

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. 2



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

Provence Chronicles
Volume 2
2013-2017

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.

This Volume 2 of *Postcards*, written between 2013 and 2017, is the second collection compiled and reissued. I had survived my *stranger in a strange land* initial years in Provence and was mastering the new language and life (I liked to tell myself). Friendships were being made that remain some of my closest today, despite the many sad departures, for this is the nature of expat circles. I also found that beautiful new friend mentioned above and suffered deeply for it. I deserved very wince and whimper and am now more sage, but still not immune to relapses of the heart. Reflections on these friendships and amorous entanglements are recorded in some of the essays herein.

Note that 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 continuation,

Bill

Of Twerks, Kinks and the Death of Pop Music

Suggested Song: [American Pie](#), Don McClean

Suggested Drink: [Nail in the Coffin cocktail](#): whisky, Madeira, Licor 43, Fernet-Branca.

We owe a great debt to Miley Cyrus and her MTV Video Music Award antics for revealing just how empty and irrelevant the music side of popular rock music has become. Talented artists still record quality songs, but they rarely get mainstream attention and no longer define a generation, at least through the poetry and power of their music.



In pop music's creative heyday – the 1960s through 1980s – Cyrus would have been a novelty act struggling a few rungs below Charo, who also found fame with sexy impishness but at least could sing well (without auto-tuning) and played a mean flamenco guitar. Imagine a music awards ceremony today with the strong fem bench of the past: Janis Joplin, Diana Ross, Linda Rondstadt or Tina Turner (add your favorite) still in top creative form. That the 2013 VMA organizers hand the prime time slot to a girl whose greatest talent is butt twerking and tongue hanging cements any suspicions that rock has reached a creative dead end. Any stripper worth her string must have been asking, *what the hell was that?*

That great journey from Presley through Petty and Prince has been marked by a

number of momentous creative pivots starting with rock's foundations in the mid-1950s (Berry, Richard), bleached clean for popular consumption (Presley, Holly); the infectious pop harmonies of the British Invasion (Beatles, Kinks) and echo answer from the Pacific coast (Beach Boys, Doors); the folk revival plugged in (Dylan, Young); the heavy hand of hard rock in its endless variations (Zeppelin, Cooper, Metallica); the heavily stylized rock operas (Who, Pink Floyd) and immediate fury of punk (Reed, Iggy, Ramones); the floating rhythms and all night party themes of disco (Bee Gees, Summers); and rap and a return of music to the street poets (Tupac, Jay-Z, Eminem).

Before MTV we first heard the music and then saw the band, or if we were lucky watched them on Ed Sullivan or Don Kirchner's Rock Concert at midnight. Looks and style, while necessary, were always secondary to talent. The Monkees will always be a goofy TV show, not a legitimate rock band. Can you remember the first time you heard list A: *Hard Day's Night*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Hotel California*,

Bohemian Rhapsody, *Highway to Hell* (for you metal heads), or *Staying Alive*? You didn't dwell on what the musicians looked like, you were simply absorbed in the sound. Am I right? Now consider some of the biggest hits since 2000, list B: *Hips Don't Lie*, *My Humps*, *Toxic*, *Baby*, or *Born This Way*. Which list is still relevant in 20 years? Can you even name the B list artists now?



Musical shifts over the past 20 years have been less momentous, more incremental. Most of been *mélanges* of pre-existing forms, 3 parts this with 2 parts that, creative possibly but not disruptive. Rap samples rock, electro infuses disco. If we compare the arc of first-half 20th century art with second-half 20th century music, we've become bogged down with Jeff Koons and his Hoover vacuums after an extraordinary sweep from the Impressionists through Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism. *Sigh*.

In the glory years each teen regiment, perhaps two to a decade, had their defining sound and iconic musical deities. My brother had Neil Young and Led Zeppelin, and 5 years later I had Bruce Springsteen and Alice Cooper. There are no analogs today, no artists releasing a series of albums and singles over multiple years on which to discuss and debate for hours on end and build loyalty. Great talent still surfaces from time to time, but the iPod has single-handedly destroyed the album and the internet has democratized the music scene. Now anyone, even your blogger, can record an album on their laptop and self-release on iTunes. It expands the playing field but makes it impossible for even the best to build a critical mass of rabid followers. My guess? Over the next 20 years concerts headlined by single mega-

acts will be mostly displaced by multi-stage festivals featuring 20-30 independent artists. This is okay, but the throne of rock royalty has been splintered in the process. Now everyone is just a court jester.

Miley, come show us that twerking thing.

Published initially on October 28, 2013.

Happy Talk

Suggested song: [Happy Talk](#) (from *South Pacific*), Rogers & Hammerstein

Suggested drink: Holiday eggnog: milk, cream, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla extract, sugar, eggs, rum.

I finished directing another Interprize Workshop last weekend at the IAE Graduate School of Management near Aix-en-Provence. Three days were spent with 20 aspiring intèrpreneurs outlining grand life ambitions, developing executions plans, and committing to next steps (talk is cheap!). I also offered my students daily *happy hours* to highlight the role played by happiness in the pursuit of our dreams; these grand ambitions – some practical, some mad, all thrilling – that define us as individuals.

I've been reading the research of Seligman, Frederickson and Csikszentmihályi on the potency of optimism for years. Their findings are highlighted in various previous *postcards* and publications listed under my Interesting Books panel. More recently I've come across Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor at the University of California at Riverside, whose output in this domain is astounding. Her recent work focuses on 3 fundamental questions:

1. What makes people happy?
2. Is happiness a good thing?
3. How and why can people learn to lead happier and more flourishing lives?

Indeed happiness is a good thing if work, friends, family, and health are life priorities (surprised?). Lyubomirsky's detailed research – and she offers plenty of heavy reading for review should you be so inclined – shows that optimism leads to higher income, greater productivity and higher quality of work. It also reinforces more satisfying and longer marriages, more friends, stronger social support and richer social interactions, more activity, energy, and flow. Regarding our health, she finds that happiness correlates positively to a bolstered immune system, lowered stress levels, less pain, and even longer life. Lyubomirsky's work also reveals that we are more creative, helpful, charitable, and self-confident, have better self-control, and show greater self-regulatory and coping abilities when we are happy. (Quoting liberally from her website, which is available by clicking [here](#).)



Of particular interest to me is Lyubomirsky's research into the connection between the scale of our aspirations and permanence of our sense of wellbeing. The higher we reach the longer lasting is our

charge of positive feedback, which stirs us to reach even higher. Equally fascinating is her study of the cause and effect between materialism and sustainable happiness (limited it seems), and steps for getting off what she calls the “hedonistic treadmill.” A girl after my own heart.

During last weekend’s Interprize Workshop we talked about role optimism plays in keeping us inspired and positive through the many challenges encountered when taking on a truly grand ambition. Leveraging our core strengths effectively can generate a virtuous upward cycle: achievement makes us happy, which leads to optimism about our goals, which leads to greater effort that results in more accomplishment and happiness. Each *happy hour* was committed to practices known to engender positive emotions, many of which Ms. Lyubomirsky confirms with her studies: expressing gratitude, practicing kindness, adopting healthy rituals, and savoring simple, rich experiences. As evening assignments my students wrote letters of appreciation to loved ones and sought out opportunities for flow and savoring. And we made paper ring bracelets in class (think preschool art projects) that documented our bad tendencies and then were burned triumphantly outside the school reception area. Yes, the IAE is starting to seriously query the content of my courses.

The core of my workshop, as always, was committed to finding our compass headings and charting a course. Which are our native strengths and styles and how do they support the pursuit of our ambitions, what additional intellectual property (IP) have we acquired or do we need to acquire, where do we find this IP, what will our interprize look like when launched, and will it make us happy? And there’s that word again.

Finally, the workshop participants were introduced to yoga and meditation as activities for enhancing sustainability through the mental and physical demands of their ambitious pursuits. Gaëlle Devic of the Layama Association in Aix (click [here](#) for more on this centre) had us chanting and stretching and learning how to bring more zen into our harried lives. It is easy to dismiss the need to wind down, but the higher we reach the more energy we expend, and without a balanced regime we quickly exhaust and lose our bearings.



Students from China, Taiwan, Korea, Finland, the Ukraine, Brazil, and the U.S. joined locals from France for this class and it was clear that creative ambition has no geographic boundary. I was thrilled with the breadth and vision of their Interprize plans, which included the launch of international boulangerie and “slow coffee” café chains, a French restaurant in Los Angeles, 2 crowdsourcing platforms for Asia of differing structures, a nonprofit wellness retreat, movie and radio production projects, a microcredit service, clothing design from recyclable materials, and other visions of immense ambition. As the Interprize community expands with each new workshop the network for sharing ideas and collaborating on our personal missions will grow and become more powerful.

In 2014 we’ll be taking the Interprize Workshop on the road, with various sessions around the U.S. and Europe. Stay tuned for locations and timing.

For more on Interprize Workshops click [here](#).

For a video recording of Sonja Lyubomirsky participating in the *Stanford 2013 Roundtable: Are You Happy Now?* hosted by Katie Kurick click [here](#).

All the best in 2014. Stay happy!

Published initially on December 18, 2013.

Burning Down the House

Suggested Song: [Burning Down the House](#), Talking Heads

Suggested Drink: a cool glass of water, straight up.

If communism failed the people, capitalism has failed the planet.

Privately owned corporations big and small are committed to one simple obsession: maximizing returns to their shareholders. They pursue this by growing revenues, cutting costs, and playing the system. There is no reward or incentive to voluntarily raise their cost base – for example, to account for the indirect costs of damage to the environment as a result of their activities – for the sake of the public good (unless customers reward them for it). That is where governments (are supposed to) step in. While businesses play their end of the game commendably well, the public sector has been woefully ineffective in its role as guardian of the environment. And is there a greater public good?

Economic growth raises all boats, is the elixir to all social ills, and must be pursued at all costs. The maxim that economic growth must be the guiding national priority is held by world leaders of every industrialized country and most all learned men of the dismal science, as we roast through Saharan summers and freeze through Arctic winters. Lower the unemployment rate? Grow the economy. Balance the budget? Grow the economy. Get reelected? Grow the economy.

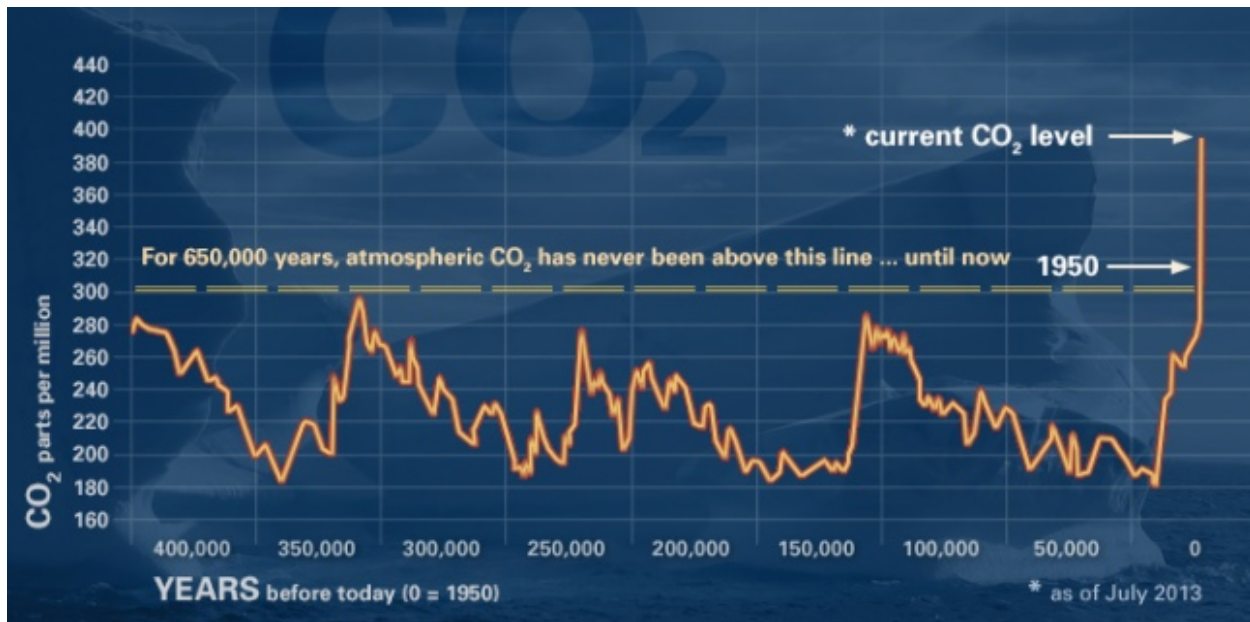


Few will argue against healthy economic growth in principal as a good thing, but what is healthy about an earth rendered barren and unfamiliar in 2-3 generations? Growth is only spurred by consumption. Consumption is enabled by production. Production requires resources and applied power, and these require energy. Over 80% of today's global energy production comes from the burning of fossil fuels – oil, coal, and natural gas – that poison the globe with CO2 emissions and other discharges. This sullyng of our planet blue has been accepted with little complaint through the industrial revolution – out of site,

out of mind – but now things are getting weird with the weather. There is a growing tension between our genuflection to economic growth and the need for nature’s ecosystem to remain vibrant. So we have a problem (that growing *we* who accept that the planet is warming and we-the-people are causing it.) *For those of you clinging to flat earth society sensibilities, no need to read further.*

Should this tension between growth versus globe be a near-term concern? A December article posted in the *Huffington Post* by Dahr Jamail (click [here](#) to read) offers some disquieting facts about our current situation:

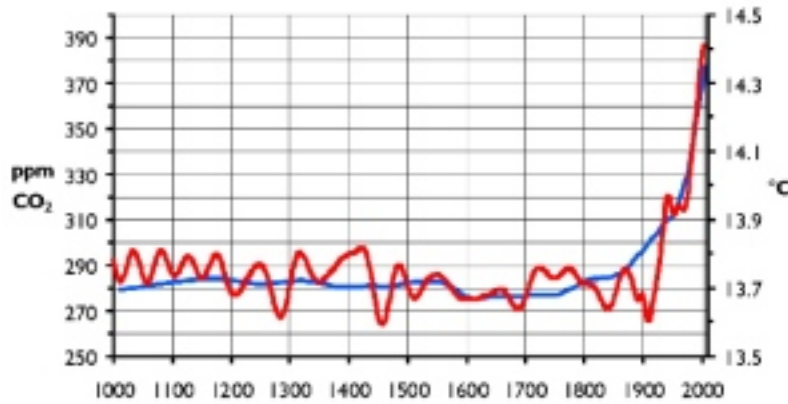
- We’ve never been on a planet with no arctic ice. Ice-free summers will start this decade.
- We’ve never been on a planet with atmospheric CO2 levels above 400 ppm (considered the tipping point of no return by many climate scientists). That will also happen this decade.
- A 50-gigaton “burp” of methane from thawing arctic permafrost beneath the East Siberian sea is “highly possible at any time” according to a July 2013 article in *Nature*. That would be the equivalent of about 4 times the volume of CO2 humanity has emitted into the atmosphere since the birth of the industrial revolution, and methane is 105 times more potent than CO2 when it comes to heating the planet on a 20-year timescale.
 - A fun fact about methane: the Permian mass extinction that occurred 250 million years ago, wiping out an estimated 95% of all species, is believed to be related to rapid methane releases after a 6C increase in earth’s surface temperature.
- A 3.5C planet temperature increase by 2100 was predicted by the *U.N. Environment Program* in 2009 that would lead to the destruction of most ocean plankton and many land plants. Humanity has never experienced an earth at 3.5C above the current baseline. In 2010 the U.N. program increased their forecast to a 5C increase by 2050. And a recent *International Energy Agency* report (November 2013) place the temperature rise at 3.5C by 2035.
- Between 150 and 200 species are going extinct daily, a pace 1,000 times greater than the “natural” extinction rate.



