

Lauren, Nick and Perry Day

# On Work, Parenting, *and* the Notion of 10,000 Hours

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The first week in January marks my one year anniversary of motherhood and my four-year anniversary as an Extension Agent. Almost a year ago, my son entered the world in his own speedy way, two weeks early on the day I was supposed to have my annual review. I figure its good luck to give birth on the day you are being evaluated for job performance; I don't think my boss had ever received such a bizarre phone call to explain why I would not be showing up for our meeting... "Yes, I'm in labor!"

As I approach this momentous occasion, I can't help but think about the learning curve I have experienced as a new parent and the many ways it has been similar to the learning curve I experienced when first starting this job, though arguably my job has given me far fewer sleepless nights. When I began my job as an extension agent, many colleagues told me it was years before they felt comfortable with their jobs or had a sense of mastery of all the tasks, responsibilities, ins and outs. Hearing this the first few times left me aghast; I had never been with a job more than a year (thanks to college, AmeriCorps, and grad school). I couldn't fathom having to spend several years just learning a job before I would actually feel like I was good at it. More experienced parents might see the similarities between parenthood and work again.

In work and school, when one puts in effort and time, there is a positive feedback loop. Good grades, positive reviews, awards, and promotions follow when you work hard. As a parent, you can work harder than you ever have, on less sleep than you experienced during every finals week of your life combined, and still get bad reviews

from your "new boss." I'll admit, this was the greatest challenge of early motherhood. No matter what I did, there was still an infant screaming at me. The negative feedback loop is not something I was prepared for and it is something I still struggle with.

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell touts the notion that true mastery is achieved after 10,000 hours of practice. He cites great musicians like the Beatles or skilled violinists and champion chess players who become experts once they have put in roughly five years of work on their chosen task. When I consider this in light of my jobs as an extension agent and a mother I'm not sure whether to feel relief or desperation. I've got one more year to go before I reach 10,000 hours on this job...and another four before I have some sense of mastery as a parent. I've heard that each stage of parenting prepares you for the next so that one needn't worry about potty training before it becomes necessary. But in my experience, by the time I've figured out a pattern with my son, he's moved on to something else so the pattern no longer holds and we're back to square one trying to figure out sleep habits, eating, or other new skills. I wonder what it will feel like to be parenting a five-year-old. Will there be a sense of expertise in my role as mother?

This is the time of year when I normally write about healthy eating during the holidays or sticking to a New Year's resolution. These are usually short-term endeavors; the unhealthy eating temptations of huge Thanksgiving meals, Christmas cookies, and continuous snacking at holiday parties lasts only a few weeks. Most resolutions don't last much longer, having gone the way of the egg nog by the time Super Bowl Sunday rolls around—nowhere to be found.

What if we were to shift the notion of short-term healthy holiday eating and lifestyle change goals



(like those made in resolutions) to that of achieving mastery over the course of many years? Would it give us more permission to fail and get back up again, knowing that we had 10,000 hours to accomplish our goals? In the nutrition classes that I teach in the community, I talk with students about long-term lifestyle changes that can be maintained. Making slow, deliberate shifts over time that are sustainable as opposed to the fad diets that might cause dramatic weight loss but the pounds come right back within a few weeks. Lengthening the feedback loop can be frustrating. We want immediate results—whether with weight loss, performance reviews at work, or parenting. If you are prone to set and then abandon resolutions or yo-yo diet, seeking the quick fixes from the latest fads, I challenge you to take the long game approach. Look at wellness and your health as something to master over the course of the next several years. What might the state of your health be if you put 10,000 hours of effort into exercise, healthy eating, and mindfulness?

As many parents will note, the more rushed you are with a child, the slower they seem to move. When you slow down a bit, get down on their level, and prompt them with a few warnings before shifting gears ("five more minutes and then it's time to go," "please put your pajamas on—bedtime is in 20 minutes"), things go much more smoothly. Exercise this same patience with yourself as you strive for a healthy lifestyle. Provide yourself with prompts about the changes you are making ("each week I will add five minutes more to my exercise routine," "I will work up to 10,000 steps per day by April"). Develop your own positive feedback loop to encourage continued efforts; we all love rewards. And if you stumble, don't begrudge the misstep, keep going. Envision yourself as a child learning to walk—it doesn't happen overnight or without the intermediate steps of crawling, scaling, and balance along with lots of bumps on the head.

**I wish you good health in the New Year—it is a work in progress.**

## Fast-food resolution: Transform junk food image

NEW YORK (AP) — Fast-food chains have a New Year's resolution: **Drop the junk.**

As people express distaste for food they think is overly processed, McDonald's, Taco Bell and other chains are trying to shed their reputation for serving reheated meals that are loaded with chemicals. That includes rethinking the use of artificial preservatives and other ingredients customers find objectionable.

"This demand for fresh and real is on the rise," said Greg Creed, CEO of Yum Brands, which owns Taco Bell, KFC and Pizza Hut.

During the presentation for analysts and investors last month, Creed said the company needs to be more transparent about ingredients and use fewer preservatives.

Recasting fast-food as "fresh" and "real" will be tricky, in large part because it's so universally regarded as cheap and greasy. Another problem is that terms like "fresh," "real," and "healthy" have nebulous meanings, making it hard for companies to pin down how to approach transformation.

One way chains are looking to redefine themselves is by purging recipes of chemicals people might find unappetizing. Already, packaged food and beverage companies have reformulated products to remove such ingredients, even while standing by their safety. PepsiCo, for instance, said it would remove brominated vegetable oil from Gatorade after a petition by a teenager noted it isn't approved for use in some markets overseas.

And fast-food chains are indicating they want to jump on the "clean label" trend too:

— Last month, McDonald's USA President Mike Andres outlined improvements the company is working on, including the simplification of ingredient labels. Without providing details, he said to expect some changes in early 2015.

— Carl's Jr. last month introduced an "all-natural" burger with no added hormones, antibiotics or steroids. "We are obviously looking at other products on our menu to see which ones can be made all natural as well," said Brad Haley, the chain's chief marketing officer.

It's not clear how far fast-food companies will go in reformulating recipes. But the nation's biggest chains are facing growing competition. In the latest quarter, customer visits to traditional fast-food hamburger chains declined 3 percent from a year ago, according to market researcher NPD Group. Fast-casual chains — which are seen as a step up from traditional fast-food — saw visits rise 8 percent.

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