

# Detach the grim-o-meter

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I'm betting that the last three posts have given many readers an incorrect impression about my demeanor. It's easy to read those posts and conclude that I must be a grim, brooding character who goes around with his jaw set all day long.

Which is understandable, but silly. You don't need to carry a grim demeanor to draw strength from seeing the dark world. It's quite possible to deeply want the world to be different than it is, and tap into a deep well of cold resolve, and still also be curious, playful, and relaxed in turn.

This isn't a story, and we don't need to pretend to archetypes.

I've met many who are under the impression that when you realize the world is in deep trouble, you're obligated to respond by feeling more and more grim. Like a movie about a detective that's trying to save a kidnapped child: as the detective learns that the child is in more and more danger, they lock their jaw and become more and more grim and determined. Their respite comes only when the child is rescued.

That's narrative thinking, and we aren't in a narrative. You can break the trope. (In fact, I *encourage* you to break tropes

as soon as you realize that you're acting them out.)

Many people seem to have this internal grim-o-meter which measures how grim the state of the world is, and they dutifully try to keep this calibrated. When they hear that they might be failing a class, they get a bit more grim, and this helps them buckle down. When they hear that there was an earthquake in Nepal, they get a little more grim, and they maybe even feel guilty if they can't feel appropriately grim for appropriately long.

I say, it's good to have a grim-o-meter, but *stop calibrating it against the state of the world*. That's a terrible plan!

I mean, look at humanity at large. People are killing each other like it's going out of style, while millions die from disease each year and civilization careens towards self-destruction.

Now look at your grim-o-meter. It has, like, seven different settings. Maybe twelve, on a good day.

That detective in the movie about the kidnapped child might be able to faithfully use a twelve-setting grim-o-meter to track the grimness of their own situation.

But the real world? The one with billions of people each with rich inner lives, and astronomical future potential hanging by a pale blue thread in Time? There's no way you can justifiably connect a twelve-setting grim-o-meter to *that*.

And what if you could? Would your grim-o-meter always be set to "maximum grimness," at least until humanity makes it through the gauntlet? That doesn't sound very fun or useful. Would you rather calibrate the grim-o-meter so that it adequately captures the normal range of variance in the human condition over your lifetime? Because then your grimness is likely to fluctuate wildly in response to events that have little relevance to your daily life (such as aggregate demand shocks in China). That *also* doesn't sound very fun or useful.

Look: that's not what your grim-o-meter is *for*. It's not supposed to be attached to the global state of the world. Feeling grim or carefree in proportion to the aggregate disparity or well-being on the planet is difficult, impractical, *and* mostly useless.

Your grim-o-meter is designed for *local* occasions. You need to get more grim (and more buckled down) as the work *immediately in front of you* gets harder, and you need to get less grim (so that you can spend time recharging and relaxing) whenever you have the affordance to recharge and relax. That's the *point* of the grimness setting.

Remember, the grim-o-meter was made for you, not you for it. What's the point of grimness? The point is to be able to buckle down when down needs buckling. And buckling down is something you need to do occasionally, if you want to get things done. But so is being curious, and being playful, and being calm. You're still a monkey, remember?

The world is dark and gritty, but that doesn't mean that you need to be dark and gritty to match. This isn't a book, and you can adopt whatever demeanor you need to adopt to get the job done.

You can look at the bad things in this world, and let cold resolve fill you — and then go on a picnic, and have a very pleasant afternoon. That would be a little weird, but you could do it! The resolve is a useful source of motivation, but you don't need to adopt a permanently grim demeanor in order to wield it. In fact, personal effectiveness is all about having the right demeanor at the right time.

I suggest a mix of playfulness, curiosity, relaxation, calm, and yes, grim determination.

I also personally recommend a healthy dose of dark humor. Everybody's dying, after all.