Let's pause here to consider a question: if you were offered a very well-paying job to taste test cigarettes, at a sampling rate considered high risk for lung cancer and other ailments, would you accept it? For readers answering yes, would you still accept it if the damage done was genetic in nature; i.e., your children and their children were almost certain to inherit your disorders and in advanced stages earlier in their lives? Okay, onward.

Back to our tension between growth and globe; two scenarios seem possible.

- Option A: Stay the course, stump for more economic growth, and continue to develop alternatives to carbon-based fuels at the margin while subsidizing the fossil fuel industry to the sum of \$480 billion annually (a 2013 [IMF report](#) placed total subsidies to this industry at \$1.9 trillion actually when accounting for indirect subsidies; i.e., not requiring the industry to repair environmental damage from global warming due to the burning of their products, or address adverse effects to health from pollution and other costs to society). Unfortunately, given the minimal impact renewable energy has made to date on the swelling global demand for more energy supply Option A provides no reason to believe that the coming meltdown will be averted.
- Option B: Revolution. These are rarely pretty, but can be anticipated when food and water run short, lives are disrupted (or lost) and the masses get angry. Ambrose Bierce submitted over 100 years ago that "Revolution is an abrupt change in the form of misgovernment." Is there something seriously misguided in our governments today.



Those who manage our options – politicians and the corporate bosses with whom they sip whisky and play golf – are incentivized to Option A. Ribbon cutting ceremonies at new solar farms make for great photo-ops and keep the hounds at bay. And the likes of Exxon Mobile, who’s 2012 profit was the second largest in U.S. history (surpassed only by its own

2008 record) shouldn’t be expected to do anything radical that would threaten returns to its shareholders (see paragraph 1). Politicians’ reelection campaigns depend on the patronage of big business, and anyhow no one gets elected being the bearers of bad news like *the sky is falling*. I mean it’s sad about those Tuvaluans and their submerged island, but they aren’t part of my electorate, and we can engineer a sea wall around Lower Manhattan, right? All is good, steady as she goes, stay the course.

Those who bear the brunt of option selections – the collection of humanity on all points of the globe (for global warming and its impact is just that) – may at differing time points decide that their politicians promoting Option A must go. Such invitations to leave are best achieved through orderly electoral processes. This takes time however, and some of us (depending on geographic location) are on a tight schedule. When Spain’s productive orchards wilt and fail and aquifers in the North China Plain go dry don’t be surprised when buildings start to burn. Elections be damned. Thank Napoleon Bonaparte for this one: “Revolution is an idea which has found its bayonets.”

From the perspective of a flu-ridden planet swinging from sweats to chills, capitalism and the free-market economy is badly in need of overhaul. It is creating immense wealth for a shrinking affluent class, but doing little to address the looming climate disaster. The billions invested into cleantech by the venture capital community has failed to produce a serious and massively scaleable energy alternative to fossil fuels. How do tiny start-ups with novel but expensive innovations compete with an entrenched industry built on mature technologies and subsidized by hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars? Fracking has lowered Americans anxiety over exposure to Middle East oil. And Obama is likely to approve the Keystone XL pipeline, which he identifies as essential to support our economic growth. It doesn’t sound like anyone is concerned about a falling sky. For every dollar the U.S. government hands to the renewable energy industry in direct subsidies (to great fanfare and flourish), it discretely hands another \$5.75 to the oil industry, which as noted above needs little help. Can real change be expected when less than half the members of the Republican party believe that the earth is warming, according to a 2013 *Pew Research Poll*?

On an optimistic note, more than a few Chicken Littles have started a dialog on economic alternatives, should anyone care. On the academic scene economists are talking about *natural capital*, which brings the value of natural resources such as topsoil, water, and genetic diversity into the economic equation. And various governments across the globe, including numerous U.S. states, China and the UK, have begun including natural capital into their assessments of progress and policy making.



Herman Daly, a University of Maryland Professor and former World Bank economist proposes a “steady state” economy for countries that have achieved material affluence. “Using tools such as carbon taxes on fossil fuels, the economy's material production and consumption would be capped at the Earth's capacity to cleanse and replenish itself. Higher consumption would be replaced by higher quality of life.”

Finally, there is an emerging interest, particularly by the young who stand to lose the most from a warming planet, in a “sharing economy.” This lifestyle lowers the consumption compulsion and is best exemplified in the growing trend of car sharing, which in theory could be extended to many other tools and appliances that sit on our garage shelves unused most of the time. Why does every household need one?

Any other bright ideas? Ready to join the revolution?

Published initially on January 8, 2014.

Artist and Magician

Suggested Song: [Suspicious Minds](#), Elvis Presley

Suggested Drink: [Absinthe](#): Absinthe, sugar cube, water.



Mark Stock died this week, suddenly, at the age of 62. He was an acclaimed artist from the San Francisco area who's unique, pensive style inspired a legion of fans from around the globe. *What is that lovelorn butler really thinking, writing, considering? What devious plans are afoot?* Stock's film noir infused work was used in Hollywood films and David Arquette produced a short film on his most celebrated piece - "Butler in Love - Absinthe" - shown at right. Two signed posters hang in my dining room in Aix. By the time I met Mark an original Stock was well out of the family budget, unfortunately.

Mark and my former admin Roxanne had been partners in the early 2000s, so I was fortunate to cross his orbit a few times. His renown as an artist was already established, but few people realized his well

honed slight-of-hand skills. At dinner parties he held court with card and coin tricks, and his floating dollar bill was always the evening's climactic dénouement. He was a fixture and crowd favorite for that brief period at our company dinners, keeping everyone laughing and amazed. *Roxanne, you ARE bringing Mark tonight, right?*

Two things struck me this morning as I read the news of Mark's death. First, that artists can be truly inspiring as many of us wrestle with the dilemma of uncertain passion pursuits versus sensible compromises. Commercial success in the worlds of music and art demand an *all-in* commitment that provides absolutely no guarantees. It's an incredible sacrifice by the many that rewards the very few. For those who take the deep and perilous dive, it is a clarifying declaration that this is their gift and *raison d'être*, and no, they will not compromise that obligation (don't all of us hold the same obligation, to share our unique gifts with world while we can?). Second, that we are all artists and magicians, regardless of our calling. The accountant, shop keeper, parent, engineer; we are all working to develop and perfect our self-defining oeuvre, to distinguish ourselves from the fray by divining some precious spark of magic. *How does she do that? Amazing!*

The world is a better place for all when each of us offers up our unique and natural genius, as did Mark Stock. Now, what is your magic within and where is your palette?

For more examples of Mark's work click [here](#).

Postscript: I recently read *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. That it took me this long to read this book - considered one of the greatest works of psychiatric analysis since Freud - shows how poorly read I truly am. Frankl's experiences as a prisoner in Auschwitz and his ensuing principle that our deepest desires stem from the search for meaning and purpose make for some powerful thought provocation. For those of you feeling resentful and handicapped by life's little injustices (and exploiting that excuse regularly) I suggest that it's required reading.

Published initially on March 28, 2014.

Of News & Knows

Suggested Song: [Knowledge](#), The Age of Information

Suggested Drink: [Mad Scientist cocktail](#): blueberry and raspberry schnapps, grenadine syrup, Bailey's Irish cream.

“Information is not knowledge.”

- Albert Einstein



We have been watching the new [Cosmos](#) series and enjoying it immensely. If there is a better show on television for kids and adults alike please clue me in. Neil deGrasse Tyson's ability to boil down the complexities of science – from astrophysics to cell biology – and present them in digestible, fascinating one hour servings has kept us riveted during our Sunday night viewings; the most anticipated family moment in the Magill household since *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*!

In this age of hyper-connectivity we are bombarded 24/7 with news – *this just in, still no trace of flight 370, and "I'm still sober" claims*

Lindsay Lohan – but are increasingly, appallingly weak in knowledge. As Tyson points out, this disconnect can be highlighted by our obsession with mass murderers like Adam Lanza but inability to identify science titans like Robert Hooke or appreciate the significance of Newton's *Principia* (no *Principia*, no espresso, no auto, no weekend getaway to Paris on the high-speed train). Staying up to date is indeed useful, but with the tsunami of sensationalist news flooding our atrophying synapses continuously only the most disciplined internauts resist the barrage and reserve real time for real learning. (To counter your guilt I offer this fun [video primer on the Mona Lisa](#), offered by the Louvre. Lots of other great free stuff there too!)

If news gives us breadth, then knowledge offers depth, expanding our appreciation for how things work, how cosmos – from the infinitely large to the atomically small – operate and interrelate, how to grow personally and create; knowledge gives us the tools and rules under which our Interprize plans – our fabulous pursuits of passion – will be realized.

“A man’s got to know his limitations.”

- Dirty Harry



Untitled, *Victo Ngai*

The internet is a peerless resource, a seemingly boundless well of information, both enlightening and distracting. A challenge with its ubiquitous nature – for the internet is now being pushed out to our computers, televisions, phones, glasses, watches and automobiles, and moving quickly to most all other consumer electronics (the internet of things) – is our own submission to distraction. My resistance has its limits and at some point the headlines in commanding bold font about bawdy entertainers having a naughty night out, heinous crimes under investigation, last minute sports victories, and new restaurant or movie reviews break me down. At some point the internet is no longer our tool, we become the tool for advertisers and click through fees. Everything orbiting our universe serves as a personal anchor or sail, and at this point the value polarity of constant connectivity flips.

Acknowledging my own feeble restraint and keeping with the science theme I am conducting an experiment this week: no internet *browsing* period, and email checking – another bottomless black hole – is done just twice daily: before 9 a.m. and again after 5 p.m. Internet *searching*, on the other hand, is permitted as needed in the quest for helpful knowledge, like ferreting out the few historical references in this piece. For weekly news of world events I’m sticking to the *Economist* magazine, which I find balanced, comprehensive, and an effective sleep aid when administered just before bedtime. Local

news is coming from *La Provence*, the daily bible best consumed with a late-afternoon pastis at one of the many cafes in the neighborhood.

Our parents grew up with the morning paper, the radio at noon, and the nightly news. They managed, despite the unthinkable handicap of no internet access, to grow economies and provide jobs, put men on the moon, cure cruel diseases like polio, and set their children up with better qualities of life than they themselves enjoyed. Can the internet generation claim the same?

Published initially on April 16, 2014.

The New 1%

Suggested Song: [Giving it all Away](#), The Frames

Suggested Drink: Cherry Coke (rumored to be Warren Buffet's favorite tippie).

A 1% club sounds elite. The egoist within would rather be part of an exclusive 1% than the common 99% in most cases, but in fact this term has acquired a pejorative distinction of late, tainting those in its ranks with an Antoinettian hue. It's unfair in the main but not surprising when certain amongst the club, typically the 1% of the 1% can't resist their own *let them eat cake* tantrums. To wit, Tom Perkins, Silicon Valley titan and former tech tycoon, made a well-documented stink earlier this year when his opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* likened the assault on America's wealthy to Kristallnacht. He has since admitted regrets for the insensitive comparison, but burnished his credentials again as a delegate for the 1%'s oblivious wing when fielding questions at a Q&A in San Francisco, starting out that his jeweled watch could buy "a six-pack of Rolexes" (just to get his pedestal firmly planted). He followed up with criticisms of President Johnson's War on Poverty and a claim that "if American gun laws had been in place in Germany, Hitler never would have risen to power." Amen to life in an echo chamber.



Untitled, cdlitestudio

That the aspiring term "the 1%" has been hijacked and vilified seems unfair. Unfortunately, those who suffer most from its negative subtext are often too reverent to their oblivious brethren doing it harm. It falls to the rest of us then to reclaim the term, to again make it cool to be elite. So here is your chance to join the club regardless of income or level of affluence: pledge to leave this holy earth with no more than 1% of your accumulated wealth still intact, the rest committed to causes benefiting the masses large or small, local or global, whatever your social passion de jour. *What, you ask, are you crazy?!* Consider these 4 benefits:

1. You join the rarified ranks of the uber-wealthy and uber-cool like Warren Buffet, who has thrown down a challenge royale with a pledge to donate 99% of his considerable fortune (\$65B at last count) to worthy causes by the time his pine box is fitted out. In fact, he and his buddy Bill Gates have started a modest 50% club for their zillionaire comrades who will promise at least half of their

wealth in the same manner. An impressive mix of entertainers, entrepreneurs, athletes and others is joining the growing list, viewable [here](#). That I see no Kardashian or Walton progenies

on the roles makes me ponder the correlation between those who work hardest to earn their booty and those most interested in putting it to good work for others.

2. You liberate yourself (and your inheritors) from the burdensome chains of wealth maintenance. Keeping one's guarded treasure in play and material accumulations inventoried requires a massive time investment and series of distractions. More meaningful and gratifying pursuits – your Interprize plan included (click [here](#) for more) – get mired in the noise. Elements that enable personal growth such as continued education remain a priority, of course. It could be your son, daughter, or niece who solve the conundrum of an endless clean energy supply or write the next *Sound of Music* score after all. But don't wait for the ghosts of Christmas past to look beyond your guarded ledgers. Buffet's take on inheritance: "I want to give my kids just enough so that they would feel that they could do anything, but not so much that they would feel like doing nothing."
3. You will be at the vanguard of an emerging movement: the measure of personal worth based on the size and proportion of one's givings, not holdings. This skew in definition still motivates us all to flourish and create stores of capital, be they financial, intellectual, artistic or other. The disbursement of that capital becomes the benchmark of our value to a globe sorely in need of great vision and investment. We are still driven to achieve great things, can still find a channel for our vanity. No longer are we celebrated for constructing the largest home or fastest yacht, but instead for the number of shelters we sponsor or investments made into renewables technologies, to cite just 2 opportunities. Dinner party conversation becomes suddenly more captivating with everyone comparing their benevolence activities like tattoos amongst sailors. And it makes us feel a bit more deserving of that next bottle of wine, ...*Garçon!*
4. You bring even more happiness into your giddy life. It is well documented that the bliss bump from increased affluence is limited and temporary, but that the act of giving has a direct correlation with and lasting impact on our sense of well-being. (For interesting reading on this topic see Sonja Lyubomirsky's latest book, [The Myths of Happiness](#)).

How you decide to build a legacy program with your 99% is of course a personal decision based on values, passions and available resources. Bill and Melinda Gates focus on resolving the grand challenges of "extreme poverty and poor health in developing countries, and the failures of America's education system" through their [foundation](#). I've chosen the nonprofit [TechnoServe](#) for all the proceeds of my first book, impressed by its mission (*business solutions to poverty*), high rating by [Charity Navigator](#), and personal connection (through student volunteers from INSEAD). And again, the capital we invest need not be financial to be impactful. [Habitat for Humanity](#) and [Ronald McDonald House](#) are just 2 of the thousands of organisations that do inspiring work and provide opportunities for engagement that extend beyond donations. Friends and family in my personal sphere volunteer time and elbow grease – their most precious forms of capital – for both.

