

# Live, Deliberately

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*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life ... to put to rout all that was not life, ... and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived.*

—Henry David Thoreau, 1854

What did Henry David Thoreau mean with this oft-quoted line, “to live deliberately” and, more important, what does it have to do with anesthesia? In the early part of the 19th century, HDT walked out into the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, and began an experiment that people continue over a century and a half later: endeavoring to become more self-aware and to live more consciously. “Be it life or death, we crave only reality,” HDT said, while still questioning if we are really living in reality or are only mere observers of life. One sign of this “observer” status is the urgency with which we all pass our days. Even in HDT’s time, urgency was understood to be symptomatic of the sickness of “observation.” As a multi-tasking, wired, over-achieving, transplanted East-Coaster, I thought I understood what HDT was saying. To suck that marrow, to avoid being a mere observer of life, one has to approach each day with a sense of urgency. This is the point of life, is it not? Put your eye on that prize, and you set yourself on the treadmill of ever-escalating aspirations. We think that we’ll be happy when—we get a better job, we get more money, we fall in love. But then, as Samuel Johnson put it, “Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment.”

What if we change our frame of reference? Ever since I moved to California, and actually took some time to think each day, I have come to appreciate that living deliberately is not at all about urgency and want. Rather, it is about just what I had begun to do—reflecting.

I have come to realize that knowing well the world around me—and being content with that world, for even just one brief second—has value and importance. One thing I’ve come to understand is that urgency is very much overrated. In fact, I’ve come to believe that urgency is dangerous as it may get things done a few days sooner, but what does it cost in happiness? Few things sap energy and motivation like urgency. As a physician, I can state with some authority that emergency is the only urgency. Almost anything else can wait a few days. It’s okay.

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Let this all set in. It is actually okay to wait. I am not saying that waiting should last forever. When a few days extra turns into a few weeks extra, then there's a problem, but what really has to be done by today that can't wait for tomorrow or, my heavens, the next day? If your "goal" is that critical to the hour or day, maybe you're setting up false priorities and dangerous expectations.

So, how does one live, deliberately? Living deliberately is to live with intention. The question is, therefore, have I been living intentionally? If urgency governs the pace of your life, then most of us would have to answer "no." Thoreau believed that living *with intent* required that one forego the tendency to respond to stimulus. Living intentionally demands that one does not live *reactively*. Urgency is a surrogate for reaction; and thus, with urgency we do not live intentionally, we live reactively, "tending to be responsive to stimuli." Most of us go through our lives simply responding to some particular perceived need or event (reacting to stimuli). We are caught up in the day-to-day stimuli around us, forgetting to live intentionally. What to do instead, you ask? Live a bit more deliberately: Challenge yourself every day simply to do a bit more than the day before. You may well experience some uneasiness with your day because it is just a bit different from the day before. Step off the escalating treadmill and, instead, focus on being concerned with keeping fresh.

By living in this manner, the focus is on learning, trying new things, experimenting, and creating in every moment. These things are true within us, and ideally can weather the steady erosion of identity found outside ourselves. This advice applies especially to anesthesiologists in the current day and age. Despite our education, the stunning diversity of our work, and the good fortune of our colleagues, we find ourselves wanting more. We compare what we earn to other professions, we lament our inability to do more, influence more, to keep at bay the encroachment by others into our world. To speak plainly, we don't seem very happy.

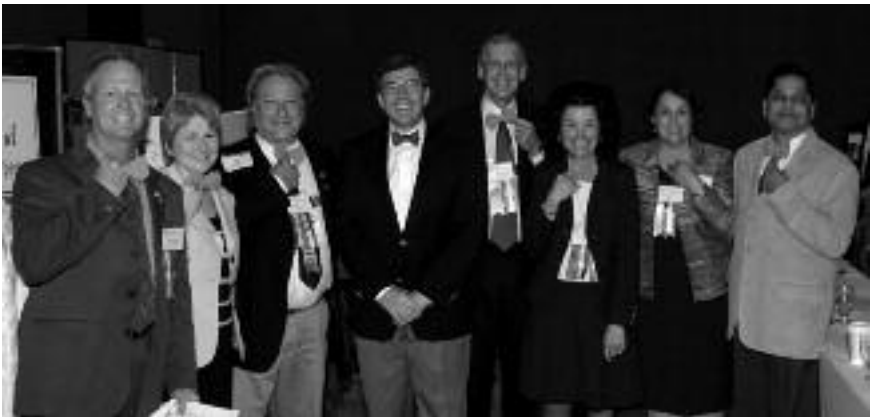
A number of recent self-help books, most notably the best-seller, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, have suggested that rather than focusing on that "low lying fruit," money, one should instead plot a course to a more richly textured and highly rewarding way of life. Those who have done so are involved in their communities: 74 percent of them attend a public meeting on town or school affairs; 50 percent serve on a committee of a local organization; and 35 percent are active members of a group trying to influence public policy. These rates are nearly double the rate of the public as a whole and about triple those of executives and professionals, college graduates, and those in higher-income households.

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More important, these people are significantly more likely to view what they do every day as a career and not just a job, and half are at the center of the decision-making processes at work. Be sure to look at how engaged you are in your own work. Ask yourself, what have I learned today? And if you don't like the answer, put yourself in a position to learn new things. Living deliberately requires all of us to do something in our personal lives that we so effortlessly do in our professional ones: focus on the here and now. Our efforts to keep up with the other professional "Joneses" by fighting for more money, or prestige, or power—may or may not ever bear fruit for our own world. Rather, by spending some of that urgency and emotional energy more locally, life will be lived a bit more deliberately, and the rewards will be a bit more immediate and tangible.

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*The CSA Executive Committee, sporting red bow ties, welcomes Dr. Champeau as the new CSA President*

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