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THE TOWER

Before a long flight to Europe, I downloaded a game to play after the plane was on its way across the Atlantic and the meal service cart had passed me by. The object of the game was to build and maintain a tower filled with people and businesses. My mission was to stock this tower with floors of my choosing — apartments, shops, banks,

restaurants. Residents would move into my tower as floors were installed, and I would assign them jobs from my omniscient view of their activities.

As the supreme overlord of this operation, I was in charge. The well-being of my residents, as well as their future opportunities,

was all up to me. Happiness, wealth, and productivity were all in my hands.

The plane flew past Iceland, into the early light of the Irish sea, and I quickly became addicted to the monotony of stocking my stores and keeping my residents happy. The first hour was fun, but the second was compelling: I simply *had* to fulfill my responsibilities. People were counting on me, and I couldn't let them down.

The ingenious design of the game allowed it to continuously operate even when I turned it off in an attempt to sleep for a fitful hour. Returning to it before landing in Frankfurt, I found I had earned rent from the residents and income from the shops—thus creating new capital for expansion—but also finding that my retail establishments were in desperate need of restocking.

For the next week I oriented myself to a nine-hour time zone change and traveled on to Southern Africa, my eventual destination. While on the road, I continued to devote much of my attention to the game, making sure to stock my stores and begin construction on a new floor right before going to sleep and first thing in the morning. If I woke up in the middle of the night due to jet lag, I could get in another round of stocking before the morning light. *Bonus!*

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Within a week of frequent play—or *working on my tower* as I preferred to think of it—I had completed nearly thirty floors. I had a sushi shop, a frozen yogurt stand, a nightclub, and so much more. Dozens of citizens milled about, keeping the shops running as long as I kept them stocked. We were a perfect team.

Alas, the more time I spent on my virtual construction project, the more I grew weary of both the game itself and the effect it had on me. In what seemed to be a flaw in an otherwise excellent design, the game's makers had failed to introduce any real changes as players progressed to towers of staggering heights. It was all the same pattern, over and over: stock stores, build floors, and wait.

There was also no way to ultimately win or lose the game. Residents expressed their feelings of relative happiness or sadness, but as their omniscient overlord, I wasn't punished for neglecting them if I slept through the night or went sightseeing during the day. As far as I could tell, the game would continue to go on forever, with no arc, climax, or ending.

I began to worry about spending so much time in an imaginary tower, with 16-bit avatars instead of actual people. It was a fun diversion for a flight, but not for a week. I craved life away from the game and in my real surroundings as I traveled.

I tried to forget the game, but it continued to call to me whenever I found myself on a bus or in a coffee shop. I finally uninstalled it entirely, saying farewell to all my data—those thirty floors, the sandwich shop, the disco. I said a quick apology to my imaginary residents, and wished for a more attentive overlord to care for them in the future. I was no longer willing to oversee a virtual empire.



My travels in Southern Africa began in Johannesburg and continued on to Madagascar and Comoros, two small island countries in the Indian Ocean. Refocusing on the journey, I thought about why I had liked the game so much. I realized that several characteristics converged to make it an irresistible lure. Without the precise combination of these characteristics, it would have been far less compelling.

In building the tower, I had a **clear goal**: keep the stores stocked and the floors going higher. In the end, the goal was not sufficient; I needed something more substantial to hold my attention. But for a considerable amount of time, I was duly occupied with the series of repetitive tasks: stock stores, accrue money, build new floors, repeat. I was working on a project that was uniquely mine.

Presumably, other players could also undergo a similar quest in their own save file, but that wasn't my concern—in the tower I was building, the goal and the responsibility were all my own.

Along with the goal, the ability to make **continuous improvement over time** kept bringing me back. I would go away for an hour and return to see that progress had been made. As I built my tower, more residents scurried about, dutifully working in the sushi restaurant and the cinema. I could see progress, and visual progress was a powerful drug.

As I toiled away, I received **rewards and achievements** in recognition of my efforts. After a dozen floors had gone up, the tower was humming along nicely, producing a flood of rents and shop payments. More money allowed me to build still more floors. More visitors arrived at the tower to participate in the world I had created. Working away as the invisible hand, I took delight in surveying my domain.

