

Find the Gap

"Happiness is a state of mind; it's just according to the way you look at things."

Walt Disney, animator, businessman, producer, director and loved the world over as the father of Mickey Mouse

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Achieving More by Changing Your Mind

What is it that makes someone an extraordinary person? Is it their abilities?

Or their talent? Or simply their smile? Sure, there may be differences in the way they do things: the difference between a winning runner and the one who comes second can sometimes be just a few kilojoules of energy, for example, and those few kilojoules may well be the result of a few hours extra training over the course of many months. However, the key difference is their attitude, their mindset. Like everything in life, our perspective on things determines our response, our action or inaction, and ultimately the consequences of those actions and responses.

On the windowsill of my office sits a glass ornament with Walt Disney's quotation about happiness engraved into it. For someone who spends his life travelling the world speaking to and training large groups of people, with lots of performance elements to make learning engaging and fun (the fallout of working as a comedy performer for several years), I've ironically always been one of those

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“no drama” kinds of people. If someone knocks over a glass and it breaks, or the dog chews a table leg, my first reaction is normally practical: did anyone die? (That’s probably the result of having a background in medicine.)

My response is simply: does what happened affect anything immediately? Can we clear it up now? Much of life is not permanent, so if it’s replaceable – well, it’s replaceable. If no one died as a result of something happening, then the result can only be much better than the worst case scenario. That’s the bench mark I use for nearly everything: did anyone die? Every moment you are living, somewhere in the world a family are gathered around a loved one, watching their life slowly ebb away; medical professionals are fighting to stem a bleed or otherwise save the life of someone as a result of injury; tears stream uncontrollably down the pained faces of family and friends at a funeral. It is sobering to put things into perspective because, quite often, we don’t. We live our lives just in the moment. We become all consumed with ourselves and what we’re doing right now. Our moods and sometimes our entire days are affected by the impact something has on us.

Of course, it doesn’t make the things that do happen any less serious: a client is unhappy with what you produce, the cat is unwell or the car is badly damaged in the car park – these are far from positive things. However, we have a choice over how we respond to these. Crying, becoming irate and allowing yourself to be engulfed by stress are simply not going to make your client happy, cheer up the cat or fix your car.

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Feeling despondent or running late? Left something at home? Shrank your favourite jumper? Scratched the wooden floor? Missed your turning? Some people work themselves into a frenzy; their stress levels rise; they are in a foul mood for the entire day and spend the rest of it slamming things down and sighing a lot. As a result, those around you become irritated and in no time at all you have an oppressive and negative environment. This is all from one person who has allowed themselves to be affected by something out of their control. However, the one thing we can all control is our own responses. The most significant barrier to making the shift from ordinary to extraordinary, in whatever endeavour we wish to do so, is ourselves because no one else can do it for us.

Be Mindful of Who You Spend Your Time With

One thing that has a significant impact on our behaviour and on the decisions we make is who we spend time with – either by default or design.

Our behaviours, responses, characteristics and even language are all heavily influenced by who we spend time with, so it is especially important to populate our life with those who will make a positive difference to our lives as a result of being around them.

I am reminded by a fridge magnet with the old adage: “you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your family”. While you may not be able to choose your family, you can choose how much time you spend around them – and your friends – and what to talk about – to protect yourself from how they might make you feel.

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Expanding the Gap between Stimulus and Response

We can all identify those moments in life when we have become so wrapped up in what is essentially something of little to no consequence in the grand scheme of things – a non-problem.

It is all around us in road rage, offices, queues, internet forums, customer service interactions, educational settings, childcare and at home; in all of these areas we experience people who appear to lose the ability to maintain rational thought. The smashed glass no longer matters – it is beyond repair; and so going forwards we should replace it or move on.

My Grandma used to say: “There’s no point crying over spilt milk.” Neither is there any point in crying over the selfish person who was in a rush and cut you up, or the arrogant shop salesperson. We do seem to have a strange predisposition as a species to not be especially realistic in our reasoning. I’m not surprised at the term “armchair philosopher” when I watch a reality television show with people making accusations and assumptions as the news broadcasts on their television, or having a twitch at the net curtains and revealing an opinion about where a person has been, where they are going or passing judgement on their life.

