone help me out here?" The crowd's reaction was predictable: a loud chorus of boos for the heckler and stirring group chant of "USA! USA! USA!" while the inconvenient truther was escorted roughly from the event. Romney supporters are evidently in *Camp America is Awesome!*, with the unifying conviction that by sheer will we – God's favored nation – can dictate terms on the weather like just another Olympic basketball opponent. But challenging climate science is not a sporting competition, right? We do all get that? Evidently not.

Romney's take on the climate (*what problem?*) may be alarming for a Harvard man who may be king, but certainly not surprising. This is the guy who defended the coal industry with a cheery campaign commercial titled "War on Coal," in which he glibly asks, "We have 250 years of coal. Why wouldn't we use it?" Well, for starters it is the most carbon intense – i.e., dirtiest, nastiest – fossil fuel on this planet earth, accounting for over 40% of the US's CO₂ emissions and about 65% of China's. Of course if one chooses to deny that CO₂ emissions and global warming are linked, then *voilà, pas de problème*. After all, the Church managed to deny that whole sun-at-the-center-of-the-universe baloney for 200 years after Galileo proved otherwise in 1610. These things do take time.



What is more discouraging, however, is Obama's silence on climate change and its probable role this week in producing the highest Manhattan storm tide on record, or since 2000 producing 9 of the globe's 10 hottest years on record, or in 2008 clearing both the Northeast and Northwest arctic passages of ice for the first time in recorded history, or..., and... ,in addition to ad nauseum. To be fair, the president has made an effort to at least acknowledge global warming and endorse the consensus of 99% of the

world's climate scientists that we are indeed on the road to a very toasty hell. He's passed auto emissions standards and pushed investment in alternative energy, but his leadership on climate change as an issue of critical importance both nationally and globally has been in a word, tepid.



The 2 candidates and most all of our national leaders have adopted the *it may go away if I stop thinking about it* approach to problem solving. That F in math, well if I stop looking at the report card it may just go away before I have tell mom and dad. That mole on my neck, well if I stop looking in the mirror then it's not really there. Think about global warming like an angry wart on your genitals. Yes, you can choose to ignore it for a while, but that may severely diminish your most divine, meaningful experiences of life permanently in just a few short years. Actually it's worse. In this case your kids (and their kids and grand-kids) get the wart too, because you declined to get treatment.

If there was an opportunity for the candidates to establish a bit of "climate cred" this was the moment. Imagine either of them declaring after the storm, "Okay enough, now we get it and MUST act decisively." I might have even considered taking a closer look at Romney if he had taken that kind of maverick position. It was a missed opportunity to draw in enlightened centrists and he blew it.

It was New York's Mayer Bloomberg who took value from Sandy's harsh lesson by breaking his pledge not to endorse either candidate and tip his hat to Obama (more precisely away from Romney) specifically for their respective positions on the changing climate. In his published endorsement, Bloomberg wrote that "Our climate is changing, and while the increase in extreme weather we have experienced in New York City and around the world may or may not be the result of it, the risk that it may be — given the devastation it is wreaking — should be enough to compel all elected leaders to take immediate action." His beef with Romney is his position shift on global warm, criticizing him for "abandoning the very cap-and-trade program he once supported. This issue is too important. We need determined leadership at the national level to move the nation and the world forward." Bravo (and please consider a run in 2016).

So where does this leave us? In case there was any doubt, this is the new and nasty normal we can all expect moving forward: hotter summers, bigger storms, higher tides, more severe weather. I would not be recommending ground floor properties in Lower Manhattan, whose residents may be joining the islanders of Vanuatu on the list of the permanently evacuated. The question is no longer how do we fix this problem, it is now how do we live with this permanent change, and how do we limit even greater damage?

For some truly frightening reading on the damage done and what to expect ext, read [Eearth](#) by Bill McKibben. And you thought Halloween was scary!! Buckle up.

Published initially on November 3, 2012

What You Do, Where You Live, Whom You Love

Suggested Music: [Do It Better](#), Imperial Teen

Suggested Drink: Juice cleanse (apple, grapes, carrot, lemon, ...) after the holiday excess.

January is a logical month to take stock of how we are doing. A tattered year is behind us and a sparkly clean 12 months ahead. But how does one determine the metrics for “doing well?” Health, of course, is at the top of the list, but we have only partial control over that. Of those elements we control entirely how about the state of our:

- Affluence
- Job title
- Golf handicap
- Wine cellar
- Other, what am I missing?

Are any elements more fundamental to our state of circumstance than what we are doing, where we are living, and whom we are loving? Do any of the ingredients for your bliss pie constitute the recipe base more than these? I would argue that the rest are just whip cream and sprinkles really, but on their own provide little nourishment.

So, as we enter the first week of the first month of the new year, take a moment to ask:



Are you happy with what you do? Does it offer full engagement and moments of flow? Do you lose track of time when deeply immersed in this activity? Does it draw on your natural strengths and leave you with a rich sense of accomplishment and worth? Are you at your best when doing this? Does a voice in your head say “I was born for this role” when up to your elbows in it? Are you working harder at it than anyone you know, happily? Will it be mentioned in your eulogy?

