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WORD OF THE YEAR

For the last few years, I've done something smart. Now, I'm not always doing smart things, so believe me when I say that this is something to write home about. What have I done? I've chosen a word of the year.

I got the idea from a book, and it's worked well to bring my life a greater sense of direction and fulfillment. I'm now such a fan that I'll shout it from my handy nearby mountaintop:

Each year, you should choose a word to represent the year you have in front of you.

Think long and hard about one word that will serve as a guidepost for what you want to do and be in the year to come. And remember that a year needn't start January 1

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—you can start your year at any time! One word that will remind you of what’s important when you need it most. One word to mean everything you want your year to be, and one word that will be a guiding light when times get tough and you’re not clear on what your priorities are.

There aren’t a lot of rules. Your word can be a verb or a noun. It can be long. It can be short. A word that has funny sounds in it or a word that rolls off the tongue. Depending on the type of year you’re going for, some examples of great words might be: Breathe, Push, Persevere, Give, Abundance, Direction, Moxie, Contentment.

The first year I did this exercise, I needed it badly. I was in a season of overwhelm, and so choosing my word—REST—felt like taking a big old breath of fresh air. Those four letters meant the world to me.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing, though, and I made a lot of mistakes during the year. By publicly stating my word, I also provoked some interesting responses in others. Many folks who read about my word of the year talked about it when they saw me—or, even better, mentioned it when they were asking me to do something! A number of times I received a note or call along the lines of, “I know you said your word of the year was REST, but I was wondering if you could . . .”

Word of the Year

This alone let me know that something about publicly stating my word of the year was working. And not just for me to know my own priorities, but for others to know them as well. (Yes, they may still have been asking me to do something, but they were at least conscious that I was likely to say it wasn't the right year for me to agree!)

The next year, with great deliberation, I chose a new word: RENEW. After a year of rest, I was ready for balance, and looked for a guidepost to help me carefully choose what I would take on in my personal and professional life in this time of measured growth. I wasn't resting, but I wasn't going hog wild either.

This past year, I mixed it up, going digital with my word of the year and choosing not a word, but a hashtag.

#BanBusy

As a digital gal, living in a digital world, the act of choosing a hashtag seemed more me than ever before. The point's the same, after all. It is one short, powerful idea promising to revolutionize the way I think about what I do. And so #banbusy aimed to help me be mindful of one of the scarcest resources I have: time.

#banbusy was my aim to help myself. And, as in past years, it did just that. On really bad days, I'd wear the #banbusy necklace someone sent me to remind me of just

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what I had signed up to. And, day-by-day, I worked hard to be a steward of my time, and a minder of not making my life *too* full.

The first step in deciding what you want to achieve or how you want to feel is about framing all those larger decisions as part of a larger theme. This theme is your word of the year (or your word for a season).

Think hard about a word that will help guide you in your upcoming season of life. Find a powerful word that encompasses the things you want to accomplish, yes, but the way you want to feel as well.

Don't jump into things. Try one word on for size. Then try another.

Give yourself time to find the right word (or, yes, hashtag) to express what you want the year ahead of you to be.

This process may take days or it may take weeks. You may start with one word, try it on for size, and discard it for another. That's fine. That's good, in fact! More than anything, you need to find a word that feels right, sounds right, and means right.

Find the **word of the year** that's **the word of you**.

HOW TO SET **SMART GOALS**

IDEATE

Once you have an overarching word in place, it's now time to begin the process of setting and then reaching your goals in the season ahead.

There are “rules” to goal setting. You can do it right; you can do it wrong. We'll get into all that, I promise. But first, it's time to brainstorm. I want you to think of anything and everything under the sun that may or may not be a goal in your life. Then we'll prune them down. We'll separate the goals from the non-goals. We'll separate the dreams from the goals from the Words of the Year. We'll choose what's this year, and what's another year.

Let's ideate.

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GET AN IDEAS NOTEBOOK

Goals start with ideas, and we need a lot of them.

We're about to go through a process that requires you to think big, and to have bold ideas about where you want to be. Think long and wide about the next few years ahead of you and what you want to do, accomplish, and feel in your work and your life. To do this, you'll need a lot of ideas.

Luckily, each one of us—whether we're teachers, doctors, mamas, programmers, businesspeople, tennis coaches, politicians, or cartoonists—has tons of ideas every day. Every hour, often. Every minute, sometimes. The challenge, however, is in effectively capturing those ideas.

When you have an idea in the shower, do you write it down? No. (Although SkyMall used to sell something to help you with that.) When you have an idea while tossing and turning at night, do you write that down? Not likely. When you have an idea in the subway, do you type it into your phone? Sometimes. The problem is not in coming up with the ideas, but in systematically documenting them.

