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PE.550 Designing Your Life  
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## Lecture/Discussion 1: Elements of Living an Extraordinary Life

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### **David Mindell's introduction**

- Background of this class
  - Lauren and David conceived of this class
  - Handel Group works mostly in corporate world, helping CEOs work on balance and leadership.
  - Now, they are bringing the course to MIT to address grad student issues.
    - MIT focuses on coursework, but doesn't think about helping people as people.
    - After the 2006 IAP course, students didn't want the course to end. Thus, the Handel group extended the course into the summer, and started a new introductory class in the fall. They are building up the EL community.
  - Handel group is doing this *pro bono* right now because believe in development. How to scale up and integrate into MIT life/curriculum?

### **Lauren Zander's introduction**

- She is the owner of 2 companies
  - Corporate
    - Go to Vogue, etc.
    - Works with executives
    - The Private Coaching Division of The Handel Group assess the drama, dysfunction, politics within a company/corporation.
    - Then makes everyone deal with it.
    - Pins it on the boss. Top-down approach.
  - The Private Coaching Division includes individuals (130 people) in business since 2005.
- This course is based on a philosophy developed by Lauren
  - Lauren was a hell-raiser. Her goal as a child was to get people to hate her.
  - Then into her teens she was a party animal, a bad girl and overweight.
  - Then she realized that she needed to author her life
    - She sorted things out.
  - Now helps other people. She spent 15 years working with people as a coach.
  - Wild and fabulous things: advise officials in the republic of Georgia
- Her goal for the participants: to get us to shift how we relate to our own lives.
  - Get us all to work on our philosophies, our brand of what is happening to us in life.
- Her job: to poke at us.
- For those people who were consistently an 8, 9, or 10 on their homework.
  - Are you *really* an 8, 9, 10?
  - Are you settling for something vs. getting what you REALLY want?
  - Are you really daring and fulfilling your life?
  - Take down your suffering.
- No one is coming to save your life except YOU.
- For those of you who are unhappy, you CAN do something about it.
- She doesn't buy bullshit.
  - You can be late, but must pay the consequence.
- She doesn't say "poor you", because it doesn't help.

- It is tempting to try to convince yourself that you ARE happy. But this will do nothing.
  - Push yourself to see what ELSE is possible.

### **How to look at your life**

- You picked your life.
  - You are not an accident.
  - You picked your parents, and where you were born.
  - You picked every issue, every problem. It's not random.
  - Change the story. You picked it.
  - Because the minute you change the contexts (from victim to leader) then you are responsible for dealing with it.
  - It's convenient to think you didn't pick this life, because then you are "doing the best you can." Then you feel that you are "off the hook."
  - Instead, realize that you are here on purpose with your life.
- *Question from audience:* If you picked it, then didn't you have good reasons for picking it? So why would you want to change?
  - *Lauren's response:* Try to understand why you picked what you picked. What did you go for, what did you give up?
    - It's hard to see beyond this when you evaluate what you want to do.
- We have a bizarre aversion to working on ourselves.
- Example: Going to the gym
  - Question: "Why aren't you going to the gym today?"
  - Answer: "I have too much work."
  - Question: "But you're surfing the Internet now."
  - Answer: "Well... yeah. But I have a lot of work."
  - Then you feel bad.
- Example: Kabbalah
  - The soul comes in at the moment of conception.
  - Your soul experiences whatever is going on between your parents at the time of your conception. It sets the stage for the rest of your life.
  - The harder your time in life, the older your soul and the more things you need to work on.
- Lauren's take on "mystical" things like Kabbalah: You can't prove or disprove them. You can believe what you want to believe.
- Nothing that happens to you is an accident.
- We don't like to do a lot of things. Life is about conquering this.
- Example: Internal dialog is a good indicator of what you *really* think.
  - A person may say: "But I don't care what I look like!"
  - But, if you put a microphone in her head, you would see that she talks to herself about her appearance all the time.
- You picked your life, so you're here to deal with it. Design your life, or be a victim of it.
- *Question from the audience:* What about accidents, like losing a parent? Did I choose the accident?
  - *Lauren's response:* There's nothing more profound than losing a parent.
  - No matter where your parents are, they are in your life. You are in a relationship with them your whole life.
  - The most important thing is what you make the death mean and how you honor the relationship.
  - All incidents in your life shape your life. Figure out how you interpreted that event into your life. Get to know yourself about it. The WAY I INTERPRETED IT is not an accident.

