



Emily Troschianko

## How to leave reality behind and dream big

It's easy to give an instruction like "dream big". It seems like it should also be easy to follow the instruction—delightfully easy, maybe even frighteningly easy. In my experience, though, the opposite is true: It's frighteningly hard to release our imaginations from the strictures of reality.

I've often run workshops where I give participants 5 minutes to sketch out their ideal working day. OK, so 5 minutes isn't a lot of time, but if all our eager imaginations needed was to be let off the leash, then it would be perfectly long enough to let those Greek island tavernas, those midday wild swims, those personal chef-cooked lunches, flow excitedly onto the page. In practice, what typically happens is that people write about sitting down in the library half an hour earlier, or checking Facebook a bit less, or taking an hour for reading in the early evening. These are lovely and potentially powerful things, but they're not really the stuff unfettered dreams are made of. They're attempts, essentially, to be realistic—even though the instruction was the opposite.

Acceptance is great. There's a lot of stuff that can't be changed that will make us miserable forever if we don't accept it, like our height—although I read a depressing story the other day about men getting height adjustment surgery (which involves breaking both femurs and inserting slowly expanding titanium rods)—or our sexual orientation or who our parents are). And there's some stuff that in theory could be changed but that probably is better reconciled to than changed (well, I guess height now falls into this category; also maybe accent—but I actually found this second category a lot harder to populate with examples than I expected when I first drafted the sentence). And then there are many many things that shouldn't be accepted as self-evident, because an individual's life, or the sum total of many human lives, would be better if it were not accepted.

All of human progress has come about as a result of a refusal to accept, and also as a result of an ability to accept to a certain degree—after all, if you aren't clear-sighted about reality you tend not to achieve much. But this is acceptance as a jumping-off point for refusal to accept. Many individuals have suffered enormously for refusing to accept—for example, for refusing to accept that women have fewer rights than men, or black people



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than white, or gay people than straight. Of course, sometimes reality is so brutally resistant that the benefits of these refusals come only to other humans who live later. But some of those individuals also benefited directly themselves from refusing the status quo. And in smaller senses all of us stand to benefit, every time we make a decision that says “I want more of x in my life” or less of y, or say “this isn’t working” or “this is unacceptable” or “I care more about this than about anything else”.

Often these refusals to accept take incremental forms. Just like its opposite, entropy (or subsidence into chaos), constructive change doesn’t happen all at once. And even getting meaningful increments of desirable change is hard: the defaults tend to be sticky. One way to get things to happen at all is to dream big. It’s to articulate an ideal that, sure, probably isn’t going to become your reality any time soon, but that gives you a reference point, a guiding light that isn’t always already accommodating itself to what you’ve decided (or not really decided but just assumed) is inevitable. Too little accommodation to reality and we can fall flat on our faces. But too much accommodation to reality (or to our assumptions about it) and dissatisfaction can easily become chronic.

Coming back to the 5 minutes to concoct your dream day, I did a similar task a while ago, as part of Ramit Sethi’s great business course Earnable

(nope, not a kickback; he very much does not need my recommendation). One of the first tasks—maybe the actual first—was to describe a perfect day in my “rich life” (a pivotal concept of his). What I wrote about wasn’t bad: It had quite a few substantial enhancements relative to my reality at the time, like being somewhere beautiful and sunny while I worked in the morning, having lunch outdoors, doing a different type of work in the afternoon, or having, as I put it, the “freedom to decide to go for a hike or meet a friend or something if I prefer”. But it took me a good few hours, as I thought about it more later that day, to realize that what I really meant my rich life means is living in southern California, or somewhere else with the kind of climate and mountains and certain other strong appeals that LA has for me. Once I recognised that, a whole other set of realizations flowed from it, some of which came back very specifically to the day itself: i.e. I want to eat all meals outdoors, not just lunch! At every turn, as I invited my dreams to grow, there were mental blocks: I thought, “OK, I’d like to rent an apartment in LA”, only belatedly realizing that’s not actually the dream, buying one is. And only some time after that, acknowledging that all right, house is the dream, not apartment. At the end of this stop-start little process, when the idea was that I email Ramit to tell him what I’d come up with, I wrote: “Amazing how much resistance there is to thinking really big. I feel really uneasy articulating this to someone else...”.



