

Visioning Joy



Vision Boards and the Quest for a Joyful Life

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Happy

“What do you want to be when you grow up”?

“Happy”

It’s a great answer, and one that’s been attributed in anecdotes to famous names like Goldie Hawn, John Lennon, and even Linus from Charles Schultz’ Peanuts.

The trick, of course, is figuring out the connection between the structures by which you define your life and the broad and somewhat amorphous topic of happiness. It’s not an easy process, nor is it something you can do once and be done. It’s an ongoing journey, and most folks can benefit from some mapping tools along the way. Vision boarding can be one of those tools. Like any tool, it can be helpful when used well and very damaging when used incorrectly. In this book, I’ll give you some information about vision boards and using them well.

First, we’ll cover what people usually mean when they talk about a vision board, and cover what it can and cannot do.

Second, we’ll broaden our focus and talk about how people know things. Knowing things is important for figuring out what will make us happy, but we often limit the things we allow ourselves to know because our culture tells us a socially acceptable focus is safer and more rational.

Third, we’ll connect the dots between the ways we know things and how vision boarding can be helpful as a part of that process. We’ll talk about discerning your vision to set the big picture, and hacking your vision to come up with novel approaches to putting things in motion. We’ll talk about the role of feelings and symbols in the process.

Finally, we’ll talk about the mechanics of how to create a vision board. I’ll provide some logistical tips and tricks, and we’ll cover what to do with the board once you’ve created it.

I hope you enjoy this resource and have fun putting together the vision board I have a hunch you’ll want to create once you’re done reading.

An Overview of Vision Boarding

What is A Vision Board, Anyway?

A vision board is a collage of images. It's that simple. There are lots of ways to put vision boards together, and the magic really isn't so much in how you do the mechanical stuff, but in how you choose and think about the images. The purpose of the images is to help catalyze some sort of change in your life.

Does it Work?

The answer is...it depends. Some approaches to vision boards can be very helpful. Others are less helpful and can actually be harmful. Unfortunately, one of the best known approaches to vision boarding falls into that harmful category.

Several years ago, a very successful book and movie popularized the idea of the Law of Attraction—and did so in the most simplistic terms with all the finesse and showmanship of the best snake-oil salespeople of all time. One of their dubious claims was that a vision board would help you to manifest your wildest dreams—all of which appeared to have been created by Madison Avenue copywriters. “I put the picture of this incredible house on my vision board, and 5 years later realized that I was living in that VERY SAME HOUSE.” In this incarnation, a vision board is described as a big easy button that can deliver all of your whims on demand with the press of a single finger.

The key, according to these folks, was simply to believe that good things were going to come to you. “Visualize checks in the mail,” they said, and the checks would appear.

If bad things happened to you instead, you were visualizing things wrong. The fault wasn't with the methodology, but just with the way you were using it. Anyone who had bad things happen to them were doing it wrong, and should be avoided as though they had a plague—because their wrong thoughts could be catching and that's not the sort of thing you want to catch.

It was enough to make rational people shake their heads in disbelief and despair—and to give vision boarding the sort of junk science connotation that keeps reasonable people away entirely. As if that wasn't bad enough, the science has shown that this sort of wishful thinking approach is the opposite of helpful when it comes to achieving goals. Students who visualize landing their dream job (but not the job search that goes into it) tend to put in fewer applications, making them less likely to actually land the dream job. Dieters who visualize themselves simply waltzing past the dessert table without experiencing any temptation lose less weight than those who visualize themselves struggling with and overcoming temptation. Magical thinking is not a useful approach in the real world.

And yet.

The concept of a vision board—using images to tap into the parts of your mind and your body that have information for you but don't use language to communicate that information—has a place in a reasonable process of self-discovery and puzzle cracking. It can be a tool that, when used well and for the right reasons, can be both fun and interesting.

