



Ode to the Morning Routine

“At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: “I have to go to work — as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I’m going to do what I was born for — the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is this what I was created for? To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?”

-Marcus Aurelius

People seem to be obsessed by the idea of the ultimate morning routine. Based on popularity—I know, not always a good idea—articles of the flavor “This is my morning routine” have to be in the top 2 or 3 “most likely to go viral” categories. Apparently, it’s a topic that people just cannot get enough and will consume over and over and over.

Why are we so collectively fascinated by the idea of morning routines? I think it has something to do with the cult of success that pervades our culture. We are pushed and channeled by the imperceptible yet profoundly powerful energies of the world around us. And what they are saying to our subconscious is “hey, you need to create a morning routine that will help you crush your goals and conquer the world” or something like that. I also think there’s something much deeper going on, for the early morning hours are sacred ground. Metaphysical traditions around the world look to the pre-dawn hours as the time for the deepest work in their daily practice. Either way, there’s something important going-on here.

I am a huge proponent of the extreme morning routine myself. It can help you in so many ways. What you gain in confidence and will power through the discipline of getting out of bed alone is worth the price of admission. When you start the day with space, not only are you more productive but also you give yourself an opportunity to introduce both reflection and intentionality into your day. At the same time, you tap into the energy of proactivity, which has a kind of inertia to it. The more you tap into it the easier it gets to call upon. Eventually, proactivity becomes habitual and carries over into the rest of your day.

But ultimately the reason it's a good idea to get up early is to give yourself the space to take care of yourself in mind, body, and soul. We live in an era like no other, where our attentions are essentially under a state of constant bombardment, where powerful and often addictive technologies are challenging the very definition of what it means to be a human being. The early morning hours, if used rightly, can become a relief from this onslaught. Yes, it's hard to get-up early and an extreme routine requires discipline, consistency, and a certain kind of deliberateness. But, trust me, it's worth it! I'm convinced that there's something almost magical about the early morning hours. They are the fertile grounds of self-discovery and should not be wasted.

Are you convinced yet?

I've been experimenting with this for a long time, basically my whole adult life, and I believe it's one of the best things you can possibly do to improve the quality of your life. When I was younger, I found it really hard to wake-up in the morning, even when I went to bed early and slept well. In those days, I had to rely a lot on my super ego. At the sound of the alarm, I battered myself with thoughts like: "Hey Nick, don't be weak. Get the F up!" Sometimes, I would even roll out of bed and bang out a set of push-ups just to jumpstart my will. Thankfully, as I matured into my thirties, it started to get easier and easier. After a while, especially after my first son was born, things evolved to where I could start the day with a gentler and perhaps more enlightened state of mind. And these days I find myself downright excited to wake-up, like Marcus Aurelius apparently was:

"When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive—to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love."

In the past few years, I think I've zeroed in on a pretty ideal routine and it's been rather life-changing. Here's the basic structure:

3:30am – 4:00am Wake-Up, Make French Press Coffee, Deep Reading¹

4:00am – 4:40am Deep Work²

4:40am – 5:10am Breakfast, News Scan

5:10am – 5:30am Meditate

5:30am – 6:00am Get Ready, Walk to Gym

6:00am – 7:00am Exercise

7:00am – 8:30am Get Ready, Help Get Kids Ready for School, Walk my Oldest Son to School

8:30am – 9:30am Deep Work

Note: I keep to roughly the same schedule on the weekends too, just with way more reading as my Saturday workout doesn't start until 8:30am and on Sundays I rest. Some weekend mornings I'll get 3 or 4 hours of reading in.

So, on a typical weekday, by 9:30am, I have been up for 6 hours, have done some serious deep work (usually enough for the whole day), had a chance to be with my family and gotten in a some very important daily disciplines. It feels like whatever I can give to the rest of the waking day is just gravy! I've discovered that there's an immense power to this kind of discipline, especially as it compounds over time. Just imagine what doing something like this every single day for several years can do for you.

Of course, this is not to say that my way is the only way. Not at all. I think even that some people might be biologically inclined to work best late at night rather than early in the morning. If you happen to be a night owl, just make sure you use those hours with the same kind of deliberateness and seriousness as discussed here. The key is to not waste your sacred time of day. As for the routine itself, I've prioritized things like reading, writing, meditating and exercise because I've discovered that these things are the keys to quality in my life. But everyone is different and should architect their routine in a way that is most supportive of their highest selves and most meaningful dreams. The key is simply to establish the space to experiment, remain open to reflection so you can make adjustments and then let things compound. □

1. Deep Reading means mystical/spiritual works, poetry, philosophy or some great work of literature or history. I used to start the day scanning and reading some newspapers as a way to kind of warm-up my mind but found that to have way too many negative side effects. The idea here is to make your first encounter with ideas from the outside world to be at the highest level possible. This is the moment of the day where your mind is most open to receiving the truth.

2. Deep Work means writing, journaling, or thinking strategically about something I'm working on or dealing with. I try to not do things like respond to email during this time—of course, I sometimes do! The idea is to tap into the creative powers that you possess. The more you do it, the easier it becomes!