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**MARSHALL**

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Sebastian Marshall

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

A cold urban desert landscape, the sun setting  
Shall it ever rise again?  
The nighttime, criss-crossed wires overhead, buzzing faintly with electricity  
That goes where? That does what?

Why is the way not illuminated?

What if the sun, then,

Would not rise unless we lifted it?

Took it upon our hands and backs  
Our palms and fingertips scorched for the effort

Nighttime giving way to sunrise  
The way illuminated

Burnt hands, sunburnt faces, eyes near blind from brilliance  
Throwing off the false gods with their faint passive buzz  
The sun was never supposed to set—let us lift it, accept a heroic scalding  
So all might bask in sunlight, oh too long has it been since the sun rose

## ***The Million Dollar Question***

A mix of confusion and awe as I step off the platform.

I must have made a mistake. But maybe a good mistake.

Birds caw and cicadas click gently, filling the warm afternoon air with sounds of nature. The train platform is open to the air and on the other side of the tracks is a high fence. Beyond it, a bicycle and walking path leading to a park.

Children are running around and playing in the park, but surprisingly quietly. Very Japanese.

Where am I?

"Su mi ma sen... Kasukabe... doko... waku des ka?"

The girl looked at the board of times, and pointed the opposite direction I came from. I had taken the wrong train and happened to step off in the middle of a quite rural station.

It's early afternoon, but the light is low since it's cloudy. It feels like a sleepy evening and the air is heavy with condensation.

The train I'm supposed to take arrives, but I let it pass. I'll sit a while.

There's a vending machine. I get a "Georgia Black Iced Coffee" for 120 yen.

It's exceptional.

People drift back and forth across the foot path. Little kids, families, older people.

It's so simple out here. Everyone looks happy. An old woman, maybe 70 years old, passes by on a bicycle. The basket on her handle bars is almost overflowing with something in white plastic bags.

Time passes.

Another train arrives. Leaves.

The old woman is riding back in the other direction, her basket empty.

I wonder where she dropped the things off at. Perhaps her daughter's house? Maybe it was some food and vegetables, and she dropped it off at her daughter's a kilometer away, tussled one of her grandkids' hair, and then bicycled back to her home.

A family passes. Father, mother, pre-teen daughter, six-year old son. The father is a little goofy in a likable way. He swings his arms broadly as he walks and his son is giggling. Dad stops swinging his arms, takes out a cigarette, lights it, takes a drag. Starts swinging his arms again, cigarette in hand. Then they're gone.

Another train comes, leaves. I'm still here.

A big group of kids, all with full bags of gear. Tennis? Camping? I can't tell. Some athletics or outdoor recreation type stuff. There's like 15 kids, maybe 9 boys and 6 girls. They wind along the path and are gone.

The cawing bird has stopped and gone away, but now a little tiny bird is chirping. The cicadas keep rubbing their wings together.

A second iced coffee. Another train arrives. Leaves. I'm still here.

A pretty girl, maybe 23 years old. She's not beautiful, but she could be: she's a just little bit too self-conscious. She's wearing a summer dress that's a size too big, her hair is a little messy. But she's pretty and she's smiling and seems like a nice person. Without knowing anything at all about her, I guess she'll get married sometime in the next two years and be a very good wife for someone.

Apparently this area is a major rest stop for train conductors. I see many of them walking around, getting on and off the train periodically. Or some sort of officials, anyways, with hats and white gloves. Probably train-related, I guess.



Maybe a lot of them live out here. It does seem like a nice area to live.

I think, this is what I'm giving up.

I don't get to have this.

It's nice to have it right in front of me, fully on display. This is idyllic suburban life. The people who live here commute to their jobs in Chiba or Tokyo and come home to this at night. Parks, trails, birds, cicadas.

People here can broadly understand each other. Everyone's a little different, but most people aren't *that* different. The people who live here probably have broadly shared values, their kids get educated in broadly the same way, they eat broadly the same sorts of food, and do broadly the same sorts of things. They put in long hours at work, but have lots of stability.

The jobs tend to be repetitive after the initial learning curve, and the days blend into each other. Wake early, walk through the clean country air to the station, ride to work, work blends together into long hours, come home and have a late dinner with the wife. Play with the kids if they're still awake, check in on them in their bedroom if they're asleep. Do picnics or go to a family restaurant or go to the movies on the weekend. Go to Tokyo Disney once a year.

Everyone here probably has 95% of their life make perfect sense to their neighbors. An eccentric hobby would be making your own fruit jam or woodcarving or having a home gym. And those aren't so eccentric ... even the things that are unique about people here, their neighbors can understand. And they get along well and are happy and at peace.

Another train arrives. Leaves. I'm going to stay here for a while and think. I'll get a third coffee in a little bit.

Last night I was working with a friend of mine on a campaign to get him \$1,000/hour rates in his profession, about 10x what he's making now. He's the most talented guy I know in his field, incredibly knowledgeable,

empathetic, good at his job. We're looking at people who his work would have a major leveraged impact on and at the kind of people currently making those \$1,000/hour rates, how they market and what credentials they have, and how my friend can systematically build those credentials and marketing channels.

I quit video games a while back. I try to build things now, that's my video game. I like trying to make money for other people. Scratch that, I don't like the trying, I like the doing of it. I like making other people money ... I think I enjoy it even more than making myself money, because I can stay distant from it. Buddhism encourages the center path—neither wanting nor aversion. Most people think Buddhism is about no desires, but they're kind of mistaken. It's about being very neutral about getting, but also about staying away from. It's easy for me to walk the center path with other people's objectives, very calm. Neither wanting nor aversion.

Everyone I meet and get along with, I try to make their lives a bit better somehow. Money tends to help, if a person is already running a business I can probably figure out a way for them to increase their volume or margins. I've got quite a bit of experience at it at this point.

Established businesspeople tend to take my counsel. I get paid pretty well.

But I also try to do it for free all the time. I want everyone who connects with me to be better off.

You know what's strange?

80% of the people I draw up plans for—plans that would clearly work—don't act on them.

It's like everyone fantasizes about ... whatever ... but once their fantasies start to become reality, they piss their pants and self-sabotage.

I'm not being haughty about it. I do it too.

I met a good guy recently. He has a chief passion in life, and he has a day job. He doesn't quite care for his day job, but he's good at it and is decently paid. I like this guy a lot, he's really a nice and good guy, so I drew up a complete business plan for him that'd get him 2x-3x what he's normally getting hourly and he'd control when he works.

I drew up exactly what the product, marketing, and delivery would be, and exactly how to do it. I volunteered to do a lot of the hard work, the "you don't know what you don't know" type stuff. I was willing to hold this guy's hand and really help him build another income stream and get him a lot of freedom and wealth.

I figured he could do his first run of it in 10-20 hours, but he'd get a lot faster once he learned the exact marketing channels, had the relevant accounts and contacts and marketing info, etc. I volunteered to do much of the hard work, said we could go 50/50 on the first run if he's interested (it would have only come out to a few dollars the first time, but it's more fun than playing video games) and he can just own 100% of the business and revenues after it's built.

Why not? It'd be fun.

He wasn't interested.

Well, he was, actually. Sort of:

"Still, I like your plan and I think it'd be a winner ... if I were prepared to put that much effort in. I've often thought it might work if I grabbed a few of my colleagues and worked together, though they all have a similar attitude to it not being their passion."

But his day job isn't his passion either. And c'mon, it's 10 hours. We all fuck around and piss away 10 hours here and there all the time in all sorts of nonsense. This would be an opportunity to work hands-on with someone he likes, to make some money, to have more control over his income and schedule. In 10-20 hours spread over a couple weeks. That's like an hour a day for a short time, and I'm willing to do most of the hard stuff (actually,

it's not so hard for me since I have experience in the marketing channels already, so the "figure it out" time is about 95% lower).

Another train arrives.

Leaves.

Still here.

Third coffee ... ? Not yet.

I look up from my thought and writing. A 20 year old guy on a bicycle, black T-shirt, spiked hair, glasses, red backpack. He stops his bike, puts it on the rack, walks somewhere ... perhaps he's coming to this station to take the train?

No, he's taking his phone out. Meeting someone? Probably.

He's not 20. More like 17, I see his face now and he's young. But he carries himself quite maturely for his age.

A 14 year old kid in skateboarding clothes sits down two seats over from me.

It sure is nice out here.

The people here broadly understand each other.

If you start trying to be really enterprising and expansive, very quickly no one understands you.

I suppose everyone's unique, but y'know what? I think most people aren't *that* unique. They have perhaps a unique mix of interests, but none of their interests are so crazy. If they are, it's 5% of how they live. The other 95% is normal and their neighbors would perfectly understand them.

If you set out building across multiple countries, continents, study constantly, and strike completely off the normal path, then how much of your life makes sense to people on it?

30%?

Less?

Last night, I was talking with my friend, the one I mentioned before about the \$1k/hour rates for. I said, "If you did this, I'm pretty sure you could get your first client at \$400/hour within 90 days." It would have to be his main thing for the next 90 days, but it would likely work.

Week 1: Research and list 10 people achieving at the target level he wants.

Week 2: Research all of their marketing channels and credentials.

Week 3: Figure out which channels/credentials might be attempted to build the fastest.

Weeks 4 and 5: Put in a couple hours each day trying to get those credentials.

For instance, make an amazing brochure with what you know in week 4, and then in week 5 print it on super high quality glossy paper at \$30 per brochure. (High quality paper is a super hack to come across as ultra-professional.) Send the brochure to the top 50 people you want as clients. Cost: \$1500. Follow up with them relentlessly. Offer free services to all of them as a trial. Get a testimonial when one of them inevitably says yes. See if you can use that to approach a key person in their organization and get discount purchasing on your services—sell in bulk. Get a testimonial. Go pitch to people who need elite performance that you're the official supplier for this major prestigious organization.

It would work.

If it didn't work, go back to week 3/4/5 and pick a new channel and new credentials. Approach magazines or TV or get endorsements or work with someone in a complimentary business and offer them 100% of your first

sale to them, or offer your services as a free bonus for anyone who makes a high-end related purchase.

It would work.

SOMETHING would work. If you kept repeating this cycle, eventually it would work. Maybe not in 90 days, but certainly at some point. If you wanted it enough.

My friend, his core goal right now is total financial freedom. I laid out a plan that would get him there.

But will he do it?

I ask him.

"But will you do it?"

He cringes and says ... "No. I won't."

"So, that's the million dollar question. Why won't you?"

He replies, "I don't know. I don't even like thinking about it really, but I'll try to. I don't know, fear? I have to confront my potential and the fact that I'm not living up to it? It doesn't feel right? I don't feel ready? I don't think I deserve that much? I think I'd have to study for longer first? I don't know."

I nod. I'm the same way. I also see opportunities like this, but have a hard time going for them.

About six months ago, I started trying to make one major upside shot per month at millions of dollars. You know, writing a proposal to get \$2 million from an enterprising government to build something amazing for them, or trying to start a bank, or trying to get a fast growth technology business funded type stuff.

One of those low-percentage/massive upside things.

A lot of times I want to throw up when I'm trying.

My buddy yesterday, we were talking about all of this at a Chinese restaurant, eating fried chicken, vegetables, and shrimp with excellent iced Chinese tea.

He said, "Sebastian, you're crazy but your logic works, the math works."

Yeah. I wonder if I'm crazy sometimes. A lot, actually. Why aren't other people trying? I keep layering success on top of success. My life is so weird and interesting and cool and crazy, but I don't have any particularly rare talent. I just do a bunch of stuff that might work, and won't hurt too bad if it doesn't work.

So why don't people do it?

Hell, I offer to make people money for free, draw up a simple, clearly workable, business plan, offer to help out. 80%+ of them don't take it.

A few months ago, a guy I'd been corresponding with for a while wrote to me. I had already asked him, "What are you working on? How can I help?"

He told me about a service business he wanted to start, and how it would have all these amazing benefits, and how he'd charge these ridiculously low rates to start to get his first clients, and then he'd be an entrepreneur.

I wrote back, telling him it was a great idea and giving him my thoughts on where to start, some points to consider, and otherwise just being really impressed. He's obviously thought this through and the ideas were workable.

Another train ... I want that third coffee now. One moment.

Ah, that's nice.

So I wrote to this guy who had this really wonderful set of ideas that were going to work.

I hit send.

Then I stopped and said to myself, "You know what? That really is a damn fine set of ideas."

And I wrote him a second email and said I'll be his first client, I'll pay exactly what he's asking, we can start whenever he wants, and I'll help him hammer out the concept a little bit too. He's a good guy and I think he'd have done good work.

He didn't write back.

Mind you, this is a guy I'd already known some, we'd swapped emails and chatted on the phone some. He just ... I don't know, who am I to judge? But it seemed like he had a dream, but as soon as his dream was about to become a reality he kind of pissed his pants or something.

I do it too, you know. Metaphorically piss my pants sometimes in the face of opportunity. Though I'm trying to stop doing that.

But why is it so hard to stop? That's the million dollar question ... .

And maybe this little countryside area is the answer.

The guy who said he's not willing to put in the effort to control his own income, to make more per hour than he's currently making, and improve his quality of life.

My buddy who said realistically, he's not going to follow up on that target plan to get him to \$1k/hour rates. (Though, we'll try to do something about that and kick each other's asses.)

The guy who pitched me on his service business and I said I'd hire him for it exactly as he described and pay exactly what he was asking, and be cool



about it as he worked the kinks in his business out.

You know what I think it is?

You won't be understood once you step off into the abyss.

The more you do it, the more people won't understand.

The second guy I mentioned, the effort guy? He's got coworkers right now he can commiserate with who understand him. The business idea I mentioned to him doesn't exist as far as I know right now, and there's a demand for it. I'm sure there's a demand for it. And his income is such that even with a low price point he could still make 2x-3x what he's making now and fulfill a market need.

But then what? Then he's the only guy doing this thing. No commiseration. People won't understand him as much.

And the more you do that, the more people don't understand.

If you keep taking all those edges that no one else will, pretty soon your neighbors don't understand you, can't understand you.

It's just you.

I didn't mention this earlier, but when I first arrived at this train station I cried for the first time in three years.

Normally I can't cry. Like, tears just won't come. I don't think that's a good thing. Control your emotions in public, but express yourself in private. Sometimes I've fallen down and wanted to cry, but I never could, no matter what happened and even if the situation called for it. Last time I did was 2008.

But I arrived here and I hear the birds and cicadas, and I see all the wonderful green land and clean air, and I see these wonderful, nice, kind

people living their lives, and who all really harmoniously truly understand each other.

And I got it.

It clicked.

I don't get to have this.

I don't get to have this.

I get something else. Something pretty amazing. But I don't get to have normal life.

And it looks really, really nice. A lot less neurosis and conflict and striving and fighting forwards.

They say the law of diminishing returns on money kicks in around \$60k or so.

I think they're crazy. They must be thinking only about their happiness as individuals.

I want \$40 million before I slow down. \$40M is enough that you can drop \$2 million on building something—a school, a bridge, an orphanage, a shrine, a monument, a massive work of public art—and it's only 5% of what you've got. If you see a deal of a lifetime, you can put \$10 mil into it and it's only 25% of what you've got.

I think I'll get there. I'll keep identifying the currents and ways forwards, building my skill, being useful, and I'll try to hit the required channels and deliver the value. And I'll just keep going. And it should work. Maybe I'm crazy, but the math and logic seem to work:

- 1.) Identify what makes people succeed at a massively high level.
- 2.) Do that.
- 3.) If that's not working, go back to step 1 and try again.

But the further ahead you go, the less people understand you.

What a fitting ending to my writing—a young suburban mom and her little daughter have arrived and are joking around and having fun. They look so happy and lighthearted.

I've done a lot and I'm really just getting started. But the more you do, the further away you get from being understood, from the joys of normal life, from being understood by your neighbors and backing each other up and living together harmoniously.

I cried for the first time in three years when I realized it.

The million dollar question ... why don't people take the large opportunities in front of them? Why don't they allow their dreams to become realities?

Because it means you won't be understood. And we need to be understood, fundamentally, it's so important to us.

Maybe that's not the whole answer. But a big part of it. I cried when I realized that's what it was.

Mostly happy tears ... well, it was a strange sort of emotion. Like when a hero dies at the end of the movie while succeeding in their quest. It's sad and joyful at the same time. There's loss, but what's being done has gotten done.

I don't get to have a normal life. I don't get to be fully understood by everyone around me.

Okay.

Stop crying. Start smiling. Keep building.

The train arrives. I get on.

## *The Weakest of the Great Men of All Time*

Me.

A few years back, I was getting complacent. I was a successful entrepreneur, in the top 1% for my age. Whenever I compared myself to people similar to me, it wasn't even close. I worked more, accomplished more, produced more, did more meaningful things, was traveling the world. I read more books, did more writing, was generally healthier and more disciplined, spent my time well. I was the top 1% for my age, and even better than that if you measured me against people from similar backgrounds.

I think it's easy for people who are doing great to get complacent. You look at the general sloth and laziness and complacency of most people, you see that you're achieving greatly, and you feel like you're so far above that. You give yourself a pat on the back. "Ah, yes, I'm doing great!"

I had a shift. I don't remember the exact day, but one day I thought to myself:

**"I'm not going to compare myself against people my age any more. I'm going to start comparing myself to the greatest men of all time."**

Instantly, I'd gone from top 1% of my peer group (people near my age, self-made, alive today), to the bottom 1% of the greatest people of all time. I started looking at Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Tokugawa, Meiji, Augustus, Trajan, Socrates, Aristotle, Confucius, Wellington, Rockefeller, Rothschild, Medici, Zhuge, Sejong, Salah, Shah Jahan, and so on.

**Suddenly I was not doing excellent; in fact, I was behind schedule.** In fact, I realized entirely that the path I was on did not lead to where I was capable of going.

**This is something I do *not* recommend.** It's neurosis-inducing. It's brutal. Mentally taking yourself off the top of a comfortable mountain and putting yourself at the bottom of a larger, more brutal, more intense mountain does not make for contentment, nor happiness.

People like to be better than those around them and better than their peers. I was, I really was. I was traveling the world and working on hard problems while most people my age were out drinking beer at parties with other kids. I was playing on a level far above my peers—but what was the difference in how much I built? Going from being top 1% to bottom .9%—is this worth breaking your back and straining for? Is it inspiring, going to be even better than the lazy, complacent children I was comparing myself to? Most young people these days have no real dreams, no strong ethics, no strength. They stand for nothing, they want nothing, they do nothing. Just by trying, even a little bit, you wind up better than most of them.

And it's easy to stop there, have a nice life, be very well off. Not me. You see, I have friends, colleagues, acquaintances who are amazing people, who I am honored to serve and associate with. But I don't have any peers. I don't know anyone who wishes to build as much as I do, who want to do as much as I do, who want to serve as much as I do, who want to be strong as I aspire to become.

I'm calm in this right now. It's not defiance, it's not a mighty roar. If anything, it is more like a shrug of the shoulders. Yes, I will become excellent. Because, why not become excellent?

But it wasn't that way at first. The way we mentally evaluate ourselves, our identity—it has such a huge impact on how we think, how we feel, and what we do. Taking myself mentally out of the top 1% and dropping myself into the bottom 1%—do you know how sickening that feels? Maybe you can imagine it intellectually, maybe, but I doubt I could show you what the emotions feel like. One day, I am feeling good, comfortable, happy, I am achieving and I am proud of my achievements, I am doing better than anyone would have thought possible for me, and doing well by anyone's standards. The next day, I am feeling neurotic, uncomfortable, unhappy, pressed for time, having achieved nothing of what I need to do yet.

I am on the bottom of the ladder—no, worse than that, I am on the top of the wrong ladder. I need to climb down, dismantling my old way of doing things. Giving up and forsaking the easy paths, scaling down my comfort, breaking the trivial desires in myself, giving myself over to greater causes, suffering. I had a small very successful thing going, and I dismantled it, and had nothing. And I will not lie, I will not tell you that I was always confident, that I felt strong all the time. Oh, no, many times I was second guessing myself, feeling stupid about my decisions. Things were dissolving, and the way forwards was not clear. I knew that where I came from wasn't the way forwards, but what now? I was lost.

I stood still in 2009, I rested and studied. In 1000 years, one year will not seem like a long time. If you hear that a great man was doing well in the from 1600 to 1620, had a bleak year 1621, and pulled through in 1622, you barely notice it while reading the history books. But, y'know, it's different when you're living through that year. A lot of times I wondered if I'd made a mistake, and what the hell was I doing?

Things happen slowly at first, then more quickly. I'm seeing things start to move quickly, things are falling into place. I have hit some of a stride, the next steps are starting to become clear. This is good. I would be lying to you if I said I believed in myself all the time. I still doubt, sometimes, but less often each passing day.

More and more, I immerse myself in what I'm going to do. I write specs and outlines for my books, I write articles daily, I am starting to contribute to magazines and other people's sites. I walk through dangerous areas at high awareness, observing crime and criminals, and thinking about how to protect the weak from them. I walk through the slums of Saigon, through the dangerous parts of Barcelona at night. I observe. I learn how to protect people. I draw up specs and plans for improving security. I'll have to get better at presenting, but I think I can recruit civilians to work undercover and make themselves look like easy targets for street criminals, draw them out and then crush the criminals. How could we completely dismantle street crime? Perhaps I could recruit some small girls who are martial artists to look unaware, but then have a team in place to spring if a bag snatcher or

pickpocket or mugger comes. What do we have to do to build that? Some insurance, perhaps, against injury. Would we need to get deputized by a city? How we would keep our team safe, this is dangerous work ... I work on this.

I dig through history books and strategy, I read the classics, I study the great men. I listen to audiobooks and learning while doing other things. I classify and reclassify things. I work out and try to combine different branches of social science. There's so much information available for free! How could anyone not dive into it? Neurochemistry is fascinating, maybe I could do some work in that. I study the systems of the body, I want to perfect my own. How to improve the lymph system? Digestion? Energy levels? What are the tolerance building effects of caffeine, at what rate is new adenosine produced when you have more coffee? How long do those levels take to return to normal when you stop?

I study social sciences, economics, governance. I am a strategist. I am trying to turn off emotions and sentiment and be rational when I study strategy. Yes, this particular policy is appalling to me as someone who believes in freedom, but it does help achieve XYZ goal. I must be neutral, study even successful people I don't like. My mind should not become an echo chamber.

I must train as a warrior, become better with my fists, improvised weapons, firearms. I should become a pilot, and learn how to sail and captain a ship.

I presented yesterday to the Director of Marketing for a prestigious local company with my new technology and engineering company. He was skeptical and unimpressed, I couldn't break through, and we were cut short after 15 minutes by someone more important arriving. Not good enough, Sebastian! I need to get better at communicating, showing the ideas I have in my head to people in a way that makes it meaningful to them.

I need to understand the nature of faith and religion. I have some faith, and no religion. I like religious people a lot. I need to read all the Holy Books, study the history of all the religions, and connect more with people from various faiths.

What will be the next trends in art, and how can I support them? How can we make the visual and sensory world into one that inspires people, pulls them to great heights? I think about what statues I will commission later, what artists I will patronize, what art I'll attempt to make myself.

I study charity and philanthropy. How can it be made to work? I draw and re-draw specs for a charity I might build. I publicly commit to giving a percent of my income to charity. Why not? I am strong, it would be trivially easy for me to spend some of my time helping the weak. Originally, I was not going to do so. Then, I decided I would, because why not do so? The aggressively mediocre, though, I am no friend to them.

How can I serve the strong and virtuous? Service is the way. What do great people require? How can I provide this? How can I stimulate great thinkers who have minor blocks to write more, to build more, to produce more? If I could inspire 1 out of 100 people I meet to produce at higher levels, then there will be a cascading effect through all of humanity. Everyone will be pulled up.

I have much to do. Who am I? No one in particular. But I'm working on things that matter. No losing sight, no getting comfortable nor complacent. Successful for my age? Bah! To hell with that. I keep the counsel of General Washington, President Jefferson, Shoguns Ieyasu and Yoshimune, Emperors Meiji and Augustus. My tutor in combat is Miyamoto Musashi, in economics it is Adam Smith, in strategy it is Carl von Clausewitz.

Would someone who reads this call me arrogant? Perhaps, but they are mistaken if so. There is no arrogance. I know who I am, what I am. Greatness is not something you are, it's something you do, it's something you work towards. I, me, the entity, the human, the flesh and blood, the chemicals and electricity—this is nothing of particular significance. But I'm unified, mind and body, to work on hard and difficult and great problems, to serve, to do more, to be more, to become strong and stronger, to inspire, to aid, to protect, to build, to write, to learn, to establish.



It is hard to say this publicly. I have drawn a line in the sand—if I fail, it will be known. The people who want all to be mediocre will perhaps hate me, would love to show me as an example of over-reaching and the danger of that, would love to use me as a story of why you shouldn't aim too high. I brace myself. I breathe. No defiance. Calmness, acceptance. No arrogance. I am not a great man, I simply aspire to work on great problems and great things. I'm no one in particular.

Is it too early to put myself at the bottom of the company of great men? Well, who is anyone to say but me? Someone will emerge from this era as the greatest strategist; I will work towards it, because it is a worthy goal. I will serve, build, inspire, connect, defend, protect, establish, write, experiment, teach, help. Or perhaps I will not, but I will try to. Over the next years, perhaps I can put hand over hand, slowly ascending, not as myself individually, but as the conduit for the works I do. There are problems and opportunities all over the place, the world could be much different than it is. Most people either do not see these at all, or see them and accept it as the way things are. Not me. I build. I try. Counsel me, ancients, share your strength and wisdom with me, so that I might become stronger. I will do my part of the bargain. We will see how the rest shakes out.

Again, I should say—I do not recommend this path to you. I do not recommend it to anyone. But if you take up this road, you are welcome to call on me as your counsel and strategist from time to time. I serve the strong and virtuous. I turn my focus to things that matter.

## ***PRINCIPLES: BE PRINCIPLED***

"Virtues are the fruit of self-discipline and do not drop from heaven of themselves as does rain or snow."

—Zengetsu

### ***Don't Know What You're Doing with Your Life?***

When I was younger, I knew I didn't want a normal life, but I didn't know what I did want.

I thought about it, and I decided I'd start building skills, resources, experiences, and mobility. I figured that I'd eventually figure out what I wanted, and then older me would be happy that younger me got cash and skills and resources and contacts.

The following is a set of general advice:

- Starting to study and develop your own ethical system
- Making good friends, advisors, and mentors who are strong and decent people
- Learning universally useful skills
- A few credentials
- Putting money in the bank
- Getting your credit up

- Studying history to learn what's possible
- Establishing good habits that'll carry you through life
- Becoming very fit and healthy
- Learning how to think

... and so on.

So here's some things I'd recommend, in no particular order:

- Get the book *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa. This is one of my favorite books, and it should help you develop some of your ethical system and learn about how to channel raw potential. It's also a really good and fun read.
- Read the sequences on LessWrong—Go to <http://www.lesswrong.com>, click sequences, read almost all of them. These will teach you how to think better.
- Go to Wikipedia once a week, and put in a historical leader or era of history, and start reading. I like Sengoku Japan, and think Hideyoshi Toyotomi and Ieyasu Tokugawa are good people to study. I like Rome and Britain too. Renaissance Italy is good. The founding of America is good. Shah Jahan, Saladin, the Prophet Muhammad, all good. Zhuge Liang and Sun Tzu, good. The Meiji Restoration in Japan. The Teutonic Knights, founding of Prussia, and how it became a warlike country. Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington. John Rockefeller, Cosimo Medici, Lorenzo Medici, Meyer Rothschild, all good to study. There's lots more, too. Don't get overwhelmed by this list, just occasionally plug a name or era into Wikipedia, and start learning. You don't know what's possible unless you study history. Also, I mostly gave you statesmen and businessmen, there's lots of people from other fields worth learning about too (though you probably shouldn't emulate "pure artists"—people who do art in addition to other things, like Thomas Jefferson, tend to do well. But pure artists often have miserably bad lives, so you don't want to start by emulating pure artists ... it's not worth it)

- If you're taking general university courses, take accounting. It's really useful, but it's too boring to self-study. It's probably the course most suited to the current university system of all of them. Take accounting.
- Start learning general social skills. I recommend you read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—but don't read it cover to cover. Instead, read one chapter per week, and then practice the ideas from it. That's what I did, and I saw massive increases from that.
- Learn how to negotiate. Read 4-5 books on negotiation. I think *Critical Conversations* is probably the best one to start with. Get comfortable haggling, but realize that good negotiation *far* transcends haggling.
- Oh, here's a pragmatic note. You're American, yes? Okay, do you have a credit score? If not, here's the easiest way to get one. Go to your bank, put a small amount of money in a certificate of deposit, and get a secured loan against it that pays off automatically. Basically, the CD will pay you 2% interest or whatever, and the secured loan will cost 3% interest... so if you put \$1,000 into the CD, you lose \$10 to do this, but it massively increases your credit score (it's automatic payment of revolving credit, which is good for a few reasons—I won't get into the exact details, just trust me and do it). You can do it with as low as \$100 I reckon, I did it with a \$1000 and it was good. After a few months of this, you'll have an established credit history. I'd recommend you apply for the Amazon credit card, which gives a big discount on books, so you can get \$50 of free books or something. Then you get points which you can use for more free books later. Much later on, when you have higher spending, you'll probably want an AMEX gold card, but secured loan + Amazon credit card is probably enough for now. **Do this ASAP, I lost a lot of money once when I couldn't get a mortgage on a very good buy because I didn't have a credit history.** Trust me on this. By the time you start thinking of needing credit, it's too late to build it. Do it now.
- Never, ever, ever get into debt. Just don't do it. If you have debt (student loans, credit cars, etc), pay them off as soon as you have any cash at all. Debt is okay for a mortgage on a house, and that's about it. I think education debt is a bad idea personally, and that universities exploit young people who don't understand the value of money yet, but I'm in the minority on that. Maybe take university debt if you need to, but much better to save and pay cash if possible. If you take on debt,

absolutely no buying toys or partying with your money until your debt is paid off. Debt *cripples* a man's ability to do what he wants with his life. Stay away from it at all costs.

