



Slack and the Sabbath

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Out to Get You

Epistemic Status: Reference.

Expanded From: [Against Facebook](#), as the post originally intended.

Some things are fundamentally Out to Get You.

They seek resources at your expense. Fees are hidden. Extra options are foisted upon you. Things are made intentionally worse, forcing you to pay to make it less worse. Least bad deals require careful search. Experiences are not as advertised. What you want is buried underneath stuff you don't want. Everything is data to sell you something, rather than an opportunity to help you.

When you deal with Out to Get You, you know it in your gut. Your brain cannot relax. You lookout for tricks and traps. Everything is a scheme.

They want you not to notice. To blind you from the truth. [You can feel it when you go to work. When you go to church. When you pay your taxes.](#) It is bad government and bad capitalism. It is many bad relationships, groups and cultures.

When you listen to a political speech, you feel it. Dealing with your wireless or cable company, you feel it. At the car dealership, you feel it. When you deal with that one would-be friend, you feel it. Thinking back on that one ex, you feel it. [It's a trap.](#)

Get Gone, Get Got, Get Compact or Get Ready

There are four responses to Out to Get You.

You can Get Gone. Walk away. Breathe a sigh of relief.

You can Get Got. Give the thing everything it wants. Pay up, relax, enjoy the show.

You can Get Compact. Find a rule limiting what 'everything it wants' means in context. Then Get Got, relax and enjoy the show.

You can Get Ready. Do battle. Get what you want.

When to Get Got

Get Got when the deal is Worth It.

This is a difficult lesson for everyone in *at least* one direction.

I am among those with a natural hatred of *Getting Got*. I needed to learn to relax and enjoy the show when the deal is Worth It. Getting Got imposes a large emotional cost for people like me. I have worked to put this aside when it's time to Get Got, while preserving my instincts as a defense. That's hard.

Others make the mistake of *not* hating Getting Got. They might not even notice. This is bad. If you Get Got without realizing, you'll Get Got often for large amounts. Bad

habits will form. Deals won't be Worth It. Reasonable is insufficient: Out to Get You is engineered to fool. Only accept capital letters Worth It.

When you Get Got, *do it on purpose.*

Never Get Got without saying to yourself "I am Getting Got. It is Worth It."

If you realize you've been unwittingly Got, feel sad. Update. Cost is finite, so you should *sometimes* Get Got unaware. It is still unacceptable.

You can choose to Get Got only if you know what you'll be Got for.

You cannot afford to Get Got if the price is not compact.

You can Get Got by a car salesman, saving time and aggravation. Max loss is the price.

You can Get Got with an unlimited phone plan. Max loss is the price.

You can Get Got by a restaurant, club or cruise ship vacation. Leaving money on the table and relaxing could be Worth It, *if you know your max loss and find it acceptable.*

You can Get Got in a relationship. That's the Price of Admission. That's fine *if you know the price and find it Worth It.*

You can buy a AAA game for \$60 today rather than \$20 next year. Pay \$2,000 a year for Magic: The Gathering. Overpay for concert tickets. Wear a symbolic hat. Go vegan. Believe the Knicks will be good next year. If you want. Your call.

There may be no reasonable max loss. Some things want too much.

A clean example is free to play mobile games. If allowed, they charge tens of thousands of dollars. Players called whales are so addicted they pay. The games destroy them.

The motivating example was [Facebook](#). Facebook wants *your entire life*. Users not consciously limiting engagement lose hours a day. Every spare moment is spent scrolling, checking for updates, likes and comments. This reliably makes users miserable. Other social networks share this problem.

An important example is politics. Political causes want every spare minute and dollar. They want to choose your friends, words and thoughts. If given power, they seize the resources of state and nation for their purposes. Then they take those purposes further. One cannot simply give *any* political movement what it wants. That way lies ruin and madness.

Yes, that means *your* cause, too.

This generalizes into most sufficiently intense signaling and status competition. One must always signal harder or seek higher status. This takes over everything you are and eats your entire life. Part of sending sufficiently intense signals is showing that you have allowed this! [Maya Millennial](#) has fallen victim. Those keeping up with the Joneses fall victim. Many a child looking fitting in or applying to college falls victim.

Obsession with safety does this.

Television eats people's lives. So do video games. So do drugs and alcohol. One must be careful and know your tenancies and limits.

Ethical arguments do this, ensnaring vulnerable people.

This property is a way to distinguish cults from religions. Cults want it all. Religion wants its cut.

You can only pay off those who charge a bounded price and stay bought. Before you pay the ransom, be sure it will free the hostages.

Would going along result in *cooperation*? Or put blood in the water?

When To Get Compact

Get Compact when you find a rule you can follow that makes it Worth It to Get Got.

The rule must create an acceptable max loss. A well-chosen rule transforms Out to Get You for a lot into Out to Get You for a price you find Worth It. You then Get Got.

This works best using a natural point beyond which lies clear diminishing returns. If no such point exists, be suspicious.

A simple way is a *budget*. Spend at most \$25,000 on this car, or \$5,000 on this vacation package. This creates an obvious max dollar loss.

Many budgets should be \$0. Example: free to play games. Either it's worth playing for free or it isn't. It isn't.

The downside of budgets is often spending exactly your maximum, especially if others figure out what it is. Do your best to avoid this. Known bug.

An alternative is *restriction on type*. Go to a restaurant and avoid alcohol, desert and appetizers. Pay in-game only for full game unlocks and storage space.

Budgets can be set for each purchase. Hybrid approaches are good.

Many cap their charitable giving at 10%. Even those giving more reserve some amount for themselves. Same principle.

For other activities, max loss is about *time*. Again, you can use a (time) budget or limit your actions in a way that restricts (time) spent, or combine both.

Time limits are crude but effective. Limiting yourself to an hour of television or social media per day maxes loss at an hour. This risks making you value the activity more. Often time budgets get exactly spent same as dollar budgets. Try to let unspent time roll over into future periods, to avoid fear or 'losing' unspent time.

When time is the limiting factor, it is better where possible to engineer your environment and options to make the activity compact. You'll get more out of the time you do spend and avoid feeling like you're arbitrarily cutting yourself off.

Decide what's worth watching. Watch that.

For Facebook, classify a handful of people See First. See their posts. No others. Look at social media only on computers. Don't comment. Or post.

A buffet creates overeating. Filling up one plate (or one early to explore, then one to exploit) ends better.

Unlimited often requires limitation.

Outside demands follow the pattern. To make explanation and justification easier, choose good enough rules that sound natural, simple and reasonable.

Experiments need a chance, but also a known point where you can know to call it quits. Ask whether you can get a definitive negative result in reasonable time. Will I worry I did it wrong? Will others claim or assume I did it wrong or didn't give it a fair chance?

When to Get Ready

Get Ready when you have no choice.

Getting Ready means battle. An enemy trying to Get You. You are determined not to Get Got. You have done the research. Your eyes are open. You are on alert. You are ready.

You have no choice. The price of surrender is too high. Simple heuristics won't work. You are already in too deep, or they have something you need and all alternatives are worse.

Sometimes you must accept a bad time and try not to let events get to you. Other times going into battle can be fun. I like games. Games are fun! So are puzzles. Buying a car, planning a vacation, trading for your Magic deck or managing one's social media interactions can be a game or puzzle. Get the one trying to get you. Get a lot for a little.

There are big downsides.

The game can be fun. The original activity can be fun. *Both at once* is rarely fun. Both means multi-tasking and context-switching, plus a radical shift in emotion and tone. Relaxing into cooperative experience is not compatible with battles of wits and tricks.

The result of this is that you often end up unable to maintain both states at once. Sometimes you end up relaxing, and Get Got. Other times, you focus on not Getting Got and don't enjoy what you get. Either way, you lose.

The best way out of this is to try and front-load or batch as much of the battle as possible. Sometimes this happens naturally. If you first choose, shop and haggle, then later enjoy the bounty, that's the ideal way to do battle. Do your best to transform into that sequence, or to make enough choices to transform into a Compact situation.

If this is not possible, consciously switch between modes when needed. Think, "time to pause to not get got," deal with the issue, switch back. This minimizes bleeding between states. If getting attempts are too continuous, this becomes possible and you need another mode.

You pay for not Getting Got with time and attention. You master arcane details. Time disappears. You spend parties talking tricks instead of living life. If shower thoughts shift to such places, you are paying a high price.

The biggest downside is *you can lose*.

When To Get Gone

Often.

You need good reason to stick around when things are Out to Get You. It is often wise to Get Gone, if you can.

If your instincts say Get Gone, Get Gone. At worst it is only a small mistake.

If your instincts do not say Get Gone, but you can't find a viable approach to another option, Get Gone anyway.

The getting can be insidious. Constant vigilance is required. Many think they can handle it, check all the right boxes and not get drawn in. Some are right. Often they are wrong.

If Getting Got means you lose an order of magnitude bigger than you can win, Get Gone.

If Getting People is how something survives, Get Gone.

Free trial! Automatically renews. Probably won't want? Don't wait. Get Gone.

You **think** you are getting good odds. You are probably wrong.

You **think** you know all the tricks they will try. You are probably wrong.

You **think** there is something is forcing your hand. Make sure this is something you need rather than a want. The word need is thrown around a lot these days.

Getting Gone is worth making sacrifices. Big sacrifices.

If you cannot Get Gone, do not engage more than necessary. Go into Easy Mode. Get what you must. Then Get Gone.

Play in Easy Mode

Epistemic Status: Love the player, love the game

Also consider: [Playing on Hard Mode](#)

Raymond Arnold asked me, why not play in easy mode?



Easy Mode is easier. The reason to Play in Easy Mode is because it is the best known way to achieve your explicit measurable goal and get to the victory screen.

Strategies that work in Easy Mode won't work in Hard Mode.

The key idea of Easy Mode is to keep your eyes on the prize. You know exactly what you want. You will munchkin your way to getting it. As long as you get a high enough number, or a check in the right box, you have what you want. That number isn't just a proxy for victory. It *is* victory. If you break the spirit of the exercise, nothing is lost. Your values are safe. You are not here to develop skills, because the game ends here.

I

Consider playing guitar in Rock Band. You must choose whether to play in Easy Mode. If you do, you won't fail. You won't need to play the same songs over and over again. You can use tricks that rely on there only being so many notes, or going at a relaxed pace. You get to enjoy playing what you want, enjoying all the modes, advancing your band, right away. You get treated better. You play on medium, your fingers don't hurt, and you smile as you sing along.

II

You have a test in a week. You cram for it. You've asked questions based on your desire to know what will be on the test, to resolve your confusion. You figure out what questions will be asked, what will help you in the exam. You focus on memorizing key facts, phrases and techniques, knowing you can [guess the teacher's password](#). When the test comes, you give back the answers. When you get the test back, you know you have passed and never have to think about that class again. A year later, you have forgotten everything, but you have a degree to build on.

III

You prepare for a tournament. You seek out representative opponents to help you prepare. You look for mistakes you can exploit, and ask what won or lost you each practice match. You ask how you can turn those events in your favor. You don't worry about surprising things unless you expect them to be common. You focus on what wins matches, and don't worry too much about little things that are unlikely to make a big enough difference this week. During the matches, you do everything you can to win, then train against next week.

IV

You start a website writing articles devoted to the things you care about. To monetize it, you sell advertising through Google. It does not pay much at first. You keep at it, posting links where you can and tracking what vectors draw in readers. Some are your friends, others seem less special. You look at what gets you clicks and likes, and craft your posts and topics that way, sculpting articles to maximize page views. Over time you learn the tricks of the trade and periodically go viral. A community knows who you are. You quit your day job to run the site full time, and teach others what you have learned.

V

(Spoilers for [some old movie](#))

You are stuck in a small snowed-in town, caught in a time loop of unknown origin. At first you have fun doing absurd things, but then you buckle down. With unlimited time, you decide to seduce the person you have a crush on. You learn to play them like a piano, to act like a character out of great literature. You listen to, A/B test and remember every reaction, until you learn what will make them fond of you, locating opportunities to get and succeed on a date. At the end of the day, after sufficient iterations*, you know you will be proud of your accomplishments, because you will get to bang the hell out of your crush. If the loop continues*, you can do it again.

* - Results not guaranteed. You are unlikely to be in a movie. Local maxima may or may not be sufficient.

Interlude!



VI

You hire a moving company to help you move. With time and practice, this group of employees has gotten good and reliable. Any time, if someone needs to relocate, they'll all be there, no questions asked. You call yourself, every so often. All your stuff arrives safely at its destination with a minimum of fuss, and you tip generously. You get some well-needed relaxation and peace of mind.