Like any tool, there are a few specific things vision boards do well:

1. Discerning Your Vision: tapping into the nonverbal part of your knowledge processing to give you general information about what sorts of what vision is likely to work well for you.
2. Hacking Your Vision: activating the pattern matching genius of your brain to identify creative solutions to a specific challenge in your life.

Before we get into the details of how to do these specific things with a vision board, let's talk about the brain science that makes vision boards helpful tools.

Ways of Knowing

The Problem with Thinking

Despite Descartes and his “I think, therefore I am” message which has shaped western culture for a couple hundred years, our conscious, language-loving brains don't always do a very rational job of making decisions. Successful and intelligent people are prone to do things they (and everyone around them) later consider ludicrous. Let's look at some examples.

Money is considered a very rational measure - to some people it's the most rational measure - of value in western culture. And yet, there are plenty of clear examples of irrationality around money and value throughout the ages. The price of tulip bulbs in Holland in the 1630, for example, peaked at about 35 times the annual income of a skilled craftsman, or around \$1,664,000 in today's dollarsⁱ. The highest paid sports figure in 2013, Floyd Mayweather Jrⁱⁱ, made \$73.5 million dollars – a figure that's probably low given that it includes income from just two fights.

If you need more evidence of the logical brain's ability to be tricked, look back at your old high school yearbook pictures. Even if you didn't graduate in the 80s like I did, I bet you remember that your clothes and hair seemed cool at the time. I also bet you wouldn't style yourself that same way for pictures today – unless it's a costume party (and even then, only maybe).

The point is, rational thinking, using language to figure things out, is only one way of knowing. And on questions like “Why am I here?” or “What's my best next step?” it may not even be the best way.

Other Ways of Knowing

Fortunately, thinking with language is not the only way of knowing things. The nonverbal part of our brain, our second brain, and all of our senses play a role that we often discount as we try and keep things rational.

While the part of your brain that processes language processes an impressive 40 bits of information every second, your nonverbal brain processes more like 11 billion bits of information per second. That's a lot more information available to your brain that isn't going to start out as words.

And that's just in your first brain. Did you know there's a second brain in your body? Scientists call it the enteric nervous system, and it is located in your gut. Using the same types of cells and chemicals the first brain does, it affects not only your digestion but your mood and mental state as well. Those cells don't have a language center, either. But they do have information for you.

Information comes in through your senses, too – and not just the five you learned in elementary schoolⁱⁱⁱ. Senses you probably don't have words for help us do lots of things you probably take for granted. We can keep our balance even on rough or changing surfaces (equilibrioception). We can touch our elbow with our finger, or get a spoon into our mouth by sensing where our body parts are in relation to other body parts (proprioception). We sense heat and cold (thermoception). We sense when our muscles have tension, or when our organs are stretching. We sense hunger and thirst. We even sense magnetic fields, though we do not yet fully understand how or why.

We use some of these senses to know things about the people around us. For example, that nonverbal part of our brain certainly notices visual cues from people when we're interacting or in proximity with them. Physiological responses like pupil dilation and unconscious responses like body language can provide information that may be contrary to the verbal cues being provided. You have almost certainly had the experience of knowing someone was being untruthful – perhaps even to themselves – without necessarily being able to articulate how you knew.

There is even more subtle information available to us about the people around us, which we are just beginning to understand. For example, the human heart gives off a detectable electromagnetic field that expands 14 feet in every direction. So if you are sharing a room with someone, or even just walking past them on the street, the nonverbal part of your brain has information available about that person.

This information is processed throughout the body – and science tells us our mind and body are more linked than Mr. Descartes would give them credit for. Dr. Candace Pert, known for her more than 250 published neuroscience articles, says “In the end I find I can't separate brain from body. Consciousness isn't just in the head. Nor is it a question of the power of the mind over the body...because they're flip sides of the same thing^{iv}.”

Which Source Do You Trust?

