Desperation

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The next three posts will discuss what I dub the three dubious virtues: desperation, recklessness, and defiance. I call them dubious, because each can easily turn into a vice if used incorrectly or excessively. As you read these posts, keep in mind the law of equal and opposite advice. Though these virtues are dubious, I have found each of them to be a crucial component of a strong and healthy intrinsic motivation system.

The first of the three dubious virtues is *desperation*. There are bad ways to be desperate: visible desperation towards *people* can put you in a bad social position, strain your relationships, or otherwise harm you. Desperation towards a *goal*, on the other hand, is vital for a guilt-free intrinsic drive.

By "desperation towards a goal" I mean the possession of a goal so important to you that you can commit yourself to it fully, without hesitation, without some part of you wondering whether it's really worth all your effort. I mean a goal that you pursue with both reckless abandon and cautious deliberation in fair portions. I mean a goal so important that it does not occur to you to spare time wondering whether you can achieve it, but only whether *this* path to achieving it is better or worse than *that* path.

In my experience, the really powerful intrinsic motivations require that you're able to struggle as if something of incredible value is on the line. That's much easier if, on a gut level, you <u>believe that's true</u>.

Desperate people have a power that others lack: they have the *ability to go all out,* to put all their effort towards a task without reservation. Most people I have met don't have the ability to go all out for *anything,* not even in their imagination.

Ask yourself: is there anything *you* would go all out for? Is there anything some antagonist could put in danger, such that you would pull out all your stops? Is there any threat so dire that you would hold nothing back, in your struggle to make things right?

I have met many people who cannot honestly answer "yes" to this question, not even under imaginary circumstances. If I ask them to imagine their family being kidnapped, they say they would call the police and wait anxiously. If I ask them to imagine the world threatened by an asteroid, they say they would do their best to enjoy their remaining time. These are fine and prudent answers. Yet, even if I ask them to imagine strange scenarios where they and they alone can save the Earth at great personal cost, they often say they would do it only grudgingly.

For example, imagine that aliens that want to toy with *you in particular* have put a black hole on a collision course with Earth. Imagine that the only way to redirect it is using alien tech on an alien space ship that has been left on Earth and which can be piloted only by you and you alone — and that, to destroy the black hole, you must cross the event horizon, never to return. Would you save the world then? And if so, would you do it only grudgingly?

Would you do it if the spacecraft was sequestered atop Mt. Everest? How hard would you struggle to get to the ship, if it was at the bottom of the ocean? What if it could only be operated if you spoke fluent Mandarin, and you only had one year to learn?

Would you go all out to save the world, or would you put in a token "best effort", a token "at least I tried", and then go back to enjoying your remaining time?

And if you can't go all out even in incredible imaginary scenarios where everything depends on you, *what are you holding out for?*

A common protest here goes "I don't want to lose my friendships, my close connections, my comfort. That is too high a price to pay. If the struggle would be too brutal, then I would prefer to enjoy my remaining time instead." But if that were the case, then why couldn't someone get you to go all out by putting your friendships, connections, and comfort on the

line? Would you fight with everything you have for *those*? And if not, *what are you holding out for?*

Why are you stopping yourself from putting in a full effort, if there is no situation even in principle which could compel you to pull out all the stops? Why are you holding part of yourself back, if there is nothing *even in imagination* for which you would unbar all the holds? If there is nothing anyone could put on the line such that you'd struggle with all of your being, then *what are you holding out for?*

I'm not saying you need to be willing to go all out for something *real.* It may be that the only scenarios where you'd really struggle for all you're worth are fanciful or ridiculous. I'm saying that you need to be able to go all out in principle.

There's a certain type of vulnerability that comes with committing your whole self to something. Our culture has strong social stigmas against people who *really unabashedly care* about something.

I remember a classmate in gradeschool who *really really cared* about Pokemon, to the point that others felt embarrassed just to associate with him. The stereotypical stigma against "nerds" seems rooted at least partially in a stigma against caring too much. Derision among the intellectual

elites towards people who get really interested in sports seems to draw at least partially on the same stigma.