Many years ago when I was working in healthcare, I remember holding the hand of a dying man called Frank. He had terminal throat cancer and was especially kind natured and selflessly thoughtful; one of those people you

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meet and wish you'd known for longer. He was old by the time I met him; I can't remember exactly how old but late 70s, I imagine. Frank's wife held tightly onto one of his hands and I gently held the other. Frank looked at me with his glassy, steel-blue eyes and said in his slightly gruff voice, with a sombre hint that he knew exactly what was coming: "no one lives forever". Frank died just a week or so following that.

For the rest of my life I shall remember that moment and how it almost instantly put everything before, then and forevermore into perspective: the time I shouted and swore at a car that had cut me up; how upset and irritable I'd got when I smashed my own favourite mug; when I was running really late for a friend's wedding and ruined the rest of the day for myself because I was so stressed and angry.

For me, largely because of that moment with Frank, I appreciated that all of the things that had happened to me in life up until that moment had passed me by. They'd just happened to me. There were many really wonderful times, memorable achievements and the occasional sad time, too. However, I had my head down and was getting on with my life, seemingly like most of us. I see this everywhere I go – very little appreciation of the fragile and finite properties of life. We are here but once, yet the way people move around you would be forgiven for thinking that this was merely a rehearsal and that we will get to do it all over again, playing out those parts we didn't quite get right with a renewed vigour, flamboyance or tact that we failed on the first time around.

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It was about the time that I met Frank that it occurred to me that not always doing what is considered normal, making an effort to reach for something more than what we expect ourselves to be able to achieve, was the key to many things: being successful in business, finding happiness, creating memorable moments for others, being better teachers, nurses, directors, parents – or indeed people. We can all perform at a greater level and create a more significant impact when we ask ourselves: “Why?” Fellow TED speaker, Sir Ken Robinson, challenges why schools teach in restrictive timetables, which force students to choose topics of study they may not necessarily like and don’t make the most of their individual abilities. Why do we invite armchair philosophers, with no legal training, onto a jury to make unqualified opinions and decide the fate of others? Why do religions that support love cause so many wars? Why are you, you? We should question ourselves more: our thoughts, our behaviours, our beliefs.

I am certainly not suggesting that we question the status quo in order to go against the grain or be intentionally obstructive.

But if you do nothing, nothing will happen. It is the safest and easiest place to be but it is possibly also the least interesting, offering the least variety and stimulation. There is nothing extraordinary about ordinary.

So the first part of our journey towards flipping the switch begins with *you*. We simply cannot simultaneously keep one foot on where we are now and make a step towards where we want to be or what we want to do. Making that

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step is simply the start of the process. If people can rebuild their lives from the lowest point of homelessness, with not a single penny to their name, then you can easily correct something that goes wrong and choose a response based on your understanding of the consequences. In many ways it is simply a matter of mindset: those things that we believe we can do, we do – and those things we don't believe we can do, we don't.

Behaviour as a Legacy

The notion of how our behaviour can influence our ability to be extraordinary is one very close to my heart. As I write this I receive news that my Grandma, Gwendoline Pearl Cunliffe, who has dementia and was moved into a home about six months ago (a decision I was never supportive of, protesting my evidence that it was likely to make her worse – it did), probably doesn't have long left to live. She's not eating and is drinking very little; simply sitting in a chair, her life ebbing away. It is most likely that nearly every person reading this book will have experienced the tragic loss of a loved one and will be able to relate somewhat to my pain. However, my Grandma really was someone quite special. I know everyone says that, but she really was.

On her 60th birthday, she thought nothing of parachuting out of a plane; the enlarged photograph of her standing in a ploughed field in front of a crumpled parachute, beaming with that trademark twinkle in her eyes and rosy cheeks, was hung with pride on the wall by the stairs in her home. On a few occasions she had to stay in hospital;

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for a new hip and after a fall – the usual when you’re over 50.

However, something quite extraordinary happened on more than one occasion when she was hospitalized. She received thank you cards when she left – from the hospital staff. She literally lit up a room with her smile, twinkling eyes and laughter. She talked to anyone and everyone – much to the irritation of my Granddad. Beautiful in her youth and right through into her elderly years, she was of the generation who had really charming qualities that we seem to have lost today: she dressed impeccably whenever she went out and was wonderfully polite to anyone that would stop to chat with her. My Granddad used to have to sometimes literally drag her away! As the second grandchild of the family and within just a thirty-minute drive of my Grandparents’ home, I was doted on, with baking, camp-building in the dining room – which involved moving the furniture and draping bed sheets and blankets over the chairs – playing at being a shopkeeper in the garden using the low wall as a counter and having access to a huge box of Lego. Grandma had a heart and spirit that many would say was saintly and an energy and youthfulness that masked her true years. Grandma would not sit still, literally – she was always on the go, with the exception of eating, playing the piano or the odd “forty winks”. She had no favourite chair as so many older people do.