I worked for years doing incredible jobs that were a terrible fit. They were coveted by many and attained by few, offered status and a good income, left me coddled and pampered, and I almost believed that I was what my title implied. Do I regret pursuing these positions? Not at all, because my priorities at the time were different. They revolved around acquiring wealth and establishing security to underpin a marriage and growing family. The objective was firstly a solid career, not personal fulfillment. But priorities change, particular at midlife, when one realizes suddenly that we have only this life and it can be unexpectedly short. Of the questions in the former paragraph very few would have been answered “yes” with these roles. At some point, certainly on the downward slope of the bell curve of life and perhaps sooner, don’t we want those answers to be “hell yes”? Are you happy with what you do?

Are you happy with where you live? If you could stick a pin in the world map (think sixth grade geography class), would you target a city centre, outer burb, small town, or country home? Do you prefer the arctic snow to the Polynesian sun? Is it a temperate breeze or the arid heat that makes you feel at home? Do you need to live at the centre of the family hive, or is an outpost far from the nest more suitable? Some of us prefer modern settings with high rises of steel and glass towering over wide avenues while others revel in the narrow alleys of old historic villages. Which do you prefer? Are you a renter, owner, squatter in a house, flat, cabin, trailer?



The reality is, everything but our personal interests plays a major role in where we live; work and family in that order. We go where there is work. It does not come to us, unfortunately. We also respect the needs of our families, both the birth and acquired varieties. Our parents need support as they get older, and we dearly need their help with the kids. But at some point around midlife the parents pass on and the children move on. We start to reconsider our pursuits of interest. At this time we

are less tethered to a geographic pin point on that map.

Many of us will decide that there is no place better than the home we know, comfortable and close to those we love. This is understandable given the upheaval that accompanies a major move. Still, immersion into new environs can be incredibly liberating and necessary for reinvention. Why be the same person at 60 that you were at 30; it is not an obligation. Try stepping into a new skin for just 1 weekend and you may be hooked. Is it worth asking, then, are you happy with where you live?

Are you happy with whom you love? I am exceptionally unqualified to counsel on the world of amour (my ex would happily back me up on that claim), but love is a most enjoyable pursuit at which to work harder. It lies at the heart of our hearts and true happiness, and certainly worthy of assessment. When you see your partner's name on the incoming call screen, does it make you smile? When he is home sick, do you want to inquire, to prepare that homemade chicken soup, or do you mostly feel obligated? Is your intimacy still rich and imaginative, or are you telling yourselves that sex no longer matters. While the cause/effect of the connection between touch and health remains a mystery, it is well documented that babies and animals deprived of physical touch are comparatively unhealthy and develop poorly. (By the way, frequent orgasms can increase life expectancy by 3-8 years, according to the RealAge book!)

The median age for marriage in the US is 26 for women, 28 for men (add 2-3 years for most western European countries). Many of us are now twice that age and have tripled the years since beginning to mature emotionally. That we would change, in ways both dramatic and unexpected, is normal and healthy. Otherwise, there has been no growth, no beautiful journey in this one life to live. Our partners are shifting course too, on independent tangents of their own design. It is beautiful to grow together, to

complement and support the other while exploring ourselves. But it is tragic to force the match, to tag along begrudgingly, or worse repress our partner's curiosity and potential.

We need to accept change and even insolvency in our partnerships, as long as the union is respected and all avenues exhausted for finding solutions. Children complicate things, but the lessons taught by example are the most immediate and effective. Is this a good lesson: *mom and dad fight like crazy and never get along, but at least our miserable family life with its many sparks and firestorms is preserved?* Is this a better lesson: *mom and dad couldn't get along, did everything possible to work it out (yep, they acted like real grownups for a change), admitted they had both changed, and now there is peace in the valley?* So, are you happy with whom you love?

The whats, wheres, and whoms of our lives are interconnected, and changes to one has impact on the others. The fun is in finding the optimum balance, the compromise among them that maximizes happiness and charges our optimism. If we do what we love, live where we belong, and have a partner deserved of our best chicken soup, then anything seems possible, any challenge feels manageable. Bliss!

Published initially on January 6, 2013

All In

Suggested Song: [All In](#), Better than Ezra

Suggested Drink: [Agavé peach wine](#)

The story went like this:

We were all called into the break room at the end of the day on Friday for a special group meeting. I was half way out the door when Ernie (the group manager) asked us all to take a seat. He had no other way to say this then to just say it. Starting next Monday, Mike, who's been a great part of this lab team for 5 plus years now and you all know very well, will be showing up as Michelle. He, or she as of Monday, will be dressing as a woman and wearing a wig and makeup. Basically, the full-on getup. You ladies should take note that she'll also be using the women's restroom. Yep, that's right. Be respectful and if you have any issues come see me about it. Have a great weekend.

My roommate was not the excitable type, but he and his entire crew were clearly caught by surprise with this news. He ended the recounting with a wide eyed coda of, *Holy shit, can you believe it!?*

We had both been working at a large government research laboratory outside San Francisco when his colleague – a married father of 2 – made the decision to get gender reassignment. A precondition for the treatment and procedure was to live as a woman 24/7 for at least 12 months first. Some things cannot be done in half measures. Mike was obviously not a weekend explorer. Inside he already was Michelle, and perhaps to feel complete he needed to be Michelle to the world outside as well. He went all in.



The John Tracy story also centers on an abrupt and major revision of oneself. John v1.0 was a science geek (physicist and aspiring entrepreneur) who founded a diode laser company in Tucson in 1992. This was the digital gold rush era when founders of companies that made lasers and other parts for fiber-optic networks were becoming overnight zillionaires. He sold Opto-Power at the market peak a few years later and decided on a complete life change. (No, not gender reassignment!)

