INITIATIVE, ACTION, AND PASSION

SETH GODIN DESCRIBED\(^1\) a pattern that successful people recognize:

More than 400 published books. How did [Isaac] Asimov possibly pull this off?

Asimov woke up every morning, sat in front of his manual typewriter, and he typed.
That was his job, to type.
The stories were the bonus that came along for the ride.
He typed when he wasn’t inspired. The typing turned into writing and he became inspired.
We don’t write because we feel like it.
We feel like it because we write.
You don’t need more good ideas. You need more bad ideas.

Seth speaks from experience, having published dozens of books, including several bestsellers, and having presented TED talks with tens of millions of views. It’s no coincidence that Seth posts daily to his blog (as do I, which helped create this book). A few pages later, Seth used director Sam Raimi to describe a similar pattern:
Raimi is one of the most successful directors of his generation (*Spider-Man, Darkman, Evil Dead*, etc.).

As a teenager, and later in film school, he insisted on screening his films to a paying audience. “Fifty cents, a dollar, it didn’t matter, as long as they paid something.”

He discovered early on that paying audiences cared more and demanded more.

Again and again, his work was booed and met with derision.

So he’d go back to the editing room and edit the film. He’d make the scary parts scarier, the funny parts funnier, and then he’d do it again.

Sooner or later, Sam Raimi was making movies.

“Sure,” you might say. “Isaac, Seth, and Josh probably loved writing and Sam probably loved making movies. If I had a passion, I’d do it daily too. Then I could create bad ideas and turn them into good ones.”

You likely don’t yet have a life passion—something you jump out of bed for, creating boundless energy, supportive community, independence from resource constraints, security, freedom from others’ judgment, confidence, and recognition for your efforts.

If a passion brought you money, power, and fame along the way, you probably wouldn’t mind, but its greatest reward would likely come from serving others you care about.

Most people live passionless lives, giving up on developing it. Yet others jump from passion to greater passion, never giving up when a passion doesn’t pan out. The passion-to-passion-never-giving-up group is as human as you. Method Initiative will make you one of them.

The path isn’t as simple as starting with passion. Nor is the path to act without passion. Paradoxically, most of us sense no passions, too many, or both none and too many at once. Understanding why will prepare us for the exercises in Part Two.
Passions, Interests, and Passing Fancies

Life has many passing fancies, some meaningful interests, and few life passions. I think of them in a hierarchy like this:

Passing fancies are things we enjoy in the moment but don’t bring long-term emotional reward. Since everyone’s values differ, your passing fancies will differ from mine. Our world is full of passing fancies like social media, fun classes, action movies, and some friendships. Our culture bombards us with more. From grade school through commencement, mainstream education spreads us thin with classes, extracurriculars, double majors, triple minors, sports, after-school jobs, and so on—too thin to go into depth with any of them. Most jobs continue the pattern.

Rarely do you act on your own interests enough to distinguish what you care about. Choosing a major or job hardly lets you explore your interests. Nor does starting a company in a Dog Show culture. Meanwhile, marketers have learned to attract our attention. If they find out you like yoga, they’ll pitch you meditation, clothes, retreats, and the whole lifestyle. Same with cars, books, travel, or any other interest. Social media compounds the distractions.
The problem isn’t that those things aren’t valuable. It’s that they are, but we have finite resources. People who content themselves with unexamined lives, passively enjoying what others present to them, rarely find enduring, deep reward.

Meaningful interests, meanwhile, include hobbies, rewarding work, and things that bring long-term emotional reward, but not things that you’d devote your life to. Mine include cooking, my windowsill garden, some challenging courses, and closer friendships. Meaningful interests are candidates for life passions, though not the only source.

Life passions inspire us, giving us boundless energy. The challenge with life passions isn’t knowing what a passion is in principle, but identifying our own with enough confidence to choose them over competing interests and passing fancies. Once you commit to a life passion, you see passing fancies as leeches, sucking energy, time, and other resources from it. When you have nothing better, drinks after work with coworkers sounds fun, but when you’re a parent, you won’t let casual drinks keep you from your child’s recital.

How do we find and create life passions? Culture confuses us with the romantic idea that passion comes when muses whisper in our ears, the stars align, or we’re born with it. Like love at first sight, such things may happen, but rarely enough to count on it. Believing passion just happens motivates waiting. Meanwhile, as with love, those who develop themselves and put themselves out there tend to find what they’re looking for. Chance favors the prepared mind and passion favors the active life.

