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As told to Brent Reichenberger, 2613 words.

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# On making time for what you do best

**Author and Historian Mitch Horowitz discusses what can be accomplished with concentration, finding what you can do without distraction, and getting better through practice.**

**Are you prone to distraction?**

Not when I'm passionate. A lot of people wonder how I can maintain such an output of writing, and part of it stems from the fact that I didn't publish my first book *Occult America* until I was age 43 going on 44, so I never take it for granted. The idea of seeing my byline or making a public presentation is something that in my 30s I thought I had left behind me. So from one perspective, I never take it for granted. From another perspective, I am so passionate about exploring, writing, and speaking about metaphysical topics that when I'm ensconced in a writing project I really do not get distracted because I love it so much. What I get distracted with are things that I don't want to do, like buying a new iPhone, doing my taxes, or some quotidian task that I find a turnoff.

A spiritual teacher once said to me, "You do everything with your heart" by which I think he meant you do everything with enthusiasm. So what do you do if you don't feel that enthusiasm? That's when I really have difficulties. If I'm booking an airline ticket for a trip that I have ambivalent feelings about, I will delay and get distracted. But if I'm dedicated to a project that I love, I just move forward with the velocity of a bullet and I don't experience any distractions whatsoever. I encourage people to watch for those areas in life where they don't experience distractions, there can be a very important message there.

**What do you do when you hit resistance?**

If I'm feeling passion for something, and it's very much a psychical process in that it's an interplay of both thought and emotion, the creative aspect just takes over and I'm all the way into it. Sometimes it might be writing a certain line and knowing that I want to go all the way deep down into it.

The first chapter of *Daydream Believer* that I wrote is entitled "The Truth About Mind Causation," and it came about because on an early spring night I was walking through the streets of my neighborhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and I had this overwhelming, indelible, palpable impression that life had assumed the contours of thought for me at that moment. And the next day, which was a Sunday, I sat down and probably in a space of about eight hours, hardly getting up once, I wrote a very serviceable draft of that chapter, which then formed the basis for the whole book. So it was just that one impression that struck me with truth and I was able to formulate a whole project out of it. And I always tell people to watch very carefully for those moments where you feel something as an indelible truth because no life is exceptional. And if you're feeling something, the overwhelming likelihood is that that's not exclusive to you alone and it will reach other people where they live. So once passion is in play, everything else comes.

Now, of course, creativity also requires great sweat equity. The simple fact is you get better at what you do frequently, which is another facet of why it's so important to have a definite chief aim. So if you're a dancer or a programmer or a martial artist, or a writer, or a cabinet maker, or whatever it is that you do in life, your excellence in that area will yield to time. And the impulse, the passion in itself is insufficient. It's an ignition point, but we all know that to build a fire requires a very meticulous process. And those of us who have been camping know how haste will extinguish a bonfire quicker than anything else. It requires building, There's a lattice work that's there. So, passion is obviously a vital ingredient. If you're cold and you need to build a fire, you're not going to have any divided impulses about the task at hand. But in order to succeed at the task in hand, a great deal of meticulousness is necessary.

I'm a better writer today than I was two years ago because I work at it constantly. So one must never get carried away with the quote that is sometimes attributed to Albert Einstein, that imagination is 90%, knowledge is 10%. Well, that may be true, but that doesn't tell you how great and vast that 10% in itself needs to be and what it requires of us, which is tremendous sweat equity, countless hours, and dedication. You do best that which you do all the time. Ask any martial artist. Ask any ballerina. And so we need to bring that to our work as well.

**In your short book, *Awakened Mind*, you talk about how your thoughts can become your reality. Can you give me an elevator pitch on creating your reality?**

Well, I think that after centuries of personal testimony and after 150 years of perceptual studies in the hard sciences, it's a given that thoughts are causative, although our thoughts also interplay with a wide array of laws and forces. I don't believe we live under one mental super law. At the same time, we'd be neglecting an extraordinary human tool to overlook the manner in which the psyche out pictures experience in concrete ways.

**In *Daydream Believer: Unlocking the Ultimate Power of your Mind* you write about why you prefer the term "selection" to "manifestation." Could you talk a little about that?**

It seems to me that our senses are nothing more than biological tools of measurement, not any different from those tools that are used in laboratory settings to measure physical properties. And yet we know, from almost 90 years of classical experiments in quantum mechanics, that on the particle scale, although not the particle scale alone, perception actualizes, things are in a state of superposition or infinitude until a measurement is taken either by a sentient observer or an automatized device, and this is not within particle physics alone. Within the field of neuroplasticity, brain scans have revealed to us for decades that sustained thoughts alter the neuro pathways through which electrical impulses travel in our brains. We know from 80 some odd years of academically based psychical research that the mind seems capable of traveling amongst different intersections of time. And it stands to reason that perception on every scale of life is, in some measure, the determinative.

So I think in terms of selection and what the psyche dwells on, and to me psyche is a compact of thought and emotion, is going to produce something experiential and concrete in the individual's life in a way that goes beyond analysis or cognition or motor function. Selection can be a very powerful tool.

**Let's say that someone who has never experimented with reality selection was curious about where to start. What is one little thing you would suggest they start with?**

I love that question because lives can be changed by doing one little thing. It's at the heart of chaos theory and also of chaos magic, that if you change one wrinkle, you change the whole. That's an incontrovertible truth. I would say that the simple act of holding a clarified wish can be extremely powerful, and I always ask people to consider simple efforts but to consider them very carefully.