John v2.0 and his wife Deborah moved to the San Francisco Bay area in 2000, bought a vineyard in Sonoma County, and took a blind dive into the wine business (think Green Acres, 21st century). When the vagaries of the grapes market become apparent he doubled down, hired a winemaker, and expanded into a winery – [Owl Ridge Wines](#) – in 2004. More recently John has diversified into becoming

a negociant (bottling grapes from other vineyards) and developing a completely new wine line through his [Agavé Garden](#) brand.



I caught up with John last week over a call from Aix. There are days when he misses the technology world – a lot in fact – and never intended to divorce himself of it completely. But running a winery and vineyard is a full time job times 2. Pursuing one’s passion demands complete and uncompromised commitment. He will tell you that he’s learned on the job, made every mistake possible, and invested himself wholly into this endeavor. He’s gone all in.

Many of us dabble in hobbies that we dream will become lifestyles. But It is difficult to establish a radically new trajectory when there are bills to pay and families to support. Mike had the expectations of family, friends and coworkers to counter. Just imagine the discussions in which he had to engage. Abrupt life changes may be required, however, in the pursuit of our personal visions,

those passions that define who we are and why we are on this spinning planet. In fact I believe that abrupt changes are more the rule than exception when going all in on a mission that truly matters. And our missions must be respected, must truly matter. Or aren’t we just dabbling?

The problem with the weekend warrior model to a new you is two-fold: your immersion isn’t long enough to affect real change – you become v1.1 (v1.0 with a feature upgrade) rather than a distinctly new v2.0, and it is difficult to attain escape velocity sufficient to overcome the gravitational drag of your existing reality. This is not to suggest that radical change should be pursued without ample preparation, and that is done before the leap.

Joe Murphy teaches a course at San Francisco State University on life planning, and he outlines 6 stages of change that define a major transition. I’ve modified Joe’s steps slightly to highlight the elements you may want to consider when thinking through the all-in process of real personal change.

1. Pre-contemplation: *do I want to repurpose and redefine myself?* Assessing one’s current state, defining new opportunities, understanding the pros and cons of change, getting feedback from others, and identifying sources of resistance.
2. Contemplation: *what would this change look like?* Envisioning v2.0, outlining a plan, identifying resources needed and available, understanding one’s fears about change, and establishing the calendar of change (to avoid being either premature or overcautious).

3. Preparation: *getting ready*. Laying out the steps to your v2.0 release date, establishing interim milestones, identifying personal behaviors to add or subtract, clarifying the mission and message, rallying support, developing financial estimates, and testing the waters.
4. Action: *time to go all in*. Implementing the vision plan, avoiding one's favorite diversions, being confident and assertive, rewarding progress, attaining new and required knowledge, remaining motivated, and validating and tracking results.
5. Maintenance: *staying there*. Sending out announcements, turning new behaviors into habits, reframing your personal pitch (to that familiar question, "and what do you do?"), respecting danger signs, accepting credit for accomplishments, continued learning and pivots, and staying vigorous through diet, exercise and meditation.
6. Recycling: *bouncing back from relapse*. Pushing the reset button, preparing for complications, learning from failures, giving oneself a break, continuing to seek the guidance and support of others who care.

Not everyone is driven to redefine themselves dramatically and this is understandable. Real change is unsettling to pursue, requires tremendous energy and significant resources, can be viewed as a threat to others, and opens ourselves to criticism and embarrassment. Still, for many of us it is not an option to remain static. If much that defines us is outdated or simply inaccurate, then we are compelled to unveil a new model. Otherwise we are all Mike – pre-Michelle – presenting ourselves falsely, struggling to dance in a straitjacket, and never realizing our true gifts. How unsettling is that?

Published initially on February 16, 2013

It's not the Size that Matters

Suggested song: [All I Want is More](#), Reel Big Fish

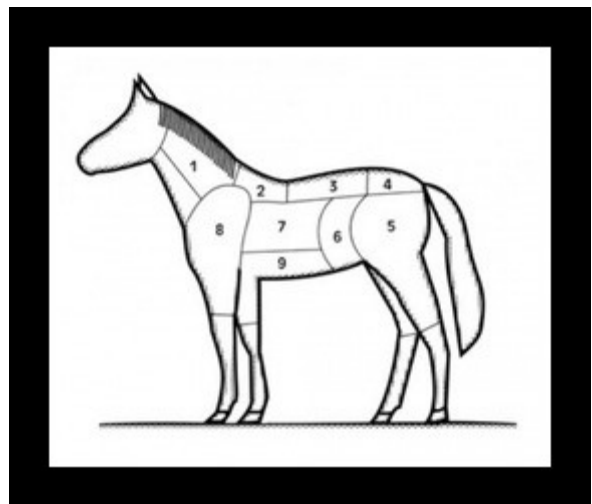
Suggested drink: [Bigger Better Blue Lagoon](#)

*The happiest people don't have the best of everything;
they just make the best of everything. – Unknown*

Horror of horrors, Pagni is gone! For the past 3 years I've been buying the best beef in the world from this boisterous butcher, operating from his white step van at the edge of the outdoor market in Aix. He has single handedly destroyed all attempts at eliminating red meat from my diet, much as I've tried. My kids were equally swayed by his product and charm, prodding me with instructions to visit Pagni on my morning marché rounds to get *his* ground beef for the occasional lunchtime burgers.

