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SLOW LIVING

SURRENDER TO SUCCESS

Imagine if, instead of striving to get ahead, we could slow down, take the pressure off and still achieve our goals. Anita Chaudhuri investigates the new thinking on success and discovers that sometimes, the less we try, the more potential we have to succeed



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How many times have we heard this mantra - If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again - in connection with achieving our most cherished goals and ambitions? The route to success is clear. We must strive and persevere and slog as hard as we can, until little blue sparks start popping out of our ears. Or some variation of that.

All the more surprising then to learn that the hottest new trend in personal development suggests a radically different approach. Its essence is simple. Stop trying so hard! Wait, really? How can taking our foot off the accelerator and slowing down possibly get results? In search of answers, I contact Edward Slingerland, thinker, professor and author of Trying Not To Try (Canongate, £16.99). 'There are a great many life situations where striving and making an effort are the worst possible approaches we can adopt,' says Slingerland. 'For example, if you have a big project to finish and you're way behind, if you get writer's block and you're trying to force the process or any kind of creative goal at all, it just won't work.'

Slingerland points out that when faced with the desire to do something

well, we often sabotage ourselves by trying too hard. If a deadline is looming for a piece of work or an essay, we might pull the classic caffeine-fuelled 'all-nighter' to get it done on time. 'This is exactly the opposite of what you should do,' says Slingerland. 'Sleep is our biggest ally; it allows the unconscious mind to process everything we've gone through during the day. If you spend all day preparing for a big meeting or exam and then you don't sleep, all that mental groundwork isn't getting consolidated in your brain. You might as well pour it all away. It's the same thing with people at work who never take holidays. It's not productive. If you don't take time away from what you're trying to achieve, you never allow your mind to tell you about

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all the wonderful new ideas it's trying to come up with. At some point you have to stop and just surrender.'

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Psychiatrist Judith Orloff, author of The Ecstasy Of Surrender (Hay House, £12.99), agrees with this approach. 'Though surrender is typically considered to be counterintuitive to success (wrongly associated with weakness and defeat), it can actually make you more powerful. Surrender lets you turn away from old ways of doing things so you can regroup and grow stronger. It gives you the maximum result with the minimum effort. In both career and relationships, it can benefit you when done at the right time and in the right way. Otherwise you can jinx success by "over-efforting" and being too intense. For grace to enter your life, you must make room for forces beyond your control.'