So what activity breeds passion? Method Initiative may not be the only way to create passion, but it works. As with love, I know of no way without ups, downs, and some heartbreak, but in the end you look back at the challenges and realize you needed them to learn what to reject as much as what to commit to.

Some people believe you need to start with a passion, which will motivate you to act:

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| Passion | Leads to | Action |
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Some hope a passion finds them by luck. Since passions rarely appear out of the blue, this view renders them helpless to act. They wait and hope, often their entire lives. Again, love at first sight may happen sometimes, but I wouldn’t base my life on it.

Others believe you have to start by acting, which will lead you to discover passions. To the extent it presumes that taking an idea to business success will lead to you loving what you do, Lean works this way. It looks like this:

Some get lucky acting on this model. I followed this model with my first company. I loved developing an idea I conceived of and building a company, but couldn’t develop a passion for outdoor advertising. Many people burn out after acting without finding passion, erroneously concluding they just aren’t born entrepreneurs or initiators. They’re more like someone who gets sore or injured their first time weightlifting. The problem wasn’t lifting weights, but improper form, or lifting too much too soon.

Relying too much on passion or action puts too much burden on those factors. What works is what I call the Initiative-Action-Passion cycle:
Starting with a little initiative, perhaps directed by an awareness of a potential passion, may motivate some action—enough to see if it leads to more passion, but not enough to cause burnout. If you feel the passion increase, you’ll feel motivated to take initiative to act more. I don’t suggest vaguely to “find your passion” or “do your best.” Method Initiative gives you specific steps that work. Passion directs your initiative. Initiative drives action. Action increases passion.

The more times you initiate and act, the more passion you’ll build, which will motivate more initiative, continuing the cycle. Starting small means you don’t have to wait for an outside muse, nor act in arbitrary directions or by following others’ interests. Going around the cycle does more than bring you back to the start. Like a spiral staircase, each time around brings you to another level. Method Initiative elevates you from passing fancies to life passions.

In fact, the entrance of the Louvre in Paris has such a spiral staircase in a pyramid elevating people from one level to the next:
The more times you implement Method Initiative, the more you leave passing fancies behind and live a life of passion. How many times you will to go through the ten exercises in Part Two depends on your situation. Growing up in New Orleans, surrounded by jazz, Louis Armstrong found his life passion by his teens. J.K. Rowling struggled through many endeavors before finding writing, and even then had to struggle before publishing *Harry Potter*. Alexander Calder showed interest in art as a youth, but had to work through interests in engineering and other fields to come back to it. After finding art, he had to go through a few cycles to discover abstract, kinetic art. Method Initiative enables you to follow paths like theirs.

One question remains: if you begin with initiative before you know your passion, how do you choose direction for your first iteration of the cycle? If you feel you don’t have any passions, you lack direction. If you feel you have too many passions, you fear moving in a direction you’ll regret if you later find you *really* loved a different option. Most cases of people feeling they lack passion arise from this fear obscuring multiple candidate interests. I mentioned
how passing fancies leech our energies. All candidates for passions, even rewarding hobbies, distract or paralyze us if we lack the skills to liberate ourselves from their grips.

To answer how to choose direction, I bring up the last, beautiful, liberating main ingredient to Method Initiative: *exhausting interests*.

**Exhausting Interests**

In your teens, did you love bands that you later cringed at? I did. I played the same songs over and over until the needle in my plastic record player dulled the groove. By high school, I had exhausted my interest in those bands. They led my tastes to mature to the point where I would have felt embarrassed if my friends knew I had listened to them.

Today I understand that I was too young to have developed taste in music and my high school friends had probably cringed at their earlier tastes too. I had to listen to what I liked at first to mature.

A similar pattern happened in college. I started majoring in architecture. My dad loved the field and nudged me toward it. I saw an elegance in it. I put a lot into it until I exhausted my interest in architecture. In fact, I felt architecture overly favored design over physics—part of what motivated me toward majoring in physics, which I loved.