Last summer I noticed the segmented outline of a horse by his service counter and asked him to translate the word *Chevaline*, framed in an official-looking certificate by the image. At that instructive moment of clarity all pieces converged, and I realized why his product tasted different, was so much richer in flavor and deeper in color.

Yes, the rewards of ignorance can sometimes be a naive bliss. Some of us cringe at the thought of equine burgers, but *the other red meat* is making a comeback in France. Compared to cow, it has twice the iron content and about 17 times the level of omega-3 fatty acids in a standard strip steak. It's also easier on the planet to produce. I'll miss my chevaline ami but confident that he's bringing a bit of fun and enrichment to the tables of others.



“I live in a 420-square-foot studio. I sleep in a bed that folds down from the wall.
I have six dress shirts. I have 10 shallow bowls that I use for salads and main dishes.
When people come over for dinner, I pull out my extendable dining room table.
I don't have a single CD or DVD and I have 10 percent of the books I once did.”

So starts [a recent opinion piece](#) by Graham Hill in the New York Times. His life journey circles from small by necessity to large by possibility, then back to minimal by choice. He sold an internet start-up in the late 1990s, which blessed him with that hallowed status to which we all aspire: independently wealthy (and then some, in his case). In unsurprising fashion, Hill immersed himself in a frenzy of unbridled consumption: big home, fast car, cool gadgets and expensive apparel. His appetite unabated, he hired a “personal shopper” to shovel more onto his heaping pile of possessions when too distracted with work to spend. *Getting tougher to release those euphoric endorphins? Nothing that a bigger straw can't solve!*

Hill touches on themes in the NYT piece on which our Postcards have reflected before. That affluence enables the accumulation of stuff that can end up consuming us, not the reverse. I use a sailing analogy in my Intérprize workshops, that everything in the immediate sphere of one's life is either an anchor or a sail, there is little wiggle room in between. Anchors hold us back, sails propel us forward, and it's healthy to take an honest inventory of both on a regular basis: home, car, job, hobbies, boss, spouse, lover, kids (wiggle room here), wine collection, gadgets, toys, etc.,anchor or a sail?



The dimensions of my habitats have spanned a wide range over the years. I once spent 3 frigid winter months in a 20 foot camper trailer in the hills of Pennsylvania, surviving on teenage love and part-time work at the local ARCO station. Twenty years and a few careers later, my wife and I would stroll the sidewalks of St. Francis Wood in San Francisco and imagine a grand life in one of those immense Mediterranean style mansions. Reality was a more moderate family home in the neighboring Lakeside district. In between were all sizes and flavors of apartments, houses, duplexes, triplexes, wigwams (kidding on that one) and the occasional few days out of my car when between accommodations. (The cramped back seat of a '67 Firebird is no excuse for a bed.)

This I believe: the size of one's home correlates poorly to sustained happiness, once Maslow's basic needs are met and the teens get some privacy. My own contentment is driven more by where I live than under what scale. It's not the size that matters; it's how you enjoy it. The flat I share with my son in Aix is a modest two bedroom, one bath. It's one-third the size of our San Francisco home, but what more is needed? The compromise of dimension to location allows us to live in the center of one of the most beautiful cities in the world, just steps from fabulous outdoor markets, theatres, cafes and restaurants, from dozens of bubbling fountains and mysterious winding alleys laid out by the Romans centuries ago. Trade this for a McMansion in the tumbleweed suburbs?

This I will admit: I still secretly admire volume in some homes. My brother owns a french palace – his street address is actually *Le Palais* – in his village in central France. But he and his wife have reconditioned this home from the bottom up, busting down walls, pulling out windows, plastering and painting and getting enough splinters and pains through the process that *Le Palais* is now a true extension of themselves. And if I could afford a grand villa in St. Francis Wood I could possibly be swayed. I still meander through that neighborhood with my children when in San Francisco and we each select our personal favorites, *our dream homes*. Does this make me a hypocrite? Is my rant about the sins of size simply a self-rationalization of my disinterest in generating more income, hence buying a larger home? I don't know. I hope not. Do you harbor the same ambivalence?

Back to Hill, there are some interesting statistics cited in his piece:

- The average size of a new American home has ballooned to 2,480 square feet in 2011, a 2.5 fold increase over the average in 1950. And because these larger homes house fewer people on average – 2.6 heads per home in 2011 versus 3.4 in 1950 – Americans are now taking up 3 times the space per head than they did then.
- We spend \$22 billion on personal storage now. Even these massive homes aren't sufficient for our love affair with buying.

If there is a silver lining in our fascination with size it's that Americans are at least enjoying more leisure time in their swelling estates. According to a recent article in the International Herald Tribune, the average US worker is laboring 100 fewer hours, down to just 1,700 per year now, than in 1970. Of course the French, whose productivity gains have outpaced the Americans during that time, have cut 500 hours from their work year, but preferring more time off (they get 6 weeks by law) to a fatter paycheck that buys more things to stuff in a bigger home. On to something or just lazy? (Despite their continued appetite for tobacco, they rank #14 in the world in life expectancy; the US comes in at #51.)

