# Why Me? I am a partially-qualified philosopher

I got a 2:1 in philosophy. And so, I’ve decided that that’s enough for me to be able to carry a card. Look, I’ve actually got cards.

What did I learn in philosophy?

Ethics - what's right, what's wrong – this is really complicated. Should we execute murderers? If we do, should we do it publicly?  
Aesthetics - which is the right tie to wear to this public execution?   
Logic - How do you reason from some things being true to other things being true.   
Epistemology - an understanding of why, when a man gets past 50, he's never actually sure whether he wants to pee.   
That's a joke. Epistemology is about how we know things. How can we know anything?   
Ontology what exists? Can we make a list? Could we just make a list of things that exist. Some people have tried it. Is God on the list? Are there such things as tables? If there aren't where am I going to put my drink?   
Philosophy of Science, how we know the earth is flat, moon landings are fake? Just kidding - it's obvious the earth is flat. If it were fizzy we'd see the bubbles.   
Philosophy of Mind - other people have minds. But if people can have minds, how come other things can't have minds? What about a dog? What about a cockroach? What if everything has a mind,   
just to a different degree? So you have humans, then dogs, then cockroaches, then rocks.

One of my favourites is epiphenomenalism. Which is the idea that we are conscious of what’s going on in the world. But we have absolutely no control over it at all.

## I’m a project manager – I wrote a book about it

## I’m a failed stand-up comedian

I’ve been doing stand up comedy on the open mic circuit on and off for fifteen years? Several people that I’ve seen on the open mic circuit are doing their own stand up tours now. Although, I can’t think of anyone who’s actually become super famous.

# Why you?

You’re probably going to need to do things in your life. The chances are those things won’t turn out like you expect.

# Why now?

Why not now? I think my advice on how to do things is a bit different from other people’s – OK, there might be some Zen Buddhists who talk about this stuff, but nobody has paid them much attention.

# Why this?

I don’t hear people talking about the difference between ideas, and descriptions of ideas and reality. I don’t hear people talking about the unexpected and unpleasant emotions that come with doing new things.

# Know your power – actually know ***my*** power

This is a physical activity. I talk about my old physics teacher Mr North. I talk about work being force times distance travelled. I get someone in the audience to time me. And then I get the rest of the audience to count. I step up and down off of a chair as many times as I can in 30 seconds.

At the end of the activity, I’m out of breath and putting my shoes back on. And I ask the audience what the point of the exercise is.

This is the point of the exercise. I have a certain power – which is the amount of work that I can do in a certain amount of time. In non-standard units of “SUOCs” (step-ups on chairs) – I’ve done this before – it’s about 13. So what if someone were to say “well, it should be 26”? What could I do? I could cheat. I could saw the legs of the chair. I could nobble the audience who are doing the counting. I could train and seek to improve my personal best – and that might improve it to 15 – maybe even 16. But it’s never going to be more than that.

Of course, another way to get more work done in a short time. Is to get more people involved.

[Jokes about power about work – could I figure out what my power is in Watts?]

# The Hero’s Journey

So, this is what the hero’s journey is. There you are, sitting comfortably in your village. It’s always a village. And somebody comes along and tells you that you have to leave the village.  
  
Why? Because you’re the chosen one. This bad thing is happening and you need to stop it, or this bad thing is going to happen and you’re the only one who can stop it. It has been foretold.  
And you, you’re the only one who can do anything about it.

So, you have to go on a quest. You have to leave the nice place and go on a journey. You have to suffer hardships.

And at many points along the way, it looks like you don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t think you’re up to the quest. You nearly despair. But you don’t you carry on.

You meet people along the way. They join your quest.

Then you have a final showdown with the big bad thing. And even though it looks like you won’t win. You do.

But our lives are full of abandoned quests.

I bet you’ve all got an abandoned quest.

Maybe this is because we have a fixed idea about how those quests are going to go. We expect them to happen, in a kind of 90-minute to 2 hour time frame, actually some of the Lord of the Rings movies seem to go on for about thirty hours, but I don’t think they actually do.

OK, we sort of imagine that there’ll be some difficult bits in the middle. But they way those difficult bits in the middle get shown in the movies is that they are overcome.

[Jokes about Star Wars, Lord of the Rings]

# Wanton Go For It

This is an exercise from a very disreputable source. But I think it works – and we’ve left this bit until last because I want this to be the last thing that you’re thinking about before you leave the theatre.

