



Fearless Philosophies with Jeff Nelsen

“The first step in following your dreams is waking up”
- Eugene Burger, World-Famous Magician and Philosopher of Magic

I had lunch last week with one of my magician heroes, Eugene Burger. Stagebill magazine proclaimed, “Eugene Burger is universally recognized as perhaps the finest close-up magician in the world.” We spoke about magic and music, and the connections between the two disciplines. The above quote struck me powerfully, and I hope it inspires you too. Let’s look into ways we can use these words to encourage us to dream crazy huge dreams, and take steps toward making these dreams reality.

I’ve previously written about posting the phrase “How much do you want it?” throughout your house to stay focused on your goals and dreams. Today’s article is about the way to make sure our “it” is a good one! Having clear goals is the best way to inspire us to get out of bed early, and keep us practicing and studying throughout each day. I define ‘goals’ as steps toward dreams. So, by reaching our goals, we are stepping toward our dreams.

A dream I’ve achieved was playing with Canadian Brass. I took many steps along the way to achieve this dream, and the mixture of

successes and failures at obtaining goals brought me close enough to my dream to grab it. I would constantly see short-term goals that I could pursue to bring me closer to my dream. Each time I reached a goal, I’d celebrate it, and set new ones further down the path, always keeping my ultimate dream blindingly clear.

“Obstacles are the things we see when we take our eyes off our goal”
 - Hallmark Card

My greatest awakening was when I realized I have a worthwhile voice of my own. I awoke to my own potential...no...*really* awoke! I learned that my voice through the horn is unique, and worth sharing. This awakening continues to happen, now that my voice is also being shared through my teaching and writing. You too have a unique voice worth sharing.

Ask yourself what you could be doing to better share your voice fearlessly, and at the highest level possible.

A crucial part of stepping toward our dreams is taking leaps of faith--essentially stepping

while believing in ourselves. If I had not done this, you would definitely not be reading this article. If I only acted on things I knew to be true, I never would have done my first audition thirteen years ago. There is always potential to ‘know’ that we’re not playing perfectly. How we utilize the knowledge of what we’re lacking or what our limits are, could be the only thing standing between us and our dreams. While knowing what we can improve on is useful information, deciding we’re only at this level or have only that ability can diminish the amount of times we surprise ourselves, and play better than we imagine we ever could. All I can say is, trust me on this. I surprise myself all the time.

I see many people who choose to be *too* smart about where they ‘know’ their level is. While this knowledge might be constructive, in most cases it serves to create obstacles. The greatest music I hear usually has a mixture of intellect and personality. Here lies the human element in music that creates connection between audience and live performer.

I was studying excerpts for my first audition, and playing many mock auditions as part of the process. I played my loud excerpts as loud as I could, softs as soft as I could, etc. Trumpeter Charlie Duvall told me something that woke me to my first ‘leap-of-faith. He said, “You’re pretty young, aren’t you? You need to play with the *illusion* of maturity.” I began pretending to be my favorite musicians, and I won the audition.

No, it’s not as simple as pretending to be good. And yet, in many ways it is.

Here are some potential ‘wake-up calls’ for us to investigate:

- How high of a standard of excellence do we bring with our inhalation every time we bring the horn to our lips?
- How often do we perform without having an absolutely clear idea of what sounds we want to create?
- How often do we perform something and hope it’s good enough? And if it was just good enough to get by, what do we do with the next moment after we’ve slid by?
- How often do we say that we record ourselves, but don’t?
- How good is our worst playing?
- How low do we *ever* allow our standards to dip?

Make a deal with yourself—wake up to a combination of more authenticity and more naivety. Embrace having clearer intent and less fear. Choose to have stronger musical goals, and fewer obstacles to a healthy self-worth. I guess this means waking to both more and less knowledge, thus the alchemy of it all. If we insist on playing our very best with every note, fearlessly, then with every breath can come a belief that this note will be the best one we’ve ever played. The degree to which this becomes a habit in our playing, and in our living, is up to us.

“The first step in following your dreams is waking up.”

...waking up to both our greatness and to how much work it really does take to reach our dreams. This saying could also simply mean that when we have a dream, all we have to do to start following it is wake up each day. If we have our dreams on our mind, we can't help but follow them. Most of us can wake up to a deeper belief in ourselves. We can wake up to our own greatness.

Sweet dreams, everybody...and perhaps even sweeter awakenings!

For more thoughts on how Jeff helps people follow their dreams, view his latest blog at www.jeffnelsen.com. Jeff is Associate Professor of Horn at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, and performs recital/master-classes worldwide. Mr. Nelsen is a Yamaha Performing Artist.

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