

The Dream

“The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.”

– Chinese proverb

An old man lay on his deathbed awaiting the inevitable. His dream came to pay its last respects and bid farewell to the man who had never realized it. As the dream entered the room, the man looked away in shame.

“What do you want?” asked the old man.

“To pose a simple question,” replied the dream, pulling up a chair next to the bed.

“Ask and be gone,” said the old man. “My time on this earth is short.”

“Of that,” said the dream, “I am all too distressingly aware.”

“Ask your question,” demanded the old man.

“Why did you not realize me?”

“You were my dream, were you not?” asked the old man. The dream nodded. “Then the choice of whether to realize you or not was mine.” The old man started coughing.

“You were afraid,” said the dream. “You’re still afraid.”

“I am not afraid,” wheezed the old man. “I was not afraid.”

“You were deathly afraid of failure,” stated the dream. “And in fearing such, you’ve brought about precisely that which you so desperately hoped to avoid – failure.”

The old man moaned and squeezed his eyes shut. “I thought there would be tomorrow.”

“Did it never occur to you,” said the dream, “that there is only ever today – the moment that we are experiencing right now? With death so near can you put it off until tomorrow?”

“No,” said the man, tears rolling down his cheek.

The dream sighed and leaned back in the chair. It knew that time tempers regret for things that we have done. It also knew that regret for the things we did not do is inconsolable.

Leaning forward, the dream gently brushed aside the old man’s tears. “You need only have taken the first step, old friend and I would have taken one in turn to meet you.”

Then the dream whispered goodbye to the old man and they both died.

The story of the old man and his dream is neither new nor original to me. The above telling is simply my rendering of the fable. By its very definition – a strong or cherished desire – the term “dream” suggests an aspiration much larger and far grander than a simple goal. A dream could be defined as an all-consuming life goal that plays perpetually in our minds demanding expression. For a goal of this magnitude, I’m going to borrow a term from corporate motivators and authors James Collins and Jerry Porras. The term is B-HAG and is an acronym for Big Hairy Audacious Goal. B-HAG is a visionary goal that is both strategic and emotionally charged.

What is your B-Hag? Do you have one? The truth is, not everyone has a big and earthshaking desire that cries out for expression. Perhaps you’re happy with the status quo and really have no desire to change your current life situation. Possibly your dreams and goals are more humble (and more pragmatic) like owning a comfortable home, having a great job, a loving relationship or happy family life. That’s OK, as those dreams are just as important and meaningful.

If you do have a Big Hairy Audacious Goal/Dream simmering on the back burner, perhaps it’s time to lift the lid and stir the stew. Your first step is acknowledging that time really is limited. Tomorrow is not a given. Sure, many famous individuals didn’t realize their dreams until later in life and we are all the better for the contributions of these later bloomers. The questions you need to ask yourself is, “Why have I waited until now and what am I waiting for?”

Who has been saying, “No?” Who has been feeding you reasons to resist? I hope it’s not you. Are you, like the old man in the story, afraid and, if so, afraid of what? Afraid of success and the perceived burden it will place upon you? Are you afraid of failure and ridicule? Are you afraid that you won’t have the energy to sustain your dream once it gains momentum?

A trap many of us fall into is seeing only the end product – the realization of our dream – and being overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. Think of the end result as your starting point and begin working backwards from there. Let’s say your B-Hag is to write the great Canadian novel. The step prior to such an accomplishment might be generating publicity and positive reviews. Prior to that: having your book published and released to book sellers. Before that? Having your manuscript accepted for publication. You can follow these stepping stones all the way back through working with an editor, attending writing seminars, building publishing credits with smaller projects to parking your butt in the chair and typing that first word on the page.

Of course, we should also add such elements as reading, research, creating a timetable, working hard, along with the less tangible but equally critical qualities of persistence, focus, commitment and so on. Think of each step as a stepping stone moving you progressively closer to the accomplishment of your dream. Imagine that for each step you take your dream is taking one in return. Each small step forward builds your self-confidence and self-esteem making the task of realizing your dream more enjoyable and the certainty of its achievement more real.

The late American actor Christopher Reeve made the following statement at the 1996 Democratic Convention: “So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable.”

Start taking action today and begin moving in the direction of your dream. Make friends with your dream and share a long and mutually successful journey together.