- You have natural instincts of how to deal with events in your life. Figure out what those are.
  - Did you shut her out?
- Then figure out how you want to deal with it. Design.
  - Write a letter to her once a year.
  - What do you want to do?
  - YOU author what it is to lose mom at the age of 21.
  - We all have opinions of what life should have been. Skip that.
  - What do we want life to BE?
- No matter if dead or alive, you have to clean up your relationship with your parents.
- So yes, the participant picked how this death was for him. The event is all about the perception.
- *Question from the audience:* The participant has a kid in San Diego. He is worried that he is not in the kid's life because he is here in Massachusetts. He is worried about how he deals with his sexuality with respect to his kid.
  - *Lauren's response:* Happiness is about conquering fears and being brave
    - Getting out of bed.
    - Getting off the Internet.
    - Talking to a girl you like.
  - The participant's job is to invent how he wants to be.
    - What is possible for being human?
    - Fear is happening always.
    - Invent what it is to be a great dad.
    - Take what you loved about your dad, and evolve it.
      - Example: Lauren had a cold mom.
        - It's important to know her story and have empathy.
        - You're an apple off their tree, and have all their issues.
  - The participant doesn't see his daughter enough, and has other things he wants to do.
    - Conflicting values.
    - He has to get a plan. He has three options.
      - *Option 1:* Invent what it would be to be a great dad. Not what his dad would have answered, but what HE would answer. No mystery. Then do it.
      - *Option 2:* I wish I weren't eating this (while eating). Feel bad.
        - We live in a saga to get off the hook.
      - *Option 3:* I don't care at all. It'll be fine. She'll be fine. I don't care.
- *Question from audience:* But what about the saying "If God gives you lemons, make lemonade"? Maybe we do have limited resources. Maybe it is too stressful to blame ourselves for everything.
  - *Lauren's response:* It is what it is, and there is just opinionating.
  - We have interesting dynamics that we are here to move through and learn from.
  - We're here to experience life, and evolve. Not just stick with what we currently are.

### **Excuses**

- We are addicted to excuses. And buying them.
  - **"I said I would do X, but I did Y" + feel bad = good person.**
  - Feeling bad is the addiction. It's a big sport.
    - If you don't feel bad, then you are a jerk.

- Example: "I was supposed to pay you back today. I didn't, but I am so sorry."
- *Question from the audience:* Isn't that "feeling bad" just your conscience talking?
  - *Lauren's response:* Feeling bad is replacing doing the right thing.
    - Example: her daughter Kiya hits her brother. "Kiya, tell your brother you're sorry." But she's really not sorry. So you are forcing her to lie about feeling bad.
- Excuses come from this equation.
- What if you were honest with yourself?
  - I am having three more beers.
- Take away message:
  - Be aware of when you feel bad.
  - Feeling bad is a lie. If you actually examine it, you realize it's the same manipulation as Kiya. If you feel bad, it gets you off the hook.
  - Feeling bad was *supposed* to remind you to go to the gym. But you pervert it into making yourself seem like a good person, when really you are a jerk.
- *Question from the audience:* What about empathy?
  - *Lauren's response:* How do you use empathy? If you feel bad, use it as an instigator.
  - If you get off the phone and feel bad, it means that you did something nasty. Go correct it.
  - Use feeling bad as an impetus to action.
  - Most people feel bad as a way to justify NOT doing anything.
    - Feeling bad replaces telling truth, replaces opening your mouth.
  - We should deal with the following fact: we're either being a brat or being gripped by fear.
  - Example: Your goal was to stop eating donuts. You are at a meeting where there are donuts that were flown in from Belgium. You eat them.
    - You have lots of excuses why you HAD to eat the donuts. They were exotic, everyone else was, this was a rare opportunity, etc.
    - Then you feel bad.
    - But you WERE in charge.
    - When you give up your right to feel bad, all you are left with is your choice.

