

## Do what matters



"Hold these. I have to go back for my Wife"

*It's more important to fail at something that matters than to succeed at something that doesn't.* —Regina Dugan

Ms. Dugan packs a lot of wisdom into this one sentence. I remember the first time I read it; my wife, Mary, and I discussed it over dinner, and then I meditated on the sentence until it found a place in my mind.

Here are my most recent thoughts.

### **Define what matters to you.**

Place all your activities and actions into one of two broad categories: things that matter and things that don't. The only category you need to define is the first category—things that matter; by default everything else falls into the second category. Your list of things that matter will be personal and finite; there is no limit to the number of things that don't matter.

Your things-that-matter list may include things you don't enjoy doing, but must do. For example, there may be aspects of your job that are unsavory, but if you want to stay gainfully employed, they must be prioritized.

This list may also include mundane activities that serve a higher purpose. For instance, I exercise three times a week, once to exhaustion. I don't enjoy working out, but it keeps my body in shape so it will enhance, and not hinder, the activity of my mind. (Einstein once said that the only purpose of our body is to carry our brain around.)

But most of the entries on your things-that-matter list will be things that you value—quality-of-life issues.

### **Prioritize what matters.**

An unexamined and undisciplined life will inevitably drift toward the unimportant so we must focus and prioritize our actions. Priorities are defined destinations—everything else is just infinite space. Think of it this way: a ship in the ocean can meaninglessly drift in an unlimited number of directions but will only reach a specific destination when directed.

A life without priorities is like a ship without a rudder.

## **When pursuing what matters, allow for failure.**

View failures as both unavoidable and acceptable. Management consultants Pfeffer and Sutton said, “Setbacks and mistakes should be viewed as an inevitable, even desirable, part of being action oriented. The only true failure is to stop trying new things and to stop learning from the last effort to turn knowledge into action.”

If you’re afraid of failure, you’ll never move beyond your safe zone; you’ll never leave sight of the shoreline for the vast ocean. Instead of thinking, “Failure is not an option,” think, “Failure is an option, and there’s a good probability that it will happen.”

When you fail, look for causes, not excuses. Analyze what happened, identify causes, learn, and adjust.

Although failure is a natural byproduct of living an aggressive life, never be cavalier about failure and don’t romanticize it. Failure is not acceptable if it is the result of slothfulness, poor planning, or poor execution.

When pursuing what matters, incremental progress is profitable even if you don’t reach the ultimate goal. For instance, if your goal is to get a degree in anthropology, every course you take toward the degree is profitable, even if you fall short of finishing.

It’s okay to fail at something that matters.

## **Don’t be beguiled by meaningless success.**

Some things masquerade as success but are not. That is, actions are not equivalent to results; being busy is not commensurate with productivity.

When you succeed at things that don’t really matter, you can develop a false sense of wellbeing and accomplishment. A quarterback can post impressive statistics—passes completed, no interceptions, total passing yardage—but still lose the game.

For the past 40 years I have used the week between Christmas and New Years to plan for the upcoming 12 months. I evaluate where I am in life, make course corrections, and decide what my plans and goal will be for the new year. I define what matters and how I will pursue it. I encourage you to do the same.

## **Summary**

**What?**- It’s more important to fail at something that matters than to succeed at something that doesn’t.

**So what?** - Analyze all your efforts and make sure you are focused on priorities.

**Now what?** - Analyze your failures and successes and make sure both are related to important matters.