

The Importance of a Strong Routine

by Bill Talley

I have always struggled, and still do, with the minutiae of everyday life – things like wearing my retainer. It's so easy, irresistible even, to say to myself, "It's been a long day, I'll cut myself some slack now, and be sure to wear it tomorrow." But when tomorrow comes around, it will have been just as long and exhausting as today, and I'm likely to make the same excuse again. This will become part of my routine. Not only will it become part of my routine to not wear my retainer, but it will become part of my routine to let myself make excuses. I'll make a habit of making concessions to my lesser nature, incorporating a small but significant failure into every day and sowing a habit that will soon manifest itself in my character and become part of my psyche.

It's hard to imagine, at first, how something as small as not wearing my retainer one night can lead to my eventual descent from being a human of character and capability. But by degrading my opinion of myself with small daily failures, I'll breed an expectation of failure, which will have a very real effect on my willpower and my ability to achieve the goals I set forth for myself.

In his recent popular book *The Power of Habit*, New York Times reporter Charles Duhigg describes willpower as being like a muscle. It can be strong or weak and have varying levels of endurance. It gets tired when used heavily, and, most importantly, it can be strengthened with training. In one study, test subjects were given programs, which required that they keep track of their finances meticulously, recording each transaction they made. In doing so, they were forced to exercise a small amount of willpower with great frequency. As you might expect, the subjects were more careful spenders and had a better hold on their finances as a result. By the end of the study period, however, the average subject consumed two fewer cups of coffee, two fewer alcoholic beverages, and, I'm not sure how this is even possible, for smokers, fifteen fewer cigarettes daily. Duhigg cites several similar studies, and the results are the same. When subjects exercised their willpower more frequently in one area, they were more disciplined in other parts of their lives.

Let's imagine, just for the sake of argument, that I already have a nasty and persistent habit of not wearing my retainer. It's deeply engrained into my routine. How can I succeed against the indomitable forces of repetition and practice, this failure I've rehearsed daily until I can hardly remember a time that came before?

Well, suppose I start each day by making my bed. It will only take thirty seconds, and I'll do it when I'm energetic, fresh, and hopeful, with the whole day ahead of me, when I'm most ambitious. I'll set a small goal, one I know I can achieve. I'll make my bed tomorrow morning. Just tomorrow morning, not every morning, or even any other morning after that. Just tomorrow morning. Tomorrow rolls around, and I wake up, rub my eyes, and straighten out my bed. It's a

small but significant victory – a moment of success injected into a schedule filled with failures and uncertainties. And, it's so easy. The next day, when I wake up, I figure, might as well do it again. Soon, it's part of my routine, and I'm doing it for a reason. That little victory becomes part of my psyche, and I start every day by reminding myself that I am readily capable of success no matter how small this one is.

When it comes to maintaining a routine, the only day that matters is today. If I tell myself I'm going to work out every day for the next six months, I'm setting myself up for failure. If I miss even one day over the course of those six months, I will have failed to achieve my goal, and that's a crushing psychological pressure to put on myself. Even if I do manage to go to the gym, afterwards I'm left with the uncertainty and doubt of knowing I still might fail. On the other hand, if I just set out to do that same thing *today*, I'm likely to succeed. When I am successful, I get a boost of confidence – I did it! – and I associate working out with a feeling of victory and accomplishment, which makes me even more likely to do it again the next day.

There are a variety of quotes which suggest, in so many words, that it is better to aim high and fail than to aim low and succeed. While this may be somewhat true when it comes to the lofty, longer term goals like becoming an astronaut or curing cancer, it is no way to go about living life each day. No one becomes an astronaut without first conquering the unsexy challenges of eating right, getting good sleep, exercising regularly, and having the willpower to complete the various tasks they set forth each day. In the everyday realm, it *is* often better to aim low and succeed than to aim high and fail. I don't mean to suggest that your only goal for the day should be to make it out of your pajamas and eat some food – although, if that's where you're starting from, power to you. What I mean is that by setting goals for yourself that you know you can't achieve, you'll feed that cycle of failure which starves your willpower muscle and makes you more likely to fail again.

In the winter of 2015-2016, I was deeply, severely depressed – so much so that I stopped going to class, and eventually had to withdraw from the University of Delaware. I came home from school and started from square one. My daily goals really did include things like taking a shower, eating, or simply leaving the house. But by defining those things as successes, rather than thinking in terms of what I wasn't doing, I was able to shift the way I thought of myself. I was able to stop thinking of someone who used to be capable but had ceased to be, and I started thinking of myself as someone who was improving every day. This attitude of micro-incremental self-betterment has become my most valuable tool as a human being, and in less than two years, I've gone from complete and total despondence to feeling the best I think I've ever felt. If I had clung to some lofty goals I set for myself, I never would have been able to recover from that depression and I certainly wouldn't be standing here today. Don't get me wrong. I have a long way left to go before I'm the person I would like to one day be. This technique of setting tiny goals won't make you superman or give you more hours in a day. It's most effective when used as a tool to develop a strong routine. For each of us, there are things which we absolutely dread and loathe doing: wearing a retainer, or writing a paper, or going to the gym. But think about the

hard things we do every day at camp (cold showers, kitchen duty, crew practice) and how much less thought you give to their difficulty after you've been doing them for several weeks. If you do something difficult every day, it becomes easy. Giving this Tree Talk definitely isn't easy. Frankly, I've been nervous about it for months. So yesterday evening, I came out here and gave it to an imaginary audience. Tree Talks are now part of my routine. This particular routine is only two days old, but it's a lot easier today than it was yesterday. If I gave a Tree Talk again tomorrow, it would be even easier, and by the end of next week, Tree Talks wouldn't be difficult anymore. They would just be part of my day.

Pasquaney is like a boot camp for willpower and routine. We do the same difficult things every single day, and just a few days into camp they cease to be difficult. Think about it. When you're at home, and you've just finished making lunch, and you have dishes to do, the thought probably crosses your mind that you might put off those dishes until later. But at camp, kitchen duty is easy because the thought that you might not do it never comes up. It's deeply engrained into a strong routine, so you just do it. It's not a drag because you do it every day.

I'm sure many of you, especially those who have been here for a few years, feel your best at camp. There is no magic to this phenomenon; I would argue that the single most important reason for that is the strength of our routine. I urge each of you to remember this Tree Talk when, at the end of the summer, we talk about taking camp home. Because camp, at the end of it all, is really just practice, training, strengthening that willpower muscle, and rehearsing a strong routine, so that when you get home, you can apply the fruits of your training in the outside world. Pay attention to how the Pasquaney routine makes you better and reconstruct it at home.