- Train yourself to do arithmetic fast. There's more value in being able to add, subtract, divide, and do percents fast than in any other kind of math. Whenever you see numbers, try to do them in your head before using your calculator. It sucks, but it's very useful when you're doing a business deal or shopping and it'd be out of place to pull a calculator out. You really want to be able to do relatively large numbers fast in your head... when you see food for sale, divide the price by the weight to see the cost per unit of larger and small containers. Stuff like that. It sucks at first, but then it becomes second nature. This is very useful.
- You'll never go wrong learning programming or any other kind of technology.
- Learn to type fast. There's many, many games that teach you how to type fast—you can get ones that explicit train you how to type fast, or games where you input complex commands by typing. This will serve you well, you're going to spend lots of time typing in your life. You have to know how to touch-type without looking at your hands.
- Consider taking up a martial art. We had a thread on the site recently with feedback about which is best, you can refer to that. I still recommend Krav Maga, but there's lots of good discussion and feedback on other arts.
- Go to the [bodybuilding.com forums](http://bodybuilding.com/forums), and start reading everything about nutrition and training. Don't bother with supplements for now, supplements don't do very much unless you've got the fundamentals down. Study the sections on losing fat and building muscle, so you understand how to do it. Gradually improve your physique. Every morning, I stretch and do situps. I usually take a long walk, swim, hike, or lift weights 3-4 times per week, and sometimes every day. The time it takes to exercise is more than made up by needing to sleep less, having higher energy, and thinking more clearly.
- If you try to become excellent, normal people will judge you. Fuck them. Seriously, I said it and I meant it. Fuck 'em. I gradually quit drugs, drinking, tobacco, refined my diet, quit sugar, etc, etc.—every time I heard discouragement and crap from people. Fuck them. When I dropped out of high school, I heard discouragement and crap from

people. When I dropped out of university to start building a company, I heard discouragement and crap. When I started traveling, I heard warnings and discouragement and crap. If you try to be excellent, you're going to constantly be hearing warnings and discouragement and crap. Listen a little if the person seems to know what they're talking about, but don't be discouraged. If you're trying to be expansive and they're telling you to be cautious, they're probably wrong and you're probably right. No one else says this, so I'm happy you emailed me—I'll say it. Fuck them. They're not bad people per se, but people do terrible things. I quit sugar or starting eating healthier and people want to drag you back down, "C'mon, have one slice of pizza... it's just a bite of cake... c'mon, you can have one drink..."—I still can't explain exactly why people do it, but I think it's to protect their own identity. As you become excellent, you show them what they *could* be, and it *hurts* them. Viscerally. So don't be too upset, your excellence hurts people to some extent. Expect constant discouragement from normal people. Eventually you'll build a social circle of high-achieving, ambitious, expansive, cool, worldly, giving, encouraging, awesome people, and then you'll be successful and normal people will envy and hate you, but you won't care because you'll have transcended it. So yeah, discouragement and warnings and crap? We all get it on the road to success. Don't take it too seriously. Don't hate people for doing it, but don't give in either.

- I strongly recommend tracking your time for a while, to see where it goes.
- Start filling up your dead time. Bring a book or audio with you when you're running errands, commuting, things like that. Life is precious, either explicitly relax, or do something valuable. Staring off into space slackjawed doesn't relax/recharge. So either take some breathes and really really relax in the dead time, or read, or listen to audio.
- Definitely start listening to audio if you don't yet. This is huge, you can pick up massive lessons in no addition time for it. Audiobooks, audio programs, podcasts. Your phone probably plays MP3s, if not, buy a phone that does or an iPod, buy a used one if you don't have much money. Used they're quite cheap. Listen while you walk, while you get groceries, while you wait in line, while you're commuting, things like that. That converts dead time into good time. I'd

recommend Brian Tracy's "The Luck Factor"—probably my all-around favorite program for re-listening ability. Tony Robbins is good. There's some good podcasts out there—37Signals has some good podcasts. I listen to lots of audiobooks too. This one is big, start listening to audio if you don't.

- Take a few deep breathes once per day. The cost of this is trivially easy, and the results are very large compared to the energy cost. You'll feel more alert, awake, stronger, and healthier.

Those are some general guidelines for what to do if you're not sure what you want yet. Start building skills, credentials, money, contacts. Study some history to see what's possible. Study rationality and learn how to think. Learn practical skills, like how to do arithmetic fast, type fast, get along with people, negotiate. Establish good habits.

These all prepare you to be really exceptional once you do have an excellent mission or goal at the end of the road. Once you find what you want to do, you'll be very happy you prepared.

## ***Make Change First, or Build Self First?***

Should you focus on success by changing things, building yourself first, or perhaps working on both at the same time?

I guess the biggest question is, what's your main goal in life? What do you live and breathe for? Professionally, I'm working to be the greatest strategist of this generation. (It'll take me another 20+ years, but I think I've got a realistic shot at it) On a family level, I'm looking to build an international dynasty, a family like the Medici, Rockefellers, Rothschilds, Tokugawa, something like that.

Those goals come first and second, then I have other goals related to service, making change in the world, being a guardian of society, doing

science, doing things professionally, etc. For me, I try to make my actions serve my larger roles.

So, what are your larger roles?

It's not easy to pick. It's not like a 10 minute exercise. It's something you go to a cafe with a notebook and pen and sit there staring at the page with a coffee, thinking for an hour. Even one hour isn't enough. You do the think-with-coffee thing dozens of times, hundreds of times if you need to, trying to discover what matters to you, what you can dedicate yourself to, what's important, what works... .

Most people never do this, and their lives are useless mediocrity. I don't mean that in an elitist way—no, just the opposite actually. I think anyone *could* do meaningful things, and most people don't. It seems like you're doing meaningful things, trying to do meaningful things. I know it gets frustrating, I get frustrated a lot of the time too.

So, should you stay in [your home country] or go to where there might be more opportunities? I guess it depends on what your highest goals are. There's no "right answer" to that—it's not like doing math, where there's a right answer. It's something you've got to choose. I'd say head to a cafe with a pen and paper, order a coffee (or tea, or juice, or whatever) and really think about what matters to you, what you want to accomplish, who you want to be. Again, one hour you might not get anything worthwhile. Or you might. It's something I try to do fairly a lot, at least once a week. I think it's time really well spent.

Personally, I want to change some things in the USA, but right now I'm not strong enough, not wise enough, don't have much in the way of resources, am not educated and learned enough ... so I'm outside of the USA, traveling and learning, becoming a better strategist, learning and setting out to start building my family. I do try to make some change at the same time as doing personal stuff though—I try to reach out and connect with good people, serve them, help them. I don't think making change and building yourself up are mutually exclusive.



What matters to you the most? That's probably the first thing. I think there's no shame in saying "this place doesn't suit me, I will go to somewhere with more prosperity to build my family"—if you choose to make your family come first, that's totally honorable and a fair decision. On the other hand, if you try to reform and build your nation, that's honorable too. There's many ways to live a good and meaningful life, but I think one of the most important steps is to think on what a good and meaningful life would be to you.

Be honest when you do it. Don't write down stuff that just sounds nice, or be like what you think you "should" want. Write what actually comes down to you. Put the time into this, and the questions you've got will eventually become more clear. Not necessarily right away—of course not, this is about finding what you're going to make the main cause of your life, what you live and breathe for. It doesn't necessarily happen fast. But it's time well spent, even if you don't get fast results. If you spend time thinking with pen and paper, you'll come to some conclusions. Be honest with yourself when you do it, do it for just yourself and nobody else when you're writing about what really matters to you, and that helps a lot.

If/when you do know what matters most to you, then the rest of the points are just cost/benefit, expected value, planning, forecasting, things like that. Which is much more concrete and easy to navigate. So, first figure out what's most important to you. Then it becomes a lot easier to figure out how to get there from here.

## ***How Do You Determine Which Values to Live By?***

**1.) How do you determine which values are the ones to live your life by?**

Slowly.

I put my ethics and values together slowly.

I think most people struggle with getting an ethical system or value system because they're looking for one overarching principle that makes everything else make sense. Frankly, I don't think there is one. Even if you did have a clear single core goal—like to follow a particular organized religion as perfectly as you could—there's still lots of judgments and areas you'll have to study and evaluate. Even if you had a core, overriding, most important, overarching goal ... there'd still be lots of other questions to resolve.

So you put your ethics together slowly. At least, I did, and it seemed to work.

The first thing I recommend is getting a clear understanding of cause and effect, and the outcomes of different actions. For instance, you might think "trust" is a good ethic, and if you trust people, things will work out. However, you discover quickly that people either forget or lie later when there's no written contracts, *and it actually leads to disharmony and fighting and bad things*. So you start writing up contracts and operating agreements, and you see that people then refer back them later, and things are better.

It'd be impossible to evaluate whether "trust people and don't worry about written agreements" or "write down agreements and sign them" is better without data. If you were guessing, you might think the goodwill from the first way is worth the chance of miscommunication or dishonesty. But you'd be wrong. Writing things down is better across the board, does not imply a lack of trust, and in fact leads to better operations and better agreements in most business contexts.

So how do you put an ethical structure together? Slowly, with data. Is it better to trust people and not worry about agreements, or to write things down? Almost always, the latter. I know, because I've been there, and I've seen other people go there. It actually leads to more clarity and less friction and better working relationships.

## **2.) Are your values set for life? If not, how to change them?**

No, my values are based on my experiences and my expected outcomes. If my expectations turn out to be false, I change.

I used to believe that marketing was wrong, was evil, was a bad thing, and that substance should win out over style and hype and nonsense. I mean, I really used to believe that strongly, passionately.

No one could convince me otherwise, though I was seeing people who could tastefully promote work and market do better than me and others who wouldn't promote/market.

I was really stubborn about that one for a long time. It took me forever to change my mind. It was only when I learned about Nash Equilibriums that I changed my mind.

Learning about Nash Equilibriums was a crazy paradigm shift for me. It turned the whole world on its head. It answered so many questions.

For instance, if you think that during the Age of Sail it was wrong for merchant companies to force open ports when the locals wanted isolationism and no foreign trade, then you don't understand equilibriums. Here's why—if even a single trading company—*just one!*—is willing to use arms and force open isolationist ports, then they're going to be able to negotiate trade treaties and monopolies and quickly grow to being the strongest merchant company.

In other words, if it hadn't been the East India Company, it would have been someone else. It was almost guaranteed by the nature of technology and the landscape of the day. "Respecting isolationism" was not really a viable ethical strategy, because if even 2% of the merchant companies didn't (that's only 1 out of 50), that 2% would have massive opportunities and victories and profitability, and grow to be the largest company. Due to the hostilities during different eras between the Spanish, Portugese, Dutch, French, English, and others, there was no authority strong enough to enforce some benevolent neutrality.

Thus, I don't think "respecting isolationism" can really be a viable position to take, because the end outcome will be the same ... if not your merchant company, then another one. And if only the decent, well-meaning

companies refrain from opening closed ports, then it's the most vicious that succeed in doing so and come to power.

So, marketing—marketing happens, it exists, and *someone's going to do it*. Now, there's things I won't do because of my personal opposition to them, but in a world where marketing and advertising exists, you need to do it because that's the equilibrium. If you fight against equilibriums, you lose.

As for changing your values, you'll want to constantly get exposure to new ideas and get a better understanding of how things actually work in the real world over time. Previously I thought something like, "Most marketing and advertising is only something that bad people do, so I won't do it" to "Marketing and advertising is part of the landscape, it's going to happen regardless of how I feel about it, so the best products and services should be marketed and succeed and reach people." (I'm simplifying a little, my views were a bit more complex than that and are a bit more complex than it now, but that's the gist of it)

### **3.) Why not just become a complete hedonist?**

Ah, so I haven't mentioned my core ethic yet. My core ethic, my overwhelming goal, is expansion of the human race as a whole. I think we should turn all the unalive matter in the universe into live, settle other planets in the Solar System, then other systems, then other galaxies if possible. Technology, science, medicine, commerce, trade, business, governance, law—when good, this helps us expand.

I'm for population growth, and more people. And ideally, people getting better over time. Healthier, smarter, more disciplined and hard working, better control over emotions, etc, etc, etc.

How I got here is complex, it would be a long discussion. But to answer your question of "Why not be a hedonist?" I answer—because really, who gives a shit about having more serotonin and dopamine in your brain?

Learning a little neurochemistry went a long way for me in defining ethics. Low happinesses are just a mix of biochemicals that humans enjoy. Do you

know how cocaine works? It's a triple reuptake inhibitor, which means some of your pleasant biochemicals kind of pool in your brain instead of getting dispersed.

When someone's goal is to get more serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine pooled in their brain, I think ... wow, that's it?

To be quite frank, I don't think I'm particularly a big deal and I don't think my pleasure on any short term timescale is a big deal. I look at the extremely long odds that life had of being created on Earth, and of our species getting to where we are ... and I think, y'know, I'm going to continue building this chain out. More humans, more technology, settling more area, harnessing and molding more energy and matter to suit human purposes.

I do differentiate personally between "low happinesses" and "high happinesses"—this isn't ultra-scientific, just how I personally think about it. Low happinesses like contentment, sensory pleasure, etc. I don't think those are important to pursue.

High happinesses—triumph, camaraderie, epiphany, wisdom—those I think are worth pursuing.

Now, this is where things conveniently line up nicely. High happinesses—triumph, camaraderie, epiphany—they happen to line up very nicely with my core goal of the expansion of humanity. There's no real conflict there, so I'm not forced to choose.

The low happinesses do frequently conflict with expansion, and also conflict with the high happinesses ... .

To that end, I say that you need enough low happiness to function. I actually rate it as very important—easily as important as having good respiration or circulation. Without enough low happiness, you stop functioning well. With none at all, you die sooner or later.

So it's really important! Don't get me wrong, I think it's as important as your blood circulation or breathing/respiration. But as the meaning of life ... ? Well, I think that's kind of laughable. Lots of smart people disagree with me on this, so don't just take my word for it. But hedonism as a life goal ... it just seems nuts to me.

**4.) Even if you delay gratification, you are still a hedonist if what you do is for yourself. And if not for yourself, for whom?**

One thing that helps a lot is to study alternative ethical systems, ideally by immersion.

For instance, the Japanese view of work, or the Vietnamese view of the value of life ... . I could maybe describe them in text, but it'd be hard to do. To some extent, you've really got to experience it.

And when you do, it's easy to think, "Huh, I didn't even realize that I had the American view of work ... . I thought that was just *the way things are*, not just how my culture does it. Huh."

Depending on how much you've traveled and studied different eras of history, you probably have lots of views about "the way things are" ... that isn't actually the way things are. Just your culture at this particular moment in history, but everyone thinks their culture is "the way things are."

So, if not for myself, then for whom? Well, I'd recommend you study some other cultures. I personally am really, really grateful for the chain of ancestors that came before me, that brutally struggled and suffered and scrapped and scratched and clawed forwards to create the next generation and protect them long enough for them to live and thrive.

Y'know, when I hear people trash their parents, it shocks me. *They created you! That's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for you!*

Even the worst, most terrible parents in the world did something really amazing for their kids—they created them.

Thus, I do feel some gratitude and a bit of a debt to all those who came before, and part of that debt is continuing the line of life forwards. Y'know how hard it was for people to have and raise kids throughout history? When I hear people saying they don't want kids, not because they're working on world-changing stuff like Albert Einstein, but just because they think they'd be happier without kids ... I don't know man, it shocks me. There's been a chain of people brutally struggling and striving forwards throughout history, and you're comfortable breaking that chain? That's ... that's ... well, that's something I'm not comfortable doing.

So, I do feel a bit of a debt to my ancestors. Life grows, or life dies. I'm a believer in life, and growing. Just as my personal preference, I rate humanity-as-a-whole as higher than any other species yet discovered, and I've got humanity's back, generally speaking.

I don't mind suffering. I'll be alive, I don't know, 50 years, 70 years, 100 years, whatever. I'm going to try to live as long as I can, and I've got a tentative goal of 110 years, but who knows.

Does getting a nice mix of dopamine and serotonin during those 100 years matter for me? I'm just one little organism, one human, amongst the vast expanse of time and space in all directions. I don't mind suffering, and I put myself under lots of suffering to build my capabilities, to create, to do more ... I'm not always able to reach my objectives, but happiness? Pfft.

Ah, don't get me wrong. You need base happiness like you need good bloodflow and oxygen and things like that. But yes, I do rate things much more highly than myself, and especially more highly than my own pleasure. I mean, pleasure? As a goal? Seriously? Really?

## **5.) What do you do if you lack direction and inertia?**

Basically, I would start with the assumption that you're going to find something very meaningful for you sooner or later, and that you'll be grateful at that point if you have resources, skills, ability, connections with people you respect, things like that.

As I suggested previously, if you don't know what you're doing, here are some useful things to be doing:

- *Starting to study and develop your own ethical system*
- *Making good friends, advisors, and mentors who are strong and decent people*
- *Learning universally useful skills*
- *Earning a few credentials*
- *Putting money in the bank*
- *Getting your credit up*
- *Studying history to learn what's possible*
- *Establishing good habits that'll carry you through life*
- *Becoming very fit and healthy*
- *Learning how to think*

*... and so on.*

I think it's rare that you find an answer to all of life's questions ... even if you convert to an established religion, there's still near infinite amounts of judgment calls you've got to make on your own and answer for yourself.

So, don't put off building good stuff because you're not sure why you're building. Build now, and I promise you'll be really happy with yourself later for having built.

I will suggest that you always try to understand how things actually happen in reality. It's hard to make an ethical case for a particular action if you're just guessing what will happen after taking that action. So, definitely study how things work, and experience different things.

I'd recommend you travel to different cultures and get some immersion in them as soon as feasible. You might consider going somewhere in the developing world where life is cheap, there is no rule of law, and basic stuff you take for granted doesn't exist. (Though, be careful if you do) That's a



perspective-changer. Japan is a perspective-changer for almost anyone. You might consider having some good, long conversations with intelligent people who are devout in the various organized religions.

Perhaps study societies that were highly successful, and try to understand their ethics. Confucianism is very interesting and has influenced in me in a number of ways, Japanese bushido/samurai philosophy is interesting and has influenced me, as has Roman history. The various Middle Eastern, Persian, Arabic, and Turkish empires and the life in those, the Jewish Empires before the diaspora. Obviously late Roman Republic/Early Roman Empire has a lot of value, as does the British Empire.

But while you're learning, start building. Eventually you're going to find causes that matter to you, and you're going to be happy that you're more skilled, more disciplined, more connected, and have more experiences and resources when you do.

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## ***PRINCIPLES: HUMANITY***

"Having only wisdom and talent is the lowest tier of usefulness."  
—*Hagakure*

"Ability without a sense of duty, purpose, or service does very little."  
—Sebastian Marshall

### ***Chase Meaning, Not Happiness***

I see such an obsession with happiness these days. It's sad.

There's different sorts of happiness, but the one people seem after the most is the lowest, saddest form of happiness—a pleasurable mix of biochemicals.

Do you know how cocaine works? It's what's known as a triple-reuptake inhibitor. It makes some of the happiness chemicals—serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine—cycle out of your brain more slowly, giving you wonderful feelings.

And—*so what?* You've got more happiness chemicals in your brain so you bliss out? How could anyone in their right mind think this is the meaning of life?

I try to do things that I find meaningful, ideally on the largest scale I can. I'm not there yet, but I'm trying. I still need to get stronger in other areas, get more disciplined. But I'm working on it.

I figure, if I chase meaning, the happiness and fun largely takes care of itself. To be sure, some happiness is important—it's important the way good respiration, circulation, and good immune system is important. It's part of being a healthy, functioning human.

But as a meaning of life? Really? Optimizing your biochemistry for happiness? You're kidding, right? When I read about people who devote their lives to happiness, I feel like I've walked on stage of an obscure dry humor comedy, and I'm the only one who doesn't get the joke. *Happiness? Really?*

Don't get me wrong—happiness is important. I'd put it right up there in importance with good respiration, circulation, and immune system. You should spend some researching the basics of happiness, and do enough of that stuff to be happy enough. And once a satisfactory level of happiness is achieved, why not do meaningful things? You could build, you could work on great things, you could become single-minded for a cause—these are so much better than the lowest forms of happiness.

Happiness? Pfft. **MEANING.**

## ***My Definitive "Meaning Over Happiness" Essay***

**How do you measure meaning if not in terms of happiness?**

What's meaningful is a personal decision everyone makes. I'd recommend everyone learn a lot about a variety of things, analyze themselves and their talents, and think about what seems meaningful to them through careful, as-unemotional-as-possible analysis.

For me, I like humanity and I want to see our species thrive. I think a significant long term priority has to be diversifying our habitat—getting it so not all humans live on Earth, moving out through the Solar System and hopefully the galaxy after that.

That's going to take a mix of science, technology, engineering, commerce, governance, and a variety of other important things. I also think art has very high value in inspiring and expressing emotional states to people. On a personal level, I also enjoy beauty and aesthetics, but I'd prioritize it a bit lower than expansion.

**Aren't things that create more happiness for a longer time for a larger number of individuals better than those things who lack those qualities but are proclaimed to be personal achievements anyway?**

I don't think so, no.

See, it's hard to have this discussion with anyone from modern Western culture, because happiness-as-a-goal is so deeply engrained that people don't even realize it's just a subjective call about what's important. Actually, most people never critically examined happiness at all!

For me, I had a breaking out moment when I studied other cultures that had goals other than happiness. If you could talk to a 1600's samurai and tried to discuss with him what's important, he'd say loyalty, duty, and honor. If you said, "Wait, what about happiness? Isn't that more important?"—well, he'd think you're insane. He couldn't express why—it was just a culturally inherited belief.

Well, the same thing happens to me when I say that I prize, for instance, duty and loyalty over happiness. If I'm duty-bound in a situation, I'll aim to perform my duties as best as I can, happiness be damned. A lot of times, the best solutions aren't necessarily the largest number of happiness solution. (Again, trying to explain this to a person who grew up in a happiness-is-most-important culture risks making you seem off your rocker, just like a modern Westerner trying to explain that happiness is more important than duty and loyalty would seem crazy to a samurai.)

**Does the scope of happiness make happiness meaningful to you or not?**

I'm not sure what this question means.

If you're talking about different kinds of happiness, I think there are some, yeah. There's "low happiness" which is just a pleasurable mix of chemicals—dopamine, serotonin, etc. Honestly, I don't think having a certain biochemical mix is very important.

Imagine Rome in the year 150 AD. Now image a 25 year old farmer on April 20th.

Does it matter *at all* what his dopamine and serotonin mix was? I think, pretty much no, as long as it wasn't too low.

Mind you, I do think happiness is important. I think it's as important as respiration or blood circulation or other key health factors. That's really, really important. Happiness too low makes you ineffective, and happiness to zero probably becomes fatal. So, happiness is important, just like good health is. I just don't think it's worthy of being worshiped as the meaning of life.

**What are achievements good for if they aren't good at facilitating happiness?**

I'm on Team Human. I want to see our species thrive and grow. A lot of times, the people that pull humanity forwards do immense amounts of suffering and go through utter brutality to bring their views forth. I think that's worthy.

**Imagine you wouldn't experience any pleasant or unpleasant emotions and would have to decide rationally what to pursue (assuming that is possible at all). Then what you want to do with your life?**

That's *exactly* the question I asked myself, and it's what I'm working on. I don't usually laundry-list all the stuff I'm working on, because it's crass, but

I'm in near constant training, producing, and looking to connect with people doing fantastic things. I'd like to see commerce improve, science improve, governance improve, culture improve, communications improve... I think the easiest way to have a huge positive impact on humanity is to have children and raise them well, so that's a priority for me.

I've been trying to lay the groundwork necessary to do things at a really high level, and largely succeeding... mind you, this isn't glorious or anything. It's just a bunch of scratching and clawing to improve my habits, consistency, health, knowledge, and ability to produce and serve. I don't have all the resources I need to do what I want to do yet, so I still do a good bit of contracting, building, selling, getting assets, and otherwise getting paid.

I've been trying to develop my scientific ability and learning more about experiment design, statistics. I'm particularly interested in neurology and biochemistry type stuff, but I'm really quite an amateur in that. So far, a lot of the experimenting I've been doing is pretty low level stuff (again, amateur and working on lots of other things), but I've figured a couple interesting things out here and there.

I write this site as a sideline thing I'm doing. I've been developing my mind and trade more. I read... I don't know, somewhere between 100 and 200 books a year? (Well, a third of those I listen to on audio, and another third I "fastread" which is somewhere between reading and skimming)

I've tried a little drawing and painting, but the mediums aren't for me. Writing works okay, though I'm still developing my craft as a writer.

I've connected with a few hundred people over the last year, which is good. Many excellent, exceptional people. I'm trying to figure out how to keep track of all of them and everyone, the people I've met are so cool and so good, but man, it's hard to keep track of 300 new interesting people in my life. I really need some sort of CRM-ish-software or relational database or something.

And then yeah, I'm traveling through pretty much every country in the world, seeing how their governance works, how their law enforcement works. I go for long walks through cities while listening to audiobooks, noting the mix of businesses in each region, what people wear, how they're dressed. I look at the law enforcement and military presences. I look for shipping docks and railroads and border crossings. I've been intending to meet government officials more often, and I've started doing that—in Mongolia, I toured the Mongolian Stock Exchange, Clearinghouse, and I also met some people at their Bureau of Tourism and Central Bank.

I've been meaning to walk into an Embassy or Consular and ask if I can be of service to the American State Department somehow, but I've been too ... shy or something to do that thus far. In '09, I applied to be a reserve officer of the LAPD (volunteer police officering), but unfortunately I wasn't accepted at that time. That's something I still intend to do—I think intelligent law enforcement and foreign service are the backbone of domestic and foreign affairs, respectively. I'd like to put some time in protecting and serving.

Beyond that, I study law kind of casually and amateurishly (I've taken a couple courses in it, almost became a lawyer ... I read regulations and decisions sometimes for the heck of it). I've been doing lots of reading on governance, statesmanship, law, and lots of history.

Business, of course. I've written about that plenty in the past. Lately I've been putting *a lot* of time into getting better at distribution and marketing, which I'm starting to think are of as of core importance to business.

Finance too. I was on a finance kick earlier this year.

I don't normally like to write stuff like this, because it tends to be taken the wrong way. You know, my friends and confidants and mentors and colleagues know that I've got a silly and ridiculous amount of ambition to do things, build, accomplish, and serve. But this is a public facing blog, and you know, people ... I don't know, a lot of times they don't like stuff like this.

You asked what I'd do if emotion didn't matter? That's exactly what I'm trying to do. I fall short a lot of the time, I still waste probably around 3-5 hours a day on average, but I'm getting better.

**In short, I think:**

- Low happiness is a bunch of chemicals, and I don't think it's particularly important beyond getting it to a satisfactory minimum level.
- I like humanity, I think our species is cool, and I want to see it thrive.
- I'm applying myself to build and serve that goal and do what I can.
- But everyone picks this on their own. My way works for me, but everyone picks their own terminal values and life goals. I do think it's worth seriously critically examining happiness as a core goal though—did you *really* pick happiness for yourself as the most important thing, or did you pick it by accident from your culture? Maybe some things are more important than happiness? I think it's worth thinking about.

## ***Rule an Empire, Fistful of Rice***

I'd like to introduce you to my all-time favorite comic series, *Lone Wolf and Cub*. It's incredibly deep philosophically.

Ogami Itto, "Lone Wolf," is on a quest for revenge after something terrible happened to him. With him is his little son Daigoro. Itto is doing assassinations to raise money for his quest.

In Volume 3, *The Flute of the Fallen Tiger*, Itto comes across a fallen samurai named "Sakon." Sakon left being a samurai and now makes money begging and playing carnival games. With his money, he eats nice food and drinks, and he cares very much about people. He buys little Daigoro a toy.

Daigoro is in training by his father for the quest they're on. Itto cuts the toy in half with his sword. Itto says, "The top spins and stops. You make it spin



again. But Daigoro, our road never stops. The day we stop is the day we are split asunder—like this top." Itto goes to leave with his son.

Sakon says, "Wait! Have you no pity for your son? Don't you want him to be a strong, gentle, upright man, with compassion for the sorrows of the world?"

Itto replies, "I understand. I *know* why you bought him the top. But the path we walk is as I just said - ." Sakon interrupts Itto and says, "Walking a half mat. Sleeping, one mat. **Rule the nation, a fistful of rice.**

**"No matter how many people you kill, countries you steal, fortunes you plunder, or titles you earn... you only cover half a straw mat when you sit, one when you sleep, and your stomach only holds a fistful of rice!"**

Sakon pours himself a big drink of highly potent alcohol sake and drinks it in one gulp. Itto already refused alcohol from Sakon earlier—Itto doesn't drink.

Sakon continues: "Why not see this world through human eyes? Why not live a human life for your son?"

Itto doesn't reply.

Sakon continues, telling Itto we only get a limited time on Earth before dying—why kill for money? Why not live a normal life? Sakon says, "Abandon the assassin's way!"

Itto replies now: "It is the path we have sought and chosen, father and son together! **There is no going back, no going astray!**" Itto explains that they're on a quest, and says, no more questions!

Sakon grows stronger. "Killing for money is evil in the eyes of the world! ... I cannot permit your assassin's road!"

This leads a long, well-drawn duel between Sakon and Itto, both fallen samurai. It's both exciting and beautiful, but many pages long. We'll skip

past it—Itto wins by throwing his katana at Sakon, catching him off-guard.

Sakon falls with a crash. Itto says, you had me beat. Why didn't you strike? Sakon says, "I thought it was a draw with your style of swordsmanship ... ."