Think about a time when your intuition and your rational mind were in conflict. Which information did you trust, and how did that work out for you?

Often, we trust the rational, verbal mind because we are used to thinking that words are the most trustworthy source of information. But remember, your language-based brain was also instrumental in talking you into those unfortunate fashion choices from your earlier days. Our verbal brains are the part of us most vulnerable to language-based persuasion, and to the idea that we need to go along with the social and cultural pressures around us. Those pressures are often at odds with our deepest self, but they are also very compelling.

In contrast, your nonverbal parts may be less prone to the vagaries of language-based persuasion. That can make it a more reliable ally in discerning your vision, if you choose to work with it. Think back over your life. Despite all the changes you've been through, is there still a kernel of you-ness that feels the same to you now as it did in your earliest memories? That's the part of you that can use the technique of a vision board to share information about what is really going to work specifically for you.

Pattern Matching

The other key skill your brain has that vision boards can tap into is pattern matching. Dr. Jan Byars^v tells a story that illustrates the power of pattern matching. While driving on a California highway with a colleague, she told him that their brains would match any pattern they decided to set up. "Purple bubblegum balls," she said, and he laughed because of course there was no way they were going to see purple bubblegum balls before they reached their destination. They did, of course (or I wouldn't be sharing the story). Okay, technically what they saw was a plant growing at the side of the road that had flowers which look like purple balls – much like purple bubblegum balls.

Were they *actually* purple bubblegum balls? No – but they were related. You've probably experienced this. When you get a new car and all of a sudden it seems every second car on the road is the same make and model. When you notice a song you haven't heard in years, and suddenly it's playing everywhere you go. When you see a kid on a ground and the made-up game she's playing suddenly gives you the solution to a problem you've been struggling with for weeks. That kid doesn't even know you – much less what's been chewing on your brain for weeks – so how is it she has the answer for you?

She doesn't, of course. The answer is still coming from your brain, in combination with everything you've ever experienced. But when a problem is percolating in the back of your mind, your brain is going to find ways to match the pattern by fitting novel information into your existing challenge to find new solutions.

Why Visioning is Helpful

Now that we've covered some of the built-in features that came installed in your human self, let's move on to the ways vision boarding can help you access them. Remember, vision boarding is a specific tool that does specific things, not an easy button to get your desires handed to you on a silver platter without any work.

Discerning Your Vision

If you are looking for general information about your life or about a specific challenge you're facing, vision boards can help you tap into the nonverbal part of yourself to figure out what sort of vision is likely to work well for you. The trick with vision, though, is that it doesn't exist in a vacuum. Think about the vision of successful organizations, for example. They exist at the intersection between what the group can effectively offer and what the world actually needs. Even the best pet rock (or glitter-bomb) company isn't going to last long, because the need it is filling is not likely to persist. Some organizations have histories running into millennia because the thing they are providing to the world is, was, and always shall be a need.

Vision at a personal level also requires an intersection between what you can effectively provide (your gifts) and what the world needs. This comes more easily for some people than others. Some people know at the age of 3 that they are destined to become a vomit cleaner at the local amusement park, or a pet food taster, and go on to exceptional lives redefining their chosen field. Other people go into their 40s and 50s (or 70s and 80s) not sure what they want to do when they "grow up" (whatever that means). Whether it's the capital V Vision for your whole life, or a smaller vision for your next project, event, or relationship, you don't get to just decide. You get to discern it.

That cultural pressure that our verbal minds are so prone to overvaluing can be a real challenge here. It's easy to think, "Hey, that guy's life looks easy (or pays well, or provides unlimited access to petting baby llamas, or whatever you think would make you happy), I'll set my mind to that and be successful." People set visions that are designed to bring a lot of a specific external reward in the mistaken belief that it is those external rewards that bring joy.

