



Inner Light, 2021. Image by author.

A Short Guide To Setting Goals

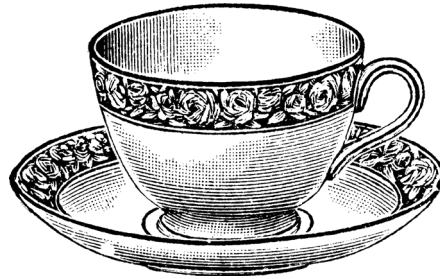
By: Christopher L. Schade

So, you picked up an article about goals— another piece that claims to have the magic key for making your life easier to manage. Now what? Many goal-centric articles provide an idealistic list of recommendations such as 'be self-motivated!' or 'be flexible!' Then the experts command us to act on our new-found ideas immediately and become the best goal-setters simply because we were told to do so.

But maybe you've noticed, as I have, that these articles are too abstract. The authors rarely provide something that we can relate to. They stand on their high, all-knowing pedestal,

and talk down to us about what we should and shouldn't do. But they don't know us, so how could they know what's best for us? Maybe we have a large project due soon, or maybe our cat needs walking (what do you mean, you don't walk your cat?!?). We can always find more pressing matters that take priority.

The truth is, the only person who knows what you should do is *you*. And that is why I, an average person, am writing this goal-centric article differently. So pull up a chair, grab a cup of tea or a glass of lemonade, and let's begin our journey.



"How do I know it's time to embark upon the journey of a new goal?" you might be asking. One indication is the arrival of a catalyst, as important lessons in life are often brought about through life challenges. As Darius Foroux, a renowned author on productivity, points out, "the reason to change comes from personal suffering, sadness, and hurt. At some point, you can't stand your current behavior anymore."

I believe this applies to being fed up with unbearable situations as well. When we find the courage to seek alternate possibilities, such prospects often appear when we least expect them, and are best explained by example. So get ready for some story-telling and reflection!



Try this:

Set a timer for two minutes and brainstorm a list of the desires that sound most compelling to you. Is there a new hobby that you have been meaning to try? Maybe there's a new skill you've been meaning to hone. Make it fun. Be bold. Don't limit yourself. List as many as you can.

A Trip To Yogurtland

Now there's a fun subtitle. Go ahead, read it again (or if you just skipped over it, read it now. Please. I put time into crafting them for you.) You are likely asking, "what on earth does frozen yogurt have to do with setting important goals?" That's a reasonable question, and I will get to that in a moment. But first we need to think about motivation. Have you ever wondered what causes us to set goals and what motivates us to keep them? I, along with many other thinkers, such as Stoics like Epictetus and more modern day scholars such as Rice University's Philosophy Department Chair, Dr. Timothy Schroeder, believe that desire is at the heart of our motivation to set goals. The perceived pleasure that comes from our desires

“The perceived pleasure that comes from our desires compels us to follow through with our intentions.”

compels us to follow through with our intentions. That is, we want something, so we try to get it.

In *Six Myths about the Good Life: Thinking about What Has Value*, philosopher Joel J. Kupperman describes desire as an "emotion that looks forward in time" (6). In other words, our desires are our emotional 'hopes and

dreams' of what our future could be. Desire contains the potential to fuel us to meet our individual goals. However, if left unbridled, desire can easily overpower our better judgment.

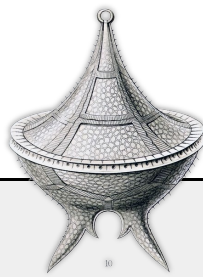
Speaking of desire, let's get back to my story about frozen yogurt. As a child, I always looked forward to eating at Yogurtland. I would think about all of the possible toppings and flavors of frozen yogurt. In anticipation of my tasty treat, I would delight in deciding whether I should put crumbled Oreos on French Vanilla yogurt or try gummy worms on a 'Rocket Pop Sorbet' instead. In the end, I added as many toppings as possible and filled my cup with several yogurt flavors. After I devoured all the toppings, the yogurt I had initially desired melted into an unappetizing ooze in the bottom of my cup. Not so delicious anymore. This experience taught me three lessons:

- It is possible to become gluttonous from our desires, and that gluttony has the potential to get in the way of them. I filled up on all of the toppings rather than enjoying the actual yogurt itself.
- Our desires are never satiated; I always wanted to go again and try something else.
- Less is sometimes more. Adding a realistic amount of toppings and flavors rather than dumping on everything I desired would produce the most pleasurable treat.



Painted Yogurt, 2021.
Image by author.

By nature, our desires drive us to pursue the impossible (like the perfect frozen yogurt). This is where goals come in. We formulate goals to make a compromise between desire and what our reality presents us with. If we set a goal that is too lofty and achieving it is impossible, then we may become frustrated, and the pursuit of the goal may bring no pleasure or sense of satisfaction. Conversely, if we set a goal that is too low, we may gain little in the pursuit, and this, too, may bring no satisfaction. In both cases, there is an imbalance between what we desire and how we would pursue it.