We all think that we know what we want in life. We're very conditioned by repetition, by peer orientation to think that we know what we want, but we also engage in a great deal of internalized inhibition and conformity, and sometimes we repeat things to ourselves so frequently by rote about what we want in terms of relationships or career or creative output that we're apt to regard those things without verification. And I encourage the individual in an atmosphere of total privacy, just within the confines of his or her psyche, to really ask with complete unembarrassed intimacy, "What do I want in life?" Not conditioning it, not subjecting it to things that have been repeated to us so long that they sound like innate truths of life and not to feel that we need anyone else's approbation, whether that anyone else might be peers or might be some personal conception of god or some other greater force. I ask the individual to really get down into the guts of things and place themselves naked in front of the question, "What do I really want?" That clarified wish by itself can be extremely powerful.

**We often hear the phrase "be careful what you wish for." How do you walk the line of following your passions and investigating what it is you want, but also not biting off more than you can chew?**

I think the phrase "be careful what you wish for, you just might get it" probably originated in an essay of Ralph Waldo Emerson's in the mid 19th century where he was actually paraphrasing the philosopher Goethe. And he felt that Goethe said in effect, what we wish for when we're very young comes in waves on us when we're old, so be careful. I think there's a lot of power in that statement and I think that it behooves us to be very clear with ourselves about what we want.

There was a Soviet science fiction movie called *Stalker* in which aliens land in this forbidden zone and they leave behind them a whole bunch of space junk, and among the debris that they leave behind is something that has come to be called The Room, or in the novel on which the movie is based is called the Wish Machine. And the Wish Machine, so the story goes, will give you whatever you want, but the kicker is that in getting whatever you want you could experience a horrible trauma or self-alienation because we're not frank with ourselves about what we want. And in a certain sense, the Wish Machine has a claim on all of us because we move, whether consciously or not, in the direction of what we really want. And then we ask ourselves after the fact sometimes, how could I have been so self-destructive? How could I have lacked foresight? Well, emotions are stronger than thought, and our emotions are going to take us in directions that we as thinking beings may or may not be capable of acknowledging or may not wish to acknowledge. My contention is that we must at least know what those things are because we don't want to arrive at something and find ourselves torn into and alienated from our actual selves.

This is the danger that we face in life sometimes where we hide from what we really want and then when and if we receive it, we're shocked by it and we damn the wish, but the wish is within us and it behooves us to understand what we truly want, whether it's comfortable or not.

**It sounds as if the key is to "know thyself," a maxim that we hear everywhere. I think a lot of us struggle with that. What would you say to those who wanted to gain clarity around the deep desires within themselves?**

The danger of terms like "know thyself", which I also use, is that they sound so familiar, we're apt to think "I get it." And we all believe, without any self-verification, that we're on a journey of self-knowledge. And yet, I have personally spoken to people and I have experience within myself, arriving at a certain wish and immediately cringing and thinking, "Oh, that's superficial, that's shallow, that can't really be who I am so I need to perfume it or I need to reprocess it through some altruistic language," and we start using terms like "service" and so forth, all of which distances ourselves from what we really want. I'm not saying that if an individual arrives at a wish, he or she is bound to act on it right away. There may be consequences, there may be debt that's too great to assume, but at least know what it is.

Profundity is revealed in application. So when we hear statements like "know thyself" or "don't lie" or "keep your word," we all think, "I get it, I get it." But it's only when applying those things in a deeply un-embarrassed and intimate way that the challenges start to appear. So I suppose I would counsel people not to skip past statements like "know thyself," which could fit on a refrigerator magnet, and think, "Yeah, I get it." We don't really get it until we confront it in a sustained and un-embarrassed way.

**You're an admirer of Napoleon Hill. He wrote in *Think and Grow Rich* about the idea of finding a definite chief aim. Can you explain what that is?**

Hill taught something which I have embraced, and that is that you need to have one definite chief aim in life. And that is the kind of thing that many of us immediately want to resist because there are all different facets to our lives, we're workers, we're artists, we're spouses, we're parents, we're boyfriends, girlfriends, we're caregivers. We have a million different roles that life asks us to play and it can seem existentially unfair to try to boil all of that down to one definite chief aim. But Hill contended, and I certainly have come to believe very deeply by experience, that life makes a transcendent but tough bargain with us, and that is that we gain a lot of self-agency through the selection of one single aim. And I often tell people that focusing on one aim doesn't liberate us from the obligations that we have in all these different areas of life, but one well selected aim can cover a lot of different bases. The resources, for example, that are gained through the success of one aim can be applied to other areas of life.

Focused concentration seems to create force. We see that in nature, for example, water can be a mist, water can be an irresistible force, light can be a single photon, light can be a laser. And in terms of the individual psyche, we very often will get in some form or another exactly what is desired. It may come to us in unfamiliar or unexpected ways, but the bargain that life seems to strike with us is singularity of focus.

#### Mitch Horowitz Recommends:

Movie: *Stalker* directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979). Leave it to a Soviet-era director to produce the deepest insight into American-made mind metaphysics. A masterpiece.

Album: Jerry Lee Lewis, *Live at the Star Club, Hamburg* (1964). The Killer invented punk rock on this night.

People: Richard Smoley (b. 1956). A scholar of esotericism, Richard gave me the style—both critical and ingenious—for which I was searching when I began my career as a writer on the occult. Read anything by him.

Book: *Unbelievable* by Stacy Horn (2009). Tells the story of academic ESP research in a manner that captures both human pathos and the unseen history of modern science. Enthralling.

Teacher: Neville Goddard (1905-1972). Neville, an extreme idealist, taught that everything you experience—including these words—emanates from your own mind. Listen to any of his lectures for five minutes and see if you don't agree.

Name

Mitch Horowitz

Vocation

author and historian


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