The Howard Thurman quote, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive," speaks directly to this point. People use a lot of different words to describe the thing that "makes you come alive." Oprah calls it a personal calling. Martha Beck calls it your true nature. Paulo Coelho, author of *The Alchemist*, calls it your personal legend. Each of these people created joyful lives doing things that seem crazy to other people. Paul Coelho's parents literally put him in a mental institution because his dream of being a writer seemed crazy to them. Martha Beck, who was cited as one of Success Magazine's 25 Most Influential Leaders in Personal Growth and Achievement for 2014, quoted herself rather ruefully in her best-selling book *Steering by Starlight* saying, "I didn't go to Harvard to become a Life Coach." And yet, it seems to be working for her.

People do make a living doing all sorts of weird and wonderful things – and some people who go off and do the thing they love in their life never make any money at all, but bring joy, connection and meaning to those around them all the same.

The largest and most accurate online source for information on the value of comic books was started by a guy named Bryan Neely. When I first met Bryan in the late 80s, you would not have predicted that his interest in comic books would help him create a life where he gets to have Batman figurines in his office and meet Stan Lee as part of his day job, but that's exactly what has happened. It didn't happen overnight, it didn't happen without a lot of work and energy going into the business, and it didn't happen just because he had a lot of comic book pictures around him. But it did happen.

If you don't yet know what the thing that will make you come alive is, the process of communicating with your non-verbal mind through vision boarding is one tool that can help you figure it out.

Hacking Your Vision

"The universe really does rise up to meet you wherever you are." India Arie

The quote above is a more succinct way of putting this longer thought from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in ones favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would come his way.

Yoga guru Erich Schiffman talks about navigating through life with your vision as your compass using the metaphor of floating down a river. If you stay with the current (the path that your non-verbal self wants to keep you on), your ride is relatively free of bumps. But if you try and move in a direction counter to the current, you're likely to bump into rocks and trees against the bank. It's going to hurt. Which will maybe steer you back towards the center of the stream, where you're meant to be.

Maybe you've had experiences like this. Have you ever noticed that some of the things you decide you want and commit to come easily, almost magically falling into your lap, while others seem to stubbornly resist any progress that you might start to make?

Research about top performers supports the idea that some things are going to simply come more easily to people than others. While the idea that personal gifts or talent are irrelevant and anybody can become an expert in anything with just 10,000 hours of practice is popular, it also appears to be wrong. The amount of practice seems to account for only about a third of the variation in achievement. Chess players who were studied reached the level of "grand master" after between 2 and 26 years of practice.

Talent is one factor. Another is the viral effect, which speaks to the process of getting widespread

recognition and attention for your work. A lot of work has been going into what factors “make” something go viral, because viral content is the McGuffin^{vi} of the modern era. Yet there seems to be no standard or easy answer to finding this kind of success. The how-to articles suggest things like “have a heart” and “make content you would share yourself^{vii}” without a clear explanation of what that means. We might as well tell people to make sure their content comes from the center of Schiffman’s stream – because that’s what people are seeking.

Finding things that come from the center of the stream is a puzzle that lots of people have solved in non-logical ways. Archimedes came up with a law of physics^{viii} by stepping into a bathtub. Arthur Fry came up with Post-It Notes in part because the bookmarks falling out of his hymnal annoyed him. George de Mestral came up with the idea for Velcro after noticing how effectively burrs stuck to his dog. In these and many other cases, novel stimulus is a key factor in coming up with a creative solution for a specific problem.

Vision boarding provides novel stimulus in the form of pictures from varying sources. This process of flipping through lots of unrelated images and paying attention to which ones spark something can help you find novel answers. The reaction of your senses and your non-verbal processing centers to the image can also give you a little preview of what a specific answer may feel like when you give it a try. Some solutions might feel “center of the stream” while others feel a lot more like hitting a boulder – and this information can be useful when you’re choosing between alternatives.

Once you know that you have access to information for you that isn’t going to come through in words, the question is how to access and use that information. There are two tools that help this process, feelings and symbols.

