

DAY 6

WOOP it UP

In my twenties, I took very little on faith. I always had to know the reason why. Show me the data, the science, the system or methodology. In my thirties, I began to experience things that would soften my lens, things both good and bad. Still, if there were data, I yearned to find the why behind the what. I spent a chunk of my late 30s and early 40s studying and teaching yoga and meditation and going deep into a science of another kind. Not just gross anatomy, but what the more energetically inclined would call the subtle body.

Words like *prana*, *ki*, *life-force*, *chakras*, *nadis*, *meridians*, *doshas*, and *akashic field* entered my realm. Though, truth be told, so much of my willingness to embrace them still hung on my ability to simultaneously overlay them with my knowledge of Western science, anatomy, and physiology. Talk to me about *prana* and I'd secretly think electromagnetic field. Talk about *chakras* and my practical brain would overlay the neural plexus. Talk about *meridians* and I'd see highly conductive fascial tissue. Still, I was becoming less demanding and more accepting when the easy analogy didn't come.

In my 40s, and heading into my 50s now, having embraced the wonder of fatherhood, the blessing of a deepening marriage, and the early edges of tragedy and suffering, grace and awe, I'm what I'd call open and practical. If there is no science but a phenomenon is real, I'm okay with the notion that something beyond my grasp is in control.

This actually happened in a funny way after I spoke on stage recently. A woman who'd been in the audience waited behind and, after everyone left, came very hesitantly to share something. "I'm not the aura lady," she said. "I don't go around seeing people's auras, but yours was so big for the first 15 minutes, I couldn't hear what you were saying. And it had a tail like a comet that was following you around the stage."

"Okay," I said, "that's cool." And, now, of course, I had to know. "What color was it?"

"Violet," she told me, and off she went.

Later that day, I met a friend in a coffee shop and recounted the story, without revealing the color. She looked at me and shared, "Yeah, I saw it, too."

"Oh, sure you did," I said. "What color?"

"Violet."

A few months later, I bumped into a friend and his girlfriend at a small gathering and repeated the story, again without revealing the color. The girlfriend was what I'd call decidedly woo-woo. She said she saw it, too, as I stood before her. Clear as day, it was violet.

Now, of course, the aura gauntlet had been thrice thrown down, so I had to know what violet meant. I took to the Internet. On allaurasandchakras.com, I learned that violets are unorthodox, inventive, intelligent, highly intuitive, visionary, big-picture thinkers with a profound yearning to make a difference and a relentless need for meaning. They're great at breakthrough ideas, seeing how things fit together in a way nobody else sees. But they're less interested in granular process, systems, and details. They have an uncanny ability to predict trends and see possibility, often long before it manifests, which can also lead to the frustrations of being perpetually "too early"

to the market. They're passionate and emotional and experience life as a constant state of evolution and growth. Violets are spiritual, but often in a more universal and less faith-driven way. They need a lot of space for solitude and can often appear aloof or antisocial, though in reality they love people on a more selective level and revel in fewer, deeper conversations. "Out of power" violets can also be arrogant, thinking they can do everything better than anyone else, and so they try, leading them to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and fatigued. They crash hard when they ignore their inner sense of mission or try to pursue many things at once, rather than going deep into a few.

The full description was far more extensive. I've taken nearly every personality assessment ever made, and the accuracy of the description made my jaw drop. So color me open to auras and other, not-so-easy-to-validate phenomena.

At the same time, if there is science out there, I want to know what it is. And if the science is strong and conflicts with the metaphysical or nonscientific explanation, you can be pretty sure I'm going to take the side of science. That's where I find myself with the whole notion of manifesting. Especially in the context of the laws and rules most often offered.

The idea has been around probably as long as we have. Want something to have or hold or happen? Think it into being. Want someone to drop into your life? Dream it into being. Specifics tend to vary a bit among leading books, movies, and teachers in the space, but the general process is:

1. Get crystal clear on what you want.
2. Create a detailed, tangible representation of it.
3. Ask the universe to deliver your vision into reality, to manifest it.
4. Do not try to figure out how to make it happen; simply hold yourself open for the answers and the outcomes to manifest themselves in your life.

5. Never ever, ever, ever think or ask questions about failure or obstacles or negative stuff, even if it's just trying to figure out why it happened in the past or how you might deal with it if it happens again, because that'll attract this negative stuff into your orbit.

As I mentioned, there are many variations. Proponents will argue that the subtleties matter, and that the reason one approach might work and another might not is about the little things.