I later exhausted my love for physics, at least as practiced today, which fostered my passion for active, experiential, project-based learning. As with music, trying and exhausting each interest not only *led* to a greater interest, it was actually the *only way* to reach that greater interest. Looking at the passions of your role models, heroes, or friends won’t tell you yours. Dabbling in an interest won’t do it. A minimum level of commitment is necessary. Exhausting interests is an essential step in discovering passions. It’s liberating to replace internal conflict, doubt, and insecurity with purpose, confidence, and security. It’s part of maturing from an ineffective dilettante to an effective initiator.
Since our passing fancies and meaningful interests outnumber our potential passions by a wide margin, almost nobody will hit a life passion their first time taking initiative. But everyone who takes initiative, even if they have to exhaust several candidate interests, wishes they had acted earlier, knowing they’d have to spend all those resources on those candidate interests.

However torn you may feel between two interests, fearing acting on A because you might later find you love B more, acting on either will lead you to a life passion faster than analyzing and planning (sadly, what mainstream education teaches). If you choose A and end up loving it, congratulations. If you actually love B more, acting on A will cause it to lose its luster faster and more surely than any other technique. Acting on A will give you the skills and sensitivity to sense your greater passion for B. You will love B more for exhausting A. You will feel gratitude for A and the work you put into it for bringing you to B.

Climbing the spiral staircase with any interest will take you out of the realm of passing fancies and distractions. Switching projects is like switching to another staircase that goes higher. Restarting the exercises from the start doesn’t mean you descend when the new project connects to greater passion. Climbing a turn or two makes you less likely to descend again even if that staircase tops out. It also enables you to see staircases you couldn’t see from the bottom. Passion leads you to take more initiative, which leads you to act more, which increases your passion.

Many don’t act out of fear of regretting a wrong choice, unwittingly risking never realizing a passion. Those who did act on an interest they later exhausted look back with gratitude at their “wrong” choice for having led to their passion. They realize that only by acting could they have found the limitations of the “wrong” choice’s appeal.

The upshot for you is that your first choice for direction your first time trying Method Initiative has low stakes. Any choice will start a process that will lead to a life passion faster and more efficiently. The skills, experiences, and beliefs you develop in each
iteration, including the first, will increase your sensitivity to latent interests. You will reject exhausted interests with greater surety. In fact, with each interest you reject, you will reject entire categories of interest. For example, say you find and act on an interest because it seems popular, but then realize popularity alone isn’t enough for you. You’ll likely no longer find any merely popular interest attractive. You’ll look at people pursuing merely popular interests as still searching.

The exercises incorporate this pattern through the option to switch at any time. You will likely not have spent any money. You’ll know that the idea of a lifetime comes once a month. Each time acting on an interest will develop you more, with some ups and downs, but generally toward greater passion and more confidently exhausting interests. You’ll sense success sooner.

You can see the pattern of cautious attempts followed by passion in the students and clients profiled in this book. Grace and RJ were tentative before their ideas formed, then they committed confidently and enthusiastically. Esther changed direction after a year of law school. Andreas exhausted travel and seeking in a few months, then found more entrepreneurial passion in unexpected places than he could have without acting on candidate passions that didn’t pan out themselves.

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**JOSHUA, PART 3**

I love my podcast. I put my heart and soul into it. Beyond what you hear, tons of work goes into finding and booking guests, editing, creating events, and everything else behind the scenes. It’s part of what I intend to make into a movement. It follows years of living the environmental values I believe most of us share—stewardship; clean air, water, and land; delicious food; personal growth; and so on. My goal is to share the joy, meaning, value, purpose, and passion I find in my environmental behavior that I see missing amid the coercion, compliance, facts, doom, and gloom in mainstream environmental communications.
It wasn’t always as joyful. It began with initiative, building on two passions, lots of advice, and iteration.

One passion, science, to me is rooted in discovering and sharing the beauty of nature. As long as I can remember I’ve worked to preserve that beauty on a personal level—turning off lights when I leave a room, preferring public transit to cars, and so on.

The other passion, leadership, emerged from taking classes in business school after being squeezed out of my first company.

Science is nerdy. Leadership sounds lofty, but in practice, working with aspiring leaders means working in the trenches of people’s challenges and flaws.

I considered my passions for nature and leadership unrelated until recently. My starting the Leadership and the Environment podcast in 2017 illustrates the process of developing a greater passion.

A few years ago, I began increasing my environmental stewardship, for example, challenging myself to avoid food packaging. I was acting on an interest. I expected the change to feel like deprivation, but to my surprise, I found the opposite. Within months, cooking from scratch became more delicious, cost less, saved time, and connected me with my family, community, and local farms. Several other changes led to similar results. Where I expected sacrifice, I found joy, saving time and money, community connection, and more results I liked.