Feelings

Think of a time that things were wonderful. Close your eyes and imagine it in great detail. Get your senses involved. What were you seeing? Smelling? Hearing? Once you get yourself mentally back to that time and place, mentally scan through your body. What do you feel? Where do you feel it?

We’re looking for what “yes” feels like to you. Because this feeling is from the part of you that doesn’t do words, describing it with words is a little tricky. Some people describe it as feeling like freedom. Like joy. Like a deep yes from your soul. Like being home. Regardless of how we describe it, I’ll bet you know what it feels like for you.

Once you have a good sense of what “yes” feels like, it’s time to go on a quest.

Symbols

There are lots of ways to find your yes. Look for things you loved doing as a kid, before you were as conscious of the cultural and social implications of various choices. Look at the things you’re doing when you lose track of time. Create a Vision Board. You knew we’d get back to that eventually, right?

The process of creating a vision board involves finding images that appeal to that inner yes and arranging them in a way that amplifies the yes. This is a non-logical process. It’s a way of pulling out

symbols that appeal to you. It's very important during this process not to censor yourself, or even to think too hard about what the symbols mean. If the picture of the brown dog appeals to you, don't worry about whether you have the time to take care of a dog, or what your cat will think if you get one. Get the picture, sit with it, and see if it has a place on your final board.

The thing about symbols is, they aren't entirely logical. A picture of a dog might mean you're going to have a puppy a year from now. Or it could mean the guy with the puppydog eyes is going to play a bigger role in your life. Maybe you need to get outside and play more or maybe you've got some crap to pick up. Maybe all of the above are true for you.

When you're not sure what to think about a symbol, quit thinking about it. Tell the logical, verbal part of your brain to take a rest. Take a bath, or go for a walk in the woods, and let the nonverbal part of your processing capacity chew on it awhile. Eventually, it'll come to you.

There are lots of stories about symbols that show up on vision boards manifesting in almost literal ways. Caitlin Sanders, a life coach, made a vision board with a blue morpho butterfly on it long before she ever heard of the book *Steering by Starlight*, which has a morpho on the cover. Fast forward a couple of years, and was in coach training led by Martha Beck, author of *Steering by Starlight*.

The important point is that symbols are not immediately clear in their meaning or importance. But they can clue you in to pay closer attention to things around you that have shown up on your vision board, which could lead you down paths you might otherwise miss entirely.

Making a Vision Board

Now that you know how a vision board can be helpful and how to use it in a helpful, rather than hurtful, manner, let's talk a bit about the process for creating one.

Playing with Pictures

Any technique that will get you out of your verbal mind and into your symbol-speaking mind can function as a vision board. If you are self-conscious about your drawing skills, however, creating a collage can eliminate that stress from the equation. As Elizabeth Gilbert says, "Collage is the gift that God gave to those of us who cannot draw."^{ix}

Any source of evocative pictures will do. Magazines work well, as do oversized coffee table books available cheap at your local used book store, thrift shop, or garage sale. The process of finding these resources can be an adventure in itself; enjoy it.

When you are ready to put your board together, set aside some time when you're unlikely to be interrupted and start flipping through the pictures. You want a softly focused mind, so use whatever tools you have to achieve that. You could do that by playing music you love in the background, by starting with a stillness practice like meditation, or with a movement practice like yoga or tai chi. You're looking for that state of mind you get when you're on a long drive or a long shower or on the edge of

falling asleep— where your mind is focused on everything and nothing at all.

Look for the images that call to you in some way. You're looking for something that gives you the same feeling you get when you suddenly hear a familiar voice say your name in a room full of conversation; your attention is drawn to that sound. In the same way, you're looking for pictures that draw your attention.

Words can draw your attention, too – but with words it's important to be especially careful not try for logic. The less sense it makes to your logical mind at this stage, the more interesting it's likely to be when you look at the finished product.

