

How to get a date with Juliette Binoche or Brad Pitt: the psychology of taking chances and succeeding with very difficult things

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Have you ever wanted to date a real looker like one of the movie superstars above? Of course you have, but somehow you never made it. It remains a daydream, like so many other daydreams: to be fabulously wealthy, to become a famous artist or writer or scientist, to achieve full harmony with your friends and family, to learn new fantastic skills like speaking almost perfect Russian or doing advanced computer programming. This article will show you how to achieve some of these goals that seem so attractive, yet out of reach. It will show you that *anyone* can take significant steps towards achieving difficult goals.

The reasons why so many wishes never get beyond the daydream stage are many and varying. One important obstacle may be lack of talents needed for the job. Juliette Binoche may be attractive to you, but how attractive are you to her? Speaking Russian would be just great, but how many years of full time study would it take to achieve mastery of that language? Are your linguistic skills up to it?

The story might end here. Some people have the necessary talents, others not. But it is simply not true that talent is the only important factor. Other aspects must also be considered. Many difficult goals are difficult for other reasons than the requirement of an extreme level of talent.

Therefore, we need to look much more closely at the stumbling blocks. Surely, one of the problems that may arise is due to stubborn persistence. Juliette is far away somewhere in Paris, and probably already has a husband or boyfriend. This article is about achieving very difficult things, but not about achieving almost impossible things. Forget about Juliette; think about the girl next-door instead. Define your goal in a way which is as little restrictive as possible. That is a sure way of making it more likely that you will meet with success, sooner or later.

A second problem is that you must realize that hard things can only be achieved by devoting a lot of time and energy to them. The goal may be very attractive, but perhaps the way of getting there just is not very exciting or interesting to you. Studying Russian may simply be boring to you. If so, you are not likely ever to be a great expert on Russian literature. We can only get so far if we do not have the right level of interest. However, interest, like humor, is a funny thing. It can develop to a sufficient level if given a chance. The most important factor in building interest is encouragement. If somebody will be your tutor and encourage even small achievements and steps in the right direction, you stand a chance of getting there one day. The tutor is wise to give exaggerated praise in the beginning. Most people believe flattery, no matter how absurd. The effect on motivation and interest can be astonishing.

The effects of failure may be devastating to your motivation, however, especially if you tend to attribute failure to your lack of ability. "That gorgeous girl rejected me, of course she did, because I am so unattractive. Any girl would feel the same way. I will just avoid trying again with another girl because of the pain I expect from a new refusal. I turn to daydreams instead." Such reasoning will destroy your motivation.

The reason most people put up with restricted lives is probably that they let themselves be deterred from trying again, after a few failures. Research on what people do in their everyday life shows that only a few percent of all actions are hard (Sjöberg & Magneberg, 1990). People are satisfied with doing the easy things in life. They avoid difficulties. But the really attractive goals are hard to reach, among other things because many people want them. There is a lot of competition for dates with the Juliettes of the world. Chances are slim that you are the lucky fellow to get a yes. Slim, but not zero. Here is the real clue to success.

The calculus

Supposes there are 1000 Juliettes in France. At least *one* of them would be really enticed by the prospect of having dinner with you in some small, intimate restaurant. That doesn't sound entirely unlikely, does it? It *is* a hard goal to reach, though, the chance of success is only 1/1000. Let us do some calculus.

Suppose you call one or two Juliettes. Chances of failure are overwhelming. But suppose you call 500 Juliettes. What are the chances of *one* of them accepting your invitation? Simple probability calculus shows that the chance is 0.39, just a little less than 50-50! The calculation only assumes that all attempts are independent, i. e. the Juliettes don't start to call each other and issue warnings about an idiot who is trying to ask them out for dinner. Please note: calling the *same* Juliette 500 times is no good! The attempts must be different and independent.

To sum up what we have learned so far: define your goal in a flexible manner, don't settle for one special embodiment of it. Then, try to harden yourself against the de-motivating effects of failure. Realize that all great successes have been preceded by many, many failures - or almost all, at any rate. And realize that all those who never make it, the losers of this world, are the ones who have given up after a few failures. Even *very* hard goals can be achieved if you are persistent enough, and make many independent attempts. I call this the Logic of Repeated Attempts.

The reasoning can be applied to many goals beyond that of dating Juliette. Suppose you have written a wonderful novel and want it to be published. Publishers are like Juliettes, "they already have a book", to use an old joke, and they have thousands of manuscripts submitted to them. Why should they even bother to read beyond the first page of your manuscript? This is a perfect example in which to try the Logic of Repeated Attempts, however. Even if the chance that any one publisher accepts your manuscript is as low as 1/10001, you are bound to succeed after having made *many* independent attempts, ignoring failures and just pushing on. The cost of postage is a minor thing here; the important thing is not to pay the psychological cost of impaired self esteem and confidence in you after each rejection. Also, you need to remember that once you have had initial success the rest is much easier. Once that first novel is published, it will be much easier to publish the second one. After one lovely night with you, Juliette will be calling *you* for a date, poor woman!