Ready to join the club, to re-elevate the 1% distinction from its stigmatic standing? Share your stories here for we are all looking for testimonials and inspiration. I'll be happy to post them.



On a completely different topic, for those of you seeking an example of passion and purpose in one's life watch *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, a 2009 documentary about Jiro Ono, considered by many (including Joel Robuchon, Anthony Bourdain, and the Michelin star committee) as the greatest sushi chef on the planet. His unassuming restaurant – the 10 seat Sukiyabashi Jiro located in Tokyo's Ginza subway station – books out months in advance and is a study in the pursuit of simple perfection. At 88 years of age the chef provides a fascinating portrait of uncompromising commitment to his craft, humility, an endless search for excellence, and deep passion. Looking and carrying himself as a man 20 years his junior, Chef Jiro and his story reinforce Victor Frankl's assertion that purpose is what keeps us alive, engaged and full of zest. For the trailer on *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* click [here](#).

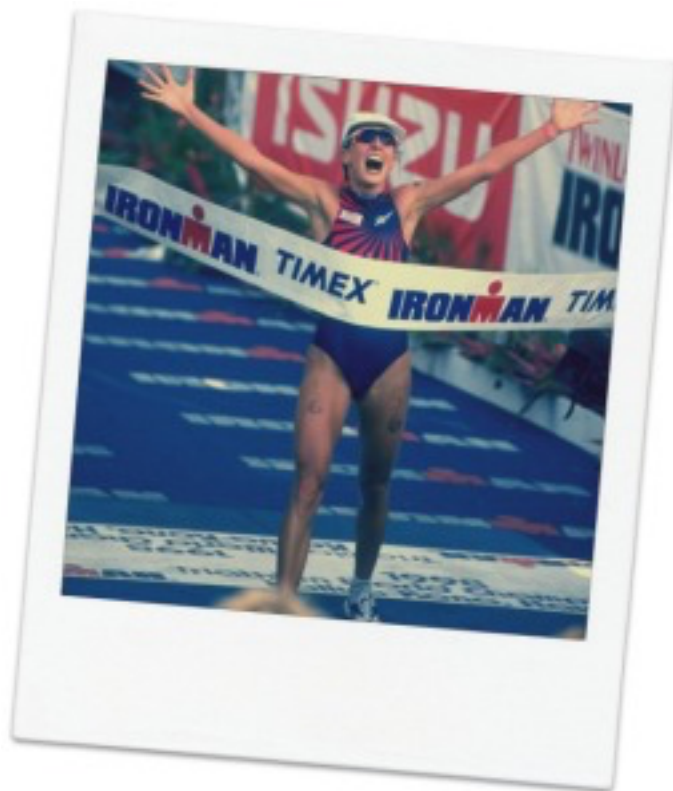
Published initially on April 22, 2014.

The Iron Age

Suggested Song: [Iron Man](#), Black Sabbath

Suggested Drink: A rich chocolate milkshake (full of carbs and protein for post-race recovery).

The 4th annual Ironman 70.3 of Aix-en-Provence brought 1,676 athletes and their supporters into town in early May. Uberjocks and jockettes filled the juice joints on Saturday, topping off their pregame power reserves, and then the many bars and pubs on Sunday for a well-earned post race reward and system flush. The commercial caravan in tow rivaled the Tour de France invasion from last summer. Open tents aligned along Cours Mirabeau were filled with top brands of racing bikes, running shoes, shorts and tee shirts, insulated swim wear, sun glasses, water bottles, coffee mugs, energy drinks and inspired consumers. *Now if I just had that cool hat I could clip 2 minutes off my time!*



Spotting Ironpeople around town is relatively straightforward: look for expensive competition gear clinging to lean, muscular frames and registration numbers tattooed in Sharpie black along buff upper arms. The lack of body fat is another dead giveaway. Swimming 2 kilometers in open water, running a half marathon, or biking 90 kilometers over hilly Provence terrain; each alone would test the mettle of we mere mortals. Completing them in sequence over a warm Sunday morning defies belief. It's not a pursuit forgiving of the few extra pounds acquired for winter insulation. It amazed me that the rigorous Aix 70.3 is just a half-competition. A full Ironman doubles the 3 distances covered.

Preparing for a triathlon demands real commitment. The training schedule offered

in the Ironman website (click [here](#) to access) covers 6 months of preparation, ramping up to at least 2.5 hours per day of swimming, biking and/or running by month 5. And more than physical endurance training is needed to compete effectively. A balanced, healthy diet is key to building and replenishing energy stores, and mental conditioning is vital to overcome the many walls encountered through the long weeks of training and final race.

Anyone taking on a grand ambition – writing the next great American novel, opening a restaurant, buying a surf shop on some distant exotic island – can learn much about effective prep from the triathlon regime. We go through stages of contemplation, planning and action when considering major

life projects or the immense challenge of an Ironman competition. In cases of profound aspiration I can think of 5 common elements that directly impact the chances of success when transitioning from plan to action:

1. Commitment – to the months of hard work that follow your initial flash of inspiration.
2. Pacing – to avoid overreach and burnout after that initial charge of adrenalin-fueled enthusiasm.
3. Balance – among the holy trinity of mind (knowing your heading), body (having a sound ship) and spirit (building the passion to overcome the challenges).
4. Partners – for mutual support and encouragement through the many miles of training, breakdown, rebound and achievement.
5. Objective – to define the end goal and know when we've reached it.



What am I missing?

A final thought on the properties of iron. It's incredibly strong when well maintained but susceptible to rust and decay when neglected. Many of us entertain grand ambitions – what I call Interprize® plans – at mid life, as the distractions of kids and career recede and our priorities turn to self realization; to the *this is my time now* time. If there is nothing pushing us to excel at this age the rust creeps in, and that fear

motivated the few older Ironman competitors with whom I chatted to take on this challenge post 50. What is your challenge and is there an Ironman within ready to pursue?

Published initially on May 30, 2014.

A Worthy Investment

Suggested Song: [Get Ready](#), Rare Earth

Suggested Drink: [Summer Night cocktail](#): pineapple juice, cucumber juice, mint, white rum.

We invest in our homes, in cars and boats, in shares of big
companies, in exotic holidays and vintage wines.
Do we invest in ourselves? Are we investment grade?



Summertime and the livin' is, ... well you know the song. The warm days of late July have descended on Provence, which means short runs at sunrise, light simple lunches like local tomatoes with mozzarella and pesto, shutters pulled to the afternoon sun, evening garden apéros with family and friends, and lots of diversions (especially when the kids are bored). Honoring the routines and our healthy habits can be a challenge from June through August. But there is merit to staying in fighting form through the lazy lull of summer months, even if not stepping back into the ring until September.

In the world of startup investing, team quality is paramount. *Give me a great team with a good idea; spare me the great idea with mediocre team.* This venture capital

mantra is drilled into business students and VC interns from Silicon Valley to Tel Aviv. In the end entrepreneurial success is driven by vision, commitment, network, knowledge, adaptability, and the resilience to execute through all of the challenges, and these are personal qualities not product descriptions.

Interprize ambitions are even more reliant on the quality of execution given the personal nature of these projects. An intèrpreneur's foremost motivation is not financial return but personal fulfillment: the publishing of a best-selling novel; opening of a popular café; completion of an Ironman triathlon, as examples. The deepest form of reward is acknowledgement (although that need not be exclusive to a tidy profit for a job well done).

And most all intéprize endeavors require investment:

- The aspiring author may need to firm up with a few college courses in creative writing, travel for research, and pay for the services of cover artists and agents.
- A café space will need to be purchased, licenses obtained or transferred, renovations undertaken and appliances serviced or acquired.
- The Ironman within will need a race-quality bike and running shoes, workout kit for swimming, running, and biking (these people are not normal), paid memberships to local sports clubs, and travel to competitions.

A key question then is, *are you worth the investment?* Can you define a compelling vision, are you truly committed to its execution, who's in your network that can help, what is your relevant knowledge and skills, can you identify risks and adapt, and the most critical element: are you sufficiently robust and resilient to negotiate the inevitable trail of challenges ahead; are you in shape for the ring? The answers to these questions will help you understand at what stage of project launch you are now – contemplation, planning, execution, correction, (summer pause) – and the level of investment, if any, that can be justified.



Photo by John Shearer

Is there any investment offering a greater return than an investment in self?

These questions apply to any startup endeavor and are no less relevant to an interprize project. Before setting pen to check, set pen to pad like any good investor. Sketch out an honest assessment of your current status, your stage of launch, the quality of your effort, and your investment grade. Shouldn't the best investment start with you? Are you a worthy bet in the ring? Might I suggest a glass of cool rosé to aid in the analysis? It is the summer after all.

Published initially on July 20, 2014.

Get Your Motor Running

Suggested Song: [Sunny Afternoon](#), The Kinks

Suggested Drink: an energizing [Irish coffee](#); Irish whiskey, Irish cream liqueur, coffee, whipped cream, nutmeg.

I clung to the dwindling days of summer with particular tenacity this year, resisting most work-related activities despite the growing backlog through August, ... including this blog. A languorous sideways drift is an easy bearing in the south of France through the hot summer months; the day's prime ambition driven by produce discoveries at the morning markets, a banquet of local fruits and vegetables at their peak and the subsequent meal plans they inspire. Breakfast is the day's only spread of predictable temperance, afternoon siestas *de rigueur*, and evening aperitifs with family and friends a given, often as not blurring into improvised dinners from the morning market haul.

My teaching at INSEAD started again this week, forcing a full stop to the August torpor. There are classes to prepare, students to manage, partners to organize, and the weekly commute between Aix and Paris to enjoy. All of this activity obliges a certain sense of drive and urgency that have largely been on holiday since June.



There is a multiplier effect from this vim of vigor that motivates a rekindling of fire under other activities from the backburner as well; a well-placed cue ball into the rack. This is an odd but welcome phenomenon: the less spare time we suddenly find available, the more ambitious we are to fill it.

In my 2012 essay [The Creative Flame \(and How to Stoke It\)](#) I considered the creative spillover from artistic endeavors onto other activities benefitting from imaginative thinking. In both cases, one action can stimulate several unrelated and inspired actions. Writer's block on a new blog draft can be dislodged by an hour at the piano. Resistance to the resumption of several ambitious to-dos this fall can be dissolved by a hard deadline in any single one. So for those readers returning to the routine with a bad

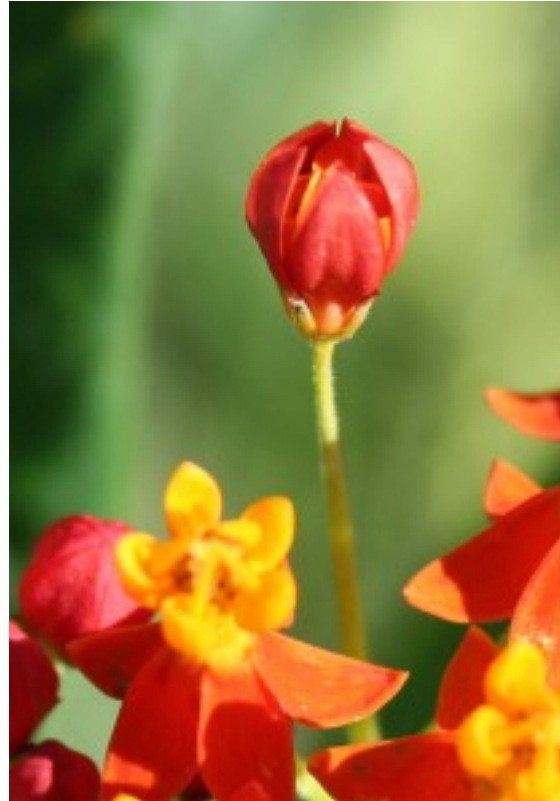
case of sunshine melancholy, fret not. Voila, the multiplier effect that saves us from our summer months on slow idle, just being lazy.

On a completely different tangent

Some of us are born with a clear sense of ambition and direction, of obvious talents and seemingly predetermined destinies. The rest of us – the most of us – ramble down blind alleys and pinball from one promising endeavor to the next, drawn to the light of the latest epiphany.

What struck me most about the suicide of Robin Williams was his reported despair over the downward spiral of career options. The singular Giant in his field (with a capital G), the Michael Jordan of comedy and Academy Award winner, the transformative genius of so many creative characters; was he besieged by a success most deserved and predestined, and mortally despondent over an inability to continue its achievement at that level or find new avenues of expression?

Could it be that those of us with less obvious talents – at least revealing themselves at an early age – benefit from the late bloom? We work through careers of convenience, driven more by opportunity and less by passion, but gain exposure to a wide range of possibilities; likely wider than those of laser-focused prodigies like Williams. The limits of core career achievement may be gated by our distractions and fumbling, but at the midlife frontier, when the bias of priorities tilts toward pursuits of real meaning, our encore careers benefit from this broader exposure.



I offer this up less as a conviction than a question. What do you think?

Published initially on September 5, 2014.

A World Gone Mad

Suggested Song: [Mad World](#), written by Roland Orzabel and covered by Gary Jules

Suggested Drink: [Gates of Hell cocktail](#): tequila, lemon juice, lime juice, cherry brandy

Villages were burned, men were beheaded, women were sold as slaves, their daughters raped and passed to the marauding troops as plunder, entire families were slaughtered, sprayed with bullets and buried alive. The world watched it all online, spellbound with the terror unfolding, and did nothing until our own innocents met the butcher's knife. After the Nazi death camps, the savagery in Rwanda and Bosnia, how could moral and enlightened societies have stayed so detached so long in the face of genocide? It was a world gone mad.



Emilie Parker, Sandy Hook victim

Dozens and dozens of school children – glowing with promise and unknowable potential – were massacred methodically, senselessly, in cold blood, year after year, at Columbine, at Sandy Hook, at Red Lake and others. Warped and bitter psychopaths were left unrestrained, unchecked to arm themselves from head to toe and wage suicide missions against our most blameless and pure. Encouraged, then enabled by the profiteers of violence to buy guns whose sole design was to kill a lot of people quickly, efficiently, effortlessly. The men and women elected to protect a nation looked on, delivered empty speeches to each other, wet themselves in the face of powerful lobbies, and did nothing. Could campaign funding and gun money really have mattered more than the lives of children? It was a world gone mad.



The science was indisputable, the evidence undeniable, the credible consensus absolute, and the dire direction of things predictable. The world was warming, the climate changing, sea ice melting, islands flooding, hurricanes strengthening, our fertile fields and orchards turning to dust, 100+ species dying off daily, CO2 levels rising, heat records breaking each year and

then the next. Implications for the earth that future generations would enjoy were daunting, yet we only strengthened the poison dosage in the name of growth, focused on discovering more oil deep in the seas, extracting more gas trapped in shale, burning more carbon.

World leaders pointed fingers, talked over elaborate dinners, made half-hearted promises that they knew were empty, and all the while unleashed the glory of our industries to amplify the cause and intensify the effect, moving us slowly and most surely beyond the point of real options. We were Thelma and Louise, defiant to the consequences and united in that drive off the cliff, holding hands and singing *American Pie* and dragging future generations along for the ride. It was a world gone mad.