It also helped that my “work” involved **specific deliverables**. I knew exactly what to produce, how to earn money for new construction, and how to build new floors. I took satisfaction in reaching another level, or placing my residents in jobs that they particularly enjoyed. Every time I completed a task, I felt a small surge of pride.

Perhaps most importantly, I had **influence** over the world contained within my tower. Even though the other actors in the game

were clearly not real, I experienced a sense of interaction with them. I did my part and they did theirs; we were all working together in pursuit of a common cause. My residents depended on me—without my efforts, no shops would be stocked. Without my intervention, the tower would remain a meager three-story walk-up. Instead, we climbed to the skies, my residents and I. It was fun while it lasted... or was it?



The discontent I felt after playing the game wasn't only that it failed to deliver pleasure over time; I also came to see it as a threat. It sucked away my time and made me an addict. If I didn't play the game in the morning, I felt as bad as if I had skipped my cup of coffee. Yet despite my devotion, the game treated me poorly, always taking my time and never giving anything besides more responsibilities.

The trap of the game was that the player performs all of the repetitive tasks for no good reason. The player must agree to operate under unbending rules laid out by unseen architects, and remains out of control of any real decisions. With the only role to stock stores and keep the operation running, the player is essentially a slave in a world that refuses to change. No one is truly helped through the player's efforts, and no one else appreciates the tower. It quickly becomes a circular process.

THE FEELINGS WE RECEIVE FROM A WELL-DESIGNED GAME CLOSELY REPLICATE THE FEELINGS THAT WE WANT TO HAVE IN LIFE.

We must work on our lives the way we would work on any other project. Instead of knowledge, pleasure, or happiness, the purpose of life is to create something meaningful that will endure after we're gone.

As I wandered the streets of Antananarivo during my days in Madagascar, I began to see that the feelings we receive from a well-designed game closely replicate the feelings that we want to have in life. In constructing a series of repetitive tasks that led to rewards and achievement, the game's designers understood the connection between work and pleasure. Contrary to popular thought, work isn't something to be avoided; it is something to be pursued. As long as we are able to have some say over the kind of work we do, it should relate as specifically as possible to the satisfaction that is produced upon completing a challenging task.

Riding along in the back of a taxi to another airport, I realized the possibility: what if the laws of a simple game could be applied in real life? What if we could create the same kind of motivation that drew me to open that game over and over—but instead of applying it to building imaginary banks, we learned to harness it for something useful?

For most of human history, scholars and teachers have speculated about the meaning of life. Some answers point to the belief that we must obtain the highest knowledge we can. Others point to the lack of something (suffering, negative emotions, envy) as the end goal. In different ways, many answers point to the pursuit of happiness in various forms. But how does one obtain happiness? Is it strictly through pleasure and self-fulfillment?

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A long time ago I was considering various titles and subtitles for my first book. One of the many I looked at with my publishing team was "A Life That Matters," as in *here's what you do to live a life that matters*.

Something bothered me about this title, and it wasn't just that a lot of other writers had used similar phrasing. I finally realized what the problem was—because life is precious for its own sake, every life matters, even if that life is somehow wasted or unfulfilled. We believe that a young child's life matters even though she isn't able to work or otherwise contribute anything productive to the world. Most of us also believe that the life of a hardened criminal still matters, despite the poor choices they may have made that caused harm to others.

It's clear, however, that there is often a gap in our lives between what could have been and what actually is. Because of choices or circumstance, some people are limited to a life less than they hoped for, or less than they were capable of. Every life matters, therefore, but not every life's potential is fulfilled. Therein lies the problem with a phrase like "a life that matters," and also the opportunity: because your life matters so much, how will you put it to good use?

In addition to the other answers about the meaning of life—to acquire knowledge, to live free of suffering, to pursue happiness—another answer is to think about influence and impact. After our basic needs are met, we have an innate desire to build and create. Constructing a life oriented around creative development is an opportunity to fulfill that desire, while also providing something of value for others to appreciate. A structure created in a video game might be a fun diversion for a while, but in life, the people

you influence will benefit from the time and attention you spend on building something real.

