



Emily Troscianko

A morning manifesto

Let me get one thing totally clear first up. This course is not some kind of ode to 5 a.m. green tea and how we can all get more of it. This is not about whether you're a "morning person" or not. We all are, in the sense that we all have "mornings", i.e. times closer to waking up than to going to bed, and we all get to make them good rather than crap if we want. I really don't care whether you wake up at 4:30 or 10:30, or whether you feel wide-awake from minute 1 or groggy until hour 2. This isn't about clock time. I mean, clock time matters in some other ways—I know what it's like to live mostly nocturnally, and it sucks—but in one crucial sense clock time doesn't matter at all: reduced contingency, or reduced dependence of one thing on everything that happened before, is about relative not absolute time. If I mean to write a birthday card to my friend today, it's a lot more likely to happen if I do it before anything else than if I leave it until evening. Sidelining clock time is also a handy way to ditch the moralizing. 6 a.m. yoga is not more impressive or morally upstanding than 9 a.m. yoga, and neither is more noble or admirable than 8 a.m. fried eggs, before or after or in absence of yoga, or pilates. The question is not how early you do anything, or how much of a cliché your choices are (some clichés, e.g. about "good mornings", are clichés for good reas-

ons, some not). The question is how well it works for you, because it gives you pleasure in itself that makes you want to wake up into it, and/or because it sets you up well for whatever comes next.

So, what was the very first thing that you did after you woke up this morning? Say it out loud (or under your breath.)

Why? Why was it that? Why was it that and not any other thing it could have been? Well, maybe you went to the loo because your bladder was full. Or maybe you put the kettle on because you were thirsty. Or maybe you scrolled through Twitter because your phone was in your hand because you'd just switched your alarm off.

What about the second thing? What was that? Why? Maybe you don't quite remember. Maybe the answers don't seem quite as satisfying: I just did it because I'd done the first thing, or I just did it because I always do.

The more time passes from the beginning of our day, the harder it is to give a clear and comprehensive answer to the question "why did I do



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that?”. Everything depends so directly on all the things that happened before that you probably have to tell the whole day’s story to explain most things properly. (“I checked WhatsApp just then because I’d got stuck with the paragraph I was writing” works, but it’s probably a fairly partial answer that should also include “because I didn’t have a reply from the person I was chatting with” and “I did this for the last four difficult patches I hit in my work today” and “I was hungry because I didn’t have enough lunch”, etc.)

But for that first thing in the morning, “I needed a piss” seems enough. Everything is simpler then. A night’s sleep is a reset: Of course it doesn’t mean you wake up a blank slate, but it does mean (if you’re lucky) that you wake up with the slate of your mind having been washed a little cleaner, yesterday’s scrawls on it a little less distracting. You wake up and your mind hasn’t done waking-style thinking for 6 hours, or 8, or 10. For all those hours, your body hasn’t been vertical, your eyes haven’t been open, your heart rate and brain waves have been slow, your body has been able to get on with tissue repair and protein synthesis, the vessels in your brain’s glymphatic system have been able to clear lots of waste from the central nervous system... Lots of cool evolved reset-type activity has been happening, and you are different for it.

So you open your eyes, you feel your body again, and you have options. What are you going to do with them?

This is what makes the first-thing-in-the-morning time fascinating. We love hearing about other people’s morning routines because this is the part of the day that you choose more than any other—because there are fewer prior conditions here. And what precisely we choose tells us a massive amount about who we are. I imagine a morning-habit version of the impressive neuroimaging studies that predict with high levels of confidence what movie someone is watching from analysing their brain activity. Presented with 3-sentence descriptions of all my family and close friends’ morning routines, I bet I could match description to person. (I now really want to do this! What an amazing party game!) Habits tell us a lot about a person, and first-thing habits tell us most. Habits make us who we are, and first-thing habits more than any other kind. After all, pretty much everything reverts to the mean by lunchtime.

