

Kicking the proverbial bucket list

Pete & Shelley Aarssen - November 2025

Many of us often muse at what will comprise our 'bucket list' in life or in our retirement years.

The bucket list has been popularized by many Hollywood movies along this theme i.e. someone has been diagnosed with a terminal disease and before they approach the more debilitating part of their illness, they want to complete a list of lifelong dreams.

This idea is not always pursued as a response to a terminal illness; some retirees compose one of these lists as a goal to be explored over a certain period.

That is all well and good but recently we happened upon an article written from an entirely different perspective by a Harvard happiness researcher that made us stop and think about what a reverse bucket list might look like.

He reflected on how we all suppose that a winning formula for life is something like: "desire + ambition + goalsetting + doing what it takes = a successful, happy life."

But Harvard University researcher Arthur C. Brooks learned from his own experience and his research, that happiness doesn't follow that formula. He says: "It took me too long to figure this one out." He cites his research and then concludes that a "reverse bucket list" is the key to living a happier life.

This is a very short column so we can't detail everything that he said here but we think that he makes a lot of sense. The Cole's notes of it are that once we complete and check off our items listed on a given bucket list, one composed for the next decade of time or for during retirement etc., we can be less happy afterwards than we were before.

A snippet of what he concluded is, "I was making the mistake of thinking that my satisfaction would come from having more. And the truth of the matter is that lasting and stable satisfaction, which doesn't wear off in a minute, comes when you understand that your satisfaction is your *haves* divided by your *wants*. You can increase your satisfaction temporarily and inefficiently by having more, or permanently and securely by wanting less." He says that we need a "reverse bucket list" to help us detach from our worldly wants and desires by simply writing them down and crossing them off. It's kind of the same approach but not having to complete the listed activity, letting it occur if it does, or if it does not. He says, "I know that these things are going to occur to me as natural goals." He adds, "But I do not want to be owned by them. I want to manage them."

Here is one of his more scientific deductions; moving those desires from the instinctual limbic system to the conscious pre-frontal cortex by examining each one and saying, "Maybe I get it, maybe I don't," but crossing them off as attachments. "And I'm free...it works," he said.

Let's be clear, it is not wrong to imagine achieving things, he simply recommends not being owned by them so to cross them out right after listing them, it sounds to us like tricking our brains a bit but for a good reason. The challenge of having attachments to things is spoken to in many spiritual traditions but he suggests that humans need healthy attachments, such as an attachment to staying alive and attachments to our loved ones. He adds,

"But many things to which we are attached are not necessarily healthy, either by degree (over-attachment) or by nature (being attached to things that are impermanent)."

At Thanksgiving this gave us pause, in a good way, to be grateful for all that we have, people in our lives and some actual achievements. While we are still eager to learn and experience more, our approach to making a bucket list has dramatically changed! He says that we should strive to detach ourselves from our wants and desires because the simplest way to solve the '*haves/wants* = happiness' formula is to reduce the denominator. The reverse bucket list, in which you cross off desires before you fulfill them. It may be a counter-cultural suggestion, but it can help free us from attachments and lead us to a happier overall life.