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When Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo for the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo initially declined. He was busy with another project, and besides, he was a sculptor, not a painter. Five-hundred years later, this profound work of art remains for two reasons: one, the insistence of the authorities that Michelangelo take on the project, and two, the insistence of Michelangelo that he do it his own way.

The initial vision for the Sistine Chapel was much different from what we know today as one of the most enduring examples of modern art. At first, there wasn't even a scaffolding in place to paint the iconic ceiling; numerous versions were

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considered before Michelangelo finally just built his own. The Biblical scenes of God's hand touching Adam, the story of Moses, the Last Supper—all of these were Michelangelo's ideas, not part of the original commission.

The Sistine Chapel, initially viewed with skepticism by Michelangelo, became his crowning achievement. It was a *legacy project*—something he worked on over an extended period of time, painting and repainting day after day, enduring discomfort and perhaps at times even boredom, all to make something that would ultimately outlast his limited time on earth. It is the greatest tangible proof that he lived in our world and made an impact on all those around him. It was documented and accessible—left standing in the Vatican for all to see.

You and I may lack the artistic talent of Michelangelo, but we face no less of a challenge in our own lives. The challenge is to craft a legacy project of our own, building something that changes the world for the better and endures for all to see. A legacy project

takes many forms, but is built on the same characteristics that draw us to play repetitive games. We just need to harness the desire to create and apply it to something useful.

Like Michelangelo, you have been entrusted with a mission that no one else can fulfill. Your mission is to build a tower, in the form of a legacy project. The world insists that you build this tower, and you must insist on doing it your own way.

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If you accept your mission, the first task is to carefully consider what you want to spend the rest of your life constructing. As with the tower in the game, you'll need a **clear goal**—something that you work toward over time. Of all the things you could choose to accomplish, what is most important? Your goal should be something deeply personal to you. (If other people close to you don't understand it or think it's odd that you would spend so much time on it, this is normal. It's *your* goal.)

You'll need **rewards and achievements** along the way, because even though the purpose of your work is not external recognition, the rewards will help you keep going. Building a tower can be a lonely and difficult process. Setting up rewards along the way can

serve as a good motivator, and a sense of achievement shouldn't wait until the end of your journey.

Building a tower or crafting a legacy project is not a lazy man's pursuit, so you'll need **specific deliverables** to know that you're doing the required work every day. Any goal worthy of forming a life around will likely involve a determined focus. To keep the focus, it helps to turn the goal into a series of manageable actions as you go along, with stepping stones of accomplishment you can enjoy along the way. (We'll look more at turning the goal into a series of smaller actions in a moment.)

Mostly, you'll need to exercise **influence** with the people who are affected by your legacy project. Influence is not the same as *control*, and sometimes it's not even *direction*—you may not be telling anyone what to say, think, or do. Instead, genuine influence is often more subtle. When you craft a legacy project over time, you'll find yourself surrounded by onlookers and participants. As you build relationships with them, your work will inspire people to pursue big adventures of their own.

If you don't know what to do at any given stage, start by creating something and giving something. Every day, wake up and think about these two things:

- *What am I making today?*
- *Whom am I helping today?*

Make something, help someone, and repeat. Your goal is to look back at the end of the day and identify something you've created and someone you've helped. Then, plan to do the same the next day, except try to take it further.



One of the projects I've been working on for more than five years is a quest to visit every country in the world. For a long time, it was strictly a personal adventure—I loved travel, and wasn't concerned if other people understood why I would wander around the world to various countries.

But then I started writing about the quest, and all of a sudden I had a whole new audience to consider. Some people loved the idea and derived inspiration for their own projects from it. Others felt threatened by it, a feeling that took me a while to understand. (The answer is complicated, but it relates to people projecting their own disappointment and regret onto others.)

Early on, someone said something that was intended as a criticism. This person said, "I don't see what the big deal is. To visit every country in the world, all you need is enough time and money. It's not that significant."

Every writer takes criticism personally (don't believe any writer who says otherwise), so at first I was hurt by the comment and tried to put it out of my mind. But then as I thought about it later, I realized that even though it was intended as a criticism, I could also find value in it.

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Hmmm... enough time and enough money. If I discarded the critical aspect of the comment and thought only about the analytical concept, deconstructing a big goal and evaluating it in terms of measurable resources could be helpful.

