Finding My Way Back to Harmony and Flow

Annotated Bibliography and Further Reading

Finding My Way Back to Harmony and Flow begins with a personal question: if the qualities we admire in others reveal something about our own ideals, what happens when the way we are living gradually moves away from those ideals?

The essay draws together several areas of psychological research—including self-concordance, values clarification, authenticity, psychological flexibility, goal conflict, self-determination, and habit formation—with philosophical and wisdom traditions concerned with character, flourishing, inner order, non-forcing, and the relationship between values and action.

No single body of research validates the complete "harmony and flow" framework. The research below supports particular psychological processes that inform the reflection.

Sheldon, K. M., & Elliot, A. J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: The self-concordance model. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76(3), 482–497. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.76.3.482

What the researchers studied: Sheldon and Elliot developed the self-concordance model to examine what happens when the goals people pursue are consistent with their developing interests and core values.

What they found: Across three longitudinal data sets, people pursuing more self-concordant goals tended to put greater sustained effort into them and were more likely to attain them. When self-concordant goals were attained, the gains in well-being were greater, in part because the pursuit of those goals supported experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Why it relates to the essay: This research provides one of the strongest scientific foundations for the question, *Does the way I am living reflect what actually matters to me?* Harmony, in this sense, is not simply emotional calm. It can involve greater consistency between our values, our goals, and the way we pursue them.

A caution in interpreting it: Self-concordance does not mean that every value-consistent goal is easy, successful, or emotionally pleasant. Nor does the research suggest that people can eliminate external pressures or conflicting responsibilities simply by identifying their values.

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Napier, A. D., & Mangat, A. (2026). The well-being and ill-being impacts of values clarification: A systematic review of randomised controlled trials. The Journal of Positive Psychology. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2026.2714053

What the researchers studied: This systematic review examined randomized controlled studies in which participants identified important values and reflected on why those values mattered or how they might guide behavior.

What they found: Across 50 studies involving 12,634 participants, values-clarification activities showed evidence of positive effects on several aspects of well-being. Positive affect, meaning, relatedness, and valued living showed some of the more consistent benefits. Importantly, studies that went beyond identifying values and encouraged participants to **act on those values or set value-concordant goals** showed more consistent benefits. Most studies were rated low to moderate in methodological quality.

Why it relates to the essay: The retreat exercise that began the essay—identifying admired people, recognizing the qualities they represent, and considering one's own ideals—is essentially a form of values clarification. The findings also support the essay's movement from asking *What do I value?* to the more demanding question *Can anyone see those values in the way I live an ordinary day?*

A caution in interpreting it: Values clarification is not a cure for anxiety, depression, or life difficulty. The review found less consistent improvement in those outcomes than in meaning, positive affect, relatedness, and valued living.

Sutton, A. (2020). Living the good life: A meta-analysis of authenticity, well-being and engagement. Personality and Individual Differences, 153*, 109645. DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2019.109645*

What the researcher studied: This meta-analysis examined 75 studies involving more than 36,000 participants to investigate relationships between authenticity, well-being, and engagement.

What was found: Authenticity was positively associated with well-being and with engagement. The relationship between authenticity and well-being was moderately strong. Cultural context and the way authenticity was measured affected the findings.

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Why it relates to the essay: One of the qualities identified in the retreat exercise was authenticity—knowing something about who we are and attempting to live in ways that reflect it. The research supports the broader idea that greater congruence between one's experienced self and one's way of living is associated with better well-being.

A caution in interpreting it: Much of the authenticity literature reflects Western and relatively individualistic ideas about the self. Authenticity does not necessarily mean expressing every feeling, resisting compromise, or prioritizing the individual over relationships or community.

Ong, C. W., Barthel, A. L., & Hofmann, S. G. (2024). The relationship between psychological inflexibility and well-being in adults: A meta-analysis of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire. Behavior Therapy, 55*(1), 26–41. DOI: 10.1016/j.beth.2023.05.007*

What the researchers studied: This meta-analysis examined the relationship between psychological inflexibility and well-being. Psychological inflexibility involves becoming so rigidly governed by thoughts, emotions, avoidance, or internal rules that valued action becomes more difficult.

