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Technology and Happiness: When Work Leads to Balance and Life Becomes a Ride

Technology has certainly changed the landscape of our culture. From creative outlets and communication to social structures and mobile work/live spaces, our lives are changing radically and quickly. Some worry that technology is undermining our connections to ourselves and to our communities. Others seek ways to use technology to build networks and relationships. And still others stumble into the potential of an inverse relationship between experience and technology: for some, technology is opening windows to re-engage with their inner-selves and with the world.

Ran Zilca, a former IBM Research engineer, is a member of the last category - a tech guy who's inner and outer life has shifted dramatically in the last few years. Zilca's is a journey inspired by his work in algorithm development, software and hardware design and development, and system level integration. From an interview in Insights Magazine, Zilca shares,

"When I was at IBM Research, I did a lot of work on biometrics, on identifying people from things like fingerprints and voiceprints and I was toying with the idea that they have unique psychological properties. The idea back then was to use those attributes for security purposes. Over time, I realized this is kind of interesting... the marriage between psychology and technology [was] basically uncharted territory [in 2005]. The more I read, the more I realized that there was basically nothing that took quantitative techniques that are available in psychology and deployed them [to the general public]."

Fast forward: Zilca left IBM to start Signal Patterns and expand his ideas. Today his company is leading the way in integrative psychology-based mobile applications. It was in testing one of these apps that Zilca found a latent passion that is changing his life.

"I was testing out a new application called *Live Happy*", Zilca said in a recent phone interview. "It is based on the work of University of California, Riverside, Psychologist, Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky. The program leads you through a series of steps to accomplish a

goal - a goal chosen by you, but based on how likely it is that you will attain this goal. You work with the app to determine which of your goals you will most likely accomplish. So one goal kept surfacing for me; it was driving a motorcycle across the country. I hadn't even ridden a motorcycle before. But I stayed with the program and took the baby-steps it suggested to accomplish my goal."

A year ago Zilca started riding a motorcycle and was almost immediately hooked. The father of 3 young children, he states that his wife was concerned. Motorcycles can be dangerous.

"It is natural to want to keep your spouse safe and to question what is going on when big shifts occur," says Zilca. "But every time I came home from an hour on my bike, my wife noticed a huge change - I was calmer and happier than before I left."

He eventually joined a motorcycle club and his wife even rides with him sometimes.

"Being on the road, on a motorcycle, is a meditative practice for me. And it is a way to have deeper conversations and relationships. Guys don't sit down, watch football, and talk about what's missing in their lives. But they do talk about such things when they are out on the road."

So with all of the baby-step behind him, Ran Zilca is days away from the final step in his goal. On September 19th he will leave for a trip across the US with just his (second) motorcycle, a laptop, iphone and the bare necessities. Through technology, he has found what is moving him past his fortieth 'life-crisis' birthday and toward a new chapter in his work and life. On his ride, he will meet with many of the psychologists, doctors, and coaches that his company works with - Deepak Chopra, Caroline Miller, Daniel Levitin, Dave Stewart and, of course, Sonia Lyubomirsky. And he is blogging and vlogging about it as he goes. He is calling this project the Ride of Your Life.

At the conclusion of our conversation, Zilca and I talked about making life-changes. I asked if he felt that one needed to leave family and friends, travel, and step out-side of his / her comfort zone in order to attain a level of self-awareness.

"When I was at IBM, we called it 'changing the wallpaper'," said Zilca. "You would see people working outside, in the lounge, really all over the place. There was an understanding that in order to be creative, you need a change of scenery."

Perhaps that is the take-away: we can see our computers and your mobile devices as constant static fixtures or we can see them as flexible tools and portable places, and technology as a conduit for creative personal and inter-personal relationships.

This article is the continuation of an on-going exploration of choices and opportunities we have to better understand and participate in: health, art, education, and our communities. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

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