This was nearly four years and sixty countries ago. Since then, I've moved forward on the quest in a repetitive pattern. I apply for visas at various embassies—how much time will it take to hear back? Do I need to receive any specific permissions or plan contingencies? Next, how can I arrange my airfare or ground transportation? I look for opportunities to maximize: while I'm in country *x*, is there any other country I can hop over to? How can I save money on this trip in order to pay for the next?

As I encounter obstacles, I deal with them in a similar way of thinking. "Oh, Angola is denying my visa application after I already have a plane ticket? I guess I'll hop on the plane anyway, and find another way in."

Along the way, lots of things have gone wrong, and I've had my share of struggles—but by applying the thought process of "What's next? How can we solve this problem?" I've made it to more than 150 countries, and I'm now down to the final 34 at the time of this writing. Thinking about a goal in terms of its base components, then splitting the components into identifiable tasks, greatly helps. In stacking the pieces together and working on them over time, the goal becomes much more manageable.

You might think that traveling the world would be a constant thrill. It's certainly *enjoyable*—I like visiting new places, meeting

people along the way, and finding myself challenged in unfamiliar situations. In a weeklong trek that was especially fun, I recently spent time exploring a gorilla reserve in Rwanda and the Congo. But the full story on enjoyment and thrill is more complicated. To get to the gorillas, I had to travel three continents. The trip and its return home required more than forty hours sitting on an airplane, and countless additional hours sitting around for something to happen. Most of all, I had to wait.

When people ask me how to be a traveler, I don't tell them what kind of suitcase they should buy. I don't ask them which vaccinations they have or advise them on learning languages, although these things are certainly helpful. Instead, I tell them to get comfortable with waiting around for long periods of time on a regular basis. Putting up with boredom and monotony, even making peace with it and learning to see it as something that has value for its own sake, is a key skill for the frequent traveler.

I had plenty of time to think about monotony when I was in the Maldives, waiting for a flight to Singapore that was repeatedly delayed. The delay was first announced as two hours, but that grew into four, seven, and finally a full eight hours before we left in the 4:00 a.m., pre-dawn darkness. (A traveler's rule: there is no such thing as an eight-hour delay. It will always be a series of delays in succession, forever raising your hopes of departure before dashing them for another hour.)

The Maldives is a beautiful country, but like many a tropical paradise, the airport is not the best place to be stranded for an

unexpected eight hours. As I sat through the night and attempted to sleep for twenty minutes at a time on hard plastic chairs before giving up, I thought about the irony: *I'm in paradise! But here I wait.* Stuck in no-man's-land after clearing immigration, the waiting simply had to become tolerable, because there was no alternative. I had to embrace the stillness or grow increasingly frustrated in my inability to change the situation.



I derive joy and satisfaction from my travel quest, but I think of it more as a worthy adventure than a legacy project on its own. Most of my personal trips don't benefit anyone else, at least not directly. But by applying the same concept of tower-building and country-counting, I learned to harness my ongoing desire to explore and create something that was genuinely useful.

As a writer, I have specific deliverables. Every week I must publish a certain number of blog posts. I must produce book manuscripts and other commitments on time. To facilitate this process, I developed a standard I've adhered to religiously. Almost every day, no matter what else is happening, I'll find a way to write at least 1,000 words. The 1,000 words won't all be good or even useable, but I know I'll fulfill my commitments if I maintain this standard over time. It's a habit that keeps me focused on constructing something much like a tower that grows taller as work is completed .

Writing is just one means of creative output. Thomas Hawk, a photographer, has a busy day job and supports a family in San Francisco. But he's also on a mission to shoot and process one

You can still enjoy the journey if you have a destination in mind.

million photos. This is no small project—it takes virtually all of his free time. Thomas is a photography machine. I follow him on two social networks and can hardly keep up with *looking* at his photos, so I can't imagine how much time and effort it takes to actually create them. He works on this goal every single day of the year, early in the morning and late at night. Much of the weekends are spent traveling to other cities for day-long photo walks and marathon editing sessions.

People sometimes ask, "What's the deal with one million photos—isn't that an arbitrary number?" Perhaps, in the same way that visiting 193 countries serves as a framework for my restless adventures. But the number is a goal that helps to center the daily practice of shooting and processing photos. You can still enjoy the journey if you have a destination in mind.