VII

(Minor spoiler for [Lost](#), at least Season 1 recommended)

You have an idea for a television show about a group of strangers who arrive in a mysterious place that plays by very different rules than our reality. You figure out some of the ways this place works, know some of the events that will happen, and lay out mysteries for the characters and viewers to uncover slowly over time. You use flashbacks that parallel events to examine and deepen the characters. Your production values are top notch and you produce great television. Your show is a smash hit, plus you're not sure exactly where you are going with all this, so you let things drag a bit, padding with extra episodes. In the end it doesn't quite fit together, but the journey was still pretty great.

VIII

To fulfill the terms of your late uncle's last will and testament, you are forced to pursue what he knew to be your passion, and to strike out and open a fine Italian restaurant. Your dishes are sublime, but you soon learn that is but a small part of a successful enterprise. You must hire quality staff, arrange logistics across many suppliers, draw in customers and much more. Each step of the way, while ruthlessly keeping costs in check, you answer the question of what customers would need to see in your place to come in,

and expand your menu to offer all the things a diverse group might want. You get to know your customers by type. A casual observer wouldn't notice how your choices of seating and lighting make you more money, or the new cheaper sources for your ingredients; all they know is that the signs tell them the establishment here will let them have a nice evening. Steadily you iterate and attract more people, and get more of them to order the wine. Business is good. You hope you made your uncle proud and talk to an agent about franchising.

IX

You have something to prove.

Hire a cleaning service every so often. It's totally worth it.

Lots of [applause lights](#).

Tell the job interviewer the strengths and weaknesses they want to hear. If they don't hire you, learn and improve your game, and keep looking.

Find people to come to your meetup by offering them a free hat. Or at least, free pizza.

Pirate music, television, movies, software, even when the owners aren't being kind of a dick and would sell it to you.

When you are in power, respect the minority only when you don't have the votes, change the rules to pass the laws you want. Weaken free speech rules and silence those you disagree with, lest they win and do the same to you.

Write whatever you want on the forms. They are useless bureaucratic nonsense. No one is ever going to read them. Now you can forget this and move on to more important things.

Learn your whole speech phonetically.

At your meetup, do not allow challenges to in-group principles, so your group will be viewed better and feel more welcoming to and attract more members of the in-group, by demonstrating loyal membership in the in-group.

Tell other people what to do.

For demo day, you show something cool your system might someday do, when you get around to building one. For that you need funding.

X

Dismayed by terrible things, you devote your life to the promise of artificial intelligence. You discover that contrary to your initial beliefs, not only is creating AI not easy, the problem is super hard! None of your programs work! No one understands the potential. You set out to teach the AI to play games and optimize recommendations, hoping this will let them see the potential benefits, with limited success. You schedule exhibition matches that are silly, but get you exposure. You keep coding. Machine learning accomplishes more things and starts to get more funding. People start to come around to AI being dangerous, but mostly for the wrong reasons, so you know their arguments are bad. You take some precautions, but you don't worry about the world being doomed. You are confident that if they arrive, we can correct for any safety problems later.

XI

You are at a meeting to arrange educational services for your son. You know that the only thing that matters is what is written on the education plan. Whatever is in that document is what will count. You let numerous falsehoods and stupid things pass, because you realize that if you just play nice, they are going to put down on the piece of paper the thing that you want on the piece of paper. They write the words you need on the piece of paper. You sign it. You walk away happy.

In conclusion:



Play in Hard Mode

Epistemic Status: Love the player, love the game

Also consider: [Playing on Easy Mode](#)

Raymond Arnold asked me, why do you insist on playing in hard mode?

Hard mode is harder. The reason to Play in Hard Mode is because it is the only known way to [become stronger](#), and to defend against Goodhart's Law.

Strategies that work in Easy Mode won't work in Hard Mode.

The key idea of Hard Mode is to keep your eyes on the prize. You know exactly what you want. You can't munchkin your way to getting it. Once you start aiming to make a number go up, or get a check in the right box, you have lost sight of the thing you actually want. Proxy measures lead to failure; your [value is fragile](#). That number correlates to what you want, but only insofar as you're aiming for the goal and not the number. If you break the spirit of the exercise, all is lost. Your values have been hijacked. If you fail to develop skills along the way, you have missed the point, because the game has no end.

I

Consider playing guitar in Rock Band. You must choose whether to play in Hard Mode. If you do, you will fail a lot. You will play the same songs over and over again. Tricks that rely on there only being so many notes, or going at a relaxed pace, collapse. Eventually, you learn new techniques. You get better. You play on expert, your fingers get sore and you smile as you sing along.

II

You have a test in a week. You ignore it. You've asked questions based on your curiosity, to resolve your confusion. You study what is interesting to you, and what you feel would help you in the future. You focus on learning key principles, knowing you can derive what details you need later on. When the test comes, you work to figure out the answers. When you get the test back, you know how much you have learned. A year later, you remember everything, and build upon it.

III

You prepare for a tournament. You seek out the toughest opponents to help you prepare. You stop to criticize each other's technique and point out every little mistake, no matter how irrelevant to the ultimate outcome of the practice match. You ask why and how you made that mistake. You do the same when you learn something new in a surprising way. You focus on the fundamentals, and don't worry too much about exactly who you are up against this week. During the matches, you remember every tough decision and every mistake, so you can train again next week.

IV

You start a website writing articles devoted to the things you care about. To monetize it, you sell advertising through Google. It does not pay much at first. You keep at it,

attracting a small but devoted readership. Some were already your friends, others soon join them. You look at what resonates so you can get feedback, but are careful not to take actions designed to maximize page views. Over time your writing improves and you learn much together. A community of sorts arises. You don't quit your day job, but you teach others what you have learned.

V

(Spoilers for the excellent [Groundhog Day](#))

You are stuck in a small snowed-in town, caught in a time loop of unknown origin. At first you have fun doing absurd things, but then you buckle down. With unlimited time, you decide to develop the skills and knowledge to give everyone a perfect day. You learn to play the piano, you read great literature. You listen to and remember the stories of everyone in town, and grow fond of them, learning what your opportunities are to engage in small acts of kindness. At the end of the day, after sufficient iterations*, you know you will be proud of your accomplishments, because you've made yourself and the world better, and you just might impress the hell out of your crush. If the loop continues*, you can do it again.

* - Results not guaranteed. You are unlikely to be in a movie. Local maxima may or may not be sufficient.

Interlude!

VI

Your help your friends move. With time and practice, your group of friends gets quite good and reliable. Any time, day or night, if someone needs to relocate, you'll all be there, no questions asked. You call yourself the Midnight Movers. Most of your stuff arrives safely at its destination with a minimum of fuss, and you order everyone pizza. Your group draws closer together, and eventually tries going into business together on an unrelated matter.

VII

(Medium spoilers for [The Good Place](#), highly recommended, skip this if you haven't seen it yet)

You have an idea for a television show about a group of strangers who arrive in a mysterious place that plays by very different rules than our reality. You figure out exactly how this place works, plot everything meticulously, and lay out mysteries for the characters and viewers to uncover slowly over time. You use flashbacks that parallel events to examine and deepen the characters. Your production values are top notch and you produce great television. Your show is not a smash hit, and you know exactly where you are going with all this, so you don't waste a minute, keeping your seasons short. In the end it all fits together, and the journey was still pretty great on second viewing.

VIII

Despite the terrible odds against you, you decide to strike out and open a fine Italian restaurant. Your dishes are sublime, but you soon learn that is but a small part of a

successful enterprise. You must hire quality staff, arrange logistics across many suppliers, draw in customers and much more. Each step of the way, while ruthlessly keeping costs in check, you answer the question of what you would want your place to be like, and evolve your menu to offer a small selection of the best things you can affordably make. You get to know your customers by name. A casual observer would think you almost dislike money, as you can barely tell from the outside that there is a dining establishment there at all. Slowly word spreads among the cognoscenti, who show up and order the wine. Business is good enough. You get to keep working on perfecting your art.

IX

You have something to prove. To yourself.

Refuse to hire a cleaning service, ever, even though it's totally worth it.

[Minimal applause lights.](#)

Tell the job interviewer your true strengths and weaknesses. If they don't hire you, you didn't want the job. Keep looking.

Find people to come to your meetup by promising them interesting intellectual discussions and a community devoted to truth.

Refuse to pirate music, television, movies, software, even when the owners are being kind of a dick and won't sell it to you.

When you are in power, respect and minority even when you have the votes, don't change the rules to pass the laws you want. Strengthen free speech rules and don't silence those you disagree with, lest they do the same to you.

Write carefully as you fill out the forms. They might look like bureaucratic nonsense, and no one is likely to ever read them, but you should get this straight and cultivate good habits.

Learn to speak the language.

At your meetup, welcome challenges to in-group principles, so your group will be viewed better and feel more welcoming to and attract more members who seek the truth more than they demonstrate membership in the in-group.

Show other people what to do by example.

For demo day, you show what your system can do, and hope that you can keep building it. For that you need funding.

X

Dismayed by terrible things, you devote your life to the promise of artificial general intelligence. You discover that contrary to your initial beliefs, not only is creating AGI not easy, most versions of it kill everyone and destroy all utility in the universe. Explaining this is super hard. None of your explanations work. No one understands the danger. You set out to teach the world rationality, hoping this will cause them to see the potential dangers, with limited success. You write a book that's silly but gets you exposure. You keep writing. Machine learning accomplishes more things and starts to

get more funding. People start to come around to AI being dangerous, but mostly for the wrong reasons, so you don't expect anyone to take the right precautions, and fear the world is doomed. You think that when they arrive, it will be far too late to correct for safety problems later.

XI

You are at a meeting to arrange educational services for your son. You know that the only thing that matters is what is written on the education plan. Whatever is in that document is what will count. Still, you cannot let the numerous falsehoods and stupid things pass, even though you realize that if you just play nice, they are going to put down on the piece of paper the thing that you want on the piece of paper. If you keep arguing, you risk getting nothing. Luckily, you think better of it in time. You go into [easy mode](#). They write the words you need on the piece of paper. You sign it. You walk away happy.

[In conclusion...](#)

Slack

Epistemic Status: Reference post. Strong beliefs strongly held after much thought, but hard to explain well. Intentionally abstract.

Disambiguation: This does not refer to any physical good, app or piece of software.

Further Research (book, recommended but not at all required, take seriously but not literally): [The Book of the Subgenius](#)

Related (from sam[]zdat, recommended but not required, take seriously and also literally, entire very long series also recommended): [The Uruk Machine](#)

Further Reading (book): [Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much](#)

Previously here (not required): [Play in Hard Mode](#), [Play in Easy Mode](#), [Out to Get You](#)

Leads to (I've been scooped! Somewhat...): [Sabbath Hard and Go Home](#)

An illustrative little game: [Carpe Diem: The Problem of Scarcity and Abundance](#)

Slack is hard to precisely define, but I think this comes close:

Definition: Slack. The absence of binding constraints on behavior.

Poor is the person without Slack. Lack of Slack compounds and traps.

Slack means margin for error. You can *relax*.

Slack allows pursuing opportunities. You can *explore*. You can *trade*.

Slack prevents desperation. You can *avoid bad trades* and *wait for better spots*. You can *be efficient*.

Slack permits planning for the long term. You can *invest*.

Slack enables doing things for your own amusement. You can *play games*. You can *have fun*.

Slack enables doing the right thing. Stand by your friends. Reward the worthy. Punish the wicked. You can *have a code*.

Slack presents things as they are without concern for how things look or what others think. You can *be honest*.

You can do some of these things, and choose not to do others. Because you don't have to.

Only with slack can one be a *righteous dude*.

Slack is life.

Related Slackness

Slack in project management is the time a task can be delayed without causing a delay to either subsequent tasks or project completion time. The amount of time before a constraint binds.

Slack the app was likely named in reference to a promise of Slack in the project sense.

Slacks as trousers are pants that are actual pants, but do not bind or constrain.

Slackness refers to vulgarity in West Indian culture, behavior and music. It also refers to a subgenre of dancehall music with straightforward sexual lyrics. Again, slackness refers to the absence of a binding constraint. In this case, common decency or politeness.

A slacker is one who has a lazy work ethic or otherwise does not exert maximum effort. They *slack off*. They refuse to be bound by what others view as hard constraints.

Out to Get You and the Attack on Slack

Many things in this world are [Out to Get You](#). Often they are [Out to Get You](#) for a lot, usually but not always your time, attention and money.

If you Get Got for compact amounts too often, it will add up and the constraints will bind.

If you Get Got *even once* for a non-compact amount, the cost expands until the you have no Slack left. The constraints bind you.

You might spend every spare minute and/or dollar on politics, advocacy or charity. You might think of every dollar as a fraction of a third-world life saved. Racing to find a cure for your daughter's cancer, [you already work around the clock](#). You could have an all-consuming job or be a soldier marching off to war. It could be a quest for revenge, for glory, for love. Or you might spend every spare minute mindlessly [checking Facebook](#) or obsessed with your fantasy football league.

