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Achievement in a Time of Coronavirus

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“I don’t know if I’m working too much or too little. I’m stressed out, but I don’t feel like I’m actually accomplishing anything.”

A friend told me this, a month into her shelter-in-place. She’s not alone. In my new day-to-day in which video conferences supplement my previous electronic diet of texts and emails, there’s a recurrent theme emerging beneath the purely transactional messages. Am I doing enough?

For most of my friends and colleagues, the art and science of achievement has been the driving force behind our working and personal lives for as long as we can remember. Leaving high school for the university of our (or perhaps our parents’) choice wasn’t easy, and getting good grades while jumping between part-time jobs took effort. Still, by the time we emerged from our academic cocoons, spread our delicate wings, and fluttered into new careers, we’d acquired self-improvement as second nature. Setting goals and achieving them was widely

understood as what successful people did.

Speaking up when the boss needed someone to take on a new project, adding professional certifications, and learning to scuba dive were all part of success. We were pretty sure it made us happy, but when busily trying to seem successful, there's no time for self-reflection (unless there was a class on the topic, in which case we'd want a certificate). Sure, there were occasional 3:00am moments when we might wake up wondering if we should have instead been building a school in some far-off country whose name we couldn't pronounce, but we could become VPs, learn Swedish, AND build that school on a long vacation. Which we never took, but we still had goals, and that's what counted.

Then came SARS-CoV-2, more widely known as coronavirus.

At first it was of course frightening, but also secretly exciting. How could we best light our home office for video calls while we also master SharePoint? And think of how much work we could get done without commuting or the distractions of having people unexpectedly stop by our desks. We would be more productive while carving out our evenings for learning a language and taking video courses. We'd come out of this smarter, stronger, and with fresh checklists complete.

And perhaps – we might admit only when the constant news headlines finally opened cracks in our armor of industriousness – we wouldn't give in to the dark cloud of doubt and worry that seemed always in the air, dimming our clear vistas of accomplishment and achievement.

After two weeks though, we noticed changes. Our checklists were not neatly ticked off, but instead were changing, mutating from new demands. Some of our colleagues rose at unreasonable hours to issue a barrage of messages, some thrived after sunset, while others might vanish during the middle of the day. Kids would wander into video calls, parents would need groceries delivered, and most of the unspoken routines of our daily work lives were dissolving. The easygoing Friday afternoon feeling of sharing weekend plans in the break room, or the electric excitement of a Tuesday with a shared deadline were gone. We were dialing in from back porches and kitchens, in t-shirts and hoodies, with fresh beards and unkempt hair.

Stress soon set in. How urgent was any given phone call, text, chat, or video call? How could anyone know we were working hard, without seeing our concerned faces as we rushed down a hallway with a sheaf of papers? If we found ourselves gazing out a window idly pondering the new spring leaves, and the pair of cardinals who certainly were building a nest, were we lazy? And when someday we returned to our offices, would we have lost our edge, the fire in the belly, the consuming need to show that we were achievers?

Should this worry me? Maybe not.

My wife tells me that her regular work team meetings have changed. These meetings might previously have consisted of 50 minutes of department reports, followed by a review of tasks to complete. Now they start with a simple question. How's everyone doing? That's it. And they spend five, ten, fifteen minutes on this topic. The nonverbal, personal communication we once took for granted can't be felt in a video call, so they talk about feelings among colleagues, something unthinkable a year ago.

They share that they're nervous, even frightened. That they too are having difficulty managing

work and home life, with both these worlds now under the same roof. They have kids, parents, family who need attention. Most telling of all, they share that they themselves need attention.

I likewise have learned to open up with my team, my colleagues, and my friends. We joke about checklists left undone, about waking late but working later, about quarantine beards and home projects that can wait until our next vacation. Our waistlines might be growing, but tellingly, concern about the end-of-quarter numbers is shrinking. We're still focused on tasks at hand, sure, but we have a renewed focus on staying connected and supporting each other.

What have I achieved?

Many of us have lost family or friends to Covid-19. We've lost innumerable hours of sleep, and shed too many tears of frustration, loss, and helplessness. If there is any silver lining, it feels small compared to this dreadful cost. Still, through that dark cloud of uncertainty, a few achievements shine more brightly than ever before.

The smile in the eyes of masked neighbors as we wave to one another, passing six feet apart on an evening walk. The torrent of "We've got your back. Let us know how we can help" messages my team shares. The hand-painted signs in my neighborhood thanking doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, and delivery drivers. The way my daughter confidently does her schoolwork every day, safe in her knowledge that things will work out. These were never on any checklist, and I have no certificates to show off. I guess I may never learn Swedish, or achieve every professional goal, or build that school in Azerbaijan.

But I'm living each day with more clarity of purpose, and a feeling that I'm closer to what matters most. Most of all, I feel I'm not alone in finding this clarity, which for the generations who always have craved achievement, might be just what we needed all along.

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