Todd Henry has been producing a podcast on creativity since 2006. That same year, I discovered it while living in West Africa. I used to listen to Todd and his guests while running on the beach in Ghana. He's dutifully kept it up all this time, hosting more than two-hundred episodes and writing a book. After working on the project during evenings and weekends for five years, Todd recently quit his job to pursue *Accidental Creative* full-time.

People like Thomas and Todd are creating an archive of work, something that is interesting, beautiful, and useful to those who appreciate it. Over time, more people discover the archive and begin paying careful attention to what they produce next. Some are inspired to start their own projects, combining something they've learned with something they have to offer of their own. Like the tower game, it's a continuous loop—except instead of an imaginary world, this world is real.



As your tower goes up, you'll need to step back and take a close look at its structure. Inevitably, cracks will have formed. Some parts of your tower will hum along nicely, without your regular attention. Other parts require attention, but only once in a while. Still other parts, however, will be in constant danger without your time, energy, and focus.

An old theory on crime argues that a broken window left unrepaired is an ominous sign for a neighborhood. If the window is not replaced in a timely manner, other windows may be broken. These broken windows forecast a darker situation: people have stopped caring about their neighborhood. If the residents don't care enough to fix their windows, the theory goes, it's all downhill from there.

Whether this theory is true in urban development is a debate for another forum. For the purpose of building your tower, we'll assume it's accurate. When cracks develop or windows are broken, you'll need to regroup and take stock. A key question to ask yourself during this time is: what happened? If you find your motivations have shifted, you may need to make real adjustments. You can put your head down and "just get it done" for a short period of time, but in the long-run, it's very difficult to consistently work on something that doesn't line up with your motivations.

If you're still passionate about your work but just got off track somehow, think about what you can eliminate or downsize. Jim Rohn said: "We must all suffer one of two things: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret or disappointment." To build a legacy project, choose discipline.

Every year in December, I take a trip for seven days to think about what I want the next year of my life to be like. During the trip, I spend a couple of hours each day journaling and working through self-interviews. The journal entries and Q&A relate to the goals I've set for my writing career, business, travel, and personal life.

I take stock of the previous year and set a number of goals for the next one, trying to align my daily life with the priorities I identify. If I need to visit twenty countries, what will I have to sacrifice to achieve that goal? If I want to write a book, what is the deadline and how will I ensure I am working toward it over time?

This process ensures I'm on track with both my daily life *and* the ongoing goals that require greater focus during an extended period of time. You can run a short race without much training, but ideally not a marathon. If I get behind on a blog post that's due shortly, I can figure something out, but I couldn't write a book that way. This is why we need structure to build a legacy project, and structure often requires mutually exclusive choices.

The review begins by looking back at the year that is ending soon. I ask myself two questions and try to come up with at least 6-8 answers to each:

- *What went well this year?*
- *What did not go well this year?*

Having a list of successes contrasted with a list of disappointments helps to frame the plan for next year. If a business I started was doing well, for example, but I didn't run the marathon I had hoped to, I have two choices going forward: spend more time training (and potentially less time traveling and starting businesses), or simply decide that I may not be able to run marathons while working hard on the other goals.

Next, I look at the goals I set during the previous year to see how things turned out. Did I achieve each goal or not? If not, why? There are usually a few goals that I don't achieve for whatever reason. Sometimes circumstances change and the goal is no longer relevant. Other times, I just fall short. Since I've been doing the Annual Review, my average success rate is around 80%. That's

a good percentage to aim for, because if I consistently achieved 100% of my goals, I'd worry I was setting them too low.

Next, I'll move to the active part of goal-setting for the coming year. I divide my life into a number of categories, involving both "work" things and "personal" things. (These categories are closely linked, but it's helpful to look at each of them during the goal-setting process.)

What will I do to contribute to the legacy project? How am I being challenged, and in what ways do I hope to grow during the next year?

It helps to keep the yearly goals as measurable as possible: write 300,000 words by maintaining an average of 1,000 words a day, six days a week. Visit twenty new countries. Run two half-marathons and learn to swim. Launch a new website. Start a new business that earns x dollars from y customers.

