

# *My Life Should Look Better on Facebook*

*The best is the enemy of the good.*

—Voltaire, writer/philosopher

*If we only wanted to be happy, it would be easy; but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult, since we think them happier than they are.*

—Charles de Montesquieu, writer/philosopher

I think I'm having a nervous breakdown," Talia said as she burst into tears.

"A nervous breakdown," I said, never having even met her before. "Can you tell me what that looks like?"

Talia caught me up in a flood of words and sobs.

"I graduated from college almost two years ago. For some ridiculous reason, I left school thinking I was about to embark on the time of my life. I had driven myself crazy with perfectionism for almost fifteen years and I viewed the uncharted life after college as the ultimate escape from this torture. Sadly, the endless nights of partying and the freedom to do whatever I wanted haven't turned out to be quite as fabulous as I expected."

She fumbled for Kleenex in her purse.

"Within months, I was living a lonely and depressing life in San Francisco. The majority of my friends are dispersed throughout the country and the one close friend I was living with suddenly did a one-eighty and abandoned me. I spend my days browsing Craigslist for jobs and going to the gym. I feel like I'm breaking down. I can't sleep. I'm crying all the time. My mom thinks I need

medication.”

I listened some more.

“And these are supposed to be the best years of my life!” Talia implored.

“They are?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, this time seeming a bit unsure.

“In my experience, these are the most uncertain and some of the most difficult years of life.”

“Why doesn’t anybody tell you that?!”

“It may not help much, but I’m telling you now,” I said.

“I feel like an incredible failure,” Talia continued. “In school there was a formula. It was pretty easy to figure out what to do so you’d know where you stand. You’d know you were living up to your potential. Sometimes I think I should just go to graduate school because it would sound better and I could get A’s again. I don’t know how to get an A in my twenties. I feel like I am failing for the first time.”

“What would an A in your twenties even mean?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. I just feel like I shouldn’t be less-than.”

“Less than what?”

“I think I thought life should be grand, in whatever way you define grand. Grand was A’s when I was in school. Then I thought maybe it would be some amazing job or guy. I felt like my life should be Big! Love should be full of grand gestures. Work should make people say Wow! But it doesn’t. None of it does.”

“Of course not,” I said.

“But look at Facebook! These are supposed to be my glory days!”

You might be surprised by the number of hours a week I spend hearing about Facebook. Many of my clients feel their lives on Facebook are evaluated, even judged, daily. They reluctantly admit they spend hours posting pictures and comments, flipping through them again and again, trying to see their Facebook pages as others will. They imagine their ex-girlfriends reacting to how they look now. They wonder whether the mean girls they used to know will think they have cool-looking friends. One of my clients laughs at what he calls his Facebook “self-advertisement.” When clients make this Facebook confession, they feel like the only ones who do this.

They aren’t.

Facebook and other networking sites have the power to help people feel more connected and less alone. [Some 90 percent of users say they use Facebook](#) to

stay in touch with longtime acquaintances, and 50 percent have found out something important about their friends this way. This can be especially helpful in our twenties because, as Talia noted, these are some of the most far-flung years of our lives. Facebook can help twentysomething life feel more coherent and less random. So why do many twentysomethings secretly, and not so secretly, hate Facebook?

For many, Facebook is less about looking up friends than it is about looking *at* friends. Research tells us that, on average, [Facebook users spend more time](#) examining others' pages than adding content to their own. The site's most frequent visitors—most often females who post and share photos and who receive status updates—use the site for “social surveillance.” These social investigators usually aren't getting in touch or staying in touch with friends as much as they are checking up on them. And my clients are right: Judging and evaluating *are* involved. [In one study, nearly four hundred participants](#) examined mock-up Facebook pages and rated web-page owners for attractiveness, only to decide that the best-looking owners were the ones with the best-looking friends.