I am normally neither a fatalist nor a pessimist but can't stop wondering when things will really change, if ever, in light of some of the less encouraging news items recently. Facebook awarded Snapchat with a \$16B check earlier this year for 32 engineers and an app that lets people chat worldwide without fees. Alibaba - a Chinese e-commerce company - was valued at over \$200B this week by investors gobbling up its IPO shares. All good, but when a pesky but ballooning ebola crisis that is ravaging West Africa can't be stamped out because the \$1B needed is difficult to source, one has to wonder about our priorities.

My next post will be sunny, I promise!

Published initially on September 26, 2014.

The Outs and Ins of 'Preneurship

Suggested Song: [Sweet Emotion](#), Aerosmith

Suggested Drink: [Passion Punch](#): rum, juices from passion fruit, oranges, pineapples and limes, sugar syrup, grenadine.

On Entrepreneurship

Ten inventors and 40 students passed through another long and exhausting Sci-Tech Entrepreneurship Bootcamp at INSEAD last weekend. We start with a speed dating session on Friday afternoon between the student teams and external innovation projects and once paired up – typically 3-4 MBAs and 1 mad scientist per love-match – the newly formed teams start pounding out the core elements of workable business models.



Friday and Saturday evenings run to midnight or later, as each of the mock startups work through an endless series of assignments around value proposition, product design and evolution, IP and patent considerations, and customer discovery and market strategy, ... and realizing that in this iterative process each business model decision impacts earlier assumptions, they return to the white board to reassess and redesign where necessary. Sunday is reserved for estimating cash needs to get their dreams across the finish line and how these will be funded, then on to presentations to investor judges. We finish by early evening, awards announced, photos taken, a big group hug, and everyone leaves exhilarated, tired, and ready for a serious cocktail.

The innovations under development through the weekend camp varied widely, from programmable antibiotics to hybrid tractors, autonomous robots to fiber composite wheels for aircraft. Through the course of a weekend my students – who lead the charge on the business model creation – tend to pass through Magill's 5 stages of bootcamp emotion:

1. Absorption, of what is often a complex and confusing underlying science.
2. Exasperation, at first attempts at developing a sound and workable business model around it.
3. Traction, when their growing understanding of the innovation's capabilities and limitations coalesces with their knowledge of basic business planning.
4. Exhilaration (or deflation), when the true market potential of their project starts to emerge.
5. Realization, that the real work of validating all of the weekend assumptions and correcting course is just beginning.

I'm never disappointed by the flexibility, efficiency, and level of accomplishment on display by the business students and visiting scientists during these entrepreneurship bootcamps. Their ability to work together through the science, the business, and deciding what's next, and often in some unpredictable mix of primary languages, is incredibly impressive and inspiring.

On Interpreneurship

In early December I'll give another 3-day workshop, what I call the Interprize Accelerator, at the University of Aix-Marseille. While the entrepreneurship weekends center on the creation of compelling businesses that flourish and sustain, with an outward focus on external markets, my intérpreneurship sessions emphasize exciting life ambitions that inspire and endure, with an inward focus on personal achievement and self-realization.

The fundamental principles of both camps are largely similar: what is your project's true value, what assets do you bring to its realization and where are the holes to be filled, who are your customers and in what format do they consume your project (some participants may want to become best-selling authors or artistic performers, others may want to start cafes or operate wineries, so the variance is as wide as in the recent entrepreneurship camp), is extra financing needed and where do you find it?

What is vastly different, however, is the added emphasis on wellness and balance. Without these things we quickly lose our bearings and the ability to execute effectively. The Interprize Accelerator involves daily *happy hours* around concepts of positive psychology, and participants also get a 2-hour experiential session on the merits of meditation and yoga (or whatever your favorite physical outlet tends to be).



Ponder, Mark Stock

Like entrepreneurs, intèrpreneurs most often start out passionate about their projects (more passionate possibly, given the deeply personal meaning of these aspirations), which yields to a more enlightened acceptance of the sober challenges involved. They pass through the same 5 stages highlighted above, then launch and optimize their models, or in some cases realize that not all dreams are attainable, at least in the form envisioned. This can be a painful discovery but one better arrived at early than late, after precious time and resources have been committed.

... a note on passion

We tumble hard sometimes, foolishly and obsessively. You meet someone and the world is suddenly brighter and more animated, colors are richer and more expressive, your heart beats faster. Irrational exuberance takes root and you know it, you feel it, but you can't resist it, talking about her or him, repeating yourself, thinking of them, aching to see them again soon.

When you feel this way about your interprize project something powerful is happening and you have tapped into something deeply meaningful that demands to be explored and exhausted. There is no option. As with our love lives, it all may come to nothing, but oh what sweet emotion while it lasts, while we still believe.

Published initially on October 15, 2014.

The Mighty Lemon: Fewer Wrinkles, Better Sex!

Suggested Song: [The Lemon Song](#), Led Zeppelin

Suggested Drink: a rejuvenating lemonade: water, fresh squeezed lemon juice, simple syrup.

Lemons are an amazing fruit: affordable, healthy, and hopefully core to your daily diet. They pack a power punch of nutrition, provide a recuperative flush after a night of indulgence, and add another dimension to your kitchen confidence in a many, many ways. The sex and wrinkles claim you ask? Yes, that was shameful.



I've read a number of interesting articles on the merits of lemons over the holidays and during one of the many December dinner parties here in Provence this question was raised: the orange or the lemon, where do your loyalties lie? For me it's the mighty lemon, that palm-sized grenade of pure zing and zest. They are available fresh throughout the year, so good for you, never break the bank, and simple to work with.

And now to those merits ...

To firm you up:

- Rich in vitamin C, a typical lemon provides 35-40% of the recommended daily allowance. And the peel of the lemon provides almost twice this amount! Vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant and aids the body's immune system; lemons are invaluable during cold and flu season. And that magic *powerpeel* is proven to be effective with brain disorders like Parkinson's disease.

- Lemons are also rich in calcium and potassium (even more so than grapes or apples), and therefore excellent natural boosters for heart and bone health.
- Despite being acidic to taste, lemons actually work as an important alkaline in the body, which helps restore our pH balance. Why does that matter? These imbalances tend to bias toward acidic and that can lead to serious problems such as cardiovascular disease, complications from diabetes, and bone fragility.
- 22 anti-cancer compounds have been identified in lemons.

To clean you out:

- A glass of lemonade in the morning is an effective detoxifier for the liver, essentially liquefying the bile (sounds lovely). That second shot of limoncello at midnight goes down a bit smoother knowing you'll be getting an organ flush in the morning!
- Your morning glass also helps to keep the daily constitution regular in the bowels department. Fewer backups means cleaner plumbing and better health.
- The citric acid in lemon juice helps to dissolve gallstones, calcium deposits, and kidney stones and is even known to destroy intestinal worms, should you be so unfortunate!
- And 1 anecdote from my childhood: I remember getting bicarbonate of soda mixed with water and lemon juice from my mother as a kid when feeling nauseous. Worked like a charm!

To zest up your meals:

As a general rule when cooking, use the juice of lemons in recipes that don't require it to heat for extended periods, as the juice's flavor and nutritional compounds are suspended in water and evaporate away quickly. The peel, on the other hand, traps these elements in its oil glands and is much better suited for long simmering or baking.

- Protect poached fish by placing lemons slices underneath during the poaching process.
- Prevent sticky pasta by adding 2 teaspoons of juice to 4 quarts of boiling water.
- Dress mild greens with lemon juice (is less overpowering than vinegar).
- Perk up soups and salads by adding a taste of juice just before serving.
- Enhance side dishes like rice and vegetables with juice or zest before serving.
- Keep pesto green by adding 2 teaspoons of lemon juice to each cup of packed basil leaves.

- Brighten basting oil by adding 1 teaspoon of grated zest, 1 tablespoon of juice, and 1 teaspoon of minced herbs to ½ cup olive oil.
- Brighten brown butter sauce by adding 1 tablespoon of juice for every 4 tablespoons of butter.
- Substitute for wine in pan sauces by adding 1 teaspoon of juice and chicken broth for equal parts wine.
- Grill lemon halves and squeeze over finished poultry or fish.

These meal tips were summarized from a January/February 2015 article in *Cooks Illustrated* magazine, my favorite resource for all things kitchen and cooking.

You don't need to live in Provence to enjoy fabulous lemons and they will keep in your refrigerator's vegetable bin for a month. For the hard-charging interpreneur lemons are an indispensable resource for balance and fitness. Stock up now and share with us all how you put them to work.

Published initially on January 8, 2015.

From Tragic to Mythic

Suggested Song: [Brand New Day](#), Ryan Star

Suggested Drink: [Hammock Time Cream Ale](#), Ambition Brewing Company.

A few questions for my mid-life readers.

Q1: Approaching the end of your core career and anticipating retirement years filled with golf, travel, grandkids, and wine collecting? That's tragic!

Q2: Building a unique base of talents, knowledge, experience, and contacts over decades of studies, work, moves, parenting and life lessons, and letting that skill-set decay in pursuit of *the good life*? That's tragic!

Q3: Committing that sizeable retirement stipend to a beautiful home remodel, new furnishings, flashy toys in the driveway, and other impress-the-neighbors *stuff*? That's tragic!

Q4: Over 50 and still living someone else's vision of your life? Unwilling to disappoint a parent, partner, boss, friend, or child? Now that is really tragic!

Our greatest potential starts at midlife. By then we have made our share of mistakes; been scarred and tempered by life's nasty lessons; been educated, coached, and drilled; have a clearer sense of our natural strengths, weaknesses, and motivations; and are driven less by income, more by passion. We may also have more disposable time and income as the core careers wind down and the kids move out. All of this offers tremendous possibilities.



Yet this is the moment when many of us decide to downshift, to redirect our time and savings toward *the good life*, and let our toolkit slowly rust. The truth is, sadly, that a lot of folks are happy to let entropy do its dirty deed on their brains and bodies while parking their derrieres on the proverbial bar stool of retirement. For the rest of us there is hope in *the engaged life*. It is one of our own choosing and can generate tremendous meaning and sense of purpose during the most productive years of our lives.

Q1: Approaching the end of your core career and anticipating a new mission; an exciting challenge steeped deeply in your grandest ambitions? That's mythic!

Q2: Using your singularly unique base of talents, knowledge, experience, and contacts compiled over decades of studies, work, moves, parenting and life lessons toward this mission that defines your powerful sense of purpose? Pursuing *the engaged life*. That's mythic!



Q3: Committing the lion's share of that sizeable retirement stipend toward the planning and implementation of your greatest ambition? Classes and training, tools and gadgets, educational travel, new contacts for new horizons; the things that strengthen your abilities, expand your awareness, and build your legend, ...not fill your garage. A pursuit centered on creative production, not competitive consumption. That's mythic!

Q4: Over 50 and living where you want, with whom you want, and doing what you want? Writing your own life story and pursuing a Grand Ambition that brings the greatest sense of anticipation for every new day. Now that is truly mythic!

What's your Grand Ambition? What are you waiting for?

Published initially on January 30, 2015.

Of Options & Obligations

Suggested Song: [Ave Maria](#), Franz Schubert

Suggested Drink: [Marillenschnaps](#) shot (a powerful Austrian apricot brandy).

If your primary ambition is a life defined by comfort, security and the relief from uncertainty then read no further.

For those continuing, please start the audio to my Suggested Song above, then read on.

Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria* is one of the most recognized songs of the classics period, adapted for films like Disney's *Fantasia* and recorded by most every major opera singer through the years. It has become the signature piece for the great Andrea Bocelli, performed with his contemporaries and grand orchestras around the globe. I prefer this simple, haunting version sung by Maria Callas.

During his life Schubert was dismissed as a minor league composer, second-tier to the true giants: Bach and Beethoven. His bid to join the Vienna Society of Music was rejected and all of his 20 stage pieces were failures. Most of his career was spent as a nomadic bohemian, supported and lodged by a small circle of friends and fans. Yet in his short 31 years he produced over 1,500 works including 7 symphonies, 600 vocal pieces, and many sonatas and operas.

Schubert could have enjoyed a secure, comfortable life-giving piano lessons at his father's music school. He tried this for one year, at his father's request, but was too bored and uninspired to continue. Thank god. Beethoven, on his deathbed, was said to have praised Schubert's music as inspired by divine genius. Brahms, Mendelsohn, Litz, Schumman, Dvorik, and other greats to follow pointed to his work as principal inspiration, and they in turn inspired the next generation of romantics.



Are we thankful for Schubert's sacrifice, the selfless and selfish dedication to his gift despite the poverty, disrespect, and disappointment to his family? Is our world a richer place with *Ave Maria* in it (not to mention his other works and those of his disciples)?

I've written before about singular promise, most directly in my essay *Y U r U* (click [here](#) to read). We each have a unique gift, at least one thing that we can do better than anyone else on this planet. This one thing is defined by the natural strengths and personality styles gifted from our DNA, plus the unique

sets of education, training and life experiences we've enjoyed, plus the one-of-its-kind rolodex of friends and contacts we've made through the years. If this one thing aligns tightly with our passions, then the Schubert inside finds its release and all the world gets a lift, more color, deeper experience.



Is it an option or an obligation to share our gifts, to commit to them? Should Schubert have been permitted to take the predictable path and relax in the stupor of his father's piano school, his promise evaporated into the ether of countless other "what could have been" possibilities?

In a powerful scene in the film *Birdman*, Riggan Thomson's daughter Sam talks about the human life span and our very short

and insignificant moment on this planet (83 years on average, perhaps 100 if we are lucky) in the much longer 6 million years that humans have walked the earth. Her takeaway is the futility of ego, of the effort to divine a purpose and attempt to do something impactful. *What's the point Dad, just get over yourself* (paraphrasing).

My take on her poignant dialog is the opposite. Yes, we are here for a very short time, a blink of the eye, so forget about failure or making fools of ourselves. If we fail at our grand ambitions, and the chances are in that favor, we'll be forgotten in a generation (same as if we attempt nothing extraordinary), but if we succeed we may leave our marks on history like Schubert. Do you want to be an ant in an ant farm, undistinguished from the colony, doing your dutiful job, living in relative security and anonymity until that fateful squash under the foot of life? Or do you want to strike out, defy convention, let your flag fly and make a difference? Comments please.

Published initially on March 13, 2015.

Zuck or Wik?

Suggested Song: [Money for Nothing](#), Dire Straits

Suggested Drink: [AIX rosé, Coteaux d'Aix](#) (comes in magnums for the spirited groups).

Imagine what you could do if financial sense was a secondary consideration of the adventures and ambitions you pursued, if the principal factor was knowledge, growth, creative production, or quality of the experience. Liberated like a child.

Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook in 2004. It has over 1.4 billion active users and generated \$12.5 billion in revenues in 2014. Zuckerberg's net worth is estimated at \$36 billion.

Jimmy Wales led the launch of Wikipedia in 2001. It hosts 35 million articles in 288 languages. It has had over 18 billion page views and receives 500 million unique visitors each month. Wikipedia generated just \$40 million in donations (through the Wikimedia Foundation) in 2013 and Wales's net worth is estimated at \$1 million.

Which of these 2 internet services will survive a half century and who, if either, will be a household name 100 years beyond that? One service provides a virtual community hall for photo updates of our cute kids doing silly stuff, snapshots from our travels and misadventures, videos of puppies and kittens doing even sillier stuff, exciting games like Farmville and SongPop, and advertisements. The other provides an encyclopedia of seemingly endless information appended and corrected every second of every day for every imaginable user regardless of age, location, interest, or spoken language. A 12 year-old sitting at home in Manila seeking a summary of Napoleon's exile to Elba written in Tagalog? They have that and without the publicity. They also don't have videos and games.