To finish off on a note of hope, perhaps the younger generations are not sold on that porn film maxim that size equals status. One of the hottest startups of the moment is Airbnb, a website connecting homeowners (with a room or sofa to let) with travelers (looking for a room or sofa to let). The company is carrying a valuation of \$2.5 billion but the CEO is still living under the roofs of his clients. In his extreme opinion, homes have "become irrelevant." How's that for horse sense?

Published initially on March 18, 2013

Y U r U

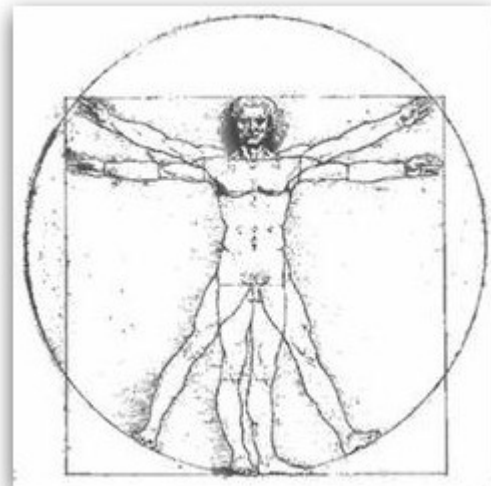
Suggested Song: [One and Only](#), Adele

Suggested Drink: [DNA cocktail](#)

You are uniquely gifted and capable of doing at least one thing better than any other person on this planet. If this one thing happens to intersect your personal plane of passions, that collection of things that frames your ambitions and stimulates your drive, then all is possible.

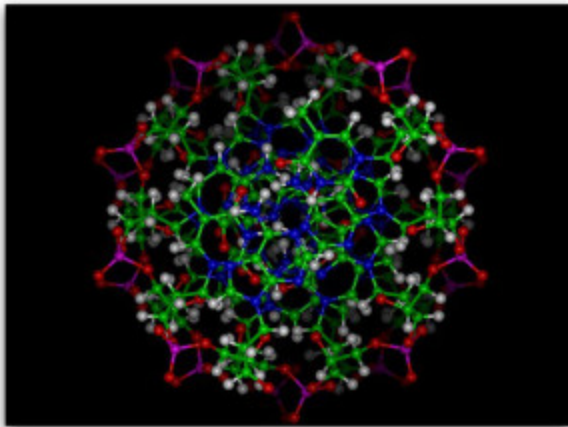
We are truly unique creatures, each one of us. Find a mirror and take a close look. Every angle and line, crease and scar and blemish that decorates your face, the blend of colors filling your iris, the line of your hair, height of your ears, and curl of your lip; the composition of your face is exclusive to all others. This singularity of design extends to the rest of the body as well, but we'll spare the details for those of us hitting midlife entropy. Our abilities and liabilities are equally unique. Start with one's genetic disposition, a cocktail of DNA inherited in some unpredictable combination from our 2 parents, with strains of unpredictable combinations from their 4 parents, flowing down in some random allocation from their 8 parents, and on and on. This [solera system](#) of blended genetics creates one very unique You.

Michael Phelps is a case study of genetic disposition mashing with uncompromised passion. His body is remarkably well suited for going fast in water. His extended "wingspan" – fingertip to tip – exceeds his height by 4 inches (80 inches/76 inches); we're supposed to be proportional (remember da Vinci's Vitruvian Man?). His size 14 feet are said to bend 15 percent further at the ankles than most other swimmers (some would say he's double jointed), blessing him with a flipper-like propulsive advantage. Phelps's torso is unusually long (typical of a man 6'8") and legs abnormally short (typical of a man 6'0") for his height (6'4"), which provides less drag through the water and a faster, tighter turn at the wall. His "freak" anatomy is a gift from his parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and on; from this trickle-down phenomenon of genetic donation.



Still, Phelps's supernatural achievements – most decorated Olympic athlete ever, most gold medals over a career, most gold medals for individual events, most gold medals at any single Olympics (we're just getting started) – would go unrealized without a supernatural passion for the sport; his desire not only to win but dominate competition at the highest level, the willingness to swim 50 miles per week and consume 12,000 calories per day, to stay mentally focused through the grind, lap after lap after lap, day after day after day.

Other factors equally elemental to our individuality are the roads we travel and people we meet. No two journeys are the same, and the singular map of each life history only compounds the unique inventory of our abilities. We learn from our experiences (mostly). We take note of mistakes, enjoy successes, and slip another tool in the box for future reference. Even the identities of identical twins diverge with age, with falls from the swing set, triumphs and tragedies and broken hearts, and other singular experiences. Nothing is more beneficial than personal networks, and while my circle of friends and colleagues may overlap yours at the margin, no two networks are identical, none. A principal element of Phelps's success was his connection to coach Bob Bowman, whose military style of strict discipline and an exhausting regiment forged Phelps from the young age 11 and through this many successes.



Your inception was truly a miracle and your genetic inheritance was unimaginably unpredictable. Consider that going back just 10 generations (to keep the math digestible) all of the sets of parents in your inception line (your mother and father, your grandparents and great grandparents, and their parents to 10, so about 250 years) managed to survive wars, famines, plagues, terminal disease, premature birth, and other unpleasant forms of nasty demise before siring. Somehow each survived long enough to forward their genes, some of which are floating around your corporeal vessel at this

very moment. The 10 male forbearers each produced about 250-300 million sperm per day if healthy, of which 1% were tasked with fertilizing an egg (the rest are hunter/killers). Still, that's one heck of a lot of sperm and each and every one had a unique DNA profile, some elegant piece of genetic code that on some enchanted evening made it upstream through the generational spawning ladders to you. In the book "Sperm Wars" Robin Barker calculates that the probability of our unique inception over 10 generations is 1.0 divided by 6×10^{100} (the hundredth power). Feeling special?

