

A GUIDE TO YEARNING

From Wanting to Wisdom

Excerpted from *Transformed! The Science of Spectacular Living*



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Introduction

“

*We are desire.
It is the essence
of the human
soul, the secret
of our existence.
Absolutely
nothing of human
greatness is ever
accomplished
without it.”*

—John Eldredge

If you're like most people, you know what you want. In fact, if pressed, you could probably rattle off a laundry list of wants: cars, houses, vacations, jobs, gadgets, and so on. But when it comes to what you yearn for, you may draw a blank.

There's something vaguely old-fashioned about the term. It has an Old Testament ring to it. Or it sounds like what a heroine in a Victorian novel might say as she stares out the window of her Gothic tower waiting for a lost love to return. As a result, you probably haven't used "yearn" in a sentence recently. It feels awkward on your tongue, uncertain in your mind . . . and hardly the dynamic power of bringing out your best and energizing your life.

It's important to remember that we are not talking about a formula (they don't work) but rather about something deeply personal that emerges from within—a unique, new you. Take a moment to reflect upon what you yearn for. Let your mind go blank and listen to your heart. Imagine if your soul had a voice and could articulate what it wants most in the world. Or, more simply, consider what you desire deeply, what would turn your good life into a great one.

Still nothing? That's okay. Yearning is a natural capacity you can develop. Or maybe you've

come up with a list of things you yearn for that are actually wants—you “yearn” to be rich, you “yearn” to travel around the world, you “yearn” for freedom, you “yearn” to have your boyfriend or girlfriend agree to marry you, you “yearn” for a gigantic television. It’s okay, too, to mistake wants for yearnings—we all do it, but it rarely leads to us really feeling fulfilled as humans.

The good news is that we know what you yearn for—and it’s exactly that yearning that fuels you getting what you want and feeling satisfied with it.

The things you yearn for are the same things that everyone in the world yearns for.

Specifically, we yearn:

- to matter
- to love and be loved
- to be seen
- to contribute
- to connect
- to belong
- to achieve mastery
- to be affirmed
- to connect with a higher power

There are different ways to parse these yearnings—Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is one way to view them—and we’ll look at them through various lenses, from stories of those who have learned to yearn effectively, to perspectives from a range of fields including education, positive psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral economics. But for now, recognize that these yearnings

are universal, and that by getting in touch with them, you open your life to the possibility of greatness.

So all you have to do is memorize this list and you're set? If only it were that easy, we could limit the frustration of career dissatisfaction, the disappointment of unfulfilling relationships, and much general emotional pain and upset with a snap of our fingers.

Getting in touch with what you yearn for is an attainable skill, but you need to learn the entire process. We know—the word “process” sounds dull and formulaic. But this particular process is neither of those things. Instead, it's challenging, exciting, and energizing.

The first step requires you to apply yearning to your own life. You see, even though we all yearn for the same things, this doesn't mean that we all do the same things to achieve what we yearn for. I may follow my yearning to connect through interactions with my team at work, while you may follow your yearning through intimate relationships. I may yearn to have an influence in the world and fulfill it through my career while you fulfill your similar yearning primarily through raising a family. I may pursue my yearning for a sense of mastery by public speaking while you pursue yours by doing and practicing yoga.

The opportunity to fulfill our yearnings exists in every moment of every day.

That means that the power of energizing our lives is available in every moment too, if only we would learn to access the fuel—our yearning. The trick that leads to our development is learning to recognize and respond to these moments consistently. And we're not talking about that once-in-a-lifetime desire—to take a round-the-world vacation or to retire. We can get what we yearn

for during even the most mundane of routines—we can find great meaning while doing a home repair project, in the middle of the night when we can't fall asleep, or while driving across the state on a business trip.

We're all on different yearning paths,
even though we are all headed toward
the same ultimate destination.

So it's a bit tricky to translate universal yearnings into our individual lives. To make it less tricky, let's analyze a much beloved movie and its protagonist who mistook his want for a yearning.