Itto says, no, you would have won! Sakon says, still confused, "I lunged forward, sure I would win. But for a samurai to throw away his sword at the first stroke ... ."

**Itto: "If the sword is the samurai's soul, yes. But to me, a sword is just a tool for killing, no more sacred than a club or a shard of rock."**

Sakon understands. **"Heh heh heh... and I thought I'd given up being a samurai. I guess I kept the soul... heh... too funny. You're a holy terror, Ogami Itto!** The perfect assassin, abandoning body and soul... seeking life in the moment of death!"

Sakon reminds Itto, **"Walking a half mat, sleeping, one mat. Rule the nation, a fistful of rice. But... but... when we die, a fistful of ash. That's all we are, Ogami Itto!** Abandon the assassin's road! Think of your child's future... return to the world of the living... head my dying wish."

Sakon dies, Itto retrieves his sword and walks on with Daigoro. He thinks to himself, "It is said a path cannot be taught, only lived. But there are some lessons that sear the heart ... . I'll never forget your words ... ."

**Sakon doesn't understand, can't understand Itto. He thinks Itto is motivated by money—but he's not. The money is a tool for Itto to complete his quest. The same as his sword, or a club, or a shard of rock.**

Sakon thinks he stands for something—poverty and love of humanity—but he's unable to devote himself fully to it. He fills his belly with food and drinks alcohol. Because Sakon isn't devoted to a quest, he can't win in the fight—Itto throws his katana, something unheard-of for a samurai. The

katana was regarded as the soul of a samurai, for Itto—it's nothing. Just another tool.

Sakon has not devoted himself entirely to one goal, not given himself over to one purpose, so he can't understand Itto. He says, "No matter how much money, your belly only holds one fistful of rice." It's true, but Itto doesn't eat food for enjoyment, he eats for nutrition. He doesn't cloud his mind for drink. He is unified, mind, body, and spirit, for the road that he walks with his son.

Sakon has a mix of principles including having a nice life, compassion for others, treating people well, and samurai ethics. Because he stands for not one thing, his goals are conflicted. He misunderstands Itto, who stands for just one thing, the quest he lives. All else is secondary to Itto. Itto has many principles, but he never loses sight of his quest.

If Sakon devoted his life exclusively to having a nice life, he could have had an amazing life. If he devoted his life only to serving people, he could have been an amazing servant. If he devoted his life only to protecting people, he could have been an amazing guardian. If he devoted his life only to being a samurai, he could have been the best samurai he could have been.

But he didn't. Thus, he had a slightly nice life, some food and alcohol, had some fun with people, tried to help some people, but in the end—was ineffective and died without accomplishing much.

Still, Itto respects people who have principles and are willing to die for them, and looks to remember Sakon's lessons. Itto is a good man. Sakon, too. But Sakon is conflicted, serving many masters. His belly and drink, protecting people, treating people nicely, operating a carnival game, being a samurai—these can't and don't work together. He doesn't walk one road like Itto. A man like Itto walks one road, and gives up much of his humanity to do so. He does not have "a nice life"—he eats for nutrition, sleeps for rest, but does not eat delicacies, stay in nice places, or drink alcohol nor smoke tobacco. Itto protects the innocent when it doesn't interfere with his quest because he is basically a good person, but he does not let this role interfere with his quest. He lives samurai ethics—but abandons them when necessary

for his quest, occasionally starting a brushfire, avalanche, or ambushing an unarmed man.

This is similar to real life. People who look for a "nice life" and don't stand for anything in particular often don't understand the single-minded obsession of people on a quest. You hear normal people sometimes say, "He's got 10 billion dollars? Why does he need so much? You can't buy anything with that you couldn't for a small fraction of it." But a billionaire becomes a billionaire almost never for love of nice food and alcohol. The normal person is correct—you can only spend so many millions on a nice life, and in the end our belly only holds one fistful of rice.

No, most people who accomplish amazing things do it because it's the road they walk. Yes, if you rule the nation, your belly still only holds a fistful of rice. But rarely do people who found nations care about what's in their belly. They wouldn't reach the height of greatness if they did.

Normal people can't understand this. People with mixed and conflicted goals can't understand this. And occasionally they try to position themselves between the single-minded person and his goal—this usually ends in tragedy for the normal person. When someone eats, sleeps, breathes, walks, works, lives with one purpose, he will usually achieve that purpose. Barriers erected are climbed, gone around, evaded, or—if necessary—destroyed. Rule an empire, a fistful of rice? Indeed. But people who build empires know that best of all.

## ***Why Build? Because I Like Humanity***

Why build? Why work on science, entrepreneurship, writing, building a family, and so on?

And I think the best answer is because I like humanity. Humans are cool. Oh, there are some knuckleheads, heck maybe there are even more knuckleheads than there are really cool people.

I'm really, really grateful to the scientists and engineers and inventors and builders and artists that came before us. We'd be living in forests and jungles and caves if it weren't for them. And I'm grateful for the long line of my ancestors that survived and thrived to lead to me. I figure some of them must have lived under really desperate circumstances, gone through all sorts of struggle and strife and misery, but they still were able to have and raise their children that eventually became my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, and so on. If one link in that chain isn't there, I'm not here. So, wow, I'm so grateful for my ancestors doing that.

So I'd like to pay it forwards. I'll build some stuff that will be used in our lifetimes, and then will help all generations henceforth. I'll have some children and help build the next line of humanity, and all lines after that.

I like building. I like humanity. I'd like to see us grow and thrive and expand. I can't really think of anything else I'd rather do with my time.

## ***"There Isn't One"***

**What's the difference between a person who is genuinely very useful and a person who just does useful things for people all the time because he wants to appear to be very useful?**

There isn't one.

It's always interesting for me to see how people weight intentions and results.

Me? I'm like 99% results/1% intentions. If someone consistently acts in an excellent, upstanding, thorough, efficient, consistent, helpful in order to ... boost their reputation or get paid or get promoted or whatever, *that's totally cool with me.*

This is contrary to how most people in society think. They'd prefer someone with altruistic motives who is a bit of a screw-up than someone with self-

interested motives who behaves well.

One counter-point would be, "Well, you can count on the natural altruist more"—and y'know what? It's a good point, but I think oftentimes it's not a concern.

By doing an action repeatedly, eventually you *become the kind of person who does that action*. If you repeatedly ask, "What can I do to come across as helpful?" and execute on that, then you *become a helpful person*.

Intentions are worth looking at, especially when someone screws up. If they screw up with good intentions, it's less of a damning thing than if they screw up with bad intentions. But in the end, it's still a screw up either way.

If someone performs well, treats people well, does well—then their intentions don't matter all that much, as long as they can be expected to continue to consistently act that way.

The natural implication of this? If you're not already useful and helpful, you can just do actions in order to appear useful and helpful anyways. You'll wind up becoming useful and helpful as a result.

## ***PRINCIPLES: EMPIRE***

"Not what I have, but what I do, is my kingdom."  
—Thomas Carlyle

### ***Machiavelli, Republics, Republican Troops, Kings and Emperors***

**What are some book recommendations for democracy and other forms of government?**

You might consider Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which was well-read and well-admired by most of the American founding fathers. I just read "Machiavelli, Violence, and History" which is a short essay -

<http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hrp/issues/1992/Minter.pdf>

Machiavelli is widely misunderstood because his most striking quotes—like, "Better to be feared than loved"—are taken out of context. The essay I just linked you to talks about violence in pursuit of the common good, things like that which can be a bit of a head-trip.

*The Prince* is one of those books that you have to think critically on, you won't agree with all of it, but there's some interesting insights. The most interesting one I got from there was reading about how the soldiers of a

republic tend to be more loyal than a monarchy's soldiers. Republican troops, thus, fight more fanatically, are more willing to die, less likely to retreat, and more likely to keep fighting even if it looks like the paymaster can't make their wages for a while.

I read that book around the same time I was learning about Napoleon, so it shed a lot of light on things. Republican troops (I use "republican" the way most people use "democratic"—for instance, America is a republic with some democratic elements, not a democracy—there hasn't been a pure democracy in a very long time)—anyways, republican troops tend to fight harder, fight more fanatically, give up less easily, and require less quality of life and less pay and less wages to fight on. Napoleon did a lot of other things right militarily, but I think an underappreciated reason for his success is that he was running an imperial republic for government instead of a monarchy.

I suppose I should define terms again—"imperial" has two potential connotations. First, of expansion and empire. This is the modern usage of the word.

There's an older usage of the word, from Latin "Imperator"—that's where the word Emperor comes from. But an Imperator wasn't an Emperor under modern usage of the word emperor. "Commander" is probably the closest modern translation of Imperator, though it's not quite right—an Imperator would have both civil and military authority to the end of a common cause.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperator>

So it's funny, sometimes you can wind up in a government structure that I'll call an "imperial republic"—that's a government with republican elements (i.e., some democracy/voting to choose representatives, then the representatives meet and have some legislative authority), but also has a very strong executive branch run by an "imperator"—Napoleon, I think, would qualify as an imperator, and indeed, he took the title "Emperor" later in his life but never "King."



Interesting, isn't it? When Napoleon re-emerged for the 100 Days, it was the Emperor Napoleon I vs. King Louis XVIII ... oftentimes, the distinction isn't made in history between an emperor-style "Emperor" and a traditional monarch "King"—but there is a difference. While "Emperor" and "King" are used more or less interchangeably in modern usage, people would have understood the difference back then. While Napoleon was to some extent a monarch later in life, he was always more of a commander than a monarch. Emperor, y'know?

Oh right, I'm off on a tangent, but I brought it up about Machiavelli and soldiering and republics. The problem that "pure republics" with a weak executive tend to face is dissent and the inability to get things done. That happened in the United States a few times—notably with the Nullification Crisis, which Andrew Jackson smashed, and then the Confederate Succession, which Lincoln smashed.

Between those two events, America was transitioned greatly from a "pure" republic towards a semi-imperial republic (again, I use "imperial" mostly in the classic sense here, though even the classical emperor also had connotations of expansion/empire).

Machiavelli wouldn't be a bad place to start analyzing the differences between monarchies and republics, as he covers history without much embellishment and doesn't care if he looks good or bad in the process. Perhaps before reading *The Prince* you would do well to check out that Harvard article/essay I linked that discusses violence as a means to common good—it's fascinating stuff. It's totally taboo to even talk about these days, but this is how much everyone through history analyzed and thought up until at least the end of World War II.

## ***The Building Blocks of an Empire***

**If you were going to build an empire, how would you do it?**

I've been thinking on this lately. I want to choose the imperial path first, last, and always. Every decision I make ought to be to the end of building. We can get into the "why" of it and philosophy another time, but I think pretty much the meaning of life is to expand, the mid-term goal of humanity ought to be to spread outside of Planet Earth and diversify our habitats a little bit, and I'd like to participate in doing that.

That's a really long discussion though, so we'll save that for another time. Yesterday I was in a really nice cafe and I was thinking, "You know, I want to always be choosing the empire-building way. When choosing between options, when prioritizing, when picking activities, when picking projects—I want to choose expansion and empire."

I thought about that and I don't have any really good heuristics for what's conducive to expansion and what isn't. So today I went to a cool little Vietnamese restaurant where the owner is friendly, got some coffee and tea and bread, and started brainstorming a little bit.

I think the following are the building blocks of an empire:

## **The Imperial Path**

### **People:**

- Family—Friends—Counsel—Network
- If conflict started today, who would be on my side?
- People knowing of me.

### **Accomplish & Credential:**

- Credentials—Elevator pitch—Prestige—Relations—Memberships with Factions
- Written works—Events—Art—Science—Accomplishments—Governance—History-changing
- Portfolio—Blurbs/testimonials—Reviews—Soundbites

**Self:**

- Skills—Habits—Routine—Regular environment—Knowledge—Intel
- Diet—Sleep—Time spent (quality)—Emotion/mood—Beliefs—Goals
- Purpose—Loyalties—Muscles/body composition—Biochemistry
- Rituals and customs—Celebrations—Things like Marshall Salute

**Resources:**

- Cash—Cash flow—Paper assets (stocks, bonds, etc)
- Grants of rights and privileges (passport, limited liability, etc)
- Tools—computers, clothing, software, other technology
- Real estate for use (rented or owned)
- Real estate for investment (rental or business)
- Processes—spreadsheets, workflows, etc.
- Ownership stakes—Royalties—Digital assets

**Organizations:**

- Commercial—Nonprofit—Governance—Security—Cultural
- Guild—Private club—Other private organizations—Religious/spiritual
- Banks—Universities—Investment groups—Small groups (regular dinner party, card games, etc)

Any of these sections could be broken down into significantly greater detail. You could probably write an entire book on the vast majority of elements here. Hell, there's got to be dozens of valuable "Skills," each one of which could have its own comprehensive book on it.

This is really a "barest elements" sort of analysis. It leaves out some of my core philosophies. For instance, "Out-compete by out-serving" isn't written explicitly, but would fall under Habits, Routine, Beliefs, Loyalties, etc, etc.

It strikes me that the "Self" category is the most important, because with the right mix of skills, habits, spending your time wisely, etc.—then you can build the rest of everything else.

There's a lot of feedback loops in here. The more you develop yourself, the more you're going to accomplish and get credentialed, which is going to make it easier to meet and connect with good people, which is going to help you develop yourself and do more, which is going to get you access to resources, and so on.

At the highest levels, it seems like you need good relationships (or at least, not bad relationships) with important organizations. If you're an American doctor and doing medical research, you're really going to be hurting if the FDA or AMA dislikes you. It'd be good if they liked you and wanted to work with you, but it's at least necessary that they don't dislike you to the point of wanting to shut you down even if you're doing good work.

Prioritizing from the above list becomes a bit easier. I might flesh it out a little more, but I got a lot of clarity from making the list.

## ***Some Differences Between Being Low Born and High Born***

**So, I expect this one to be controversial. If you're a very sensitive person that likes to get offended, you might want to skip it. If you're in a hurry, feel free to skim the bold parts.**

I didn't come from all that much. My great-grandparents and grandparents were dirt poor. My parents dug out of it a little bit, though I was born when they were young and unestablished. My kids will have more opportunities.

I wish to do much. How much is possible? To know, you have to study history.

So I study history. And looking at the history books, I see a number of differences between people of low birth and high birth.

Now, before I go any further, I recognize this is unfashionable and controversial to talk about in this day and age. But it's definitely a real phenomenon, and I've never shied from the truth even when unfashionable. Also, I think after reading this you'll see that the majority of high born characteristics are superior to low born characteristics, and it's worth learning, training, and becoming better.

You have to do things correctly and consistently in order to become wealthy or powerful *and hold on to it for any significant amount of time*. People can become wealthy or powerful through evil means in the short term, but it's unsustainable in the long term.

Before we go any further, let's define wealth and power.

**Wealth is anything that's suitable to humans that humans want.** Reshaping matter and energy into forms more suitable and desirable to humans produces more wealth. There are near unlimited possibilities to reshape energy and matter into more and more suitable forms. **Thus, there is near unlimited wealth available.**

Wealth, honorably gained, is purely a virtuous thing. If you steal, extort, embezzle, or fraudulently gain control over things people want, that is bad. But gaining wealth by building, innovating, shipping, transporting, taking risks, making the world beautiful and more suitable for humans—this is a purely virtuous thing.

**Power is mastery over yourself and your surroundings.** Again, power is virtuous if virtuously gained. Definitely, the power that comes from self-mastery and self-discipline is purely virtuous. Power over surroundings also tends to be a good thing—you are more powerful if you have a roof over your head and an umbrella so you don't get wet in the rain, if you have books so that you become more knowledgeable, if you know how to write,

if you understand numbers, and so on. You become more powerful by cooperating with other people in an honorable way. And so on.

**The first difference between low born people and high born people are their attitudes towards wealth and power.**

To put it bluntly, high born people generally pursue wealth and power, while low born people do not. Funny enough, a lot of times high born people actively put down and say bad things about wealth, while accumulating more and more of it. For instance, a notable insurance salesman campaigns for having higher estate taxes, while lobbying the government to make life insurance payments tax free—then he includes in his advertising that his insurance lets people get away from taxes.

This two-faced behavior is perhaps the largest turnoff of high-born people—they advocate for equality and unity while establishing political positions of great power. They find roundabout ways to enjoy all the privileges of wealth while simultaneously condemning it. Yes, I find it insufferable, but we can still learn from it. **The first difference between low born and high born people is that high born people are generally steered towards getting wealth and power. (Ignore what they say, look at they do—they're drawn to power)**

I think this, in and of itself, is probably the biggest and largest difference. If you actively say, "Okay, I will get wealthy. I will move matter and energy around so that is more suitable for humans, and I will gain a greater mastery over myself and my surroundings"—in that case, you will become wealthier and more powerful. The decision to do it is a big part of the process.

**High born people expect to be treated well. Low born people frequently expect to be treated poorly.** And thus, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you grow up watching people snap to attention and treat your parents well, you expect it. Thus, paradoxically, you become kinder, friendlier, and less adversarial. High born people tend to have an expectation that the situation will work out favorably for them, that people will do right by them, and that they're going to get what they want. Thus, they do. Low born people frequently have an expectation that the situation

is going to go poorly, that people do wrong by them, and that they're not going to get what they want. Thus, they don't.

**High born people generally are more friendly, giving, and helpful than low born people.** I understand this goes against what you see in movies, but it's true. Generally speaking, someone who is successful or was raised by successful parents is more likely to do you a favor, introduce you to someone, or otherwise help you out. Low born people tend to be more paranoid and stingy about everything.

**High born people don't look to get paid back immediately.** They know that you help people who seem friendly with a good character, and a lot of them will do right by you someday, sooner or later. Many won't, but that's okay.

Personally, I've found 90 out of 100 people you do right by kind of forget about it and are ungrateful. 9 out of 100 are gracious, friendly, and cool about it, and then that's the end of it. But then that last 1 out of 100 people changes your life in an amazing way. I'm not looking to get paid back when I do something nice for someone—it's like, do a lot of nice things, and good karma will catch up with me sooner or later. My best friend in the whole world I met because he sent me a long question at a company I was running, and for whatever reason, I was inspired to take two hours to write a long, detailed reply with lots of instructions. Since then, he's helped me put together some really important business deals, we've been snowboarding together in Japan, I stay with him whenever I'm in Los Angeles, and I've learned so much from him.

There are dozens of people I've helped out that didn't even say thanks, but who cares? It doesn't matter. **Low born people feel very quid pro quo about things—they expect to get back right away, and will often remind whoever they did a favor for that they did a favor. This is tasteless and turns people off.** High born people tend to know better—spread the good around, it'll catch up with you sooner or later.

**With that said, high born people are much more comfortable getting compensated for their skills, ability, and contribution.** A girl born to a

wealthy family will go to a cafe and say, "I made some paintings. Can I hang them in here with price tags on them?" A girl born to a poorer family will be more shy about trying to sell her work, despite the fact that she could use the money more. This is really a shame. **High born people are more comfortable asking for money or compensation in exchange for providing value.** People of high birth do more nice things for free with no expectation, but are also more comfortable selling themselves and their work.

**High born people define themselves less by money and possessions.** Thus, you see less asinine purchases. Well, you might see someone who is making \$2,000,000 per year buy a \$200,000 sports car, and you think that's asinine. But that's only 10% of what he makes in a year, which isn't so much compared to paying \$25,000 for a car when you make \$40,000. Low born people tend to be more insecure about not appearing well off, so they put a greater fraction of their income into consumption and showing off. This is, of course, not conducive to getting wealthy.

There's lots more, and examples in both directions. I could write another 10-20 other points off the top of my head, but this is getting along. Though, I've got one big important one here:

**Low born people often try to do too much in one generation, and wind up over-expanding because of it.** If you're familiar with Japanese history, compare Hideyoshi Toyotomi to Tokugawa Ieyasu. Hideyoshi had entirely won and unified all of Japan, but then—inexplicably—he immediately declared war and tried to conquer Korea and China. As a result, his family was overthrown shortly afterwards by the Tokugawa, who then ceased expansion, solidified their position, and ruled Japan for the next 250 years.

Hideyoshi was of low birth, he came from nothing. Really, he's an inspiration, but he's also one of the greatest lessons to low born people—*don't go too far*. Hey, don't mistake me for someone who is overly cautious—I'm trying to become the greatest strategist of this era. But note that strategist is a captain and advisor, not a general role or a king. My children will be high born, which means they'll see from a young age these lessons—yes, it's virtuous and appropriate to build wealth and become powerful.



Expect to be treated well. Be friendly, giving, and helpful and don't expect anything in return. Yet, when you've got something of value, offer good deals and get compensated. Don't define yourself by money and possessions. There's an unlimited amount of wealth and power available, you can gain it by building, inventing, innovating, cooperating, trading, and doing other virtuous things. Don't be stingy and scramble for the last penny, leave something on the table. But don't be too shy either, build and receive a lot in return, because why not do so?

I've learned a lot of these lessons, but many of them too late. I'm still shy about picking up the phone and calling a stranger to ask for help (though, getting better at it). I'm still shy about picking up the phone and asking someone how I can help them (though, getting better at it). I'm still shy about walking into an executive's office and telling him that he should give tens of thousands of dollars to my company to build things for him (though, I'm getting better at it).

But I still have many of the low born mentalities, so I'm going to be careful not to go too far. A captain, not a general, not a king. If one of my sons has the ability, drive, and desire to be a general or king, so be it. He'll be learning lessons at age 5 that I started learning at age 19. When he's 14, he'll know much of what I knew at 24. But not me—no over-expanding, no going too far and losing it all. I'm fit to be a captain, an advisor, a high-ranked servant, but I don't aim to rule. There's still too many screwed up low born ideas in the back of my head.

There are exceptions to this—John Rockefeller was low born, but epitomized all of the high born traits to an exceptional degree. Alexander the Great was high born, but overly expansive and lost his empire because of it. But as a general rule, you'll see these differences. I'd say aim to a most excellent captain, advisor, servant, or merchant if you're low born, but be careful looking to rule. The ideal pedigree to rule starts being constructed young.

**Recap, some generally helpful things to work on:**

1.) Consciously decide to pursue wealth and power. These are virtuous things, and there are unlimited amounts of them available. Do it honorably.

2.) Expect to be treated well, and act accordingly. Have a calm expectancy that people will agree to do things your way. Don't argue or get upset, but do calmly insist that things be done correctly.

3.) Be friendly, helpful, and giving to as many people as you can. Don't be modest—ask people how you can help them, introduce people to each other, look to do good things. Make book recommendations, buy people small gifts, hell, even wash the dishes if you're a guest in someone's home. Things like that.

4.) Don't expect to be paid back or remind anyone you helped that you helped them. Don't even mention it again. Keep doing good things, don't remind people you did something nice for them. It's insufferable.

5.) Yet, feel comfortable asking for compensation when you can bring value to the table. Sell some things you produce, sell some of your skills, get paid. It's cool to ask people for money as long as you know you can deliver 10x the value of what you're being paid.

6.) Don't define yourself by money or possessions. Define yourself internally by your ethics, what you stand for, what you mean to the world, what you mean to people who you truly care for, what you intend to do.

7.) Be careful about over-expanding—you don't have to do it all in one generation. Have children, raise them well, have your son take over where you left off. There's only so much a person can accomplish in one lifetime, whereas even a modest dynasty can accomplish much, much more.

**Oh, I forgot one—high born people generally don't talk about this stuff.** Whoops—guess I ain't gettin in polite society any time soon. It's going to be weird having my kids in with polite society and be high bred while I'm so rough and uncivilized. Ah well, life is a circus, as they say. Every dynasty's gotta start somewhere.

## ***On Brilliance and Consolidation***

In any field, brilliant maneuvers are remembered and celebrated. But brilliant maneuvers without consolidation amounts to nothing long-term except the empty glory.

We could look at military commanders for an example. There's been some in history that have shown remarkable amounts of brilliance in pioneering tactics and doing crazy maneuvers. These sorts of things go into the history books, like Hannibal Barca's actions or Napoleon Bonaparte's.

Despite Barca and Bonaparte being remembered for their brilliance, *it's worth remembering that neither of them won in the end.*

We've talked about over-expansiveness in the past and not trusting your successors/family to keep up with your work, which is a common flaw that afflicts low born creators and leaders. Today, I want to look at something a little bit different—on brilliant actions and consolidating actions.

One time, when Hannibal's troops were pinned down by the Romans and it looked like all would be lost, he came up with a brilliant scheme. He waited until nightfall, and then took all of the oxen in his camp, tied branches and tinder to their horns, and lit them on fire and drove them off.

The oxen panicked, as can be imagined, but the Romans—normally incredibly steadfast—also panicked. They saw loud noises and flamed horns emerging from the night—it must have felt like the Depths of Hell were opening.

During the confusion, the Carthaginian forces were able to escape.

This was a *brilliant* desperate move on Hannibal's part, one of many brilliant moves throughout his military career. But in the end, despite many victories, he wasn't able to consolidate and reap the spoils that would have been due to him.

Consolidation isn't sexy. They usually don't build statues to great consolidators. But it seems like the ability to consolidate, reinforce, and hold your gains and make them permanent is the key to lasting success.

When we look at the major political leaders of World War II, we see Roosevelt, Chamberlain, Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Chiang Kai-Shek, Mao Tse-Tsung, and the Japanese faction nominally under Hirohito's control.

Interestingly, WWII is the story of successful consolidation rising in the world, and unsuccessful consolidation falling in the world.

Roosevelt, Stalin, Mao, and to a lesser extent Chiang were excellent consolidators, and the positions of their nations rose in the world. After making gains, they were able to fortify them, dismantle opposition, reinforce and benefit from the gains made.

The United States took over a great amount of military bases in the Lend-Lease agreement from Britain. Roosevelt additionally created new courts and agencies that catered to him, took broad powers over media, and embarrassed/denigrated/marginalized political opponents. He built infrastructure that would last and changed the scope of the American economy, consolidating personal, political, and national gains.

Stalin, likewise, capitalized on the state of emergency in Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union was able to take control of everything between East Berlin and Moscow. Finland was barely able to fight off Soviet domination, but most of the previously powerful Eastern European forces had been worn out from fighting the fascists, and the Soviets were able to install themselves over those places. Stalin also broadened the scope of his secret police and cracked down on individual dissenters and organizations hostile to him.

Mao was one of the greatest consolidators in Chinese history. He had his moments of brilliance and was quite a talented military theorist (On Guerilla Warfare, by Mao, is worth reading), but he was fighting a

defensive action almost nonstop from the start of his military and political career. Regardless of how you feel about the man's policies after taking power (I'm not a fan), it's worth noting he did an exceptional job consolidating. He achieved victory over the Nationalist Chinese largely by consolidating power successfully after the Japanese were defeated, seizing Japanese arms, supplies, and munitions. He also had lower losses and established better positions than the Nationalists when fighting the Japanese.

Chiang Kai-Shek, in his own way, was a good consolidator. Certainly, he made numerous mistakes. He's a great example of winning the vast majority of your battles, but losing on a decisive moment. He was an excellent commander in some ways, but he bungled the consolidation after defeating the Japanese, and the Communists were able to defeat him. Still, he picked the absolute best place he could have for retreat—Taiwan. Taiwan is a classically near-impossible-to-invade location. Completely surrounded by water, mountainous terrain, good logistical networks/roads through the mountains that would be able to be destroyed quickly during an invasion. Despite his huge blunder in losing Mainland China to the Communists, he was able to consolidate his forces in Taiwan intelligently, and the government, political, technological, cultural, and financial systems he helped architect live on to this day.

You can see the opposite among all of the defeated, but also some of the victors of World War II. Chamberlain is generally regarded as incompetent by historians—declaring war on Nazi Germany and then not attacking immediately was insane... they gave the Nazis first strike against Western Europe, which they did quite effectively when they ran the Maginot Line and conquered France.

Churchill, on the other hand, has his moments of brilliance... but he was a terrible consolidator. Unlike Roosevelt, Stalin, and Mao, he didn't have the same savvy consolidate-in-politics pulse of his fellow Allies. In the election immediately following WWII, Churchill was shocked to be voted out of office.

Likewise, the British lost more territory during and immediately following WWII than just about any victorious nation in history has ever lost in a war.

Looking quickly at the other WWII leaders, Francisco Franco and Charles de Gaulle were both good at consolidation and had moments of brilliance. Obviously, Hitler and Mussolini were unable to consolidate any of their gains, nor were the Japanese.

Truman is an interesting case—an excellent consolidator in some ways, but having tough shoes to fill following Roosevelt's popularity.

Following WWII, I'd give a nod to Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew as the best consolidators in the post-WWII era. Both were able to take quite shaky circumstances they inherited and rapidly transform their economy and infrastructure while simultaneously consolidating their personal/political positions. Sometimes I wonder if it's coincidence or culture that two of the greatest consolidators of that era are Han Chinese—I could be persuaded either way, but I think Han culture tends to celebrate and push for intelligent consolidation more than Western culture.

In terms of American presidents, I'd point to Bill Clinton as the best American consolidator in recent history, with Eisenhower's presidency second. Clinton had the rare ability to build supports around good things that were happening, fix and tuneup some fundamental problems, balance the budget, and otherwise run a good presidency without trying to launch any insane initiatives.

It's sad, but quite likely that in 200 years, Bill Clinton won't be remembered very much. He doesn't have a legacy for conquest or massive initiative—again, we don't build statues of consolidators. But the Congress he oversaw was brilliant—as the internet started to emerge, they did a surprisingly good job with the initial legislation. Large protections for the internet and streamlined policies to keep things running well without too much interference. He cleaned up a number of flagging government programs, and the military campaigns conducted during the Clinton presidency tended to be short and effective. (I've got qualms with the Kosovo campaign as a significant mistake—joining one side of a civil war and not seeing it

through to conclusion tends to make permanent enemies, which it did and now the Serbs hate America basically permanently. But if that's the biggest blunder and black mark on his record, that's a quite good presidency)

(His monetary policy arguably kept interest rates too low, the effects of which were seen in the stock and housing markets... he could and should have tightened up rates a bit late in his presidency, but again, not a tremendous flaw.)

