



FINANCIAL PREPAREDNESS

"One of life's most painful moments comes when we must admit that we didn't do our homework, that we are not prepared." ~ Merlin Olsen

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The Art of Taking Action

If you've read any books about personal productivity/effectiveness, you're familiar with subjects like clarity, [goals](#), intentions, [gratitude](#), [affirmations](#), visualization, mindfulness, thinking time, [planning](#), [reviews](#), etc. Although those are all great concepts to know about and practice, there is only one thing that can get things done, move the needle and pay the bills: the physical act of taking action.

I just finished reading [The Art of Taking Action: Lessons From Japanese Psychology](#) (4 stars, published in 2014) by Gregg Krech, who runs the [ToDo Institute](#). It's a nice collection of short essays about the importance of taking action and the various obstacles that often prevent us from doing so.

Regarding the primary question "How do you know what action to take?", Krech notes that "Paying attention to the world around you is a priceless skill....the more you notice, the more you will be clear about what needs doing." When I first came up with my list of values back in the early '90s, the first was *clarity*, which allows you to see a situation clearly and determine what you should do about it. I liked the definition of it that I heard from the soundtrack of the movie *Apocalypse Now*: (spoken in Martin Sheen's voice) "seeing clearly what there is to be done and doing it directly, quickly, awake, looking at it."

Regarding procrastination, Krech writes, “We can't do everything that we would like to do or that needs to be done. So each moment we choose what to do, we're not doing everything else. This is the art of procrastinating [which] isn't something you need to stop doing—it's something you need to get better at.” Additionally, knowing your purpose “is a good way to check on whether what you are doing is what really needs to be done.”

One of the three concepts from Japanese psychology that the book covers is Naikan, which involves asking three questions: (1) What have I received from ____? (2) What have I given to ____? and (3) What troubles and difficulties have I caused ____? Periodically asking yourself these questions “will often give you new or different ideas about what you need to do.” I recently read that focusing on others instead of yourself will help get you unstuck and past emotional states such as depression.

Doing just about anything worthwhile in life involves risk. As an investment advisor, I evaluate and take risks every day (so I also consider myself a risk manager). Krech provides the following equation: **Reflection + Risk = Contribution** and then writes, “Meaningful contributions are more often the outcome of taking time to reflect and then make changes that involve risk.”

Another practice from Japanese psychology covered by the book is Morita therapy. Krech writes, “...it's very important for us to recognize the distinction between thoughts...and actions. There is a world of difference between the two....Good intentions are wonderful but I'd rather have a small portion of compassionate action than a barn full of ideas about kindness. Intentions don't necessarily result in action.”

The book includes an essay by Shinichi Suzuki called “To Merely Want to Do Something Is Not Enough.” He wrote, “The habit of action...is the most important thing we must acquire. Life's success or failure actually depends on this one thing.”

There's also an interesting essay by Linda Krech called “The Price That Others Pay” for our procrastination. These costs include rushing, waiting (“When we keep others waiting, we are not being respectful of their lives. And time is the most precious commodity that any of us have.”), ripple effects (“We are never privy to the ways that our lateness ripples out into the world.”) and the karma of things undone. She writes that “...we will always be vulnerable to that which is uncontrollable and unpredictable [which is why [you should prep](#), and thus] we need to plan for the unexpected, as much as possible.”

In an essay called “Show Up,” Patricia Madson writes, “One of the simplest approaches to taking action is to get your body in the right position....Your commitment is just to be there. You're not committing to doing anything.” Usually when you show up, you end up taking some action, and Madson writes, “I often do more than I planned to do. That's because the suffering caused by anticipation is worse than the actual reality. We actually create more suffering for ourselves by procrastinating than we would if we just jumped into what we need to do.”

In an essay about the difference between your mind and body, Gregg Krech writes, “Another difference between the worlds of thought and action involves effort. The world

of thought is a world of little effort....But the real world often requires lots of effort...your mind lives in a lazy world where it can think anything it wants to because it doesn't have to act. Your body, on the other hand, has to be very discriminating about what it does because just about everything requires energy and that's a precious commodity for your body.”

Regarding resolutions (as in the kind you make for a new year), Krech writes that they “reside in the world of thought. Most of the time...your body isn't going to listen to them...because your body is a creature of habit....Resolutions are thoughts about what you want to do in the future.” Instead, you could “put your energy into *presence*—practicing mindfulness in what you're doing now.”

In another essay about effort and outcomes, Krech writes that the problem with goals is that they “are nearly always outcomes. And outcomes, in most cases, are uncontrollable.... The alternative is to focus on the effort we make. Our effort is almost always controllable....” Any good sports coach tells his team to focus on the process, not the results.

Another benefit of focusing on effort instead of goals “is that it naturally moves us from *focusing on the future to focusing on the present*. Goals are what we desire or hope will happen in the future. Goals have a distance between our life as it is and life as we hope it will be. But our effort is what we're doing now! And when we move from the future to the present, we move from the imaginations of the mind to the grounded reality of real life.”

Finally, in an essay about impermanence by Pema Chodron, she writes, “One of the challenges of living in an impermanent world is that change often requires action on our part....Each change presents us with a new 'what do I need to do now?' riddle....Whether we like it or not, we have to work with impermanence. And the way to work with it is to respond to change according to what needs to be done. It's not about how we feel...or what we're thinking....It's about taking action according to the needs of the situation. We accept the circumstances that we cannot change. We accept the internal reaction we're having...that we also cannot change. And we try to simply step back and look clearly: What are the needs of the situation?”

Chodron notes that even difficult situations have a saving grace, which ironically is impermanence: “The situation you're faced with will change....It always does. The feelings you're feeling will dissolve, disappear and be replaced by other feelings. They always have. You don't have to deal with this forever. You don't have to feel this way forever.”

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