Despite its revolutionary promises, Facebook can turn our everyday lives into that wedding we have all heard about: the one where the bride chooses her prettiest friends, not her best friends, to be bridesmaids. It can feel like a popularity contest where being Liked is what matters, being the best is the only respectable option, how our partners look is more important than how they act, the race to get married is on, and we have to be clever all the time. It can be just another place, not to be, but to *seem*.

Rather than a way of catching up, Facebook can be one more [way of keeping up](#). What's worse is that now we feel the need to keep up not just with our closest friends and neighbors, but with hundreds of others whose manufactured updates continually remind us of how glorious life should be.

Recently a twenty-six-year-old client said to me, “*All* of my friends are having babies. It makes me feel so behind.” Statistically this did not seem possible, so I asked which friends: Whom had she ever mentioned in sessions who was now having a baby? She said, “Oh, none of those friends. Just a ton of the nine hundred other people I wouldn't even know about without Facebook updates.” Or a male client said to me, “I feel pretty good about how my career is going until I look on Facebook and I see what other people are doing.”

Most twentysomethings know better than to compare their lives to celebrity microblogs, yet they treat Facebook images and posts from their peers as real. We don't recognize that most everyone is keeping their troubles hidden. This underestimation of how much other twentysomethings are struggling makes everything feel like an upward social comparison, one where our not-so-perfect

lives look low compared to the high life everyone else seems to be living. This leaves twentysomethings like Talia feeling not empowered and connected, but helpless and alone.

When Talia went online, the jobs she saw on Craigslist didn't match the parties and the lives she saw on Facebook. "It makes me feel depressed and stuck because I'm not saving orphans like everybody else," she said.

"Do you want to be saving orphans?" I asked.

"I want to be reaching my potential."

"What does saving orphans have to do with *your* potential? Do you have some sort of interest or experience in being a humanitarian?"

"Not really."

## The Search for Glory and the Tyranny of the Should

Each person has an inherent urge to grow toward his or her potential, much in the way an acorn becomes a tree. But because we all aren't acorns and won't all be oaks, there is bound to be confusion about what exactly growing toward our potential means. Some twentysomethings dream too small, not understanding that their twentysomething choices matter and are, in fact, shaping the years ahead. Others dream too big, fueled more by fantasies about limitless possibilities than by experience. Part of realizing our potential is recognizing how our particular gifts and limitations fit with the world around us. We *realize* where our authentic potential actually lies.

Working toward our potential becomes what developmental theorist Karen Horney called a search for glory when, somehow, we learn more about what is ideal than about what is real. Maybe we feel the cultural press to be an engineer before we find out what exactly that entails. Or our parents tell us more about what we should be like than what we are like. Or Facebook suggests that our twentysomething lives ought to look a lot better than they do. Scrambling after ideals, we become alienated from what is true about ourselves and the world.

Sometimes my clients are unclear about whether they are striving toward their potential or are on a search for glory, but a search for glory is pretty easy to spot. Any search for glory is propelled by what Horney called the tyranny of the should. Listening to Talia talk, it was difficult *not* to notice the "shoulds" and "supposed to's" that littered her sentences: Work should be Wow! She should be in graduate school. Her life should look better than it did.

Shoulds can masquerade as high standards or lofty goals, but they are not the same. Goals direct us from the inside, but shoulds are paralyzing judgments from the outside. Goals feel like authentic dreams while shoulds feel like oppressive obligations. Shoulds set up a false dichotomy between either meeting an ideal or being a failure, between perfection or settling. The tyranny of the should even pits us against our own best interests.

Contrary to what we see and hear, reaching your potential isn't even something that usually happens in your twenties—it happens in your thirties or forties or fifties. And starting that process often means doing what doesn't look so good, such as carting granola around in vans or choosing a starter job. As a

twentysomething client who works on a trading desk recently said to me, “These are the years when I put the hard work in, right?” Or as another who works in journalism asked, “I figure I’ll be fetching coffee for higher-ups at the office at least until I’m thirty, right?”

Right.