Are we obliged to share our unique gifts and talents? Can we agree that exceptionalities reside within each of us, even when not manifest in a form easily harnessed or appreciated? Can we agree that genius in a cave is unrealized and pointless? The greater world, both intimate and anonymous to us, becomes a richer, more fascinating and meaningful place when we offer the best of ourselves. Would the 2008 Olympics have been as intriguing without a Phelps?

You will probably die around the age of 83 (if you are reasonably healthy now). For me that leaves 10,000 days, not all necessarily productive. Seems like a lot, seems like so few. If you choose to discount the possibility of a life hereafter, be it with harp-strumming angels or rebirth as a butterfly, than this is it. Can you imagine your wondrous gift unrealized? What do you have scheduled?

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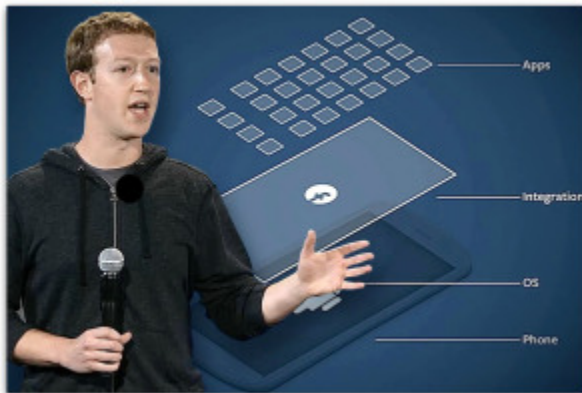
Never Far from Home

Suggested Song: [Home](#), Foo Fighters

Suggested Drink: [Tsunami IPA](#), Hawai'i Nui Brewing Company, Ohana

There is no place like *home*. The word alone induces feelings most warm and sentimental, particularly of the family homes in which we were raised. If you attended summer camps as a kid then you may remember the rush of seeing your parents' car glide into the dusty parking lot on the last day of fun. Pure joy; I'm going home! It's where we feel secure and peaceful; that sheltered haven from life's little tempests.

Facebook introduced a new mobile app last month called Home. Its core innovation is in flipping Facebook from an outbound, manual experience – you decide when to touch your digital community, to open the app and what to read – to an inbound, automatic one – all posts are forwarded to your mobile device's new Facebook-engineered home screen without any manual activation on your part. In introducing Home, Mark Zuckerberg stated that “Instead of having to click on the Facebook app, Facebook will be integrated into everything you do.” A company post added that it is “a window into what's happening with your friends – friends finishing a bike race, your family sharing a meal or an article about your favorite sports team.” Such a joy.



On an aside, it seems that all techy CEOs have now taken a page from the Steve Jobs playbook that reads, *once per year awe your rapt believers dressed in something “I don’t give a shit” cool and monastically basic (black faux turtlenecks and casual hoodies with jeans works well) like Moses descending from the mount, coming to share the messiah’s holy message of a new feature that will profoundly elevate the quality of their trivial lives to a higher plane of unimaginable digital rapture. “And get this, in addition to the new GPS, accelerometer and 3-axis gyroscope, this iPhone can actually talk*

to you!”.

So, back to Home. Imagine your friends and their friends (and their friends through association) pinging you 86,400 seconds a day, 365 days a year with burning updates of a family dog's demise, dinners at the Olive Garden, drinks being shared (*thought you'd LOVE to know, burrrrp!*), photos of parents from 40 years back, the niece of someone's second cousin having her broken her finger splinted (*isn't she just a trooper?*), articles just read, pop songs just heard, phone pics of Pocatello through the airplane window, and all other sorts of mostly inane experiences and opinions about which you may but most likely will not have the slightest curiosity.

It gets scarier. A recent article by Om Malik highlights that Home knows what apps you use and how often; where you are right now (thanks to that nifty GPS) and where you live, shop, dine, and drink; if you're on the move and whether by foot, bike, or driving (thanks to that nifty accelerometer). It's clear why Facebook wants this information (and will likely be selling it aggressively), as advertising fees fuel

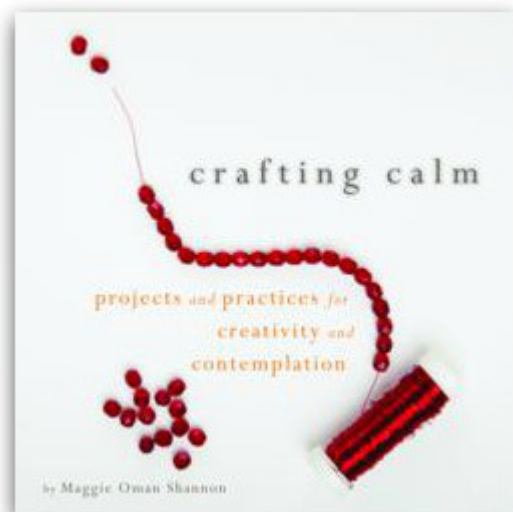
the dot com industry. It's less clear what users gain beyond the constant hassle of a phone that won't stop chirping.



