



IN SIGHT

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RETHINKING PROCRASTINATION

People do not procrastinate because they are lazy. People procrastinate because they are afraid they will not be able to make an exceptional effort or because they dread the demands of doing so. Once they realize that an average effort is always good enough and that truly exceptional efforts rarely make a difference, they will never procrastinate again.

CONTAMINATED LANGUAGE

Here's some startling news: everything in your head is not you. The little voices picking on your looks and intelligence – telling you life would be great if only you were a little smarter, a little better looking, a little wealthier, a little more exceptional – are phantoms and liars.

When you talk to yourself inside your head, or talk to others, the words you use have a physical impact. When that phantom says, "You look fat," your stomach tightens, pulse quickens, and breath shortens. You feel a little sick.

Contaminated language causes these unpleasant physical symptoms. You find it in the words used by some law professors, opposing counsel, judges, coworkers, or anyone who doesn't have your best interests at heart. The words they use give you uncomfortable physical sensations and cause procrastination. That's why when you procrastinate, you feel physically ill.

Practice saying "No!" whenever you hear contaminated language and remind yourself that the people who use it do not have your best interests at heart. That means you do not have to take what they are saying at face value.

EXCEPTIONAL VS. AVERAGE

Most law students think they got into law school because they're exceptional. That's because

most families teach their children those words. Some parents shout, "You better improve if you want to make it in this world!" Others sigh, "My baby is so exceptional!" Many lawyers believe that success in practice demands that they be even more exceptional. They are incorrect.

Exceptional doesn't mean *quality*. *Average* doesn't mean *mediocrity*. *Hard* doesn't mean *good* and *easy* doesn't mean *bad*. *Exceptional* and *average* are terms of frequency. *Hard* and *easy* are terms of difficulty. Look these words up in the dictionary and see for yourself. Pay attention to the physical symptoms you experience as you read each definition. Save *easy* for last.

A person born with lots of talent may work hard making an exceptional effort on a project and still produce a mediocre result. Another person with less talent, who has developed skills by practicing, may tackle the same project, put out very little effort, and produce an excellent result.

Exceptions, by definition, are things that only happen occasionally. Average is what you can keep going every day – what you can rely on. Things you can rely on every day always make more of a difference than things that only happen every now and then.

None of this is "mere semantics." Words come into the language to do a job. They go on doing that job whether you want them to or not. They have a real life impact on listeners.

FINDING YOUR AVERAGE

Everyone has a high and low average. Your low average is what you can keep going even when you're tired or not feeling well. Your high average is what you can keep going day after day when you're feeling great and really performing well.

We all have the ability, through practice, to raise our average slowly. The only thing standing in our

way is contaminated language. It tells us our every effort must be all or nothing. If we can't do an exceptional job right now, we shouldn't even try. It's the language well-meaning parents tell their children – "Always do your best" – when that is neither possible nor desirable.

One night the fire alarm at a hotel where I was staying went off at four in the morning. I was scheduled to begin teaching an all-day seminar just five hours later. If this had happened ten years earlier, my phantoms would have been going wild, filling my head with contaminated language. "Teaching today will be a disaster! I'll be exhausted! My students will hate me!"

But that night my phantoms were silent. Instead of descending into an emotional black hole during the half-hour it took to fix the alarm, I passed the time chatting with another hotel guest, a delightful gentleman from Ireland. I knew the skills I developed through practice made teaching within my average possible, even after a sleepless night.

Knowing my average and steadily raising it through practice helps me to keep my phantoms from making me nervous.

To get a license to practice law you have to "average" throughout law school and for the bar exam at a level that allows you to achieve admission to the Bar. You did. You earned it. If you make the mistake of believing you are a lawyer because you are exceptional, you may feel you have not earned it. You may even think you are a fraud who somehow faked it through college and law school and may fear your secret will be discovered.

Successful lawyers become successful by practicing their average throughout their careers. Trying to be more exceptional produces anxiety, fear, unhappiness, and alienation from others. Practicing your average could potentially save your marriage, your clients, your sanity, and maybe even your life.

THE COST OF BEING EXCEPTIONAL

Millions of people are born every day with wonderful abilities. These talents are so common that calling them exceptional is silly. But talent, no matter how great, seldom makes a difference if it

isn't practiced. Practice equals skills. Skills may also be honed by making sporadic exceptional efforts, but only at the terrible cost of pursuing a binge-and-purge approach to life. Tackling jobs with exceptionality means you'll always pay too high a price for differences you make. Exceptionality often lasts a lifetime, or shortens one, because it's both sneaky and addictive.

If you believe the voices when they say that you have done a good job because you are exceptional, you are left with two ways of thinking about yourself. You may decide you are special – better than others. Or you may feel you have not earned your success. Usually, exceptionality phantoms will Mutt and Jeff you, telling you one moment that you are special and the next that you are worthless. Either way, you will wind up miserable and friendless.

THE REWARDS OF AVERAGE

You will never fail because you have not been exceptional enough, but you might fail if you believe you must be exceptional to succeed. If you became a lawyer to make a difference and think that making differences and being close to others will bring joy and meaning to your life, your average will always be good enough. This approach may lead you to great success as a lawyer, or it may lead you to decide practicing law is not for you. It will certainly lead to happiness and meaning in your life.

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