Notice the negative connotations attached to words like "cultist", "zealot", and "idealist". Notice all the people who distance themselves from whatever social movement they're in; those people who loosely identify as "effective altruists" or "rationalist" or "skeptics" or "atheists" but feel a deep compulsion to make sure you know that they think the *other* EAs/rationalists/skeptics/atheists are naive, Doing It Wrong, and blinded by their lack of nuanced views. I think that this is, in part, an attempt to defend against the curse of Caring Too Much.

Caring hard is uncool. The stereotypical intellectual is a detached moral non-realist who understands that nothing really matters, and looks upon all those "caring" folk with cynical bemusement.

Caring hard is vulnerable. If you care hard about something, then it becomes possible to lose something very important to you. Worse, everyone around you might think that you're putting your caring into the *wrong* thing, and see you as one of the naive blind idealist sheeple, and curl their lips at you.

Desperation is about *none of that mattering*. It's about having a goal so important that the social concerns drop away, except exactly insofar as they're relevant to the achievement of your goal. It's about being willing to let yourself care more about the task at hand than about what everyone

thinks about you, no matter how much they would deride you for fully committing.

A common barrier to desperation is that it can be difficult to admit that you really, really care about something, because then that means you are vulnerable to the loss of something that's very, very important to you. If your desperation is visible in a hostile social environment, desperation can destroy your ability to bargain and put you at a social disadvantage. Being social creatures, I suspect that many of us have mental architectures that prevent us from feeling desperation, because if we felt it, we'd show it, and that would undermine our social standing. (In my experience, confidence all the way up helps alleviate this effect.)

Thus, if you want to make desperation part of your intrinsic drive, you may need to practice becoming able to admit, to yourself, on a gut level, that you might lose something so terribly important that it's worth gaining a little desperation. You must first *allow yourself to become desperate.* (This is why I wrote about seeing the dark world and coming to your terms before writing about desperation.)

There is a common failure mode among those who succeed at becoming desperate, which is that they burn their resources too quickly, in their desperation. If you have to get yourself into an alien spacecraft at the bottom of the ocean,

and it's going to take many months of training, social and political maneuvering, and monotonous searching, then you would be unwise to spend your first week all wound up at maximum stress levels simply because you think that that's what it means to "go all out" and "hold nothing back." If you're going to pull out all the stops and unbar all the holds, you need to understand how to carry on a slow burn as well as a fast burn. (This is why I wrote about how to avoid working yourself ragged and rest in motion before writing about desperation.)

With these tools in hand, I suggest finding a way to *become able to become desperate.* Perform whatever thought experiments and meditations you have to to be able to *imagine a situation* where you would do everything in your power to achieve some outcome, without regard for the consequences (beyond their affect on the outcome). Figure out the circumstances under which you'd pull out all the stops and unbar all the holds and put *everything you have* into the struggle.

(If there is no situation, even in theory, where you would give everything you have into your efforts, then consider that there may be a part of yourself that you're holding back for nothing, a part of yourself that you're wasting.)

I'm not saying you need to become desperate *now*. That may be unnecessary. Maybe your life is going well enough, and your goals are well enough achieved, that the best way to continue achieving them is to strengthen your friendships and your connections and enjoy your comforts. If your fami-

ly *is* kidnapped, you probably *would* do best to call the police and then wait anxiously. If Earth *is* threatened by an asteroid, most people *would* do best to leave it to the experts and enjoy what time they have. So be it not upon me to force desperation upon you if you're leading a comfortable life. Make sure you don't suffer from <u>the listless guilt</u>, and make sure you can in principle *become* desperate, so as to ensure that you're not holding a part of yourself back for nothing, but save the actual desperation for times of need.

If, on the other hand, you are in a time of need, if you're the sort who sees every death as a tragedy, if you're otherwise <u>fighting for something larger than yourself</u>, then *get desperate now.*

The first step is allowing yourself to become desperate in principle. It's allowing there to be at least one imaginary scenario where you'd let yourself commit fully to a task without hesitation. Once you are able to do this, imagine the feeling that would come over you when you first committed yourself to that crucial undertaking, come whatever may. Is there a sense of desperation you would feel, a grasping need to *change the future?* Sit with it, become familiar with the sensation of desperation and any other feelings associated with the imaginary commitment.

Once you've gained some familiarity with those feelings, look with fresh eyes at what you're fighting for, at what you have to protect, at what you value, and see if any of it is worthy of a little desperation.