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seated near a pair of these at your next bachelor(ette) party, beach outing, or dinner date (*was that her spouse?*). Bans are already popping up in numerous bars and cafes. In addressing complaints about Google's privacy intrusions in 2009, then CEO Eric Schmidt retorted that "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." This from the company who's original motto was "Don't be evil."

For an antidote to this always-on digital tsunami I can recommend [*Crafting Calm, Projects and Practices for Creativity and Contemplation*](#) by Maggie Oman Shannon and Mary Anne Radmacher. Shannon – a San Francisco-based interfaith minister – introduces the reader to 40 or more unplugged activities designed to bring a sense of calm, quiet, and mindfulness when the digital assault gets overwhelming. I've written before of the value of crafts and rituals in their tether to home (the real home) and family, binding us to the core unit and a historical story. Students are assigned crafts to complete in my Intérprize Workshops. Rituals and crafts of the unplugged variety – and these are the most meaningful – offer pause from the tidal surge of the digital wave, that endless inundation of chats, texts, updates, calls, emails, and general web browsing that calls to us when bored. They make our homes more than just a place to plug in and click on.



Published initially on May 15, 2013

Break On Through (To the Other Side)

Suggested Song: [Light My Fire](#), the Doors

Suggested Drink: [Imagination cocktail](#)

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

Sylvia Plath, from *A Mad Girl's Love Song*

Feeling uninspired? Has the clutch of your imagination disengaged? Wrestling with a vexing problem/question/issue for which the obvious solution feels two steps beyond the infinity point? My suggestion: clean up those brushes and dust off the easel; warm up the keys/strings/vocal chords, spit valves; lace up your ballet slippers or tapdancing shoes; or ponder *the purpose of it all* through the rhythm and verse of your inner Plath or Wordsworth.

A dive into the arts – practicing, not just appreciating – opens the mind through a curious cocktail of opposing dynamics: it relaxes the mind while demanding concentration. The space junk of stuff *that absolutely needs done today* floating constantly around our craniums is blown out long enough to permit the ganglia to relax and reassemble, allowing synapses to form and fire in new and auspicious configurations. Okay, so this is pure speculation on my part and most surely BS, but it feels like that after an hour at the piano. Einstein said “At times I feel certain I am right while not knowing the reason.” Good enough for him, good enough for me.

Our man Albert was also a believer in art as a catalyst to broader, deeper thinking. He was an accomplished pianist and violinist and claimed that “The greatest scientists are artists as well;” that creative breakthroughs came more from inspiration than logic. “The gift of imagination has meant more to me than any talent for absorbing absolute knowledge.” What better way to stimulate our imaginations than through art?

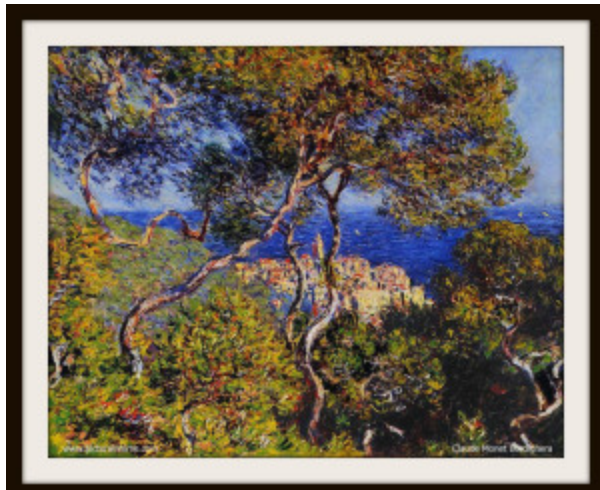
Members of the '60s supergroup The Doors were also creative giants of their time; musical polyvants who collectively married extraordinary talent with a fascination in musical genres far afield from 3 chord rock & roll. What inspired this genius? For one thing



their interests with art ranged well beyond music. Ray Manzarek and Jim Morrison studied film at UCLA and Manzarek was a writer, publishing 2 novels in the post Doors era. And drummer John Densmore's career extended into professional dance and acting.

For a remarkable peep into a creative process in-process, I offer an edited [audio clip](#) of Ray Manzarek explaining the group's writing of "Light My Fire" to Terry Gross on a 1998 NPR edition of *Fresh Air*. Take equal parts great melodic song writing by guitarist Robby Krieger, the interweaving latin and jazz rhythms adapted by Densmore, Manzarek's gift for finding the cohesive balance (plus bringing in the Bach-inspired intro and outro), and finally Morrison's aggressive lyrical brilliance (*the time to hesitate is through*), at once direct and dangerous to the teenage girls hanging on every word.

Why my fascination with open thinking and creativity? I am in the course of creating and executing on a grand vision plan, that blueprint for a deeply meaningful venture, and I'm often stumped on definition and strategy. Beyond the happy stardust of napkin plans and broad ideas, what EXACTLY am I selling and how? This uncertainty is typical of intreprenurial (and entrepreneurial) planning, something with which my MBA students wrestle constantly. The art-immersion strategy – in my case songwriting and recording – is effective for unclogging my congested imagination, the perfect laxative for a constipated brain.



My 2012 [Last Night at the Ha-Ra](#) project provided more than just a musical outlet last year. The songwriting activity, draining as it was, demanded an open, expansive mind that once actuated remained engaged to untangle other mental gridlocks (I have many). If you too hit an inspiration wall from time to time, try on your artist chapeau for an hour or two. It matters less the form of art and your level of mastery, and more the depth of your dive, the sincere commitment for that period of immersion. If you find this exercise helpful, please write, as I am collecting anecdotes of experiences.

