

Getting to the Goals

- The Journey of Setting Them and Getting Them

Dream big That's what I tell my students and clients whenever I do a "goals list" exercise in a class or a session. I do this continually in my own life as I achieve goals I've set and add new ones to my list. Recently I've had some standout experiences in terms of goal getting. These "gotten goals" were on my list for as long as I can remember. But more about that later on.

Obviously doing a goals list is going to be different for every individual. Whether as a clinician or an educator, I'm interested not only in the goals people choose, but also in their reaction to the exercise of creating the list itself. Sometimes people will say they can't think of any goals, which is quite an informative statement. It sends an important message about the person's sense of value in the world. If a therapy client is making this statement, he/she has provided me with incentive and direction. It is a pleasure to watch clients who start out by saying they have no goals, or can't think of any goals, only to end the session with a goals list to take away with them for future reference. Every now and then I hear from a client or former client who kept a goals list and achieved a goal on the list - that's also a welcome treat.

Sometimes clients have no problem coming up with long and varied goals lists. I had a client a few years ago who was in despair in terms of her immediate, everyday life, and who was reluctant to make decisions about her own forward journey. But when I asked her to create a goals list and I told her to "dream big," the client was able to come up with so many I couldn't write fast enough to keep up with her. On the other hand, I also have clients who, when they say they can't think of goals, believe they are not "allowed" to have goals for themselves. For whatever reason, throughout their lives, these clients have been "programmed" not to consider their own thoughts, feelings, hopes, plans and dreams relating to them as individuals. Resistance can be high with these clients, and asking them to think of goals for themselves just stumps them, because it almost feels "wrong" for them to consider what THEY want - how profound.

There are other clients who come up with well planned and realistic goals, only to decide to reject them because to follow these would somehow be "too good." It's as if they are so invested in the chaos of being "stuck" that even a glimmer of the possible (which they say they want, and I believe them) is too scary, because then they have to give up a lifetime of investment in the chaotic lifestyles they have come to find "safe" or "comfortable" which is really code for "familiar." Again, this gives me clues in terms of directions forward therapeutically. Here I'm faced with massive resistance to change, even though the client talks the game of wanting change - a typical paradox.

When formulating the goals lists with clients and/or students, I make a few suggestions for guidelines. First and most important, the items on the lists are to be goals they want for themselves, not based on the others in their lives, and not based on what they think they are "supposed to" want as goals. For example, of course I'm not against or opposed to the "get married and have a family" goal or the "graduate from college" goal, and if those are on someone's list, then of course I validate that. However, that still seems like something someone else (society, our parents, peers, etc.) tells us we're "supposed to" want or do.

In terms of considering goals for oneself, I encourage people not to think in terms of “supposed to.” Then, they are not to be limited by any restrictions - money or time or age or marital status or children or aging parents or any of the other “reasons” people will throw out as obstacles preventing them from achieving their goals. For example, people with children don’t need to write down, “I want to see my kids grow up and be happy and successful.” Yes, I understand that, but how is that a goal for the individual? Clearly, it’s not, so I remind people who are parents that the goals lists are to be about nobody else but themselves. Also, there can be no time constraints - none of this, “by a certain age I have to make a certain amount of money,” kind of thinking. And while we’re on the subject of money, there can’t be dictates from others about how much money is “enough,” or that earning some amount of money will imply success. Again, it’s about what the individual believes for him or herself, not what someone has “programmed” the person to believe about money or success.

Once the suggestions/guidelines are out there, I again encourage people to dream big. Some folks have an understanding of how this is helpful, and they start to write down their goals - large and small, real or imagined, practical or impractical, perhaps possible, perhaps not. For others there are still difficulties around feeling compelled to “be practical” or using phrases like, “that could never happen.” Okay, so not everyone is able to envision right away what it feels like to be selfish in a good way, thinking of self not in terms of anyone else. For them, I encourage continued talking and thinking and imagining. Eventually, just about everyone comes around to an understanding of how this exercise is worthwhile because it takes us out of our problem place and into the possible place. What’s wrong with having that possible place? Nothing, if you’re asking me. My life is an example of the possible place, and also of how dreams can become realities if we never give up believing in ourselves.