I think about this often. Brilliance is brilliant, but brilliance without consolidation gives you empty entries in the history books. There's many examples of companies that led great innovations, but were unable to capitalize on them. Tesla was a brilliant scientist, but Edison was better at consolidation.

Of course, cultivate brilliance in your field if it appeals to you. But also think about how to consolidate after successes, so that the good changes and gains you've made become permanent.

## ***Self-Control and Enduring Success***

**"Persuade thyself that imperfection and inconvenience are the natural lot of mortals, and there will be no room for discontent, neither for despair."**—Tokugawa Ieyasu, Unifier of Japan, Founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate

I've studied the [Sengoku Era of Japanese history](#) a lot. There are so many lessons in it—about courage, about restraint, about going too far, about not going far enough... about honor, about idealism, about pragmatism... about trust and distrust, love and hate, loyalty and betrayal...

It's rare that an era of history has so many unique and varied lessons to teach. The only thing that comes close, in my mind, is the Italian Renaissance. Certainly, there's been eras with a great many lessons to learn from them, but not so many with such a wildly diverse range of views.

Sengoku was the crossroads that created Japan. The victors of the era were those who could appeal to tradition while using the most modern advantages—tapping into the samurai culture and spirit, while simultaneously beginning to employ firearms and other newly emergent technologies in war.

Out of Sengoku came Japan's "Three Great Unifiers"—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. It's a long story and you can read the history article I wrote on Sengoku that I linked if you're curious to see the whole thing.

But the basic idea is, Nobunaga and Hideyoshi were both probably more remarkable and more brilliant men than Ieyasu. But in the end, Ieyasu won and his family and administration ruled Japan for the next 250 years.

I think the key, most critical difference that sets Ieyasu apart from the others is his self-control. It's something I strive for and model, something that's easy to see in the leaders who build enduring success.

Washington had it. Augustus had it. Rockefeller had it. Rothschild had it.

Alexander didn't. Napoleon didn't. Hitler didn't.

Nobunaga didn't.

Hideyoshi didn't.

You know, the victors—the ones who build the really enduring victories—they're often not the most brilliant or charismatic or brave. They're the ones who are most patient, who are most rational, who have the most self-control. You can win 10,000 battles, but have it all undone in one rash misstep. You could perhaps lose 10,000 battles, but still win at a decisive moment and then consolidate intelligently.

I was originally going to write a slightly different piece than this one, focusing more on mental state than on historical analysis. But this is pretty good.



"Persuade thyself that imperfection and inconvenience are the natural lot of mortals, and there will be no room for discontent, neither for despair." Imperfection and inconvenience are part of the bargain of being human. Do not act rashly or impulsively. There's no reason to feel discontent or despair when things are going wrong.

Things are never perfect. Acknowledge things as they are, always. Discontent and despair don't serve you. When bad feelings come over you, acknowledge them and dismiss them. Thinking, reflection, and self-control reigns. Keep building. Win.

## ***Studying Patience***

*"The strong manly ones in life are those who understand the meaning of the word patience. Patience means restraining one's inclinations. There are seven emotions: joy, anger, anxiety, love, grief, fear, and hate, and if a man does not give way to these he can be called patient. I am not as strong as I might be, but I have long known and practiced patience. And if my descendants wish to be as I am, they must study patience."—Tokugawa Ieyasu*

In the late 1400's, the ruling Ashikaga Shogunate of Japan became weak and lost its hold over the country. A many-sided civil war broke out, thus beginning the "Sengoku Period"—known as one of the most bloody and lawless periods in Japanese history, but also an era of some incredibly most heroic leadership.

Eventually, "Three Great Unifiers" came to power and ended the conflict through victory. These three were Oda Nobugana, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu.

In the end, Tokugawa Ieyasu won, and his family ruled Japan for the next 250 years. However, he's probably the least popular of the three great unifiers in Japan.

Nobunaga is popular for having an incredibly fierce, martial, masculine spirit. At one point, the warrior-monks of the Honganji allied themselves against Nobunaga and harried, harassed, and ambushed his armies. The Honganji provided supplies, spies, and information for Nobunaga's enemies and sometimes faced them in direct combat.

When the Honganji would be losing, they'd retreat back to their fortress on Mount Hiei.

This was kind of a sacred place with many relics and many nuns and priests, in addition to the warrior monks. The monks would war Nobunaga on temporal authority, and then refuse to fight and claim amnesty under spiritual authority.

Nobunaga marched to Mount Hiei, and burned it to the ground.

I couldn't adequately explain what a shockingly big deal this is if you're unfamiliar with Japanese history. The closest example I could give be if an Italian Pope was opposing the French, and a French King had marched on Vatican City, burned it to the ground, and put all the high ranked members of the church to the sword.

Certainly, many rulers in European history would have *wished* to do something like this, but none of them did for fear of the very real repercussions and consequences.

But Nobunaga? No, he just did it.

Nobunaga was assassinated by one of his own generals in 1582. His oldest son had been groomed to take over for him, but also died at the same time. A power struggle broke out among his two highest ranking generals—Shibata Katsuie and Hideyoshi Toyotomi. Katsuie lost and was commit suicide in 1583, leaving Hideyoshi Toyotomi as the strongest man in Japan.

Hideyoshi went on to unify Japan, and is generally the most loved of the three great unifiers. He originally came from nothing, and worked his way

up from carrying Nobunaga's sandals for him. Through his excellent use of diplomacy and martial skill, Hideyoshi was able to get promoted to foot-soldier, sergeant, captain, and eventually general. When Nobunaga died, Hideyoshi and Katsuie battled for command of Nobunaga's forces.

Hideyoshi won, and then kept winning. He conquered all of Japan.

He didn't stop.

He launched an overseas invasion against China and Korea.

Hideyoshi died of old age in Japan while his forces were fighting in Korea. They didn't hear of his death until nine months after he had died.

This caused a lot of ill will among his top generals, and let Tokugawa Ieyasu recruit many of them to his cause. Hideyoshi had died while his son was very young and had entrusted his top five generals to look after the boy until he was an adult.

Once again, the former Toyotomi forces split into two camps: Tokugawa Ieyasu's, and his opponent, Ishida Mitsunari.

At the Battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu won, Mitsunari was executed, and the Tokugawa family went on to rule Japan for the next 250 years.

Tokugawa Ieyasu is generally not as well-respected as Nobunaga or Hideyoshi. Nobunaga was the ultimate masculine, ferocious warrior. When the religious authorities worked against him, he burned the entire religious capitol to the ground. In the first battle of his career—Okehazama—he was faced with overwhelming odds. Instead of fighting a defensive action, he snuck around to the back of the enemy camp, raided, and killed their commanding officer, thus sending the much larger force into disarray.

Hideyoshi is respected—he's the Japanese version of the American dream. This boy of no significant birth works his way from being a sandal-carrier, to a foot-soldier, to a sergeant, to an officer, to a general, to the ruler of all

of Japan... he's known for being incredibly tactful, diplomatic, graceful, and intelligent.

Ieyasu has no such defining characteristics. Whereas Nobunaga might be represented by a blazing fire, and Hideyoshi might be represented by a beautiful butterfly—well, Ieyasu would probably be represented by a large boulder in the middle of a river. The boulder diverts things around itself, and the immensely powerful water must detour around it. But no one looks at a boulder and says, "Ah! That! I will be like that!"

If you were being charitable, you could compare Ieyasu to an oak tree instead. Yet again, a powerful fire or a butterfly would be more inspiring than an oak tree to most people.

Yet, I respect Tokugawa Ieyasu the most. You see, Nobunaga and Hideyoshi both unmade themselves with their bad qualities. Nobunaga's ferocious temper is what led to his betrayal—in a fit of rage, Nobunaga had insulted and beaten the general who later betrayed and assassinated him.

Likewise, Hideyoshi's persistence and ambition led him to become the ruler of Japan, *but then he was unable or unwilling to stop.*

Without the fateful invasion into Korea, Hideyoshi's forces would have been de-mobilized and garrisoned after he had unified Japan, instead of mobilized and sent to war. A number of his top generals felt upset that they were fighting for Hideyoshi in Korea after Hideyoshi had already died, and no one told them.

This crack in their loyalty is what allowed Ieyasu to court them, and bring them over to his camp. I think it's fairly uncontroversial to say that without the Korean invasion, the Toyotomi dynasty is established to end Sengoku, instead of the Tokugawa.

Once again:

*"The strong manly ones in life are those who understand the meaning of the word patience. Patience means restraining one's inclinations. There are*

*seven emotions: joy, anger, anxiety, love, grief, fear, and hate, and if a man does not give way to these he can be called patient. I am not as strong as I might be, but I have long known and practiced patience. And if my descendants wish to be as I am, they must study patience."* -Tokugawa Ieyasu

Indeed, I constantly search through my moods and emotions. Certainly, all of us feel joy, anger, anxiety, love, grief, fear, and hate from time to time. Ieyasu does not say to suppress or not feel those emotions.

Rather, he says to *not give way to those emotions*. I had a major professional triumph last week. I celebrated for six hours, and then got back to work.

You know, I'm scared sometimes of *giving way* to being joyful. It is a good thing to feel joyful, but not to let joy dull your edge. Likewise, consistency in action even if feeling anxious, consistency even if feeling fearful, consistency in love, consistency even if trapped in the thralls of hatred...

You can see that emotions unmade both Oda Nobunaga and Hideyoshi Toyotomi.

Ieyasu gave way to none of them. Certainly, he had his highs and lows. But his even, consistent temperament, in the best and worst of times, is what allowed him to build the most prosperous of all Japanese dynasties. Study patience.

## ***PRINCIPLES: RELATIONSHIPS***

"Command Flows to the Worthy

'Command' is having people listen to you and accept your recommendations and instructions.

'Worthiness' is achieved by:

- 1.) Being competent,
- 2.) Understanding everyone's needs, and
- 3.) Taking care of people's needs (both intrinsic and extrinsic).

Everything else about command is a derivation of those three."  
—Sebastian Marshall

### ***On Loyalty and Empire-Building: Muhammad and Khadijah, Hideyoshi and Nene***

I've scoured the books of history looking for trends—why did this person succeed, when that one failed? Why did this movement shape the world, while that one died out? Why did this nation win, and that one lose?

Some people think accidents explain history. Perhaps accidents explain some of history, but certainly not all. You see common virtues among those

who succeeded, and frequently you see common vices among those who failed.

Of the common virtues, the successful seem to have an immense amount of loyalty and reverence for the people that "got them there," revering and celebrating them even as they bring more and more people to their banner. The people who break from their early friends and supporters usually end poorly, in an isolation of their own making.

You can see this with two men that had the biggest impact on their respective cultures—Muhammad in Arabia, and Hideyoshi in Japan.

Both men were low born, but came to be hugely influential. There are a number of similarities in their stories. They both found and married an exceptional, charismatic, diplomatic, high born, highly intelligent woman relatively early in their careers. The wives of these men—Khadijah to Muhammad, Nene to Hideyoshi—were their first, most passionate, and largest supporters when few else believed in them.

But that's where the similarities end. Muhammad went on to be the Prophet of Islam, united the previously warring Arabic tribes, conquered Mecca from the hostile Quraysh, and then all of the Arabian Peninsula. The series of laws, decrees, and messages he spread are one of the most enduring in the world. His own family went on to do well, his three daughters all marrying future Islamic Caliphs, and leading to a long and healthy bloodline and genealogy.

Hideyoshi, of course, became the Second Great Unifier of Japan, finishing Oda Nobunaga's work. He'd risen from sandal-bearing house servant to one of the greatest diplomats and generals in Japanese history. But after being named Kampaku—Grand Regent of All Japan—he led the foolish Korean expedition, executed his nephew and ready successor out of pettiness, and died leaving his family and values with an unstable power vacuum. Not long after his death, Japan broke out in Civil War, with the Tokugawa faction destroying Hideyoshi loyalists. Hideyoshi's bloodlines were exterminated and erased from history.

I've spent a lot of time studying Hideyoshi Toyotomi. The first 50 years of his 60 year life are some of the most luminous and impressive of all time. But the last 10 years of Hideyoshi's life are an unmitigated disaster, the most ridiculous and extreme blundering imaginable.

I've come up with a few different hypotheses about where Hideyoshi went wrong. But certainly—this is key—he paid dearly for his lack of loyalty to the people closest to him at the end of his life.

Hideyoshi had a number of people who helped him build early in his life. Nene, his wife, was key to that. But later, he married a young princess, Yodo-dono, who was very beautiful but didn't have the same wisdom, intelligence, and diplomacy that Nene did. But Hideyoshi progressively started ignoring Nene and favoring the young princess.

It was the beginning of the end. Yodo-dono eventually alienated Hideyoshi from his sister, who had also been extremely loyal and helpful to him. When Yodo gave birth to a son of Hideyoshi's, she demanded for Hideyoshi to execute his sister's son, his nephew who was a smart and capable boy.

Things unravelled quickly. Hideyoshi went on to execute one of his top advisors, Sen no Rikyu, and marginalized a lot of his most loyal supporters. When the Toyotomi Civil War broke out after his death, many of his former supporters defected to the rival Tokugawa camp—and the Toyotomi were destroyed forever.

Muhammad wound up in a similar situation. After Khadijah's death, Muhammad took other wives—but he handled things 180 degrees differently from Toyotomi. He showed immense reverence and loyalty to the people who had gotten him there.

Muhammad's later young wife, Aisha, was jealous of Khadijah's role in his life. Aisha asked Muhammad, wasn't she better than Khadijah? She'd become jealous when he visited her friends and relatives to take care of them.



Muhammad was obviously enchanted with Aisha, but he held more strongly to his loyalty and reverence for Khadijah, saying, "She believed in me when no one else did; she accepted Islam when people rejected me; and she helped and comforted me when there was no one else to lend me a helping hand."

This consistency of loyalty and reverence to the people that got him there inspired and moved Muhammad's followers—including the ones who joined later. Truly, it's a noble trait. Whereas Hideyoshi's unraveling and betrayals of his closest people led many of his generals to defect to the enemy.

It's not even about personal gain—it's about a sense of right and wrong. A short-sighted man would think rewarding your new supporters would engender the highest level of loyalty in them, but Hideyoshi proved that false. By taking great care of the people who elevated you from the beginning, you build a stronger foundation that's worthy of respect and admiration—you stay close with your early supporters, and create an atmosphere of calm trust and strength among new supporters.

## ***How to Avoid Exchange-Based Relationships***

On this coming Monday or Tuesday, I'll be asking the Director of Sales and Marketing at one of the most prestigious local businesses for \$100,000. I have all manner of charts, research, data, and numbers showing why this is an exceptionally good idea that will have a fantastic ROI—and it is a good deal. But still, it's mildly terrifying to present in that sphere.

Part of what I'm going to do is go in and ask for a considerable sum of money, but I'm trying to build a different sort of relationship than most people would think. If they choose my company, we'll be producing lots of good work for high pay—but I'm trying to build something other than an exchange-based relationship.

**What's an exchange-based relationship?** Over the last 10 years or so, researchers have identified two kinds of ways trade and interact and cooperate. The first way would be through "market norms"—this is where two people clearly agree to make an exchange, and deliver what they agreed to exchange, and the deal is concluded. The second way is through "social norms"—where you're looking out for each other's best interests.

**Let's go over quickly what market/exchange norms look like and how they push out social norms—then I'll have some ideas and guidelines for your own life.**

If you like digging into primary source papers, "Communal and Exchange Relationships: What is the Difference?" by C. Daniel Batson, *Pers Soc Psychol Bull*, December 1993, vol. 19 no. 6 677-683, is pretty good. If you're more into books, this was covered in Dan Ariely's book *Predictably Irrational*. And Derek Sivers wrote a review of *Predictably Irrational* (<http://sivers.org/book/PredictablyIrrational>) that I highly recommend.

Market norms push out social norms. But I've started to wonder if this can be avoided by always leaving something on the table.

This means getting away from haggling, grinding up/down to the absolute final price someone would pay, and hard selling. For my work, I'm going to be aiming to generate a 10x return on investment over the the next three years. Yes, that's 1000%. I think that's the first part—looking out for their interests and not grinding.

**A lot of people don't understand good negotiating. They think it's about getting the best price—no, no, no. Good negotiation is about figuring out what you can offer that's worth more to the other person than you, and what they can offer that's worth more to you than them.**

I have some friends that are very good at negotiating. My best friend just turned 30—he started working at age 14 and became a self-made millionaire at age 24 by working really hard and saving/re-investing everything he got. He doesn't try to grind people to the highest/lowest price—he typically overpays for things a little bit, and sometimes tips on top of

it—but then he asks for really exceptional service, and always gets it. When he joins in a deal, he looks to deliver 10 times or more what would be expected of him, and to be an absolute maniac for his client's cause.

**I think the overall strategy of avoiding exchange-based relationships when doing business is to give such a great deal that the person doesn't feel like they're paying for a deal. If it's obviously a ridiculously amazingly good deal, it almost feels more like a favor than a transaction.**

If you're selling, the deal or product you offer should seem like a fantastically good value, like your service existing is a favor to the person doing business with you. Companies like Amazon do a great job of this—they offer tons of free value with great reviews, charge lower prices than traditional bookstores, offer free shipping on medium-sized offers, and take good care of you if anything goes wrong. You get a warm fuzzy feeling with Amazon.

If you're buying, you want to be a dream customer. When I've contracted creative work in the past, I did it very wrong the first time, and right subsequently. The first time, I tried to micro-manage a process I didn't understand. This was six or seven years ago, and we were buying a high-end, five-figure website. We were the classic scope-creep client—in the end it came out alright, but man, what a hassle for our web designer. In retrospect, I feel bad. Since then, I've changed stripes—I say, "I'm hiring you because you're an expert and know more than me. I have loose guidance, but I want you to do this your way and I'll give you free reign to do your thing and express yourself."

I explain the basic parameters and goals that I've already thought about beforehand, and then give them free run. I get the impression this is very rare, and contractors seem to have a blast working on projects with me.

**If you want to stay away from exchange-based feelings, be very enjoyable to work with. Figure out what your client or provider's highest-level goals are, and help them get it. Pay well if you're buying, over-deliver to a ridiculous extent so it's clear you're above and beyond**

**the call if you're selling. And make it enjoyable, really enjoyable, so it doesn't seem like work.**

I think you need to be aware and make everyone look good. A lot of times when someone is buying, yes they're concerned with what they get, but they also have other concerns that people ignore. You need to make everyone look good. Definitely aim to over-deliver and generate a 10x return, or to be a dream customer. But then make your contact feel very good about what you're doing, make them look good to the people they want to look good in front of, and raise morale and be very cool to anyone on their team.

That means always having fun and sharing little valuable things with your contact, but also I think reaching out to whoever they report to in a way that's tasteful and makes them look good. Like sending a report to the CEO once a month showing the results built and explaining how it was your contact that did such a great job to make all this happen. Maybe including a little note in there how lucky the CEO is to have such a great member on their team.

**Those little details go a long, long ways. Does a guy getting his kitchen remodeled care more about the kind of countertop used, or how his wife thinks about him?**

**Make people look good to the people they really care about.**

You want to be good to people's teams, too. Judd Weiss at Park West had amazingly fast growth in valet parking in Los Angeles, sometimes unseating competitors who had run a location for years. Park West is more upscale, professional, and modern than many competitors—many of whom still have 1980's fonts and branding, while Park West has clean, modern black and orange colors and uniforms. They offer much better prices and take lower margins than competitors; companies know they're getting an amazing, ridiculously good deal hiring Park West. But then on top of it, Judd takes really good care of the people they work with. He goes and eats at the restaurants that his company does valet work for and tips very high and is very friendly, taking good care of the staff there. If the manager there

recognizes him and comps him, Judd tips 100% or more of the price of food for the staff, making everyone look good and feel good.

**Looking out for people outside of the scope of the deal can help make it about more than just the deal.**

A final thought—this post has been looking at it in the context of doing business, but this also applies in social settings. Notice how co-ops and community groups are rare and fail so often when people try to build them? I think these are good things, people working together to help each other.

**I think if you want a co-op or community group to succeed, you need to "de-marketize" money, so people can pass it around in a healthy, non-neurotic way when it's appropriate.**

Most co-ops/sharing/community group-type places try to do away with money, but this leaves feelings of guilt or unfairness, and undermines the whole system. I'm pretty sure there'd be a way to jointly chip in different amounts to casually spread and move the money around, get it flowing within the group, so people can use to equalize a situation in the short-term while still avoiding triggering the market norms. This might be difficult, but I think not impossible if done correctly.

Gifts are one way to trade value without triggering exchange/market norms, but I think it can be done with money too, *so long as the money represents going for a specific purpose*. For instance, let's say there are five families with kids who take turns babysitting. What if whenever one family took all the kids, whoever dropped off each left \$5 or \$10 or \$20 along with it for gas money, activities, and food? You could make clear that the money is just a budget for the kids to play and have fun, but then whoever is watching the kids that day gets to save \$10 or \$20 in free food and activities. If the number was set right, this would reduce the guilt if one family couldn't babysit as much, and it would be a nice little bonus and flexibility for a family who babysat more often. But instead of being wages, the money is "for the kid's activities and costs"—money is exchanged without incurring the exchange-feelings. And it moves around a little, each family chipping in a little when it's not their turn to watch.

Maybe some other time I'll write my thoughts on avoiding the exchange dynamic in dating—exchange-based intimate relationships seem like building intimacy on quicksand to me, but that's a longer topic for another time. Also, it's okay to have pure exchanges sometimes, like if you're just buying something once. But if you can transcend that, move it beyond the exchange and into looking out for each other, that can be a beautiful thing.

## ***Becoming a Liberal and Magnificent Tipper***

I was always pretty frugal with money—I'd spend on good tools, lessons/training/classes for myself (including *lots* on books), on having unique or developing experiences, and on showing appreciation for people who make me successful. One of my good friends helped me finish an important business deal once that made me a lot of money, and I bought him a plane ticket to Japan to say thanks.

But I never liked spending money on comfort or luxury that doesn't serve a higher purpose. I eat very simply, I sleep simply, I don't need or want much.

Lately though, I've been thinking about how this conflicts with another goal I have—constantly improving my environment. I want every room to better because I was there. And not a little better—a *lot* better.

I was always a decent tipper, I'd go out of my way to tip great service in particular. But I'm thinking lately I should be an exceptional tipper, even at businesses where I don't want a long term relationship with the establishment.

Not sure why I'm starting to think this way, I'm just starting to think it's correct. I was going through Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics—in particular, there's sections on liberality and magnificence.

From Wikipedia on Liberality  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean\\_Ethics#Liberality\\_or\\_Generosit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean_Ethics#Liberality_or_Generosit))

y.):

*"Stinginess is most obviously taking money too seriously, but wastefulness, less strictly speaking, is not always the opposite (an under estimation of the importance of money) because it is also often caused by being unrestrained. A wasteful person is destroyed by their own acts, and has many vices at once. Aristotle's approach to defining the correct balance is to treat money like any other useful thing, and say that the virtue is to know how to use money: giving to the right people, the right amount at the right time. Also, as with each of the ethical virtues, Aristotle emphasizes that such a person gets pleasures and pains at doing the virtuous and beautiful thing. Aristotle goes slightly out of his way to emphasize that generosity is not a virtue associated with making money, because, he points out, a virtuous person is normally someone who causes beautiful things, rather than just being a recipient."*

And from Wikipedia on Magnificence  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean\\_Ethics#Magnificence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean_Ethics#Magnificence)):

*"Aristotle says that while "the magnificent man is liberal, the liberal man is not necessarily magnificent". The immoderate vices in this case would be concerning "making a great display on the wrong occasions and in the wrong way". The extremes to be avoided in order to achieve this virtue are paltriness (Rackham) or chintziness (Sachs) on the one hand and tastelessness or vulgarity on the other. ... The aim of magnificence, like any virtue, is beautiful action, not for the magnificent man himself but on public things, such that even his private gifts have some resemblance to votive offerings. Because he is aiming at a spectacle, a person with this virtue will not be focusing on doing things cheaply, which would be petty, and he or she may well overspend."*

This is kind of alien to me still—I always believed in taking care of people, but I was always quite frugal. But going forwards, I'm going to be calling people and telling them that if they give me \$5,000, my company can work to build them \$50,000, and if they give me \$500,000, we can work to build them \$5,000,000. So I figure, it's time to start taking care of everyone a little bit more.

It's good to be in Vietnam when I decide to put this into motion—things are cheap by Western rates. I went to get a massage at the Saigon Star Hotel and they had really good service, so I decided to tip two guys there that normally don't get tips here in Vietnam—the washroom attendant and the guy who serves noodles in the relaxation room after the massage.

Both guys were good, so I tipped 50,000 VND to each of them. The guy in the relaxation room that serves water, noodles, and fruit was kind of shocked—I said thanks for the good service and waved goodbye. He said, "Wait, wait!" and ran into a back area, ran back, and handed me four envelopes full of cards:



There was card in each one, for a 15,000 VND discount every time you came to their spa. So, that's pretty cool. I'd already been planning on bringing one of my friends there to say thanks to him for having me as a guest in his home—and now it's going to be 30,000 VND cheaper for the two of us to go.

So I'm starting to see—some liberality, some magnificence—doing beautiful things, taking care of people. Constantly improving the environment around me. Building wealth, taking a small fraction of what I build, making every interaction along the way positive with everyone friendly—yeah, I can do that. It still feels strange counting out a 50% tip at a restaurant, and I couldn't afford to do that in a Western country. So I figure this is a good place to start practicing—I'll work to become wealthy enough



someday that I can afford to do this even in New York or London. In the meantime this is a good place to start learning how to take greater care of people, to signal that my presence means everyone nearby is going to benefit, to be grateful, to make everyone wealthy ... yeah, I'm working on it. Still feels strange—I'm used to being frugal and ultra-conscious with money. But I'll practice. I think this is the way forwards.

## ***Becoming a Person Who Helps People***

**Do you think it's more virtuous to do \$5,000 worth of good for someone and get \$0 in return, or to do \$10,000 worth of good for someone and get \$2,000 in return?**

Stop and think about that for a moment. Really, don't read on until you've answered.

...

...

...

...

Got an answer? C'mon, think about it. I'll wait.

...

...

...

Okay. Me, I think it's *overwhelmingly* more virtuous to do more good and receive more in return.

What's this have to do with being gracious, though?

Well, see, I think people have a problem. Most people believe there's some conflict between giving and receiving. If you put it clearly, most people would say that delivering \$10,000 of value and getting \$2,000 of it back is better than delivering \$5,000 for \$0. It's more absolute good, the other person has more, the pie is bigger, and you get compensated too.

But most people cheerlead martyrdom and sacrifice. Most people feel like they *should* be martyring and sacrificing themselves more, but they also *don't like to do it*.

Anyway, why cover all this ground?

**Because I don't think it's possible to be as gracious and helpful and friendly as a martyring self-destructing guy.**

**Overwhelmingly, the most gracious people I know are comfortable receiving as well as giving.**

Oh, don't get me wrong. The most gracious people I know give *far* more than they receive, but they also receive.

There's a long running half-joke among successful people. "I'm not an altruist." My friend Judd threw an amazing party for a lot of people he knew one time, he spent like \$5,000 to throw this party. And I teased him, I said, "You're such an altruist, dude." And he says, "No no no, no, no, I'm not an altruist."

We all say that. I'm not being friendly and gracious and helpful out of altruism. No, no, no.

I'm doing it because it brings into existence the kind of world I want to live in, it helps me serve my ethics and goals, I enjoy doing it, and perhaps the biggest reason—1 out of 100 people you're friendly and gracious to are going to become amazing friends and confidants and colleagues.

90 out of 100 people are relatively ungracious. 9 out of 100 say thanks and nothing else. But 1 person out of 100 winds up becoming something very special and cool.

Meanwhile, I'm not trying to sacrifice and suffer and martyr myself when I help people. I ask for feedback, I'm friendly and lighthearted about it, and I enjoy it.

**A tip—I make connecting with people part of my entertainment time.** You know, when most people are watching TV, I'm reading email, writing email, hopping on the phone with people, answering questions, helping other people do strategy.

I usually don't ask for anything in return. Almost never, actually. I try to give a lot. I figure 90 out of 100 people won't give me anything in return, and that's fine, no problem. Still glad they're better off.

9 people say thanks, which is really cool and I really appreciate that. Maybe it sounds stupid, I guess, but I still really like getting encouragement and comments and a friendly email and things like that. I write some rather aggressive pieces condemning the normal way, advocating strength and virtue and imperialism and victory and wealth and things like that. So, y'know, sometimes people take some serious fangs out. I'd like to eventually be mentally strong enough to feel neutral to all kinds of feedback—praise and criticism—but I'm not there yet. In the meantime, kind words and a quick thanks goes a long, long way.

And then ... 1 out of 100 people I connect with, we build some amazing shit, some really win/win/win/win positive sum game stuff. I've met some of my best friends through doing random good things, and I know I try to be fanatically loyal to people who do right by me when possible. It's a good thing, helping people.

And it's fun. It's my entertainment time, y'know?

**How did that come to be? Have I always been that way?**

How did I come to be this way? *Slowly*.

I realized for a long time it was a good thing to do, but I was still shy about doing it. Dunno why. I think it's a normal human thing. What I did was I started slowly emailing people very short emails to say thank you if a piece of work helped me.

The key is to be short and overwhelmingly gracious. "Hi person. I saw (x thing) and it (meant y to me). I am really grateful for this. Thank you. Sebastian"

Slightly more than that, but not much more. Some people won't reply. No problem. Everyone feels good when they get something like that, even if they don't reply.