MISWANTING: WHY I CAN'T GET NO . . . SATISFACTION

Unfortunately, when it comes to yearning, we are our own worst enemy. We are, as positive psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson have noted, guilty of “miswanting.” We convince ourselves that something will make us happy, but in reality, that “something” does nothing more than provide a brief, temporary buzz. As a result, we ignore our deeper yearnings and focus on surface wants.

If you’re skeptical about this last statement, understand that this is the way our brains are wired. Neuroscientists have identified different pleasure centers in the brain, and one is related to our wants or cravings and one to our feelings of deeper satisfaction. Dopamine is released in our brain when we anticipate and indulge our wants or cravings, while opioids are released when we meet deeper needs. We choose the dopamine over the opioids almost every time. We confuse dopamine’s stimulation with satisfaction . . . and end up in a spiral of wanting without the fulfillment of the opioid-generating center of the brain. We want what we want, and we want it now! We don’t engage in internal debates such as, “Should I eat that huge bowl of ice cream or should I strive to meet my deeper hunger to matter in the world?” We scarf down the ice cream without a moment’s hesitation. We numb our tongue—and ourselves—to our deeper requirements.

If you’re like most people, you’ll feel “buzzed”: energized, high, excited. This is the same feeling that you receive when you engage in these wanting behaviors. You feel that rush of

anticipation when you eat a bag of cookies or when you buy that cool new outfit or when your day trading nets you a big gain. But this buzz is temporary. More to the point, it creates the illusion that this is what provides us with profound happiness. If you've ever bought a hot car, cool gadget, or other sexy high-ticket item, you know what we mean. In fact, there's a term for it: buyer's remorse. People spend weeks or months wishing and wanting, and when they finally achieve the object of their desire, it's a rush. Then it is all over, and the ensuing emptiness causes us to seek the next acquisition or goal. We had such high expectations, and yet somehow, they aren't met by actually possessing the object of our wanting.

That initial buzz does, however, enable us to avoid thinking about what we really yearn for. It allows us to focus on something more easily obtainable, something that will send a surge of dopamine through our brains. The same can be true of anticipated events, television shows, dates, and almost anything. We may have been convinced that the designer dress, latest techno-gadget, vacation home, cool car, or plasma television was what would provide us with true happiness, but as it turns out, we are poor predictors of what makes us lastingly and fully happy. Positive psychologists call it poor affective forecasting.

Even more troubling, after we discover that the designer shoes don't provide the long-term joy we expected, we fail to learn from our mistake.

You would think we would recognize that vacations, electronic devices, and job promotions are not what provide us with sustained happiness after the second or third time, but we continue to miswant. In our minds, we tell ourselves that even

though the job promotion or the beautiful house in the country failed to offer sustained satisfaction, perhaps it is really the luxury boat that we need to be happy; or the new outfit; or the latest version of the iPad; or the trip to Aruba.

The problem isn't just in our heads and the pleasure centers in our brains. We also become confused about what really makes us happy because of all the external messages we receive. Not to pick on Apple, but that company's advertising is so slick and sophisticated that it's easy to envision your life becoming infinitely better once you purchase their devices. Advertising, television shows and movies, romance novels, Web sites, and music videos all intensify our miswanting. Stressed out by a high-pressure job, trying to grapple with rebellious teenaged children, concerned about financial issues, we can fall prey to media messages that deify objects: a car, a diamond ring, and a cruise all appear to be transformative.

Therefore, you need to be able to differentiate what you want versus what you yearn for if you are going to energize your life. Let's look at some techniques and tools for doing so.

THE “SO THAT” RED FLAG

Wanting is external, and yearning is internal. In other words, what you want resides outside the core of who you are. You want things, positions, cars, job titles, money. Yearning, though, goes to your essence: you yearn for mastery, for connection, to matter. What confuses matters, though, is that what you want is connected to what you yearn for. You may want to make a lot of money, but it's related to your yearning to touch and be touched, to be loved, or to be valued.