### Hesitation

There’s something that you want to do. It’s something that you really want to do. But you keep hesitating. Maybe you’re putting it off, it’s a some-day maybe kind of thing. Maybe you get right up to the point of doing it. You’re looking at the sign-up screen. You’re thinking about downloading the app. You walk past the place every day, and you’re thinking about going in. You bought the book on how to do it. Maybe you’ve even bought the gear. But then. At the last minute, you don’t. You hesitate. You pull up short.

### Frustration

And this is very frustrating. This way that you’re behaving. It’s very frustrating. You’re annoyed with yourself. Maybe you’re annoyed with other people that you think are holding you back. Maybe you’re annoyed because

### Impatience

You’ve had it now. [Could I do this to Zadok the priest?]

### Wanton Go For It – sooner or later someone has to say fuck it

Some sociopathic tricks to help you say “Fuck it.”

# Heckling

This is shit

You are shit

Why should we listen to you, you’re a fat old man?

I thought this was supposed to be comedy – tell us a joke.

These heckles are shit

You haven’t created anything!

# What are we gonna do now? Looking after the biscuits

Things that you’ve actually done – biscuits and things that you’re going to do – descriptions of biscuits need looking after.

And they need looking after in different ways.

When you’ve made some really nice biscuits, people will try to take them off you. They’ll try to make money off of your biscuits. They’ll take credit for your biscuits. You need managers, lawyers and agents.

Nobody expects success. The great train robbers – they planned the robbery meticulously. Then they did absolutely no thinking at all about what they would do with the money.

This is why so many artists get either the proceeds of their creations, or their actual creations taken off them.

We’re terrible at imagining how we’ll feel.

Even though we see all the pop stars and actors and other people who’ve become successful struggling to pull themselves out of drink and drugs and relationships death spirals, we don’t imagine that things will be the same if it happens to us.

[Jokes about feeling bad, emotions, unexpected things]

# Ideas are shiny

That’s what attracts us to them. They are simplifications. Things get interesting when we get to the complications.

# Monkey Mind and Should-ering to a halt

Now you’ve made one biscuit, why not make a thousand biscuits?

You should be in business making biscuits. The most popular biscuit in the uk is the digestive biscuit. Maybe you could outsell that. And maybe you could do it ethically. Maybe you could make it a Vegan biscuit. Maybe it could use fair trade sugar.

A minute ago you were just making a biscuit.

This is what Buddhists call “Monkey Mind.”

And it’s what I call “shuddering” to a halt.

It’s your mind just making stuff up that you \*should\* be doing.

And notice what world this lives in.

It lives in the world of ideas.

You see monkey mind all the time in project management.

There’s this measure of how fast a project is going called velocity. And the only thing that anybody says when you tell them about velocity is “why isn’t it double that?”

When you show people working software, they mostly talk about what it doesn’t do.

And people talk software into existence. Do they do that in other parts of life?

I’m sure they do.

# Agreed activity

I got this idea from improv theatre Guru Keith Johnstone. It’s this idea of agreed activity.

The example I give – I think it’s the one that he gives in the book – is of a group of improvisers pretending to be on a ship and ignoring the pirate ship that’s on the horizon.

There was a response to this that I was kind of expecting that nobody ever mentioned.

Isn’t Agile agreed activity?

Stand ups, planning, show and tell.

Another concept from improv is “stakes” the audience are interested in stories where something is at risk.

If nothing is at risk – if there’s no danger for the crew because they’ve got an instant Pirate-destroying ray gun that works! Then that’s boring. If they have a ray gun that doesn’t work – or works in an unexpected way – they think it will shrink the pirates but it makes them bigger.

And it’s the same with agreed activity – there needs to be the right amount of jeopardy.

Too little – it’s just mopping the decks. Too much it’s just sparkling panic.

What you really want is calm, grimly determined preparation. With a constant eye on the pirate ship, where it’s going and what it’s doing.

[Jokes, about time-wasting, jokes about pirates]

# All creativity is a status transaction – all public action is a status transaction

Another thing that I learned from improvisation. All creativity is a status transaction.

When you do something. Especially when you do something creative, you will get criticism.

