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“The curse of ambition.” The words came to me as I struggled to identify a topic for this essay. Does it warrant 1,000 words, give or take?

It sounds clever in my mind's ear – maybe I've coined a phrase that will outlive me. I shimmied down the “research” rathole. In other words, I Googled it.

It's taken. The curse of ambition has been identified and examined...by a student, an assistant pastor, an Antarctic entrepreneur (the definition of “niche” market), and an Atlanta-based rapper, among other opinioners. Generally, it's a not-so-humble brag. A disingenuous attempt at introspective criticism. For example, Hugh Culver, the Antarctica guy, wrote, “I found myself envying people who seem stupidly happy with their lot in life. You know who I'm talking about – they have nothing better to do than watch *Survivor*, or *Batchelor* (sic), find the best deal on Costco patio lights and document their every breathing moment on Instagram.”

Stupidly happy. I allowed the phrase to sink in. The man has been paid to speak, with motivational intent, to more than 1,200 groups (he says). Yet he uses the modifier “stupidly” to qualify the condition of happiness because he perceives someone else's interests to be less important or virtuous than his own.

Would I rather be “stupidly happy” or “brilliantly miserable?” I've tried both (See what I did there?...a humble brag of my own), and neither represents sustainable bliss.

Sifting through the curse-of-ambition sufferers, I triggered a related thought: This is like answering, “I'm a perfectionist,” or “I tend to try too hard” or “care too much” when asked to identify a personal weakness in an interview. I became very aware of an essayist's Achilles heel: There's a fine line between candor and smug self-aggrandizement, and I'm sure I've crossed back and forth over it many times.

Enough of the procrastinatory musings. What am I trying to say? I'm attempting to describe the malaise and subsequent inertia that accompanies a long to-do list. You've got so much on your plate that you lose your appetite altogether and excuse yourself from the metaphorical table of productive life. It's 7 a.m. and you've awoken naturally, giving yourself the opportunity to get

a running start in the daily race to achieve. Ideas begin to swirl, but the quick-toggling gates of your psyche pinball you erratically between topics. Your brain can't sit still. But, also, your eyes refuse to open. You lie there, energized and paralyzed. You begin to worry: Tomorrow's to-do list is going to read exactly like today's. Worry leads to inaction. Lethargy breeds disappointment. Disappointment yields to self-loathing. And you haven't had your first sip of coffee yet.

“I hate writing, but I love having written,” author Dorothy Parker (and many others) have mused. The other night, a modern writer shared the sentiment that an acolyte confided in him: “I want to be a writer, but I hate to write.”

Permit me to tweak my phrase. “The paradox of aspiration” might be a better way to describe the curse of ambition that's on my mind. We want things, but they don't come easily. If I'm not likely to be great at an endeavor, then why undertake it at all?

What would a great writer tell you if you asked her for the secret to writing? “Write.”

How do I progress toward my objectives, both great and small? Open my eyes, get out of bed, choose a thing and complete it. Rest a few minutes. Select something else. Do it, too. And, most importantly, exert little to zero energy chastising myself for the things that remain undone.

No form of happiness is stupid. There's joy in the doing, just as there is in the having done. Call it the curse of ambition or the paradox of aspiration; just remind yourself that unfinished business is the raw material of every great business plan.

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