On the outside, you want to make a lot of money because you believe that you'll be more desirable, or treated with more respect, or that others will envy you if you're wealthy. Deeper down, however, you long to have more contact with others; for them to love you for who you are, not what you have; or you long to make contributions to the lives of others. Becoming wealthy may provide you with a brief burst of happiness, but relatively soon, you'll experience a growing sense of dissatisfaction because you're not meeting your deeper yearning. This is a critical differentiator: meeting a want provides fleeting happiness while responding to a yearning provides longer-lasting and deeper satisfaction.

Wants can be very seductive and appear to be the key to this satisfaction.

Lucy, for instance, dreamed of becoming the first woman to be named managing partner of her corporate law firm. In Lucy's mind, this and only this was what she was striving for. She told herself it wasn't just for the prestige of the title or the money,

but that she wanted to do it to open doors for other women. She dreamed of people talking about her as a pioneer, a groundbreaker.

Dreams are great, and they can motivate people to achieve significant goals, but even so, they often are merely wants in grand disguises.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue your dreams. Recognize, though, that we yearn for more than being the head of a firm or being viewed as an innovator.

At a deeper level, Lucy yearned to touch and be touched, to matter, and to have a sense of mastery. Her dream of becoming head of her law firm seemed on the surface to be related to that yearning, but even when her dream came true, there were problems. It didn't fully satisfy her—because she had not fully recognized or directly addressed her yearnings.

At first when Lucy became the managing partner, she was ecstatic, her friends threw a big party for her, and, as she said, “I was on a high for a week.” But in the weeks that followed, Lucy came crashing down to earth—she found herself enmeshed in the details of being a managing partner and spending hours each day with what she viewed as petty problems, policy, and paperwork. She also found it difficult to put her policies into place because of resistance from other senior partners. Within a few months, she began to think that she had made a huge mistake as she realized that she disliked her new role.

It took some work on Lucy's part to recognize that her yearning was to touch and be touched and to matter, and upon that recognition—as we'll see later in the chapter—she began restructuring her life in many ways, both at work and at home.

Our point is that while some wants are easy to identify as wants—various objects like clothes and cars, for example—others are trickier to discern. Don't assume, therefore, that just because you've aspired to something for a long time or feel a burning desire to achieve a particular goal that it means it's more than a want. Lucy's example has hopefully disabused you of that assumption. Her original goals were driven by, but not directly informed by, her deeper yearning. She wanted to be managing partner so that she could have more power and control. She wanted more power and control so that she could make a difference in the firm. She wanted to make a difference in the firm so that she could be more important. She wanted to be more important so that she could touch others and matter to them—all of which she learned had been available the entire time, each step of the way in her career.

How can you determine whether something is what you want or what you yearn for? Ask yourself what a given want, aspiration, or goal will do for you. It may not be immediately obvious; however, if you keep looking beneath your wants, it can lead you to your deeper yearnings. Subject your fervent wishes and desires to the "So That" litmus test:

Take a piece of paper and write down three goals, or objects, or situations that you believe will make you enormously happy. Put this in the form of the following sentence: "I want_____so that_____."

For instance:

"I want to be a CEO so that my dad will be proud of me."

"I want to lose weight so that I look sexy."

"I want that new vacation home so that people will like me."

"I want him to ask me out so that I feel good about myself."

"I want a promotion so that I can have more money."

In many cases, if your desire is a want, then you will be able to fill in the blank after "so that." And, each want leads to another.

FROM WANTING TO YEARNING

Now, go back to your list and see if there are other levels of “so that’s.”

Keep going until there is no other “so that”—chances are you have now gotten to the yearning underneath your want or goal. For instance:

“I want a promotion so that I can have more money.”

“I want more money in order to be able to have more fun and skydive more.”

“I want to skydive so that I feel the thrill.”

“I want to feel the thrill of skydiving so that I can feel alive.”

“I want to feel alive . . . I yearn to feel alive.”