As the pictures start to pile up, you'll find that you want to arrange them. A piece of poster board is good for this but you can use anything that works for you here. As you are arranging the pictures, stay focused on that “yes” sensation, and look for the arrangement that best captures it.

Once everything feels just right, and you've got the pictures affixed in a way that will allow them to stay put for a while (whether that's with tape or glue or rubber cement), take a step back and look at the finished product. What do you notice?

Using a Vision Board

Now that you have your vision board, you get to decide if you're done with it. If all the symbols in it make sense right away, you might be ready to just put it away and plan to pull it out after several months, to see what you notice then.

If some of the symbols are interesting to you but you're not quite sure why, you might place the vision board somewhere where you'll see it regularly. The symbols involved may not make any sense at all – until one day all of a sudden they do.

As I said before, creating a vision board is not like using “the easy button.” It can be a way to communicate with the nonverbal parts of yourself, or a way of figuring out the answer to a challenge in front of you. It can simply be a fun way to spend an afternoon. However you use it, don't rush through. Enjoy the process – because insights and information might sneak in at any point throughout.

Process Overview and Tips

Here are some concise step by step instructions for creating your vision board, along with some tips to make the process go smoothly.

Logistics

1. Know what a “yes!” feels like from the nonverbal part of yourself.
2. Decide if you have a specific question in mind, or if you're open to information about whatever your subconscious want to talk to you about today. (Note: This may not actually be your choice. If your essential self has something it wants to talk to you about, you may find it being very insistent. Trust that it is acting in your best interest, and find out what it has to say.)
3. Dig through a bunch of images – from books, magazines, or online image libraries.

4. Select images that elicit the “yes!” sensation and arrange them in a way that feels right. Remember, this is all about feelings. Tell your logical brain that you love it very much and its turn will come in a few minutes – and that it should go sit quietly in the corner until you’re through with this part of the process.
5. When the board feels right to you, invite your logical brain back into the picture. This process is a little like interpreting dreams, because you’re doing pretty much the same sort of thing – looking at symbols from the non-verbal part of your brain and seeing how they relate to your life.

Tips

- Don’t use Elmer’s glue – it will wrinkle magazine pages when it dries. Glue sticks are better for not wrinkling things, but they don’t last forever. Rubber cement or spray adhesive used for scrapbooking solves both of these problems.
- Ask your friends for magazines. While the ones already in your household are likely to reflect your interests, it’s valuable to also provide yourself some less familiar images to see what piques your interest.
- Start with an intention, but be willing to vary from it if something appears to be leading you in a different direction.
- Be willing to be silly and nonjudgmental during the process.
- Give yourself permission to notice what comes up, and know that you don’t have to act on anything you notice.

Conclusion

As you complete the vision board, you’ll have a whole bunch of symbols available to you that match up in some way to the life that’s going to lead to you to joy and prosperity (whatever that means to the nonverbal side of your brain, which as you remember doesn’t really care what your salary is or what brand name is on your blue jeans). It’s up to you to figure out what these things mean, and more importantly to keep an eye out for how they show up in the real world.

ⁱ <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2012/12/when-certain-tulips-cost-more-than-a-house/>

ⁱⁱ http://espn.go.com/espn/notebook/_/id/10761701/25-highest-paid-athletes-worldwide-espn-magazine

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2010/07/humans-have-a-lot-more-than-five-senses/>

^{iv} <http://www.healingcancer.info/ebook/candace-pert>

^v <http://www.leadsyncnow.com/about-us>

^{vi} The MacGuffin is the thing the hero is after in fictional narratives. George Lucas describes it as “the object of everybody’s search.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacGuffin>

^{vii} <https://www.facebookstories.com/stories/1942/essay-13-ways-to-make-something-go-viral>

^{viii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archimedes%27_principle

^{ix} <http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/a-fun-project-for-people-who-cant-draw-dear-ones-every-year-around-this-ti/>