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**W**e often feel embarrassed dreaming big, especially when the dreams cost real money. We often feel embarrassed telling people about them, even if they're the people who have designed online courses specifically to help us dream. Your dreams might not cost significant money, but if they do, or even if they don't, you may well feel that it's somehow unseemly to articulate them, even to yourself.

**I**would like to invite you, in this first thing you do as part of this course, to set that unease aside, just for as long as it takes you to do this exercise. As I say, it doesn't apply only to money, the unease. It might be that when you really set your imagination loose, you realize it takes routes the sensible part of you isn't entirely OK with. Maybe what you imagine for your morning doesn't have your current partner in it; maybe it has someone else, or maybe it has no one else at all. Or maybe the kind of work you're setting your day up for is totally different from how you earn your living now. Or maybe you just have a lot of pet rats in this strange dream vision. Whatever it is that's striking in its difference from now, whether it comes easily to you all in a flood or takes time to prize out like my California dreaming, I think there is more danger in dreams forever unacknowledged than in dreams done the courtesy of getting them down on paper.

**S**o, here's the invitation. It's simple: take 20 minutes to describe your dream morning. How to actually follow the instruction? I suggest some practical steps that may help.

**F**irst, take the time to get yourself into a frame of mind and body that you think will make it easier for you to be honest with yourself, in this imaginative mode: a state in which you can think clearly and hopefully even enjoy doing so!

**T**his might mean relaxing yourself physically with warmth (a hot bath or shower, a cosy blanket on the sofa, some sunbathing time if the weather permits), or by going for a walk or doing something else active, or by having sex or doing some structured breathing. It might mean clearing your mind with meditation, if you already practise that. It might mean creating some alterations with music or alcohol or another psychoactive drug you know how to use responsibly and effectively. And/or it might mean changing your setting, to let your thoughts be more expansive: for example, places with wide horizons help us think big-picture; and unfamiliar places—or even unfamiliar angles on familiar places, like a different chair or different room in your home—help us think differently from usual.



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**W**hatever you choose, please then set an alarm and make yourself as uninterrupted as possible for the 20 minutes. This means getting all tech devices away from you and/or switched off, or on flight mode. It may mean asking others in your immediate environment not to disturb you because you're doing something you need to concentrate on, or doing it early or late or some other time you can more readily be alone. You could also go to a café or your bedroom. You could use a walk not just as preparation but as a context for doing the task—either pausing to scribble down notes as ideas come to you, or making a voice recording as you walk. In any case, do what you need to to protect this chunk of time for yourself in whatever ways feel right.

**Y**ou can pause the recording now and turn to the worksheet to make notes on your plans before continuing.

...

**Y**ou may also like to decide on something to do after your structured dreaming. Really imagining a different life, even only a morning-sized chunk of it, can be exhilarating, or exhausting, or upsetting, or all of these at once. It would be good not to continue straight on with this course, or plunge directly into work or something else cognitive, if you don't need to. If you can do some activity

that involves physical movement (even something as low-level as cooking or folding laundry, but maybe more substantial like a walk or yoga or something else you love), that will provide a nice context for coming more gently back to reality. You may also find, as I did, that the imagination continues to throw up ideas for you once you've let it off the leash, and these developments are more likely to happen, and to get noticed, if you're not doing some other cognitively demanding task at the same time.

**W**hat you do afterwards could follow on directly from what you did to set things up before or during, so staying in the café listening to music and people watching, for instance, or continuing your walk, but you might want to choose something quite different.

**S**o if you like, turn back to the worksheet to make a plan, and follow the rest of the instructions there for how to really dream—and then for how to sacrifice as little of the dream as possible, as you make the transition from the ultimate dream to reality via your “maximum viable ideal”.