You cannot relax. Your life is not your own.

It might even be the right choice! Especially for brief periods. When about to be run over by a truck or evicted from your house, Slack is a luxury you cannot afford. Extraordinary times call for [extraordinary effort](#).

Most times are ordinary. Make an ordinary effort.

You Can Afford It

No, you can't. This is the most famous attack on Slack. Few words make me angrier.

The person who says "You Can Afford It" is saying to ignore constraints that do not bind you. If you do, all constraints soon bind you.

Those who do not value Slack soon lose it. Slack matters. Fight to keep yours!

Ask not whether you can afford it. Ask if it is Worth It.

Unless you can't afford it. Affordability is invaluable *negative* selection. Never *positive* selection.

The You Can Afford It tax on Slack quickly approaches 100% if unchecked.

If those with extra resources are asked to share the whole surplus, all are poor or hide their wealth. Wealth is a burden and makes you a target. Those visibly flush rush to spend their bounty.

Where those with free time are given extra work, all are busy or look busy. Those with copious free time seek out relatively painless time sinks they can point to.

When looking happy means you deal with everything unpleasant, no one looks happy for long.

The Slackless Like of Maya Millennial

Things are bad enough when those with Slack are expected to sacrifice for others. Things are much worse when the presence of Slack is viewed as a defection.

An example of this effect is [Maya Millennial](#) (of [The Premium Mediocre Life of Maya Millennial](#)). She has no Slack.

Constraints bind her every action. Her job in life is putting up a front of the person she wants to show people that she wants to be. If her constraints noticeably failed to bind the illusion would fail.

Every action is being watched. If no one is around to watch her, the job falls to her. She must post all to Facebook, to Snapchat, to Instagram. Each action and choice signals who she is and her loyalty to the system. Not doing that this time could mean missing her one chance to make it big.

Maya never has free time. There is signaling to do! At a minimum, she must spend such time on alert and on her phone lest she miss something.

Maya never has spare cash. All must be spent to advance and fit her profile.

Maya lacks free speech, free association, free taste and free thought. All must serve.

Maya is in a world where *she must signal she has no Slack*. Slack means insufficient dedication and loyalty. Slack cannot be trusted. Slack now means slack later, which means failure. Future failure means no opportunity.

This is more common than one might think.

“Give Me Slack or Kill Me” - J.R. “Bob” Dobbs

The aim of this post was to introduce Slack and give an intuitive picture of its importance.

The short-term practical takeaways are:

Make sure that under normal conditions *you* have Slack. Value it. Guard it. Spend it only when Worth It. If you lose it, fight to get it back. This provides motivation for fighting things [Out To Get You](#), lest you let them eat your Slack.

Make sure to run a diagnostic test every so often to make sure you're not running dangerously low, and to engineer your situation to force yourself to have Slack. I recommend [Sabbath Hard and Go Home](#) with my take to follow soon.

Also respect the Slack of others. Help them value and guard it. Do not spend it lightly.

A Final Note

I kept this short rather than add detailed justifications. Hopefully the logic is intuitive and builds on what came before. I hope to expand on the details and models later. For a very good book-length explanation of why lacking Slack is awful, see [Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much](#).

Sabbath hard and go home

Growing up Jewish, I thought that the traditional rules around the Sabbath were silly. Then I forgot to bring a spare battery on a camping trip. Now I think that something like the traditional Jewish Sabbath is an important cultural adaptation to preserve leisure, that would otherwise be destroyed in an urbanized, technological civilization.

Sabbath as easy mode

As a child, I first learned that the Sabbath was a “day of rest,” a day on which you don’t do “work.” I was brought up by liberal Jews in a society in which “work” tends to mean either business or wage labor. Things you do for *money*. Things you do because someone else demands them. This is for the most part how we observed the Sabbath.

But I was also taught about the older traditions in which many [categories of mundane activity](#) are forbidden: lighting a fire, cutting or mending cloth, writing or erasing letters. This seemed to me like an arbitrary superstition based on an excessive literality. Surely I could tell for myself whether I was writing as part of a leisure activity or a desk job. Surely I could tell for myself whether I was planting seeds for my private garden, or on a commercial farm. Why avoid these activities in the privacy of one’s own home, doing things for oneself, and not *working* at all?

Likewise, Orthodox Jews must walk to and from their synagogue on the Sabbath, because driving would involve lighting a fire. Automobile engines run on combustion, after all. Liberal Jews often argued, if there is inclement weather, or if the synagogue is far, is it not more *restful* to take an easy drive than to walk?

In short, I thought that the rest of the Sabbath meant, or ought to mean, [playing life on easy mode](#).

Unplugging as leisure

Recently, I’ve been feeling too caught up in local social momentum. When it looked like it would be difficult and take a long time to [book a cabin](#) to spend some time alone, I asked a friend to teach me how to go camping, to improve my range of options for solitude, both by directly giving me the affordance for camping, and by more generally expanding the range of living conditions I had experience coping with.

On my first solo two-night camping trip, I forgot to bring a backup battery to charge my laptop or phone. I was car camping, so I could have charged them that way, but I felt like that was outside the spirit of the exercise, and inconvenient anyway. So instead, I mostly kept my phone turned off. Very quickly, I started being able to *think* about aspects of my situation that had been too overwhelming, too *in motion*, to get leverage on the day before. Because I wasn’t *dealing with them*. I wasn’t *keeping up* with anything. I was just present, where I was. I wished I’d done this years ago.

And then I realized: if I had keeping a Sabbath, it wouldn’t have taken years to take a step back from social momentum. I’d have gotten a chance within seven days of noticing that there was a problem. And seven days later, another chance, and so on.

Immediately, came the reflexive follow-up thought: of course, not the literal Orthodox Jewish Sabbath. But then I asked my self: why not, exactly?

I went through some of the more onerous-seeming requirements. You are not permitted to write. But when I [went on a meditation retreat](#), they *also* asked us not to write. And I had no problem with that. It did not seem like an arbitrary superstition to me; it seemed like part of the discipline of an integrated mental practice.

Maybe the Sabbath too is a discipline meant to cultivate a particular sort of mental practice.

You are not allowed to light fires on the Sabbath, which means no cooking; you eat what has been prepared in advance. On that same meditation retreat, we were asked not to bring or prepare our own food, but to accept what was served to us. That too felt like a natural part of the practice.

Why had I been so ready to dismiss the Sabbath out of hand? Where did this prejudice come from? It came from my childhood self, who was *assuming alienation of labor*.

Work as keeping up

If you do not assume like a modern consumerist that *work* is what you do *for money*, and *leisure* is what you *spend money* on, then what is work? It is the activity of producing or maintaining the artifacts necessary for the ongoing production of sustenance. It is the activity of keeping up with reality. And in a civilized society with specialization of labor, where your work is only productive because it is integrated with the work of many others, work is the practice of keeping up with the predominant social reality.

What is leisure, then? Leisure is time when you are not responding to a persistent stream of demands. Not your boss, but not a television commercial or newsfeed either. You can take a walk, or sit silently with friends, and let your mind wander.

Leisure is crucial for a very particular sort of freedom. Not freedom as the range of options presented to you, or the absence of overt restrictions on your behavior, but the amount of autonomy you have in practice, the extent to which the choices you are making are determined by the combination of your own preferences and foresight, rather than the result of being led down a path of someone else's design.

The distinction between this sort of work and leisure is not a perfect match to the Sabbath prohibitions.

You can read a book on the Sabbath (which was not allowed at the meditation retreat), and engage with your whole mind, so long as you do not take notes. So long as you do not try to produce some useful artifact, for your future self to pick up and run with.

You can also talk. Jews do not engage in Noble Silence on the Sabbath; it is not a day of silence. But it cuts out some of the more cognitively costly practices of daily life.

Sabbath as hard mode

Some automation plans make sure to include what they call a human in the loop - on some level of abstraction, every decision is reviewed by a human. You can think of the Sabbath as playing life on [hard mode](#) in order to make sure that there is a human in your loop.

You would not want to do this sort of thing all the time. But it might make sense to do periodically - perhaps once a week - as a stopgap measure to combat attention drift. If powerful and pervasive cultural forces are [out to get you](#), you ought to check in from time to time with yourself, and other people with whom you have local, high-quality relationships, to give yourself a chance to notice whether you have [gotten got](#) for too much.

Daily meditation or reflection practice has something to offer on this front. So does the Quaker practice of silent worship. And so does the Jewish Sabbath.

Sabbath as alarm

One more useful attribute of the Jewish Sabbath is the extent to which its rigid rules generate friction in emergency situations. If your community center is not within walking distance, if there is not enough slack in your schedule to prep things a day in advance, or you are too poor to go a day without work, or too locally isolated to last a day without broadcast entertainment, then *things are not okay*.

In our commercialized society, there will be many opportunities to purchase palliatives, and these palliatives are often worth purchasing. If living close to your place of employment would be ruinously expensive, you drive or take public transit. If you don't have time to feed yourself, you can buy some fast food. If you're not up for talking with a friend in person, or don't have the time, there's Facebook. But this is palliative care for a chronic problem.

In Jewish law, it is permissible to break the Sabbath in an emergency situation, when lives are at stake. If something like the Orthodox Sabbath seems impossibly hard, or if you try to keep it but end up breaking it every week - as my Reform Jewish family did - then you should consider that perhaps, despite the propaganda of the palliatives, *you are in a permanent state of emergency*. This is not okay. You are not doing okay.

So, how are you?

Bring Back the Sabbath

Epistemic Status: Several months of experimentation

Previously: [Choices are Bad](#), [Choices Are Really Bad](#), [Complexity Is Bad](#), [Play in Easy Mode](#), [Play in Hard Mode](#), [Out to Get You](#), [Slack](#)

For More Thoughts After: [Sabbath Commentary](#)

Alternate Take (Endorsed): [Sabbath Hard and Go Home](#).

[Slack](#) is life. It is under attack. We must fight for it.

[Choices Are Bad](#). [Really Bad](#). We need a break.

[Complexity Is Bad](#). We need a break.

Work is exhausting. We need a break.

Relaxation is hard. Our attempts fail or backfire.

The modern world is [Out to Get You](#). We need a break.

We need time for ourselves. Time that is truly our own.

Without setting aside such time, that won't happen. Even when you take time, you'll be continuously *choosing* to take time, and... well, whoops.

Modern life made the problem worse, but the problem is ancient. The ancients had an answer.

We need rules. We need ritual.

We need the Sabbath.

Cabin in the Woods

The parallels of my [and Ben Hoffman's](#) Sabbath realizations are striking.

A few months ago, like Ben, I needed a break. My job puts me under constant pressure. My weekends weren't refreshing me. Like Ben, I experimented with camping. Like Ben, I had no spare battery, and left my phone off. I read [The Great Transformation](#). I had meant to do that for weeks. I loved the world *leaving me alone*. Like Ben, I could relax, slow down, think.

I wasn't worried about things I *could* be doing - I couldn't do them.

Could I get this without the trip? Friends had started hosting Friday night dinners. What about the whole thing? What if we brought back the Sabbath?

Tradition makes rules easier to justify and explain, to others and yourself. These rules were time tested. I could take them and make them my own.

I thought about the components. Which made sense? What rules would let me cut the enemy, and relax?

Return of the Ritual

Rituals need clear beginnings and endings.

Sabbath begins with candles. One lights two candles, and recites a blessing.

For the evening meal, one says additional words and blessings, drinks wine, eats bread from one of two whole loafs and sits down to a proper meal with friends and family.

The candles are a signpost and deadline. Your week is complete and your work is done. There will be guests, so the apartment is ready. The ritual objects, and your needs for tomorrow, are secured. The meal is prepared. Time to feast and relax!

[Slack](#) is thus preserved in five ways.

This creates a time and place to see friends and family. Most want more social events, but coordination is hard and events are work. Now there's always Friday night.

They increase the value of improving your home. Every week you notice the little things that enrich meal, visit and home. They're Worth It, but easy to forget. Enhancing the little things enhances your life.

They prevent accumulation of personal-and-home-related work debt. A chaotic house is not restful. Postponed chores weigh on you. The deadline forces handling them in advance. Payoff is immediate.

By moving work *before* the deadline you are forced to *make time during the week*. You don't eat into Slack. If you can't find the time, this alerts you. Emergency!

They create visible failure as you approach hard bounds. When emergency arises, you sacrifice from the ritual. This signals emergency *before* life falls apart. You still have reserves. The ritual *is* Slack.

Sabbath ends with another candle. This prevents doing work until you *go through non-trivial motions*. You must do it on purpose.

Four Freedoms

We need restrictions that free us from the world. We need a new [four freedoms](#).