Facebook and Wikipedia are successful ventures because they provide value to their users at no direct cost. One of them also provides real value for advertisers by selling data on everything you like, link, and suggest and a map of your network of friends. The other service has no idea whom the vast majority of its users are and that distinction goes a long way in explaining the contrast in revenues.

I am an open user of one, a closeted voyeur of the other. My fickle teens are not loyal to any online service – Facebook, Wikipedia, or otherwise – and I look to them for direction on internet trends. Even email is from the bygone era of typewriters and fax machines for my kids and Facebook has been pushed aside by Instagram and Snapchat. Will they return to Facebook as they get older? I don't know; what would be the driver? Will they use Wikipedia more often as they get older? Yes they will. It's utility as a knowledge source for their school essays and work-related research is unmatched, not to mention the rabbit hole of reading it offers for the merely curious like me.

Is a venture's profitability the primary determinant of its value? Does the Facebook platform provide more utility to its users than Wikipedia? This is an interesting debate perfectly suited for a late afternoon rosé, ... I could suggest a few from Provence (says the incorrigible corrupter).

We seem to be guided from a young age to consider all of activities through the lens of financial gain or loss. For our commercial endeavors it's the measure of demand as reflected in cash paying customers (or advertisers in this new era). Even our personal considerations are run through the mill of financial sensibilities. *I could move here or do that, study this or learn that craft, but it's just crazy to consider it, you know? I mean that just makes no financial sense at all!*

This takes primacy over our actions and limits our imagination, our potential. Imagine what you could do if financial sense was a secondary consideration of the adventures and ambitions you pursued, if the principal factor was knowledge, growth, creative production, or quality of the experience. It can be liberating to imagine, dangerous even.

We can be happy that Wales decided from Day 1 his creation would be best managed as a nonprofit. He could have been a billionaire by now, yacht hopping with Jay Z in Cannes or challenging Zuckerberg for the title of biggest charitable donor in Silicon Valley. (It turns out that the Zuckerbergs are giving munificently for this distinction.) But our Wikipedia browsing would be distracted with blinking ads and our surfing stats filling up the servers of the world's great purveyors of useless stuff. Here's to you Jimbo, *un verre de rosé vous attend!*

Published initially on April 20, 2015.

The Jenner Lesson for All of Us

Suggested Song: [\(You Make Me Feel Like\) A Natural Woman](#), Aretha Franklin

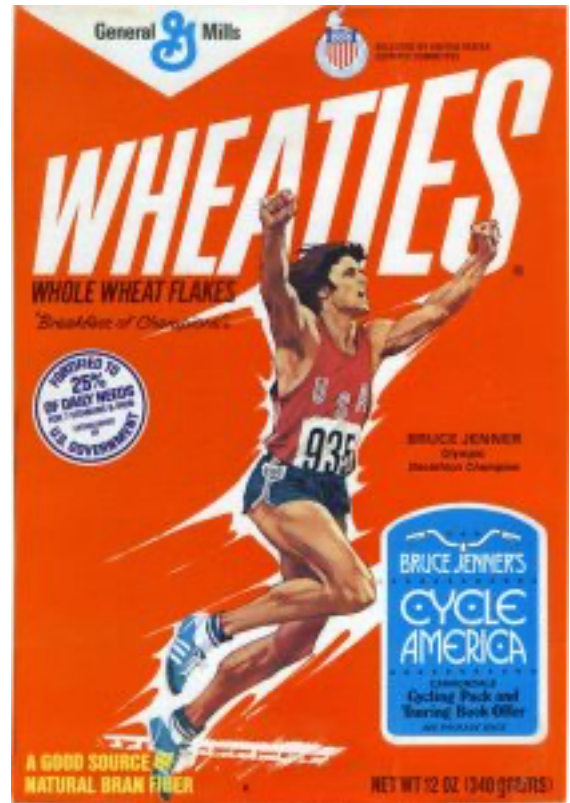
Suggested Drink: [Olympic cocktail](#): cognac, orange juice, Clemente Creole Shrub, orange bitters.

Bruce Jenner disclosed the worst kept secret in America last week. Her great misfortune of being assigned the wrong birth body didn't hinder extraordinary Olympic achievement and an enviable career and life (the Kardashian taint notwithstanding). Perhaps it was exactly the snare of natural gifts and achievements and the celebrity they engendered that kept her closeted to the world for 65 years. She's opting for honesty now, to finally live and express her true identity openly. Brave woman. Bravo!

How many of us are that brave? To honestly consider, accept and possibly realign our (dis)orientations, and assume the risk no matter how unsettling? Like Jenner we may have fabulous careers, solid marriages and friendships, enviable lives, but still feel dishonest at the core.

The momentum of life sweeps us in unpredictable directions. It can carry us further and further from our authentic selves: what we do, where we live, whom we love. Correcting course is often uncomfortable, although I would venture cause less disruption than Jenner is undergoing at the moment.

Imagine fighting the powerful sweep of the Jenner riptide, the transition from "Worlds Greatest Athlete," the Hollywood handsome 1976 Olympic medalist, to estrogen injections and breast enhancements, all under the microscope of the celebrity press.





It's never too late to assess and realign our bearings. In fact there is no time better than post midlife, when the mighty forces that keep us compliant, channeled and predictable – kids, mortgage, aging parents – start to dissipate. Am I wrong?

We keep a set of helpful tools and tests at the Interprize Group that are useful in this consideration and are always looking for new ones. Get in touch if curious to know

more.

Published initially on April 27, 2015.

All the Fishes in the Sea

Suggested song: [Kokomo](#), Beach Boys

Suggested drink: [Rum punch recipe](#): pineapple juice, orange juice, Bambarra rum, grenadine.

We descended on Turks & Caicos last week to celebrate the 50th birthday of a great friend. There were 25 or so in the group, arriving in clumps as summer schedules allowed, couples and singles and kids in tow for the family few.

The Caribbean is wilting in July and between the pool and beach we were growing gills by the end of the week. Constant hydration was *le rigueur*, with a steady water infusion plus rotating lineup of cold Presidente beer, rosé wine and local rum punch as the sun dipped from noon to night.



Sea life

Turks & Caicos has the third largest coral reef in the world. Its beaches have been voted the most beautiful, it's diving the most stunning on this planet by Tripadvisor and others. The water is warm and calm and visibility exceeds 100 feet, sometimes more. Needless to say the boating and snorkelling is unforgettable.

The variety of sea life darting over and through the vibrant coral is a visual feast, from spinning swarms of tiny forage fish to solitary predators gliding majestically over the sandy floor. Blue tangs and bar jack, eagle rays and lemon sharks and barracuda, parrotfish and trumpet fish and damselfish, ... and conch. Oh the conch! This large spiral sea snail is the sought-after celebrity of Turks & Caicos and served in most every eatery, as raw ceviche, over tender leaves of salad, deep fried into fritters, however you

enjoy it. It's the royal plate for the well-heeled to the flip-flopped. It's colorful, delicious, and makes for one hell of a sea horn. Yes, by week's end we grew gills and had conch coming out of our ears.



Land life

The birthday party group at Turks was as diverse as the fish in the crystalline blue sea. We were old and young, gay and straight, black and white and beige and olive, carnivores and herbivores and pescetarians, liberal and conservative, wealthy and not nearly so, some overworked and a few unemployed, flying in from all points on the globe. Among us were doctors and consultants and professionals of every stripe, restaurateurs and a bartender, jewelry shop owners and a jewelry designer, musicians and writers (who isn't these days?), a physical therapist and a garbage man, students and grandmothers. Who am I missing?

I'm convinced that this variety was key to the unending smiles, hugs, and the warm and familial vibe of the amazing week. We open ourselves to the diversity of colors around us and our worlds become richer and vastly more fascinating. Among our immediate and extended networks, and networks beyond that, we have the diversity of the boundless sea. Why limit our reach to fish of our own color and stripe?

The merits of openness extend beyond simply more interesting rum cocktail conversation. Many of us have grand ambitions that profit from a wide spectrum of connections, experiences and advice from all walks of life and corners of the sea. Limit your network and you limit your possibilities. Teach, learn, grow, ... now where's that rum punch?

Published initially on July 28, 2015.

Sunsets are for Sissies

Suggested Song: [When I'm 64](#), Beatles

Suggested Drink: [Accelerator cocktail](#): tequila, rum, cranberry juice, orange juice, ginger ale.

“It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old,
they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams.”

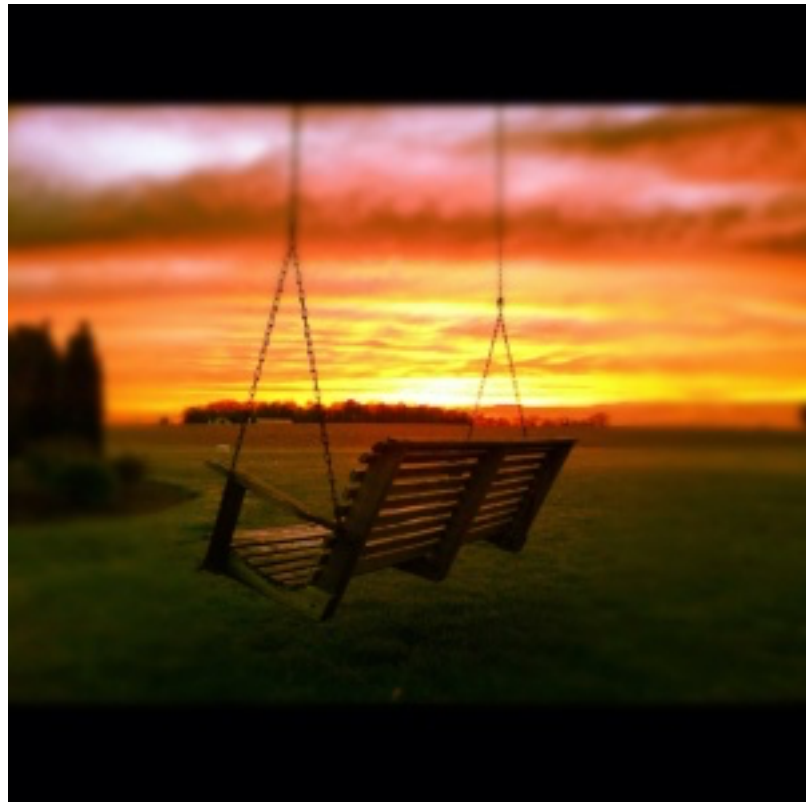
- Gabriel García Márquez

We humans are a curious species. Half of our lives are spent developing into interesting, capable creatures. We get degrees, build careers, save money, acquire knowledge and experience, hone interests, learn from mistakes, gain compassion and learn to love. From molehill to mountain we slowly, steadily grow our possibilities and potential. And at the peak of our prowess we downshift to the “good life” and atrophy into a retiring sunset.

Wasted potential is everyone’s loss. We harangue the young about squandered time when their hourglass is mostly full, and then become the worst violators

when ours is half empty. At a time when creativity in all its forms is most needed and appreciated on this planet, the surrender of our talents to the porch swing and wine cave is a communal loss.

How do we stack up at midlife against our younger selves in the capacity to achieve great things? The following table displays a brief summary.



Our typical profile...	@ 25	@ 60
<i>Venturing money</i>	None to a little	Some to a lot
<i>Venturing time</i>	Weekends maybe	All week 24/7
<i>Education & training</i>	Some, limited	A lot, and varied
<i>Work experience</i>	None to a little	A lot, and varied
<i>Acquired wisdom</i>	Shallow	Deep
<i>Emotional maturity</i>	Just forming	Developed
<i>Child rearing priorities</i>	Just starting	Just ending
<i>Helpful connections</i>	Narrow and limited	Broad and effective
<i>Primary motivations</i>	Interests and income	Passions and legacy

Oh to be young again, just starting out and facing adventure, pursuing such promise, the exciting unknown of the roads ahead. Most of us were balancing a host of obligations and still seeking our balance. We were finishing studies and starting careers, probably the first of a series as we pinballed through different ideas and experiences. We were discovering ourselves and uncovering new interests, but generating income was the primary concern and motivator. Time was consumed with work and kids, and the emotional child inside lingered well past the twenties (speaking for myself). Our time and resources for pursuing grand ventures outside conventional careers were limited in all manner of ways: our finances, support networks, bases of knowledge, and emotional maturity.



These factors that hobble our passion plans start to dissipate by midlife, leaving us well armed for the pursuit of grand ambitions. Kids graduate from our daily lives at about the time our core careers are winding down, leaving us with more time, fewer distractions, and more disposable income. We have been well educated, trained and retrained through our university and working years, gained knowledge, and as importantly gained perspective and balance. Our rolodexes are full of people who can help, or people who know people who can help. At midlife we have the time and resources, the maturity and experience, and we have interests that are blossoming into real passions. This is when we retire to porch swings and sunsets?

We humans are a curious species, it is true. Our interests shift to the deep end of the pool with age, the lure of the profound not marked firstly by splashy income, but personal achievement, meaning, and the possibility of leaving something big behind. We're taking better care of

physical and emotional selves than did our parents; 60 is the new 40; interpreneurs are the new entrepreneurs. Now is the moment to accelerate into the experience, to dive deep. There will be time for sunsets down the road.

Published initially on August 23, 2015.

The Distilled Life

Suggest Song: [Distractions](#), Sia

Suggested Drink: Your preferred single malt Scotch, served neat.

noun dis·til·la·tion \,di-stə-'lā-shən\ : to extract the essence of something

We saturate our time and space with unessential distractions. The online world offers an endless spring of mildly interesting, mostly superfluous reading, and our smartphones with their noisy arrays of buzzes, bells, and beeps demand our attention like bratty kids. Not to be outbid, the brick-and-mortar world demands equal time and its pound of flesh, promising eternal consumer happiness. Our time gets diluted, our space gets inundated, and our defining essence becomes a bland blend of muddle.

We self-define through our stuff. I am a master homechef because I have 12-piece cutlery set and full array of All-Clad pans and pots. I am a talented musician because a Martin D28 or Fender Stratocaster is resting on the guitar stand in my living room. I am an astounding sommelier because my wine cave is brimming with expensive bottles. What a wonderful world it would be if aptitude and skill could be a purchase away.

The best homechefs I know have limited kit: a few essential pots and pans and perhaps 3 solid, razor-sharp knives. They focus on technique, ingredients, and presentation. My ex mother-in-law produced some of the most delicious Spanish dishes I've tasted from a tiny kitchen and with unremarkable equipment in her Barcelona flat. I don't recall ever seeing a cookbook on the counter. She's never had internet access for recipe look up and only recently got a mobile phone (emergency calls only!). She wouldn't know Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsey if they bit her on the ankle, ... but I think they would love her empanadas and paella.

The most entertaining piano player in Aix-en-Provence – David Brulin – can be seen pushing his ragged piano through town to the markets at noon and restaurants at night (*La Cita* every Thursday!). The faded instrument's brand is anyone's guess, the keys have long since lost their ivory sheen, the hammers



and strings rattle and jangle as it rolls on a dollie through the bumpy alleys. But when David takes his seat it might as well be a Steinway. It's his well-honed skill at the keys that gets your feet tapping, not the name on the lid.