Knowing the yearnings beneath your goals makes the achieving of them much more satisfying. And, ironically, focusing on the yearning in daily life leads to achieving many more goals than you imagined. While goals are fine, we don’t have to wait until we get a raise and go skydiving to fulfill a deeper yearning such as feeling alive. Focusing on the deeper yearning leads you to be more present and engaged every day. Being more present and engaged, you are more likely to win that promotion—and a whole lot more. And, when you do achieve your goals, you will be much more satisfied.

Yearning is the heart of intrinsic motivation—the motivation to transform that comes from inside ourselves and is satisfying in and of itself; wants are extrinsic motivation—wanting something so that we get some other reward. With intrinsic motivation, not only are we more satisfied, but we also achieve more. Behavioral economics and motivational researchers have proven that intrinsic

motivators result in higher achievement and enjoyment than extrinsic ones do. Spontaneous exploration, curiosity, greater creativity, and productivity are results of intrinsic motivation. It seems that intrinsic motivation is strongly related to what neuroscientists have identified as the satisfaction center in our brains, which is activated by our yearning. Both are scientific validation of the importance and the power of yearning versus wanting.

Another key differentiator between wanting and yearning involves specificity versus universality. You know it's a want when your wish involves a highly specific outcome, person, brand, or style. You want a Kate Spade bag, the newest iPad, Jimmy Choo shoes, to date Josh, to attend a professional baseball dream camp, to spend the summer in Greece. These are as opposed to the universal desires to matter, to make a difference, to have influence.

Keep in mind too that you may express these universal desires in terms that are a bit different than ours. For instance, we talk about the yearning to make an impact; you may express it as a yearning to be seen and heard. Nonetheless, it's the same shared yearning, and that universality differentiates it from a more specific, individualized want.

UNIVERSAL YEARNINGS

Here are some of the universal yearnings we share as human beings. While you probably can relate to them all, say them out loud to see which have special resonance for you. I yearn...

Survival and a sense of existence
...to exist

A reflection of your existence
...to be seen
...to be heard
...to be touched

An appreciation of your existence ...
to be loved
...to be affirmed
...to be respected

An expression of your existence
...to express
...to experience fully
...to learn, to grow
...to trust, to develop
...to touch
...to create

Exchange and connectedness with
other people
...to be known
...to be understood
...to matter

...to know another person
...to be close
...to feel connected to others
...to make deep contact with
another
...to be intimate
...to love

A sense of mattering
...to matter
...to be valued and to value
...to do what I came here to do
on earth
...to make a difference
...to please God
...to fulfill my purpose
...to unfold my destiny

Ultimate union with the Divine ...
to feel connected to the greater
whole
...to be one with all
...to know God
...to feel union with the Divine

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GOOD AND A GREAT LIFE

Now let us return to lawyer Lucy and what happened when she made the transition from wanting to yearning.

Smart, empathetic, and attractive, Lucy was one of those people who seemed capable of getting anything she wanted. In fact, before she even graduated from her law school, she did what so many highly motivated individuals do: she made a list of goals. In the next decade, she focused on achieving these goals, devoting a great deal of time and energy to accomplishing them. Some of the goals were related to her career—she wanted to make partner at a major law firm before she was thirty-five, and she made it with two years to spare.

Lucy also wanted to marry “a stable, decent guy, someone who is a professional”; and she found him at age twenty-seven. And she wanted to have two kids before she turned thirty—she just made it to that goal. There were other smaller goals—a beautiful house in a particularly prestigious suburb, trips to Paris, London, Barcelona, and so on. All achieved.

But by the time Lucy turned forty, she had become increasingly dissatisfied with her life. Here she was, managing partner, at the top of her firm and profession. She couldn’t quite figure it out, since everything was going well both personally and professionally. The feeling intensified over her first and only year as managing partner. As much as she tried to shake it off—she felt guilty for complaining since she had achieved so many of her goals—it wouldn’t go away.

Within a year, she had talked to the partners' management committee and asked to be replaced. She recognized that she needed to make changes in her life, though she didn't know exactly what they needed to be. Feeling stuck and confused, Lucy came to us for coaching.