So get a notebook. A tiny one. Not your regular hefty journal, and definitely not your phone. A real notebook

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you can touch and look at and think, *this is for all my terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad ideas*. (And some of the good ones as well.)

Carry it around. Use it *just for ideas*.

Don't listen to the part of your brain that says that you don't need one more notebook just to write down a random idea in. For years, I told myself I could use my regular journal. For years, it never worked. I didn't want to lug it around. If I did, I didn't want to take it out to write just one line in. It never worked until I designated one spot for just such content: a separate notebook *just for ideas*.

Get yours today.

BRAINSTORM

These days, that notebook isn't just going to be for incidental ideas. We're going to be actively courting them, and you'll need it to ideate on potential personal and professional goals you might want to pursue.

Brainstorming is a tricky art. Some folks can come up with five hundred mostly terrible ideas in fifteen seconds and some believe that ideas must be "good" before they see the light of day.

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In *Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Problem Solving*, Alex Osborn set out the rules I follow when I brainstorm. Osborn's work holds that there are four basic tenets of brainstorming, and that they are important to ensuring that any brainstorming session results in positive, helpful ideas.

Here's how they work:

1. *Focus on Quantity*: Whoever said, "It's not quantity, it's quality," wasn't thinking about brainstorming. In brainstorming you want *as many ideas as possible*. This isn't always easy, so one way to do this is to motivate yourself by setting a specific number you want to come up with—say, twenty. Then, go a step further and commit yourself to coming up with those twenty ideas in a short period of time—five or ten minutes, say. This will help you to not overthink your ideas, and to keep on track with the next tenet.

2. *Withhold Criticism*: It's easy to think of this only being an issue when you brainstorm with someone else, or in a group setting, but in reality this is just as important when you're brainstorming by

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yourself, since many of us are our own worst critics. Come up with a bad idea? Don't throw it out without writing it down. As Osborn's fourth tenet shows ("Combine and Improve Ideas"), even "bad" ideas can be tweaked to become great ideas.

3. *Welcome Unusual Ideas*: A similar concept to #2 (Withhold Criticism), the idea of welcoming unusual ideas is just to make sure that you are really thinking outside the box, and not limiting yourself to only "tame" ideas. Sure, some tame ideas might be great ones, but I'm willing to bet that most of the better ideas in your life (and mine) are the unusual ones. Also, as we'll see below, remember that often a wild and crazy idea can be the genesis of a fantastic (tamer) gem.

4. *Combine and Improve Ideas*: Your best idea isn't necessarily going to come fully formed to your brain. Instead, to really excel at brainstorming you've got to be ready to tweak, massage, and coax a great idea out of an okay or even poor idea. Combining and improving on ideas is essential to make this happen.

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Ultimately, these tenets prove the point: with brainstorming, getting to good usually has to start with bad. So come up with lots and lots of bad, and, if you're like me, feel free to do so in gigantic sparkle-blue pen for added mirth.

FREWRITE

Sitting down and asking your brain for a list of ideas is not always the best way to brainstorm, and many folks find that freewriting is a great way to supplement the brainstorming process to get that list of goals you need.

The act of freewriting is, in essence, the act of writing anything down without thought to what you're writing, why, or if it's even legible. The idea is that by writing out whatever you are thinking about, an idea will generate over time. Although people historically think of freewriting as a tool mainly for writers, Mark Levy's wonderful book *Accidental Genius* explains that anyone can use it as a powerful tool for ideation and idea generation.

Levy says there are a few key reasons for this.¹

First, **freewriting gets the juices going and gets the writing and thinking process to flow.** The concept of getting your writing flowing is often the only reason most people think freewriting exists. And this is a good reason.

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Freewriting *does* get the energy unblocked in your mind and gets your fingers clacking across the keyboard. But, critically, freewriting also gets the *thinking* juices flowing.

Second, **freewriting tells you what you know**. Are you having trouble coming up with any goals at all for the year ahead? Do you have way too many in your mind that you don't think are worth writing down? Are you not really sure what you want to focus on when thinking of potential goals—work or family? Are you simply baffled at where to start? Writing down what you do know is a key way to help you sort out your thoughts. If you start a brainstorming session and have no ideas, a ten-minute freewrite will induce some, guaranteed. By the same token, if you start a brainstorming session with lots of ideas you're not sure are fully fleshed out, a ten-minute freewriting session will help give clarity on which ones you really care about.

HOME IN: IS THIS A GOAL?