And then, still on the power of mornings, there’s the flipside of everything being less determined by what came before, the earlier it is: the fact that the earlier it is, the more other stuff in your day it’s having effects on. What you do and don’t do in those first few minutes after groggily coming to—or zingily leaping up, or something in between—de-



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termines a lot of what else will happen in your day, and how it will feel.

So the first thing is really potent. For me personally it's been through some pretty profound transformations. In my early 20s I had an eating disorder, and for most of that time I slept through the mornings entirely, or I saw them from the wrong end, just before I fell asleep, often waking up only just before dark in the winter. In this and most other ways, the days of my young-adulthood were something to be got through. After washing, cleaning teeth, getting dressed, and packing a pannier full of the stupid number of library books I for some reason always used to cart round with me, the first thing I'd always do was go on a bike ride, just so I'd done it, and everything else I did in my day was just a way to give myself an illusion of having done the things I had to before, at long last, early in the morning, I finally got to eat. This was not a first-thing routine designed by me. It was designed by my illness, and it felt awful.

Then I got better, and I fell in love, and the man who moved in with me helped me learn the pleasures of multiple cups of tea in bed, with or without either laptop or sex, and I remembered how much I loved cooked breakfasts, and I restarted a morning journalling habit in those years too. In many ways the routines then look similar to the ones I have now, but they were always under pressure from the

sense that I ought to be working as many hours as possible, was always behind, had always committed to more than I could manage, always had a long unshrinking to-do list breathing down my neck. I defended those teas in bed, but I also didn't manage to prevent all kinds of work stress from encroaching on them.

The latest phase of my morning routines has been shaped most of all by deciding against an academic career, as well as by running a writing programme and wanting to get a deadline-free book written. Moving out of academia (which felt like partly being pushed, partly like jumping) has let me finally work through the backlog of unwise past decisions and feel like at last I'm really starting from where I am. And turning my attention to writing, for my own reasons and to help the graduate students I was supporting, made me try out doing 45 minutes or so of writing before any other work inputs got in: before phone on, before an email check, before wifi on. That was the way that particular book got written, and I don't know how on earth it would have otherwise.

So OK, I'm teasing here, aren't I. What's actually in my routine, and why? Well, it normally starts with getting dressed for a walk to the toilet block here in the marina where my boat is moored, because my bowels are beautifully predictable. The 1-minute walk doesn't al-



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ways feel nice, if it's raining or freezing cold out, but it does wake me up. Then I wash a bit and brush and floss my teeth and wash my face and put on some sunscreen (all of that happens now because it helps me feel more alert). And then I use the Down Dog app for 10 minutes of yoga or HIIT (to get me connecting with my body and continue the waking-up), or else I get back into bed and write my diary while the boat warms up a bit, and then do the 10 minutes afterwards. Before I start journalling I put the kettle on, and while I'm journalling (which I do to help me process the day before, learn anything from it, set it behind me, and feel calmer and readier for today), the kettle is boiling and the pot of tea brewing. With my two large cups of milky decaf tea (which are to get me rehydrated and complete the waking-up process, and because it's yummy, and because caffeine doesn't work well for me—more on this in the Top Tips section!), I do something meaningful, usually writing of some kind—sometimes in bed, sometimes at the table. After this, I look at email and/or my phone and deal with anything quick (to get it off my plate). Then I make breakfast, usually either porridge (made with whole milk, protein powder, and an egg stirred in—everyone I mention this to thinks it sounds weird and gross, but it's great) or fried mushrooms, halloumi, eggs, and usually a buttered bagel or similar (because both these options taste excellent and keep me feeling sated and energy-filled until lunchtime). And then anything can happen to the day, and often does. But by then,

this stuff has happened, and I've done something I care about, and I've given the rest of the day a good chance of being decent. This is similar on weekends, but I might skip the meaningful writing and do more admin-y things instead, or read fiction or something else in bed, or get straight up and do some housework or head out if I have morning plans. The standard weekday version including some writing time takes between 2.5 and 3 hours in total.