On to my story. I have written in other articles of goals achieved and how wonderful that feels. The most recent journey to a “gotten goal” began in August 2006 when I attended a week long conference in Santa Fe, NM. It was called “Creativity and Madness,” and it was one of the best conferences I attended, in a most important and personal way. For more information about this conference, visit their website at www.aimed.com. From the start, the conference wasn’t your typical mental health workshop gathering. The people I met and spent time with were operating on such a different and positive plane, one that I could relate to and learn from on so many levels. And as I sat listening to different presenters, I thought of an idea for a presentation of my own. I came up with the article “Creativity and Control - The Fine Line Between Help and Harm.” You can find it in the Articles link at this website. From there I came up with concepts for the presentation, which I submitted it to the conference organization after returning home from Santa Fe.

As I mentioned earlier, I don’t put a “timeline” on any of my goals. This one, to present at a national credential conference, had been on my list for years. Then it was a matter of the right time presenting itself, and there it was. I made the effort and took the risk this opportunity presented to me of sending a piece of myself out into the world. Once it was out there, nothing more could be done, and it was up to someone else to extend an invitation to speak. The point though is that I had done the work of setting the goal, and this was a chance to take the next step toward getting the goal. Not too long after submitting the proposal, I got an email from the

conference organizer, with a message to call and discuss my proposal, which I did. After a short phone conversation, I was invited to present at “Creativity and Madness” in Santa Fe, NM in August 2007. How amazing was that! Even now, with the experience behind me, I still think of that moment after I hung up the phone from that phone call. I was too exhilarated for words. I was sitting at my computer, looking at the article, already thinking of what Power Point slides I would create. And inside of me there was this feeling of contentment, satisfaction, calm, joy, peace.

So I’ve returned from the conference, and am still smiling as I remember bits and pieces, moments and impressions, thoughts and feelings. You can visit the Photos link at this website and see pictures from the conference. I kept a conference-related journal throughout the experience, from the invitation onward, and I go back to reread how each day unfolded, not just in terms of events, but also what was going on internally for me as the week went on. Once I was actually in front of the audience and gave the presentation, it was a “parallel time” kind of thing. On the one hand, it went quickly and before I knew it, it was over. On the other hand, it seemed to go slowly as well. Perhaps the part of me that felt time passing slowly in the moment was the part of me that was savoring the sensation of achieving this long hoped-for goal. Too many words, too many feelings to catalogue and document them all here - suffice it to say it was beyond my best imaginings, it was an event for me like none other in my life so far, and it’s a wonderful addition to my storehouse of sensory memories. It was validating and empowering and affirming for me. Though at this time in my life I’m blessed with many validating, empowering, and affirming days, this adventure was an “even more so in a million different ways” type of experience. Even though it’s past me, it’s still playing in my head and as I said earlier, it brings a smile to my face.

One other thing to bear in mind - sometimes achieving one goal prepares us for the next one. Being a clinician for fifteen years prepared me for teaching at the college level, and becoming a clinician and a college professor were both on my goals list. Then, having both of those experiences, having those “gotten goals” prepared me for doing speaking engagements, and there’s another goal achieved. See how some goals lead to others? Again, no timelines, no restrictions, no “that will never happen” type thinking going on here.

Do you have a goals list? Try it for yourself, and then keep it and refer to it from time to time, as many I know do regularly. For one thing it’s a chance to dream, and I think that’s always worth some head time and space. For another, isn’t it satisfying to achieve what you strive for? I know it is for me. And lastly, it keeps us in touch with forward motion, with listening to and following our hearts and thinking from a self place. Remember, when you put yourself and what you need at the head of your list, you have that much more to give to the others in your life who are of value to you. Learning to do that and then putting it into action is in itself an excellent goal. When this is achieved, so much else is able to be done, and you’ll know what it is to live life in that possible place.