We need *freedom from work*. Decide what counts as work to you. Don't do that. Anything done for money is automatically work. During the week, time is money. Today, do what *you* value.

We need *freedom from interruption*. Space to think. Cut off the outside world. Especially cut off anything continuously updating and all periodic rewards. There lie Skinner boxes. Much of the world is [out to get you](#). Today it can wait. Friendly visitors are welcome, but ideally arranged in advance.

We need *freedom from choice*. Full freedom from choice requires a step *beyond* the traditional rules. In my version, even among permitted activities, only those explicitly

selected in advance are available – particular books, radio stations and so forth – plus things you feel intrinsic motivation to do. No lists. No browsing.

We need *freedom from stress*. Stressful conversations are *not allowed*. Doing work is *not allowed*. Making decisions is *not allowed*. Outside information is *not allowed*. If something was *still* going to stress you out and it was fixable, *fix it before the Sabbath*. Things can't change on their own, and you can't make them change. Why stress?

Sabbath Easy, Sabbath Easy, Sabbath Hard

Tension exists between *that which is most restful right now*, and *that which would be a stable set of rules*. There are two [Easy Modes](#), representing each extreme.

One extreme is Orthodox Sabbath. This uses a *strict, fixed set of rules*. Pure deontology. You can't *carry objects* without special preparations. Many objects you can't even *touch*. This interferes a lot with relaxation, and *forces realignment of life to prevent that*. That can be good. There are even rules about violating the spirit of the rules – if you violate the spirit without breaking *even those rules*, that's almost encouraged. Restrictions allow maximization.

Another extreme is Reform Sabbath. This asks, *what would be most restful today?* This is utilitarian and uses [causal decision theory](#). Sabbath is for rest, so if driving a car or making a call would be more restful, do that. You *could* break the rules. This destroys freedom from choice. Who respects such boundaries? You won't have urgency *before* the Sabbath. You can handle things later. Wouldn't that be *more restful?*

The [Hard Mode](#) approach asks, *what sustainable rule set best preserves long run Slack?* Taking stock and encouraging Slack-preserving outside the Sabbath are explicit goals. It uses [logical decision theory](#). It creates personalized rules *you* can follow that work *for you*, but understands each divergence you select is expensive.

It asks *what would be in the spirit of the rules*, and modifying the rules to reflect that spirit. It views breaking current rules *during the Sabbath* with extreme skepticism, to reinforce following the rules. It modifies rules on Sunday.

In choice-related ways my current system is more restrictive than the Orthodox version. Mostly it is less restrictive, but becoming more restrictive over time. I currently allow Level 4 but everything there is on the chopping block. On Friday night I restrict to Level 2.

Hierarchy of the Shabbistic

There exists a hierarchy of shabbisticness. At one end are activities aligned with the goals of relaxing, recharging and unplugging. Sleep certainly qualifies. At the other are activities perfectly in conflict with those goals. Work done for money.

The hierarchy's details are different for different people. If you see something as work, it drains you. Move it down towards the unshabbistic. If you see something as invigorating, and have the spontaneous urge to do it *for intrinsic reasons*, move it up towards the shabbistic.

Then draw a hard line. Deciding whether to allow something is an impactful choice (itself banned) and a slippery slope. The golden rule of Sabbath is not breaking the rules. When in doubt, don't do the thing, then refine your rule on Sunday.

I encourage stricter rules for Friday night than Saturday. This enriches without being stifling.

This is my current hierarchy. Levels 1-2 I consider purely good, Levels 3 good, Level 4 questionable. Level 5 is bad, Level 6 very bad. *Level 7 is banned all week.*

1. Pure rest. Sleep. Rest. Walking. Intellectual discussion. Friendly discussion. Reading physical books and other physical objects. Meditation. Museums. Taking a bath.
2. Active rest. Sex. Flirting. Running. Swimming. Playing sports. Arguments for low stakes. Board and card games with no stakes. Puzzles. Building models. Taking a shower. Eating. Watching sports in person. Light switches.
3. Consumptive rest. Riding elevators. Radio with one station. Listening to music. Food preparation without lighting a fire. Window shopping. Kindle and other e-books.
4. Potentially toxic actions. Writing for yourself. Taking notes. Practicing and training personal skills that are not work or work related. Working out. Computer games. Pre-selected television. Phone calls and texts for physical coordination purposes. Riding in cars and trains (without payment).
5. Violations of compactness. Phone calls and texts not for same-day logistical coordination. All other use of smartphones. Making impactful decisions. Planning. Flipping stations on television or radio. Browsing the internet. Browsing a giant music collection. All long lists, especially lists of choices. Checking anything that continuously updates. Lighting a fire. Stressful topics of conversation.
6. Work and outside demands. Exchange of money. Doing business. Anything that earns money or creates commercial value. Negotiations. All continuous updates. Email.
7. Considered harmful. All timed and daily rewards. Micro-transactions. Social media.

The Rules Simplified

Start here. Adjust as needed.

Light candles before sundown Friday to begin.

No outside inputs except in person.

No choices impacting post-Sabbath.

Light and extinguish no fires. Do no work or business. Spend no money.

Only preselected and spontaneously motivated actions are allowed. No browsing. No lists.

Light another candle after sundown Saturday to end.

State of Emergency

I brought back Sabbath for Slack and relaxation. Ben brought it back as an alarm system, for when life was out of control. Sabbath shows when you are not okay, and provides method and incentive to get back to okay.

This Saturday I did full Orthodox Sabbath (minus prayer), and also fasted, as an experiment. I won't do this every week or even month, but it had important alarm value.

Ben's post is excellent. [Read the whole thing](#). I'll finish with two key passages from it.

Key motivation:

You would not want to do this sort of thing all the time. But it might make sense to do periodically – perhaps once a week – as a stopgap measure to combat attention drift. If powerful and pervasive cultural forces are [out to get you](#), you ought to check in from time to time with yourself, and other people with whom you have local, high-quality relationships, to give yourself a chance to notice whether you have [gotten got](#) for too much.

His conclusion is important and worth quoting in full:

One more useful attribute of the Jewish Sabbath is the extent to which its rigid rules generate friction in emergency situations. If your community center is not within walking distance, if there is not enough slack in your schedule to prep things a day in advance, or you are too poor to go a day without work, or too locally isolated to last a day without broadcast entertainment, then *things are not okay*.

In our commercialized society, there will be many opportunities to purchase palliatives, and these palliatives are often worth purchasing. If living close to your place of employment would be ruinously expensive, you drive or take public transit. If you don't have time to feed yourself, you can buy some fast food. If you're not up for talking with a friend in person, or don't have the time, there's Facebook. But this is palliative care for a chronic problem.

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So, how are you?

Sabbath Commentary

Epistemic Status: Several months of experimentation, then talking from the hip

Commentary On: [Bring Back the Sabbath](#)

Required: [Slack](#)

I have a lot of thoughts on the topic that don't belong in the main presentation. I'm going to put them here in disorganized form for the curious. These claims are believed, but I may not have good explicit evidence to defend them with. I'm fine with that.

I. Slack Against Slack

One might challenge Sabbath with, "Isn't it weird protecting Slack by taking Slack away? Aren't you avoiding hard bounds on behavior by *imposing hard bounds on behavior*?"

Yes, I am doing that. Yes it is weird. Also suspicious.

You're taking some types of Slack away by forbidding and requiring activities, to guard and create the Slack that matters.

This can backfire. When I was a kid the Sabbath was rules preventing fun. Saturday was just Sunday except nothing worked and you sat in a room for three hours while people mumbled in Hebrew. That's not a solution, that's making the problem worse. Sunday was free from outside pressures and insanely great! Why not do that?

So no, not *everyone* needs a Sabbath for Slack or relaxation. It is one solution among many to the problems of outside pressures, to too many choices, to having less than no time and not enough money. Not everyone even has those problems. If you have so much time and so little to do, rather than striking that and reversing it, a regular Sabbath is not right for you. This is your periodic reminder to [reverse all advice you hear](#).

You still need to take stock sometimes. If there's nothing worth doing, forcing the issue by taking away your social media and match three games might help solve your rut. Is that worth one day in seven? Probably not, but one in forty-nine?

II. Sabbath Dinner

I kept and went into a lot of detail on the Sabbath dinner. The dinner speaks to me and my needs a lot. It might not speak to yours, but I'm a big fan, and want to say more about that. Here are some non-obvious benefits, in addition to the ones I already mentioned – a place and time that enables social gatherings and visits and/or family/relationship time, a strong demarcation and strongly positive experience for the transition to your day of rest, and providing urgency and incentive to take care of business around the house and make it a place worth living in.

Sabbath dinner gives incentive and opportunity to learn to cook. Cooking skill is an investment that pays off. The few things I know how to cook well provide great benefit to me, even though my wife Laura is a *much* better cook. If you can't cook, you'll be forced to do commerce constantly to eat reasonably. Having to go into that mode in order to get your daily sustenance is actually pretty bad. It's great to know that if need be, you can take care of things yourself, if you're short on cash or in an unfamiliar place without good options. There's also something very satisfying about both cooking and knowing how to cook. With

time, you learn to make things exactly the way *you* like, and things are pretty great. They're even better than that for those around you. Highly recommended. Basic life skills and self-sufficiency are a thing, they are key to Slack. Muddling through without them is a trap.

This then contrasts with the lack of cooking during Sabbath. I suspect that it should go a step further and you should perhaps *fast* on the Sabbath, with the feast at the start setting you up well for either. Fasting takes away the distraction of thinking about food, and fasting is a key Slack skill – if you *need* to eat all the time, that can lead to some bad trade-offs. If I don't have good options I know I can always fast, because I have the practice. Even if cooking is allowed, consumption shouldn't be a focus during the Sabbath day, it's out of place.

There's also making sure you treat yourself to one true feast each week, one indulgence for yourself. You need it, you deserve it, and you need to confirm that you have the Slack for it. You want something to have gratitude for – prayer and blessings are phrased like you're trying to placate or negotiate or petition a higher power, but really it's a trick to get you to write gratitude letters. Thus, you want the meal to be *visibly abundant and bountiful*. This is why it's important to me to have two full loaves of bread for the main blessing. You only truly needed one, but you make sure to have two anyway.

The wine is similar. I don't drink, but I totally understand the idea of "I need a drink" and the idea of a time when one can drink, and think those are important even though I don't get enjoyment out of alcohol and thus save my calories for elsewhere outside of ritual quantities. It's weird that I can be in the state of "I need a drink" and still not want one; I appreciate the benefits other people get and want those benefits, but I know I wouldn't get them. Plus, alcohol is kind of a terrible drug and cause of all life's problems, so sitting non-symbolic quantities of this one out seems wise.

This is something I have to sacrifice to get. Work provides me with free and quite good lunch even if it can't hold a candle to my wife's cooking, but I don't have the caloric budget to eat three meals in a day, so I have to both give up on a free lunch and I have to get through the day hungry. When I finally get home, I'm that much more appreciative, and I value my ritual, feast and rest that much more.

I think others can and should substitute other things (although I would still light the candles, and say some ritual words of your choosing), but that the idea of starting the Sabbath with a special indulgence that speaks to you is very important. Save something special to you for that slot in the week. Make sure it stands out.

III. Travel

An argument can be made that, while freedom to go anywhere would be a violation of freedom from choice and also feel a lot like work, being able to go places in accordance with plans seems valuable and reasonable, especially if you can take a train or bus with a monthly pass, or otherwise avoid spending money and avoid driving. I think it's a reasonable stance to allow this for (and only for) plans made together with other people, but would still be cautious about that.

Being physically next to the people you care about, and the people you want to spend time with, is an important thing we have lost. Proximity, including being able to walk to each other and knock on the door, is important. Knowing your neighbors, or at least some of them, is important. I think it's great that a bunch of people in The Bay are moving to the same street, even if I think the particular street isn't in the best location. I hope they knock on each other's doors all the time unannounced, and I hope lots of other people drop by all the time and let spontaneous things happen. That would be great.

I used to live in the same building as my good friend Alyssa, and that was pretty great. I would love to live that close to my friends again, and hope to coordinate such a thing here in New York at some point. Perhaps in a year or so. Giving people a strong extra incentive to do

this, given they should be doing it anyway, seems very good. Not having this is an emergency situation and needs to be treated like one.

Right now, we're kind of cheating, because *we* won't travel but *our friends* mostly will, so they come to us. Those others who actually do keep the Sabbath, are exactly those we *can't* see on Saturday. So that's weird, and I don't love it, but I think it's a price worth paying.

IV. Screens

There is something obviously bad about screens, even when we can't quite put our finger on exactly what it is. We can say things like 'takes our focus away from where we are and what is happening' but that doesn't seem like it captures the true objection. Their demand for attention, the constant impulse to look at them even when you don't want to, is definitely also a big factor. We've all heard the arguments. Certainly there should be a prejudice that things done with screens are more unshabbistic than things done without them, even when the thing being done is the same.