All this is beautiful and important in itself, for me: Even when life is tough, it gives me something lovely to begin my day with. And especially when life is tough, it creates precious robustness that wouldn't exist otherwise. It's been one of the main things that's kept me afloat during a painful extended breakup. It's also been important for me way beyond these usually-protected morning hours themselves. Designing this part of my day has been at the core of coming to understand what it means to design my life. These days my professional life consists of elements that are mostly directly chosen by me. The main components include coaching and running events, various kinds of writing, academic research and the associated activities, and designing courses like this one. The hours I work and don't work are basically 100% flexible, which allows me to spend daytime weekday hours at the spa and/or the gym and the bar attached to the spa and gym, where I like to work with a latte amidst all the retired people there for their coffee



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mornings. And there's my lifting platform next to the boat that I can head out to use any time I need an injection of a bit of fresh air and blood flow. And I have the months I spend in LA when I want or need more sun and mountains and other kinds of Californian pleasure than the UK offers. And, back in England, I even have the option to take my boat up the river Thames to my favourite field and moor up there for a while, just because. This level of freedom didn't come about accidentally. I mean, in the end everything is luck, but I've prioritized creating what one of my great influences, Ramit Sethi, calls the "rich life"—working out what this means for me, and doing my best to live it. After losing a decade to anorexia, it's clear to me that life is too short not to.

Your freedoms needn't look or feel anything like mine. You'll have different constraints, different preferences, different priorities. But I'd like you to take seriously the freedoms you do already have—by definition, the option you have to choose to act on them. This is the other thing about mornings, which can feel like a contradiction to all I said earlier about them being the most chosen part of our day. They also tend to be the most routine part. And it's in the nature of routines to make us feel they're not negotiable. But they are, and routines are where negotiating—which might involve reflecting, observing, questioning, challenging, experimenting—is more efficiently powerful than anywhere else: because if you make one

change (that sticks) you get a change to that bit of your day indefinitely, as opposed to if you just decide not to go out tonight and that decision affects only today. So yes, mornings tend to vary less than other times of day, and yes mornings are the most alterable part of the day and have the most effect on other parts of day when we do alter them—and these facts are not the mutual contradictions they might seem. They all arise from the same crucial point that being asleep creates a unit of time that feels separate from the past such unit—one day is separate from the next.

Acknowledging that we have options, about our mornings or about anything else, often feels really uncomfortable. It's so easy to feel that all the accumulated ways that life has somehow come to be are not optional now; that this is how it has to be. But that's often, I think, a lie we tell ourselves to spare ourselves the bother of making any actual decisions rather than continuing on autopilot—as well as the discomfort of wondering whether we should have done so years ago, and the discomfort of saying that we'd prefer some stuff to be different and then realizing that it's not easy or maybe doesn't currently even seem possible to make it different in that way. Settling for not too bad is a massively common way of avoiding these interlocking discomforts. To put it bluntly, "It's not that bad really, I'm not being raped in a basement in war-torn famine-struck Africa so I shouldn't complain" is



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structurally what this kind of avoidance amounts to.

As I hope the exaggeration conveys, I consider this kind of reasoning to be complete rubbish. Life is so fucking short. My father Tom died unexpectedly of heart failure, asleep in an Amsterdam hotel room, at 58. If that's me, I have only 18 years left. I am sure as hell not going to mess around doing things I don't want to do, with people I don't want to be with. No one benefits if I do. Since I recovered from 10 years of being as much dead as alive, and since Tom died, I've been living with the knowledge that this could all be over any day now, from two different angles. The first kind of acute awareness of transience is: this is how life can be truly not worth living, and drift by so lacking in light and shape and colour that looking back it telescopes into nothing at all. And the second way I'm aware of massive brevity is: my father's way of living showed me how life can be as full of aliveness as anything imaginable, and then over, between falling asleep in that hotel bed after a lovely evening strolling the canals, and then probably going to the loo in the small hours (the post-mortem told us, based on his bladder contents), and then never waking up.