Have I always been this way? Nah, it's all learned behavior. All learned. Learned and trained. I added a note to my daily checklist for a while, "Reach out to someone" or something like that. So I'd try to send one nice or thankful email per day, or offer to help someone, or ask quickly what their favorite book is. Baby steps. Now I'm getting fairly a lot of email and comments and people reaching out to me on different sites, and that's really cool. I still try to reach out to people I haven't had any contact with, but now I'm still adjusting to how many people are reaching out to me.

**Now, won't this come across as being fake? Won't you get embarrassed?**

Here's where I've got to clue you in.

You're going to die.

Being mildly embarrassed isn't going to hurt you.

This is when I really opened up and started reaching out to people, started writing what I really think, started doing a lot more.

I'll tell you the truth. I'll be 100% honest. If you reach out to people, you're going to say some stupid ass something sooner or later and kick yourself. I do multiple times weekly. I shake my head and kick myself.

And y'know what? It's not so bad. I'm in conversations with amazingly cool people. Just signed with LevineGreenberg, a top literary nonfiction agency and I'm working hands-on with Jim Levine, who is amazing. I'm talking to scientists and entrepreneurs and we're swapping notes. I'm helping lots of people, I'm writing a lot, I'm making art, I'm making new friends...

...and yeah, I have 5-10 embarrassing or annoying moments per week. I say something stupid or write something stupid or get a fact wrong or some random anonymous bozo insults me or whatever. It happens.

And you know? I think 5-10 moments like that per week is *considerably* higher than the normal person has happen to them.

If you reach out to people, you are putting yourself on the line a bit, you will say something stupid sooner or later, and come across poorly.

Oh well.

Do it with good intentions.

I just got an email from a guy who criticized me publicly a while back. He said, upon reflection, his criticisms were mistaken and he thinks I'm doing good stuff. And now we're having a good conversation.

That's pretty cool. I get to do so much cool stuff. The embarrassment ... yeah, you have to pay that price. It's not so bad, really. I promise.

Okay, summary time:

- 1.) Don't try to be suffer or martyr or sacrifice your way into being gracious. It's not sustainable. Enjoy it and have it serve you and your goals.

2.) Enjoy the 9 out of 100 people who say thanks, and especially the 1 out of 100 who becomes something amazing. The other 90 out of 100—meh, so what. They're not people who take action, I guess. That's fine, maybe they'll become action takers later, or maybe not. But 1 out of 100 becoming an excellent friend, colleague, or confidant is pretty amazing.

3.) Make connecting with people part of your entertainment time. Don't make it work time. Do it to relax, to cool off, enjoy it. Think of it as a nice privilege. I really enjoy it.

4.) Stuff like this happens slowly. Incremental progress. Work towards it.

5.) Start by sending out short (the shorter the better) emails to people who you see saying or doing something cool. Even if they don't write back, I guarantee they appreciate it.

6.) Embarrassment and errors are part of doing meaningful things. It's not such a big deal, really. Eventually it becomes less of a horror and more of a shrug-and-roll-your-eyes type thing when you get embarrassed.

7.) Keep in mind you're going to die. It puts things into perspective. Mild discomfort? Who cares, you're going to fucking DIE at some point. DO SOME COOL STUFF BEFORE THAT HAPPENS. As far as I know, you get one bite at the apple that is life. Embarrassment? Dude, eternity stretches before and after us. Embarrassment is your neurochemistry in a mildly uncomfortable position. It doesn't matter at all. None of us are such a big deal that we can't be embarrassed. Do some cool stuff today, there's no reason not to. Thank some people, do some art, drop a line to an old mentor or teacher or to your family or whatever. Life is fleeting. I meditate on this daily, which helps put things in perspective. The worry of being embarrassed pales in comparison to the the very real concern with wasting my limited life energy. The worry of coming across poorly or un-genuine or fake pales in comparison to the very real concern of wasting my limited life energy.

## ***I Think Good Marketing Is Mostly Just Having People Want to Spend Time With You***

I never really understood good marketing until I started to respect my own time more. These days, I'm trying to really live 24 hours per day the way I want to be living them. Do you know how much time there is in 24 hours? It's *a lot*.

Before I respected my own time, I didn't really respect other people's time as much. Don't get me wrong—I was always cool enough, I didn't waste people's time, but I never realized what a magnificent thing people choosing to spend their time with you is. There are so many good places to spend your time—getting entertainment, learning, connecting with good people, building things, inventing, relaxing, thinking, working. When someone spends their time with me, whatever the medium, that's a tremendous honor.

When someone comes to join me at my blog, reads something I write, listens to me speak, meets me for a coffee or we go on an adventure together—there are a hell of a lot of other places they could be, and a hell of a lot of other great things they could be doing with their time.

I think good marketing respects that. Good marketing goes, "This person could be anywhere else—let's make it worth their while." Kathy Sierra, Seth Godin, and Chet Holmes all talk about this—educating people, teaching them, making them want to spend time with you. Being entertaining, or informative, building a place people feel welcome, or strong, or get smarter at.

I think that's most of good marketing—having people want to spend time in and around you, your company, wanting to be associated with what you've got. The rest of good marketing is offering people something worth many, many times more than what you're charging. My current target is 10x—if I'm working to help someone build their revenues, I'm aiming to get them 10 times my fees in net profit, for a 1000% ROI. To be honest with you, I'll settle for 4x and 400%, but I'm aiming for 10.

I want to build and get stronger after that too. Ideally, I could offer people things that are worth 100 times what I charge, to give people things so marvelous and amazing and such good quality that they're amazed it could cost so little.

But honestly, the second part—offering immense quality worth many times what the person pays—that's second to having people want to spend time with you. If people want to spend time with you, because they're learning, because they're entertained, because they feel strong and cool and fashionable and amazing being around you—then everything else goes smoothly. You can tell people what you're doing and let them decide if it's right for them. You're not in such a tremendous hurry when people want to see you and return again and again.

I think the first step to being a great marketer is respecting your own time, and seeing how much is possible to get done when you respect your time. Then start really respecting other people's time—it's amazing what wonderful things can be done with time if you're spending it well. So acknowledge that, be aware that it's an honor, a privilege, a blessing if people want to spend even 2 minutes, 3 minutes, 5 minutes with you here and there. Make it the best time they ever spend, give people what they want, really respect their time. If you do that, if you deliver and make every minute someone spends with you a great minute, marketing will become easier and more joyful all the time.

## ***The Three Basic Ways to Connect With More People***

**"How can you start connecting with people across the world and helping them in some way?"**

Well, the way I see it, there are exactly three basic ways -



- 1.) Get introductions
- 2.) Reach out to people
- 3.) Do something prominent and solicit people to reach out to you

#3 is the easiest once you get it going, but it can be hard to get going. What could your #3 be? A blog, a magazine, creating a student or youth organization in your area, creating a charity, joining and becoming a main member of a charity, contributing to open source projects, joining a discussion forum and becoming a top contributor ... .

All of those take a while. I did lots of #2 before people were reaching out to me. The reply rate is much lower. You just have to realize it's worth doing and do it despite the low reply rate. It does suck if you write a few letters/emails in a row and get no replies, and that does happen. But just remind yourself that it's a required part of doing stuff and keep going.

On #1, I refer you to the book *Never Eat Alone* by Keith Ferrazzi, who covered all of this much better than I could. He's got all kinds of great insights in there, highly recommended.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## ***PRINCIPLES: RATIONALITY***

"The primary thing when you take a sword in your hands is your intention to cut the enemy, whatever the means. Whenever you parry, hit, spring, strike or touch the enemy's cutting sword, you must cut the enemy in the same movement. It is essential to attain this. If you think only of hitting, springing, striking or touching the enemy, you will not be able actually to cut him."

—Miyamoto Musashi, from *The Book of Five Rings*

"We are living on borrowed time and abiding by the law of probability, which is the only law we carefully observe. Had we done otherwise, we would now be dead heroes instead of surviving experts."

—*Devil's Guard*

"People with intelligence will use it to fashion things both true and false, and will try to push through whatever they want with clever reasoning. This is injury from intelligence. Nothing you do will have effect if you do not use truth."

—*Hagakure*

### ***Strategist Dictum 1: Do Things for Reasons***

So, what is this absurd strategist nonsense I'm always going on about?

Good question.

Reflecting today on the nature of the world, I believe I have come to the core tenet of strategy. The one from which all other tenets flow, the quintessential, alpha-omega principle of strategy, which is -

**Do things for reasons.**

*Wait, what?! What is this absurd nonsense? "Do things for reasons"? This guy aspires to be the greatest-something-or-other-victory-empire-strategy-what-the-hell, and what he's got to say is "Do things for reasons"? Do things for reasons?*

Yes. Do things for reasons.

**While this might simple on the surface, *this is not the way most people run their lives.***

Most people's daily lives are *done out of custom, with no carefully evaluated and explicitly defined reasons for their actions.* Worse still, decisions in high conflict and highly leveraged situations *are usually made on the basis of naive emotion...* which is horrifying if you really stop and reflect on what that means.

Most people do not do things for reasons. They do things "because that's the way it's done," or they go with their first impulse.

You might have as many as 10,000 nuanced options when you come to a crucially important decision. Outside of Disney movies, your first impulse is not at all likely to be the most effective one.

So again -

Strategist Dictum 1: Do things for reasons.

Which brings us to a corollary -

Strategist Corollary 1: Do not simply "do shit" for no reason.

Doing shit for no reason is a cause of lots of misery. Your wife is in a very bad mood one day and starts yelling. If you go with your first impulse, it will most likely be wrong, and your marriage will suffer. Out of the 10,000 options available to you, the naive impulse is unlikely to be the correct one.

The same is true in negotiations.

The same is true in the buying and selling of securities.

The same is true in choosing how to market your product.

The same is true in dealing with crime.

The same is true in maximizing tax revenues without destroying commerce.

The same is true in dealing with being insulted.

The same is true in dealing with criticism.

The same is true in choosing how to spend your money.

Doing things without reasons (usually because of habit/custom, or out of emotion) leads to ineffectiveness and misery.

The first dictum of strategy, then, is "do things for reasons."

The way to start doing that is to ask, "What is my objective here?"

Then, "What course of action makes me most likely to reach that objective?"

That's a little hard to remember when all hell is breaking loose. The simpler version is to ask yourself, "What is winning?"

Do things for reasons.

Don't "do shit" for no reason.

Your naive impulse is unlikely to produce the best result.

Ask, "What is my objective here? What gives me the best chance of reaching it?"

Ask, "What is winning?"

Follow up with action. Adjust if necessary. Win.

## ***Stupid People Aren't a Problem. Oblivious People Are a Problem.***

When I was a bit younger, I used to think stupid people were a problem.

I don't know how I'd define stupid exactly, but you know roughly what I mean. I thought, "Stupid people cause problems."

Now I'm starting to change my mind.

However you define "stupid," I don't think it's stupid people causing problems. There's lots of things I'm unskilled, uneducated, or unsophisticated about, but I tend to *know* I'm unskilled, uneducated, and unsophisticated about it. If I got into a metalworking shop, I'd quickly ask someone there what I'm supposed to do to stay safe, and then I'd stay the hell out of the way.

You see, I'm stupid about metalworking and metalworking safety, but that's okay. I'm rarely in a metalworking shop, I'd ask for guidance/instructions if I was, and I'd be careful and stay out of the way.

Some people lack all common sense, but even then I don't think they're necessarily going to break something. If you're a boss and you've got an employee who is a hard worker, honest, but lacks common sense, that's okay. Give them clear, simple, precise, repeatable instructions. Have them trained and re-trained before letting them loose on something breakable. Check in on them, encourage them, gently correct when things are wrong.

There's plenty of room for stupid people in the hell. I'm pretty stupid about lots of things, but I manage okay.

I don't think stupidity causes as many problems as I originally thought.

Nah, it's not stupidity. You know what causes problems? People who are oblivious and aren't paying attention.

I reckon most car crashes—are they the result of unskilled drivers, or paying not paying attention? I think the latter. Either someone talking on the cell phone, eating, putting on makeup, or otherwise not paying attention while driving. Or having liquor and being oblivious to your drunkenness and hopping behind the wheel.

Our society places a huge premium on "intelligence"—and frankly, I think it's kind of overrated. I'll write about this some other time. There's plenty of attributes more important than intelligence—work ethic, honesty, loyalty, awareness, persistence, empathy, diplomacy, things like that. For most important things in life, I'd take a hard working, honest, loyal, aware, persistent, empathetic, tactful person who had even below average book smarts over an intelligent person lacking those attributes.

But the real killer is being oblivious and unaware. Not watching the road while you're driving. Not checking and double-checking that all the machines are off. Not putting up signs that construction is happening. Just basic, basic shit that has nothing to do with intelligence. Paying attention to surroundings.

Stupidity can be dealt with. If someone's not good at something, they can learn it slower, or manage around that area, or avoid it, or delegate/defer it to someone else.

You can plan around lack of skill or ability in many areas, or avoid those areas and key in on virtues. Really, I think there's room in the world for people of people of all smarts and lack-of-smarts. Intelligence is overrated, and there's a dozen or so traits I'd look for before intelligence in someone in my life.

Stupid people aren't a problem. Oblivious people, though? Oh, they break all kinds of shit. Oblivious people are a big, big problem. We gotta watch out for them.

## ***If You're Intelligent, Beware the Cleverness Disease***

**Maybe the biggest problem really intelligent people have is that they spend more time being clever than being effective.**

I used to suffer from this disease of the mind. I'd want to do something new, novel, and fascinating—instead of just getting something done.

The really effective people I know, the people who make the biggest difference in the world, who make the best things, who get the most done, who live the best lives—they all are more concerned with getting something done that fits than with making it clever.

Over-researching relatively minor things is a great example. Take a quick look, get an understanding, choose one. Change later if it becomes an issue.

Trying to reinvent the wheel constantly.

Using words people don't know—maybe makes you seem clever, but makes you much less clear and less effective.

Trying to show off instead of listening.

Trying to make a point in an obscure way for no good reason—instead of just saying it outright.

The absolute worst one? Arguing with people over stuff that doesn't matter—you win the point, but become radioactive to whoever you were arguing with. Proving someone wrong? Yeah, clever. Very ineffective, though.

# Winning Ugly is Superior to Losing Beautifully



I was getting absolutely destroyed in this game of Chess. The opponent played a crazy reckless attacking style, but my mind wasn't running fast enough to keep up with the pace of the game.

You can see he has two queens and a rook to my one rook, but then he decided to take all of my pieces before ending... or something. He had numerous opportunities to trade off a queen for my last rook, but didn't do so. He could've checkmated me a number of times, but didn't do so.

So I moved my king around out of the way of checks, leaving my rook just to sit there. He doesn't take it, and gradually picks off all my pieces. Then,



bam, I dump my rook on the back row, checkmating him. What a ridiculous victory.

A few lessons here -

1.) The ugliest win in the world is superior to the prettiest defeat. You usually don't want risk losing in order to win a little prettier.

2.) It ain't over 'till it's over. Don't party until the cash is in the bank. Finish things when they can be finished.

3.) Winning by a huge margin can make people stupid... I wasn't as bad as I was playing, and my opponent decided to play cat and mouse with me... whoops. I was having a bad game, but that turned out around really fast on the last move.

***"After victory, tighten the straps on your helmet."***—Tokugawa Ieyasu, Founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate

***"They don't get it!" No, you don't get it.***

I'm writing this largely as a reminder to myself.

Sometimes I do something that I think is really cool. Then I go share it with the world. And sometimes, I get feedback that seems off-base to me.

Y'know, I'm wrong a lot of the time. I'm wrong more often than most people, simply because I try to huge volumes of stuff. When I'm 55% sure, I'll usually write up my initial thoughts and just note that I'm not sure if it's correct, but it's what I'm thinking about.

So, I'm wrong a lot. A lot of times, someone points out a glaring error I made. For instance, Jason Shen was kind enough to point out that the vast majority of people think to some extent that business/commerce/wealth is zero sum, so maybe it keeps making sense to talk about "adding value"—

oh, right, selection bias on my part since most of my peer group either directly create things that didn't exist before (artists, engineers, programmers, experimental scientists, etc) or facilitate trade and exchange and wealth building (entrepreneurs, managers, investors, financiers, etc).

But most people that aren't directly involved in the creation or trade. The world is complex, most people in the West work in big corporations and don't see how their role directly contributes to new wealth being created. So anyways, mea culpa there, and I'll amend my position. Thanks Jason.

So, sometimes it's pointed out that I'm mistaken. And that's great! Then I get to evolve my thinking.

But other times, I do something that I think is pretty cool and useful, and I get some feedback that seems to indicate a complete lack of getting-it on the part of the other person. Y'know, like, really really quit ignorant shit sometimes. The worst is when I'm writing something and I get ignorant nitpicky shit that incorrectly summarizes the point I made—even though I wrote the exact opposite point a little bit later in a piece, for instance.

My first reaction—"Blah. What an idiot. They don't get it."

False!

No, it's on you, if you're creating, to make sure people get it. And that doesn't just mean being logical if you're writing or having great features if you're marketing a product you made or having the right qualifications if you're trying to land a job or a contract.

Nope. Being right isn't enough. You also have to do everything else.

If you're writing a piece, you have to make sure the title, introduction, images, and formatting all fit the expectations and heuristics of the people who you care about if they "get it" or not.

If you're marketing a product, you've got to cover all the relevant specs, and ALSO cover all the (sometimes irrational) buying criteria people have.

If you're trying to land a job or contract, you've got be well-qualified, but you've also got to convey professionalism, empathy, and the warm fuzzy feeling.

A lot of this seems like, and partially is, bullshit.

If you're writing, people will skim your work. You need to take that into account, and make good transitions, sub-headlines, intelligently use bolding and links, and otherwise make sure the people of your target audience get the message. If they don't get it, that means YOU didn't get it.

If you're marketing, people aren't going to buy your product solely on logic. Actually, a slim fraction of people will, but probably not enough to keep you in business. You need to keep learning marketing and buyer's psychology, even if you don't want to. Or hire someone to do that. Because if you're getting your ass kicked by a competitor that's got a worse product than you, it's not your customers that don't get it—YOU don't get it.

If you're trying to a land a job, people are going to size you up based on somewhat arbitrary criteria. If you get passed over for a less qualified candidate, it's not that the company didn't get it. YOU didn't get it. Cufflinks matter and the quality of the paper your proposal is on matters and if your shoes are shined matters and all of that matters, \*if you care about that particular job\*.

Of course, sometimes you don't care. Some people aren't your target market, and you can shrug it off. I think it would be a fantastic idea to conquer North Korea, for a whole lot of reasons. Yet, I likely won't be able to persuade Kim Jong-il of that, and that's okay. He's not my target market and won't be convinced.

But if you do care, then never ever ever ever say, "They don't get it" if you care about the person who just made that decision. No, you don't get it. You did it wrong. Learn. Figure out where the decision/reaction came from, and do it better next time.

This was largely a reminder to myself.

## ***Stripping Down to Cause and Effect***

One thing I've been striving to do—often unsuccessfully—is remove moral judgments from my observation of situations.

Most people don't distinguish between observing and judging.

They say, "It's bad that it's raining outside." Well. Maybe, yeah. But there's two things going on there—first, it's raining. That's either true or false. Then there's that "bad"—which is an opinion, a moral judgment on the situation.

I think most people aren't aware of when they're making moral judgments and when they're making observations. That's not good for being able to think clearly.

Analysis and observation needs to be separated from moral evaluation to do it straightforwardly, or else you get blind to effects you don't expect and don't want to see.

Thus, I'd recommend you strip your observations down to cause and effect. "X seems to have happened, what caused it? Perhaps Y, perhaps Z... let's observe some more."

That's observing and then moving into analysis.

You can judge after that—that's fine, I judge things all the time—but for clear analysis, you've got to be able to separate the observing from the judging. And yet, it's hard. Look at the this sentence here—"that's fine, I judge all the time... for clear analysis, you've got to separate observing from judging." That sentence fails its own recommendation.

Sort of.

It's complicated. It's maybe impossible to completely remove judgment from observation. But I'd recommend you try, because you're more likely to figure out what's actually happening to do that. To do that, look for what effects are actually happening, and then try to figure out the causes. Refrain from judging whether the causes/effects are good or bad until you've figured out what causes produce what effects.

## ***Guest Essay: Humans Are Not Automatically Strategic***

Guest essay by Anna Salamon, "Humans Are Not Automatically Strategic":

Sebastian Marshall writes:

*"[A] large majority of otherwise smart people spend time doing semi-productive things, when there are massively productive opportunities untapped.*

*A somewhat silly example: Let's say someone aspires to be a comedian, the best comedian ever, and to make a living doing comedy. He wants nothing else, it is his purpose. And he decides that in order to become a better comedian, he will watch re-runs of the old television cartoon 'Garfield and Friends' that was on TV from 1988 to 1995....*

*I'm curious as to why."*

Why will a randomly chosen eight-year-old fail a calculus test? Because most possible answers are wrong, and there is no force to guide him to the correct answers. (There is no need to postulate a "fear of success"; *most* ways writing or not writing on a calculus test constitute failure, and so people, and rocks, fail calculus tests by default.)

Why do most of us, most of the time, choose to "pursue our goals" through routes that are far less effective than the routes we could find if we tried?[1]

My guess is that here, as with the calculus test, the main problem is that *most* courses of action are extremely ineffective, and that there has been no

strong evolutionary or cultural force sufficient to focus us on the very narrow behavior patterns that would actually be effective.

To be more specific: there are clearly at least some limited senses in which we have goals. We: (1) tell ourselves and others stories of how we're aiming for various "goals"; (2) search out modes of activity that are consistent with the role, and goal-seeking, that we see ourselves as doing ("learning math"; "becoming a comedian"; "being a good parent"); and sometimes even (3) feel glad or disappointed when we do/don't achieve our "goals".

But there are clearly also heuristics that would be useful to goal-achievement (or that would be part of what it means to "have goals" at all) that we do *not* automatically carry out. We do *not* automatically:

- (a) Ask ourselves what we're trying to achieve;
- (b) Ask ourselves how we could tell if we achieved it ("what does it look like to be a good comedian?") and how we can track progress;
- (c) Find ourselves strongly, intrinsically curious about information that would help us achieve our goal;
- (d) Gather that information (e.g., by asking as how folks commonly achieve our goal, or similar goals, or by tallying which strategies have and haven't worked for us in the past);
- (e) Systematically test many different conjectures for how to achieve the goals, including methods that aren't habitual for us, while tracking which ones do and don't work;
- (f) Focus most of the energy that *\*isn't\** going into systematic exploration, on the methods that work best;
- (g) Make sure that our "goal" is really our goal, that we coherently want it and are not constrained by fears or by uncertainty as to whether it is worth the effort, and that we have thought through any questions and decisions in advance so they won't continually sap our energies;
- (h) Use environmental cues and social contexts to bolster our motivation, so we can keep working effectively in the face of intermittent frustrations, or temptations based in hyperbolic discounting;

.... or carry out any number of other useful techniques. Instead, we mostly just do things. We act from habit; we act from impulse or convenience when primed by the activities in front of us; we remember our goal and choose an action that *feels associated* with our goal. We do any number of things. But we do not systematically choose the narrow sets of actions that would effectively optimize for our claimed goals, or for any other goals.

Why? Most basically, because humans are only just on the cusp of general intelligence. That is not at all the same as the ability to *automatically implement these heuristics*. Our verbal, conversational systems are much better at abstract reasoning than are the motivational systems that pull our behavior. I have enough abstract reasoning ability to understand that I'm safe on the glass floor of a tall building, or that ice cream is not healthy, or that exercise furthers my goals... but this *doesn't* lead to an automatic updating of the reward gradients that, absent rare and costly conscious overrides, pull my behavior. I can train my automatic systems, for example by visualizing ice cream as disgusting and artery-clogging and yucky, or by walking across the glass floor often enough to persuade my brain that I can't fall through the floor... but systematically training one's motivational systems in this way is *also* not automatic for us. And so it seems far from surprising that most of us have not trained ourselves in this way, and that most of our "goal-seeking" actions are far less effective than they could be.

Still, I'm keen to train. I know people who are far more strategic than I am, and there seem to be clear avenues for becoming far more strategic than they are. It also seems that having goals, in a much more pervasive sense than (1)-(3), is part of what "rational" should mean, will help us achieve what we care about, and hasn't been taught in much detail on LW.

So, to second Sebastian's questions: does this analysis seem right? Have some of you trained yourselves to be substantially more strategic, or goal-achieving, than you started out? How did you do it? Do you agree with (a)-(h) above? Do you have some good heuristics to add? Do you have some good ideas for how to train yourself in such heuristics?

[1] For example, why do many people go through long training programs "to make money" without spending a few hours doing salary comparisons

ahead of time? Why do many who type for hours a day remain two-finger typists, without bothering with a typing tutor program? Why do people spend their Saturdays "enjoying themselves" without bothering to track which of their habitual leisure activities are *\*actually\** enjoyable? Why do even unusually numerate people fear illness, car accidents, and bogeymen, and take safety measures, but not bother to look up statistics on the relative risks? Why do most of us settle into a single, stereotyped mode of studying, writing, social interaction, or the like, without trying alternatives to see if they work better -- even when such experiments as we have tried have sometimes given great boosts?

## ***Steps to Achievement: The Pitfalls, Costs, Requirements, and Timelines***

I believe that's a fantastic list of achievement/victory heuristics. Some of these are difficult to do, though. Let's look to make this into a practical, actionable sort of document. I believe the steps outlined above can be broadly grouped. I've done it with some minor rephrasing to make it in first person plural -

**Identify:** (a) Ask ourselves what we're trying to achieve, (b) ask ourselves how we could tell if we achieved it and how we can track progress

**Research:** (c) Become strongly curious about information that would help achieve the goal, and (d) gather that information (through methods like asking how folks commonly achieve this goal, especially methods that aren't habitual)

**Test:** (e) Test methods that might work to achieve goals, especially non-habitual methods, while tracking what works and doesn't

**Focus:** (f) Focus most of the energy that isn't going into researching/exploring on methods that are starting to produce the best results, (g) make sure that the "goal" chosen is worthwhile, is desired for coherent reasons, and firmly commit to it at this stage so that doubt does not consume excessive time and energy

**Persevere:** (h) Use environmental cues and social contexts to boost motivation, persist in the face of adversity and frustration, and not given in to temptation to quit or take it easy.



There's some implicit steps in the model. I think it would go like this:

**Identify -> (make decision to begin) -> Research -> (begin) -> Test -> (analyze early results) -> Focus -> (make firm commitment at this stage) -> Persevere -> (achieve or re-evaluate) -> (back to step 1)**

I believe Anna roughly laid out five key stages—Identify, research, test, focus, persevere. I believe there's seven other stages mixed in—make decision to begin, begin, analyze early results, make firm commitment, achieve or re-evaluate, repeat.

**Identify** - the first stage to accomplishing a goal is to identify a goal.

I believe this is one of the hardest stages, due to the individual nature of it. You need to figure out your goals for yourself.

There are other potential pitfalls—people who are fatalistic ("things are already decided"), nihilistic ("nothing matters"), or believe they can't achieve will have problems with this stage.

Thinking about goals tends to be difficult because you're making sacrifices. If you choose to make one thing your goal, then you're choosing not to make something else your goal. You have to prioritize, or you'll be stuck serving multiple masters, which is no good.

*Requirements:* Introspection about what you want to achieve, patience, working and re-working at goals, and taking the time to describe and elaborate what success would look like.

*Timeline:* Varies wildly. Bursts of insight are fast, finding loose threads can take more than a year. Don't feel bad if it does.

**Make decision to begin** – I believe this is an underrated component to achieving. Saying, "I have now decided start pursuing this goal."

This tends to produce a lot of anxiety. Our next section will have tips for dealing with it, so I won't deal with this here.

*Requirements:* Willpower. This is tricky.

*Timeline:* Varies—people think things over for a while. But the decision to start exploring a goal can happen instantly.

**Research** – Facts are actually useful.

Everything you can know about how to do anything is based on a fact. How do I improve my energy level? Turns out that knowing about nutrition is useful.

*Requirements:* Research skill, internet.

*Timeline:* Depends on the goal. Of course, research can be an ongoing process forever, but how much is enough to get started? Depends on the field. Younger fields probably require less research since they tend to have more long hanging fruit available for discovery/achievement, less established competition, and less regulation about beginning.

**Begin** – The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step and whatnot.

A lot of people never actually start things. They think about starting something, or they start to think about something, but getting to the actual step of starting something rarely happens.

When were you taking your dream vacation, again?

This is another thing that's scary. When you start, the thing that was only a possibility before starts to form, and that freaks some people out. The next section of the book, again, helps you deal with it.

*Requirements:* A bit of decisiveness, and then, simply starting.

*Timeline:* Immediate, though people often take a lot of time to prepare to begin.

**Test** – You should probably test things as long as the test doesn't damage you too badly.

Testing things that aren't fatal or too damaging if they fail is probably the only way to achieve in a new domain, and maybe the only way to achieve in a domain where how to succeed shifts over time. A lot of people obsess

over, "Where should I get started?" Well, why not start *anywhere that might be valuable*? There's probably some good ways to assess and choose the best jumping off point, but action of any sort that might work at this stage is quite valuable.

*Requirements:* Action orientation. Though speed isn't required, the faster you can try/implement something, the better. Willingness to stomach non-success

*Timeline:* Depends on the discipline. You should start getting some feedback fairly quickly.

**Analyze early results** - Here, you analyze what's working early on and put more emphasis/effort into that area.

Basically, once something is working, you know that it's promising. Just keep in mind that you should explore other options, and that some things take a while to pan out. If it's a rare high-upside thing, it might be worth pursuing even if it hasn't shown tangible results yet.

Potential Pitfalls: Analyzing with too small of a sample size could give you bad data and make you quit too soon or be overly optimistic about a particular way. Focusing on something that produces short term gains with a relatively low local maximum could be unfortunate.