Despite that, screens have great utility and power, so we need to think hard about exactly what we're doing and what effect it has. If you're reading a Kindle, isn't that basically reading a book? It sort of is, but it also sort of isn't. It feels like you're invoking something you shouldn't be, it strains the eyes, it doesn't give you physical control of what you're doing in the same way, it can hold lots of books and thus implies choice you want to have freedom from. Your environment no longer is what it appears to be. Certainly the Kindle book is *much less bad* than most uses of screens, but it still feels like it should be strongly discouraged. Does this then mean a bunch of physical books that you don't otherwise need? It might. Is that good or bad? I'm not sure, but I think it is good. By going digital perhaps we are trading for convenience at the expense of building a library (again, creating a home) and a connection to what we are reading. Having books around means books get read and thought about in a way a Kindle does not. The main advantage of a Kindle is that it allows the easy *taking and sharing of notes* but that is the least Shabbistic thing one can do with a book!

Computers and smart phones are highly dangerous, offering tons of choices and distractions and opportunities for the outside world to reach you. Phones are the worst, threatening each free moment. We've been trained to reach for our phones every spare moment, constantly comparing what we're doing to what little distraction we could be looking at. They also let anyone reach you, and provide a world of resources and connection if you wanted it. I think it's important to physically leave your phone behind on the Sabbath if there's no pending emergency.

I have used computer for two purposes on the Sabbath, to write and to play video games. Writing is a special case. Playing video games can be relaxing, but it can also be a palliative and Skinner box you no longer enjoy that prevents you from taking stock. I realized that the game I'd been playing wasn't something I was still enjoying that much; it had turned into work and stress, still with satisfaction and strategy but mostly I wanted to see how it ends and achieve victory – the joy of the journey was mostly dead. That doesn't mean I don't still want to finish, but it *does* mean it's not Shabbistic.

V. Notifications

Sabbath proper begins with lighting candles. The ritual truly begins for me earlier than that, when I finish work: I turn email notifications off on my phone.

Notifications are tricky when you don't want to be bothered, but still know you have the urge to check for new things. If you have notifications on, you'll be interrupted every time you get notified, and that's terrible. If you turn them off, the risk is that you'll still worry there's something waiting for you, and you'll check *anyway*, even if there isn't anything to see, and that's even worse. So you only want to turn notifications off if you'll actually be able to

ignore the situation. The act of turning notifications off is my way of telling myself that it is time to start winding things down. I still have some preparations to do and several miles to travel, but as of now the world can wait.

Turning notifications back on, and checking my email, always feels like a mistake. I want to postpone it, knowing that once I look I'll be drawn back in, and I keep meaning to move that to Sunday morning but keep not doing it. That is a sign of how bad things have gotten. How am I, indeed?

VI. Writing

Writing is important to me. Writing is how I figure things out for myself, and it's value that I hope I am creating for others, and it's part of the grand project that isn't my career and isn't my family, and that I'm hoping will actually matter. I have a lot of ideas running around in my head all the time, and working them out has strong intrinsic motivation. It is refreshing to me to work on that, and would greatly bother me not to. So for now, I do write on the Sabbath, even though it does seem suspiciously like work.

One result of this is that I am very careful to make sure that I'm not being compensated in any way for writing. If I was making money off this, it would so obviously be work I would have no excuse. It also might quickly destroy my intrinsic motivation. I am very worried about such things, and distortions of incentives to pay attention to numbers or incentive gradients rather than the things I have intrinsic motivation to work on. I'm meaning to write a post talking about the grave dangers of Karma systems to places like Less Wrong 2.0, because attaching numbers to things with rapid feedback is a deal with the devil and I'm quite worried the devil will end up winning. So an extra reason to keep on my toes about such things seems quite good, at least for now.

It comes down to, this is *my* day, and I need to do with it what I am driven to do – the very things that are under attack, and that I need my Slack in order to preserve. Otherwise, what was the point? But at some point this may reverse, and it will feel like pressure and work, and I hope I have the wisdom to change my rules to reflect this.

Note that I post my writing often on Saturday morning. That's intentional. By timing my posts for Sabbath, I give everyone a full day to read and react before I have the chance to look at comments or votes or hits or anything else. That rabbit hole is bad, and I'm glad I have a way to avoid it.

VII. Football

Rationalists tend not to be sports fans. I think that's a shame, for many reasons (that I hope to explain some time, but not now), but the key here is that I am the exception. Watching a good football game (Go Badgers!) is one of my great joys. However, it also involves television, and a giant array of possible games and lots of outside information running across the screen, so it's dangerous. How to handle this?

My answer for now is that football is *being somewhere*, and *being in the moment*. That somewhere is elsewhere and that moment isn't here, which are notches against. There is a screen involved, and that's not great either. But sharing an experience with my fellow man of a story unfolding before us, of going through a ritual unique to the weekend where we celebrate the fruits of our hard work? Some friendly competition? That totally works for me. If I could walk to the stadium and hand them my (previously purchased) ticket, I wouldn't bat an eye at that, it would be obviously great. If it was baseball, it would be even more obviously great, except that it wouldn't be football, and also the Mets are awful.

So to the extent that I am *moving forward in time and being in the moment*, and watching a real-time story unfold as we journey through the season together, even if it is on tape delay, and to the extent that the games to watch have been chosen in advance (thus avoiding choice), I think this is fine. I think football (and College Gameday, which I enjoy the ritual of

for reasons) are permissible and good in a way that most television would not be, and in a way that scripted dramas or comedies definitely would not be. It's not a palliative, not in the same way, or at least it's one I'm willing to allow.

A final good reason is that sports are cyclical. For five months we have football. For the remaining seven we don't. That ensures we take a break.

Am I rationalizing and making excuses? Not impossible. It wouldn't shock me if I realized this had to go and I moved my watching to Sunday.

Until then!

VIII. Alarm

There is a lot to be said for the strict version, where the rules are as they always have been. You don't have to debate or choose or refine the rules, you only follow them. They do a very good job of forcing your hand, and of alerting you to how reliant you are on things you may not wish to be reliant on, allowing you to fix all that. Similarly, going camping without electronics is an eye opener, forcing your hand. I don't think it's a coincidence that both me and Ben Hoffman started our experiments after a camping trip.

For now, I'm going with the personalized hybrid version. I think that the act of thinking hard about what things I want to do without, what things I can do without, and what things I can't do without, along with which things would enhance or degrade my experience, is exactly what will lead me to better understand how to handle these issues.

My worry is that this isn't robust over time. Such a procedure requires buy-in, requires motivation. Customization means work. Traditions that survive need to survive for years and generations. If we are to form such a tradition, and I think that we should strive to do so, we will need it to be able to defend and pass itself down from father to son, from mother to daughter, to survive the constant pressures of the world. The constraint binds us, and we must consider it even now.

The first step, however, is still to take back our lives, protect ourselves to get to a place where we can think. This is one way that starts.



Confessions of a Slacker

Crossposting the entire thing from [Putanumonit](#) in honor of the [Slack sequence](#).

Go read [Slack](#), it's short and important.

If you're not a slacker, that post might change your life and explain why you feel like you have no control over your own life despite doing well on *almost* all counts. If you are a slacker, like me, this post gives our philosophy a name and provides a definition: *slack is the absence of binding constraints on behavior*.

Zvi's post is abstract on purpose. I'll continue his mission by getting more specific and, of course, by putting a num on it. To the latter purpose, I'll modify the definition of slack to make it quantifiable:

Slack is the *distance from binding constraints on your behavior*.

Keep your Distance

Slack is a function of many resources. Running out of any single vital resource is enough to constrain your behavior: make you do something you didn't want to, or prevent you from doing something you want. Freedom requires having spare time, spare money, spare energy, [spare weirdness points](#), available friends etc. The "slack as distance" formula looks a little something like this:

$$Scarcity = \frac{1}{Slack} = \sqrt{\left(\frac{1}{spare\ time}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{1}{spare\ money}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{1}{spare\ energy}\right)^2 + \dots}$$

Slack disappears when the spare capacity of any single resource goes to zero, regardless of how much of everything else you have. Maintaining slack requires balancing all the important resources, making sure to shore up the scarcest resources first.

My grandma just paid to replace a pipe on her floor that was flooding the entire apartment building. The other 20 tenants were supposed to participate in the cost, but due to [diffusion of responsibility](#) and greed, they decided collectively to weasel out of contributing. A lawyer suggested that my grandma should go to court but she refused, for reasons of slack. The question isn't whether the time in court will be worth the money *gained*, but whether the *lack* of this particular sum of money will *force* my grandma into something as undesirable as spending weeks litigating against her neighbors. It almost certainly wouldn't.

At her age, my grandma's scarcest resource is stress-free time. She's not trading it for money.

It's remarkable how many people fuck up by doing the opposite: concentrating on the resources that are easiest for them to obtain, and neglecting their most pressing needs.

[One half of Americans have less than \\$400 to spare](#), including millions of middle-class people who make and spend tens of thousands each year. The author of this shocking article is an educated professional and a family man. He has accumulated many achievements, but he forgot to save any cash to pay the water bill. On the other side, I have friends from business school with six figures to spare in their bank account and not a single hour to relax.

Whatever resource is scarcest for people is probably the one they aren't good at dealing with, and for this reason, thinking about it is aversive. It's easier just to ignore it. But an ignored constraint doesn't go away, it still binds you.

Currency Exchange

When no single resource is very scarce, you can keep it that way by figuring out the [exchange rates between resources](#) and making trade-offs based on those. Trading-off "life currencies" is [a subject I discussed in detail before](#), but slack-based thinking offers a good way to calculate the correct exchange rates. For example: how much is an hour of free time worth to you in dollars?

The slack-based exchange rate is [spare money] / [spare time], when the definition of "spare" is derived from the definition of slack. **Spare X** = how much X you **can lose before being forced** into undesirable behavior.

Example: you make \$60,000 a year, put \$15,000 in retirement, save \$5,000 in cash and spend the remaining \$40,000. Of those, \$30,000 are for necessities and \$10,000 are for things you can live without like fancy clothes and expensive restaurants. This means that you can cover your necessities for \$45,000 and since you make \$60,000, that means you have \$15,000 a year in spare cash. That's how much money you can give up before being forced to change your lifestyle significantly (e.g. move to a cheaper apartment) or jeopardizing your retirement.

Do the same math for time spent: let's say you spend 10 hours a week on activities other than those you *have* to do (work, sleep) or those you really *want* to do (ping pong). These 10 hours a week (or ~500 a year) aren't the entirety of your free time, they're the hours you can afford to lose without having to sacrifice important activities.

In our example, \$15,000 spare money each year and 500 spare hours imply an exchange rate of \$30/hour. This is a good baseline to consider trade-offs against. If you can pay a maid service \$75 to save you three hours of house cleaning (\$25/hour), you should take the opportunity because you're converting money to time at a good exchange rate.

Notice that once you've made a trade-off, the exchange rate shifts. If the cleaner comes once a month it saves you 36 hours each year and costs you \$900. You now have \$14,100 to spare and 536 hours, so the new implied exchange rate is $14100/536 = \$26.3/\text{hour}$. Money became scarcer relative to free time, and you'll be less inclined to keep trading it away.

One danger that lurks when calculating the trade-offs is forgetting about the important resources that are hard to measure. A while after my friend hired a housekeeper, his girlfriend remarked that if they had done this earlier she probably would have had a lot more sex with him. What's the resource that was binding the girlfriend before the housekeeper showed up? I don't think it's spare time or even energy. If you spend your last hour and ounce of energy dusting shelves instead of making love, slack isn't the problem in your relationship.

So what is it? As usual, we shall find the answer in the ancient teaching of the Hebrew sages.



Abraham and Three Angels, Fiasella Domenico

The only time in the Old Testament when God tells a bald-faced lie is when informing Abraham (age 99) and Sarah (88) of their upcoming pregnancy. When Sarah hears the news she laughs incredulously, wondering how can she have a son when "... my husband is old" (Genesis 18, 12:13). But when God informs Abraham of Sarah's reaction he quotes her

as saying “*Will I really have a child, now that I am old?*”. God obfuscates the fact that it’s Abraham’s age she laughed about.

[According to the Talmud](#), this story teaches the importance of “peace in the family” (*shlom-bayit*). It’s a resource so important that it’s worth God lying to preserve it. *Shlom-bayit* is hard to quantify, but your behavior is as constrained when you’ve lost your partner’s goodwill as if you were down to your last dollar or minute. When maintaining your slack according to formula, don’t forget to count the uncountable resources too.

Earphones

I find it much easier to untangle my earphones when I hold the entire cable in a loose lump in my hand so that none of the wires are pulled taut.

