

Official Topic: Reaching your Dreams by Choosing Optimism

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We were all once dreamers.

As young children, we wished upon pennies flicked hopefully into fountains, upon petals plucked delicately from a flower. We longed to be extraordinary—to be popstars, presidents, athletes. We hollered into wishing wells and waited expectantly for the buoyant reverberations to rise again to our ears; we gazed in wide-eyed wonder outside our windows at the intermittent flickers of shooting stars. We spoke with an unperturbed confidence, an assured invincibility, a conviction as firm as the sky is wide. Perhaps we perceived a world of elusively utopian ideals, perhaps our ambitions were quixotic and wild, yet it is undeniable that we were dreamers in the truest sense—earnestly unrelenting, brazenly zealous, and wholeheartedly hopeful.

What has changed? It is neither our passion nor ambition, but rather our perceptions of the surrounding world. Now when we glance out our windows, we no longer seek stellar miracles painting their way across the night, but, instead, witness the failure, judgement, and criticism residing in our very backyards. Achievement, at such distance, seems unattainable, so we conclude that we are inadequate to secure it, just not *made* for victory. We question ourselves: Who am *I* to be a dreamer?

A few years ago, my family and I visited Asia and were waiting at a train station in Nagpur, Maharashtra. An unrelenting heat beat down on the chaotic symphony, the metallic shrieks of rails dissonant with the loud chatter of riders and the contrasting tunes of the numerous street musicians. I paced around agitatedly, squirming as beads of sweat formed on my forehead.

A soft melody cut through the commotion. I whirled around to see a woman seated on a thin blanket, holding a wooden flute. She played a few notes, then paused. I watched, wide-eyed, as she slowly removed the instrument from her lips.

She glanced up and shrugged. "I'm just practicing."

I smiled at her nervously and nodded.

"For when I'm a star," she continued nonchalantly.

I nodded again and placed a few spare coins on her threadbare blanket, not contemplating much on what she had just said. Yet, on the way home, her statement resounded oddly within me. She was quite the quintessence of emptiness, yet simultaneously seemed to be teeming, brimming, practically bursting with vehemency. She emanated the same energy as that of blissful childhood sureness. However, indubitably, she must have seen the ruthlessness and failure that lay outside, right? What could she have possibly chosen instead?

*Elpis*, in ancient Greece, translated to and represented the personified spirit of hope. In the famous narrative of Pandora's Box, a reckless curiosity led Pandora to open a jar gifted to her by a vengeful Zeus, although she had been explicitly forbidden from doing so. As a result, all manner of misery and hardship were liberated into the world, yet Pandora shut the jar before *Elpis* could escape. Initially, there was a standard interpretation of this popular myth: all the evil in the world proves that the jar was a punishment to plague humanity, a sentence to be eternally deprived of hope.

Yet perhaps it is us that *chooses* to construe it in that way. As we begin experiencing struggle and defeat, we elect to abandon our dreams in favor of so-called "reality"—the cautious and mundane. We misdoubt our capacity to be extraordinary, overlooking the fact that perhaps it was destined for *Elpis*—hope—to remain with us, to never abandon humanity when it needs her

the most, to prevail in the restless spirit of persistence and resolve. Perhaps that was what the woman with the flute had chosen: the antithesis of pessimism, an unbreakable will. I realized such divergence between a hopeless end and an endless hope was embracing *Elpis* with a tenacious vitality—in other words, optimism.

What was once your dream? When you flicked a coin into a fountain, what did you ardently wish for? When asked about your hopes, what was your delighted reply?

In fact, James Warren, one of the first African-American military aviators in the Armed Forces, received his pilot's license at 87 years old. Fauja Singh set marathon records at the age of 100. Businessman Mark Cuban was a bartender, billionaire Manoj Bhargava drove a taxi, and author Stephen King lived in a trailer. Now it is our turn—instead of questioning our capability, we must ask ourselves: Who am I to deprive myself of hope? Who am I to doubt my potential?

It is our choice to embrace *Elpis*, adopt a mindset of optimism, and return to our time of conviction and faith, a time of shooting stars, flower petals, and wishing wells.

Because, inherently, we are all still dreamers.