

Working yourself ragged is not a virtue

21 JUNE 2015

Let's get back to the "replacing guilt" series. Here's a quick recap of what we've covered so far:

Part 1 was about replacing the listless guilt: if someone feels vaguely guilty for not really doing anything with their life, then the best advice I can give is to start doing something. Find something to fight for. Find a way that the world is not right, and decide to change it. Once the guilt is about failing at a *specific* task, then we can start addressing it.

Part 2 was about refusing to treat your moral impulses as obligations. Be wary of the word should, which tries to force an obligation upon you. I recommend refusing to do anything just because you "should": Insofar as that sets you free, the obligations were false ones. Insofar as that sparks fear that something important won't get completed, seek out the cause of the worry, and complete the task because you want to see it done, rather than because you "should."

However, having something to change in the world and being free of false obligations is not anywhere near enough to replace guilt motivation. In fact, I think that most guilt in most people comes from a different source: it comes from people honestly deciding that X is what they want to do and then finding themselves *not doing X anyway.*

Maybe they *know* that watching another episode of a TV show will cause them to stay up too late and be tired at class tomorrow, and they *know* that their classes are very expensive and that their parents would be very disappointed, and they decide that the best thing to do would be to stop binge-watching the TV show and get some sleep — and then they find themselves watching the next episode anyway.

This sort of guilt is one of the most demoralizing, and therefore it's perhaps one of the most damaging types of guilt. Addressing it is going to require quite a few different tools. Today, I'll describe one of them.

(If you haven't read [half-assing it with everything you've got](#), recommend doing so now: I wrote it as a direct predecessor to this idea, before realizing that I actually needed the previous seven or so posts first.)

Here's a failure mode that I used to see all the time, back when I was a professional programmer: A co-worker of mine would be working on a project that was *almost* under control. It would be a Friday afternoon, with an important deadline coming up in a few weeks, and everything would be almost passable but slightly behind schedule. Some dire bugs demanded fixes, some poor decisions required refactoring. Inevitably, my co-worker would conclude that if they just worked really hard *this* Friday, then they could finish

the big refactor, and once that was done, *next* week they could get all the bugs under control, and then by the beginning of the week after that, everything would be back on track again.

(We all know how this story goes.)

Inevitably, co-workers of this type were constantly stressed, and reliably worked late into the night.

I suspect that most people who act like this are guilt-motivated. They're often the sort of person who feels guilty if they stop working before they're completely exhausted. Sometimes, they feel guilty for stopping even when they *are* exhausted, if there is still more work to be done. It's as if part of them believes that if they stop before they're physically forced to drop, and there's still work to be done, then they're being Bad.

This sort of behavior can stem from a number of mistakes. First and foremost, it seems to me that this sort of programmer is usually pursuing a lost purpose. They have succumbed to tryer propaganda; they have confused the quality line for the preference curve. I sometimes want to grab them by the shoulders late on a weekend, look them in the eyes, and ask them what they're fighting for — surely not this? You're allowed to fight for something!

But I also see this failure mode in people who love their work, who believe in its importance. And yet, they still work

themselves to exhaustion in a binge/recovery cycle, as if this were the best way to cause their project to succeed.

These people seem to be following an impulse to work as hard as possible whenever they can, perhaps due to a belief that it is unvirtuous for one to stop working when they could continue.

This is an error. **The goal is not to maximize how much work you get done today. The goal is to maximize your productivity over time.**

People who feel guilty for stopping work when they could continue seem to be trying to maximize their local velocity: they feel a need to produce as much as they can, right now, on pain of guilt if they fail. But the actual goal is to maximize the total distance traveled, to maximize how much important work you can get done over time.

(When all is said and done, and Nature passes her final judgement, you will not be measured by the number of moments in which you worked as hard as you could. You will be measured by what actually happened, as will we all.)

People driven by guilt and shame often feel bad for *slowing down*. This is about as effective as starting a marathon with a dead sprint, and then feeling bad for slowing down when you can't sustain it.

Working yourself ragged is not a virtue. You don't get extra points for effort. In fact, you *lose* points for effort: effort is costly; spend it only to purchase better outcomes. The goal is not to appear to be working hard, the goal is to improve the world. Sometimes you do need to push yourself to the limit, but before you do, acknowledge the costs and weigh the tradeoffs, while keeping your long-term goals in view.

We're not yet gods. We're still apes. Remember to pay attention to the distance you need to cover, and remember to pay attention to yourself.

Being a human can be frustrating. Human-bodies aren't as productive as we might like them to be, and running a human-body at maximum capacity for too long causes stress, chronic exhaustion, burnout, and psychological damage. With this in mind, doesn't it seem a bit confused for a person to berate themselves for stopping before they've spent all their available reserves?

Let me be clear: I'm *not* saying to restrict yourself to only 40 hour per week of work because it's important to pace yourself. I'm just saying that it's important to pace yourself. Do as much as you can, but don't be constantly taking damage. We aren't yet gods. We're still fragile. If you have something ur-

gent to do, then work as hard as you can — but work as hard as you can *over a long period of time*, not in the *moment*.

I'm also not saying "stop as soon as working feels hard." When exercising, it's important to understand the difference between soreness and strain, between pushing yourself and hurting yourself, and the same is true psychologically. Maintaining focus and productivity for long periods of time is a skill that can be trained, like any other. (More on that later, but spoiler alert, "feeling really guilty when you didn't work as hard as you wanted to" is not the best way to train this skill.)

Push your limits! Some things are worth fighting for! But while you're doing that, recognize that the way to complete a marathon isn't to sprint 42+ kilometers.

There is no shame in doing less than you could do in any given moment. Most guilt-motivated people I meet would do well to worry less about whether they're going fast enough *now*, and worry more about whether the amount of work they're doing day-to-day is ideal in the long term, taking psychological constraints into account. You don't get points for pushing your body and mind as hard as you can, you get *good outcomes* from using your resources as *wisely* as you can. That usually entails stopping well before you drop each day, while steadily improving your capabilities.

Please treat yourself well today; doing so is an important component of long-term productivity.