Also at fault for my current art obsession is the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence. It is hosting *Le Grand Atelier du Midi* (The Great Workshop of the South) this summer and fall, and the works on display are wondrous. The exhibit is a celebration of painters who captured the charms of Provence on an impressionistic canvas, from Cezanne through Dali and all stops along that arc: Renoir, Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Braque, Picasso and so many more. If you were looking for an excuse to hit me up for a cool glass of rosé, your timing couldn't be better!

Published initially on June 29, 2013

The Tao of Now

Suggested Song: [The Long and Winding Road](#), The Beatles

Suggested Drink: [The Good Life cocktail](#)

Life seems all so predictable, until it's not.

Joy Covey was by all indications smart, ambitious and successful. A graduate of Harvard Law School, she had made *Fortune* magazine's list of the *50 Most Powerful Business Women in America* while not yet 40, during her tenure as Amazon's CFO. She was also a committed environmentalist, serving as treasurer for the Natural Resources Defense Council post Amazon. Her life ended abruptly in a freak accident in early September, struck by a car that had lost control while riding her bicycle on a country road outside San Francisco. She was just 50 years old.

5 pm and I'm on the Thursday train home from Paris, also in September. It has been a few days on campus tipping back into the rhythm of work, the first key to the office lock since early August. I'm struggling to bid farewell to the summer laze, the bright afternoons floating around some lake with my kids, the warm Mediterranean evenings shared with friends over dinners and drinks. But back to work we go, ...or to school in my kids' case, to our structured days and weekly commitments.

My work situation has tempered notably over the past 5 years, since turning 50. Gone are the endless early hours and late days, the weekend deliverables, the recurring confrontations and restless nights, the parenting through Skype and the missed birthdays. Gone too are the generous paychecks that bought our home and cars, put our children in private city schools, paid for beachfront holidays in Hawaii with nanny in tow. It's a trade of fleeting indulgence for deeper significance.

I will go out on limb here and presume that Ms. Covey was in a good place financially. CFOs of multi-billion dollar internet empires tend to be very well compensated. As for me, I am neither semiretired nor financially independent. A son has just started college (who would have imagined that?) with twins in junior high school. Financial obligations continue to multiply, yet I've chosen this moment to pull back from the big push and my prime income generating potential. Is this decision foolish, selfish, or the move of a sage and aging idealist? Opinions welcome.

We want to believe that our years ahead will be linear and predictable when in fact they are random, fickle. We want to believe that there will always be time for meaningful engagement and memories with those we love when in fact the only certainty is uncertainty. We can commit our best years to the office and then run out of time. We can cut back early and risk our long term security. Which side of that impossible balance point have you selected?

I am driven now more by my eulogy than résumé (to quote Arianna Huffington, [click here](#) to read her recent essay). Taking on the work week of my former career(s) would void any chance of playing hands-on superdad at a time when a lot of hands on is required. Each morning starts at 6 a.m.; breakfast together and a walk with my twins through our beautiful Aix-en-Provence to their bus stop. Lunches are shared regularly with my oldest son and a chance to relive my college youth through his experiences as an incoming freshman. When not teaching, myself, there is time for morning strolls to the farmers market, butcher shop and boulangerie, basket in hand (a supreme joy for any foodie like me). Dinners mainly are prepared at home with healthy stuff from the day's hunt, and not ordered out or rushed through in a fluorescent-lit fast-food booth (not that my kids would complain about a bit of McD on occasion). Homework is done collectively, play dates arranged, weekends planned, an occasional movie shared, then iGadgets collected (grumpily I may add) before bedtime. We're scattered about the apartment, the 4 of us sharing 2 bedrooms and single bath, comfortably. It's a rich life without the riches, and I sleep well hoping (praying) that on some unfortunate day many, many years from now, one of these 3 will stand before *the friends and family gathered here today* and say "he was a great dad." That works for me.



Published initially on September 29, 2013

Acknowledgements

A special thanks to the city of Aix-en-Provence and its many colorful inhabitants. You've given my escape a warm welcome and soft landing. Also to my 3 children: Jess, Stella, and Shane. You have followed Dad across oceans and continents, suffered my Quixotic wanderings, and forgone many little luxuries with great patience and good humor.

Biographical Note



Bill Magill was born in the small town of Newport, Pennsylvania. Studies, work, and whims carried him to Texas and then California. Disillusioned with the Silicon Valley fixation on wealth and competitive consumerism, Bill moved to Provence, France in 2010 to seek a simpler, deeper, more authentic life. Writing became part daily structure, part self-therapy, and laid the foundation for this collection of essays on bewilderment at midlife and the search for *what truly matters*.

These ramblings are meant to inspire and provoke fellow travelers and big dreamers also unsettled with life – what we do, where we live, and whom we love – and rally the pursuit of grand ambitions of deep personal meaning, simple as that. Please share these *Postcards from a Runaway* with friends and family who never stop asking the right questions.

Bill has worked in venture capital, investment banking, consulting, and academia (he still gives courses on startup creation at INSEAD and elsewhere). Bill has also been paid to wash dishes, tend bar, pump gas, play loud music, and blow up cool stuff with big lasers. All readers passing through Provence are invited to seek Bill out for a drink and exchange of ideas.