Try this:

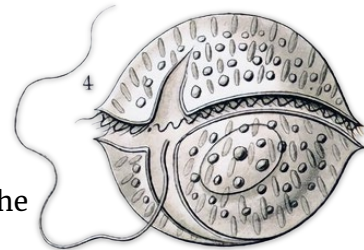
1. Now, pare down the list of desires. Which one speaks to you most? Choose the one that is most essential or important to you right now.
2. Turn this desire into a realistic goal by naming something specific and achievable. This doesn't mean it has to be a small goal, but it should be something concrete.

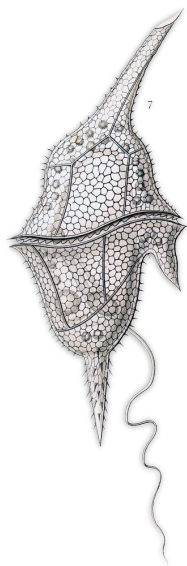
Example: A desire might be "have a lot of money," but a goal-directed version of that might be something like, "travel six months out of the year without worrying about funds."

Bioluminescent Revelation

There is a historic and age-old document that is too-often-confused with the too-often-unread Constitution of the United States, and that document is The Declaration of Independence. Within it, there is the famous statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Out of that mouthful of six commas, the phrase "and the pursuit of happiness" is likely to stick to your mind. Aside from this psychological phenomenon, why is this important? As humans, we have always tried to pursue what makes us happy. One could say we *desire* happiness.

I believe that one of the goals of government is to facilitate this pursuit. If you don't agree, at least I have Aristotle on my side (see *Politics*, for example).





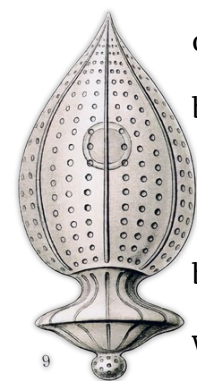
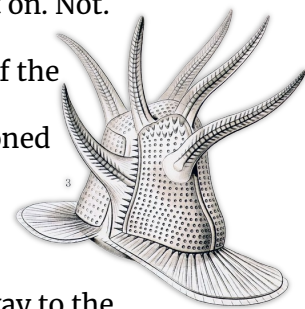
The pursuit of happiness is part of what makes us alive. We desire what we think will make us happy, and we set goals to try to make those desires a reality. The difficult part for us is that we harbor attachments to our goals, and this makes us miserable when they don't work out the way we imagined. The goals we set are inevitably imperfect. As the old adage says, "few things go as planned." It's important to put things into perspective. Philosopher time again. To quote Kupperman, "the more difficult something was—the more dissatisfactions there were along the way—the more fondly people look back on it" (54).

“The goals we set are inevitably imperfect. As the old adage says, ‘few things go as planned.’”

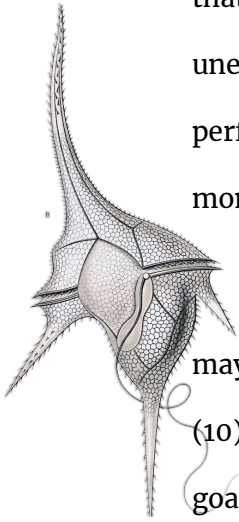
My childhood interest in backpacking would be a good example. Growing up, I'd heard many backpacking stories from my parents, which influenced me to try it for myself. Perhaps you had influences from your family, too. On the spontaneity of a ten-year-old's whim, I decided I should try backpacking. So I signed up for a summer camp and waited with great anticipation

for six long months. I imagined the sights and the smells, the way fog would hang among the trees, the awe of a sweeping view of the ocean from a mountain stretching miles into the horizon. Once on the trip, however, I realized how hard this goal really was. The trail was long, my feet hurt, and I was sweating profusely. The backpack felt heavier as the trail went on. Not. Another. Hill. Would it ever end? When we arrived at camp, there wasn't even a view of the ocean as I'd wistfully imagined. I was disappointed because this was not how I envisioned backpacking would be.