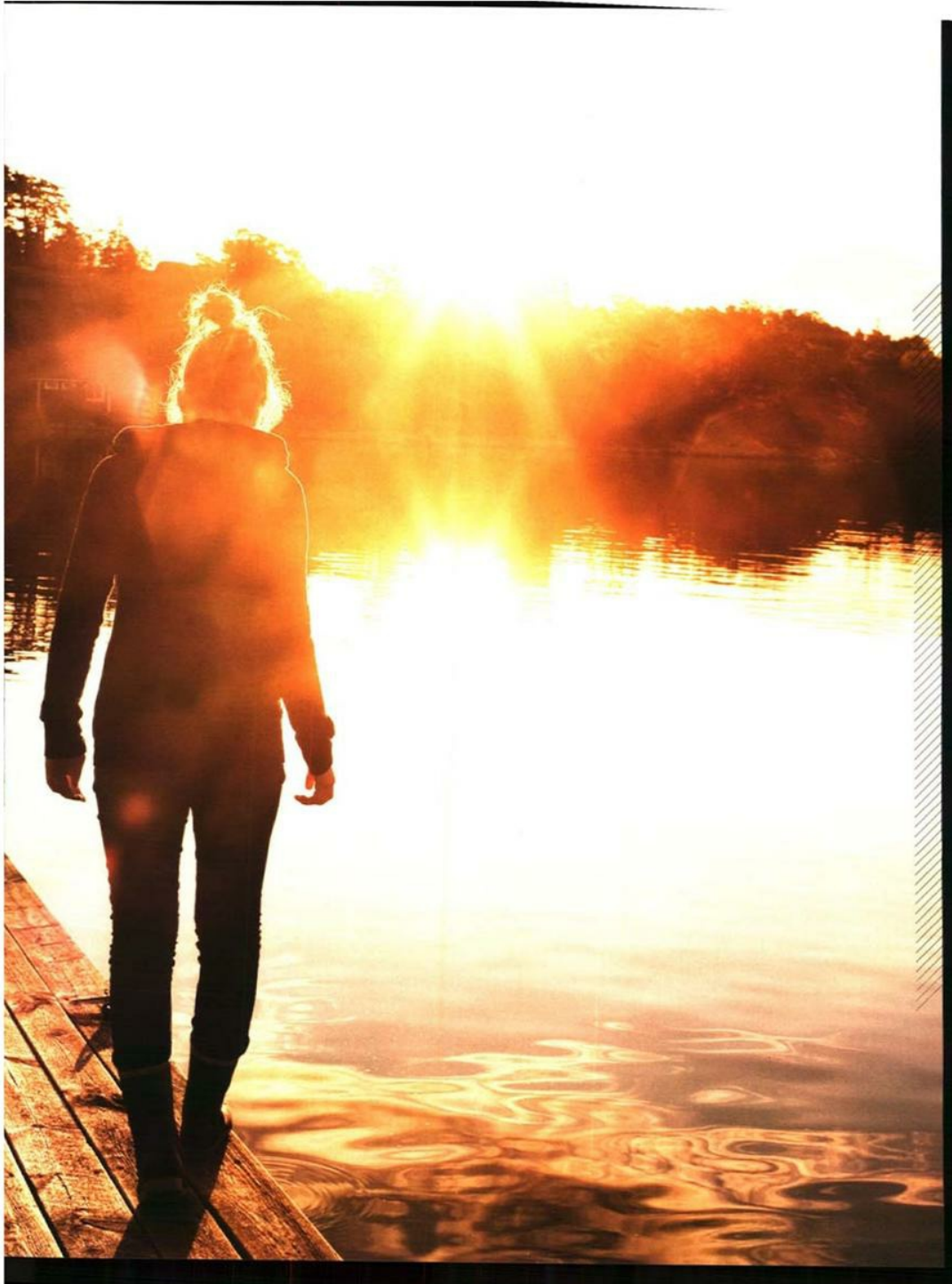
Slingerland, whose habit is to go kayaking when he notices he's striving too hard at work, is an expert in the history of Chinese thought. He researched the principles of four different ancient Chinese philosophers, including Confucius and Laozi, to understand more about the key ideas that influence the pursuit of effortless success. The first concept is wu-wei (pronounced oo-way) which translates in English as

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>> 'no trying'. The other is something called de (pronounced, amusingly, 'duh') which is Chinese for 'charismatic power' - a quality possessed by all who master the art of wu-wei.

Using foreign terms as shorthand for these states of being might initially seem unwieldy, but Slingerland makes a strong case for it. 'If our own language doesn't have the words to express an idea, then how can we grasp the concept? A good example is the word schadenfreude - we don't have an equivalent word of our own for that in English. I think wu-wei and de are like that. My students use it all the time in conversation, and sometimes my wife will say to me, "Well, that's not very wu-wei of you!"'

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

According to Slingerland, the ancient Chinese identified a paradox. You can only attain this state of effortless ease by being really good at what you do. And how do you get to be really good at what you do? Why, you have to expend a great deal of effort and practice until you master it of course.

So unfortunately, being wu-wei is not about sitting around on a pink cloud eating biscuits. A good example of how this works is to consider what's involved with public speaking, a prospect few of us relish. 'If you think about a really great speaker at a TED Talk, it feels like they're talking off the cuff, spontaneous and relaxed. But the reason they come across like that is because they have spent such a lot of time writing the talk, preparing the speech and practising. The key thing is when you get to the moment of performance; it is then that you need to stop trying. You've laid a solid foundation, but now you can respond to what's going on in the

moment. It's a lot like improvisation - a

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jazz pianist can only do what he does because he's already mastered the scales,' says Slingerland.

GO WITH THE FLOW

A more laid-back approach is not only advantageous to work and task-oriented goals. Slingerland believes being wu-wei is also highly relevant in social and relationship settings. 'There are a lot of areas in life where spontaneity is much better than toxic striving. Take dating, for example. Game-playing just doesn't work, because at some level, we just pick up on the cues that someone is trying too hard to impress, and we know not to trust that. Anyone who's clearly up to something, with a plan and a strategy, is not going to do well.'