Most people have had one of these things happen to them. They’ve been singing and someone has suggested that they shouldn’t. They’ve been dancing, and someone has pointed and laughed. The brutal truth is that part of the reason for this is that when you do something. Especially something that is slightly more uninhibited, you’re shifting your status.

There are in fact whole television shows about this. The dark unpleasant side of talent shows is making fun of people whose talent isn’t as impressive as they think it is. This is essentially the same gag in Dragon’s Den and The Apprentice.

What’s the message? Stay in your lane. Don’t stick your head above the parapet.

But here’s a confession that I have to make. One thing that you can imagine that you can do, is that, by creating something, you’ll elevate your status. Isn’t that the point of being famous?

But, for example, inside an organisation, there are power structures. And most of the people in those power structures, don’t spend their time creating, they spend their time reasserting those power structures.

Naively, you might think they’re going to be happy when you do something innovative and creative. The reality is that they’re only going to be happy with you doing something innovative and creative if they can use it to elevate themselves in the power structure.

And don’t play the innocent. That’s part of why you’ve done this thing.

This is the difference between wanking and having real sex. Wanking doesn’t change anything. Having sex can have real consequences – well I suppose, so can wanking if you do it in public.

[Jokes about something other than wanking]

# Paintable Turds

OK, I could probably come up with a better name for it than that.

But I suppose baked into the idea that you can’t paint a turd is the idea of inherent talent.

This is something that people can deal with. They can deal with the idea that someone can be naturally talented.

Get a something. No matter how little and then paint it, decorate it, add to it.

But of course, here’s the problem with a turd. It’s a turd. Initial attempts at things are going, very obviously, to have serious problems.

I had this idea for the “turding point.”

It’s getting something to the point where there is a something. Something that you could call a short story. Something that you could call a performance. Something that you could call a joke.

[Jokes about painting]

# Stories

When I was a lad university studying ‘t philosophy there were just two kinds of philosophers – Greeks and Germans, and nobody talked about any other kind of philosophy. Nobody talked about Buddhism or Zen Buddhism or Daoism. And nobody talked about the French.

But one of the things that I was thinking about when I started thinking about talking about making things, is a distrust of stories.

And when you research distrust of stories – it’s a bunch of French philosophers whose names come up.

So, I started reading a book – it’s a picture book actually - about Roland Barthes.

And there are some idea that I got from that, that are very relevant to what we’re talking about.

One that Barthes talks about is there being a kind of societal story (this is philosophy now, so I’d need to check the language). And we have no reason to trust these stories.

Like the idea that if someone is standing on stage talking about the difference between ideas and reality, well, then, he should probably be an expert on the difference between ideas and reality.

And that story – which we all kind of believe, could go one of two ways.

It could mean that people who do have something interesting to say about the difference between ideas and stories, but aren’t necessarily experts, will just shut the fuck up.

Or it could mean that some people who have some experience will be forced to dress it up and claim more expertise than they really have.

But then there’s another way that stories are dangerous and this comes directly back to the idea of the biscuit tin and the biscuit. The whole point of this show is that when you get the biscuit, it’s made of different stuff than the idea.

It will embarrass you, it will shame you. It will make you feel stupid. Or the climactic moment when it made you feel good will go by in a moment, but it will have made you stand out from everybody else and you will have to deal with other people’s resentment, and also, now, you might see, that to make this thing good, you need a bunch of talents that you just don’t have.

And in order to make this thing a success, you have to make some decisions. Some of which might be catastrophic.

And timing.

Stories can fuck about with timing. Especially, stories can edit out the boring bits.

And stories can do montages for the bits that are full of painful learning.

[Jokes about timing, jokes about fairy stories]

# Making sense of data

So, I wrote about this in another book. I wrote about it in the chapter that I wrote for bosses. Because, when you manage bosses – actually, that’s one of the main things that you do as a project manager, you realise that they don’t really like bad news. Especially the young, naïve ones. They see bad news as embarrassing, they see bad news as frightening, they see bad news as threatening.

And I think in that book, I was tempted to try to say that bad news isn’t any of those things, but of course it is. Nobody wants bad news.

So, in the best spirit of adding to that, “Yes, and ing” the bad news. Bad news is also something else. Bad news is also data. I was tempted to say information.

But data isn’t information. In order to turn data into information, we need to make sense of it and in order to make sense of it, we need to gather it. We need to pay attention.

And information isn’t enough. We need to decide on what that information means.