What they found: Across the studies reviewed, greater psychological inflexibility was associated with poorer well-being, with a meta-correlation of approximately −.47.

Why it relates to the essay: The essay distinguishes standing firmly in one's values from insisting that only one particular outcome or strategy is acceptable. Psychological flexibility provides a scientific parallel: values may remain important while behavior stays responsive to changing circumstances.

A caution in interpreting it: Much of the available evidence was cross-sectional, so the relationship does not prove that inflexibility causes poorer well-being in every case. The measures used in this literature also have known conceptual limitations.

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Gray, J. S., Ozer, D. J., & Rosenthal, R. (2017). Goal conflict and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis. Journal of Research in Personality, 66*, 27–37. DOI: 10.1016/j.jrp.2016.12.003*

What the researchers studied: This meta-analysis examined 54 independent samples involving more than 12,000 participants to investigate relationships between conflict among personal goals and psychological well-being.

What they found: Greater goal conflict was associated with poorer psychological well-being and greater psychological distress. The association was stronger for negative or distress-related outcomes than for positive well-being outcomes.

Why it relates to the essay: Inner disharmony sometimes occurs because several valued goals are competing at once: peace and justice, belonging and independence, rest and responsibility, kindness and self-protection. The research helps explain why unresolved conflict among important goals can feel psychologically exhausting.

A caution in interpreting it: Goal conflict is not inherently evidence that something is wrong. Mature decisions often involve legitimate values that cannot all be maximized simultaneously. The important task may be integration, prioritization, or accepting unavoidable tradeoffs rather than eliminating conflict altogether.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55*(1), 68–78. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68*

What the authors examined: Ryan and Deci summarized research underlying self-determination theory, particularly the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in motivation and well-being.

What the research suggests: People tend to function more effectively when they experience some meaningful sense of choice and self-direction, feel capable of acting effectively, and remain connected to others. Environments that chronically frustrate these needs can undermine motivation and well-being.

Why it relates to the essay: Harmony and flow are not exclusively internal states. Our environments matter. Life tends to feel different when we can act in ways that feel self-

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endorsed, competent, and connected rather than pressured, powerless, or perpetually adversarial.

A caution in interpreting it: Autonomy does not mean independence from other people or freedom from responsibility. In self-determination theory it refers more specifically to experiencing one's behavior as meaningfully self-endorsed.

Lally, P., van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. European Journal of Social Psychology, *40(6), 998–1009. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.674*

What the researchers studied: Participants selected a simple health-related behavior and repeated it in a consistent context over 12 weeks while researchers tracked the development of automaticity.

What they found: Repeated behavior became increasingly automatic over time, although the rate varied enormously among individuals. Missing a single opportunity did not materially derail the habit-formation process.

Why it relates to the essay: William James's insight that repeated responses create familiar pathways has strong parallels in modern habit science. If defensiveness, urgency, or overcontrol have become practiced responses, new responses—pausing, asking a question, tolerating uncertainty, or allowing a different path—also require repetition.

A caution in interpreting it: The study examined relatively simple behaviors such as eating, drinking, and physical activity. Complex interpersonal and emotional patterns cannot be reduced to the same process. The research supports repetition and automaticity, not the claim that changing deeply rooted emotional habits is simple.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations

Plato. (1992). Republic *(G. M. A. Grube, Trans.; C. D. C. Reeve, Rev., 2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing. Original work written in antiquity.*

Why it matters here: In *The Republic*, particularly Book IV, Plato develops an analogy between justice in the city and order within the individual. Justice becomes not merely compliance

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with external rules but an internally ordered condition in which different parts of the person stand in an appropriate relationship to one another. Contemporary scholarship describes this as an account of justice as order and harmony within the soul.

Connection to the essay: The essay uses this idea not as a modern psychological theory but as a philosophical lens for considering inner conflict: peace competing with vigilance, kindness with the desire to win, or acceptance with the need to control.