### ***Making choices in life and the voice in your head***

- You could have the power to design your life in any way, but you don't want it.
- *Question from the audience:* What about when you know what you need to do, but it is hard to do?
  - *Lauren's response:* How do you stop smoking? Stop putting cigarettes in your mouth!
    - Then you are left dealing with that little voice in your head.
      - But you need a cigarette after dinner. You NEED it!
    - People believe that it's difficult to avoid putting their hand to their mouth. Isn't that crazy?
    - That little voice in your head is a brat.
    - You're here on this planet to manage your mind. Get those voices under management.
  - The Double Agent
    - Everyone pretends that they are 100% supportive of their life.
    - But the double agent in your head bets against you.
      - "I can't do this"
      - "There's no way I can do that"

- The only thing that is really true about your “inability” to act is that you don’t have a plan.
  - So make a plan, and stick with it.
  - If you had gun to your head, you’d be fine.
  - Break the pattern of excuses, justifications, and feeling bad.
- The real problem is that you suck at keeping promises to yourself!
  - So deal with it.
- All this excuse stuff you’re dealing with is all a diversion so you don’t have to deal with your fears and where you want your life to go:
  - Going after your dreams
  - Dealing with the rage of feelings you would have to feel if you were doing what you wanted to be doing.
  - So we are chickens without personal integrity.
    - And we buy our own hype.
    - If Lauren can do it, we certainly can.

### **Reading examples from the Areas of Life Homework**

- The excuses, reasons, and justifications for why your life is a certain way are all B.S.
- Note: the real *you* is in the language you used.
  - It wasn’t said wrong... it was said perfectly.
- *Example 1*: “I end up getting sucked up by Television.”
  - The TV has some form of vacuum capacity?
  - Note the passive voice: “I end up getting.”
- *Example 2*: “I have no discipline”
  - Like it’s some sort of physical condition.
- *Example 3*: “I end up having sleepless nights”
  - Who is living this life?
  - Did you meditate? Did you give up coffee? Did you see someone for therapy?
  - Insomnia has been solved for decades.
  - Worrying should not be mistaken for *doing something*.
    - If we even used a small fraction of this energy to actually do something, it’s amazing how much we’d get done.
- *Example 4*: I think I’d be happier just quitting the Ph.D. Even though it’s been 10 years, something just keeps holding me back.
  - *Question from audience*: What if you don’t know what the right decision is?
  - *Lauren’s response*: You pick. Don’t hang out in the drama of the mystery.
    - You’re going to make lots of decisions. In hindsight, you will feel good about some of them, and bad about some of them.
    - Deal with it.
    - Don’t live in this *in between world* where there is such a SAGA about the decision.
    - People have all the answers. They need to have courage.
    - When the mind and heart align, then you should go for it.
      - Both talk to you all the time.
- *Example 5*: I’m always stressed and hungry so I am not eating well.
  - Does this really logically follow?
- *Example 6*: “I’m a great planner, but I don’t get around to doing the things on my plan.”
  - What is your definition of being a good planner?
- *Example 7*: Wants to learn about wines, but spouse won’t be supportive.
  - Do you really need your spouse to be supportive of wines in order for you to do it?
- *Example 8*: “It’s difficult to connect spiritually with my religion.”

