

On Philippe Petit
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Last night, I saw a documentary, “Man on Wire,” which recounted the planning and execution in 1974 of a high wire walk by Frenchman Philippe Petit across the space between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. I found the film riveting: I can’t imagine a more audacious, daring, beautiful, and inspiring act. For me, it was a celebration of individual freedom and possibility and the majesty of the human spirit. For years, I have had a picture of Petit on the wire that day on my office wall at the university.

Seeing the new documentary brought to mind my 2005 book *While There’s Time* and something I wrote about Petit in that book.

I was reminded of the book’s message as reflected in its title: that the fundamental reality of our lives is the finiteness of time, and that the fundamental choice of our lives is what we do with the precious and irreplaceable gift of time we have been granted.

Petit was twenty-four when he walked the wire that day and we see him in the documentary as he was then, young and lithe and vital. We also see him as he is now, approaching sixty, an old man, his body diminished by age, his focus not on the future as it was then but rather on reminiscence. Although at least Petit still exists; of course the Twin Towers do not.

The thought below is drawn from my account of Petit in *While There’s Time*.

In the early morning of August 7th, 1974 a twenty-four-year old Frenchman named Philippe Petit was at the top of one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, 1,350 feet—one-quarter mile—above the streets of Manhattan. Earlier that morning, a colleague of Petit’s shot an arrow with a line attached from the North to the South Tower where Petit was, a distance of 145 feet. Petit used the line to haul a thin steel cable of five-eighths of an inch in diameter, about the thickness of two pencils, across the gap between the towers and secured it to a steel beam. At 7:15 a.m., Petit wrote his

name and the date on the beam, changed into black pants and leather slippers he had stitched himself (he had planned on wearing a black sweater but accidentally dropped it the 110 stories to the street below)—and then stepped out onto the wire.

Word spread rapidly. “An unbelievable story has just arrived—I don’t believe it,” one broadcaster said. “Report of a man walking across the World Trade Center building on a tightrope!”

Petit stayed on the wire for nearly an hour. He glided back and forth. He lay on the wire. He knelt, bowed, danced, and ran. He sat down and watched a seagull fly beneath him.

Petit describes his performance that August day: “I continued to do the best and the most beautiful things I knew. I did the exercises in the order I had prepared them during my practice sessions. I added what a man of the wire possesses: the expansiveness of movement, the steadiness of eye, the feeling of victory, the humor of gestures. I climbed down from the wire covered with sweat, unable to remember having once taken a breath.” This wasn’t a daredevil act, Petit declared, but rather “poetry and art.” “And it makes me happy up in the sky.”

Petit has describes how to walk the wire:

There is the walk that glides, like that of a bullfighter who slowly approaches his adversary, the presence of danger growing with each new step, his body arched outrageously, hypnotized. There is the unbroken, continuous walk, without the least concern for balance . . . as if you were looking for your thoughts in the sky; this is the solid walk of a man of the earth returning home, a tool over his shoulder, satisfied with his day’s work. These walks happen to be mine. Discover your own. Work on them until they are perfect.

“The wire walker of great heights is a dreamer,” says Petit. “He stretches out on his cable and contemplates the sky. There he gathers his strength, recovers the serenity he may have lost, regains his courage and his faith.”

Petit counsels doing only those moves on the wire that “transfigure you.” “I triumph by seeking out the most subtle difficulties.”

Says Petit: “Limit, traps, impossibilities are indispensable to me. Every day I go looking for them.”

“Persist,” Petit advises, in order to “feel the pride of conquering.” Because for the victor “a red velvet wire will be unrolled for him and he will move along it brandishing his coat of arms.”

See Petit’s book that describes his Twin Towers walk: Philippe Petit, *To Reach the Clouds: My High Walk Between the Twin Towers* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).