As part of the coaching process, Lucy began learning about herself. The more self-aware she became, the more Lucy realized that there was something beneath all her wants that she had been missing.

Lucy yearned to touch and be touched, to matter, and to make a difference, and the higher she had gone in the firm, the less she seemed to matter.

Everything from her choice of a husband to her career decisions had been dictated by societal standards. Measured by these standards, Lucy was leading a good life. Measured by her deeper sense of herself, however, she was nowhere near the great life she yearned for.

Lucy began to recognize the deeper yearnings that really motivated her, and she restructured her life. She began by trying to relate to clients not just on a business level but as individuals with a range of issues and concerns—about everything from the future of their companies to retirement to their own professional growth. When she broadened and deepened her approach, Lucy found she was making a much more significant contribution.

This energized her; she felt as if she were truly partnering with her clients. In turn, her higher level of drive and commitment enhanced her performance. Lucy was adding value in a way

she never had before. Her clients gave her more work and she attracted more clients to the firm. In the process, she added to her staff and became more interested in developing her people—she loved watching them learn and grow, and soon she was overwhelmed with associates clamoring to work in her group. Resigning as managing partner was only a first step.

Over the next few years, Lucy made additional changes in her life, and they all revolved around her yearning to touch and be touched and to matter. More subtly, she and her husband evolved their relationship—they had regular dates, provided each other with much more honest conversation and feedback, and helped each other grow both personally and professionally. Lucy cut back on her over-the-top exercise regimen, devoting more time to a personal project she had long wanted to make happen—coaching her children's teams and spending more one-on-one time with each of them. The kids looked forward to their special time each week with Mom.

The greatest surprise to Lucy was the deepening of her prayer life. She had been taught to pray as a child, but it had been more a matter of habit than a personal relationship with a higher power. The yearning for contact with the Creator was strong in her and she wondered how much of her earlier accomplishments had been driven by misguided attempts to meet that deep need. In ways both small and large, in every aspect of her life, Lucy was learning to be guided by her yearning.

Getting in touch with her yearning freed Lucy to be who she really wanted to be.

Lucy was able to grasp what yearning meant to her and recognize it from one moment to the next. Let's look at how you can do the same.

YEARNING: A GUIDE FOR THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Satisfied people know that their yearnings provide them with a life compass. When they are at a crossroads or facing a difficult decision, their yearnings give them direction.

If you're like most people, no matter how much you have learned and grown, you have experienced a feeling that you wanted to live an even more meaningful and satisfying life; or you wanted to develop a more spiritual nature. And so you volunteered at a soup kitchen or you signed up for meditation classes.


Again, if you're like most people, you may have enjoyed the first few times serving food to the homeless or sitting cross-legged on a mat trying to clear your mind. But then you became bored or other events and activities prevented you from continuing with these endeavors. With yearning, we are talking about a driving force that can bring meaning to everything we do, if only we learn the skills to activate it.


When you're not acting out of your yearning, these altruistic or spiritual goals are pursued in isolation. In other words, they aren't tied to your intrinsic drives. You're seeking a single experience to fulfill you rather than finding thousands of fulfilling encounters and activities as part of your life project. It may be that instead of volunteering at a soup kitchen, you should be investing more fully in many different areas of your life, bringing greater meaning, and serving yourself as well as those whose lives you touch in the course of a day.


Tapping your yearning, then, is not an intellectual exercise, nor is it about what you think you should do or the right way to live. Instead, it's a discovery and celebration of deep-seated needs that come from your heart, that represent your soul's longing. You've encountered it before in brief glimpses—just before your eyes close and sleep comes, in the space between wakefulness and dreaming. It echoes within you, something you can't quite put a name to, but you know it's what you want most in the world.


Think of yearning as a companion to your days, a guide for your decisions, a compass toward satisfaction, fulfillment, and well-being—your guide to creating an energized life where you are bringing out your best and loving your life. Yearn, baby, yearn!




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