A caution: Plato's psychology and political philosophy arose in a very different historical and cultural world. The essay borrows the idea of inner order and harmony without endorsing the entire Platonic system.

Aristotle. (1999). Nicomachean Ethics *(T. Irwin, Trans., 2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing.*

Why it matters here: Aristotle's ethics centers on *eudaimonia*—living or flourishing well—and on the development of character through repeated practice. Practical wisdom is not merely knowing abstract rules; it includes learning how to act appropriately in particular circumstances.

Connection to the essay: This provides the philosophical foundation for the statement that harmony must eventually reach "Tuesday afternoon." Values become character partly through practice in ordinary circumstances.

A caution: Aristotle's conception of flourishing is philosophical rather than an experimentally validated psychological construct. Modern psychological uses of "eudaimonic well-being" overlap with, but are not identical to, Aristotle's meaning.

James, W. (1890). The principles of psychology *(Vol. 1). Henry Holt. Chapter IV: Habit.*

What James argued: James treated habit as central to human life and emphasized that repeated behavior makes particular responses progressively easier and more available.

Connection to the essay: The image of mental and behavioral "grooves" comes directly from this tradition. A person who repeatedly meets uncertainty with vigilance or disagreement with immediate defense becomes practiced in those responses. Different habits can likewise be cultivated.

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A caution: James was writing before modern experimental psychology and neuroscience developed contemporary methods for studying habit. His work is historically foundational rather than a substitute for current empirical research.

Franklin, B. (1791/various modern editions). The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.

What Franklin described: Franklin devised a deliberate system for cultivating thirteen virtues, concentrating particular attention on one virtue at a time and examining his behavior daily.

Connection to the essay: His method illustrates the movement from abstract ideals to observable behavior. The essay deliberately softens Franklin's scorekeeping approach: rather than recording moral failures, the proposed daily reflection becomes a compass—*When did I feel like myself? When did I begin forcing? What might alignment look like tomorrow?*

A caution: Franklin's method was a personal moral-development system, not a psychological intervention tested in controlled trials.

Slingerland, E. (2003). Effortless action: Wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China. *Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780195138993.001.0001*

What the author examines: Slingerland provides a scholarly analysis of *wu wei*, a major ideal in early Chinese thought. Although literally associated with "non-doing," it is better understood in many contexts as effortless, non-coercive, or unselfconscious action.

Connection to the essay: *Wu wei* offers a philosophical counterpart to "life at ease without everything being easy": action without unnecessary forcing, participation without constant struggle, and responsiveness rather than domination.

A caution: *Wu wei* is richer and more historically complex than a modern stress-management technique. It should not be reduced to "relax and stop trying." Scholarly interpretations emphasize that it does not mean simple inactivity.

Putting the Research Together

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No single study validates *Finding My Way Back to Harmony and Flow* as a psychological model. The essay is an applied synthesis.

Taken together, however, the research supports several of its underlying ideas: people tend to benefit when important goals are self-concordant; authenticity is associated with well-being; identifying values may be useful, particularly when values are translated into action; psychological rigidity is associated with poorer well-being; conflicting goals can contribute to distress; autonomy, competence, and relatedness support healthy motivation; and repeated behavior can become increasingly automatic.

The philosophical sources contribute something different. Plato asks about inner order. Aristotle asks what kind of life we repeatedly practice. James asks how repetition shapes the person we become. Franklin asks how ideals reach daily behavior. Daoist thought asks whether effective action always requires force.

Science does not establish these philosophical or spiritual claims as facts. Philosophy and wisdom traditions do not substitute for empirical evidence. Together, however, they can provide different lenses through which to consider the same practical question:

Am I living in a way that resembles the person I want to be?

One terminology note may also be useful in the bibliography: **"flow" in this essay is not intended as a technical reference to the psychological flow-state construct associated with Csikszentmihalyi.** Here it refers more broadly to responsive, less-forced movement through life.

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