As soon as she woke up she would be up and doing something again: cleaning, baking, mending, gardening, washing. In recent years she was given a walking frame to help her with her balance. Getting her to use it slowly and not push it around so quickly was a constant battle, her mind

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was always one step ahead of her body. She thought of it as getting in her way and slowing her down but watching her with it, and the speed she used to go, reminded me of that time my friend and I were at the dog race track and he got his shoelace stuck in the electric hare. Some things just take off.

I remember clearly the first couple of years of her dementia setting in – not that back then we thought it was anything more than a few transient moments of old-age forgetfulness. But, oh, we laughed about it! That wicked sense of humour, tear-inducing laughter and ability to find the positive in everything: “what’s your name again?” would bring a good five minutes of fun such that our sides would hurt and we’d have to try our hardest not to inflict any more laughter pains! But the memory lapses and confusion gradually got worse and the first time I knew it was serious and had gone past the point of no return was when I went to visit her in their bungalow in Dereham in Norfolk. I walked into the front room to see her, sat in a chair (which is where you now always see her).

It was like a train had hit me right in the chest. I can’t describe the instantaneous, hard realization that hit me. The sparkle in her eyes had gone. They were dull. She looked overweight, grey and spent much of my visit being nasty, rude and obstructive. I cried for most of the two and a half hour journey home. That visit and subsequent time spent thinking about her made me realize how important our minds are.

That sensational organ tucked away deep within our protective skull, which we give so little thought to, will

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create the difference between ordinary and extraordinary. After all, what do we have without our mind and without our decisions and choices? What is the point in having health and a body that works if you can't enjoy it, understand it or even comprehend it? Our character traits, the choices we make, our beliefs, desires, passions, our preferences, our foibles, our hopes and dreams, are all rooted in our mind. It's a sad reality that those things we cannot see, we tend to forget about, which is the very issue social lobbyists have about so-called invisible disabilities.

Dementia is a cruel and devastating illness that slowly strips away sufferers, causing torment and suffering to family, friends and those around them. And although she isn't physically dead and I don't think of her as such, my Grandma, the Grandma I knew and loved so dearly, has been gone for some time now. I haven't visited for a while. I'm not keeping track of the days but I know it has been longer than I would normally leave it: it's not enjoyable for me and she doesn't appear to remember much of who I am, which probably hurts more than anything else. The favourite grandchild, with so many happy memories that now seem to pale into insignificance because the person I shared them with and who created them for me appears to have turned their back on them – and me. Now of course I know that isn't for a second the real truth and she isn't consciously aware of what she's doing – much of the time she doesn't fully comprehend where she is or why she is there. The extraordinary woman I once knew has gone. And you will have to trust me when I tell you that the world is worse off without her.

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But what was it that made my Grandma extraordinary? I have never heard of patients receiving thank you cards from hospital staff before. Her love of people and communicating with others is certainly something you don't see much of. Something which probably reads as a rather ordinary conversation is propelled into the extraordinary for the other person. It stands out because it's different – it's a moment in their life that, albeit for a short time in this example, lingers and has an impact, as it doesn't normally happen.

Do We Become What We Think?

Fear often plays a significant role in preventing us from behaving differently: fear of unknown consequences and fear of the responses we might receive, for example. However, this is really only because of how habitual we are as a species: it's normal. We are creatures of habit, which is why we generally read the same authors, take the same routes to work and go to watch the same type of films. When you understand that this resistance is normal, it is much easier to flip the switch and make conscious choices to change your behaviour.

How many days have you spent working away at your desk until late at night, neglecting your spouse, your pets or your children? How often have you sat watching television leaving family or friends uncalled? How many “just this one” moments have you had with food and drink that left you overweight and unhappy? Indeed we take for granted the very fact that we are alive.

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Some people appear to grasp life and the opportunities it presents and indeed create their own opportunities. These people aren't abnormal, however; they are, in a sense, extraordinary because it isn't common, it isn't the norm for people to readily make the most of every day or work to a positive solution. It is common, however, for people to focus on a problem, spend time talking about, debating and concentrating on something that has gone wrong, all the time not looking to the future for a solution.