And it's funny, this dual awareness of how soon this will all be over for me crystallizes in many ways, but one of the most important is: I never set an alarm clock. I mean, I do if I have to leave

for an airport at stupid o'clock, or if there's some good reason why I've scheduled something with someone else for relatively early morning. But I fucking hate alarm clocks. I hate how an alarm clock disturbs my sleep as soon as it starts, because I know I have a time limit on it. I hate how I'm half-awake before it goes off, doubly wasting proper sleep time because I know it's shortened. I hate how even though I'm half-awake it feels like a jolt. I hate how I resent being awake just because my body didn't choose to wake up now. I hate how I then want to turn over and curl up and carry on sleeping but never can, because my body is very good at being almost immediately fully alert. It's all crap. What I like is waking because my body is ready to. Or because some geese are doing some very loud mating rituals right outside the boat, at a push. Though they are also annoying.

Anyway. It's funny to reflect on how crucial something as apparently trivial as alarm or no alarm has been to how I've come to think about what it means to construct a life that I want to be living. How my days unfolds is different thanks to alarm or no alarm and all the other decisions that coalesce around that one (e.g. how early I schedule things, what kind of work I do). You may not give a damn about alarm clocks but have some other non-negotiable: maybe time to sit in your garden or walk your children to school or whatever else it is. The point is, these things matter. It isn't first-world softy priv-



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ilege to suggest that they do—or if it is, let’s all take the privilege of choice seriously. This is “I’m a human being, existence was inflicted on me, I have little time before I am nothing again, and if I don’t make this as good as it can be, sure as hell no one else is going to.” Whatever our starting points, I think this is true and important.

And so it feels surreal to me when, as quite often happens, I speak to someone who doesn’t even understand the question “what does your morning routine involve?”. The last time this happened, the woman, a coaching client, simply couldn’t describe what she did first in her day. When I really pushed, she said something about getting dressed, and about going downstairs and making food. But there was a total absence of anything curated there: things were just happening, and it had never occurred to her that it could be any other way, let alone that there could or should be anything pleasurable in any of it. She was also vaguely appalled by my 2.5-hour routine. What time do you have to get up to have time for that? she asked, clearly imagining some hideous pre-dawn alarm. I said I get up around 7-7:30, whenever I wake up, because I’ve arranged things so I rarely have commitments until mid-morning. So, we had a little collision of ships in the night: her never having conceived of the idea of making this kind of decision about her day, me having forgotten what it was like not to have, even though that was me for so many years.

And so, we come back to what you want this actively designed morning of yours to be. You’re interested enough in thinking about what your mornings could be for you to have invested in this course, so you clearly have a sense that this might be important.

You might feel like the major payoffs of a morning reset are going to be for your work, and how you set yourself up for it. Or you might be doing some long difficult process like recovery from an illness, and feel that you want or need the stabilizing power that comes from knowing how your day is going to begin, and making it conducive to recovery rather than antagonistic to it. It could be that you feel vaguely dissatisfied with how most days or weeks pan out and what you do with them, and you want to turn vague dissatisfaction into something better. Or maybe you have the uneasy sense that autopilot is driving almost everything, and that you haven’t even asked any proper questions for years, or ever.

Whatever your starting point, I want you to think about the prospects open to you here not as being about generating about some rigid joyless replacement of the status quo. This is about dreaming up the kind of structure that you can relax happily into, whether every weekday or just on a Monday morning or a Sunday morning, or on those par-



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ticular days when you wash your hair or have to go to the office or have a working-from-home day.... You get what you want by giving the new routine just enough non-negotiability that it actually survives the onslaught of reality, more often than not.

I hope that you'll find both the design process and the output that results interesting, satisfying, and worth every minute and every ounce of effort and discomfort. These will probably be involved, but in the end I hope that clarity and joy will for you too.