- If life is about inventing, then what relationship do you want to have with your religion?
  - What are you going to invent for yourself?
- *Example 9*: "I don't form intimate relationships, and I don't miss it."
  - The "Who Cares?" plan.
  - It's sad, because you're missing out on a lot.
- *Example 10*: "My genes are problematic. All the people in my family are fat."
  - Investigate why everyone is so fat. Be the revolution in your family.
- *Example 11*: "I don't want to do anything embarrassing in public" so I won't have relationships.
  - You avoid *so* many things to insulate yourself.
  - But these are YOUR words, not the weather report.
  - If you look back at your life, the times you are the happiest about ARE the times you took risks.
- *Example 12*: "I'd like to go back to school but I feel that I don't have the tools because etc. etc."
  - You're off the hook because you have justified why you don't do it.
- *Example 13*: "I'm working on things in other areas" so I am ignoring the following areas.
  - Is it valid to write off whole parts of your life?
  - No. Those parts will impact your whole life and your wellness.
  - What's complicated is everything we're avoiding.
  - Key distinction: we are not making fun of you. We are laughing at humans. The people in this room are doing something about it, so you are to be lauded.
- *Example 14*: "I just quit smoking and drinking. I'm not sure how long it will last. I wish I could make the temptation go away. I wish I could do it in moderation. I don't think moderation is right."
  - You have no rules, and you feel that you don't have the ability to make your own rules.
  - Write whatever rules you want, and then practice them.
  - Why can't you do moderation?
- *Example 15*: "I don't know why I do these things, but I don't think I can stop."
  - You know why you like these things.
  - You can either deal, or stay in this whining state of affairs.
- *Example 16*: "My parent's marriage was terrible. They didn't want kids, but they had me. I don't want to be tied down. I saw my parents give up so much for the family. I don't think that family and career can go together."
  - We are all collecting evidence to support our theories.
- *Example 17*: "I wish I could marry her, but I can't marry her. I am so sad because I let the woman of my dreams go."
  - Change your plan. Is it really the plan you want?
  - Example: Lauren's old criteria for boyfriends
    - Shouldn't be cute
    - Should have \$
    - Should be Jewish.
  - She tried to reconcile herself to boring.
  - Lauren made a law that she was done pleasing the parents. Done protecting herself.
  - The next person she kissed had to pass the test. It's really possible to ask for this.

- Example: A kid wants to be a rock star. He doesn't need to defy nature; he only needs to defy himself. **The only thing to defy in this world is yourself.**
  - Most of us are in the business of MAKING UP COCKAMAMIE, and not busting through.
- If you think children = wrecked career, this is not self-expression. It's a reaction.
  - Invent how you want things to be; don't just reproduce what you are given.
- The old way: "Gather evidence, make a plan, and live it out"
- The new way: "Ask what you want the plan to be and live it."
- Take yourself off autopilot, choice by choice.
- Rationality is over-rated
  - There is no IS truth.
  - You get to live in your truth, and prove your truth.
- *Example 18:* This person is moody when people are doing things the way they feel is wrong. The person comes across as stubborn and impatient. The person cut off their father because he is close-minded.
  - We inherit all of our parent's issues.
  - You have to see it all and deal with it all in order to be with the good qualities in our parents.
  - *Question from audience:* Can you change those characteristics that you catch in your parents in yourself?
    - *Lauren's response:* She had a father who "worked hard, so he deserved a few cocktails in the evening."
    - You can catch that in yourself. No cocktails.

### ***On Consequences for breaking your promises***

- Question from audience: You say that we should make our promises and issues public, because it makes it lighter. But some things can't be made public, right?
  - Lauren's response: Wrong!
  - Example: Lauren's sister is doomsday. She has a negative internal monologue about the likelihood for successes.
  - Example: Lauren's marriage. She's not allowed to have a fantasy of a guy past 30 seconds. Else she owes a confession to her entire company.
    - As a result, she has never cheated.
  - But you need to have integrity called "I tell on myself." No pity party and lying to yourself.
  - The only way out is to figure out you can.
  - If you were getting paid for every time you went to the gym, would you go?
    - You'd be collecting.
- Example: We are rats, and always try to get around our promises.
  - Be vigilant of what plan you want to follow, and figure out rules to prevent the rat. After a few iterations, you'll have it figured out.
- Stop waiting to obey promises until you are a good person. That will never happen.
- Have fun with it.
- Example: Lauren doesn't like manicures. But the mind is available for authoring whatever you want. She could like manicures.
  - Do these things ever become automatic? Like a "just do it?"
  - Vices will always be there. It's a lifelong struggle.
  - Lauren doesn't feel bad about her nails. She just battles with them.
- Example: "I'm not a morning person"
  - Not true.



- Once you realize you have a choice, then you can choose. But you must break through your excuses first.
  - You're living in the repercussions of your excuses.
  - If you go off of autopilot, then your whole paradigm comes crashing down around you.
  - Creativity is the underlying goal
    - Oprah took abused, poor, fat and made it beautiful.
    - She authored the whole thing.

***Notes on this evening's homework***

- Are your 9s or 10s based on an ideal, or on your own goals? OR are you settling? Examine this for your homework.
- Secrets keep you embarrassed about yourself. It keeps a level of shame. Set yourself free from the things that you are hiding.
- Write down your mom and dad's positive and negative characteristics, and describe their marriage