*Requirements:* Data-tracking ability. Analytical skills, especially with numbers, statistics, and trends help *a lot* here. Being able to make charts, graphs, and visualizations isn't necessary, but might help you easily spot long term trends.

*Timeline:* I find analyzing one week's worth of data can be done in between 20 minutes and an hour, depending on the complexity. The first time is the hardest, it gets easier after that.

**Focus** - Here, you isolate the one, two, or three things that provide the most results and bear down in those areas.

This is an important part. If you stay split between too many paths, you never wind up actually doing the thing.

*Requirements:* The ability to identify high yield areas from your analysis, and be decisive enough to focus in the highest yield area or two.

*Timeline:* It might take a while to ramp up the effort in the highest yield area or there might be relevant equipment/supplies needed, but the decision to do it can be made very quickly after analysis.

**Make firm commitment** - These might seem redundant, but I think people don't commit to their goals enough.

At least, I see normal people who seem to be wandering through life without having anything particularly meaningful happen. Whereas I tend to see results from people who say, "Yes! *I will!*" At this point where you're getting ready to focus, you have an idea on what things cost and what the results are going to be. Do you want it bad enough to firmly commit to get it at all costs?

*Costs:* This might be scary, or not. It might be slightly mentally taxing, or not. It might require an identity shift, or might not. It shouldn't be too difficult, but you're getting on the verge of success—you might have to confront some inner demons.

*Requirements:* Decisiveness, a bit of willpower.

*Timeline:* Instant.

**Persevere** - In this stage, you're gearing up for the long haul.

Getting relevant supplies, tools, outreach, building an external environment, making relevant commitments, and otherwise positioning yourself for success, and then persisting.

A lot of people give up. You can reduce the chances of this by making the environment more supportive of your success, getting emotional support, and the old fashioned "burn your boats behind you."

*Costs:* I think if you've clearly identified the payoffs, it shouldn't be too tough, but the road can get weary at times. Persistence can be hard and

tiring. The most expensive cost is doing the right thing when you need to, but you're not in the mood to do so.

*Requirements:* Constructing an environment conducive to success, staying motivated, persistence.

*Timeline:* Constructing a positive environment varies in time depending on what your environment looked like before you started. How long you'll have to persist depends on the scope of your goal and the methods you've chosen.

**Achieve or re-evaluate** - Time to see if your beliefs pay the rent.

You're either starting to achieve your goal, or you're starting to reconsider if the path you chose was correct. If the latter, you might have to go back to the drawing board. If the former, congratulations! Time to celebrate briefly, and then move on. Either way, you'll be assessing, re-assessing, identifying, and re-identifying goals at this stage.

*Costs:* Completing or abandoning a project both have their costs, the latter more than the former. Either way you'll get a sense of closure after this—consciously abandoning a project where you gave it your all, but then it didn't pan out or your high level goals changed can actually be very enjoyable if you ship.

*Requirements:* If achieving, graciousness. If re-evaluating, emotional steadfastness to not quit too early, but pragmatism/realism to know when you need to go back to the drawing board.

*Timeline:* Funny enough, a lot of times when you're succeeding at an abstract discipline, you don't realize it for a while. Other goals are easier to notice. It depends on the specific goal and field.

**Repeat** - After completing or abandoning a goal, it's time to go back to the start, to identify the next things you'll devote yourself to and spend your life energy on. This is where you start identifying goals, researching them, committing to starting, and so on.

Anna wrote:

I think there's a lot of potential to build out in each specific area, identify and apply these methods to common goals, and so on. Perhaps we could go through the list for developing in rationality, or becoming more healthy, or wealthy, or an accomplished artist, or any other number of valuable pursuits.

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## ***GROWING: YOU CAN DO AMAZING THINGS***

"Greatness is something you do, not something you are."  
—Sebastian Marshall

### ***Positive Sum Games Don't Require Natural Talent***

It just dawned on me—there's the "you can do anything, be anything, have anything" crowd, and obviously, that's not literally true. Could anyone play professional golf and win the Masters and perform as first chair violin at a prestigious symphony? Nah, probably not.

But I always think to myself, "I can do anything except the things I can't do yet, and I could learn those and do them if I want to." Most successful people I know think the same way.

Trying to reconcile that, I start thinking: You might need natural talent to win at a zero-sum game, or if you're competing for limited pieces of pie.

But you don't need natural talent for positive sum games. Positive sum games make multiple winners and expand the pie more than what the person eats.

NBA? On the court, it's a zero-sum game. Every "W" in the win column comes at the expense of putting an "L" in another team's loss column. There are 5 starters, and if you want to start, you've got to take someone else's spot when they retire or get sent to the bench. Then there are a few more rotation spots, and a few more non-rotation bench spots. And that's pretty much it.

That means that hard work, hustle, struggle, discipline might not be enough to play NBA-level basketball. Because there are only so many spots.

But positive sum games don't require natural talent—by building more, accomplishing more, facilitating more in a way that *makes it possible for others to build more, accomplish more, and facilitate more*—well, then you never run out of spots. To be an NBA player, you're knocking someone else off an NBA team. To get into an NBA rotation, you're taking someone else's minutes. To become an NBA starter, someone else is retiring or getting sent to the bench.

So maybe you can't be an NBA player. Because there's somebody that'll work just as hard as you but also might have been born taller, or put on denser muscle mass, or has a higher vertical jump even after you've trained like crazy on it.

But don't make the mistake that all of life is like this. Anyone could succeed teaching craftsmanship, because people learning more about art, engineering, machinery, and building stuff makes them willing, excited, and able to learn *even more* about art, engineering, machinery, and building stuff. There's a near infinite role for good craftsmanship and good teachers of craftsmanship in the world. There's a near infinite role for good business. For good science. For good art. It makes other things possible if you do a good enough job of it.

That doesn't make it easy. But if you hustle long and hard enough, you should be able to break through if you're playing a positive sum game.



## *Wanting Everyone to Win*

Envy and schadenfreude are common emotions. People like seeing their opponents fail.

Is it possible to get over that? Would it be desirable to get over that?

I think envy and schadenfreude and hatred are usually a detriment to people feeling them. This is obvious enough when you're playing a positive sum game—because positive sum games don't require natural talent and have a near infinite opportunity for success. Disciplines like inventing, engineering, finance, entrepreneurship, mathematics, and the natural sciences work hand in hand. Every win by an inventor opens lots of doors for engineering, finance, entrepreneurship, math, and science. And indeed, for other inventors.

A lot of people mistake positive sum games—like the economy at large—for a zero-sum game. They think that if you get money, they'll get less money. Of course, it doesn't work like that, as our exponentially growing standard of living shows. Even if someone loses a local conflict (to gain market share in a new technology, for instance) they can still go on to invent and innovate in a new field.

Take Justin Kan from Justin.tv. His first startup was called "Kiko" and it was an online calendar. Google comes out with Google Calendar, which really put a hurting on Kiko, and Justin and team had a fire sale of the remains of Kiko following Google duplicating their effort.

Sucks, right? Well, maybe not. Because of that, he goes on to found Justin.tv which looks really promising. Even losing a local conflict (Google eating your lunch in online calendars) can be positive-sum if the person whose lunch was eaten goes on to do bigger and better things.

But what about true zero-sum games, like sports?

I got seriously interested in sports when I lived in Boston, so my primary teams were Red Sox/Patriots/Celtics. Now, if you don't understand the

American sports scene, take my word for this—Boston fans were expected to hate the New York Yankees in baseball, Indianapolis Colts in football, and Los Angeles Lakers in basketball, due to long-standing rivalries.

But after some thinking about it, I decided that wasn't the best way to go. "Intelligent people who like baseball and statistics" is a very small subset of people. Why curse and alienate intelligent Yankee fans? Wouldn't it be possible to root for likable Yankees, and to hope for exciting, crisp baseball games between the two teams, and a general increase in popularity of the sport, especially among people who like statistics?

As a Boston fan, you were expected to dislike the top players of the rival team—Alex Rodriguez, Peyton Manning, and Kobe Bryant.

But I think, man, sports fans (and especially sports fans really into advanced statistical analysis) are somewhat rare. Why antagonize them? Alex Rodriguez is a hell of a hitter, it's a pleasure to watch him hit.

Peyton Manning has some of the best vision for small things of anyone in any sport ever. He'll see a small twitch in the opposing defense, and "audible"—change the play at the last minute. It's fine to watch him with some awe, thinking what the heck did he see?

And it's cool to admire Kobe Bryant's *massive* work ethic, and his skills and fluidity playing basketball. Seriously, he's more graceful playing basketball than most figure skaters are. The guy is a joy of an athlete to watch.

I think looking for things to like, respect, connect with—even *if you're playing a zero-sum game*—goes a long way. Instead of rooting for Peyton Manning to throw an interception, you start trying to figure out what he sees that causes him to audible ... this is something most Patriots fan are blind to, because they hate the guy. They don't want to appreciate his skills, so they blind themselves to things they could learn about.

In the end, I think most sports fans would do well to root for exciting, quality games in their sport, and the sport growing in popularity. The more popular it gets, the more quality teams, clubs, and players will come into

the sport. The more international competitions there will be in the sport. The more good games you'll see.

Could you root for your competition in business? I think to some extent, yes. Sure, give an all-out effort to win that market share. But also root for them to pivot and make massive dollars in (ideally) an unrelated field. Or to break new ground and new markets so you both prosper.

And this sort of goodwill means that if the company does fail, you can recruit some of their team on good footing.

This goes against human nature. We want enemies, and we want to root for our enemies to fail. This has been hard for me to adopt, and I'm still working at it. Maybe it's because I started reading the various war plans of historical communist leaders recently, like Lenin and Mao. I really dislike communism, but being open-minded enough to study "What Is To Be Done?" and "On Guerrilla Warfare" is increasing my knowledge of history and how things happen, and making me a better strategist.

Of course, there are no enemies in death. But maybe this same principle can be applied in life—yes, you can root for the Red Sox to win 110 games, and the Yankees to win 109, the sport to grow in popularity, and for an exciting championship series between the two teams. And if the Yankees win 110 and the Red Sox win less, well, you can still appreciate their quality pitching and hitting, and again root for the sport overall to grow in popularity.

This is admittedly hard to do. But I think it's good. It's not always possible, but I think it's healthy to start to want everyone to win.

## ***Why I'm Very Skeptical of Genius***

Gosh, I like *The Wall Street Journal* a lot. I like this piece, too: "No You Can't: Is genius a simple matter of hard work? Not a chance," by Terry Teachout, November 12, 2010.

I like the whole piece, except I disagree with the conclusions.

You'd need a certain baseline to be able to do the kind of work or craft you want to do. Enough to understand the discipline. But that's not such a high bar.

If you can understand the discipline, then, is it possible to make incremental progress every single week? Could you tighten your fundamentals, study related disciplines for synergy and crossover, and experiment on the hardest problems every single week?

Why not?

Really, why not?

Almost everyone sucks at almost everything when they first try it. But do they keep trying, and do they make focused effort at improvement?

If you wanted to be a writer, you could study some fundamental of writing every single week. You could study some related or unrelated field to see if there are some possible synergistic effects. And you could take a crack at doing something difficult in writing every single week.

For instance, you could reread a part of *Elements of Style* or *On Writing* every week. Then you could go through and edit and rewrite a piece that's already written to try to make it better using the newly learned rules you're adapting.

Then you could kind of scan around in related or unrelated fields. Personally, I was thinking of doing a sort of "DNA analysis" of successful writing. Have you heard of the Music Genome Project ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_Genome\\_Project](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_Genome_Project))? It powers Pandora.com.

So I was thinking, you could probably do something like that for writing, and then try to craft a written work with elements known to appeal to

people. For instance, if you wished to write a best selling detective novel, you might do an analysis of when the antagonists appear in the plot for the first time. You might find that 15% of bestsellers open with the primary antagonist committing their crime, 10% have the antagonist mixed in quickly into the plot, and 75% keep the primary antagonist a vague and shadowy figure until shortly before the climax.

I don't know if the pattern fits that—I don't read many detective novels—but it would be a bit of a surprise if it did. You might think, well, hey, I better either introduce the antagonist right away and have them commit their crime, or keep them shadowy for a while.

Or, to use an easier example—perhaps you could wholesale adopt the use of engineering checklists into your chosen discipline? It seems to me like lots of fields don't use checklists that could benefit tremendously from them. I run this through my mind again and again—what kind of checklist could be built here? I first came across the concept of checklists being adopted in surgery from engineering, and then having surgical accidents and mistakes go way down.

And finally, can you try to do something hard in your field regularly? And ideally, complete and perhaps ship some version of it? I mean, why not?

Paint isn't so expensive.

Typing is basically free these days.

How much to do a rough recording of a piece of music nowadays? Like, close to nothing?

So you know, make a painting, or write something, or write and record a song every week. Or whatever your craft is. If you write 52 iPhone apps per year, I reckon one of them is going to be good. (Ideally more than one)

Or game designers who actually write and ship games regularly—one of them is going to be a winner eventually, no?

Well, I certainly think so. I'm working on doing important stuff. And I really think it does come down to:

- 1.) Constantly improve fundamentals
- 2.) Look for synergies in other fields
- 3.) Regularly complete attempts to do significant work (and ideally ship them)

I think if you do those three regularly, you're pretty likely to produce some genius-quality work.

## ***Could You Do Genius-Quality Work?***

### **Could you do genius-quality work?**

I know the word genius gets thrown around pretty casually these days, I certainly throw it around pretty casually. But honestly, I don't think it's very hard to do genius-quality work, *if you decide to try*. Most people don't try. But if you did try, I think you could do some.

What's genius-quality work? Hard to define. Let's try, though. "Something that makes a large, permanent impact on an important field." That's not quite right, but it's close enough for now.

Here's the interesting point, here's why I wrote this post: **I reject the notion of a person who is a "genius"—you're either doing genius-quality work or you aren't.** Regular, normal people (you and me) who keep trying to make large, permanent impacts on important fields are likely to do so at some point, and that's genius-quality work. Yes, most people won't try. But if they did try, they'd probably get around to doing some genius-quality work sooner or later.

Now, there's a whole other level—timeless-quality work. That, I'm not so sure we can just do that. That's the kind of work made by da Vinci and Socrates and Tsai Lun and Confucius. That's Special Relativity and the

Parthenon and things like that. Timeless work, I don't know if anyone can do timeless work.

But genius-quality work? Large, permanent impact on important fields? I think we're in the easiest era of history to do that. There's so much low hanging fruit available—just cross-reference two important disciplines that haven't talked to each other enough yet, BAM, genius-quality work. Not so hard. And I mean, you've got the whole internet at your command if you're having a hard time. You've got summaries of almost everything online and why they're important, you can get quick access to almost any book throughout history, and you can get into contact with almost anyone for free.

Timeless work? I don't know if anyone could do that. Maybe not. Genius work? Oh yeah, certainly, if you *try*. What are you working on these days?

## ***Things More Important Than Intelligence for Getting Wealthy***

Well, I think intelligence isn't the only thing. Maybe not even the most important thing. I'd rank *effectiveness*, *desire*, and *consistency/persistence* all higher than intelligence for tangible success.

By "effectiveness", I just mean the ability to get shit done. I don't have a fancy definition of it, but some people can obviously get shit done, and others can't. You need to be able to get shit done to get wealthy (or otherwise do meaningful things).

Then "desire". A lot of people—it doesn't really occur to them to get wealthy. Or they don't want it. Or they don't think it's possible for them. Or—and this is totally fair—they rank other things as more important than wealth. That's fine, if that's what they choose.

On cultivating desire, I'd recommend Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* if you haven't read it. I mean, it's not as good as the hype about it (it's good, but waaaaay overhyped in my opinion)—but there are some very, very valuable points in there. Recommended.

Then "consistency/persistence". I think you've got to be working on your long term objectives almost daily, or at least weekly. If you put them off until some undetermined date in the future, it's very likely they never happen. So, the ability to consistently put in time and persist when things suck (and keep putting in time, even if you're sick/tired/demoralized/whatever), I think those are all important.

Intelligence is maybe #4? I'll take an effective-gets-shit-done person who is desirous of success and consistent/persistent over someone who is more intelligent but not those things.

## ***Luck Doesn't Exist***

I hear people talk about luck a lot. Straightup—luck doesn't exist.

If you believe in luck, then you believe either:

- 1.) some people consistently defy probability, or,
- 2.) some things aren't a result of cause and effect.

Life is a series of probabilities. Every day, there's a chance that a given set of things will happen. **If you want to have a successful life, expose yourself to as much high-upside low-downside probability as you can.** Any given thing you do might not work out, but if you expose yourself to high-upside low-downside, good things will happen. Read books, reach out to people, try to get projects working, keep trying to write and build things, keep learning new skills, keep treating people well.

**If you want to fail at life, expose yourself to high-downside no-upside probability.** This is short term gain at long term expense type stuff.



Cigarettes. Unsecured debt for consumption. Most TV.

You'll keep getting "lucky" if you keep exposing yourself to things with upside and limited downside. If you get an amazing job or contract that you had a 1 in 1,000 chance of getting, were you lucky? No, especially not if you applied and pitched 1,000 other places. If you say, "OK, I'm going to keep trying to get what I want until I do" you'll get it, as long as it's a positive sum game you're playing.

How about people who are born into a good situation vs. a bad one? Were they "lucky"? No, of course not—they've got their background, training, country they live in, city they live in, whatever, as a result of the conscious decisions of the people that came before them. Luck has nothing to do with that.

My great-grandparents were dirt poor. Like, dirt poor. My grandparents were quite poor—after my grandfather got back from serving in the Pacific in WWII, he married my grandmother, and they had nine kids. They never had any money. My Mom was #8, she (and I) only exist because they kept having kids because they thought it was important. My Mom worked really hard to dig out of being poor, and I was born with a little more opportunity than the generation before. I also owe a debt of gratitude to all the inventors and scientists and engineers and businesspeople who invented and built and improved the world before I was born.

But is that luck? No, it was conscious, deliberate actions by humans to build the world. Were Mayer Rothschild's sons lucky? No, they were successful because their Dad decided he wanted to work really hard, save his money, raise his kids well, and build the next generation instead of just consuming for himself and having "a nice life" like most people do.

There wasn't too much luck involved in the building of House Rothschild. Hustle, yes. Hard work, yes. Discipline, yes. Strong family ties, yes. Luck? No. It was all cause and effect, with some probability mixed in.

What about people who get killed in an earthquake? Bad luck? Or is it that there weren't enough safeguards and well-built emergency-proofings in the

buildings they were in? Now, just because I say "Luck doesn't exist" doesn't mean "Everything is under your control"—but really, did you build two years of savings and diversify? If not, then when disaster inevitably strikes, you're more high and dry and in worse shape. Is that bad luck? Could you have sacrificed earlier in life and thus been prepared for [layoffs/disaster/changing political situation/whatever]? Some people are in trouble when crisis strikes, some people are ready. Is that luck? No. Luck doesn't exist.

Well, how about when someone dies senselessly, in a car crash or some such? Well, that's the closest you can get to something that's "bad luck", but even then, were you as careful about safety as you could be? I was in Cambodia and got hit by a motorcycle whose driver was a teenager driving fast on the wrong side of the road ... and I was walking in a crosswalk at the time. Bad luck? No, probability. You go to a Third World country, your chance of dying this year goes up quite a lot. I got hit by a motorcycle, went to the clinic, got patched up, survived. Life goes on.

But what if the bell does ring for you early? Well, after you've done all you can do, you really can't control that. But again, I'm saying, no luck there. And also, no tragedy. Your time will come. I try to think about this every day—we don't have too much time on Earth. Whether it's one month, eight years, 50 years, 70 years, or 100 years—this isn't too much time, it's not enough time to do all the good things that are capable of being done. The question is, were you spending your life right, doing all the best things you could, searching out the most meaningful things, taking the best courses of action, training yourself, building your talent, spending your time well, serving people, appreciating life? If you were, it's no shame to go when you go. The bell rings for all of us at some time. No luck there either—it's all cause and effect, and probability. There's a chance you're not breathing tomorrow and today's your last day. I meditate on that daily—when the bell rings for me, it's not bad luck or good luck, it's cause and effect and probability. If I've spent my time well, there's no bad luck when the bell rings. It'll happen. It'll be too soon, no matter when it happens. But luck will have nothing to do with it. Luck doesn't exist.

## ***If Luck Doesn't Exist, Then Should We Give Way to Fatalism?***

Some people might say that if luck doesn't exist, shouldn't we be fatalistic and just accept things? Question the current order less? Here are my thoughts.

### **Should a person be responsible for their good or bad starting point?**

I've got a belief, a value, a way of living. Everything is my responsibility. I got mugged by a psycho criminal? I should've been trained in martial arts. Some idiot crashes their car into me? I should've been paying more attention and had faster reflexes. My bank suspends my only credit card in a foreign country? I should've had a backup card, enough cash, and notified them beforehand that I was traveling. It's hailing outside? I should've moved somewhere warm if I didn't want to deal with that.

This isn't for abstract thinking reasons. This is because it makes me always take responsibility for what's happening in my life, even if it's not my fault per se. Everything is my responsibility. I was born without the opportunities that would've been nice? Well, suck it up and build those opportunities for myself and my children. Someone did. We evolved from being apes—we crawled out of jungles, forests, and caves with nothing. All civilization is the result of building the world. I can do that. You could do that. Anyone could do that. It just takes trying, really. I don't think it's even all that complicated.

### **Isn't any person just one of a multitude?**

I reject that stance. I'm not one in a multitude. I am. I will. No one can say I'm part of a multitude without me joining voluntarily—you can threaten me, and I might submit out of a mix of cowardice or pragmatism. But no moral authority can be asserted over me—not by a vote, not by the head of a religion, not by a dictator, not by the mandate of heaven. You're not one in a multitude unless you want to be. You can become one in a multitude if

you want—that's your choice—but you can never ascribe someone else as part of a multitude without their consent. Threaten them for trying to break free? Yes, certainly, that's common. It might work, even. But now we're into questions of war and combat and violence—this is straying from the base philosophy. I am. I will. Individually. Not "We are". I am. Not "We will". I will.

**If we are individuals, then how can you say an individual is the result of a long chain of ancestors?**

For all that I just said, I am a believer in individualism, but I am also a believer in voluntary interdependence. I'll absolutely join with others for a common purpose. If a man takes a post in law enforcement or a military by choice, he swears oaths and becomes part of the group—interdependent on his fellowmen. But the key is—it's voluntary. I say that I see a bond with my ancestors and my future descendants, but this is by choice. If a man were to say, "I will have no descendants"—this may be a sad thing to me, but who am I to tell him this is a mistake? It is his choice. We choose who we become interdependent with. Voluntary interdependence is good. (Though, don't mistake a 51% vote as voluntary—this is a common misconception)

**If people realize there are connections between them, that they are products of cause and effect, won't that make people question less the current order?**

I don't like fatalism. The fact is, the chain exists, like it or not. That's how you came to exist—a chain of cause and effect. Gravity exists. The weather exists. Like it or not, y'know? So saying, "I'm where I am as a direct result of cause and effect" isn't giving myself over to fate or fatalism or anything, it's just acknowledging reality as it unfolded behind us in the past.

Is that luck? Again, I think not. *You make your own luck*, more or less. To an extent it's not true that you create your own life—your life is insignificant, trivial. Honestly, I believe that—if you're taken to the grave early because the dice landed in a fluke way for you, there's no tragedy there. You do what you can; some of us go before we want to.

Does this make sense? If you flip a coin and it lands against you—were you unlucky? I don't think so. I think that's normal. I think that's life.

This isn't just a high level, theoretical, academic thing—I see this general sentiment in successful people. I am responsible for all of my life, there are no accidents, everything is cause and effect, I can improve my outcomes by taking the best actions possible, it's no tragedy if I do all the best actions I can and things don't work out as I hoped.

And then—start with individualism. No one can take that from you. They can threaten you, beat you, whip you, chain you, insult you, mock you—but they can't break you inside unless you let them. Once freed from other people's would-be control, you are able to volunteer yourself to the causes you believe in and become interdependent with those—though I'd recommend respecting people who don't want to join in. No luck! I really think this way. Most successful people I run this by do too. And most people who feel this way before they're successful become successful too.

## ***I Think Greatness Is Something You Do, Not Something You Are***

I don't think I'm a particularly great man. I hear this kind of shit from people all the time. I don't think people realize what's possible yet—look, you've got the whole world full of information available to you. You've got summaries of every era of history, every notable inventor, every science paper, every kind of music—all of it available for free at your fingertips. Do you know about Sengoku, Japan, and why Ieyasu won where Nobunaga and Hideyoshi didn't? Do you know how the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire, why Mark Anthony and Augustus fell out, and how Augustus defeated Mark Anthony and Cleopatra's forces? How come America became America, whereas the French Revolution became a bloodbath and led to Napoleon? Do you listen to classical music? You can

watch Karajan conduct Dvorak's ninth symphony for free on Youtube, it's really nice. Check out some Beethoven while you're there.

I hear this great man shit from people. Who am I? I'm nobody. I'll probably become the greatest strategist of our generation, make great works of art, write books, found a virtuous dynasty, sponsor artists and scientists and engineers, build schools and hospitals and universities, improve and serve good governments, serve law enforcement and military and other guardians of society, perhaps liberate some people from tyranny ... . I don't know, I'll do those things, but why aren't you? Who am I? I'm fucking nobody. I'm just trying.

Don't get me wrong. It sucks. It's hard. It's really, really hard sometimes. It's neurosis-inducing sometime. I hate to lose as much as anyone, and I've lost a lot. I push myself to the edge of what I think I can handle, and sometimes I lose and get beaten down. I broke my hand training in fencing, I broke my teeth on separate occasions, I broke my ribs racing an ATV down a canyon, taking a turn too hard and rolling it. Yeah, it sucks. I don't like it. But it's not such a big deal.

Have you been poor? I've been poor. Like, no money at all and "damn them, I'll take nothing from them" poor. I've been there. It's okay. It's not much worse than having a normal middle class life. You do it, you survive. Take some risks. Try. Please, please try. I'm not great. I devote myself to great causes. I try. Oh, it's hard. Don't get me wrong. Broken hand, broken ribs, broken teeth, failures and disappointments, long nights burning midnight oil trying to turn ideas into reality. But—why not do this? What else is life? Drinking a beer, or a glass of champagne, or watching television? I've drank the best beer in the world—I always liked the Trappist beers myself, Chimay, Duvel, and Dubbel. I smoked the best marijuana and hashish in Amsterdam. Television? Sure, I've watched plasma TV. It's great. But it's nothing like *producing*. Creating. Oh, it sucks. It's hard. You'll go crazy a little bit. But I promise it's worth it. Nothing else compares. You could do it if you try. Why not try?

Do you think that "greatness" is the domain of "great people"? Look, when General Washington had to go to the bathroom, he pulled his pants off and

took a shit. So did Tokugawa Ieyasu and Miyamoto Musashi. So did Cosimo Medici. So did Meyer Rothschild. So did da Vinci. So did Jefferson and Franklin. So did Sejong and Zhuge Liang. So did Augustus and Marcus Aurelius and Aristotle and Socrates. All those guys got bitten by a mosquito from time to time and had to scratch the itch and were aggravated. Sometimes they'd be walking and step in a muddy puddle and they'd curse. What's the difference between them and us? Nothing. Except they tried.

Who am I? Nobody. If the bell doesn't ring too early, I'll write works of strategy and history, I'll found branches of science and make great works of art, I'll fund artists and researchers and engineers working on great projects, I'll be a visage of hell and misery to criminals, and I'll make myself into a warrior and guardian of society and support the law enforcement and military that keep us safe. Perhaps I'll serve in combat, or in governance. I don't know. I'll do something. What else is life, but doing things?

I'll have many children, and raise them to be strong and virtuous. Why not? I'll write books. Why not? Sit for an hour each day in the morning before anything else in front of paper or a word processor. Either type, or sit and don't type, but don't do anything else. A book will come from this. Want to write a great book? Free yourself to write a bad book first.

I've tried painting and making music. Why not? It's simple and inexpensive try. I've had a couple lessons on drawing. I study history—why don't you study history? It's all free to study, and it's fascinating. I train my mind and body. Why not? I'm friends with people like you, reader, who are smarter than me, who are wiser than me, who help me and guide me forwards. You have as much talent as I do, probably more. I don't have so much talent. I just try. I'm not a great man. I'm just working on great things. We'll see how it pans out in the end.

## ***GROWING: FINISH THINGS***

"It is written that the priest Shungaku said, 'In just refusing to retreat from something, one gains the strength of two men.' This is interesting. Something that is not done at that time at that place will remain unfinished for a lifetime. At a time when it is difficult to complete matters with the strength of a single man, one will bring it to a conclusion with the strength of two. If one thinks to do it later, he will be negligent all his life."

—Hagakure

"By thinking that you must complete the job you will run out of time. By considering things like how many men the enemy has, time piles up; in the end you will give up."

—Hagakure

"Real artists ship."

—Steve Jobs

***"Help! I've found that I have no passion!"***

**How do you stay focused and committed enough to follow your passions? How do you keep from flipping from idea to idea, losing focus on one only to follow another?**

**First off, no one is coming to save you.**



I heard that line from Nathaniel Branden when I was at a talk of his ... it's true. The fact of the matter is, *nobody* cares about your success as much as you do. Maybe your Mom. Maybe.

But really now, nobody cares about your success as much as you. To work with talented and driven people, you gotta show you belong in that crowd, which means self-starting to some extent. You're unlikely to luck into a random mentor until you start doing interesting and engaging things. Once you do start doing lots of interesting and engaging things, then it becomes a lot easier to meet and connect with people.

I know, what a bitch of a thing, eh? A real chicken and egg problem there. You can't meet interesting people until you're doing interesting things, and it's hard to do interesting things without knowing anyone interesting ...