Unfortunately, mastery comes through practice only, and these distractions of ours divert energy and attention from that pursuit. I admit to this sin in spades. If there is one thing at which I'm truly a master, it's finding trivial things to sidetrack my focus. And it's not my fault! We're all under constant assault to check out the latest gizmo or app. This arrived from Apple last week in my inbox: *7 Underrated Apps You Didn't Know You Needed!* These included *RunPee* that "lets you know the

best time to pee during movies so you don't miss any good scenes" and *Plant Nanny* that "comes with cute little plants (on your phone) that are meant to remind you to drink your water regularly." Damn right, I didn't know I needed those.

So how do we cut through the noise? These 5 practices help me so might help you:

1. *List*: Make a short list of passions you most enjoy and want to master; those things by which you want to be defined. Cooking, fitness, writing, music, ...? Everyone's list is unique. What is on your list?
2. *Commit*: Reserve time on your daily or weekly calendar for each passion and do your best to respect the commitments, and that means saying no to friends and family who call with last minute invitations.
3. *Control*: Tame your email and internet beasts by checking emails and the latest news 2-3 times daily and no more. I'm trying to stick to (1) first thing in the morning, (2) at noon, and (3) late afternoon before the apéro hour. When the will is weak I turn the wifi router off during "my hours."
4. *Master*: The better we get at something the more we want to get even better at it. Adopt practices that promote your growth and mastery in the passions you've selected and a virtuous upcycle will develop, pulling you to commit even more time. And remember to emphasize the practices, not the accessories.

5. *Meditate*: Just 5 minutes per day helps clear my head and calm the noise.

As mentioned earlier, my discovery in mental distillation continues to be a work in process and I'm looking for suggestions and experiences we can share with my community of readers. Anything you care to note?

Published initially on September 11, 2015.

A Year in Four Acts

Suggested song: [Woodstock](#), Joni Mitchell (this is the CSN&Y rendition I love)

Suggested drink: Spiked summer lemonade: vodka, lemonade, basil, lemon slice, simple syrup.

*We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden*

Much is written on the merits of eating locally and seasonally. I'm a fan and advocate, and adopting this practice in Provence is easy and immensely pleasurable. The benefits of adapting to seasonal changes extend well beyond an evolving dinner plate, however. Acknowledging that we're in the month of October, not May, and cooking and eating accordingly encourages us to consider nature and our environment; it inspires respect and empathy for the earth's bounty and limits. In the age of hyper connectivity and globalized availability – *Blueberries in December? No problem!* – we lose this appreciation and are the worse for it.

My adult life has been largely enjoyed in San Francisco, where there are just 2 seasons really in the city proper: chilly, foggy season A (winters and summers) and glorious, less foggy season B (springs and falls). To be fair to the larger Bay Area, 15 minutes outside the city in any direction and the climate dynamics are wildly different.

Getting back to a full climate cycle was one of the many attractions I anticipated when moving to Provence. The changing seasons define life here beyond just weather, but also in ways edible, social, visual, and cultural. Provence is colored by brilliant summer yellows, somber winter greys, by fresh spring greens and fading autumn browns in all shades from blossom to decay. It is a cycle that keeps things in flow and evolving, changing in predictable patterns that echo previous seasons but never truly repeat. This cycle also ties us to our surrounds in ways more natural and organic, less artificial and technologic. And this is a very healthy thing: enriching, humbling, authenticating.





Placed between the Alps and Mediterranean, Provence swings from bone chilling Januaries to sweltering Julys. This change stimulates a vast range of local fruits and vegetables, flowers and herbs, wines and oils and nuts. Local Gariguettes strawberries and Charantais melons fill the market stalls with shades of orange and red – and pesky honeybees – through the warm summer days.

The fields are ablaze with sunflowers and lavender. The aromas are inviting, seductive. During the darker months gourdes of every odd shape and size, and middle earth root vegetables like turnips and rutabagas inspire child-terrorizing recipes. Cool salad plates yield to steaming soup bowls. Sweet red and black raspberries give way to cepe mushrooms and the savage black truffle: formidable king of all French fungi.

Other selections on the Provence menu are seasonal as well. The café scene is vibrant year around, but the outdoor terrace reigns supreme for coffee and drinks in summer. Without outdoor seating your restaurant business is somewhere between anemic to 100 percent dead. Socializing with a cool glass of rosé or pastis in the early evenings under a warm Mediterranean sun is pure bliss. A light dinner of shared charcuterie, cheese and bread is plenty when the weather is still balmy at 10 p.m. And with the elegant baroque setting of Aix and beautiful pageantry on display why stay home, and when out why be inside?

The out/in seating bias evolves gradually to a complete 180° flip by year end, with those same terraces now the exclusive domain of a few weather-defiant smokers, bundled up for a shivering fix in heavy winter coats while the rest of us crowd into cozy, packed interiors, warmed by wood fired ovens, calming aperitifs, and simmering plates of delicious this or that. Summer nibbles and pale rosés give way to hearty menus and full-bodied reds. The winter din is unique to the season, the chatter amplified by the tight enclosed quarters, the espresso machines hissing, the waiters barking, the clatter of coffee cups and wine glasses and silverware being served or collected.



As the daylight hours dwindle and temperatures drop we start to entertain more at home and indoors. I struggle to find my Escoffier toque when the thought of sweating before a hot stove top in midsummer is the reward. By October there is no place I'd rather be. The changes in local produce at the outdoor markets give us a chance to mix up the dinner menu, the entrees, the wine selection and cocktail starters. What an opportunity to find harmony with the sun, moon, rain, wind, and dirt; with the *terroir* as they say in France. Respect for and adaption to our climate cycles is a sign of humility, a deference that is critical in this period of extreme climate events that reveals a nature mother aggravated by our false sense of control and hubris.

We can choose to insulate ourselves from the natural world or embrace its messy chaos and diversity. We're brimming with modern technologies that enable sterile, inert lives largely impervious to the seasons.

Increasingly we encapsulate ourselves in the great

digital bubble, plugged in to an endless and fascinating online universe that gives no hints of the natural world, the *real* world. And that's our collective loss.

Our climate has become unhinged thanks to a global appetite for better lives, bigger homes, a car or 2 in the garage, and more stuff – in essence the “good life” – with ignorance (initially) and disregard (ultimately) for the ugly environmental impact of this pursuit. Isolating ourselves from the natural elements only widens the disconnect and exacerbates the problem. What's on your menu tonight?

Published initially on October 10, 2015.

Prepare to Die!

Suggested Song: [You Only Live Once](#), The Strokes

Suggested Drink: [Forever Young Cocktail](#): Cointreau, curcuma shrub, spiced rum, sweet potato jam.

It's been sobering start to 2016 for the bulletproof believers amongst us. You know, we flag bearers of the centennial club, confident that at 100 we'll still be kicking on most cylinders and fully engaged, and then softly, painlessly fail to wake up one sunny morning.

It's a comforting fable for *Big Idea* procrastinators like me. Why do today what we have 40 more years to achieve? Zen, relax. And then we hear that certain ageless celebrities of our youth – David Bowie, Glenn Frey, Dale Griffin, and Alan Rickman, just this month alone – are dying from the frightening unmentionables like cancer, Alzheimer's, and colitis before the age of 70. It's a deflating jab to our comfort bubble.

The centennial club thrives on 2 fundamental deceptions: when and how we'll die. In reality we shouldn't expect to tick past 83, which remains the average lifespan for the much of the western world. And we won't likely expire peacefully in our sleep. We'll probably succumb to the kinds of disorders and diseases that snatched the headline names mentioned above. It won't be pretty and it will rob us of a few final years of fun and frolic. We won't be supernovas, expanding in unbound potential until a final blinding flash leaves us scattered to the ashes. Damn.

So let's get real. Let's assume that our productive years wind down at 80, after which we'll drool over endless rounds of bridge, shuffleboard, and acceptable wine on decks of the Carnival Cruise Lines. How many months are left then to do something grand, to pursue a legacy ambition that leaves us feeling accomplished and complete, that our unique purpose for being on this beautiful planet at this amazing time has been served? At 50 we can expect 360 more months and at 60 just 240 months. Sounds like a lot, sounds like so little.

Anxiety over our lack of effective runway can also be debilitating. Why try to take on something ambitious if there is insufficient time to implement it? Bowie and Frey were wasting time in rock bands in their teens, a time when we were planning responsible careers. They had decades to experiment, fail,



perfect, and establish their genius. What hope is there to start at midlife, regardless of our ambitions, music or otherwise?

The fact is we're never better positioned to pursue quixotic adventures than at midlife. You probably have more disposable income at 50 than 20, are less impulsive and smarter about the world, have established a helpful network of support (even if 1-2 degrees removed), are no longer distracted by childrearing (although child-funding never ends!), and are driven less by considerations that are purely financial (that corrupt your vision), more by self-realization (which distills your vision).



For a lot of reasons we can't expect to launch a stellar career at 50 like Bowie's, but we can still find success, recognition and respect, and establish a more authentic self, whether it's as a musician, writer, artist, restaurateur, winemaker, nonprofit director, extreme athlete, teacher, yoga instructor, life coach, or whatever represents that grand ambition of deep personal meaning to you.

The point is this: there is no better time than now to get to it. The real prize is the journey and self-discovery as much as the final creation of our endeavors. In a few years someone will be writing your obit; perhaps the same person who summarized the lives of those above. Give her something to smile about.

Published initially on January 23, 2016.

Five Days, No Phone

Suggested Song: [Garden Party](#), Ricky Nelson

Suggested Drink: [Strawberry basil margaritas](#): strawberries, lime, basil, tequila.

A new spring edition of Bill's fabulous adventures in Provence. It is easy to write about this time of the year, with the eager return to longer days, changes in the local farmers markets, and the resumption of warm weather rituals that most often center around drinks and socializing.

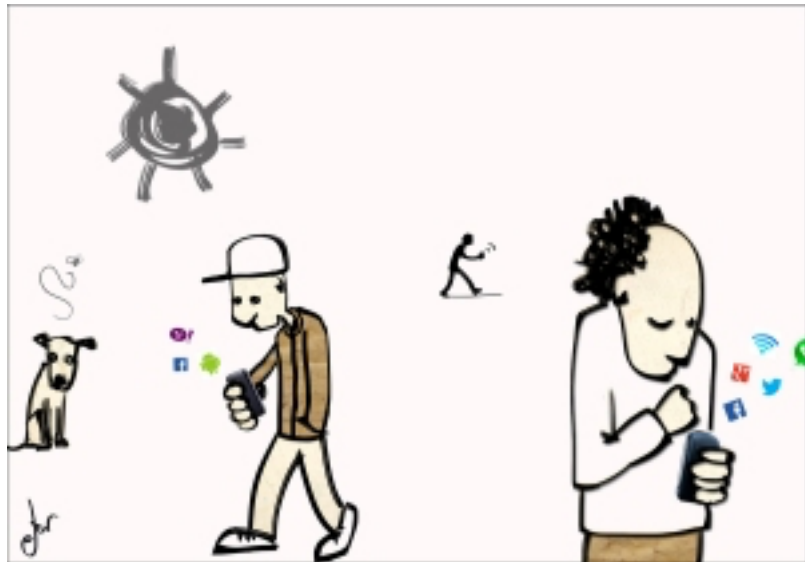
I'll start, though, with an epiphany of sorts: smart phone addiction is little different than other forms of unhealthy dependence, and the loss of its tickle in our pockets leads many of us through the same series of withdrawal emotions.

I suffered through 5 days sans connection recently. My iPhone went missing after a Saturday night of pronounced revelry at the restaurant Les Agapes in Aix.

There was eating, there was drinking, there was singing and dancing, and my socket to the wireless ether vanished mysteriously through a wormhole of midnight excess. These things can happen when we're having serious fun.

As the next day was a Sunday and the day after that had me on an early morning train to Paris, there was no time for quick replacement, so I resigned myself for a few days of unconnected disquietude. This I experienced:

- Day 1, Sunday: denial, anger, depression, acceptance (that my phone was indeed gone, dammit).
- Day 2, Monday: comprising, coping (through another day – this one traveling – without constant connectivity).
- Day 3, Tuesday: observing, realizing (all the ways my smart phone distracts, demands attention, and eats up my precious life minutes).
- Day 4, Wednesday: embracing, flourishing (the minutes and hours freed from uninterrupted connectivity and distraction).



- Day 5, Thursday: denial, anger, depression, acceptance (that my new phone had arrived).

For a final word on this topic I defer to Prince Ea's compelling recent video: [Can we auto-correct humanity?](#)

Back to the warming weather, we took advantage of longer daytime hours this past weekend to throw a casual dinner party in a friend's garden. Spring training for the competitive season that will be in full swing by May. Creating an Aix-Mex menu from the spring vegetables in the local markets was challenging great fun, and with the aid of said friend's massive grill we offered up fajitas of slow-roasted skirt steak (onglet to my local French butcher) and melt-in-your-mouth beef tongue, peppery gambas marinated in Italian lime and cilantro, papas con chorizo with spicy Spanish sausage, and an amazing Provençal inspired pico de gallo with local tomatoes (just starting to find their flavor now), green onions, and roasted chili peppers. Homemade cornbread and a just-from-the-oven chocolate cake filled out the menu. Yee haw.



Dinner Party, Jennifer Pochinski

All in there were 27 of us – half kids – enjoying this spring fling; no phones sitting on the table or gripped instinctively in needy hands. Just great conversation and catching up after the dark days of winter. Another bottle please. Life is short, the world is beautiful. Unplug, connect.

Published initially on April 12, 2016.

The Ties that Bind

Suggested Song: [The Ties that Bind](#), Bruce Springsteen

Suggested Drink: [Domain Saint Aix rosé](#) (hey, it's almost summer!).

I'm back in the U.S. for 3 weeks. I always miss home when traveling, but I'm sharing fun times with people I love, mixing in a bit of work that I enjoy, getting my fix of Americana like smoked BBQ and sweet tea and friendly waitresses who say *darlin'*, and staying in sunny locales with good wine and lively music. No need to reach for the Kleenex just yet.

My final day before departure was a list of last-minute to-dos that mark the approach of an extended trip: the laundry and ironing and packing, and discovery that my favorite shirts weren't washed; the inventory of passports and boarding passes and U.S. bank cards that I use stateside; and a sit at the laptop to firm up flight times and *can't wait to see you soon* emails.

Still, there was time to for a dose of my daily routine, first stop the outdoor market for flowers and strawberries, and surprised to find a good friend back from winter travels and manning a fruit stall. After promises of a longer follow up over drinks I popped over to the roasterie for a rich brew with my morning coffee clutch. We spent an hour discussing nothing more pressing than the current glorious weather, last night's dinner menus, and who had the best produce at the market that day. I made a pitch for Maité's berries: unbelievable.



I was back home in time to scratch out a short note (writing letters with a quality fountain pen on heavy parchment is pure indulgence) and a meander to the post for stamps. In a moment of clarity I decided that the ripe strawberries, bought for my incoming house/cat-sitters, would pair nicely with a split of French champagne or Italian Prosecco. My guests would be arriving from California after all, so midday here would mean late night there and the combination sounded like a perfect antidote to their certain jetlag. Since my go-to wine shop was en route, I stopped for a recommendation from cave manager Carl and picked up a couple of bottles of rosé for the effort. A productive start to the day indeed.

