## You Are Living the Dream Life

### William B. Irvine, The Stoic Path, Waking Up

I have good and bad news for you. The good news is that you're living the dream life. The bad news is that the dream in question probably isn't being used by you. It's instead being had by someone else, probably a total stranger. In most cases, this dreamer will dream of being like you in specific ways. Wouldn't it be great, she tells herself, to have your job, your car, or your house? Likewise, wouldn't it be great to be as healthy, affluent, or educated as you are?

In other cases, though, a dreamer isn't satisfied merely with being like someone else in certain respects. She instead dreams of inhabiting that person's life. I've been told, for example, that some people dream of living the life of Kim Kardashian, whoever she is. They are convinced that if only they could live that life, or a close facsimile of it, they would find lasting happiness. Some listeners will react with astonishment to my claim that there are people who dream of living their life. The life in question, they will protest, just isn't that great. Indeed, they themselves wouldn't want to live it if they had any choice in the matter. This unhappy individual might go on to describe the hardship she is experiencing. She recently lost both her job and her boyfriend, and not only that, but as a result of trying to text on her cell phone while walking, she tripped, broke her ankle, and now has to limp around with crutches. Who, she might ask with a degree of irritation, would want to swap their life for mine. It turns out that lots of people would. And by lots, I mean millions or even billions of people. One way to find these people is to travel places where extreme poverty is the norm. This includes places where people's annual income is less than the amount of money our limping lady spends on coffee each year. It includes places where houses not only don't have hardwood floors, they don't even have vinyl or concrete floors. They instead have as floors the dirt over which their dwelling was built. Imagine living that life. It also includes places where people work very hard in the hot sun for an entire day to make two or three dollars and feel lucky to have had the opportunity to do so. It includes places where people live without flush toilets. You might assume that these people are forced to use outhouses, but in some parts of the world, even outhouses don't exist. Instead, people resort to what is politely termed 'open defecation.' Some of these people lack a flush toilet because they lack plumbing altogether, meaning that to obtain water they have to leave home. Sometimes they walk miles to get water that is borderline drinkable. They might bring a water container with them and on the hike home it might weigh 40 pounds. For cultural reasons, the water getting task is often left to women and girls. As a result, young women, when sizing up potential husbands, factor in how far they would have to carry water if they married a certain suitor. Again, imagine living that life.

I could extend this list, but I think you get the idea. In material terms, you're living the dream life of very many of the world's inhabitants. Time travel is impossible, of course, but if it were, you could use it to meet your long dead ancestors. When you describe your life and circumstances to say, your mother's mother's mother's mother's mother, she would doubtless be astonished. You have antibiotics that quickly cure infections that would otherwise be deadly? You have X-ray and MRI machines that let you see inside your body without cutting it open? You can travel by flying across oceans? You have a device the size of a deck of cards that lets you not only talk to people who are far away, but shows you a picture of them as they speak? And on the same device, you can consult all the books in the world's great libraries? Astonishing.

A few minutes into this conversation, this great-great-grandmother-might draw what to her is the obvious conclusion. The Second Coming had finally arrived and as a result you are enjoying heaven on earth. Continue the conversation further, though, and you might make a discovery. Yes, your great-great grandmother may be astonished by all the things you have described, but because she doesn't dwell on their absence from her life, in part because she can't even imagine them existing, she's about as happy as you are. Or, who knows, maybe even happier. Along these lines, realized that your descendants will likely look back on you and say, 'the poor guy,' think of all the things we take for granted that he doesn't have. But because you don't fixate on these things, or at least I hope you don't, you don't feel deprived.

You don't need to go to a far corner of the earth or back in time to find people who dream of living a life like yours. Indeed, there's an excellent chance that you can find them in your neighborhood. You're just oblivious to their existence. Living near you, for example, might be a woman who as a result of a birth defect, is confined to a wheelchair, and has difficulty interacting with other people. Tell her about losing your job, boyfriend, and about having to hobble around on crutches, and she might respond not by consoling you, but by telling you how lucky you are to have had a job and boyfriend, and how lucky you are to be able to hobble.

Before we move on, let me point out that even this woman is living someone's dream life. The dreamer in question might be suffering from locked in syndrome. In my book The Stoic Challenge, I tell the story of one such person at age 43, Jean Dominique Bauby had a brainstem stroke and as a result, woke up stripped of almost all of his physical abilities. The two exceptions, he could slowly swivel his head and he could blink his left eye. He was therefore bedridden and because he could not swallow, had to be fed with a tube. Despite being physically incapacitated though, Bauby's mind remained fully functional. And although he could not speak, his doctors came up with a way for him to communicate by blinking his eye. Lucky fellow.