Exploration

One of the main things that slack gives you is *optionality*, the freedom to change your plans. The value of optionality varies a lot depending on what one is up to, whether you’re [exploring or exploiting](#). “Exploit” is when a single best option is available to you, and you pursue it single-mindedly. For example, I’m starting an internship at a dream company in a few weeks, and I will care about nothing except getting a full-time position there. I won’t be interested in other employment options, and I won’t need slack for anything besides work.

“Exploration” is when a lot of paths are open, when there’s great potential but little certainty. That’s when slack is valuable, it allows you to pursue the opportunities. I learned to appreciate slack in my own life after messing up a critical exploration phase due to slacklessness, my college years.

When I was 18, I joined a very selective academic officer training program. We pursued a double degree in math and physics condensed into three years, along with intensive military training and [enough chores to be a bummer](#). We had negative slack: no money, no freedom, and a daily to-do list that would take about 20 hours to complete, but only if you were fresh off 8 hours of sleep. I dropped out after a hectic two years. I realized that not only did I remember almost nothing from the classes, I didn’t even know if I liked physics, or the army, or if I actually wanted to be an officer.

The same year my wife-to-be enrolled in a community college without much pressure to do anything other than study and to try stuff. She made lifelong friends, learned Japanese, tried out a bunch of subjects and eventually discovered and fell in love with biology. Then, she could shift fully into exploit mode: she aced all the available biology class, transferred to a good university where completed a degree in biology in two years, and got into a leading graduate program. She became a biologist because she had several years when she didn’t have to decide what she would become.

I made up for my slackless undergrad experience by going to a slack-friendly business school. I had time to play every single intramural sport, go on a lot of drunk dates, and become a regular writer for a satire magazine which I spent more time on than all my homework combined. Writing satire later turned into a [paying gig](#), a short but exciting stand-up career in NYC, and eventually Putanumonit when I couldn’t get anyone to pay to hear my jokes. This blog only exists because in the last few years I’ve guarded my slack jealously.

And yet, I see smart people in elite universities fall into the same trap I did originally. Very prestigious schools are very competitive, and [competition will incinerate](#) every bit of slack you have. Heavy course loads leave students little slack to fool around with satire, squash, or even fooling around. Once you start pursuing a major there’s little slack to learn anything else, and once you graduate with a load of debt there’s no slack to do anything but take the first paying job on offer. A less prestigious university that requires half the time, the effort

and the money of an elite school often offers a better education simply by leaving you with slack and the freedom to explore.

The same is true for other exploration activities like travel (on long trips, I try to leave 50% of the days unscheduled), job hunting, and dating. Slacklessness brings desperation, and desperation leads to making the sort of choices that your friends will shake their heads about a decade later. Fight for your slack, and give yourself it.

Amos Tversky Said

The secret to doing good research is always to be a little underemployed. You waste years by not being able to waste hours.

How much time did he waste coming up with this pithy aphorism? It was worth it.

Slack for your belief system

Follow-up to Zvi's [post on Slack](#)

You can have Slack in your life. But you can also have Slack in your belief system.

Initially, this seems like it might be bad.

Won't Slack result in a lack of precision? If I give myself Slack to believe in whatever, won't I just end up with a lot of wrong beliefs? Shouldn't I always be trying to *decrease* the amount of Slack in my beliefs, always striving to walk the narrow, true path?

Claims:

1. For some things, the only way to stumble upon the Truth is to have some Slack. In other words, having no Slack in your belief system can result in getting stuck at local optima.
2. Having Slack allows you to use [fake frameworks](#) in a way that isn't epistemically harmful.
3. If you are, in fact, just correct, I guess you should have zero Slack. But—just checking—are you ALSO correct about how you come to Know Things? If your way of coming to conclusions is even a little off, giving yourself zero Slack might be dangerous. (Having zero Slack in your meta process *multiplies* the problem of no-Slack to all downstream beliefs.)
4. I'm willing to make the more unbacked, harder-to-define claim that there exists no individual human alive who should have zero Slack in their beliefs, on the meta level. (In other words, no human has a truth-seeking process that will reliably get all the right answers.)

[I want to note that I fully believe I could be wrong about all four claims here, or thinking about this in the entirely wrong way. So [fight me](#).]

Now, I'm going to specifically discuss Slack in one's *meta* process.

So, while I can apply the concept of Slack to individual beliefs themselves (aka "holding beliefs lightly"), I am applying the concept more to the question of "How do I come to know/understand anything or call a thing true?"

So, I'm not discussing examples of "I believe X, with more or less Slack." I'm discussing the difference between, "Doing a bunch of studies is the only way to know things" (less Slack) vs. "Doing a bunch of studies is how I currently come to know things, but I'm open to other ways" (more Slack).

The less Slack there is in your process for forming beliefs, the more constraints you have to abide before being able to claim you've come to understand something.

Examples of such constraints include:

- I only buy it if it has had at least one peer-reviewed RCT.
- This framework seems like it'll lead to confirmation bias, so I will ignore it.
- If it involves politics or tribalism or status, it can't have any truth to it.
- If it's self-contradictory / paradoxical, it has to be one way or the other.

- I can't imagine this being true or useful because my gut reaction to it is negative.
- I don't feel anything about it, so it must be meaningless.
- This doesn't conform to my narrative or worldview. In fact it's offensive to consider, so I won't.
- If I thought this, it would likely result in harm to myself or others, so I can't think it.
- It's only true if I can prove it.
- It's only worth considering if it's been tested empirically.
- I should discard models that aren't made of [gears](#).

Note that sometimes, it is good to have such constraints, at least for now.

[Not everyone can interact with facts, claims, and beliefs without some harm to their epistemics.](#) In fact, most people cannot, I claim. (And further, I believe this to be one of the most important problems in rationality.)

That said, I see a lot of people's orientations as:

"My belief-forming process says this thing isn't true, and in fact this entire class of thing is likely false and not worth digging into. You seem to be actively engaging with [class of thing] and claiming there is truth in it. That seems highly dubious—there is something wrong with your belief-forming process."

This is a reasonable stance to take.

After all, lots of things aren't worth digging into. And lots of people have bad truth-seeking processes. Theirs may very well be worse than yours; you don't have to consider something just because it's in front of you.

But if you notice yourself unwilling to engage with [entire class of thing]... to me this indicates something is suboptimal.

Over time, it seems good to aim for being able to engage with more classes of things, rather than fewer.

If something is politically charged, yes, your beliefs are at risk, and you may be better off avoiding the topic altogether. But—wouldn't it be nice, if one day, you could wade through the mire of politics and come out the other side, clean? Epistemics in tact? Even better, you come out the other side having realized new truths about the world?

I guess if I'm going to be totally honest, the reason I am saying this is because I feel annoyed when people dismiss entire [classes of thing] for reasons like, "That part of the territory is really swampy and dangerous! Going in there is bad, and you're probably compromised."

At least *some* of the time, the thing that is going on is the person just figured out how to navigate swamps.

But instead, I feel like the person lacks Slack in their belief-forming process and is also trying to enforce this lack of Slack onto others.

From the inside, I imagine this feels like, "No one can navigate swamps, and anyone who says they are is probably *terribly* mistaken or naive about how truth-seeking works, so I should inform them of the danger."

From the inside, Slack will feel incorrect or potentially dangerous. Without constraints, the person may feel like they'll go off the rails—maybe they'll even end up believing in *gasp* horoscopes or *gasp* the existence of a Judeo-Christian God.

My greatest fear is not having false beliefs. My greatest fear is getting trapped into a particular definition of truth-seeking, such that I permanently end up with many false beliefs or large gaps in my map.

The two things I do to avoid this are:

a) Learn more skills for navigating tricky territories. For example, one of the skills is noticing a belief that's in my mind because it would be beneficial for me to believe it, i.e. it makes me feel good in a certain way or I expect good things to happen as a result—say, it'd make a person like me more if I believed it. This likely requires a fair amount of introspective capacity.

b) Be open to the idea that other people have truth-seeking methods that I don't. That they're seeing entire swaths of reality I can't see. Be curious about that, and try to learn more. Develop taste around this. Maintain some Slack, so I don't become myopic.

Sacred Cash

Previously: Categories of Sacredness, [Eternal, and Hearthstone Economy versus Magic Economy](#), [Slack](#)

Related (Compass Rose): [Kidneys, Trade, Sacredness and Space Travel](#)

Remember when money was sacred?

Thanks to [The Great Transformation](#), there is an increasingly free market in money. We spend money continuously, and get paid continuously.

This is relatively new. Or at least, its universality is relatively new.

It wasn't so long ago that money was sacred *at the bank*. [They had to give you a toaster](#) instead.

My parents grew up in a different world. They taught me money was sacred. You had a job for a fixed number of hours, paying a fixed amount. That was all the money you got. Earning more was *very* difficult. Side jobs were lousy and rare. You'd spend lots of time to sell unwanted items at yard or sidewalk sales, at severe discounts. Everyone kept a strict budget. The edge was never far away.

Money spent other than on necessities was a special treat, a grand honor or dire emergency.

This cultural attitude is hard to learn. It is also hard to unlearn. It is quite jarring when you first see it violated.

The Profane

When I moved out to Denver to work at Social Games on the Cyperpunk TCG, I met a group that neither *had enough money*, *had ways to earn more money* nor *treated money as sacred*.

They'd think nothing of paying a dollar for a Slurpee. On payday, they'd all get takeout. Far from payday, they'd (literally in one case) search their seat cushions to find change with which to gas up their motorcycle, to get to work.

[Anything they had, that could have been reasonably sold, would eventually have been.](#)

I did not understand.

In a start-up with one angel investor who lacked the ability to reinvest, and little hope of raising additional funds, they did not prepare for the inevitable cash crunch while trying to sell enough to stem the bleeding. I don't know if we could have stabilized if given a few more months, but we had a shot only with those months. We likely fail anyway, but to see it all thrown away infuriated me.

MetaMed's final blow was similar. My replacement as CEO increased our spend, leaving insufficient runway to do the things necessary to raise additional funds, and failed to realize (despite my repeated warnings) that this meant 0% chance of

success. The plan's timeline didn't work. It was incoherent. Again, we probably fail anyway, but to do that which inevitably fails? Infuriating.

I did not understand.

What was wrong with these people? *Money was sacred.*

Sure, it wasn't *automatically* sacred, but it was *sacred in context*. Supply was limited. Being flush today doesn't change that.

On [The Wire](#), a character who not a day ago was about to be *killed* for lack of funds burns hundred dollar bills in a bar. His explanation? "When I'm flush, I'm flush."

In Denver I had some savings, but fully understood I had a terrible salary and acted accordingly. I rented a \$400 apartment, lived on \$1,000 a month, agonized over buying an occasional luxurious Quiznos sandwich or a pizza, and worked to solve the local Indian casino poker game (it had a strange unique structure for legal reasons) to pay the rent while getting paid in equity to help the company.

Later, I had to train myself out of that. I taught myself that increasingly large amounts of money *weren't* sacred *to me*. It is still a sin ([in my code](#)) to waste money or make a bad trade, even for trivial size. I've kept some amount of sacredness. I think this is important in a makes-my-12-rules-for-life kind of way. Don't lose that cringe! But 'throw money at the problem' is an option, and 'buy it even if it's expensive because you'll enjoy it' has its place.

[Slack Tax](#)

Money moving from sacred to non-sacred is a huge change.

When money is sacred, *so are things one can buy*. All worthwhile possessions are prized possessions.

When money isn't sacred, *neither are things one can sell*. Only things you *cannot efficiently sell* can still be prized. Potential trade becomes an enemy.

When one is flush, one buys experiences, memories and hard-to-sell assets.

If one does not, one falls victim to the wealth tax.

The slack tax takes many forms.

In Denver, it took the relatively benign form of obliviousness and hyperbolic discounting. People spent money on themselves, voluntarily, acting as if they were more wealthy than they were, leaving them poorer still.

It has less benign forms. Governments and other bandits look for wealth and take it. Sometimes those bandits are your friends, family and neighbors. A little giving back is a good thing, but in many cultures demands for help and redistribution rapidly approach 100% – life is tough, and your fellow tribe members, or at least family members, are endless pits of need, so any wealth that can be given away must be hidden if you want to remain in good standing. Savings, security and investment in anything but status are all but impossible. There is no hope for prosperity.

In between is commercial pressure, price discrimination and hold-up problems. Agents see free energy and work to extract it by charging for access to complementary goods, holding out promises, creating perception of needs and manufacturing expensive status competitions. The manufacturer of a key component, or the head of the union, demands *almost* all of your profit margins. Products advertise miracle effects that *might* solve your problems; you know they're lying, but what else is there to do? And what would you do without the hot sneakers, the latest handbag, the hip new phone or the most prestigious college degree?