Talia and I spent some time talking about what was *real*. An unemployment rate of nearly 10 percent. Median starting salaries for college grads hovering around \$30,000, and median student debt hovering at about the same. Only about [half of recent graduates working in jobs](#) that require college degrees. The danger of being unemployed for too long. What her actual friends’ lives were really like.

With student loans and financial woes from childhood, Talia needed a job—with or without the Wow!—and she knew it. She also needed to find ways to feel good about herself without A’s, because, fortunately and unfortunately, those days were gone.

Talia’s hard work in college was not for nothing. At a time when so many have trouble finding jobs, soon she was hired as a marketing analyst. Her job was difficult, but she saw it was the friction between herself and her work that sparked her real potential. In school, Talia had been good at following directions, but at work she became more directed on her own. Her ease with people grew in meetings and on phone calls, and she found she had a real knack for coordinating teams and projects. Collapsing on the couch with a Lean Cuisine after a long day at work wasn’t what she expected from her twenties, yet she felt happier and more successful than ever before.

This is how she explained that change:

For a while, I worried I was selling myself short or not reaching my potential by not getting a Fulbright or going to graduate school, even though I knew that those sorts of things hadn’t made me happy. I knew I didn’t really want to do those things. But it was like what I was doing wasn’t any good because it wasn’t the best thing I saw people doing. I knew I had to stop worrying about how life was supposed to look, because it wasn’t pretty.

I stopped thinking about whether what I was doing was below me. I learned to not worry about how to make it to the next level and just focus on the job at hand. If they were willing to let me do it, I was willing to try. I think the fact that I never felt like I was better than those around me, and that I was just focused on learning and getting

results, is what has led me to better and better things at my company.

I guess you could say I gained humility. I saw that bigness came from investing in what I had, from taking part in what was in front of me. I have been able to discover a career field I never would have considered and I have learned to appreciate my talents. I have more courage and self-confidence. I have a lot more perseverance. So far my twenties have been a great, but rude, awakening. I'm even grateful for the internal transformation I've undergone.

Talia's search for glory might have ended at school and at work but, nearly two years later, the tyranny of the should continued after hours. Weeknights, she sat home and clicked through the photos of the parties she was apparently missing. She apologized to her friends for not going out more, though she'd grown progressively bored by spending her weekends talking to people who were drunk. One afternoon she came in crying, looking a lot like she did the first time I saw her in tears.

"Aren't I supposed to be traveling in France or something right now, like for three years?" she asked with equal parts anger and confusion.

"Sort of... but sort of *not*," I said slowly, trying to unwind in my mind what could have raised this. With her tailored shirt and tiny handbag, Talia didn't look like she would enjoy traveling for three years. And how would she pay for it?

"Is going to France for three years what you want to be doing?" I asked.

"No," she sniffled, "but shouldn't I be having my own *Eat, Pray, Love*?"

Having heard this particular should before, I made my usual response: "You know, Elizabeth Gilbert was an author for many years before she sold the concept of a book based on her postdivorce travels. Traveling and writing for *Eat, Pray, Love* involved self-discovery, but it was her job. If someone offers you a few hundred thousand dollars to see the world, we'll talk."

"That's right," she laughed as she cried. "That was in the book. I forgot about that."

"Why are you asking about this now? Would you like to take a vacation in France?"

Talia broke into deeper sobs. "No, the truth is... I just want to go home."

"Oh. Then let's talk about *that*."

When I asked about the "just" in "just go home," Talia said she felt like going home would be "giving up" or "taking the easy way out." The friends she'd made could not understand why she would want to leave the Bay Area and go back to Tennessee. Her father, someone whose own travels had defined who he

was, said this was her chance for adventure. Whenever she hinted she wanted to move home, he would say, “Why would you want to do that?”

Talia’s father had settled far away from his own relatives, so Talia grew up in Nashville without grandparents. When holidays rolled around, her childhood friends put on talent shows with their cousins in the backyard and collected dollar bills from Grandma. She and her sisters would have quiet days at home. “It was kind of sad,” she said. “I want my kids to know their grandparents.”

