

A Great Year-End Self-Evaluation for Overachievers

Overachievers are hideously bad at celebrating their successes. A minute after they've crossed some proverbial finish line, they're already parsing what they did wrong. Why it wasn't that great. Why it's not good enough. Why *they* are not good enough. Here's a four-minute exercise to help change that.

Keep Your Connection to the Reservoir of Enthusiasm

Everyone has access to humanity's vast reservoir of enthusiasm for living. You can see it in babies: they'll pick up a block and put it down in front of them. Then they'll take another block and, with a massive intensity of concentration, place it on top of the first one! They did it! Their eyes light up, their arms and their bodies bounce in celebration. *"I did that!"*

And each time a child has that jubilant dance after an achievement, they get a flood of new enthusiasm—new delight and energy to keep doing, to keep achieving...because it makes them happy.

Most of us lose that spontaneity to celebrate our successes. Critical attitude grows louder with each challenge—whether we overcome it or not. And we give far more credence to criticism than success. But with each success we squelch too soon, we choke off our access to that unlimited reservoir of enthusiasm we all had as little children. Eventually, we're running on fumes, resenting too much, too often...and finding little satisfaction or contentment with our lives. Let's fix that!

Hallelujah! I Did That!

Here's a simple exercise that takes less than four minutes. The music for this is (you guessed it):

Handel, Messiah, "Hallelujah", Sir Thomas Beecham, conductor (approx. 3:30), Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Chorus, Sir Eugene Goossens, orchestrator, 1959 recording
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAcc5aTScpU>

There's a reason I'm being pointedly specific about which performance to use for this exercise. Most others are too slow, too polite, too soggy. They don't have that sense of muscular, robust triumph that the Commander inside you needs to express when celebrating a victory.

And forget any religious connotations! That's not relevant to this exercise. In any event, it's not the empires or the religions that matter, it's the art and music they leave behind. I remember going to Christmas Eve mass at Notre Dame in Paris back in 1973 with a college friend. Just inside the doors, my friend halted, stupefied by his first sight of the soaring gothic interior, and said, "Now I know why they were all Catholic back then!"

I use this music as a celebration of you and all your accomplishments. Whenever you hear "Hallelujah," think "Yes! I did that!"

This exercise makes your blood happy! Your muscles and bones, your breathing, your nervous system and the “blood of your Life-Being” all store the happiness you generate from doing this exercise.

- **Exercise:** Sit, eyes closed, imagine a refectory-type table in front of you – either stone or wood – and place on that table some symbolic something for each of the different achievements in your life.
- As the music plays, see what appears to your mind, and place a symbol of those events and successes on the table.
- Each time you hear *Hallelujah!* (and you’ll hear it a lot!) think, “I did that!”
- Go back farther than you can remember! Congratulate yourself for the achievements you long ago forgot are important, incredible successes. You learned to walk, to ride a bike, speak a second language, play an instrument, do flip turns in a pool.
- Remember all the terrific (and sometimes tough) milestones that shaped your life: making it through high school, leaving home! Getting your higher degrees, getting your first job, starting a family, learning to be a parent, etc.
- Especially notice what appears to your mind that you “automatically” dismiss. Observe the things you put on the table that seem to disappear.
- See the milestones from all the times of your life and honor them, because they all coalesced to create you.
- *Here’s a tip:* If you shrink from conjuring your successes, if you feel awkward or embarrassed to do this exercise, check where the music seems to be in relation to you. If it’s above you, it may be pushing you down. If it’s in you, you may get all puffed up with self-importance...but no substance. If it’s in front of you, it may seem overpowering and make you feel small and silly. Try feeling that the music is coming from somewhere behind you—imagine the sun and a buoyant breeze are behind you, pouring through you, and enlivening both you and the delights on your table. (These suggestions aren’t necessarily right for you, but experiment and find what does work for you.)

Like the painting below, try to have your table **gushing with the bounty of your efforts.**



“Still Life with Fruit and Vegetables,” Frans Snyders, Flemish, 17th century, Norton Simon collection

When I first saw this painting in the Norton Simon Museum, I was shocked! Not because of the composition's theme: there are countless still life paintings in every major art museum and few of them rank at the "timeless top" of art history treasures.

But this one is immense! More than six feet high and over nine feet wide. And it's not miles away from the viewer like the Delacroix paintings in the Louvre. No, this mammoth canvas is "in your face," shouting with the vegetative bounty that threatens to burst out from its frame and engulf the entire room. And in that arresting moment of first view, I just laughed with surprised delight.¹

Why Do This Exercise?

The biggest problem that you can have in life is to under-accept yourself. It's also the biggest limitation to your happiness. This exercise shows us how we relate to our past achievements—and by inference, our future ones. It can offer clues as to how we rank our achievements in importance, and also indicates whether or not we can draw happiness from our achievements.

This is an exercise to celebrate and evaluate far more than just this past year. This exercise helps keep your Being "together" and nurtured by what you do with your life.

People can't sum up their lives, their achievements, their successes. They cannot remember the happiness, the joy, of first learning to walk or talk, they can't even remember the triumph of first learning how to tie their shoelaces. The struggles and frictions we overcome, the persistence and dedication to learning a skill or an art, the choosing to make efforts to the best of our abilities—all these are lost in a fog of vague forgetfulness. But they are the milestones of our life's journey of meaning.

¹ By the way, if you're in Los Angeles, make a point of visiting the Norton Simon Museum. It has a spectacular collection—superb Impressionist paintings, one of the best Rembrandt self-portraits, and a Southeast Asian collection that's on a par with the Met, the National Gallery and the Musée Guimet.