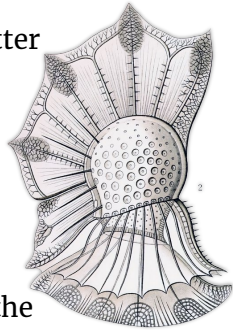
Later that evening, after we'd set up camp, we made our way down a small pathway to the beach. Our counselor led us to the water's edge. I noticed something peculiar as the ocean waves splashed onto the shore. The water was flashing with blue light. As I approached, bright lights sparkled and glittered where my feet sunk into the wet sand. The counselor explained



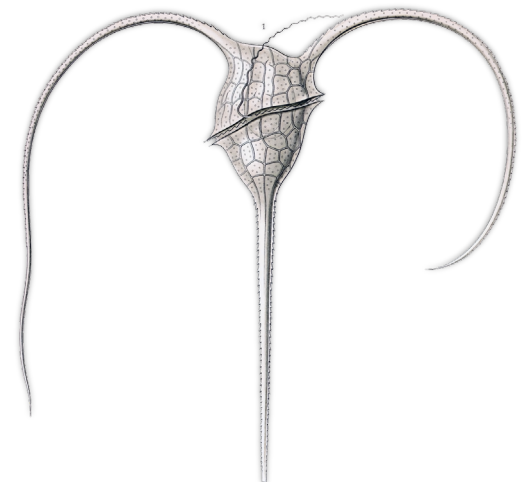
that the blue flashes were microbes in the water that would bioluminesce when disturbed. This unexpected, magical experience became the highlight of my trip. Since my expectations of the perfect backpacking trip did not pan out as anticipated, I ended up enjoying this mysterious moment all the more.



Imagining the exciting outcome of a goal is what propels us forward. Along the way, there may be "pleasures of spontaneity," as Kupperman calls them, that mix things up for the better (10). For me, this bioluminescent revelation turned out to be just as influential as the initial goal to complete a backpacking trip. But I didn't realize just how much that bioluminescent experience would pique my interest in biomolecular engineering until many years later. I marveled over the memory of it all and wondered, 'how could something we can't see with the naked eye produce such a bright blue light?' Had I not set an initial goal to go on a backpacking trip, I might never have experienced one of my favorite backpacking memories. Nor would I have chosen to go backpacking again. However, that experience, along with countless others, kept me coming back every summer since.



It's quite possible that I might not have developed an interest in biology had I not gone on that backpacking trip. Lacking such an interest would have led me in another direction altogether. Perhaps I would've aspired to be a travel agent or a lobbyist instead. But this backpacking trip helped me to realize that it's quite possible our ten-year-old whims carry the potential to lead us to greater goals that might otherwise remain hidden from our awareness. That is, our goals' shortcomings or successes can influence the creation of future ones, in ways we can't even imagine, so long as we are open to the possibilities.





Try this:

Once you've found the goal that speaks to you most, don't beat yourself up for worrying about when to begin. Great accomplishments take time. The trick is to break up a larger goal into smaller ones. Small steps on the trail lead to impressive destinations over time. Don't give up!

Example: If you've always wanted to play the piano like Beethoven, you must first learn how to read music. Then you will need to learn what letters the keys are and how they may be combined into chords. You will also need to practice simple songs over and over to develop muscle memory and a sense of rhythm. These 'mini goals' must be spread out over time in order to stay within the realm of setting a realistic goal.

Goals Interrupted

Well, that went by quickly. No? Ah well. Can't please everyone.

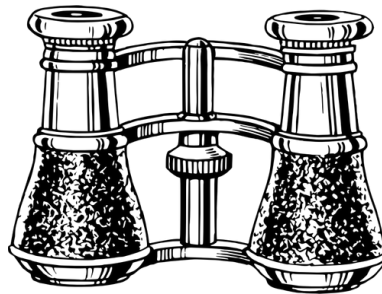
I'd like to end this with an insightful quote from Neel Burton, a writer for *Psychology Today*. He described desire as something that "moves us and gives our life direction and meaning." Our desires are essential to giving life a course, but as demonstrated through my gluttony for frozen yogurt, they don't directly translate well to reality. What we imagine is too perfect to be feasible. Desires have to be balanced with reality and consciously regulated through the careful formation and follow-through of goals. Even then, things don't always work out. But as I found out on my backpacking trip, this can be a blessing in disguise. In other words, we should try hard to pursue what we want and withhold expectations of how it will turn out. These unpredictable outcomes greatly affect our future, and we should learn from them rather than overstress our 'failure' to control them.

“...we should try hard to pursue what we want and withhold expectations of how it will turn out.”

As I sit here writing this, I'm aware of a goal I have *not* yet seen the outcome of. That goal is based on my desire to earn a degree at UC Santa Cruz and live on the campus. Already, things have not been going as planned. The COVID-19 pandemic has made sure of that. (Need I say more?) Like so many others, I have not been able to live on the campus. My goals are evolving in reaction,

but the core of my desire still holds true. I am keeping my eyes open for new opportunities. And I keep going.

It might seem counterintuitive, but I've found one of the best ways to make a decision is to put the decision-making pressures aside. Clear your mind and put yourself in a space where there is no right or wrong choice. In such a state, you may find that your desires crystalize out of the chaotic gloom, allowing you to focus on what matters most. As vaccines roll out and mask mandates are lifting, I find myself imagining a life on campus again. Still, I do not know what the future holds, but that is OK. More than OK, it is *wonderful*.



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