(Or is it a falafel?)

I don't mean to make fun of falafels. But I do have a saying.

If I'm at a restaurant, and I order lasagna, say, and it comes and I am taking my first bite and it doesn't taste like

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what it's supposed to taste like, I bring out my phrase: Is this a falafel?

It's the same with goals. You've come up with a whole host of words. But some of these aren't goals at all. They are falafels.

By now, you've written down a lot of ideas. You've ideated. Now it's time to take out those dozens and dozens of ideas and hold them up to the light. Shake them around. Look at them real good. And eventually distill them into your goals for the year (or season) ahead.

This is a process. It's *not* always linear, it's *often* messy, and it may or may not involve bulletproof coffee. (Coffee with butter. Yes, butter. Look it up!)

So, how can you start sorting out the goals from the falafels?

Goals, as we've all heard before, should first and foremost be actionable, and they should have a timeline. A goal is not "I want to make a billion dollars this year!"—unless you made 80 percent of that last year, of course, and a billion is actually a specific, reasonable number. A goal is something that you really can potentially achieve with a little sweat, grit, and (yes) luck thrown in.

Good goals must also have a timeline, or deadline. (The "line" at which said aim is "dead," if you will.) I cer-

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tainly didn't create the concept of SMART goals, not by a long shot. Instead, a smart man named Paul Meyer did. According to Meyer, a SMART goal² is a goal that fits the following criteria:

- **SPECIFIC:** A goal should never be vague. For a few years now, I have set a goal to read two hundred books per year. This is not a vague goal. It is not “I want to read some books,” or “I want to read dozens of books.” No. I want to read two hundred books. A specific goal is specific. Period.

- **MEASURABLE:** It's not hard to measure a measurable goal—so find a goal you can count your progress against. If you are training for a 10K run, say, you need to plan out how many times you are going to run each week and for how many minutes. Three runs, twenty minutes each, say. Numbers are measurable. So are other things, but you get the point.

- **ACTIONABLE:** With an actionable goal, you know what to do next. If I want to finish my current book manuscript (I do), then I have a nifty word processing program called Microsoft Word I can go ahead and open up to get going. In fact, I can keep doing that every day for ninety minutes

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(or five hours, depending on the day!). Actionable goals tell you (or at least strongly hint at) what needs to happen next. To finish that book, I better fire up my MacBook Air.

Do you have a goal to expand your business? You've got to turn off House Hunters International and get crack-ing. Choose goals you can count progress against.

Although measurable goals don't need numbers attached, they do need a yardstick you can work against. They should not be things that will randomly be either done or not done come December 31. So if you have a goal to have one out-of-town family reunion this year with your extended family, you can reasonably guess that if in June you have not thought about this at all and neither has anyone else in the family, you are likely behind. Thinking creatively about ways to measure non-numeric goals is key.

- **RELEVANT**: Goals should be relevant to you and the year before you. Three years ago, health was top of mind for me, so I set a goal to try eating a thirty-day "Paleo" or Whole Foods diet. It's worked so well for me over the years that this year my goal is to eat 90 percent Paleo. Always make sure your goals are relevant to the particular season of life you are in. The year I had a baby, I decided it was not realistic to read two hundred books, and dropped

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my goal by 25 percent. (I heard that babies took up time. I heard right.)

- **TIMELY:** Goals must be timely. Let's say I want to write some ebooks, and I have a goal to self-publish two in a given year. It's best to put more of a timeline on that goal. The first book when? The second book when? Put a date by those numbers. And never forget important life events that aren't necessarily in your goals chart. If I have a goal to have at least one annual reunion with my college roommates (I set this goal every year, and luckily it's a fun one to cross off), I should not plan for that to happen in the spring, when I have a baby due.

By understanding the SMART goals framework, we can now look back and see if the things we came up with during our brainstorming were actually goals, or if they were something else.

Take a look back at your list. If something doesn't fit the profile of a goal as outlined above, then is it a word of the year? Or a dream to think about later on? Or is it perhaps just an idea of something cool you'd like to do, but don't want to prioritize?

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Sort all the ideas you came up with into three categories:

1. *A Word of the Year (or a Word of You)*: Your word of the year, as discussed, should be one defining word to help bring together what you wish to feel and accomplish in the year or season ahead.

2. *Dreams*: Your dreams should be big, bold ideas that you may want to pursue one day, but aren't ready to start actively working toward by prioritizing or putting a timeline on. If you're thirty, and you have dreams of retirement, say, or if you're eighteen and coaching your kids' little league games isn't around the corner.

3. *Goals*.