The most insidious traps are explicit [slack](#) traps. You must send the signal that you have spent all your resources. Any diamond (or college, or house..) is fine, *so long as it cost you everything you had, so I know you love me*. You can raise more capital for your start-up, *but first you must be broke, or it would be irresponsible to give you more yet*. Also would mean I wouldn't have as much leverage.

The Slack Tax's most popular form is the Wealth Tax. But it works on any resource. Thus, for example, the need to create socially acceptable, legibly sacred time.

Without strong defenses, those forces [out to get us](#) will find a way. All slack, and thus hope, will be lost.

Guarding Slack vs Substance

Builds on concepts from:

- [Slack](#)
- [Goodheart's Imperius](#)
- [Nobody Does the Thing They are Supposedly Doing](#)

Summary: If you're trying to preserve your sanity (or your employees') by scaling back on the number of things you're trying to do... make sure not to accidentally scale back on things that were important-but-harder-to-see, in favor of things that aren't as important but more easily evaluated.

[Epistemic Effort](#): Had a conversation, had some immediate instinctive reactions to it, did not especially reflect on it. Hope to flesh out how to manage these tradeoffs in the comments.

Zvi introduced the term "[Slack](#)" to the rationaljargonsphere a few months ago, and I think it's the most *clearly useful* new piece of jargon we've seen in a while.

Normally, when someone coins a new term, I immediately find people shoehorning it into conversations and concepts where it doesn't quite fit. (I do this myself an embarrassing amount, and the underlying motivation is clearly "I want to sound smart" which bodes ill).

By contrast, I experienced an explosion of people jargon-dropping Slack into their conversations and *every single instance was valid*. Lack-of-slack was a problem loads of people had been dealing with, and having a handle for it was a perfect instance of a [new name enabling higher level discussion](#).

This hints at something that should be alarming: "*slack*" is a useful term because *nobody has enough of it*.

In particular, it looks like many organizations I'm familiar with run at something like -10% slack, instead of the [40% slack that apparently is optimal](#) across many domains.

Gworley noted in the comments of Zvi's post:

If you work with distributed systems, by which I mean any system that must pass information between multiple, tightly integrated subsystems, there is a well understood concept of *maximum sustainable load* and we know that number to be roughly 60% of maximum possible load for all systems.

The probability that one subsystem will have to wait on another increases exponentially with the total load on the system and the load level that maximizes throughput (total amount of work done by the system over some period of time) comes in just above 60%. If you do less work you are wasting capacity (in terms of throughput); if you do more work you will gum up the works and waste time waiting even if all the subsystems are always busy.

We normally deal with this in engineering contexts, but as is so often the case this property will hold for basically anything that looks sufficiently like a distributed

system. Thus the "operate at 60% capacity" rule of thumb will maximize throughput in lots of scenarios: assembly lines, service-oriented architecture software, coordinated work within any organization, an individual's work (since it is normally made up of many tasks that information must be passed between with the topology being spread out over time rather than space), and perhaps most surprisingly an individual's mind-body.

"Slack" is a decent way of putting this, but we can be pretty precise and say you need ~40% slack to optimize throughput: more and you tip into being "lazy", less and you become "overworked".

I've talked with a few people about burnout, and other ways that lack-of-slack causes problems. I had come to the conclusion that people should probably drastically-cut-back on the amount of things they're trying to do, so that they can afford to do them well, for the long term.

Oliver Habryka made a surprising case for why this might be a bad idea, at least if implemented carelessly. (The rest of this post is basically a summary of a month-ago conversation in which Oliver explained some ideas/arguments to me. I'm fairly confident I remember the key points, but if I missed something, apologies)

Veneer vs Substance

Example 1: Web Developer Mockups

(This example is slightly contrived - a professional web developer probably wouldn't make this particular mistake, but hopefully illustrates the point)

Say you're a novice web-developer, and a client hires you to make a website. The client doesn't understand anything about web development, but they can easily tell if a website is ugly or pretty. They give you some requirements, including 4 menu items at the top of the page.

You have a day before the first meeting, and you want to make a good first impression. You have enough time that you could build a site with a good underlying structure, but no CSS styling. You know from experience the client will be unimpressed.

So instead you throw together a quick-and-dirty-but-stylish website that meets their requirements. The four menu items flow beautifully across the top of the page.

They see it. They're happy. They add some more requirements to add more functionality, which you're happy to comply with.

Then eventually they say "okay, now we need to add a 5th menu-item."

And... it turns out adding the 5th menu item a) totally wrecks the visual flow of the page you designed, b) you can't even do it easily because you threw together something that manually specified individual menu items and corresponding pages, instead of an easily scalable menu-item/page system.

Your site looked good, but it wasn't actually built for the most important longterm goals of your client, and neither you nor your client noticed. And now you have *more* work to do than you normally would have.

Example 2: Running a Conference

If you run a conference, people will *notice* if you screw up the logistics and people don't have food or all the volunteers are stressed out and screwing up.

They won't notice if the breaks between sessions are 10 minutes long instead of 30.

But much of the value of most conferences isn't the presentations. It's in the networking, the bouncing around of ideas. The difference between 10 minute breaks and 30 minute ones may be the difference between people actually being able to generate valuable new ideas together, and people mostly rushing from one presentation to another without time to connect.

"Well, simple", you might say. "It's not that hard to make the breaks 30 minutes long. Just do that, and then still put as much effort into logistics as you can."

But, would have you have *thought* to do that, if you were preoccupied with logistics?

How many other similar types of decisions are available for you to make? How many of them will you notice if you don't dedicate time to specifically thinking about how to optimize the conference for producing connections, novel insights and new projects?

Say your default plan is to spend 12 hours a day for three months working your ass off to get *both* the logistics done and to think creatively about what the most important goals of the conference are and how to achieve them.

(realistically, this probably isn't actually your default plan, because thinking creatively and agentily is pretty hard and people default to doing "obvious" things like getting high-profile speakers)

But, you've also read a bunch of stuff about slack and noticed yourself being stressed out a lot. You try to get help to outsource one of the tasks, but getting people you can really count on is hard.

It looks like you need to do a lot of the key tasks yourself. You're stretched thin. You've got a lot of people pinging you with questions so you're running on [manager-schedule](#) instead of [setting aside time for deep work](#).

You've run conferences before, and you have a lot of visceral experiences of people yelling at you for not making sure there was enough food and other logistical screwups. You have a lot of *current* fires going on and people who are yelling about them *right now*.

You *don't* have a lot of salient examples of people yelling at you for not having long enough breaks, and nobody is yelling at you *right now* to allocate deep work towards creatively optimizing the conference.

So as you try to regain sanity and some sense of measured control, the things that tend to get dropped are the things *least visible*, without regard for whether they are the most substantive, valuable things you could have done.

So What To Do?

Now, I *do* have a strong impression that a lot of organizations and people I know are running at -10% slack. This is for understandable reasons: The World is On Fire, [metaphorically](#) and [literally](#). There's a long list of Really Important Things that need doing.

Getting them set in motion *soon* is legitimately important.

A young organization has a *lot* of things they need to get going at once in order to prove themselves (both to funders, and to the people involved).

There aren't too many people who are able/willing to help. There's even fewer people who demonstrably can be counted on to tackle complex tasks in a proactive, agency fashion. Those people end up excessively relied upon, often pressured into taking on more than they can handle (or barely exactly how much they can handle and then as soon as things go wrong, other failures start to snowball)

[note: this is not commentary on any particular organization, just a general sense I get from talking to a few people, both in the rationalosphere but also generally in most small organizations]

What do we do about this?

Answers would probably vary based on specific context. Some obvious-if-hard answers are obvious-if-hard:

- Try to buy off-the-shelf solutions for things that off-the-shelf-solutions exist for. (This runs into a *different* problem which is that you risk overpaying for enterprise software that isn't very good, which is a whole separate blogpost)
- Where possible, develop systems that dramatically simplify problems.
- Where possible, get more help, while generally developing your capacity to distribute tasks effectively over larger numbers of people.
- Understand that if you're pushing yourself (or your employees) for a major product release, you're not actually *gaining* time or energy - you're borrowing time/energy from the future. If you're spending a month in crunch time, expect to have a followup month where everyone is kinda brain dead. This may be worth it, and being able to think more explicitly about the tradeoffs being made may be helpful.

You're probably doing things like that, as best you can. My remaining thought is something like "do *fewer* things, but give yourself a lot more time to do them." (For example, I ran the 2012 Solstice almost entirely by myself, but I gave myself an entire year to do it, and it was my only major creative project that year)

If you're a small organization with a lot of big ideas that all feel interdependent, and if you notice that your staff are constantly overworked and burning out, it may be necessary to prune those ideas back and focus on 1-3 major projects each year that you have can afford to do well *without* resorting to crunch time.

Allocate time months in advance (both for thinking through the creative, deep underlying principles behind your project, as well as setting logistical systems in motion that'll make things easier).

None of this feels like a *satisfying* solution to me, but all feels like useful pieces of the puzzle to have in mind.

The Amish, and Strategic Norms around Technology

I was reading [Legal Systems Very Different From Ours](#) by David Friedman. The chapter on the Amish made a couple interesting claims, which changed my conception of that culture (although I'm not very confident that the Amish would endorse these claims as fair descriptions).

Strategic Norms Around Technology

The Amish relationship to technology is not "stick to technology from the 1800s", but rather "carefully think about how technology will affect your culture, and only include technology that does what you want."

So, electric heaters are fine. *Central* heating in a building is not. This is because if there's a space-heater in the living room, this encourages the family to congregate together. Whereas if everyone has heating in their room, they're more likely to spend time apart from each other.

Some communities allow tractors, but only if they don't have rubber tires. This makes them good for tilling fields but bad for driving around.

Cars and telephones are particularly important not to allow, because easy transportation and communication creates a slippery slope to full-connection to the outside world. And a lot of the Amish lifestyle depends on cutting themselves off from the various pressures and incentives present in the rest of the world.

Some Amish communities allow people to borrow telephones or cars from non-Amish neighbors. I might have considered this hypocritical. But in the context of "strategic norms of technology", it need not be. The important bit is to *add friction* to transportation and communication.

Competitive Dictatorship

Officially, most Amish congregations operate via something-like-consensus (I'm not sure I understood this). But Friedman's claim is that in practice, most people tend to go with what the local bishop says. This makes a bishop something like a dictator.

But, there are lots of Amish communities, and if you don't like the direction a bishop is pushing people in, or how they are resolving disputes, you can leave. There is a spectrum of communities ranging in how strict they are about various rules, and they make decisions mostly independently.

So there is not only strategic norms around technology, but a fairly interesting, semi-systematic exploration of those norms.

Other Applications

I wouldn't want to be Amish-in-particular, but the setup here is very interesting to me.

I know some people who went to [MAPLE](#), a monastery program. While there, there were limits on technology that meant, after 9pm, you basically had two choices: read, or go to bed. The choices were strongly reinforced by the social and physical environment. And this made it much easier to make choices they endorsed.

Contrast this with my current house, where a) you face basically infinite choices about to spend your time, and b) in practice, the nightly choices often end up being something like "stay up till 1am playing minecraft with housemates" or "stay up till 2am playing minecraft with housemates."

I'm interested in the question "okay, so... my goals are not the Amish goals. But, what *are* my goals exactly, and is there enough consensus around particular goals to make valid choices around norms and technology other than 'anything goes?'"

There are issues you face that make this hard, though:

Competition with the Outside World - The Amish system works because it cuts itself off from the outside world, and its most important technological choices directly cause that. Your business can't get outcompeted by someone else who opens up their shop on Sundays because there is nobody who opens their shop on Sundays.

You also might have goals that directly involve the outside world.

(The Amish also have good relationships with the government such that they can get away with implementing their own legal systems and get exceptions for things like school-laws. If you want to do something on their scale, you *both* would need to not attract the ire of the government, and be good enough at rolling your own legal system to not screw things up and drive people away)

Lack of Mid-Scale-Coordination - I've tried to implement 10pm bedtimes. It fails, horribly, because I frequently attend events that last till midnight or later. *Everyone* could shift their entire sleep schedule forward, maybe. But also...

People Are Different - *Some* of people's needs are cultural. But some are biological, and some needs are maybe due to environmental factors that happened over decades and can't be changed on a dime.

Some people do better with rules and structure. Some people flourish more with flexibility. Some people need rules and structure but *different* rules and structure than other people.

This all makes it fairly hard to coordinate on norms.

Contenders for Change

Given the above, I think it makes most sense to:

- Look for opportunities explore norms and technology-use at the level of individuals, households, and small organizations (these seem like natural clusters with small numbers of stakeholders, where you can either get consensus or have a dictator).

- While doing so, choose norms that are locally stable, that don't require additional cooperation outside yourself, your household or your org.