Some goals, habits, and choices may require prioritization. Running and staying healthy requires that I get enough sleep at night, even if I'd rather stay up and work on my projects. For several years, I chose to prioritize world travel over other expenses, living in a modest apartment and riding the bus instead of owning a car.

A key principle of this kind of prioritization is that you can have almost anything you want, but not everything at the same time.

It's easy to get hung up on false dilemmas and worrying about how you can "balance" everything you love—but it doesn't have to be so complicated. The simple answer is: decide to make your legacy project the most important thing, and then spend your time working on that.

It gets easier to make competing choices when you clearly understand what you value and what you are working toward. Having a **personal mission statement** will help even more. You might be familiar with corporate mission statements, which are often long-winded and full of platitudes ("We go above and beyond... the customer is always right... we were asleep when we wrote this.").

A personal mission statement need not be so boring or useless. You can create a simple-but-good statement in about ten minutes, and you can always change it later.

Part of my personal mission statement says that *adventure* and *gratitude* are my highest values, so I try to make decisions that are aligned with those values. My track record is far from perfect, but that's the point—I need the values to guide my decisions when I'm uncertain. For example, I know that sometimes I can be stingy or selfish, even though I chose *gratitude* as a guiding force. On a recent shuttle bus ride to another hotel from yet another airport, I looked in my pocket in search of a dollar to tip the driver. I found only a \$5 bill, and thus was presented with a dilemma: do I give \$5, an abnormally high tip, or do I choose to give nothing?

I stiffed the driver and gave nothing.

A tip isn't always required, of course, but I felt bad all morning—richer in cash, but poorer in spirit. If I had given the \$5, I might have felt momentarily sad about the loss of a few dollars more than I had planned. But I'm pretty sure the monetary loss would have been compensated by the positive feeling of making someone's day with an unexpected reward. (You can also apply this perspective by being more purposeful in thanking people for helping you. Chances are, you'll never regret saying "thank you.")

I also know that sometimes I'm afraid of adventure even though I chose it as a guiding value, and when left to my own devices, I might avoid it by taking the safe road. Thankfully, I've learned that this is usually the wrong choice—I *know* it will almost always be worth it. Amelia Earhart said it best: "When a great adventure is offered, you don't refuse it."

On the trip to Southern Africa, I made a major mistake: I completely ran out of money, and thus found myself entirely unprepared for the visa-on-arrival fee on the small island of Comoros. My passport was confiscated at the airport, and I had a real problem. This set off a whole course of action that nearly caused me to miss my return flight off the island. The solution involved the chartering of a taxi to drive me to a town one hour away in a failed attempt to withdraw money from the only bank on the island that took Mastercard. When this desperate errand proved foolish, I returned to the airport in further desperation, prepared to trade an iPod for my passport if necessary, and wondering what would happen if I missed the flight.

The whole time I was in slight panic mode over the situation. I asked myself: *All this stress for a personal accomplishment... is it worth it?* And the whole time I answered: *YES*. When you set out on an adventure, all kinds of unexpected things can happen. You don't always know where you'll end up, and your adventure will likely contain a certain amount of risk. But as I learned to accept monotony as a traveler's friend, I know I must also welcome the element of uncertainty on the road to adventure.*

Whatever you choose for your guiding values, take time to regularly center yourself on where you'd like to end up. Finish this sentence every morning: *If nothing else happens today, I will at least have accomplished the single task of _____.*

Remember the fallback plan: if you're not sure of the next step, start by helping people and creating things. This kind of consistent effort is how you visit 193 countries, write books, or even build a Sistine Chapel. Drink water, stretch, and get to work.

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 • *IN THE END I WAS HELPED BY THE KINDNESS OF A STRANGER, SOMETHING ELSE
 • THAT MOST TRAVELERS KNOW WELL. THIS PERSON CHOSE TO COME TO MY RESCUE
 • IN THE FORM OF A LAST-MINUTE LOAN HE WASN'T PREPARED TO MAKE, WITH NO
 • REAL PROOF I WOULD PAY HIM BACK LATER AS PROMISED. ANOTHER LESSON: MOST
 • OF THE TIME, MOST PEOPLE ARE GOOD.
 •

There was one final factor that contributed to my brief addiction in playing the tower game. While I could schedule the building activities at my own convenience, there was also a **clear sense of urgency** to the work. When I performed my tasks frequently, I was ahead at the next check-in. When I waited, I found myself behind schedule. It was in my best interest to keep things going, working as quickly and as often as possible.