1 . Data on publishing new novels in Sweden support this failure level. Only about one manuscript in 1000 is accepted and published.

Sometimes it is not feasible to make hundreds of attempts². Then, the really difficult goals where the chance of success is 1/1000 or less at a single attempt are just too hard. More ordinary difficult goals with a chance of success of 1/20 or 1/100 are feasible, however, if you can make 25 or 50 attempts. The chance of having your manuscript accepted by a major publishing firm is probably smaller than that, while asking the girl next door for a date may be no less likely to lead to success than 1/20. Twenty-five attempts will then lead to success at least once with the probability very close to 1.

It is very important, then, to know if a goal you have set is just difficult, very difficult or almost impossible. You should not try what is almost impossible. Also, be wary of the very difficult goals. They may demand just too much to reach, even if they *can* be reached. Go for the difficult but reachable things in life. Most people don't do even that, meaning that competition is not that fierce.

The die is cast

So far, we have treated the topic as one of rational problem solving. Defining a sensible rather than almost impossible goal, hardening yourself so failures won't de-motivate you, increasing interest in the necessary work so you will have enough energy and spend enough time on the project. However, this sort of recipe will only take you part of the way. What you really need is to break loose from all the self-imposed restrictions on your life. This is a risky road to take, and there is no guarantee that what happens won't hurt you deeply. On the other hand, it is a good way to test alternative worlds.

Luke Rhinehart, the American who wrote the famous novel "The Dickeyman" (Rhinehart, 1971, 2000) was on to something important. He described a man who lived according to the random behavior of a die. He set up options, some of them risky and some not, he rolled the die, and then he *must* behave according to the option chosen by the die. People who have tried this describe a sense of lessened responsibility - it was the die, after all, that made the final decision, they say. This is an illusion, of course. But it seems to work that way in many cases.

We do not know how many people have tried to live this way for a short or long time, but the book and its sequels have become cult literature. Surprisingly many people I know have read this book, and if you have read it, you won't forget it. It may change your life. So far, no research seems to have been done on the effects of die living. Probably, the effects will be very different depending on who you are to begin with. The Dickeyman describes a man who had some violent and destructive wishes, which were suppressed. Living according to the decisions by the die made him follow some of those violent wishes, and the results were partly disastrous, as one might expect.

The art of die living involves formulating options that you really feel that you could go through with if they are chosen by the die. If you don't, the whole thing becomes meaningless and you might just as well go back to your old habits, which usually means never trying the golden opportunities that life might have in store for you.

² Stephen King describes the difficult beginnings of his successful career as a writer of popular fiction. He made hundreds of attempts, and had hundreds of manuscript rejections, before he finally succeeded. He just would not give up (King, 2001, 2002).

Let me suggest that you start by reading the book. Then start with small steps and relatively easy and not very risky options. If you feel comfortable, try the bigger steps, and you are likely to find that you will enter new worlds. There is no guarantee that these new worlds are kind to you, they may well be very nasty, depending on the options you formulated. But even the worst experiences carry with them a chance of learning. That is what we should cherish most of all: The chance of learning.

Breaking loose from the prison of everyday life is a common theme in literature and the movies. You may remember the 1993 movie *Falling Down* with Michael Douglas, directed by Joel Schumacher. Caught by his rising rage and frustration, and in a traffic jam that never seems to end, the protagonist just leaves his car on the highway and enters on a journey into the unknown. I think the story resonates well with many viewers and may serve as a substitute for actually doing something of that nature themselves. At any rate, it is a good illustration of what it means to break loose and why it may sometimes be important (and risky).

Yes - but what does it cost?

It is obvious that many restrictions on our lives are economic in nature. Not all, not by any means, but many. Money can be very effective in making you live in a certain routine and constrained manner, simply following a golden trail and forgetting about the wide green landscape around you. Leaving that golden trail can be quite painful in the sense that you lose money and must make major changes in your life, and it may well hurt also other people who are dependent on you. These are hard decisions to make. Maybe the real possibilities are there for people who have passed the age of having children to support. On the other hand, in middle age and later, other factors enter the picture and speak against the adventurous search for new possibilities. If nothing else will interfere, other people will tell them that they are "too old", which is often just a prejudice. Age does mean a loss of capacities of many kinds, but less so than many people believe. Intellectual abilities remain the same for a long period of time.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare wrote:

*The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
but in ourselves
that we are underlings.*

Think about that. The restrictions on your life are there mostly because you believe they are, but they vanish in thin air the day you start to ignore them.

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