And meaning isn’t enough. We need to decide how we’re going to act on that meaning.

I’ve got to admit. I hate fake American-style positivity – and look where it’s got them.

But part of what’s so hard to take about it, is that I think most Americans, most of the time, are genuinely positive. They are enthusiastic. If I said it, I’d be being sarcastic, or over-correcting.

What data do we get back in the creative process?

* How we feel – deciding how to feel about how we feel
* Reviews – do we take any notice of reviews or feedback?
* Involuntary reviews – the look on people’s face
* Popularity – is what’s popular always good?
* The opposite of popularity – fringe shows – nobody turning up.

[Joke about being able to see things through things]

# OODA loops

Observe – look at things.

Orient – not Leyton – tilt your head, move your body, put on your big boy pants.

Decide – right, this time, I’m really going to do this.

Act – Do it, do it! Do it!

Why is this so hard. Why is inspecting and adapting so hard?

Here are some reasons that I can think of.

The strongest human urge. It’s not sex, it’s not hunger, it’s not water. It’s not even air. It’s to keep doing what you’ve always been doing.

Procession. This is an idea that I got from ecology. When you’ve got an ecosystem that’s in a certain state – like a rain forest that’s been cut down. It develops in a certain way. It’s very difficult to stop it developing in that way.

OODA loops that I can’t get started.

Losing weight – because I like food! I like the feeling that food gives me.

Dressing better – because I like comfortable clothes.

These two are connected.

How to install an OODA loop – a public aspect to it. You have to say it out loud.

Make the conflicts and contradictions clear. Accept there are downsides.

Guardrails that you don’t want to hit.  
Eating – heart attack or stroke.

Dressing – being treated like a bum.

[Jokes about needing an ending, what are we going to do now?]

# Emotional Work

It’s not just game, but progressing with making something is, in my experience about dealing with negative emotions, like shame, fear and embarrassment, boredom.

The supposed distinction between guilt and shame is that guilt is something that you’ve done.

Guilt is when you’ve vandalised a bus shelter. Shame is when you look like a vandalised bus shelter.

If this were right, it wouldn’t be possible to feel ashamed of things that you’ve done. But there are of course things, that you should feel ashamed of.

This is the crux of this show.

Doing things results in unexpected, unpleasant emotions.

Someone on LinkedIn – said “If you react, you lose power.”

I responded by saying “If you don’t react, you’ll get run over by a bus.”

I see a lot of posts of the form of “We can’t choose what happens to us, but we can choose how we react to what happens to us.”

One of the things that’s interesting about this is that it’s a manifest lie!

There’s a whole bunch of neural pathways in our brains that bypass the frontal lobes and the neocortex and make us angry, of make us afraid – or make us horny. And we can guess at the evolutionary reasons why they happen immediately and don’t involve any thought.

If you’re standing around wondering how you’re going to look if you react to this life-threatening situation (a bus) rather than getting out of the way of it, then likelihood is that you aren’t going to be around to pass on those extremely thoughtful genes.

I’ve done some standup comedy. I’ve done just one gong show. A gong show is where a comedian can be kicked off by the audience if they don’t find them funny.

The gong show that I did was a relatively humane one. You couldn’t be gonged off immediately – when that happens it means one of two things – the audience are doing it because they can – they think it’s funny, or their immediate response to how you look or sound is “Oh God! No!” Guess which one you think it is? If it happens to you?

The gong show that I did, you had two minutes of grace. And when you were gonged off, they just turned out the stage lights so you could slink off in the darkness. As gong shows go, it was relatively painless.

But I never did it again.

I’ve talked to some people, braver and more dedicated to becoming successful stand-up comics than I was, who have won one of the more brutal gong shows – there’s one at the comedy store in central London where you can get gonged off immediately. I talked to one guy who’s won the gong show there. And the interesting thing was that he didn’t want to talk about his win. He wanted to talk about when he got gonged off after 10 seconds, or 20 seconds.

What I’m saying is that doing creative things will put you in situations where parts of your nervous system will react negatively. Sometimes, like me, your nervous system will essentially say “We won’t be doing that again.” And when it came to gong shows, I agreed.

But it’s important to understand that when you do creative things. One of the things that you’re doing is giving yourself emotional work.

What’s emotional work?

Emotional work is the work that you have to do to deal with your emotions.

# Giving up and going all in