On a subconscious level, we also know that spontaneity is the one thing that's very difficult to fake and that's why we know to trust it. For that reason, being in the moment and going with the flow is a much better approach when it comes to finding a partner or connecting with new people.

Slingerland believes our unconscious desire to be wu-wei is even behind most people's tendency to have one too many margaritas on a night out. 'Alcohol is a

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cultural strategy that we have developed in order to create more spontaneity in our lives; it forcibly downgrades

cognitive control. If you drink when you're socialising, you're genuinely less able to be inhibited or construct believable lies – that's why we use it. Basically, having a drink at a party is reaching into your brain and taking out your prefrontal cortex, saying "see, I can't inhibit myself, you can trust me."

Being in tune with your authentic self, rather than doing what everyone else expects of you, is another valuable shortcut to mastering effortless success. 'Say you are thinking about changing career. Rather than making a list of pros and cons, which is bound to involve a lot of complex variables, it's far better to trust what you're naturally drawn to, and try and get in touch with your own

spontaneous inclinations, even though it might defy logic or advice or what others expect you to do,' says Slingerland.

SECOND IS BEST

Richard Hytner, author of *Consigliere: Leading From The Shadows* (Profile Books, £12.99), also embraces this approach. After years of working as

CEO of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi, he opted to step down into the role of deputy chairman. The happiness and creativity that followed proved to be a revelation; so much so that he began to research why on earth it is that so many of us are programmed to pursue and value the top job, to the exclusion of all other possible options. >>>

FOUR ROUTES TO EFFORTLESS SUCCESS

Edward Slingerland shares his ways to slow thinking

1 PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT Take steps to rigorously master your craft, be it jazz piano, novel-writing or flirting, and you will eventually be able to be effortless in the moment.

2 REJECT PURSUIT OF GOALS Embrace a Zen-like state of non-attachment and actively stop pursuing your goals. The hope is that the goals will then come to fruition organically.

3 NURTURE WHAT YOU'VE GOT Try to work with your strong points in a low-key way. Nurture and expand your abilities slowly over time until they come to the fore naturally.

4 LIVE IN THE FLOW Make a conscious effort to forget about trying – and forget about not trying. Just let the values that you want to embrace pick you up and carry you along.





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>>> 'It took me a long time to realise that you can have a lot of fun not being the out-and-out leader,' he says. 'I was brought up believing that number one was the only place to be and I lusted after that top job until I got it. And I was an OK leader. I waited until I was 48 to decide to have a crack at leading from a sideways position, and discovered that I was happy.'

Hytner wonders why there is so little help given for people who want to opt for other roles rather than top dog. 'If you're not seen to be pursuing the big prize, then people think you're somehow opting out or making a compromise. Yet what happens is people get to the top job and find out that actually, it's not as good as they thought it would be.' And very often, after all that striving, when people reach the top, they end up shuffling paper and being stuck in endless meetings, far away from doing what they originally had a passion for.

As part of his research for his book,

"A big reason why we try so hard and keep striving is because we haven't made peace with who we are and what we've achieved"

Hytner interviewed numerous people in these deputy or 'sideways' roles; people who acted as a behind-the-scenes troubleshooter, spin doctor or adviser, the *consiglieri* role of his book's title made famous by Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. He discovered that people who were happy in these roles had distinct personality traits in common. 'They tended to have an insatiable desire for learning, they liked to try new experiences, to go to new places and were naturally curious. Interestingly, it wasn't true that the cause of their happiness in these sideways roles was

down to the idea that they *didn't* want responsibility. They like to be autonomous; they just don't like being micro-managed at all and are hungry to challenge themselves. They also tend to set a high value on privacy. If you're in the top job, you'll come under the glare of public scrutiny. By taking the sideways role, you get to be at the heart of power, but retain your privacy.

Orloff believes that understanding the negative impact that competing with others can have is key. A big reason why we try so hard and keep striving in the first place is because we haven't made peace with who we are and what we've achieved in our lives. 'When you believe you're a failure if you don't earn a certain income, look a certain way, get a certain job or have a certain type of home, you'll miss out on your magnificent qualities that signal true power.'

Once we understand what truly makes us thrive, and we stop competing with the 'alphas', we never look back.

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