

The Best Goal is No Goal

by Leo Babauta

The idea of having concrete, achievable goals seem to be deeply ingrained in our culture. I know I lived with goals for many years, and in fact a big part of my writings here on Zen Habits are about how to set and achieve goals.

These days, however, I live without goals, for the most part. It's absolutely liberating, and contrary to what you might have been taught, it absolutely doesn't mean you stop achieving things.

It means you stop letting yourself be limited by goals.

Consider this common belief: "You'll never get anywhere unless you know where you're going." This seems so common sensical, and yet it's obviously not true if you stop to think about it. Conduct a simple experiment: go outside and walk in a random direction, and feel free to change directions randomly. After 20 minutes, an hour ... you'll be somewhere! It's just that you didn't know you were going to end up there.

And there's the rub: you have to open your mind to going places you never expected to go. If you live without goals, you'll explore new territory. You'll learn some unexpected things. You'll end up in surprising places. That's the beauty of this philosophy, but it's also a difficult transition.

Today, I live mostly without goals. Now and then I start coming up with a goal, but I'm letting them go. Living without goals hasn't ever been an actual goal of mine ... it's just something I'm learning that I enjoy more, that is incredibly freeing, that works with the lifestyle of following my passion that I've developed.

The problem with goals

In the past, I'd set a goal or three for the year, and then sub-goals for each month. Then I'd figure out what action steps to take each week and each day, and try to focus my day on those steps.

Unfortunately, it never, ever works out this neatly. You all know this. You know you need to work on an action step, and you try to keep the end goal in mind to motivate yourself. But this action step might be something you dread, and so you procrastinate. You do other work, or you check email or Facebook, or you goof off.

And so your weekly goals and monthly goals get pushed back or side-tracked, and you get discouraged because you have no discipline. And goals are too hard to achieve. So now what? Well, you review your goals and reset them. You create a new set of sub-goals and action plans. You know where you're going, because you have goals!

Of course, you don't actually end up getting there. Sometimes you achieve the goal and then you feel amazing. But most of the time you don't achieve them and you blame it on yourself.

Here's the secret: the problem isn't you, it's the system! Goals as a system are set up for failure.

Even when you do things exactly right, it's not ideal. Here's why: you are extremely limited in your actions. When you don't feel like doing something, you have to force yourself to do it. Your path is chosen, so you don't have room to explore new territory. You have to follow the plan, even when you're passionate about something else.

Some goal systems are more flexible, but nothing is as flexible as having no goals.

How it works

So what does a life without goals look like? In practice, it's very different than one with goals.

You don't set a goal for the year, nor for the month, nor for the week or day. You don't obsess about tracking, or actionable steps. You don't even need a to-do list, though it doesn't hurt to write down reminders if you like.

What do you do, then? Lay around on the couch all day, sleeping and watching TV and eating Ho-Hos? No, you simply do. You find something you're passionate about, and do it. Just because you don't have goals doesn't mean you do nothing — you can create, you can produce, you can follow your passion.

And in practice, this is a wonderful thing: you wake up and do what you're passionate about. For me, that's usually blogging, but it can be writing a novel or an ebook or my next book or creating a course to help others or connecting with incredible people or spending time with my wife or playing with my kids. There's no limit, because I'm free.

In the end, I usually end up achieving more than if I had goals, because I'm always doing something I'm excited about. But whether I achieve or not isn't the point at all: all that matters is that I'm doing what I love, always.

I end up in places that are wonderful, surprising, great. I just didn't know I would get there when I started.

Quick questions

Question from a reader: Isn't having no goals a goal?

Quick answer: It can be a goal, or you can learn to do it along the journey, by exploring new methods. I'm always learning new things (like having no goals) without setting out to learn them in the first place.

Another question from a reader: So how do you make a living?

Answer: Passionately! Again, not having goals doesn't mean you stop doing things. In fact, I do many things, all the time, but I do them because I love doing them.

Tips for living without goals

I am not going to give you a how-to manual for living without goals — that would be absurd. I can't teach you what to do — you need to find your own path.

But I can share some things I've learned, in hopes that it will help you:

Start small. You don't need to drastically overhaul your life in order to learn to live without goals. Just go a few hours without predetermined goals or actions. Follow your passion for those hours. Even an hour will do.

Grow. As you get better at this, start allowing yourself to be free for longer periods — half a day or a whole day or several days. Eventually you'll feel confident enough to give up on certain goals and just do what you love.

Not just work. Giving up goals works in any area of your life. Take health and fitness: I used to have specific fitness goals, from losing weight or bodyfat to running a marathon to increasing my squat. Not anymore: now I just do it because I love it, and I have no idea where that will take me. It works brilliantly, because I always enjoy myself.

Let go of plans. Plans are not really different than goals. They set you on a predetermined path. But it's incredibly difficult to let go of living with plans, especially if you're a meticulous planner like I am. So allow yourself to plan, when you feel you need to, but slowly feel free to let go of this habit.

Don't worry about mistakes. If you start setting goals, that's OK. There are no mistakes on this journey — it's just a learning experience. If you live without goals and end up failing, ask yourself if it's really a failure. You only fail if you don't get to where you wanted to go — but if you don't have a destination in mind, there's no failure.

It's all good. No matter what path you find, no matter where you end up, it's beautiful. There is no bad path, no bad destination. It's only different, and different is wonderful.

Don't judge, but experience.

And finally

Always remember: the journey is all. The destination is beside the point.

'A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.' ~Lao Tzu