Wait! Well, thankfully, we live in an era with more resources than ever possible for the doing of things *without* the explicit help of others. I wrote my blog for my little audience of 10 to 40 people for a few months before anyone tuned in and started reading. Those 10 to 40 people were just friends I told, and putting up my blog in my profile of every site I go to online.

I remember, a day when 11 people read the blog was a pretty good day when I first started.

And I reckon a lot of success is like that ... you move forwards without an external blessing or reward for quite a long time, you work hard for nothing in return, and then you break through and become more successful. As soon as you're starting to succeed and take off, then people reach out to you and want to help you, work with you, collaborate with you, etc.

So the first thing I have to say is—no one's coming to save you. You'll have mentors, colleagues, collaborators, people who want to hire you *after* you produce some good stuff, not before. That's the bad news—there's no magical solution or someone coming to save you. You're going to have to

pick up the torch and scratch and claw forwards with it for a while before someone else takes it from you and helps you run the relay.

### **Second, neurosis here doesn't help, so let go of the neurosis.**

If you panic about it, it becomes a problem. Panic and general neurosis and bad feelings make you tense up, cramp up, and block you creatively.

Oftentimes there are advantages to bad feelings, but not here. Clear the decks a little. Spend time in nature, exercise, do some breathing, listen to good classical music or rock music, eat healthy, get enough sleep, take vitamins, maybe do some martial arts or yoga or something. This is not an area where being in a panic is going to help, so get out of a panic or any bad feelings. Do the stuff that we know helps with calmness and breaking neurosis—nature, breathing, exercise, eating right, etc., etc., etc. That'll help.

### **Third, a lot of effortless passion you see is a bullshit illusion.**

Or rather, it's sprezzatura. A lot of it's bullshit. Really. Maybe most of it's bullshit.

*"Sprezzatura" is an Italian word that means "to hide conscious effort and appear to accomplish difficult actions with casual nonchalance."*

*As Derek Sivers wrote:*

***"But when you find out they're amazing only because of unglamorous persistent sweaty hard work, you can be double-inspired, thinking, "Wow! I could do that!"***

Producing isn't always enjoyable, *especially while it's happening.*

Afterwards, it's a tremendous joy, but oftentimes it sucks, especially when you're having a hard time connecting the dots. For instance, I like reading history, but writing up and analyzing history can often be stressful ... my recent Sengoku Japanese history article wasn't actually enjoyable to work

on while I was doing it. Normally I can write fast, but that one took me four to five sessions over the course of a week to do.

There are lots of details, little nitty-gritty type stuff ... what to leave in? What to cut? What level of abstraction to write on?

Reading history is pleasurable ... after writing that article I was really proud of it (even though it's not one of my best pieces) and felt really good ... but while I was in the middle of working at it, it wasn't fun.

You probably don't see that with the passionate programmer or chef. You don't see the time that sucks. You don't see the pizza crust that you mixed wrong and it turned into disgusting pizza soup. You don't see the frustrating debugging.

When you hear someone speak at a conference, or tell you about their favorite project, or serve a beautiful dish in front of you, you're seeing them at their peak. A lot of success sucks. You see the sprezzatura. You see the concert, not the setting up of the stage. Not the practicing until your hands hurt. Not the cleanup of the filthy area afterwards. Not the time touring in little nightclubs where nobody is actually watching you play, and nobody cares, and you're kind of low and tired and strung out but gotta go play to a crowd of nine people anyways and make it good.

It's hard to feel passionate about it when it's like that, and it's often like that. To be successful, you kinda sorta have to claim that you loved it the whole time, but y'know what? It's bullshit, man. I know lots of creative people doing interesting stuff. They like their line of work as a whole, but there are times it sucks, everything sucks sometimes. I'm working on some (paid) writing stuff right now, and I just couldn't get anything to work for like three days in a row. Sitting in a cafe, staring at the word processor. Dude, that sucks. I'd start writing, and it wouldn't be good. I'd move to a different cafe. Starbucks. An Arabic restaurant. A cool dark lounge type place playing 80's music. Back to Starbucks. McDonalds at 1 in the morning when nothing else is open. Nothing's coming. Fucking writing.

And then ... the heavens part, and inspiration returns, and I'm writing well. Whoa, that's cool. Okay, well, I want to be successful, eh? I better pretend it was always easy and a pleasure, because that's how the game is played. Whee, yaaay, I'm so passssssionatteeeeeeeee ... .

No, it's true, I am. But don't be fooled. The light easy breezy passion is kind of an illusion. When you tour a horse ranch, you don't see the years the rancher was working as a lowly ranch hand shoveling shit. You don't see the time a big storm hit he wasn't prepared for, and then he's riding around in the rain fixing stuff even though he's got a cold. You don't see that. But it's true. Practically nobody feels passionate during those times, but you just suck it up and keep going anyways.

**Fourth—bouncing around from different things is normal and fine.**

At the same time, I'd recommend you look to build things you're certain are going to be useful, kind of universally valuable skills.

I've suggested these before, but here are some general things you can start doing, no matter what you are passionate about:

- Starting to study and develop your own ethical system
- Making good friends, advisors, and mentors who are strong and decent people
- Learning universally useful skills
- Earning a few credentials
- Putting money in the bank
- Getting your credit up
- Studying history to learn what's possible
- Establishing good habits that'll carry you through life
- Becoming very fit and healthy
- Learning how to think

... and so on.

Okay, you don't know what you're passionate about. That's normal. Nobody's coming to save you. Neurosis doesn't help, so break the neurosis by doing neurosis-breaking stuff, like nature, exercise, breathing, sleep enough, but not too much, etc.

Now realize, a lot of effortless passion is bullshit. You don't see the ranch-hand shoveling shit, but he does. He also saves all his money when his buddies are out eating a steak or drinking, because he's got his eyes on buying his own ranch later. He suffers, suffers, suffers ... and then breaks through.

But what are you suffering for? You don't know yet. Well, I do recommend you read this post from Miguel Hernandez: <http://grumomedia.com/5-steps-that-will-help-you-discover-your-true-passion/>. In the meantime, I'd start building skills that are going to be useful when you do discover what juices you up.

It's *totally normal and not a bad thing* to not know what you're doing. Just, start building anyways, with the expectation that you'll figure it out. You will figure it out. And once you figure it out, you'll be happy you built the skills and resources and connected with good people and did good things.

**Finally, an exercise that might be worthwhile:** I would go to a cafe a lot with a blank paper notebook, a pen, and I'd order a black coffee. I'd get my coffee and I'd write at the top of the page, "What do I want?" I'd underline that, and then sit and drink coffee, stare at the page, and write everything I want, no holds barred, not examining, not judging, just writing.

Most of the time it would be similar type stuff, but occasionally I'd have a breakthrough realizing what I'd want. Sometimes nothing would come of it. But it was a good exercise overall ... . I'd say for every 10 times I did this, I'd make one breakthrough. I mean, that's 10+ hours though! I'm not claiming it's easy, just that it was worthwhile for me. Paper notebook, pen, coffee. Nice atmosphere conducive to thinking. Nothing else for distraction—no computer, no phone, no internet. Maybe a book, but usually not. "What do I want?" Underline it. Start scribbling notes on the page.

That worked for me. Would it work for you? Dunno. But I got a lot of mileage out of it. Might be worth trying.

### **Recap:**

1.) No one's coming to save you. You've got to scratch and claw forwards the first part of the journey.

2.) Bad feelings and tension aren't going to help solve this, so do the stuff that you know clears those out. Nature, exercise, breathing, etc.

3.) A lot of "effortless passion" you see is kind of an illusion. There's a component of working-through-suck in being successful at almost anything, but most successful people kind of mask that.

4.) Bouncing around is normal. In the process of bouncing around, try to pick up skills, assets, resources, connections, habits, experiences that you think are likely to make you successful later.

5.) I got quite a bit of mileage of going to a cafe, ordering a coffee, and writing at the top of the page, "What do I want?" Frequently nothing interesting would happen, but whenever I'd do it 10-20 times, I'd get 1-2 epiphanies out of it.

## ***What Separates a Generalist and a Dabbler?***

**What's the difference between a generalist and a dabbler?**

Rather, what separates a generalist from a dabbler?

They're very similar. Both dive into a wide variety of things and affairs. Both pick up new skills regularly, sometimes at the expense of the highest level of mastery in a specialized field.

But we all know people who dabble in this, do a little of that, and never make any contributions. And then, on the other hand, you've got people like Thomas Jefferson and Leonardo da Vinci, who did excellent work in a variety of fields.

Or take Steve Jobs—it's not clear that he's the best person at Apple at anything in particular, aside from maybe his presenting ability. There's probably more talented people at hiring, managing, design, marketing, operations, cash flow/numbers, negotiation, etc, etc. But one that seems remarkable about Jobs is that he's really, really good at a great majority of important things. He might not be the best at any one skill he has, but he's among the best in a huge variety of skills.

... I think I've got it.

I love thinking on paper. In this case, I'm not going to go back and edit this essay so it looks like I had it all along. No, I'd rather show you my thought process.

I started thinking about the difference between a generalist and a dabbler. I'm something of a generalist—I'm studied and trained and I've worked and played in a lot of different fields.

I think anyone aspiring to a generalist role (in my case, as a strategist) really ought to be concerned that they're not just dabbling away. I figure, a good generalist type is incredibly valuable to have around, naturally filling many blanks on any team and doing lots of interesting work.

But I think a would-be generalist has to be concerned that they're not just dabbling. So, what separates a skilled generalist from a mere dabbler, who screws around in this and that but never accomplishes anything? That wouldn't be a good place to wind up.

My first guess is that the difference would be some overarching purpose. In Jobs' case, it's clear he really likes making beautiful things. Everywhere he's gone, he's made incredibly beautiful things. Beauty runs throughout his

career—both Apple stints, Next Computer, and Pixar. Beautiful products, beautiful advertising, beautiful packaging, beautiful everything.

But I started thinking more about da Vinci and Jefferson. While da Vinci was clearly a preeminent artist and inventor, he also made a host of pragmatic scientific discoveries, and even worked in warfare. I can't find a unifying theme throughout his life without forcing it.

Jefferson even less so. Jefferson worked on such a wide range of unrelated things. It's clear he believed in knowledge, learning, life, liberty, and philosophy, but again, no overarching theme.

No, I don't think it's an overarching theme. That was my first guess—my first guess was that the difference between a generalist and a dabbler was that the generalist had some overarching theme or purpose, while the dabbler did not.

I don't think that's the answer.

So I asked, then, what do Jobs and Jefferson and da Vinci have in common?

And then one of my favorite quotes hits me.

***"Real artists ship."***—Steve Jobs

Could it be that the difference between a generalist and a dabbler is just saying "this is as done as it's going to be" and shipping the work?

I think maybe yes. If you look at a Jefferson, da Vinci, Jobs—they shipped. A lot. I think the dabbler moves on when he's 95% complete, so he never gets the completion, satisfaction, and feedback from completing a work.

Also, by completing a work in a field, you gain some renown and prestige, which makes it easier to get in touch with other successful people, which speeds your learning curve.



The dabbler moves on when things get tough. The generalist keeps going until he puts enough work out that he feels complete in a particular field, and then, and only then, is he on to the next thing.

And that's perhaps the difference. I'm still regularly surprised by which of my projects are winners and which are not. It's never the ones I guess or anticipate. By shipping, you have a chance to win. If you don't ship, you don't win. You don't even lose. You don't get the lessons, the feedback, or connect with other people in the field. You don't get the satisfaction and boost that comes from shipping.

Is the difference between a generalist and dabbler that the generalist buckles down and ships? I think ... I think maybe that's the difference, yeah. In order to avoid dabbling, ship work in the fields you care about before moving on.

## ***Passion Emerges From Action, Not Contemplation***

Miguel Hernandez of Grumo Media and I have swapped some really good communications recently. Super sharp guy, he sent this observation and question to me:

*Here is a suggestion for a future essay for you. Today I met with a friend who has been friends with the [recently very successful movie director] for many years. He noticed I got some attention from Ashton Kutcher and is convinced that my career is going to skyrocket too (he is dreaming of course) and I am going to become yet another of his friends that "makes it" and he doesn't.*

*He is a hilarious dude and very talented movie editor and wants to succeed and make a difference on this world, like all of us really. Today he took me out for lunch to pick my brain a little and get some advice. He had a great point which I totally agree with. Here it is:*

*So I keep saying that to succeed you have to welcome failure and keep trying continuously. But that really works if you actually have an idea of what your passions are. The problem, the big problem most of the world have is that most people don't have a clue of what is that passion for them.*

*I have had that problem myself, well, my problem is that I always had too many passions and wanted to do everything which is fun but also dilutes your chances to be very good at something specifically.*

*So the question is, how can people find their passion? What steps should they take to discover what they want to do in life? That is the first and most crucial step, I think millions of people waste their great talents because they just don't know what to do.*

**"I keep saying that to succeed you have to welcome failure and keep trying continuously. But that really works if you actually have an idea of what your passions are. The problem, the big problem most of the world has is that most people don't have a clue of what is that passion for them."**

But here's what I think is the big problem—people expect their passion to hit them in the head someday, then they'll "get it", and then they're driven and motivated and ready to go.

I don't think so. I don't think you can sit and think about what you might want to do, and then wake up inspired one day.

This is what I see with people who are uninspired—they think they're going to fix that problem by doing a careful search of what might inspire them. Then, once they find it, they'll take lots of action.

Nope. That's backwards.

At one point, I thought I wanted to be a painter as a hobby. I was in Dubai in 2007, and MTV launched MTV Arabia. There was a launch party that had all kinds of music and crafts and stuff, and they had easels and oil paints.

So I splashed some paint around on a canvas, kind of trying to get something like perspective going on. Having no skill at all in painting, I kept it kind of abstract, and painted two lines going from the bottom left upwards to the right towards a horizon, a hill in the foreground, and kind of a blue/black night sky with some stars above.

One woman there running the painting area said, "Hey, that's really good!" I said, "Nah, come on, I just splashed some paint around." She insists it's good, and asks how long I've been painting. "Well, this is the first one I ever made."

She literally didn't believe me. Well, in fairness, I spent a lot of hours at museums studying the hell out of paintings, and imagining how I'd try to do it, so I had probably a little idea of some of what I should try to do with painting.

That was a cool experience, and painting was something I was thinking about doing when I had more free time.

Flash forwards a couple years, I decide to try a really good crack at painting ... and ... well, it wasn't for me.

What?

Well, I learned that to be a decent painter, you need to know how to draw, and I just don't like drawing very much.

Ah, don't get me wrong, I like and respect people who can draw a lot. I just don't really get any pleasure or inspiration out of working with pencils, and the fine level of detail of it.

But both of these outcomes *only emerged from action*—I had this vague thought that maybe I wanted to be a painter, but I was never really excited about it until I did it, and then I saw a couple sparks of inspiration and passion starting to grow. But when I investigated what the training would be like and started learning how to draw, it didn't really resonate with me.

There's lots of things I enjoy and think are worth pursuing, but the time I'd have to put in to learn how to draw and paint, I didn't think would be worth putting in.

And I think that's how you discover passions. Take a crack at it once and see if you like it at all. Then start studying and improving your craft, and see if you like that too.

Writing did resonate with me with me when I started, but more importantly, I also enjoyed the process of improving my craft and skill at writing.

In business and life-in-general, I love taking a really complex problem, defining it, figuring out what the real objectives are, brainstorming through a number of paths that could get there, spec'ing out a campaign, implementing the campaign, and reviewing the results. I like taking the hazy and undefined, and turning it into the experimental, and turning the experimental into the concrete.

Well, that's pretty much the definition of a strategist ... .

But what little kid says, "When I grow up, I want to take hazy problems, define the problem and desired outcomes, experiment to see if a proposed solution gets the desired outcome, and implement it"—well, nobody thinks like that. I only discovered it by applying myself, working on different stuff. I love when I read a book on something like knightly orders in the 1100's, and it gives me an idea for something a business can do in 2011 to grow.

But who would've guessed they'd be passionate about that sort of thing without diving in? Nobody.

So that's the first thing, I think, about passion—it doesn't come from sitting and thinking about it, it comes from diving in and getting dirty.

But what if you have too many interests? Miguel writes, "I have had that problem myself, well, my problem is that I always had too many passions

and wanted to do everything which is fun but also dilutes your chances to be very good at something specifically."

As I previously noted, do you know what I think the difference is between a generalist and a dabbler?

Shipping.

Completing and delivering things.

I could've read all the techniques and watched all the videos about painting in the world, and I wouldn't know if it suited me. Instead, I made a painting and enjoyed it. Then I investigated what it would take to learn more, started trying to do some drawing, and didn't enjoy making drawings.

But in both cases, I was actually creating stuff. Not thinking about creating, not preparing to create, but actually creating.

I started a newsletter, "[Get Some Victory](#)," maybe three months ago. What was it going to be about? Well, I wasn't entirely sure. I just thought it'd be nice to create a more personal way to work through some stuff with people once a week, and have them able to hit "reply" right away and give me thoughts and feedback from it if they want to.

But honestly, I wasn't sure if I'd actually enjoy it, or be able to do anything interesting with it. In that case, I would've sent out a final newsletter and said hey guys, we gave it a try, but nothing good is coming out of it, I'll see you on the blog and thanks for tuning in for a while.

And that would've been the end of it. But instead, the newsletter has been growing steadily. The first weeks the formatting ranged from bare bones to ugly to broken, but I just a few compliments two weeks ago on the template I customized—it's funny, my second-to-last design got a couple people telling me it hurt their eyes (it was white text on a black background, I thought it looked good but that shows my lack of design talent I suppose), but then the latest design is looking really, really sharp.

How'd I know I'd enjoy writing a newsletter?

I didn't. I just started. I created an account on MailChimp, played around with it enough to get comfortable, announced the newsletter, and then I had my feet to the fire. There was only 40-some subscribers the first edition that went out, but it's grown steadily since then up to 219 now. Also, only two unsubscribes total across the whole time—I think that's pretty phenomenal, less than 1% of the people who signed up canceled ... so that's going well.

In this case, I built something out and promised to deliver it (a newsletter every Sunday). That's how I set out to discover whether newsletter-writing suited me or not.

A friend of mine wanted to work in the music business, so he got into a music video production company and started working there. Turns out, he didn't like making music videos at all. He likes listening to music, but the days of working on set at a music video he didn't enjoy at all. Nowadays he primarily does negotiation, commercial real estate, and runs a high-end valet parking company.

His passion was for music, so he thought he'd go into the music business.

Now, here's where he does right that other people don't—*he actually went into the music business and created some music videos*. He didn't like it. But he knows because he took action and shipped some stuff. I think if you've got 10 interests, 20 interests ... if you try to actually create a significant work in each one of those fields, and also try to put in some training in those fields—well, you'll probably find you don't actually like the majority of those interests, and you'll be left with three to five you do really enjoy.

Final thought—I think people sometimes people look too much at the "what" and not enough at the "how" when looking for passion.

There's something to be said for enjoying the process you're doing. I like taking anything poorly defined, and turning it into something concrete. Whether that's sourcing or procurement or logistics or management or

people or art or going through military history or law or governance ... all of it's interesting to me. While I'm not really passionate about the stock market at all, I do find the various strategies people use when investing fascinating. The most interesting to me is how the best investors try to make the decisions unemotional and formulaic.

I don't have any passion for the stock market, but I do really enjoy striving to make decisions based on evidence and probabilities and not emotion. The "what" there isn't interesting to me—stock market—but the "how" is really fascinating to me and something I'm really passionate about, so I could talk stocks and investing for hours with someone if they're doing it an interesting way.

The "how" passions are probably even harder to guess from just reading a book to know that you enjoy it—you do need to jump in, try some stuff, ship some stuff, and see what happens. But I reckon that's the formula for all passion-discovering—take some action, deliver some concrete things, and then evaluate how well it suited you. Passion rarely strikes when you're sitting sitting and contemplating. Jump in, build, create, experiment, ship ... then evaluate to see how it suited you.

## ***Your Interests Flit Around? Ship Stuff***

The key thing that ties everything all together is to *produce and ship things while you have a current interest*.

I have a friend who made rap music about five years ago. Now he's a buttoned-down business guy. He doesn't even really listen to rap any more, so that phase of his life is dead. But it's sad—some of his tracks were pretty cool. He made like five or six of them with his own beats, but he never shipped them ... now it's something he'll never do, y'know? It'd be much cooler if he'd put out an EP. If nothing happened, no problem, it'd still be something he did. Or maybe it would've blown up a little bit and had some success? Either way it'd have been cool.

So yeah, even on fleeting interests, try to ship something or produce somehow. That's what I'm thinking these days.

More and more, I'm thinking produce and ship stuff. Even tiny tiny things. If you get into a new kind of music, write up your thoughts and first impressions on it—either on a blog, or even just Amazon reviews. The mindset shift from being a consumer to being a producer is huge, even if what you produce doesn't see all that much use at first.

Your interests flit around to different stuff? Yeah, me too. But more and more, I'm looking to build/produce/ship things when I have a passing interest. Obviously you can't do that for everything, sometimes you can just be a consumer and be happy with that. But if you have a sincere interest, then why not try to write an analysis or critique or user guide or quick-start manual or observations or ... something? Producing, shipping ... it's cool. I think it's basically *the* way for people whose interests jump around to achieve lots of good stuff in the world.

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## ***GROWING: ACHIEVE***

"There is something to be learned from a rainstorm. When meeting with a sudden shower, you try not to get wet and run quickly along the road. But doing such things as passing under the eaves of houses, you still get wet. When you are resolved from the beginning, you will not be perplexed, though you still get the same soaking. This understanding extends to everything."

—*Hagakure*

### ***Celerity***

I'm listening to an autobiography of Octavian, the man who went on to become Augustus Caesar.

What's interesting from the book is that Augustus had more patience than his various rivals of the day in large scale affairs and reforms, but he moved with serious haste—*celerity*—when there was a situation that could be settled decisively.

Around six years ago, I started paying more attention to business and entrepreneurship and generally success and things like that. I remember coming across a lot of literature that encouraged doing things faster—especially in business. Shaving off the shipping time from 7 days to 4 days. Things like that.

Back then, I didn't understand why there was so much emphasis on speed. I thought, "Okay, obviously you wouldn't want to go too slow, but why go so fast? Why does it matter that much?"

And more recently, the answer has been clicking. It's not that getting your package 4 days from now instead of 7 makes such a big difference in all cases. Much of the time, it doesn't.

But when it matters, it *really* matters.

Let's say someone is building a new wooden fence, but he doesn't know about finishing fences. So he orders a book on it. If the book takes 3 more days to come, that's 3 more days before he can order whatever kind of sealant or paint or stain he's going to use on the fence.

If the stain he orders takes 3 more days to come, he's now six days behind where he could be on a faster schedule.

On top of that, if he's gotten busy or something else has come up in his life, he might not be able to finish the project right now... the six days could make the difference between it getting done now, or never.

Also, even if he stays motivated and nothing comes up, those six days burn some of his thought cycles. It imposes a [cognitive cost](#) on him.

Paul Graham wrote about this as well, in the excellent essay "[The Top Idea in Your Mind](#)." If the man is thinking about the fence, he's not thinking about something else. If the fence was built, he could be proud and celebrate for a moment, but then *stop thinking about it*, which frees his thought cycles to do other things, or just to relax more.

Celerity. Speed. Haste.

When you move faster, it speeds up the rest of the process. Sometimes this is the difference between success and failure. But even when it would have gotten done eventually anyways, going slower means some thoughts are

never born that would have been. By moving faster, you can discharge action and get it behind you—either so you can relax with lower cognitive burden at the moment, or get on to the next thing.

Augustus realized this. He was patient until he could move decisively, but then he did—oftentimes, the circumstances that would have allowed for a war or a treaty were very temporary, and would have faded if he didn't move fast. So he moved fast, and he looked to conclude things thoroughly so he could move on afterwards.

Think about celerity. About speed. If you can speed up crucial areas of production, maybe you can get important things behind you earlier? It might take 50 hours either way, but if that 50 hours of production time is done in two weeks, then you're more free to relax or get to daydreaming about your next project after it's complete. Whereas for the man it takes two months, his thoughts are dominated by the unfinished project—he's less relaxed and less open to new things he could do.

Celerity. I'm making it a new mantra of mine.

## ***Hey—Start Failing More***

One of the problems a lot of people have is that they don't fail enough. At this point, for me, I seem to have crossed some threshold where additional unintentional errors and mistakes don't bother me. I'm on the edge of so many things I'm trying to learn that I'm finding myself confused or making errors that were obvious in retrospect fairly often.

And you know what? It's not so bad.

Some errors are embarrassing, some are ridiculous, some are obvious in hindsight. But a lot of things are falling into place too. I still don't like making mistakes, and give the biggest effort I can—but often my biggest, focused effort isn't good enough when I'm pushing the envelope.

But you know what? It's like, not much has changed. My life is the same life I had last month, except now I'm making more errors, and I'm also accomplishing a lot more stuff.

Maybe people don't do this because they make one error, and it kind of shocks them out of normal life. It gets easier. I keep trying to write down six things at the end of every day to do the next day, and then not doing them all the next day. But I'm doing a hell of a lot more than I was. Eventually I'll start going for six for six more frequently.

I'm trying to do some really tricky stuff with my new business where most people in the business have 20+ years of experience, which I obviously don't have. I keep making errors. I mean, I'm not trying to, but there's lots of things to figure out. It's OK though, I'm learning a ton. I kind of dig it. The failure is less making me cringe and more making me shake my head and roll my eyes at myself. It's pretty good.

I'm pushing the boundaries on my writing, getting lots of feedback from people. Trying to find the right mix of entertaining, thought provoking, connecting with people, slightly provocative, not *too* offensive, etc. Hard mix to find. Before, I would write too timidly, boring and safe. It's gotten a lot more entertaining, but I'm making more mistakes too. But it's not so bad. Maybe it's even good in a way. I kind of almost dig it, all the errors are helping me figure out where the line is. I think most people are miles away from the line their whole life.

When's the last time you tried something, gave it your best effort, and it fell apart? If it was happening more often, would you also be succeeding more? What do you *really* lose when things go wrong? Pride? Your will's pretty strong, though, right? You'd survive if you made a screwup, yes? I'm thinking—fail more. It's not so bad. Succeed more too. Succeeding is good.

***How Do I Write So Much, You Ask? Well, Glad You Asked***

A few of my friends—three friends, to be exact—mentioned to me that I write a heck of a lot on here and they're impressed. I have convinced the ultra-smart [Sami Baqai](#) to start blogging, and he just got the holy-shit-this-is-hard-I'm-overwhelmed feeling. Ah, yes, I have been there Sami. Perhaps I can share some thoughts.

First and foremost, I am a huge devotee of the Equal-Odds Rule. As far as I know, I'm the only person talking about it outside of academia. [This Amazon review](#) covers it pretty well:

*"The equal-odds rule says that the average publication of any particular scientist does not have any statistically different chance of having more of an impact than any other scientist's average publication. In other words, those scientists who create publications with the most impact, also create publications with the least impact, and when great publications that make a huge impact are created, it is just a result of "trying" enough times. This is an indication that chance plays a larger role in scientific creativity than previously theorized."*

So I read that, and I'm like—whoa. You know Neo in the Matrix? Whoa.

**If you want to make excellent stuff, you need to make a lot of stuff.**

**If you want to make a lot of stuff, you'll make a lot of crap.**

**If you want to make excellent stuff, you need to make a lot of crap.**

And my personal opinion here:

***And that's okay, because you get judged by your best work, not your bad work.***

At the risk of being honest, a lot of my writing is crap. I mean, it's okay, it's not totally stupid, but a lot of it is very "meh"—well, by my own estimation. But occasionally I really nail something, and that's what people are going to remember. My essay "[A Lot of Victory is Just Walking](#)

[Around](#)" turned out to be a huge hit and got hundreds of visitors from people Facebook-liking it, when I just typed it up on the spur of the moment. I thought it was good, but nothing crazy revolutionary—I was talking about noticing where businesses are in certain areas, and what businesses are missing that you could potentially build. I talked about putting a premium mechanic shop in an upscale district of Hong Kong I walked through, or opening a coffee chain in Cambodia. People *loved* that, I got so many compliments and lots of new visitors, many of whom stuck around and are still readers. In retrospect, I guess yeah that was a good essay. But it only happened because I wrote some very just-okay essays too.

Alright, but let's talk nuts and bolts more. Three things we've already covered this essay:

1.) I believe in the Equal-Odds Rule, which states roughly that a creator can't entirely control the quality of their output. **In order to do high impact excellent work, you have to do a lot of work, which includes low impact not excellent work.**

2.) **I think as long as you're not doing life-or-death stuff, it's okay to put out low quality work.** Well, not really. I'm kind of a perfectionist. What I actually mean is you're going to be a bad judge of how good your own stuff is, especially if it's creative work. Don't put out anything wrong or terrible or lazy, but if something is okay and you gave it your best, put it out. People might like it, or might not, but you probably won't be able to know in advance.

3.) **You'll get judged by your best work.** I've written up at least 150 articles over the last four months. If I want to present my writing to someone, I'll link to the best 10-20 and get evaluated on those. If I'm pitching something really important, I can always go edit and polish an even better version.

This is big stuff. This is the mental side of it. I happen to know how good Sami's writing is, because he and I swap emails and share ideas. We connected originally from Hacker News, and he's a super-sharp guy, very multi-disciplinary bright. But Sami obviously has some issues with putting

crap out into the world. He doesn't want to do it. Well, Sami, do you want to do great work or not? You're going to have to put some crap out to do great work. I know, it's hard. It sucks. Mind you, I don't *want* to put crap out. It's just, that's the Equal-Odds Rule, which I am a believer in.

Alright, nuts and bolts for real this time.

4.) **I commit to doing it every day, every single day no matter what.**

5.) **My audience is whoever likes it**—the site is written for me. If someone doesn't like it at this point in their life, they're not my audience for now.

