

Is the Grass Sometimes Greener on the Other Side?

The popular saying goes, “The grass isn’t always greener on the other side.” Yet, this statement implies that there are indeed times when it is. So why are we then told to err on the side of caution, if there is potential of improved life outcomes from our instinct to run away? What is it about the lessons from those who came before us that illuminate and give us guidance on how to approach this flight/fight dilemma we regularly encounter?

Given I’m an engineer by trade, I won’t be able to adequately address all these questions, but I can enlighten you with my own thoughts on the situation, based on my personal revelation I had while reading the popular novel, “The Alchemist”.

This is one of my favorite books, and I recommend giving it a read. However, in the meantime here is my brief synopsis into what happens in the book:

Santiago, the main character, is fixated on the idea of finding a treasure and breaking free from the identity of shepherd boy that was bestowed upon him. To satisfy the demands of his ambitious plan, he sells his entire herd and uses the money to travel from his remote town in Andalusia Spain, to the nearest town in Africa. Upon entering his first port town, he gets swindled and loses all the money he had amassed for his journey through the desert to the pyramids. Due to this he must postpone his journey and work at a glassware shop to earn enough money to continue. He eventually does, runs into many hurdles, and finally lands himself on what can only be described as a mystical experience. He engages in a Moses-like interaction with an omniscient being, and it’s during this encounter that he is told the treasure he was seeking was only, but a stone’s throw away from where he had grown up the entire time. He then embarks on his return, finds the treasure, and lives happily ever after.

And so, if we return to the first question I propose, I think there could be two ways to perceive Santiago and his decision to sell his herd and leave for Africa. The first way would posit that if the treasure were near his home all along, then how can any sensible argument be made for leaving? And if we approach this from a purely logical perspective, how can you refute it? Leaving his hometown resulted in him wasting a considerable part of the year searching for this treasure, just to have to turn all the way back close to where he started. However, I think there are more prudent questions to be asked.

Why does fleeing our current situation seem so appealing at times? What is it that we are running towards or away from, that makes it so tempting?

Discussing this, I believe, results in a more engaging discussion. So, to start this discussion, I'll share a personal anecdote:

Ever since I was a teenager, there was one place I always wanted to visit. Italy. And more specifically, Rome. My family is from the Appalachian Mountains, but a few generations prior had boarded boats from Napoli and made their way to America. There was a pride we had in the pizza and pasta we made, and it's something I saw in popular culture, and was able to relate to. That, and I used to watch a ton of roman war movies and always found the colosseum awe-inspiring. Cool buildings and masculinity came first, and then the obsession with their culinary excellence came second, but they both clung to my psyche into my time in college and post-graduate.

It was only roughly two years ago, that I finally attained my passport, and once secured, I made it my central mission to make it to Italy before my 26th birthday. My coincidental exposure to Italian culture resulted in my fixation and pull towards Italy, but what was pulling me away? What was it about taking a break from my life in Denver at the time that made teleworking abroad for a month seem so alluring?

In simplest terms, I was running from the feeling of rejection. I had made the decision to move from my home state a year and a half prior, and I still hadn't made myself a single reliable friend in my new city. I also had just finished a 30-day challenge of posting to YouTube, with each video getting less than 10 likes. I was failing in friendship, and entrepreneurship. My relationship was also on the brink of collapse, and I just needed to distance myself, before I broke down entirely. I booked my plane ticket, and when I arrived at 10 AM that fateful morning after being awake for 30 hours, all I could feel when I dropped my bags into the apartment was a sense of relief and fulfillment.

I had a lovely time checking out all the cultural sites and popular restaurants, but I look back at the not so lovely times and find these to contain the most useful life lessons. For example, in my brain, I had convinced myself that I was going to land in Italy, and with the couple weeks of Duo Lingo practice I had spent prior to my trip, I would be able to get around easily and relate to everyone. I didn't realize what a gift it is to not have to deeply contemplate every sentence you say.

Every time I wanted to even say something nice about someone's outfit, or the food they had prepared, it felt like my brain cells were doing gymnastics. Stressed to the maximum, while simply trying to determine what wine to order. The language barrier, and lack of social contact with others, really cornered me into a bout of isolation. At least during the week, when I was confined to my BnB in Rome. My weekends in neighboring

cities, where I stayed in hostels with those who spoke English, were much more favorable times.

My long-winded recounting of my Rome fixation highlights how I imagined Italy as this place of tranquility, and where I would have no mental afflictions. But alas, it was quite the opposite. I found myself ruminating often, which ultimately lent itself to fruitful reflection, but in the moment, it was not pleasant. During these ruminations I reflected on how I had approached my life and understood how my reliance on my partner's friend group for companionship at the time had ultimately caught up to me. I never tried to make my own friends, and with me and my partner likely breaking up, I would only have my sister to hang out with and rely on. This was a sad realization, but a much needed one.

So, this then begs the following questions:

Would I have been able to come to this conclusion about my behavior without leaving Denver? Or were my bouts of isolation and rumination during my time abroad just what I needed to arrive at this epiphany?

Did Santiago really need to leave his hometown to find treasure? Or was there an alternate path he could have taken to arrive at a similar conclusion?

In all honesty, I don't think there is a wrong or right approach on how to shift one's perspective. I think the important thing is to note that discontent is a normal feeling that isn't location dependent. Discontent arises from our perception of where we live and how we act. It arises when we expect better of ourselves yet continually fall short.

A 50-room mansion is the pinnacle of success on the exterior, but the 47 vacant rooms within its interior exude despair and failure.

Understanding what you personally need to shift your perspective is paramount, and I think that's why I relate to Santiago so much. I understand his approach. Regret and despair eat at him. Keeping him from the present. It's only until he commits to selling his sheep and seeking the treasure that his mental affliction starts to alleviate.

So, in Schrodinger-style, I'll end with this. We will never truly know if the grass is greener, unless we inspect it for ourselves.