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Wake up with the sun. Move through a lengthy yoga sequence before meditating for a half hour. Scribble out morning pages by hand: three laborious pages of stream-of-consciousness gibberish. Bundle up for a brisk morning walk. Come home, peel off all my layers, and craft a balanced breakfast and homemade latte.

Finally, *finally*, sit down at my computer to work. Wait — no, I still have to set my intentions for the day. Close laptop. Check the time. 10:30 a.m. Bang head on desk repeatedly.

I’ve always believed in the power of a solid routine. By following the same daily structure, I’ve been able to work away at even the most insurmountable tasks and see real progress take shape in both my personal and professional life.

Plus, having lived in five cities and three countries over the last couple of years, my routines have felt nothing short of essential. Without them, I feel untethered. So when I dove headfirst into full time freelance work over a year ago, I knew I wanted to establish the sort of morning routine that would keep my creativity stoked and my passion for my work alive.

Enter the morning routine to end all morning routines: a laundry list of healthy habits and introspective practices that would surely make my freelance life blossom with creative insight and productivity.

When I first decided to do yoga, meditate, write morning pages, walk, cook a hot breakfast, and set daily intentions before launching into the tasks that actually made up my job, I figured I may have discovered the secret to an ideal work-life balance — a sort of enlightenment I couldn’t wait to achieve.

I could see it so clearly: I’d feel more grounded than ever. I’d float from task to task after my luxurious morning routine, feeling so deeply connected to my inner well of creativity that ideas would pour forth from me with ease. My skin would begin to glow. Tiny cherubs would float around me as I lay down to sleep at the end of a satisfying work day. And then I’d wake up to do it all again, my energy never wavering.

The night before I set out to accomplish this lengthy list of to-do’s for the first time, I gleefully set an alarm for 7 a.m. I envisioned myself waking up with birdsong and the sun, stretching my arms overhead, eyes clear and bright.

Instead, when my phone blared at me the next morning, I awoke with a start. Squinting at my screen to turn off the alarm, all I wanted to do was roll over and go back to sleep. But I couldn’t hit snooze, at least not on the first day of what was going to be my Dream Morning Routine.

I begrudgingly sank down onto my yoga mat to crank out a few sun salutations. My creaky morning joints cracked and popped in protest. I dreamt of leaping back into bed,

or at least making some coffee. As I moved from one pose to the next, ideas for my work kept running through my mind. But I forced them out, feeling guilty for not staying present in the morning routine that was meant to leave me inspired and refreshed.

The rest of the morning proceeded like that. And so did the rest of the week, and the week after that. Each day, I noticed myself sitting down to work later and later. My breakfasts got more complicated. I decided to add some resistance training before my daily walk. I started hitting snooze, because as soon as I woke up I dreaded the thought of sitting for a half hour with my legs crossed followed by writing three pages of my most asinine morning thoughts.

No thank you. I'll just stay here in bed. Morning pages can wait another fifteen minutes, right?

This went on for three months. I spent more time, energy, and focus on my morning routine than any other part of my day. By the time I finally sat down to write for work, I was already sapped of creative energy. I had been up since dawn, and what did I have to show for it? Some chicken scratch filling an old notebook and sore sit bones. But I pushed through, thinking that soon enough, I would feel the benefits of all this inner work that I set aside hours for each day.

At the end of the third month, I landed a big project. It was a rush job for a new client — I would need to pump out a lot of work in a very short amount of time. I was excited to do the job, but nervous, too. So on the first day, I got to work immediately: I woke up, stretched for a few minutes, made some coffee, and jumped straight in.

After chipping away at the project for a few hours, I had made some major headway. The words had flowed easily. I felt energized and inspired. I stopped to check the time. 10:45 a.m. I did a double take. I had already finished a third of the project by the time I would normally be sitting down to start work.

That's when the irony of the situation hit me, and I wasn't sure if I felt closer to crying or laughing. Forcing myself to check off a 3-4 hour to-do list every day before I could even think about my work had robbed me of the time, energy, and mental space I needed in order to do my best creative work.

From there, I completely slashed my morning routine for a few weeks. I simply got up when my alarm went off, stretched a bit, and made a quick breakfast before sitting down in front of my computer with a cup of coffee.

I watched my creativity and my productivity skyrocket. Ideas came to me quickly and easily. I had more time to pitch the kind of work I really wanted to be doing, and the energy to turn out my very best work for clients.

I was no longer funneling all my brain power into a bunch of activities that were meant to prepare me for the day, and instead just getting straight to what I needed (and wanted) to be doing: writing.

It's been over a year now since I realized how detrimental my morning routine was for my creative process. After a few weeks of the most minimal morning routine I'd ever had, I did start to feel a bit ungrounded — like my life revolved around pumping out client work and checking off essential tasks.

These days, I've found a harmonious balance between the "dream" morning routine that left me drained and the minimalist routine that made me feel burnt out.

I've brought back the morning pages because I do love the catharsis that comes from

dumping all my thoughts somewhere. But I no longer write them by hand, and I no longer force myself to write three pages — I just open a blank document on my computer and let the words pour out until I feel like I'm finished. I usually do a little yoga before I sit down at my desk chair, but I keep it short, slipping in a 2-3 minute meditation at the end. I make a quick breakfast, but I always cook something hearty enough to stay fueled.

And most mornings, I'm poised at my laptop, digging into my work for the day between 8:30 and 9 a.m.

I had to listen to my gut rather than a long list of self-imposed "shoulds" to figure out what to keep and what to get rid of. I kept the non-negotiables: the things that truly made me feel grounded and connected to myself. But I shortened them all greatly.

I thought my dream morning routine was the key to being a creative person and successful writer. I thought that because I could now construct my days however I wanted, there was no reason I shouldn't indulge in all the habits that normally connect me to my creativity first thing in the morning.

In reality, all it did was make me feel constantly behind. Like every day was getting away from me. Like I had to complete this list of to-do's before anything else, even while I tried to hold myself back from drafting the first lines of an article in my head during meditation, or scratch down a reminder to myself to email that one client before I took my morning walk.

With the balanced morning routine I have now, I still feel like I get to connect to that intentional part of myself that loves to start each day slowly and purposefully. And even moreso, I'm not rigid about it. If I'm feeling inspired and want to jump right into work without doing my morning pages, I do. If I'm feeling antsy and can't bear the idea of slowly moving through a yoga sequence, I dance around my kitchen while I make breakfast instead.

I no longer feel beholden to a daily checklist that only gets in the way of my creativity and productivity. Instead, I listen to what my body and brain need each day, and I honor that instead of some arbitrary routine I've forced upon myself.

It's not perfect, but I have to admit: I feel much closer to being surrounded by cherubs and birdsong every day — and much more connected to my creativity.



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