Similarly, in building a real-life tower in the form of a legacy project, we must understand the urgency behind our efforts. Life is deceptively short, and the choices available to us today may not be here tomorrow. This fact centers everything about a legacy project: while we will likely have many diversions and setbacks along the way, we get only one chance at the life we know, and we may not receive warning about when it will end.

One evening, the musician and composer Jeff Buckley went for an impromptu swim in the Wolf River Harbor near Memphis, Tennessee. His body was found the next morning; it appears he was pulled under the water in the wake of a passing tugboat. The death was a tragic accident, with no drugs or alcohol involved, and no evidence of foul play. He was thirty years old.

If you've ever known someone who died young or unexpectedly, you've probably struggled with trying to understand why it happened. Along with questions on the meaning of life, people have speculated on the questions of death and suffering for a long time. Unfortunately, the answer to why the world is often unfair is much less clear. When asked to eulogize or explain a tragedy, religious leaders of all kinds tend to revert to a familiar script: "We're not sure why this happened. The best thing we can do is cherish the life we have and choose to love as much as we can."

There is a cemetery in my neighborhood that I often pass through while running. It's been there for a long time, with gravestones marking the deaths of people who died as early as 1846. The cemetery is multicultural and interfaith, with inscriptions in many languages and numerous forms of honoring the dead.

As I run through this resting place and toward the waterfront that flows through the center of my city, I often think about these people, loved by others but unknown to me except through the epitaphs on their tombstones. Did they live the life they wanted? Their lives *mattered* regardless of the choices they made, but did they fulfill their potential? Did they die with any unresolved regrets?

Someone who died a hundred or more years ago may have lived a meaningful life, but the choices that were available to them were dramatically different than the ones available to us today. They couldn't take one million photos, visit every country in the world, or talk to thousands of interlinked people from all walks of life through the online social web.

ONE
TOWER

TWO
CHALLENGE

THREE
REVIEW

FOUR
COMMISSION

Life is a series of purposeful choices that can produce great rewards from great effort. Choose to craft your life around creative work that goes up like a tower and out to the world.

ONE
TOWER

TWO
CHALLENGE

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FOUR
COMMISSION

The same may be said about us in another 150 years, but that is not our concern. Whether the era that we live in is more special than others or not, a single fact remains: this is *our* time. This is our chance.



On my way home from the trip to Africa, I thought more about what I'm trying to do with the time remaining to me. Ultimately, I want to spend what's left of my life building a tower. I want to work toward a challenging goal over time. I don't need to win by competing against anyone else, but I also don't want to lose. I'll lose by giving less than my best, making poor choices, or wasting away a day I'll never see again. I want to go to sleep every night thinking about how I will respond to the opportunities I've been given, and I want to begin planning my response immediately upon awakening.

When I work on the legacy project, I want the same feelings I had when I played the game. I want to live for the anticipation of what comes next. I crave interaction and influence—part of this beautiful world needs me, and I need it too. Although everything I give will be flawed and insufficient, I must give it anyway, and then I must give more.

The world also needs *you*. We have no guarantee of seeing another day, but we do have the opportunity to make changes right now. Your legacy project is the means of world-changing. And thus a tower is built. One life, one day, one concentrated action at a time.

Life is not a spartan existence, nor is happiness the greatest value we can achieve. Instead, life is a series of purposeful choices that can produce great rewards from great effort. Choose to craft your life around creative work that goes up like a tower and out to the world.

The tower we choose to build can be constructed in many forms, which is why it's your own, unique tower. Like Michelangelo, you are the master architect. Nothing less than the fate of the world is in your hands—therefore you must give it your all, today and forever.

To do this, you must fill your life with challenges, adventures, and the love of good friends. And you must get to work, building your tower every single day.



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Thanks for reading. If you find it valuable, please share it with anyone you think should read it. Most importantly, I hope you'll build your own legacy project in whatever form makes sense to you.

Chris Guillebeau
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