Lunch and the afternoon followed with the requisite nap, two hours at the desk putting final touches on an upcoming Interprize workshop in Charlotte, a self-administered (and poorly executed) yoga session, and a half hour or so at the piano to wind things down. I was considering a dinner of leftover pasta when

the invite came to an impromptu garden apéro. The evening was spent chatting with friends and enjoying pan-fried veal cutlets, a spicy simmer of spring vegetables, a simple green salad tossed in truffle oil and lemon juice, and more than a few bottles of well-matched Cotes de Rhone.

My life in Provence is deeply rich, but without the wealth. It's colorful, luscious, intemperate, unhurried and simple, and it thrives on connection and community. I might splurge on a Saturday night feast for a dozen good friends, then go a week without paying for a meal. We share a passion for food and entertain from our kitchens, comparing recipes and debating our favorite market stalls and butcher shops and cheese guys. With local Provence produce so inexpensive eating well doesn't break the bank, especially with meals focused more on seasonal fruits and vegetables, fresh herbs and zesty Mediterranean spices, less on a dominant meat entree.

Our Aix circle is a varied mix of expats and natives, runaways and homecomers, bar browsers and homebodies, left-leaners and right-wingers, carnivores and vegetarians and pescetarians and flexitarians, hedonists and innocents and the malleable. Professionally we are a handful of struggling entrepreneurs and industry captains, writers and artists, engineers and admins and bartenders and merchants of mysterious unmentionables. In other words, all over the map in both income and accomplishment. Everyone is pursuing something purposeful but greater affluence is not the guiding principal; status not the binding glue. And this is the implicit thread that connects the group, I believe.



I'll be touching down in San Francisco in the next 30 minutes and I'm excited. It's a city of remarkable beauty, diversity, energy, and potential. It has also become a city of extremes and divisions, of unhealthy margins at both ends. The hyper-creative and hard-working tech tribe and the financial industry that funds them are driving an impress economic resurgence. They live from bonus check to options grant, dress their kitchens with high-end stoves and cookware, then eat out because,

well, who has the time or energy to create in the kitchen? Mingling with the masses means chatting up the tattooed bartender or speaking broken Spanish with the housecleaner, but these folks are not getting put on the dinner invite list (which is a missed opportunity. Imagine the stories). There is a very tangible caste divide between the have-a-lots and the others in this city that cuts mostly across income and wealth.

To find the strongest currents in the deepest streams you have to move beyond surface illusions. I'm not at all adverse to money, just no longer willing to compromise my lifestyle and community for it. New possibilities open up along so many dimensions – where you live, what you do, with whom you love and commune – when you stop obsessing about the bank balance and status trajectory. I could be dead in a week. Fuck that.

Published initially on May 19, 2016.

Admiral for a Day

Suggested Song: [Sunny Afternoon](#), the Kinks

Suggested Drink: [La Rose Des Ventes rosé](#), Cotes de Provence.



Your author hard at work.

It's Wednesday afternoon and hopefully someone is working. Are you? Because I'm floating around a placid lake in the south of France with a few friends, enjoying the Mediterranean sun and warm breeze and a bottle or two of Provence rosé. We forgot to bring plastic cups so have dissected small water bottles into goblet pairs. Amazing how creative one can get with a bold thirst and Swiss Army knife.

We've rented two small electric powered boats; one for the adults and one for our teen daughters. They've set out up the gorge in search of flirtatious mischief and a discreet cove to probably smoke something tucked into a bikini bottom. They would deny all of this of course.

We watch from a receding distance and putter along leisurely, recounting our own tales of youth and sharing details that only great friends care to hear. There is no rush, ... to go where? ... to power aggressively through one of the most

stunning river systems in Europe, the beautiful Gorges du Verdon at the southern base of the French Alps, with its limestone cliffs carving dramatically down into the cool turquoise-green water? The good lord was having a inspired day when she cast this spot.

It is a small boat, a lazy pace, and a best-of-friends moment. The sun is bronzing our shoulders from a pastel blue Cezanne sky. Are you working, keeping the wheels of industry turning, the flows of the economy flowing, craving that rush hour drive home in your fabulous gleaming Tesla or BMW or whatever the driven class drive these days? I truly hope so, because the world needs you. We float in our 15-foot rental and praise you, we toast you with another pour of the bottle. God bless you.

We'll gather with our girls in an hour to share a simple late lunch of smoked salmon and lettuce sandwiches in poppy seed baguettes, and local Provence cherries and strawberries from the market this morning. It's hot but we have lots of water and plentiful ice for the wine, and now the carved-up plastic cups. All is good. All is really good actually.

This makes me think about the goings on in my old stomping grounds of San Francisco. Tom Perkins died there last week. He was an originator and titan of Silicon Valley's venture capital industry and amassed a great, great fortune investing in companies like Genentech and Tandem Computers. Perkins was a man of big appetites and had commissioned the 289-foot clipper the Maltese Falcon (at that time the world's largest private sailing yacht). He must have enjoyed some amazing times on that massive beast, champagning the biggest celebrities, wooing the hottest models (just saying it's possible), traversing the oceans blue. Well perhaps not too much free time for traversing blue oceans. That high-gain, high-burn vc lifestyle doesn't tend to pair well with extended, low-stress getaways. Unlikely he'd have been caught dead on our dingy, drinking discount wine out of MacGyvered cups. We would have enjoyed having him aboard I think. What an exchange.

I think about Perkins and his accomplished life while bobbing around on this warm serene day, chilled rosé in hand. I hope he died a happy man, with that keen knack for moneymaking and great talent for toy buying: the boats and Bugatti collection and massive homes. He probably did, what do you think? Maybe he got buried in one of his Bugattis, that would be cool. Who said you can't take it with you? He did get touchy about his wealth status near the end, writing that the rich in America were being unfairly persecuted in a manner last visited on the Jews in Nazi Germany. It's a weird paradox: the more we have, the less willing we are to share it. Money is like that, cocaine is like that, rosé with good friends isn't like that.

How's that commute going?

Published initially on June 11, 2016.



First mate with an engineered goblet.

Quit Your Job, Leave Your Spouse, Move

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

Suggested Drink: [Jackhammer cocktail](#): Jack Daniels whiskey, Amaretto.

“Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.”

– Pablo Picasso

I want to destroy your life. No, actually I want you to destroy your life. I want you to quite your job, leave your spouse, and plan your move, today.

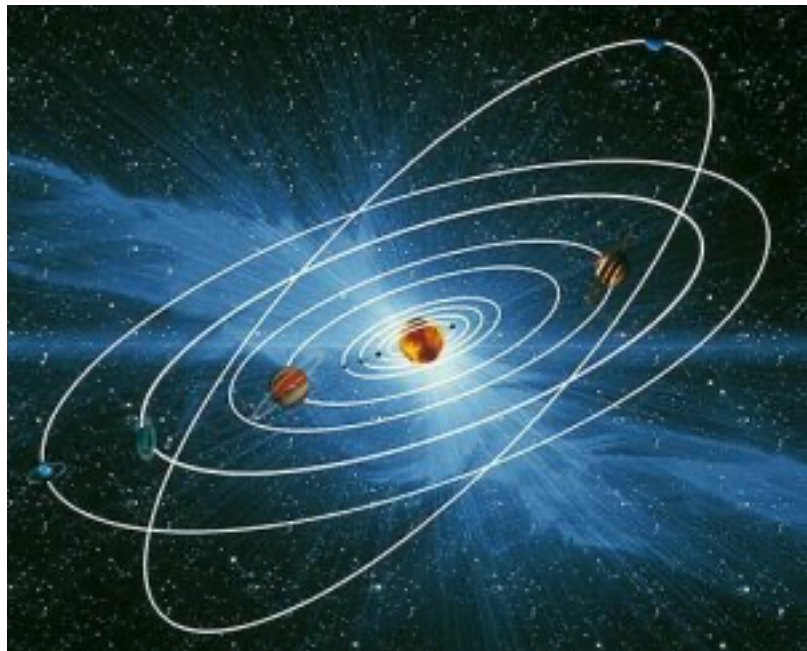
Stick with me for one reckless moment.

We tend to frame major life changes – professional, personal, geographic, and other – from the inertia of our current situation. Like planets in a universe, each of these big things has a distinct and defining rotation, but orbit around a common core called *our life*. If any one of these big things gets out of orbit our whole universe can wobble out of control. So we focus on keeping things in safe (even if less than stimulating) trajectories. Knocking them out can initiate a chain of unpredictable consequences after all. Reckless.

Considering this astro-emotional dynamic, we ponder change through an inventory of impacts to our safe and predictable cosmos. If I left this job/spouse/location how much upheaval would it create in my entire universe of orbiting things? It's a focus on the negatives and how to manage them. It's a calculation that most often encourages inaction.

Let's flip this conversation on its head. Imagine that for some reason – because Bill says so – you are *required* to leave your job, spouse, or location. Can you

defend why you want to stay, why you are ready to defy that expectation? Tell me now, because as I said above, I want to destroy your life. Now the conversation leans toward positives. What do you so love about your job, spouse, location, and other big things? Remind yourself why the compromises are worth it, make a quick list. Is there enough good stuff there to fight for?



Now here's the reckless part: stop treating this like a silly exercise. Do it, act on it. How's the list coming along?

“It takes a long time to become young.”
– Pablo Picasso

Picasso was a big fan of child-like liberation, of creating art without the constraints of convention and expectations. Life imitates art with respect to our compliance to an ever-expanding collection of rules and etiquettes as we age. We grow up. We get properly tamed.

Did you ever “run away” when really young? I remember rolling some provisions into a cloth sac tied to the end of a wooden pole, tossing it over my shoulder like Huck Finn and heading out. I was probably 7 or so, and with no hand to hold that small Pennsylvania town felt like a wide-open universe. I didn't consider my parents' reaction, didn't think about how I would buy stuff, wasn't worried about my safety. I was limitless and unbounded. Untamed.



The older we get the more we consider the consequences of our actions. A high priority is paid to risk aversion and fitting in, of not making waves. We gain a sense of responsibility at the surrender of possibilities and our autonomy. It's also the start of the blame game: jobs, partners, and locations. My job is killing me. My marriage is boring me. This town is stifling me.

I wager that the single deepest source of frustration in our lives is the loss of self-determination; believing that our personal options and identities have become compromised. We sign contracts, make vows, and take on debts (financial and emotional) that we come to regret. But all of these obligations can be cancelled with a little

steel in the backbone. Isn't being honest and authentic more important than some hell-or-high-water cling to desires and ambitions long since faded? Kids are the only obligation that demands honor: you created them, now raise them. But, even kids don't expect you to honor that *until-death-do-we-part* stuff if you're unhappy and being a fraud. Ask them, I did.

We tiptoe around life like cowards. Most all of us. We limp through our second half and ask, *why did I spend my best years with someone whom I no longer loved? Why didn't I leave that crushing, pointless job when I still had the energy and time to pursue something of real interest? Why did I waste my life in city X instead of trying my dream on island Y?*

I'll tell you exactly why: **money, security, feelings, and judgment.**

Money

A lot of us drive career aspirations off income potential. I know I did. I was a failing physics major who loved the wine industry, and UC Davis had one of the best departments in the world. There was no money in that though, so rather than changing my major to wine and oenology I moved over to economics and had a decent career in finance and business. I was a square peg in a round hole but a couple of the jobs paid well. No regrets.

Maybe I'd make the same choice again at 25 and would be dishonest to suggest otherwise. I wasn't living a passionate life, but managed to woo a great wife, buy a comfortable home, raise 3 terrible kids, and establish some savings. At 25 these are strong considerations for most of us, and that's understandable. Be a good boy now, just a small dose of lithium and off you go to work.

At 50 I become uncooperative. Step 1 was to stop making life choices based on income. You should too. Our fixation on money is the single biggest source of bad decisions we'll regret at the tail end of life; choices that pad our bank accounts and provide security to the detriment of true happiness and sense of authenticity. It's a corruptive influence that pushes us to take on certain work, stay with certain people, and live in certain places that leave us feeling drained and compromised.

Doubt me? Just google "top regrets when dying" and compare the many, many various articles. The biggest common laments:



"This is money—get ready to worry about it for the rest of your life."

- not being authentic to oneself (at the top of every list)
- not pursuing one's passions and purpose
- not taking more risks
- not finding real love and the right partner

Interesting that no one wishes they had worked longer hours and made more money, yet we make most of our big life decisions around their impacts to our finances. How odd.

Want to reclaim yourself? The single toughest but most immediate step is to vow no more decisions based on money, zero. Damn the consequences.

Security

Ever hear this: I'm not really happy with life and would change it tomorrow, but how would I survive, where would I live, what would I do? Maybe it's a friend confiding over a glass of wine, maybe it's a pesky voice in your own head.

We get comfortable in our bubbles of habit and security. Maybe life isn't a soft bed of fragrant roses, but at least it's not full of anxiety. Change and uncertainty make us anxious.

Consider for one reckless moment that it's time to be a bit untethered and noncompliant. You can choose to face the unknown as a set of risks or list of possibilities. It can be *how would I survive, where would I live, what would I do?* Or it can be *what new skills can I develop, new people can I meet, new horizons can I discover?* Most importantly, you can approach change for what it is: the chance and excuse to reinvent and rediscover.

We are packrats with our bad tendencies; I know that I am. Only a disruptive move or change dislodges them from my routine. There's no better time than midlife to question what's important, go grab it, and leave the rest behind, despite the risks. (As for the anxiety that may result from your rash and reckless disregard for security I suggest meditation, sex, and the occasional joint.)

Want to reclaim yourself? A big step #2: no more safe decisions based on security.

Feelings

We stay too long in relationships, personal and professional, out of concerns for peoples' feelings. It's honorable to consider others' happiness but serves no one to dial in a performance that is insincere, apathetic, and prolongs inevitable closure.

I've let people down at inopportune times and have been troubled by my betrayal and own egoism. I've quite rock bands and startups and corporate positions where my positions were key and the timings of

my departures were disruptive. I recently broke up with a woman who loved me deeply. Feelings get hurt, colleagues and lovers feel betrayed, and we feel horrible. But life in all its unpredictable beauty is full of uncertainties and risks. Interests and priorities can change. The greater sin is remaining in expired situations and blaming others for our unhappiness and sense of entrapment. We have to be adults about this.



Two Women, Pablo Picasso

We also have to acknowledge that our gifts are unique and there is an obligation to share them to the best of our abilities. Each of us has a Picasso-sized gift waiting to be uncovered, developed, and shared. This can require life pivots that cause real damage.

Your inception was a miracle and your genetic inheritance was unimaginably unpredictable. Consider that going back just 10 generations all of the sets of parents in your inception line managed to survive wars, famine, 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 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. There is no one on this planet with your unique profile of education, experience, and talents and you have a responsibility to offer them up. Right? Should you let the fear of hurt feelings get in the way of this obligation?

Indeed everyone deserves kindness and respect in these situations. But that respect extends to you as well. In fact, you are your first priority.

Want to reclaim yourself? A sometimes-painful step #3: no hesitations out of a fear of hurt feelings.

Judgment

No one enjoys being judged poorly. If I quit my job, leave my spouse, or move away what will my parents think, my friends think, my boss or colleagues think, my kids think? We waver over our actions and defer to the comfort of group acceptance, suitably tamed and compliant. What a terrible impulse.