A suggestion. The next time you're feeling sorry for yourself and the life you're living, take a moment to think of Bauby.

Elsewhere in these talks, we have encountered the gap theory of happiness. According to this theory, a leading cause of unhappiness is your awareness of a gap between what you have and what you want. In order to regain your happiness, this gap must be filled, and most people close it by working hard to get whatever it is that they find themselves wanting. There is, however, a second way to close the gap. They can learn how to want the things they already have. This gap closing strategy, although less obvious than the first, is vastly more effective.

As we have seen, the Stoics developed psychological strategies for wanting what we already have, including engaging in negative visualization and doing the last time meditation. The gap theory of happiness also comes into play when, instead of talking about what we have, we talk about the life we find ourselves living. If there's a gap between that life and the one we dream of living, we will be dissatisfied. One way to close this gap is to somehow achieve the life of our dreams. A second, less obvious but vastly more effective way to close it is to embrace the life that we are living and learn to count ourselves lucky to be living that life.

OK, you say, but how can we learn to embrace the far less than perfect life that we happen to be living?

One way is to employ what I call trans life meditation. Allow me to explain. The Stoics knew that our assessment of what happens to us is usually comparative rather than absolute. Ask someone whether they are having a good day today, and they might tell you that compared to last Saturday, they're having a miserable day. But that compared to Wednesday, they're having a wonderful day. Psychologists refer to the point of reference we use in making a comparison as an anchor. The Stoics knew that although we have limited control over the challenges life presents us with, we have considerable control over the anchors we use in our assessment of daily events. If the person focuses his attention on Saturday, his assessment of today will be negative, and if he instead focusses his attention on Wednesday, it will be positive. It would therefore behoove him to focus his attention on Wednesday.

The trans life meditation is based on this insight regarding anchoring. We can increase our satisfaction with the life we are living by turning our attention away from the people whose lives we might dream of living, and toward those people who dream of living our life. In particular, we can make a point of periodically imagining what life would be like if we suddenly find ourselves inhabiting the life of someone who felt lucky to earn $3 a day doing hard labor in the hot sun. Or maybe someone who is physically incapacitated as a result of being afflicted by locked in syndrome. What would it be like, we should ask ourselves, to be living that life rather than our own? We should also use our imagination to fill in some of the details of their existence and maybe to form a few mental images as well.

OK, meditation over resume your usual activities.

You will likely find that meditating in this manner will dramatically change your outlook on life in general, and your outlook on your life in particular. For one thing, it will seem far more agreeable than it previously did. You will also likely find that this effect is short lived, but as is the case with negative visualization in the last time meditation, not to worry, you can repeat the trans life meditation as needed.

It would, by the way, be a mistake to think that the Stoics don't want us to dream. We should dream, but we should be very careful in our choice of dreams. One dream that the Stoics would heartily recommend is the dream of waking up each morning with the knowledge that, with a bit of luck, we get to spend the day being us, living the life we happen to be living. What more could any sensible person ask for?

Most of the Stoic meditations I teach require no advance preparation. The trans life meditation, though, can benefit from a bit of research on your part. In particular, you can educate yourself about the lives of people who dream of living the life that you are living. You can do this by reading about life in impoverished nations, or, if circumstances allow, by visiting people who live those lives. You can also read the memoirs of people who have had much more difficult lives than yours. I already mentioned the plight of Jean Dominique Bauby, a man who woke up to find himself locked into his body. His memoir, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, is very much worth reading. He dictated it, in a manner of speaking, by blinking his left eye.

In your research, you can also educate yourself about what life used to be like everywhere on the planet. As a result of the research I've done, I'm convinced that in many respects my life is vastly superior to that of, say, King Henry the Eighth of England. Yes, he had much more power and many more wives than I do, but I have indoor plumbing that he could only dream of having. Oh, and I have toilet paper too. Poor Henry. I suspect that many of those who are deeply disenchanted with the lives they are

living are in part paying the price for not having done their trans life homework. They simply do not appreciate how much worse their lives could be. The same disenchanted individuals, though, might be able to tell you in great detail what some celebrity has been up to lately. I don't want to sound judgmental, but perhaps they could spend their trans life research time a little more wisely. Besides making you more appreciative of the life you're living, doing the trans life meditation can have a spillover effect. In particular, it can transform you into a more compassionate human being. As a result, you might find yourself becoming more generous with your time, your patience, and your resources. As a consequence, doing trans life meditation can improve not only the quality of your life. But the quality of other people's lives as well. It's a win-win situation, one that the ancient Stoics who felt they had a duty to help the non-Stoics around them, would very much approve of.