

Introduction: Do you often feel anxious about the following outcomes? Will I get that promotion? Will my project succeed? Do my colleagues, my boss, and that special person I just met like me? If the answers are yes, then this speech should be of interest to you. Tom Tan is going to share with you his similar experiences and what he finds useful to alleviate such anxiety and live a more fulfilling and freer life. With his speech, *Let's Dance Today and Everyday* – help me welcome Tom Tan.

Let's Dance Today and Everyday

(Introduction: connecting with the audience, identifying the common need) At the age of 18 ... (pause) I came to the U.S. alone. During every selective academic/career stages, (use hands to demonstrate the three stages) from going to college at Columbia, to getting accepted at the doctoral program at Wharton, and then having a tenure-track position at SMU, I have often felt (slow down) anxious and stressed. I was worried if I would be admitted. When I graduated college, I told myself, “When I get into Wharton, I’ll be happy.” But then I was still worried if I would get that professor job or succeed to the tenure promotion. I was also miserable for I deeply missed my home and friends. As an outsider, living in a different world and speaking a foreign language I was ultra-sensitive to how the insiders, my colleagues, and my students perceived me. (soft voice) Like all human beings - I want to be accepted. I want to be liked and supported. (normal voice) No matter how much we achieve, we often feel distressed, fearful and restless about the uncertain future and the unpredictable people around us.

(Solution) Today, I would like to share with you some lessons I learned from my teachers, mentors and life throughout my journey. I am not a guru; however, I am hopeful this will be helpful for you.

In most of Buddhist temples, you will see three statues of Buddha: the Buddha of the past, the Buddha of the present, and the Buddha of the future. Normally, the Buddha of the present is the biggest of the three, and sits in the center. This arrangement symbolizes the importance of the present. **The past is the finished version of the present, while the future is the extension/continuation of the present.** (Pause) If we live the present well, we actually live the entire life well, the past, the present, and the future. (Pause)

(Change status quo) Unfortunately, we often fail to live in the present.

(Move to the right side of the stage) First, we keep delaying the right to feel happy to the uncertain future. We tend to focus too much on the uncertain future, and skip the actual present. And yet, it is the present that determines the future. When I was a PhD student, I told myself, “when I find my professor job, I will be happy.” I was wrong! Once I found my job at SMU, I would delay my happiness again by saying, “when I get tenured, I will be truly happy and free.” Wrong again! (Pause) There is no end of delaying happiness. We can always find another excuse for delaying it until some unknown tomorrow. Instead, we should try to be a happy person today.

If you have bought an expensive pair of earrings or a new watch, don't wait till that "special moment" (playful tone). Put them on today, because every day is a special moment!

(Move to the center of the stage to let the audience know I am starting a new subject.) Second, we are sometimes too nostalgic. We tend to feel reluctant to accept the present and wish we would still be able to live in the past. Why? The past is known to us, but we are unfamiliar with the present. When I moved from (exciting tone) New York City to (not too exciting tone) Philadelphia for graduate school, I had a very difficult transition time. I missed the classic campus of Columbia. I missed the Riverside Park where I used to jog, and deeply missed my friends. The challenges of the first year at graduate school exacerbated my stress. I, for the first time in my life, got insomnia! Fortunately, a professor of mine later advised me not to compare my current place with the previous one, but to fully embrace wherever I am. My present place is the best place for me to grow personally and professionally. I have been trying to be like a boat on the water, following the flow. When the fate brought me from Philadelphia to Dallas six years ago, I would happily settle down here to become a Texan (hat gesture)! When the fate turned me to a professor, I would play this role the best I can. When the fate keeps me single, I will have fun by myself. ☺

(Move to the left side of the stage to start another topic) Third, we are blindly too outcome-driven. We are taught, "where there is a will there is a way". Therefore, we feel paranoid if the future outcome does not turn out the way we want it. However, in fact, where there is a will, there is not necessarily always a way. The future outcome is not just dependent on ourselves. During my first year as an assistant professor at SMU, I set up my mind on nailing my teaching evaluation. I tried very hard to please my undergraduate students. I paid much attention to *their* reaction in class; I accommodated rescheduling *their* make-up exams, even though someone's grandmother died twice in the semester. In the end, as you can expect, I was not confident, and my first teaching evaluation was lackluster, to put it in a nice way. After that, I realized that there are always people liking us, and people disliking us, regardless how good we are. Even Jesus was persecuted by the Pharisees. Whether or not people like you often depends on how useful you are to them, whether you easily give out As. (Pause) Nevertheless, we still need to do our best, because our effort will contribute to the outcome tomorrow. (Pause) I would turn my anxiety about my teaching evaluation into designing another recap question, finding another relevant case study and news article for discussion, and honing my in-class delivery and organization skills. I stopped focusing on *pleasing* my students, but on having *no regret* on my own effort. I felt self-assured. During my second year of teaching, my evaluation significantly improved. (Pause) After we do our best, we then should not be too fixated with the outcome. There is a Big Boss up there determining it. If you like me, that is great. If you dislike me, that is fine, too, as long as you think this is good.

To summarize, the key to being happy and peaceful is (pause) to fully live in the present. We should not delay our right to feel happy until tomorrow. We should not be too nostalgic, and too outcome-driven. Don't don't don't don't don't. Don't do this. Don't do that. Trust me, half of the

time, I say these don'ts to remind my own self. Don't wait until tomorrow to live in the present. When I am talking with you, you are the apple of my eye. When I am watching a movie, I am not playing with my cell phone. When I am daydreaming, I let my mind thoroughly wander around like a Bohemian. That is such a great feeling! When we wholly live in the present, we will feel this life is so worth celebrating. As Friedlich Nietzsche advised, "*We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.* (repeat)" In this new year, I hope you will join me in dancing today, tomorrow and every day!