So what can we do about changing how we approach the challenges and barriers that we face to positively alter the consequences? There are three questions I consider extremely important to help flip the switch and instantly change our behaviour:

1. Ask: "Why Does it Have to be Done This Way?"

This question is not designed to encourage you to be obstructive or intentionally go against the grain. It's to help push yourself to find new ways of doing things; searching to improve and challenge the status quo. Quite often you find that the only reason things are done the way they are is because "they've always been done that way"; they've remained unquestioned because of the overwhelming power of habit. This answer, combined with a resistance to change, is crippling for productivity and will prevent any movement towards changing behaviour. How will anything extraordinary come about if you keep doing things the same way? By repeating the same actions the same way you'll only ever get the same result, so looking

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at things from a different point of view is the cornerstone of doing things differently.

2. Ask: “How Can We Make This Better?”

In this one question you follow up the previous question, which challenges why you do things the way you do, with the solution: How can we – or I – make this better? Striving to always improve what you are doing, to find a more efficacious way of doing things is the best kick-start to actually doing it. Many of us are gold-star procrastinators and put everything off until the time is right. Only the time never is. In my experience the right time never comes, but this arguably over-cautious approach is that of pretty much every ordinary person I’ve ever met.

3. Ask: “What Would Grandma Do?”

Now, obviously, you don’t know my Grandma – and more’s the pity. But you can ask the same question about anyone else that you respect for making sound judgements and good decisions, to help guide you. My Grandma is not perfect. But everything she does has humanity at its heart and a genuine desire to do the very best. That’s a fantastic role model to have and offers me a different perspective on whatever I’m doing.

There’s also a lot to be said for not accepting the ordinary, which is what makes the “why?” question so useful. By not accepting what has gone before, you open up your mind to many alternatives that were previously invisible to you. If, for whatever reason, there is in fact no way to

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improve what you have been doing or the way you have been doing it, you can still ask yourself how you could do it differently – there’s almost always something that can be changed for the better ... I find that sometimes in life, all it takes is someone else to do something that puts you in a position where you find yourself asking: “why didn’t I do that?” or “could I do that?” Those moments that make you pause just for a moment and force you to consider your chosen actions happen all too infrequently in the rat race most of us are caught up in.

The Behaviour You Get More of is the One that You Feed

There is an ancient parable attributed to the Cherokee Indians, which goes something like this, from memory: a young Cherokee man is hauled before the tribe’s elders, who are concerned about his aggressive tendencies. One of the elders takes the young man to one side and tells him that his anger is in fact understandable, for all humans have within them two wolves. One wolf is generous, humble and has an open heart. The other is aggressive, arrogant and selfish. The wolves are in constant battle with one another because neither is powerful enough to destroy the other. So his aggressiveness is only natural. The young man turns to the elder and asks: “but which wolf will win?”, to which the elder replies, “the one that you feed.”

Much in our own lives is up to us: our future and life path is carved out as a result of the choices and decisions we make on a moment by moment basis. Do you want to get out of bed today? Do you want to eat a large,

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fattening burger? Will you donate some of your monthly pay to charity? Will you stop and think of ways in which you can do things differently? Will you continue to work late, narrowing the time you spend with your friends and family? Will you allow yourself to get angry and consumed by negative emotions, or stop and do something about the problems? Will you take the motorway home, or the scenic route? The decisions we make every day determine which wolf grows.

Changing our behaviour in order to get extraordinary results is not necessarily always easy but it is actually relatively simple. It just takes a little conscious effort at the time to make the right choices and widen the gap between stimulus and our response.

**NOW, FLIP THE SWITCH!****The Two Common Behaviour Barriers**

There are commonly two things that hold us back and prevent us from changing how we behave:

- 1 *A lack of conscious exploration of the things that are causing us unhappiness, or a reduced sense of well-being.*

Ask yourself at least once every three months: "What happens in my job that makes me want to throw it all in and leave?" You can of course apply this same question to your personal life: your relationship or marriage, for example.

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Use this question as a reminder to keep an eye on your behaviour and the things which impact your behaviour – and to do something about it.

2 *A lack of understanding as to why we are doing something, or why we are involved.*

Explain to yourself, or others, why the task needs to be done. With a greater understanding of the reasoning behind the task, you feel closer to it, can conceptualize the task more easily and take ownership of it.

For maximum effect, take the time to consider what the consequences will be: what will happen as a result of you doing this? Furthermore, what will happen if you don't do it?