For example, I could imagine an entire household trying out a rule, like "the household internet turns off at 10pm", or "all the lights turn reddish at night so it's easier to get to sleep"

Slack gives you space to notice/reflect on subtle things

Followup to "[My slack budget: 3 surprise problems per week](#)"

Previously, I thought the reasons to preserve slack in your life (or in your organization) were to:

- Avoid using up all of your resources
- Avoid hitting a crisis where you suddenly have multiple surprise problems, and you have no choice but to either do a shitty job handling all of them, or deliberately not handle some of them at all (and deal with the consequences)
- Avoid feeling really unpleasant
- Allow you to live up to principles / be more pro-social.

This year in December/January, the Lightcone Infrastructure team (where I work) took on a large number of difficult projects at once. I was thinking about how wise/unwise this was, and chatting with John Wentworth about it. I listed the problems-with-lack-of-slack.

He said (something like): "Oh, that's not the point of slack. Or, not the part I'm most interested in. The point of slack is to give you the space to notice subtle things and think about them."

A rough model is something like, here are three types of things you can do:

1. You can take actions on whatever stuff it is you like to do on-purpose. (Typically your day job, or fun projects, or whatever)
2. You can rest/recover/do-random-fun-things.
3. You can... be cognizant of stuff going that isn't immediately relevant to the first two things, and mull it over, and notice new, potentially fruitful trains of thought about them.

When you're got too many things to do and stuff is constantly exploding and demanding your attention, #3 is the first thing to go. You often *need* to be putting out fires (#1), and if you do that too much and did into energy reserves your body will eventually be like "No, screw that, time to burn out for a bit and spend a week tired and recovering." (#2)

But, there won't be a moment where you experience a clear failure-and-control-mechanism that pushes you to spend time on #3. You just... won't notice a thing that you might have noticed.

And this is particularly important when you're working on problems you [don't understand how to solve](#) (such as AI alignment, or how to improve institutions, or learn/teach rationality, or, just, any ol' problem in your life you're currently confused about, or maybe haven't even yet realized that you have)

In the explore/exploit dichotomy, when solving a problem-you-don't-understand, having a train of thoughts in "explore" mode is pretty valuable. Slack gives you space for your shower thoughts to be in explore mode.

My slack budget: 3 surprise problems per week

Previously: [Slack](#)

In a [couple earlier](#) articles I urged people to adopt strategies that reliably maintain a margin of "30% slack." I've seen lots of people burn out badly (myself included), and preserving a margin of resources such that you don't risk burning out seems quite important to me.

But I realized a) "30% slack" isn't very clear, and b) this is an important enough concept it should really have a top-level post.

So, to be a bit more obvious:

Maintain enough slack that you can absorb 3 surprise problems happening to you in a week, without dipping into reserves.

"Surprise problems" can take multiple forms, and cost different types of reserves. These can be financial expenses you didn't know about (whoops, I needed to buy some medicine), or cognitive attention (whoops, I need to figure out what medicine to buy) or stress (whoops, I'm sick, and now I need to talk to a bunch of doctors while being kinda exhausted).

These can be problems happening to you, or problems happening to friends that you care about.

Why "3 surprises", and not just one? Because at least a couple times a year I personally run into 3-surprises-in-a-week. And sometimes I get hit with much bigger things *require* me to burn my reserves, and if I didn't have a habit of ensuring my reserves I just wouldn't be able to do those things at all.

I was motivated to write this today because, last week, four problems came up. I had recently taken on two major projects; a community institution was in trouble, and a friend was hurt and needed help. I only had bandwidth to deal with 3 of those. I realized that not only was this a particularly bad week, but I had let too many ongoing responsibilities accumulate.

The weekend came 'round, right as I hit exactly-zero-slack. I needed time to recover, but I had made some time-sensitive commitments to help with some of the above things, and I ended up having to spend the weekend doing a more constrained version of those outstanding obligations, while carefully recovering.

Being Pro-Social Requires Slack

I think an important part of being a good friend, community member or effective altruist, is taking care of yourself. I think if you can't absorb 3 surprise problems per week, it probably make sense to prioritize fixing that above most other things.

"But my friend is in trouble!"

That's legitimately sad, but if you can't absorb 3 surprise problems per week, you are probably not going to be able to help your friend *next* week. Moreover, you might burn out, then *you* will need to be asking other friends for help, and you might need to ask that at a time when they were also hurting.

Take care of yourself.

"But the world is in trouble!"

The world is always in trouble. There is no end to the things you might hypothetically do to help it. It is virtuous to help. It is not virtuous to help in a way that runs the risk of you becoming one of the people who need help and are adding to the problem.

"But maybe I can do this and it'll be fine?"

One of the legitimately tricky things is that, sure, often you can roll the dice and come out fine *this time*. Many extra tasks you take on are *usually* okay, but have, say, a 10% chance of turning out to involve much bigger responsibilities than you thought you were committing to. You can skirt by a few times and be okay.

But, well, if you do that 10 times, one of the times you will turn out not to be okay.

Developing intuitions around how risky actions are, and developing policies for how often to do them, is pretty important.

"But I made commitments!"

I take commitments pretty seriously. Trust is one of the sources of slack. So if you've suddenly realized you've overcommitted, often the solution is not to abruptly abandon all of them.

But, it *is* often necessary to abandon at least some, while making sure to [take ownership of that abandonment](#), perhaps with a promise to pay back a favor later.

Develop Weekly Capacity and Build Reserves

That all said, I quite sympathize if you see your friends hurting, or the world on fire, or even just lots of cool parties that you want to go to even though you're tired.

There are various things you can do to build up that capacity. Get a better job. Carefully cultivate friendships that are naturally restorative most of the time. Find a good living situation. Invest in habits that that eventually make things easier.

This isn't a selfish thing to do for yourself, [it should be coming out of your long-term budget for improving the world](#).

Slack Has Positive Externalities For Groups

You ever have one of those group projects where you all need to find a time to meet, but some or all of the group members have packed schedules, so you pull out the whenisgood and it turns out the only times that work are 2-2:15 pm on Thursday or 6:30-7:30 am on Tuesday?

For this sort of scheduling problem, the best group members are those with lots of [slack](#) in their schedule - people who either have lots of time available, or have very flexible time commitments which can move around to accommodate a group meeting. But if my schedule is flexible, note that most of the benefits of that flexibility are captured by the group as a whole, not by me: my flexibility mostly allows the group to accommodate less-flexible members.

The slack in my schedule creates *positive externalities* for the group. I mostly control how much slack to create/maintain in my schedule, but a large chunk of the benefit goes to other people. This means I'm incentivized to create/maintain less-than-optimal slack in my schedule.

Once you look for it, this shows up in other guises too: many different flavors of slack create positive externalities for groups. In general, we should expect people to create/maintain less slack than would be socially optimal, and this in turn will make groups less functional. What do other forms of this look like, and what can we do about it?

Many Flavors of Slack

A few common forms of slack:

- Financial: money not budgeted for anything in particular, or which can easily be spent on something else instead, is financial slack.
- Time: time not scheduled for anything in particular, or which can easily be rescheduled, is time slack.
- Space: space not used for anything in particular, or which can easily be used for something else, is space slack.
- Emotional: capacity for excess stress is emotional slack.
- Social: multiple social groups which one can fall back on, or the ability to make new friends quickly, provide social slack.

We can also separate short-term vs long-term slack for each of these. For instance, a bank may have lots of capital to invest, but limited liquidity, so they can't move their capital around quickly: high long-term financial slack but limited short-term financial slack. Conversely, someone who has some savings on hand but is spending as much as they earn has short-term financial slack, but not long-term financial slack. Exercise for the reader: what would short-term and long-term time and emotional slack look like?

How do each of these create externalities for groups?

Space is an easy one: groups often need space in which to meet (either short-term, when the usual space is unavailable, or long-term) or store things (again, either short-term or long-term). If someone has spare space to use, that slack provides benefits to the whole group. But unless the group is paying to use the space, the person providing the slack captures only a small share of the benefits. So, people are incentivized to maintain less space slack than optimal.

Financial is another easy one: if some group members can occasionally cover some group costs, and it's not a big deal, that makes it a lot easier for a group to function smoothly. Again, this applies both short-term (e.g. paying the bill for a group dinner, with the expectation that everyone will eventually pay back) or long-term (covering some costs without reimbursement). Again, the person providing slack captures only a small share of the benefits.

The short-term/long-term distinction matters mainly for a group's agility/responsiveness/dynamicity. If there's a crisis and the group needs to respond quickly, or the group needs to make and execute plans on-the-fly as new information comes in, that requires short-term slack on the part of the group members. For instance, last year many groups started to work on COVID tools, like [microcovid](#), [radvac](#), or the various forecasting projects. Many of these required full-time work - people needed the slack to pause or quit their day jobs on relatively-short notice. That takes short-term financial slack, obviously, but also short-term emotional slack (very stressful!) and social slack (hopefully my coworkers aren't my only friends, or I can make new ones quickly!).

Another example: suppose a company or organization wants to move ([*cough*](#)) - not just across town, but to another state or country. That typically means employees will need to move with them. That requires emotional slack: moves are among the most stressful events most people go through. It requires social slack: people either need friends in the new location, remote friends, or the ability to quickly make new friends. And it requires financial slack, to pay for the move.

In both these examples, the group needs slack from its members in order to do things. (Or, to put it differently: group members' slack facilitates solutions to [coordination problems](#).) The ability to do things as a group mostly benefits the whole group, so the benefits of any particular person's slack largely go to the rest of the group.

What To Do About It?

One standard econ-101 answer is "internalize the externalities" - i.e. reward people for their slack. People don't usually do this with monetary payments, but we often do it with less legible rewards, like social status. For instance, if someone provides space for a group to meet, or occasionally covers some bills for the group, that's usually rewarded with status within the group.

Another standard solution is to *require* group members to maintain slack. Again, this usually isn't explicit, but we often do it in less-legible ways. For instance, if one or two people have very little slack in their schedules, maybe the rest of the group decides to meet without them. Or, if one or two people have very little emotional slack and sometimes break down if a competition gets too stressful, maybe they end up usually not participating in board game night or capture-the-flag. This is especially relevant to the last two examples from the previous section: the various COVID groups or the organization moving. If someone lacks the slack to participate, they would probably

not end up in the group. Of course, there still need to be *some* people who *do* have enough slack in order for the group to include anyone at all.

But these are illegible and imperfect methods. One point of this post is that it may help to *explicitly* pay attention to slack and its externalities. At a personal level, if we wish to be altruistic, this might mean maintaining extra slack in all its various forms, in order to provide value to the groups in which we participate. It might also mean avoiding people who have very little slack along one or more dimensions, or trying to supplement others' slack when possible (easy for finances, hard for time). For group organizers, it might mean explicitly requiring slack - e.g. the national guard requires that its members be able to drop everything and respond full-time to an emergency.

Important side point: slack has increasing marginal returns; the tenth unit of any particular flavor of slack is worth more than the first unit. The reason is that, if we flip n coins and count up the number of heads, the noise in that count is only $\sim\sqrt{n}$. And more generally, if we add up $\sim n$ independent noisy things, the noise will typically be of order $\sim\sqrt{n}$. So, if we want to take advantage of noisy *opportunities* - like a project which might go over budget, or a group which might need to move its meeting to a different time/space sometimes, or an event which might be fun or might be stressful - then we only need $\sim\sqrt{n}$ units of slack to take advantage of $\sim n$ opportunities. Going from zero unit of slack to one lets us take advantage of \sim one more opportunity, whereas going from nine units of slack to ten lets us take advantage of \sim twenty more opportunities. The more slack we have, the more we can benefit from adding marginal slack.

That means we should expect people to specialize in either having lots of slack, or no slack at all. For instance, we should expect people to either have carefully-planned tightly-packed calendars, or mostly-open calendars with lots of flexibility. We should expect people to either budget every dollar carefully, or have a large surplus and mostly not worry about their budget. Etc. One type takes advantage of lots of "noisy" opportunities, while the other makes their schedule/budget/etc maximally predictable. For a low-slack person to take advantage of just one noisy opportunity would require them to free up a bunch of extra room in their schedule/budget "just in case". The high-slack person already has a bunch of "just in case" built in, and can "re-use" that elbow room for one more thing, since it's highly unlikely that *all* the "risky" outcomes will happen all at once.

To the extent that this actually holds in the real world, we can think of slack (of a particular flavor) as binary: am I a high-time-slack person or a low-time-slack person? Am I a high-emotional-slack person or a low-emotional-slack person? That means the incentives don't need to be perfect - as long as a group can *roughly* select for high-slack members, or *roughly* reward high slack, that should be enough to incentivize the high-slack equilibrium rather than the low-slack equilibrium, and create lots of positive externalities for the group.