



Beating Groundhog Day Syndrome

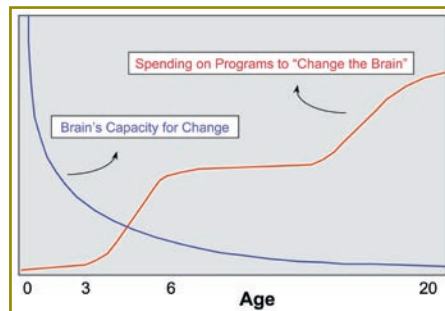
If we really want it, 2010 can be a radically transformative year where we express the parts of us that we most admire. What stands in our way? What do we want from life anyway? Based on my experience, setting goals and keeping them is the only way to move toward the life we want. But why is it so easy to set goals and so hard to keep them? Just look at the graph.

As adults, why would we set goals anyway? If we are happy, what good are goals? Don't goals get in the way of our spontaneity and being in the "now"? Aren't I complete and whole just the way I am? Even more scary, what if I set a goal and miss out on something that comes up as I am pursuing the goal? The fact is, we have lots of excuses to not change and to not set goals. Rationalization — God's greatest gift to humankind — makes it really easy to allow goals to slip away, with last year looking a lot like the year before, and life feeling a bit like the movie *Groundhog Day*.

In my very basic observation of human nature, I have seen three seemingly positive characteristics that get in the way of setting and reaching goals:

First, most people have some elements of an "optional" personality. They like to keep their options open, so committing to going out to dinner next week (let alone taking a better job or marrying) are big commitments to be avoided, undermined, or overanalyzed. I remember walking through the streets of Paris with a card-carrying optional personality for two or three hours, looking for the perfect "breakfast place."

Second, some people are just happy. You might wonder what is wrong with that. And perhaps being naturally good-natured and cheerful is nothing to be concerned about, but it can cause us to stay in unhealthy relationships and mediocre jobs, eat junk



food, and just float mellowly through life.

The third thing that can slow down our goal-setting and change is having a broad skill set. I work with (and know) lots of very high-functioning, brilliant people who can do just about anything well. The problem with being so good at everything is that often, the broadly skilled end up not doing what really "rocks" them. They end up in a career or job chosen by their parents, a teacher, or other adults who told them what they were good at. A dentist who hated his job said to me recently, "Paul, I let an 18-year-old decide my career."

Of course, no amount of understanding about what gets in the way of our goals and our ability to make or keep commitments has any value if there is no desire. We learn from Taoism that desire is influenced by its opposite. All I know is that we usually need a carrot to motivate us, so contrary to what the Taoist might proclaim, we don't just flop between our desire and desirelessness. Love, of course, is the

best motivator. It worked well for Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and Mother Teresa and can work for us. If we are mired in our own happiness, treading on an endless loop of *Groundhog Days*, then we need to have goals that are capable of motivating us to action. One of my teachers used to scream at the top of his lungs at me, "Be on fire with desire!" He allowed no room for excuses, options, or being conservative. He simply said, "Place a fire under your goals, and work like crazy to get it!"

I will venture to say that most readers of this column can relate to all of the reasons to avoid working on goals. I also will venture to say that most readers of *Spirituality & Health* are, at their core, what might be called radically responsible people. We simply need to do good and not do harm. How do we want to express our radical responsibility? What do we wish to accomplish? What ills of the world do we wish to fix? Poverty, injustice, sadness, laziness, victim thinking, child abuse, environmental issues, our personal budgeting, saving for retirement, enjoying our friends, teaching a kid to read, planning our new career, buying a home, having financial security, expressing love to everyone — all can be issues to motivate us to move forward, firing up the radical responsibility that is built into our DNA. Once we have the desire, and we work and relax into the rhythms of our life's responsibilities, our goals — and our life — will naturally fall into place.

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