

Chapel Talk  
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Philippe Petit, at 19 years old, was sitting in a dentist's office reading a magazine when he saw an artist's rendering of two buildings that were yet to be built. At that moment, he knew what he had to do, and he spent the next six years planning and preparing to do it. What he did was remarkable, unimaginably dangerous, beautiful and illegal. Philippe Petit walked between the World Trade Center towers on a wire he had put there, with the help of his friends. The story of Petit's wire-walk is one of perseverance and resilience, and is a story that might contain some valuable lessons about what it takes to set a goal and then pursue it, through ups and downs, to the very end.

St. Andrew's wants its students to be resilient--to keep pushing forward despite adversity--to persevere. But how do you learn and develop this trait? Is there something else to it besides "keeping going" or "trying harder?" If someone is having troubles, I've found it is just about useless to tell them to try harder. "You can't figure out vector subtraction? Try harder!" It's not a very helpful suggestion, is it? If you want to develop a trait, one way to go about it is to watch someone else who possesses the trait, then practice the trait yourself by emulating the example.

Philippe Petit, through his quest to conquer the towers of the World Trade Center, demonstrated first and foremost an intense focus and concentration. That intense focus is a hallmark of the perseverance mindset is not surprising. But he also demonstrated the power of careful observation, and I think that this second skill, although it may not be as obvious a part of perseverance, is just as valuable as the first.

Philippe Petit's powers of concentration permeated all of his preparations to walk the towers, but nowhere more obviously than in his practice on the wire. Near the end of his preparations, Petit was living in New York City, surveilling the buildings and gathering helpers. The two Americans that he befriended and convinced to help him were dubious of this French character. Was he mad? Was he a con man, who had made up this wire-walking exploit to fool them into some unwitting role? The only thing that kept them involved was the obvious adventure, whether or not Philippe

was for real. It was not until Petit invited them to watch him practice walking the wire, that these two were convinced. The two Americans were spellbound--not by Petit's balance and wire-walking skill, but by his sheer, utter concentration. One of the two said that he had never seen anyone focus that totally, that Petit's face became sphinx-like. It was this focus, this concentration the intensity of which they had never before witnessed, that convinced the two Americans that Philippe was the real deal.

The overall planning for the wire-walk between the towers involved collecting published information on the towers, visiting New York several times to surveil the towers, erecting a scale mock-up of the tower tops in France, developing a spool for paying out fishing line behind the arrow that would connect the two towers. There were two widely publicized wire walks preceding the Twin Towers attempt: Petit walked between the towers of Notre Dame in Paris, and he walked between the towers of the Sydney Harbor Bridge in Australia. All these tasks required focus over a sustained period of years.

At one point in January 1974, Petit and his friends were convinced time was running out on their plan, but there were problems with the logistics. Not convinced that they could get to the top of the towers undetected, Petit and his friends decided to cancel the walk. Seven months later they were back with an alternative plan. It was in August of 1974 that Philippe Petit finally achieved his dream to walk between the towers. Philippe Petit describes his methodical approach thusly: "A grain of sand at a time. I am a specialist in a grain of sand at a time."

Even outside the realm of wire-walking, Petit is a focused human. When asked in an interview if he ever relaxes, Philippe answered "no" but went on to explain how concentrating on his hobby reconstructing an 18th century barn in Woodstock, NY serves to calm him. I think his description of the process explains very well how concentration can be enjoyable:

... I am passionate about some activities which are very calming. I am an 18th century post and beam carpenter. When I am working with tools that are not powered by electricity, I have to be really focused. It's a dialogue between the wood and me, with no noise in between.

"With no noise in between" himself and his work. Another favorite quote of mine concerning focus comes from the "grandfather of computer programming," Donald Knuth. Now if you do any reading about the history of computer programming, there are several outsized personalities that dominate the field, and one of them is Donald Knuth. You would think a man like Knuth would constantly be in touch with other computer scientists through email. On the contrary, Knuth describes his relationship with email this way:

Email is a wonderful thing for people whose role in life is to be on top of things. But not for me; my role is to be on the bottom of things. What I do takes long hours of studying and uninteruptible concentration.

Note carefully the words "uninteruptible concentration." Not uninterrupted concentration, but uninteruptible concentration. That means the kind of concentration that is not possible to interrupt! That is true focus. Now most of us are in situations where we need to be "on top of things" some of the time... I know I do. But there are other times, for instance when I am preparing materials for my classes, or studying pedagogy, that I need to be "on the bottom of things." Knowing when AND how to switch modes is an important skill.

Back to Philippe Petit and his walk between the Twin Towers. One of the most remarkable aspects of Petit's planning for this event was his unceasing observation. Observations of the buildings and their roofs, the night watch security, the people who came and went from the buildings, the protocols for the service entrance to the building, the security arrangements for construction vehicles and personnel. His months-long "casing" of the World Trade Center was much like what you might expect of very savvy bank robbers. He even rented a helicopter and procured the services of a professional photographer with aerial photography experience to photograph the buildings in order to augment his copious drawings and notes that he gathered on his surreptitious trips to the top of the towers. Petit's observations and analysis of his observations are at once scientific and artistic. In both disciplines, observation, recording of observations and analysis of observations are paramount.

While being intensely observant might be an obvious key to anyone's success, why is it part of perseverance? I believe that without his intense and relentless observations of everything around him, including the moods of his friends and accomplices, Petit could not have maintained his focus. The act of consciously observing and recording kept him going, even after the disappointment of January 1974, when the first attempt at the towers had to be scrubbed.

Finally, of course, all the work paid off. On August 7th, 1974, the day before Richard Nixon resigned from office, Petit walked between the towers. He stepped out onto the wire at 7:15 a.m., after spending the night hiding from night watchmen and frantically rigging the wire starting around 4 a.m. He was almost immediately seen from the street, seemingly floating in mid-air between the towers. Police were called, a scene ensued on each end of the wire, but Petit calmly walked back and forth for more than 45 minutes, saluting the pedestrians below, laying down on the wire, jumping up and down on the wire 1,350 feet above the pavement. Each time he neared the end of the wire, policemen would reach for him, but he would turn and scamper back out toward the middle. Around 8 a.m., it started to rain lightly, and Petit figured he had tempted fate enough for one day. He dismounted the wire onto the South Tower, and was immediately arrested for trespassing. The annoyed and impatient police handled him roughly. He was pushed down a stairwell in what he said the most dangerous part of the whole morning.

You can imagine the media circus that followed. Petit was immediately famous. But his focus on his art remained steadfast. Quoting, Petit:

I could have become a millionaire within days. A stupid book would have been made, a stupid film, stupid T-shirts, stupid little dolls climbing on the tower like King Kong would have been made. I didn't say no in principle, I said no because I looked at the people and heard their words and everything was wrong. There was a different language, it was a different point of view. It was not me. And I cannot be not me. I'm not honourable and courageous in my way of seeing life - I just cannot help it.

So what happened to Philippe Petit? His sentence for trespassing (which wasn't a real sentence, for all formal charges were dropped) was to put on a wire-walking show in Central Park for the

children of New York, a task he eagerly threw himself into. Throughout the years he has occasionally staged large-scale walks, officially sanctioned, of course. These walks pay well, but they are far between and Petit is in no way a rich man. He says of what he does:

It's the most impossible profession in the world. I am the most stupid man, to have become a wire-walker. But again, I didn't choose it. It chose me. So here I am - a prisoner of something I love.