My activity led me to see leadership missing from environmentalism. I don’t consider people telling others what to do, or spreading facts, information, and doom and gloom leadership. I saw a need for a Mandela of the environment. While it still feels presumptuous to say it, if a Mandela of the environment is what I felt was most missing, and if no one else was doing it, I decided I would try. That gumption forced me to wrestle with the risk of looking foolish or publicly failing. I felt torn, not impassioned.

I acted with what I could. First I spoke to friends about my interest, soliciting suggestions. I gave a series of talks at NYU and Columbia that I expected to inspire. Instead, they revealed my ignorance of the emotional minefield speakers face on the subject: people push back at a lot of environmental talk. The feedback from attendees discouraged me nearly to give up.
I kept working at the talks, though, listening to attendees’ advice and experiences. Then a conversation with a former student inspired me back. Without my prompting, he decided to try my habit of picking up at least one piece of trash per day, having heard how I’d come to enjoy the habit. He committed to picking up ten pieces of trash per day for a month. At the end of the month, he told me he enjoyed the habit enough to find more to act on his environmental values. He cut his meat intake by half while meeting his dietary goals as a weightlifter. He acted out of joy and expectation of success, not coercion, facts, guilt, blame, doom, or gloom.

People talk about raising awareness to motivate behavior, but with environmental issues front page news for years, everyone is aware. I found that behavior led to awareness more than the other way around and that people tended to claim needing to raise awareness to delay acting. I decided to replicate what worked with him more publicly by starting a podcast with a format based on what worked. It still took some iterations to reach the current format: featuring influential people sharing their joy and reward from acting on their environmental values. I don’t give them tasks. I ask them to share their personal environmental values, which I then invite them to act on share their experience. Since they create the task based on their values, they do it for themselves, not for me or out of coercion. I soon found support beyond any I expected when world-class influencers like Daniel H. Pink, Jonathan Haidt, and Seth Godin participated enthusiastically.

I felt inspired!

The next iteration came from talking to a guest, Sandy Reisky, who pointed me to research showing that a top predictor of people installing solar on their homes, more than how much money they’d save or their politics, was how many neighbors had it. I concluded that community influenced social and cultural change more than facts, science, guilt, blame, doom, or gloom and decided to refine my strategy to bring guests in everyone's communities—renowned leaders. I’m not trying to use celebrity. I want to help people move from “If I act but no one else does then my actions won’t mean anything” to “People in my
community—people in everyone’s community—are acting. Time for me
to as well.”

I couldn’t have predicted finding a passion that clicked with so many
things I cared about. Only acting on what I knew at the time could
reveal it.

Do you see the cycle of finding ever greater passions and acting
on them, each time developing more skills and sensitivity to deeper
interests? I believe I will significantly change an area of unmet global
demand. Time may reveal that I was mistaken and I don’t influence
much, but in the meantime, I work with influential people like Nobel
laureates, #1 bestselling authors, Pulitzer Prize winners, a Presidential
Medal of Freedom honoree, a Super Bowl champion, Olympic athletes
including a gold medalist, Victoria’s Secret models, sustainability teams
at Fortune 100 companies, CEOs of publicly traded companies, and
Hollywood directors, with more to come. My guests share joy based on
experience, not guilt, blame, doom, gloom, or facts that don’t motivate.
I give them a platform to create environmental legacies. Since they
have larger followings than I do, I’m helping them become Mandelas of
the environment. I also face incredible frustration, along with people’s
inaction and misunderstanding, which I learn from.

I spent probably under $100 to start the podcast. I’ve since spent a
few thousand dollars on back-end equipment and services, but it’s cre-
ated more speaking and coaching revenue, not to mention joy, growth,
and connections.

I may seek investment to expand. If so, it will be to serve my lis-
teners and guests and will come from sources who want to help that
mission. Who knows, I may win my equivalent of Best in Show, but that
would be a side effect. If I do, it will mean I’ve influenced hundreds
of millions of people to find joy, meaning, value, importance, pur-
pose, and passion, where they now feel lethargy, complacency, and
indifference—in stewardship, cleanliness, purity, responsibility, and
maturity. It will have come from loving my Jake.