

## The Long Jump

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Let's go back to October, 1968 – Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated a few months ago. NASA is a year away from landing on the moon. The Olympics are taking place in Mexico City, and Bob Beamon, a 22-year old track and field star from Queens is competing for the United States in the long jump.

On a mild October afternoon, Beamon approaches the runway for his first jump, runs forwards, and jumps as he has done thousands of times before. He lands near the far end of the sand pit. After a delay, the announcer calls out the distance of 8.9 meters, but Beamon doesn't understand how far he has jumped because he doesn't know metric measurements. When his teammate tells him the distance he had jumped – 29 feet 2 ½ inches for those of us who are also metrically challenged -- he collapses to his knees, leans his head against the track then clasps his head in his hands as he mumbles “tell me I am not dreaming.”

Not only was Beaton was the first long jumper in history to reach 29 feet. He was also the first to reach 28 feet. He had beaten the existing world record by almost two feet. To put that in perspective, before Beamon's jump the world record had been broken 13 times since 1901 with an average increase of 2 ½ inches and the largest increase being 6 inches.

My first reaction to this story was of awe as I tried to understand how it was even physically possible. But as I thought more about it, I couldn't help but think about what came next. Was this jump the beginning of a lifetime of greatness for Beamon? Or was it a freak event that was the height of Beamon's career?

That idea, that my peak is behind me, is a fear that keeps me up thinking, a fear that comes in and out of my life like that relative that you see every other year during the holidays. It's a haunting thing, the idea that the best has already passed, and that everything I do next will not be as impressive as what I've done. The fear shows up particularly when things aren't going so well. It's tempting to just forget about now and think back to the good old days when things were going my way.

Psychologists have a formal way of defining the good old days to which I'm referring, but instead of long periods of time they consider discrete moments. Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, described these moments as "rare, exhilarating, elevating, deeply moving experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality, and are even mystic and magical in their effect." These are called "peak experiences."

I think of them as the moments that are the happiest, the most wonderful, or the most inspiring. They can happen when doing something you love, understanding a book or a painting, playing a sport, or spending time with others.

One of my own peak experiences was in the beginning of February of my senior year of high school. It was dark outside, and I was walking to the library with a girl whom I had been seeing on and off (as we millennials often do). At one point, I stopped and turned to her a little too quickly causing us both to fall down into the snow. I turned to her, and asked her to be my girlfriend. She said yes. Elation and joy aren't sufficient to describe my feelings. It was like I was fully alive and experiencing something that would change how I see the world.

When Bob Beamon collapsed onto the track on that October afternoon in 1968, he had a peak experience brought on by an extraordinary performance. Considering that, I realized that my fear of having peaked comes from this idea that peak experiences in my life can come only from extraordinary performance measured by the traditional standards that "matter": grades, jobs, and so on. But reflecting on my own peak experiences, I see that vast majority of them haven't come from big achievements, but from living my everyday life doing the things I cherish.

It's easy and even encouraged to spend a lot of time chasing achievements with the assumption that achieving them will make us very happy. But it's counterproductive to seek out those achievements if they are at the expense of the things that may lead to peak experiences.

I see the frequency of peak experiences as a barometer for leading a good life, a life in which I feel fully alive and find meaning in who I am. In that sense, my fear of having peaked is much less scary because I know I'm

solely in control of how I spend my time to maximize my own peak experiences.

So I suggest you to take some time tonight or this weekend to think about your own peak experiences and how you spend your time now aligns with those experiences. Maybe you realize you want to spend more time on academics, or more time with friends, or more time painting or writing or hiking or whatever it may be. And I hope that the future that you choose holds plenty of peak experiences.