

When I Win the Lottery

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When I win the lottery," a friend of mine said recently, "I'm going to read a lot of history." Huh? When you win the lottery? She might as well have said, "Even though I want to read a lot of history, I don't intend to do anything about it." That's what she really meant.

Let's face it. The odds of winning some state lotteries are comparable to the odds of getting fatally struck by lightning. One of every 2 million people in the United States will be killed by lightning this year. If, every month for a year, you bought a \$1 ticket for a lottery with a single \$24 million prize, your odds of winning would be less than 1 in 2 million. Yet you never hear people say, "When I get killed by lightning . . ."

When I get venture funding...

Many employees in the technology industries who would like to become entrepreneurs say something similar: "When I start my own company . . ." But then you notice that they aren't doing anything like writing a business plan or raising funds. What they really mean is, "I want to do a lot of other things in my life, but I'm not going to." If you think that way, don't be surprised if, at the end of your life, and even throughout the rest of it, you have a whole lot of regret. Sometimes I think people who say these wishful things actually do want to change their lives yet are just afraid to make the move. But that answer isn't entirely satisfactory, because fear isn't necessarily paralyzing. So what stops people from taking risks?

I know what stopped me. As a child, I didn't get much attention from adults, including my parents. They never seemed to care much about what I did, what I got, or even what I didn't do or get. When I compare notes with others, I find that my experience wasn't all that unusual. I felt cheated out of something that I thought I deserved. Back in the dark recesses of my mind was the thought, Someone will come to pay up, to give me all those things I deserve-one day the phone will ring, and the person on the other end will offer me the perfect job or the perfect whatever.

Others have similar thoughts. A friend in Monterey, California, told me that he could actually picture the person who would save him. His imaginary savior was a strong, benevolent man who, that minute, was using a chain saw to hack his way through the woods in the Carmel Valley and would arrive "any day now." Fortunately, I was disabused of my fantasy in my late 20s. Here's how it happened. I was at a weekend-long intensive therapy session run by Nathaniel Branden, a pioneer in the psychology of self-esteem. At one point, Mr. Branden said that many of us daydream that someone is coming to save us. "Ladies and gentlemen," his voice boomed, "I have news for you." Pause. "No one is coming."

Bell curve

Those last four words sounded like a bell being hit hard an inch from my ear. I realized how self-destructive my thinking had been. I got on with my life. At age 28, I quit a secure job as a professor to pursue my passion of writing and speaking in favor of freedom and against government oppression. At age 31, I spent my last \$4,000 to move to Washington where I joined the Reagan administration to help dismantle government programs. (We failed, in case you didn't notice.) When I was 39, I went on leave without pay from a university position to produce *The Fortune Encyclopedia of Economics*, with the goal of helping people understand economic reality, especially the power of free markets as a force for good. Year by year I've increased the percent of time I spend pursuing my most deeply held values.

Next time you find yourself saying, "When I win the lottery," or whatever might be your equivalent, just stop. Instead, ask yourself, "What do I really want, and what steps can I take today to get it?"

I know every excuse. I've heard them all, and I've used a few myself. "How can I quit this job when I've got a mortgage to pay?" "Does switching jobs really make sense when I have only 16 years left until retirement?" "If it were such a good idea, wouldn't someone already be doing it?" (Imagine how much Thomas Edison or Kim Polese would have achieved had either woken every morning with that thought.) Those are all disempowering questions.

So ask empowering ones: "How can I continue to pay my mortgage while taking the job I want?" "How can I make the best use of the remaining 20 to 30 years of my working life?" "What obstacles are preventing me from implementing my idea, and how can I work around them?"

We live in a wonderful time. The standard of living for the vast majority of Americans has never been higher. In a 1981 high school graduation speech I gave at my alma mater, I said that we lived in a country where you could quit your job at any time and never worry about starving. I explained that this was mainly due not to the welfare state but to the great wealth that almost all of us enjoyed compared with what people in this country had just 50 years earlier.

I would go further today. You can quit your job and not even worry about going without a VCR. The fact that our government has regulated wages and labor markets less than governments in Western Europe has helped keep our unemployment rate lower. Recessions in the future are not likely to be as severe as those in the past (for the reasons, see my article "Kinder, Gentler Recessions"). Silicon Valley has never been so favorably disposed to job seekers. For all these reasons, it's relatively easy to find another job if your new venture plans don't work. If you think that quitting a job to start your enterprise is like jumping off a cliff, then I say, Jump off that cliff. Buy at least one parachute--cut your spending, buy catastrophic-illness health insurance, take out the biggest credit line you can on your house--and remember that it's not that far a drop.

When you seize control of your life, some people will seek you out for help with their own lives and will encourage you to live yours. Others, the "lottery waiters," will attack you. Why? Because you are a living contradiction of their distress and their self-righteousness about their distress. Your success reminds them that maybe they could take action too, and many lottery waiters don't want that reminder. Be prepared for both kinds of people. Also be prepared for people who are supporters at times and attackers at other times. In almost all of us is some of both.

Ladies and gentlemen, the bad news is that no one is coming. The good news is that you're already here.