Monkeys as Judges of Art, Gabriel Cornelius von Max

It is patently unfair to blame others for our own unfilled desires and ambitions. Yet we hear it constantly, particularly in the final years. The *what-could-have-beens* if I didn't have this or that commitment to meet. As mentioned above, one of the common regrets in later life is not pursuing our real passions and much of that stems from a fear of judgment. But as also mentioned above, there is only one obligation: raising our kids responsibly, and that doesn't require staying in dead-end jobs, expired marriages, or same cities. Think about the examples those decisions set for

your impressionable brood. My mom sacrificed everything for me, and I'll be a good mother and sacrifice all for my kids because I want them to be the best that they can be. But wait, based on your example they will feel obliged to sacrifice for their kids, who sacrifice it all for their own, and on and on. Who the hell gets to benefit from this solarium system of martyrdom?

If your actions are self-serving you will surely be judged, but who better to serve than yourself at the most fundamental core? If you live through the lens of others' expectations, how will you align with the most authentic sense of yourself and be truly understood and appreciated? Who knows and appreciates that identity better than you?

Want to reclaim yourself? A courageous step #4: no hesitations from the fear of judgments (which are surely to come).

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

– Dylan Thomas

Taking a jackhammer to your secure life foundation sounds horrifying, but here’s the good news. If your list in defense of inaction is long and convincing, the hammer can be safely tucked away (for now). If not, there’s no better time for disruption than midlife. Your maturity, self-awareness, skill set, and helpful connections have never been stronger. You probably have some financial buffer to see you through a gap, at least more now than at 25. And it’s been shown that we start to lose this constant anxiety over money at midlife and focus more on happiness and self-realization.

Grow old gracefully, compliantly? To hell with that.

Published initially on June 11, 2016.

Only Love Can Break Your Heart

Suggested song: [Falling In Love](#), Elvis Presley

Suggested drink: [Broken Heart cocktail](#): vodka, lemon juice, champagne, red vermouth.

A secret to happiness in our later years is through acts of creation; showing yourself and the world that you can still produce something amazing. Giants in the field of positive psychology like [Seligman](#) and [Csikszentmihalyi](#) have written about this extensively. Wind down and kick back and you'll ossify right into a fossil of your former impressive self.

We are at our most creative when emotions are hot and high. I write my best music when provoked by something beautiful or terrible, something blissful or sad. I prefer inspirations of the beautiful and blissful varieties, but life doesn't always let us choose.



Heart and Sea, Justin R. Christenbery

Painful experiences are also emotionally charging and nothing hurts more than a broken heart. The ache can collapse you in tears of distress and desperation. You want to wake up from this very bad dream, but it's not a dream. Want to hear that they were only kidding, but they weren't kidding. Your mind spins with memories of tender moments. And the plans you had dared imagine together singe black and curl like pages of a book thrown to the flame, the ash slowly drifting away.

They call it heartache because it truly aches in your heart. There is a physical pain in the center of your chest that feels like an iron grip around that precious organ, the same organ that fluttered and thumped when you used to think about her or him, the one that walked away.

All you can do when brokenhearted is treasure the times you shared and be grateful for having loved so richly. The more precious the memories and splendid the plans, the deeper the cut. If it feels fatal then you know it was good. It's hard, but that's the risk you take when opening your heart for the deep, deep dive.

I'm running on a very raw set of emotions as I write this piece tonight. I can't curl up in a ball on the bed because my mind will flood with beautiful, painful memories. I can't drink myself to sleep because I'll wake up feeling even worse about things tomorrow. But I can be creative. I can grab my guitar or sit at the piano and turn this dark emotional burst into something beautiful, like a soulfully sad song. The cause for my pain was an experience so very, very beautiful. Why should its legacy be anything less?

Life is short. You can play it safe and just paddle around in the wading pool, or you can venture to the deep end. You can be reckless and foolish and if you're lucky taste the most beautiful, heartbreaking thing life has to offer: to be in love. Now where's my guitar?

Published initially on September 24, 2016.

Of Gifts and Giving Back

Suggested song: [You Get What You Give](#), The New Radicals

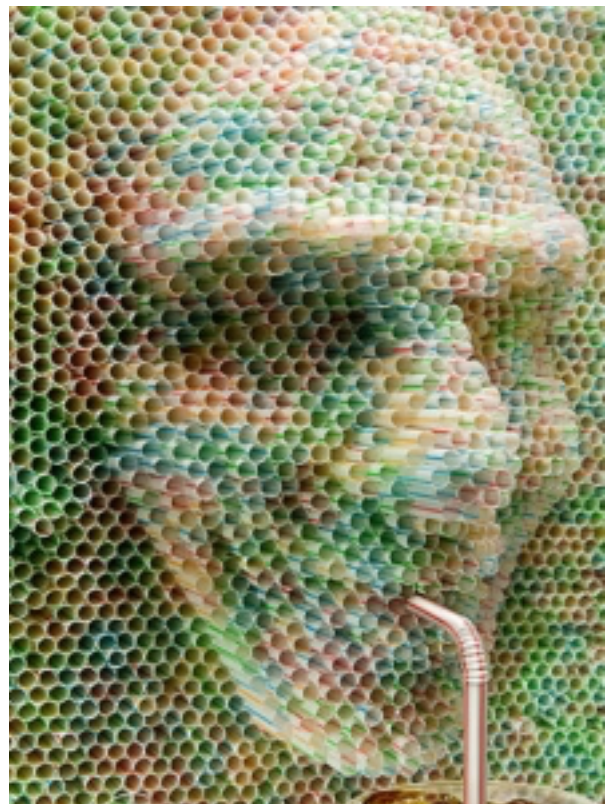
Suggested drink: Champagne (your favorite, it's the holidays!).

What is your big gift for the holidays? No, I don't mean what are you getting, I mean what are you offering? We each have a special gift and an obligation to share it with the world. I believe this, do you?

The self-improvement aisle is lined with books on finding purpose in life. The authors treat its fulfillment as a key to happiness and benefit to you, the seeker. But isn't it more importantly your obligation? If you're like me you've sucked a hell of a lot more out of this world than you've put back: a half-life of durable and consumable stuff, art and music, food and wine, the love and generosity of others, ...everything that nourished your life and gave it definition. Now is the time to reverse the net flow.

It's an ugly, uncertain time we live in today where ignorance is celebrated and consumerism is king. Bigger, faster, harder, wrapped in a tidy bow of obliviousness. These hallmarks of the moment will end soon enough, one through the will of the many, and one by the hammer of nature. But it won't be pretty.

More than ever we need enlightenment and beauty to counter the tide, ... and this is where your obligation begins. You have an amazing, inimitable gift to offer the world. It's unique, a result of your one-of-a-kind DNA predisposition plus singular history of upbringing, education, experience, and personal community of friends, family, and colleagues. No one else has the exact same set of resources, skills, and interests. Align that with an ambition of deep personal meaning and you are better prepared and motivated than anyone else on this planet to do at least one incredible thing, to offer at least one amazing gift.



Sunsets are for Sissies

I wrote an essay with that title in 2015 (to read [click here](#)) in which I argued we are better prepared at 60 to pursue something truly significant and life defining than at 25. We have more time, more experience, more money, and a lot more maturity, as summed up in the following table.

Our typical profile...	@ 25	@ 60
<i>Venturing money</i>	None to a little	Some to a lot
<i>Venturing time</i>	Weekends maybe	All week 24/7
<i>Education & training</i>	Some, limited	A lot, and varied
<i>Work experience</i>	None to a little	A lot, and varied
<i>Acquired wisdom</i>	Shallow	Deep
<i>Emotional maturity</i>	Just forming	Developed
<i>Child rearing priorities</i>	Just starting	Just ending
<i>Helpful connections</i>	Narrow and limited	Broad and effective
<i>Primary motivations</i>	Interests and income	Passions and legacy

If you are at midlife and considering retirement and *what next?*, then now is not the time to downshift into a recliner by the sea, comparing daily golf scores and evening sunsets. You're better prepared than ever to leave your mark on this world, and that's not just a pleasant dream to imagine over icy margaritas, that's your gift and obligation. *Allez!*

Published initially on December 27, 2016.

RESPECT

Suggested song: [Respect](#), Aretha Franklin (written by Otis Reading)

Suggested drink: [Shot of Respect](#) cocktail: tequila, rum, tabasco.

I love that my partner believes in past lives and future premonitions. She buys gemstones of various colors and shapes – agate and garnet and bloodstone – some for protection, some for energy, others for healing. The spiritual resonance of vintage jewelry and clothing can overwhelm her emotional antennae; the histories of ownership, the echoes of lives and loves. Phases of the moon and astral alignments can swing her moods and appetites. This embrace of mysticism is just a small part of her beautiful complexity, and often leaves me both baffled and enlightened.

I studied physics and worked in finance. I'm the son of a no-nonsense country doctor and was taught to believe in logic and the observable, in the need for empirical evidence, the credibility of proofs and statistical significance, and to call bullshit on bullshit. Grounded, predictable.

Do I share my partner's faith in a world beyond our world? Does that matter? No, it doesn't matter. What matters is respect.



I respect beliefs of all stripe and persuasion and allow that someone, most anyone actually, may have a better handle on the bewildering mysteries of life than me. I accept that emotional states like heartbreak and love may inexplicably induce or remedy our physical ailments, and wonder openly if universes parallel to our own might be humming along at this very moment, shifted in time and frequency. With the greatest admiration for the principals of solid science and Neil Degrasse Tyson, I respect that not all cause and effect can be proven through scientific method (although that's a great starting point).

Respect for the beliefs and priorities of others is not a virtue promoted widely across the globe these days, particularly by our political leadership. There has been a decidedly *my-way-or-the-highway* approach to governing and diplomacy since George W. declared in 2001, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

This type of narrow, self-centered bluster, which proved highly effective at rousing patriotic fervor (and voter support), has been co-opted by every aspiring strongman worth his or her spittle: Putin, Jong un, Trump, and Le Pen are just four headliners making the most racket at the moment. National mandates are paramount, compromise shows weakness, and those with opposing views are twittered as morons, frauds, and liars. Respect for opposing opinions? That's for losers.

Now here I sit, a loser with his pint of beer at Le Grand Café in downtown Fontainebleau, a beautiful French city (aren't they all?) just an hour southeast of Paris. Macron's win last week is the topic on everyone's tongue. I'm guessing he was widely supported in this upper class enclave, home to the regal Fontainebleau Chateau where Henry IV (the very coolest of French kings), Napoleon, and various Louis entertained in the gardens, hunted in the forest, and generally carried on with the local beauties.



The election outcome reflects to me a story of 2 conflicting global movements, the first based on hope despite the very real risks, the second based on fear in light of the many challenges. France has emerged as the best example of #1, showing again that it cuts its own stubborn path. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*: these are uneasy times to honor such honorable principles. The US is the best case study for #2. *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore*. This is another tough invitation to honor for a nation terrified by the bad hombres under the bed.

It surprises me. The *The Home of the Brave* has been so quick to surrender its principals and self-respect to the threat of terror, despite having almost no instances of domestic terror in the past 15 years. Respect for the hopes and dreams of others, ... the American DREAMers for example? *Désolé*. Look at the man they've elected. Meanwhile their *Surrender Monkey* counterparts have hung tough and shown real bravery, despite suffering the highest incidence of *Allah Akbar*-screaming lunatics spraying their cafés and clubs with deadly fire. You think life is dangerous in Paris, think of the genocide in Aleppo. Come, come. Look at the man they've elected.

It surprises me. At this moment of global upheaval both countries have placed their bets on mavericks with no political experience. The similarities end there. One married a schoolteacher 25 years his wise senior; the other a model 24 years his long-legged junior. (I give her big points for avoiding the White

House these days, however. She's growing on me.) On election eve one spoke of hope, humility, and the imperative of a proud country to coalesce around ambitions for a brighter future and respect for all cultures, creeds, and religions. The other spoke in dark tones of enemies at the gate, a country in crisis, and himself as the single sole savior able to counter the nation's impending doom. Who deserves your respect?

Published initially on May 16, 2017.

A Year of Goodbyes

Suggested Song: [Hello, Goodbye](#), the Beatles

Suggested Drink: [Memory Lane cocktail](#): rye whisky, shrub, bitters, lemon juice.

Goodbyes can be hard and I've had an avalanche of them this year. Friends, kids, and lovers moving on, cherished apartments given up, and even my daily out-door market moved from the bottom of the street to across town. Now that really hurt. Adios.

This kind of churn wreaks havoc on the daily agenda. Whom I see when, where, and what it is we do together has been upended, and being a creature of habit I am off my game. The creative well is dusty, productivity down, and motivation flagging. My summer rosé pace remains robust and thank god for that. At least I can point to something that's trending up.



It all started near year-end with that darn Sottak family. After holding court as provocateurs and organizers of all things social and immensely fun amongst our circle for the past 7 years, they decided to call it a French day and skedaddle back to the US. They were the glue and warm glow that pulled us all together for spontaneous apéros and long family dinners, group holidays to hither and tither, fun and frolic and generally irresponsible licentiousness. That they could not be replaced made their move even more unforgiveable.

Then over the Noel holidays my landlord sent a cryptic email that a dinner in January was welcome, ... and needed. He needed to sell the apartment that was my welcome mat to Aix-en-Provence in 2010, a small but noble 17th century flat in the heart of this sun-touched, provincial city. So many memories between those walls: my 3 kids and their friends joyfully spread out amongst the cots and daybed and pullout; the communal meals and singing and supporting and debating and always one more bottle;

mon amour at my breakfast table, her perfume lingering for hours after departure. Another difficult goodbye.

More recently good friends of mine in Aix have decided to get divorced. They are managing it with all the love and respect that a beautiful 13-year marriage deserves, but it leaves me sad and deflated. My reaction is purely selfish of course, as they both seem fine and taking on the change with a positive, forward-facing attitude. I see a farewell to the many delicious memories we've shared these past 7 years, two of my closest friends imagined as forever a unit and couple.

I will continue to see them separately of course, but between their news and my own recent breakup, and my daughter packing up last week after a final long summer with Dad (growing up and college bound next year), and the Sottak departure, and the apartment move, ... 2017 is becoming one long goodbye to an intimately warm and beautiful era.

Coping

Goodbye and *Hello* are funny words. One starts with a positive syllable but is often a distressing experience, while the other begins with a foreboding term but is typically hopeful and uplifting. Weird. Hello to new people in our lives, hello to new places.



The best we can do with empty space is to enjoy its serenity. Our daily lives are filled with turbulence, and a momentary calm can be soothing and restorative. An empty home is a clean slate, and an empty heart, once healed, open for new and beautiful souls to discover.

I'm keeping my hellos to a minimum through this transition, leaning toward the zen hermit mode and a few faithful friends. Stay busy and switch up the hours regularly. Avoid the routines that

tug out warm memories. Run at dawn, write into the night, then write at dawn and run late. Travel on impulse, an evening in Italy or weekend in Paris. Keep the overnight bag at the ready. Staying off balance seems to offset the imbalance of these various goodbyes. I can't explain why, but it's working.

I'm hoping that all of your goodbyes are as warm and tender as mine. That doesn't lessen the sting, but eases the recovery.

Enjoy the rest of the summer. It will be saying goodbye all too soon.

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The period of this Volume 2 of essays (2013-2017) was colored beautifully by new friends with whom I shared many rosé-colored afternoons and weekends. Through these years we enjoyed a most richly-decadent *moveable feast*. Many friends have since returned to homes in the US, Australia, the UK, and Europe, but remain forever family to me now. Thank you for persistently guiding me astray.

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 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.