This time we talked about what was real, not in terms of unemployment rates and starter jobs, but in terms of what was authentic for Talia. I told her that an adult life is built not out of eating, praying, and loving but out of person, place, and thing: who we are with, where we live, and what we do for a living. We start our lives with whichever of these we know something about.

Talia was enjoying her rising career in marketing, and now she had a clear vision about her place. This was encouraging. At a time when many twentysomethings yearn for somewhere to call home and have no idea where they might be in ten years, choosing a place can be incredibly useful. Whether it is moving closer to family or building a life in a city you love, knowing your place is something not to be overlooked.

“Some of my friends are *from* here,” Talia said enviously. “They can drive home and have dinner with their parents whenever they want to. I miss my sisters. I wish I could do that. That sounds really nice.”

“Why do your sisters get to be in Nashville?”

“Oh, they’re the twins. The babies. Well, they’ve graduated from college now. But they don’t care what anybody thinks.”

“So they get to be the real rebels and stay home.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that funny?” Talia laughed ruefully. Then she leaned forward and, in a slightly lowered voice, told me what felt like a secret. “The other day, I was on the bus and I thought to myself: Maybe I’ve already done it. Maybe this is my big adventure. Maybe this is it.”

“Is that scary?” I asked, clearly missing the point. “If this is life’s biggest adventure for you?”

With an emphatic, heaving sigh, she nearly shouted, “No! It would be a relief! That would mean I could go home.”

I sat quietly as Talia cried for a bit. I thought about what I saw when I looked at her. I saw a young woman who had done some exploring, worked hard, and earned some great capital. Now she felt she wasn’t allowed to take that home.

Talia’s friends invalidated what was real about Talia by assuming that searching was better than finding, friends were better than family, and adventure was better than going home. I couldn’t think of a good reason why Talia couldn’t



go back to Nashville. I asked where this idea had come from.

“My dad. And my friends here.”

“Don’t your friends want a place to call home?”

“Yeah. But they say I’m too young to talk like this. Like it’s too early.”

“Too early?” I asked.

“They say, ‘Oh, you’re cute.’ To them, settling down is *settling*. But I go to their apartments, and my neighbor next door, she just sits around and picks apart every guy she dates. And she’s still trying to figure out what to do for her career. She’s still deciding whether to take the GRE! I look around and... it’s... it’s just a bunch of furniture that doesn’t go together! *And she’s in her thirties!* I know this sounds mean, but I think... she’s not happy at all... and I think... I hope I don’t wind up like that.”

“What do you want your life to look like when you’re in your thirties?”

“I want to be in Nashville, probably working in marketing, maybe as a brand manager. Hopefully I’ll have met somebody and we’ll have a home. I see myself in Nashville either way.”

“So what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Everyone says I should be out in the world exploring. But I *did* that! I just want to go home!” Talia pleaded.

“So you feel some cultural imperative to drag this out.”

Talia started to wonder if going back to Nashville was taking the easy way out or if, at this point, she was doing it the hard way. “Why am I going broke living here? Why am I trying to meet someone so far away from where I want to be?” she asked.

“Good questions,” I said.

Talia began to look online for jobs in Nashville. She just missed an opening at a marketing firm. “It would have been awesome,” she said. “I would love it but the position is closed.”

“Call anyway,” I said. “It could be closed because they are sitting on a stack of faceless résumés. And find out if you know anybody who knows anybody at that company.”

Later that week, Talia called to cancel our session, saying she was on her way to Nashville for an interview. The following week, she walked into my office and said, “I have good news.”

Talia enjoyed her last few weeks in town and even felt nostalgic about her college and postcollege years in California. But when she went next door to tell her thirtysomething neighbor about the new job in Tennessee, the neighbor made a cutting remark about how soon Talia would wind up married with babies. Then she slammed the door in Talia’s face and burst into tears behind the door.

Talia tiptoed back to her apartment. She was ready to get on with her life.