I'm open to the idea that sometimes your best answers and opportunities come from hard work followed by space and surrender. I'm also good with the possibility that when you get very clear on what you want to create, your brain has what Harvard Medical School professor and neuropsychiatrist Srinivasan Pillay calls a hidden GPS system that sets in motion all manner of less-than-conscious processes needed to reveal the steps to make it happen.

But what I don't understand is the need for mystical explanations for why a process of manifestation might work, when there's actual hard science about what's happening. Nor do I buy the proclamation that even thinking about the possibility of obstacles and failure, or planning for them, makes you less likely to get what you want. The research, in fact, has been done, and the answer is clear. The exact opposite is true.

Maybe now you're starting to see why I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with the whole self-help version of manifesting. The word, alone, had a pretty great history until a few years back. At its root, it's really just about making things real. Taking something that exists in the ether of ideas or energy and turning it into something you can touch, feel, see, hear, or in some other way experience. Something horrible and feared can manifest as easily as something wonderful and desired. A hidden illness can manifest in symptoms. An idea can manifest as a book or business.

But in truth, manifesting is just a more passive version of goal achievement. And there's a ton of research on what it takes to turn dreams into realities. In. Real. Life.

Turns out that true manifestation doesn't come from a clear vision, a deep desire, blind faith, and a refusal to go to the dark side. It's not about seeing and wanting and willfully pushing away negative thoughts. In fact, research shows that those negatives have value. They just might be the missing pieces in the manifestation puzzle.

Enter Gabriele Oettingen, a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg. She studies motivation and goal achievement, among other things, diving into how we maddeningly irrational humans think about and create our futures. In other words, she researches manifesting to figure out what actually works and what's total bunk. Oettingen is also the author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*, where she shares an interesting take on wishful delusion versus practical goal attainment.

In her lab, she found something pretty interesting. People who only *fantasized* about finding a new partner, getting a new job, recovering from surgery, or acing an exam fared much worse than those who fantasized and then took a few extra steps. The big winners were people who moved beyond fantasizing, acknowledged the major obstacles that were likely to appear, and planned how they'd handle them if and when they did appear.

Turns out acknowledging the very real likelihood of bad stuff happening along the way doesn't make you more likely to fail. It doesn't "repel" your dream outcome. Nor does supplementing your brain's GPS by actively pursuing solutions instead of waiting for them to be given from beyond. In fact, these things do the exact opposite. They make you acknowledge, quantify, and then choose whether you are willing to own what it will truthfully take to make your dream a reality. The potential suffering, the sacrifice, the stumbles and failures, and the judgment. They force you to examine the cost of the quest and then decide three things: What are the biggest potential obstacles? Do I still want it enough to endure those associated costs? And if so, how will I prepare in advance to deal with the challenges and costs if and when they come?

Oettingen has distilled her peer-reviewed, published research on wish attainment, or manifesting, into a simple and practical four-step method, easily remembered by the acronym WOOP.²⁵

1. W—Wish. Identify something you want to have happen or something you want to accomplish. It should be something you really want, something that excites you, but also, deep down, something you believe is attainable.
2. O—Outcome. Describe the outcome that would unfold in your life upon attaining your wish. Make it emotional. Describe how it would make you feel, why it matters.
3. O—Obstacle. Think about the potential personal obstacles that will likely, or at least possibly, come up along the way. This often starts on an internal level, around fear or willpower or loss of confidence.
4. P—Plan. Detail what you'd do to overcome each obstacle, should it arise. Think, "If X happens, I will do Y."

The method is simple, and having now been thoroughly vetted, both in the lab and in practical application, it's been proven to work.

Does that mean I'm forever closed to other approaches? Of course not. But since there is proven science, I want to be convinced with science, not anecdotal data. At least to my knowledge, that hasn't happened yet with manifestation. Since I'm the practical yet open guy and I promised you a practical guide, at least for now I'm going to suggest we all spend a little more time WOOPing and a little less time waiting and hoping and ignoring. That brings us to today's exploration, your first WOOP.

Daily Exploration:

Let's try a little WOOPing, shall we? A bit of advice before diving in: You may be inclined to go big out of the gate. That's probably not a great idea. Pick something simple in the beginning. Something like "I want to walk for five minutes every morning before work." Two ways to go about it:

1. Use the WOOP My Life app. Because Oettingen isn't only about what happens in the lab, but also about what happens in life, she's turned the entire WOOP method into a free app that you can download. You can find it over at woopmylife.org. Spend a little time, think about something you'd like to make happen, then head on over and let the app be your guide.
2. Do it on paper. Over at goodlifeproject.com/bookinsider, I've included a full-page template designed to walk you through the process of creating your first manifestation quest using the WOOP method.