6.) Extensive notes/backlog—quotes, stories, pictures, ideas. Lots of this.

7.) I accepted that I'm going to be judged. I don't love it, but I accepted it. It comes with the territory.

A few tactical thoughts:

8.) **When you have a good idea, write it down.** I have a "shorttermblog.txt" on the desktop of my laptop, and there's at least dozens of ideas written down in there. Sometime or other I'll talk about how Roman Emperor Septimus Severus made a huge mistake making his two sons Caracalla and Geta joint-Emperors. Dude, Septimus, that never works...

9.) Have fun. I mean, really have fun. When I wrote an essay titled "Arguing With Peasants Shows a Lack of Self-Discipline," I thought to myself, "Do I really want to write that?" Am I going to get asked on some news interview sometime, "So, you think you shouldn't argue with peasants, do you?" in a really sanctimonious, judging tone that makes me look bad? I don't know, maybe. Probably? Whatever. It's actually how I think. I read some insight from economist Vilfredo Pareto about how the peasants never actually take control of the government, instead one elite uses the peasants to kill off the other elite, but the peasants themselves never take power. Reading that, a lot of things clicked. I said, "Ohhh, I shouldn't argue with peasants who believe they can really take power." A lot of peasants are

backing their team—well, have fun in your new worker's paradise Socialist Soviet Republic. Idiots. Will I catch flak later because I shared my honest opinion about this? Maybe. But whatever, it's how I think. This is a relatively new feeling for me, in the past I always tried to be diplomatic, and now I'm more and more just saying what I'm actually thinking. It's actually really enjoyable.

10.) That leads me to the final point, which is **you gotta remember, this is all a circus**. Life is really a circus. Are you such a big deal that you can't be embarrassed, or make a mistake, or do something wrong? No, you're not. You're not a big deal. At least, I'm not a big deal. I'll say some stupid shit at some point, and get embarrassed, and look bad. Oh well. If things break the right way, I'll also found branches of science, inspire people, build amazing businesses, found charities that actually work, make art, fund art, fund science, build a virtuous international dynasty, and all sorts of other stuff. But if I try and fail? Well, whatever, I'm not such a big deal. I can be embarrassed. It's okay if I get something wrong or say something stupid. Most of what we obsess over is going to turn to dust anyways.

My favorite poem: [Ozymandius](#), by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

*I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

This is all coming down, man. Turning to dust. Life's a circus.



Now, some people have this attitude of, "Well, all this doesn't matter, so I'm just going to party, or do nothing, or whatever." Me? No way! I think, "Well, most of this doesn't matter, so I might as well found branches of science, do great works, build amazing things, make art, write, fund things, build things, fix things, serve people, and otherwise do amazing stuff."

I mean, why not, right?

On the tactical level, **I'd strongly recommend committing to writing every day**. Every single day, write *something*. Even something small. People liked "[Sun Tzu says—Make It Look Easy](#)." and that was just a short quote I picked up listening to the *Art of War*.

Look at my early posts, if you like. A lot of them aren't very good. But you start doing it every day, every single day, and you get better pretty quickly. You start noticing what people like, and tweaking your works, and it'll come. Just accept that your early work is going to suck, and even later some of your work is going to suck, and cherish every visitor. You'll suck and make crap for a while, and then you'll do good stuff, and in not-very-long you'll do some awesome stuff. Tone is hard to get, but it comes with time. Every single day is the way. Something, even just a quote. You'll find the theme later. **Now, get started, eh?**

## ***The Creator's Curse***

**The work you just completed is never your best possible work.**

I had a wonderful evening tonight—a reader of the site visiting Saigon reached out to me, and we spent five hours having coffee and discussing philosophy, writing, history, traveling, government, business ... amazing guy. Great conversation. Really enjoyed it, the time flew.

Now, I tell you—this is a guy with amazing creative ability and insights. He's spent a lot of time thinking about and researching and learning

interesting things. He has *a lot* to share with the world.

Yet, he hasn't released most of the writing he's done. He's a writer, and I'm guessing quite a solid writer—he reads a lot, writes a fair bit, and is a clear thinker, and that combination lends itself to solid writing. I'm almost certain he can at least write well enough that the writing doesn't get in the way of the good insights, and he definitely has good insights.

But, he said to me—he's looking to create timeless, masterpiece-level work, like the literature he really admires most.

I think that's a tough thing to do, because of what I'm going to call "the creator's curse" -

**The work you just completed is never your best possible work.**

Doing anything of significant magnitude means you'll get better at your craft in the process. That means, *as soon as you complete anything significant, you'll notice how you could have done it better.*

This seems to hold true of *anything* significant.

Some endeavors mean you can't agonize after you finish. If you're putting on an event, it happens at a fixed time and place. After you throw the event, you realize all the things you could have done differently to do a better event, but you can't agonize over them—you just have to throw another event to put those ideas into motion.

But if you're writing, painting, programming, composing, designing, anything like that—you could keep refining your work and never release it, and the work would keep improving. Every time you do significant work, you learn lessons and see how the work you created could be better.

This excerpt from "Art and Fear" on [codinghorror.com](http://codinghorror.com) has burned the phrase "[Quantity Always Trumps Quality](#)" into my mind:

*"The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its quality. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the "quantity" group: fifty pound of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on "quality", however, needed to produce only one pot—albeit a perfect one—to get an "A".*

*Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the "quantity" group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the "quality" group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay."*

The answer, I think, is to stop comparing your work to the standard of perfection—which you'll never reach. Instead, start comparing your work to what else is potentially available. If what you're working on potentially fills a need by people that isn't totally fulfilled, then release it and let people start benefiting from it. You can make your next work better.

**The work you just completed is never your best possible work.**

It can't be your best possible work, because doing anything significant means you just learned new lessons. But that'll be true even if you go back and do it from scratch again. Release your work into the world, imperfect and all. Let it start fulfilling people's needs. Keep improving, and make your next work even better.

***High Upside No Downside Has Practically \*Zero\* Risk. Why Don't We Do It? I Don't Know.***

**What are some suggested books on taking a risk?**

Well, okay, for doing bigger projects read *Getting Things Done* by David Allen. That's probably the most important one. There are books that are more specific to whatever, but that's got a very solid general mix of how to break projects into things, get on top of everything, etc., etc., etc. If you're looking to do any kind of selling or anything where you face personal rejection, I'd recommend Brian Tracy's *The Psychology of Selling* audio which has some excellent insights.

But let's step back a minute, shall we? Let's look at risk.

There's no *real* risk to trying a high upside no downside endeavor.

I emailed Steve Jobs once. No reply. I emailed Larry Ellison once. No reply.

I admire both those guys a lot. So I sat and put together an email, took about 15 minutes of thinking what I wanted to put down, and I sent it.

No reply.

What'd I lose *really*? Nothin'. Nothing at all.

So why don't I make a habit of writing letters to people I respect and do it all the time?

Hell, I don't know.

Gandhi used to do that, even when he was a nobody. I read once that he frequently wrote 60+ letters per day. He wrote to anyone and everyone significant.

I could do that. Why don't I make a list of like 1,000 people I really admire, and write to three of them a day? I bet I'd connect with only a small fraction of them, but it'd be a lot.

But I don't. Dunno why.

There are tons of web services that offer free or near-free technology. You could start a blog for free, you could buy a cheap camera and start trying to build a photography portfolio almost for free, you could start a newsletter for free, you could open accounts at popular discussion sites for free and start contributing, you can get a free email account and reach out to people you admire, you could volunteer for civic organizations that are doing things you admire, you could start organizing some kind of local cultural event, you could put up a basic webpage offering some sort of consulting at some bargain rate with an explanation of why it's so cheap and then go hustle to get that work, you could volunteer to become a tester of some cool new technology that's understaffed, you could ... .

You could do a lot of things. None of those have any real risk, except for wasting your time. But I bet you waste a hell of a lot of time doing stuff you *know* is pointless and *know* won't bring you any satisfaction and *know* won't advance you closer to the things that are meaningful ...

... and yet ...

I don't know, man. I wish I could tell you. I still grapple with it. You want recommendations? Alright, check out *Getting Things Done* and *The Psychology of Selling*. Also, Derek Sivers's book reviews (<http://sivers.org/book>) are all excellent—that's probably a good place to start if you're looking for business/social psychology/motivation/execution books.

But let's be real clear here. The risk? There's no risk. It's just ... it's ... no, I don't know, sorry. I wish I could tell you. The fact is, there are tons of projects that have basically no risk. In fact, shifting your time from watching random TV to trying to do something creative is almost a guaranteed win, because you would have just avoided having your mind rotted for however long. Even if you get no results, just attempting to do anything meaningful pays higher dividends than aimlessly channel surfing.

I don't know. I wish I had more answers. It's about identity or something. I don't know. I still grapple with it.

What about motivation?

Motivation is fleeting, but a general, slow trending upwards gets you there. There's no magical potion, you just kind of scrap and scratch and claw forwards, get a little better regularly, and that translates to being a lot better in not-too-long.

I'd like to be more expansive and prolific. I'm still not. But I guess you keep working at it, and eventually get there. Remember this though, at least intellectually—there's practically no risk. We all spend plenty of time with activities that give us a guaranteed zero.

Shifting that time to attempting something with a chance of zero or a chance of something fantastic is no risk. No risk. Remember that, at least intellectually. Emotionally seems to take longer unfortunately, but it's worth pursuing.

## ***How to Become a Faster Decision Maker***

**How do you become a faster decision maker?**

I could give you some tactical guidelines on this question—*how do you become a faster decision maker?*—but that's probably not the *real* question we're grappling with.

Is that the real question though? Make sure the underlying issue is not that you are afraid of failing.

No one *likes* failing. But intelligent people are sometimes terrified of it. So much so that they don't even realize that's what's going on.

I'm not being metaphysical here. I don't believe the universe vibrates things to you, or any such stupid nonsense shit like that. I'm talking plain old cause and effect behavioral things. I bet you don't want to look stupid, so you

spend an extensive amount of time doing everything you can to not look stupid, and that's why everything takes so long.

Recently, I did something like 5x or 10x my productivity. Really, my logs of things I'm accomplishing now have around between five times and ten times as many entries in them. My *everything* has improved tremendously.

I'm also doing stupid shit about 3x more often than I used to. So, I'm accomplishing 500% to 1000% more stuff—life's amazing right now—but I'm making 300% more errors, mistakes, blunders, and feeling stupid.

Note, my error *rate* didn't go up 300%. My error rate actually went down. When you move fast, your decision making actually gets *better*, because you're constantly immersed in action. You pick up trends and patterns a little faster, and you wind up repeating processes that work. I'm doing stupid shit less often as a percent of my overall work. And yet, I'm doing 300% more stupid shit than I was before I sped up.

And you know what? It's arguably a net-emotional-drain. I feel worse about the mistakes I make than I do the gains I make. I feel worse at the blundered pitch than the successful sale. Isn't that silly?

I think that's most people. I overcome it with logic. I figure the quality of my life will rapidly trend upwards, and eventually the primitive emotional system that I've got will catch up with my high-level logical decision making and reasoning.

So that's the most important underlying thing:

- 1.) You decide to go faster because you'll do more meaningful things in your life.
- 2.) You accept that you'll make more errors overall if you do more things.
- 3.) You know that'll feel bad for a while, because humans are usually more loss-averse than gain-oriented.

4.) You realize that your error *rate* will actually go down.

5.) You figure that your emotional system will eventually catch up. And hey, if it doesn't, you'll at least have a ton more money you can go spend on hookers and things like that to make yourself feel better after a particularly tough day.

So that's the philosophical, high level of getting there. Some tactics would be in order, as well:

1.) Whenever you're doing something, define "adequately complete"—then ask, "What's the fastest way to adequately complete?" Then do that.

2.) After adequate, there's a whole no-man's-land of "slightly better but still not amazing"—don't bother going there. Get to adequate ASAP, and then either decide to go to the top of the game (like Apple's hardware) or just keep moving. "Slightly better" often takes twice as long, for 10% more gain.

3.) Consult, advise, or work for other people. It's damn near impossible to evaluate your own projects correctly—you get emotionally attached, you get stupid, you get blindsided. This still happens to me. I'll probably do consulting forever, just so I'm working with other people and can be more clear-headed than when I'm doing my own thing. Whenever you give great advice to someone else about how much time to put into something or their decision making choices, write a note in your journal or diary and refer to it later when making the same decision.

4.) Additionally, this is why executives and big companies hire consultants. So someone less emotionally attached can tell them what to do. It doesn't always work, but that's a big part of why they do it.

5.) You can get a free version of consulting by laying out your requirements and choices to an intelligent colleague, and asking what you should do. Then just do it.



6.) Increase your schedule or move up your deadlines so you *must* get things done faster, and you will. This quote from the "You and Your Research" talk by Richard Hamming at Bell Labs, 1986, is relevant:

*"I am an egotistical person; there is no doubt about it. I knew that most people who took a sabbatical to write a book, didn't finish it on time. So before I left, I told all my friends that when I come back, that book was going to be done! Yes, I would have it done—I'd have been ashamed to come back without it! I used my ego to make myself behave the way I wanted to. I bragged about something so I'd have to perform. I found out many times, like a cornered rat in a real trap, I was surprisingly capable. I have found that it paid to say, "Oh yes, I'll get the answer for you Tuesday," not having any idea how to do it. By Sunday night I was really hard thinking on how I was going to deliver by Tuesday. I often put my pride on the line and sometimes I failed, but as I said, like a cornered rat I'm surprised how often I did a good job."*

So, there's some tactics. But again, you've just got to become comfortable with failing more often. Your failure and error rate will actually go down if you become a faster decision maker, but the total number of errors will obviously go up, so you accept that. It's the price to moving 5x to 10x faster in your life. But man, it's amazing moving so fast, even if failing feels bad in the moment.

## ***GROWING: CHANGE***

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

—From Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

"There can be no question that in both Nietzschean and Confucian thought the human capacity of self-command is of the essence of one's humanity: self-overcoming is the constitutive principle in the human."

—Lin Kuen Tong

"Purity is something that cannot be attained except by piling effort upon effort."

—*Hagakure*

### ***Why Making Big Changes is So Hard***

**What are some better execution strategies for getting things done?**

You're suffering from an insidious problem. I know, because I've been there.

Here's the score—most of our day-to-day actions are a result of custom, habit, and environment. There's very little thinking/reflective decision making on a moment to moment basis.

This was kind of a head-trip for me when I first realized it. We've got ... a lot less moment-by-moment and day-to-day control over our lives than it appears.

Now, we have a hell of a lot of control over the broad patterns of our life. This is true. But if you've got an established pattern of doing things a certain way, you'll probably default to it.

An example: Let's say a guy starts his day, every day, by surfing the internet and checking the news and checking sports scores. He decides one day that he'd rather start the day with 10-20 minutes of planning the day and working for an hour on his most important thing to do instead of goofing off.

Then he wakes up the next day and—you guessed it—surfs the net and checks the news ... and around the time he's checking sports scores, he's cursing because what the hell? This shouldn't be so hard.

Well, things are how they are. That's being human. The lion's share of actions we take are a result of a mix of habit, custom, and environment. To take better actions, you need to gradually establish better habits, new customs, and an environment more conducive to doing what you want to do.

And honestly, it is pretty straightforward, but it's kind of a bitch of a thing to do sometimes. It sucks and it's demoralizing, *because this shouldn't be so damn hard* ... and yet, it is ... .

There's 10,000 little hacks and tricks you can use to make a bit of progress, but the fact of the matter is—habit/custom change takes some time and practice. I call the process of getting it down "scratching and clawing forwards"—which I'm aware isn't the most inspiring or glorious way to describe it, but I think it's pretty accurate.

You scratch and claw forward ground on your habits and customs. It takes a while. There'll be lots of little backslides and screw-ups and things like that,

and they'll suck and they're not enjoyable. I'm aware of this whole process and I still don't like it, so it's not just you.

You can get big pushes from refining your environment. Do you use Google Chrome? I do. I've found that deleting or moving around my "Most Visited" sites goes a long ways towards changing my internet usage. Crazy as it sounds, just by adding that tiny bit more friction to hopping on an entertainment site, you spend less time on them.

Likewise, back when I wanted to start spending my mornings planning my day instead of just signing online, I'd turn off my laptop, unplug it, and *turn it upside down*. I did that as a reminder so I couldn't just turn it on and mindlessly surf. I'd see my laptop upside-down in the morning when I was tired, I'd think, "That's weird, why is—oh, right." And then I'd spend the morning in my planner.

I screwed up the planner thing a lot before I got it down. But now I'm starting my day planning it out probably 19 out of 20 days (the other 1 out of 20 I have a very early call or meeting or something, I almost never surf the internet before planning my day now—score).

I found setting my running clothes in my bathroom, right by the shower, helped a lot with going running. I'd get out of the shower, dry off, and then just put my running clothes on. Then I'm in my running clothes and shoes, so I'd go running. Cool.

You will fall off track from time to time though. I've been constantly traveling for the last 15 months, so I get into and out of routines. Actually, because of that I have to be even more disciplined with my environment—I have a set of things I set up everywhere I go quickly, as I described in "[Thoughts On Not Going Crazy While Long Term Traveling](#)." Actually, I'm writing this in my "cafe conducive to thinking" in Beijing—Leonard Cohen is playing, the coffee is strong, the chicken is good, and I'm working and thinking well.

Environment matters. A lot. You can get pretty big pushes from moving your environment around to suit your goals and life.

Ramit Sethi wrote a great post about this—"[Barriers are your enemy](#)"—worth reading for more examples on eating healthier and managing finances.

The fastest gains are probably from moving your environment around to make it easier to do your tasks. But then you do have to put the time in towards making progress. Scratch and claw forwards to change your habits.

I recommend aiming to get a very small, consistent amount of progress. I aim for 70% success rate on my goals and that works pretty well for me. That means succeeding a little more than 2 out of 3 times you're trying to do something. If you're in a space where you can't succeed at 70%, take the difficulty down until you're over 70%. Adjust difficulty upwards after getting some wins.

For going to the gym, you might consider only aiming to have a quick 10 minute session, which seems much more doable and much less of a barrier. Once you get there, you might want to do more. But only mandate doing 10 minutes—if you're sick or tired or it's late, go put in 5 minutes on the cardio, hit the free weights for two sets, and go home. That's cool. You *went*, that's worth a lot.

And then, yeah, failure is part of the game. Habits and customs are difficult to change. They basically rule your life and dictate how you take action. Slow, gradual, incremental progress—scratching and clawing forwards—seems to be the way to make your life into what you want. The upside is that once the habits and customs are built, then you're doing things right automatically and the struggle abates.

Recap:

- 1.) Most of our day-to-day actions are ruled by habit, custom, and environment.

- 2.) Reflective thinking/planning goes a long way towards finding new things to do, but it's still very easy to default to habits, custom, and

environment.

3.) The process of changing habits and customs takes a while. I call it "scratching and clawing forwards"—that's what it feels like sometimes.

4.) Set small, achievable goals on habit/custom change. I recommend aiming for 70% success rates, and making consistent incremental progress.

5.) The biggest bang for your buck in the short term is moving your environment around. This can be big stuff like finding a new place to hang out after work, or little stuff like setting your gym clothes by your shower the night before. It works.

## ***Guest Essay: Letting Go of Your Ego Enables You to Live Without Limits***

*A guest essay by Matt Ramos, who talks about exploring and breaking behavior limits on his blog, <http://30vanquish.com>.*

### **Letting Go of Your Ego Enables You to Live Without Limits**

*"As soon as you try to step outside of the behavioral limits, it gets scary and nasty and ugly real fast."—[Sebastian Marshall](#)*

So why should it be so scary, nasty, and ugly?

All you have to do is let go of the ego.

So now you're thinking, how does letting go of your ego enable you go outside of the pre-made boundaries?

First, let's define what the ego is.

Your ego is the core of all your self-esteem and your self-importance. It is what defines you as you.

Your ego makes you feel entitled to get things you deserve. So what do you deserve?

You deserve all the things you ever wanted of course.

The problem is if that thing you want is in conflict with social conditioning.

What's social conditioning?

Social conditioning is all those rules that stop us from taking action.

Example 1: The boss is intimidating and you better not distract him from what he is doing. Besides, asking him anything can seem scary! However, let's say you want a raise. The only way to get it is to either wait for it to come to you (it can happen but rarely) or you ask him/her for one. The latter is risky because it can potentially go against what you've been taught. However, if you execute it in a professional manner, you have the potential for gain.

Example 2: An extremely attractive person passed you by. You know that you'd like to get a date, but you just shake your head or make some excuse about the situation to avoid taking a chance. Deep down you'd like to go for it. The problem is that it doesn't seem acceptable to you to start small talk and potentially get rejected. It isn't so comfortable to talk to a stranger. It's actually really awkward. Well, with that particular person, that's the best shot you have. A few minutes of awkwardness to have a potential chance at something great is worth it.

So you'd let that awkward feeling get in the way of finding those amazing people? A shot in the dark is definitely better than walking away from the chance altogether. Trying can create a percentage chance above zero, whereas walking away guarantees that it is zero.

All our lives, it seems that talking to strangers is the wrong thing to do. It only is the wrong thing to do if you think that. How do you combat years and years of being told it is totally wrong and out of line? **You let go of your ego.**

Nothing beats first-hand exposure. Even if the first thing you do is just say "Hi" and nothing else, you are now one step closer to breaking the routine of your life.

All you have to do is go up to tons of people, a potential lover, a boss, a cashier, a traveler, a tourist, a friend you haven't seen for years, etc. and accept any outcome. When you let go of your ego (wants, desires, your self identity, etc.) and accept the situation for what it is, then you're able to take as many chances as you'd like. There is no attachment to any expected outcome, therefore there's no resentment, no frustration. There is only looking forward for the next opportunity!

So let's say you do that and you continue to get failures. It all comes back to the [90-9-1](#) rule. Maybe you'll only click with 10% of the population and only get into the same wavelength of 1%. That's totally fine because those odds are better than zero. The more people you talk to and try to associate with, the better chance those averages will play out. Don't be discouraged when only failures arrive. Continue to make adjustments based on that past exposure. Learn small talk, learn charm, learn confidence. The only way to learn those is by exposure! (Unless you're a natural and in that case, you should already be out there.)

Who really cares if you follow the social rules given? Strangers around the situation won't really care and if they did, would forget about it relatively quickly. As long it harms no one, there's no other rule for me to really stand by. If you say the wrong thing, move to the next opportunity. If you do the wrong thing, apologize and move on. What if you do the right thing?

You get the date.

You get the promotion.

You get to be more altruistic.

You get to have more fun by breaking the routine.



You create more opportunities for yourself.

You observe situations where you can take chances you wouldn't normally see.

**You get farther in life.**

## ***No Shame***

A friend of mine set some goals for last week, and failed. His goals were realistic and possible, but he did not do them. He sent me an introspective email analyzing why. We had a good discussion on it, here's an excerpt of what I wrote him:

I understand. This really sucks. By the way, I *still* do this, myself. I *still* catch myself making the occasional fundamental mistake. The good thing is, no single mistake kills you (well, usually). Usually you can recover. Don't flip out when you a mistake, damage-control it and move on. How old are you—28? You've got 10-15 years of mediocre societal programming, you don't get that out of yourself in seven days. 30 days, 60 days, you can take a huge chunk out of it. A year or two, absolutely you can almost completely re-wire yourself. But remember how you were saying, "Dude, I can do this so much faster than your timeline!" Well, I've been there. Shit like this happens. You're fighting some of your deepest, instinctual defense mechanisms to keep you alive. You've also got your toolbox of good instinctual mechanisms limited by society, so you're needing to create new tools. Basically, you've got all the disadvantages a caveman had (fear, nervousness, pressure), but you lose a lot of the advantages (unbridled, raw power, no rules, etc). You've got to make new tools—calmness, focus, intent. It takes a while. There's no shame in that—let me say this -

**THERE'S NO SHAME IN THIS, IT'S NO REFLECTION OF YOU—  
WE'RE ALL BUILT WEAK, YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW WHO  
ACKNOWLEDGES IT AND TRIES TO BECOME STRONG.**

We're all built weak, man. Most people hide from it, deny it. That way they don't have to feel it. But you're diving right in, into your weakness, into

your errors, into your unrefined patterns, into your fears... so you feel it. But don't mistake these things—these things are the weakness that everyone feels, there is NO SHAME in feeling it. It's part of being human. You need to feel it to conquer it. This is what I was writing in "[Give me strife and suffering](#)":

*Your mind—your thoughts—may come into conflict, especially when you're trying to do meaningful things. It's easy to feel the pull of distraction and ease, and to choke up and pause in fear when you look at the mountain you're set to climb. The mind is not in harmony, especially at the beginning. Struggle, strife, conflict, suffering.*

*I say—give it to me! But not so fast that it will break me. I must be pragmatic. We must be pragmatic. We have our limits. We can expand them over time. It's not brave to go into the gym for the first time and try to lift 400 pounds. It's foolhardy, unrealistic, stupid. Being pragmatic, aware of our limits takes its own sort of courage.*

*But I want to suffer, I want to be bathed in strife, I want conflict, I want challenge, I want it to be hard—but just barely easy enough that I can make it through.*

*I set goals every week. I aim for a 70% success rate. That means I fall short on 30% of my goals every week. I figure, if I succeeded at 100% my goals weren't set high enough. If I succeed below 70%, this might be too much to stay on the path. If I succeeded above 70%, I add more for next week. If less, I pare down to the most essential things and try to get my success rate up.*

*Every week I want strife and struggle. I want challenge. I want to be always falling short of what I could be, and that is the way forwards.*

We're all built weak, man. It's hard to confront, so most people hide. Confront it, bathe in conflict and strife, and make it serve you. YES, it's hard. YES, we're weak sometimes. YES, we fail sometimes. GOOD, life would be BORING without strife and conflict. Embrace it, love it, work through it, and come to the other side. The external rewards on the other

side are great, but nothing compared to the internal rewards of being strong and steadfast, conquering weakness, becoming the master of strife instead of afraid of it. Great things are in store, many great things. Talk soon.

## ***Give Me Strife and Suffering (but in Manageable Doses)***

"Life is suffering," said Buddha. His plan? Release your attachments to this world and end your suffering.

I'm not with Buddha on this one. Give me strife and suffering. And once I have grown stronger, tempered, hardened by the strife, give me MORE.

Life is strife, suffering, struggle. Your body and mind are kept alive by a series of violent chemical reactions, your heartbeat, the acid in your stomach, the cells constantly breaking apart and dying as new ones are created, the battle towards homeostasis with different bacteria and cells combating each other, all inside your body.

Your mind—your thoughts—may come into conflict, especially when you're trying to do meaningful things. It's easy to feel the pull of distraction and ease, and to choke up and pause in fear when you look at the mountain you're set to climb. The mind is not in harmony, especially at the beginning. Struggle, strife, conflict, suffering.

I say—give it to me! But not so fast that it will break me. I must be pragmatic. We must be pragmatic. We have our limits. We can expand them over time. It's not brave to go into the gym for the first time and try to lift 400 pounds. It's foolhardy, unrealistic, stupid. Being pragmatic, aware of our limits takes its own sort of courage.

But I want to suffer, I want to be bathed in strife, I want conflict, I want challenge, I want it to be *hard*—but just barely easy enough that I can make it through.

I set goals every week. I aim for a 70% success rate. That means I fall short on 30% of my goals every week. I figure, if I succeeded at 100% my goals weren't set high enough. If I succeed below 70%, this might be too much to stay on the path. If I succeeded above 70%, I add more for next week. If less, I pare down to the most essential things and try to get my success rate up.

Every week I want strife and struggle. I want challenge. I want to be always falling short of what I could be, and that is the way forwards.

I took an oath at one point, and I tell you, I do not recommend this to you. If you listen to me, listen carefully to all my words. I do not recommend this, it might even be reckless of me to share this. But it's true. I took an oath—I said, "I would rather die than be average." It almost killed me. When you close off all the normal paths in front of you, and burn your boats behind you, you are suddenly left in uncharted places. Striving is at first lonely. I don't know anyone who aspires as high as I do.

Not for myself. I wasn't able to commit to doing this for myself. I was shy when I was thinking of doing great things as me. No, I've given myself over to higher causes, to the things I believe in most, to building things that matter. Me? I'm nobody in particular. But I'm working on great things. This is no guarantee of success, but it's how I spend my days in strife and struggle.

It's lonely at times. Very few people understand. Even among people geared for achievement, how many wish to change the fundamental nature of things for the better? And mind you, I am not saying this the way the dreamer idealists say it. Many of my virtues are not morally fashionable in the mainstream. I believe in STRENGTH, and I might be one of the last people who is willing to say so. I believe in EXCELLENCE, and IMPROVING, and if you believe in excellence and improving, you're going to wind up better than people who do not. I don't believe in equality. What

sort of cowardice would you need to feel to wish for everyone to be the same? Isn't it obvious that 4 out of 5 don't even bother trying to improve the world and themselves? If so, isn't it obvious that if you try you'll wind up better than 4 out of 5 people, almost automatically? No, the believers in equality don't want to pull those 4 out of 5 up, they don't say, "Embrace strife, and suffering, and challenge, and live on the edge of your capabilities. Suffer for your ethics, and enjoy suffering, and grow stronger and become excellent." No, they try to tear down the 1 man in 5 who tries to be better.

I believe in excellence.

I believe in strength.

Not for myself. For the world. The world needs strength and excellence.

But the way there is through suffering and strife. I do not recommend this course of thinking to anyone. I don't, really. It's hard. It's brutal at times. It almost broke me. But I think I've made it through to the other side. I wouldn't wish the path I'm on for anyone, not for a good friend, nor for a worst enemy.

Is it reckless of me to share this? My philosophy is dangerous. It's neurosis-inducing. I almost went crazy at times. Knowing that I was on a path I didn't want, and saying I'd rather have nothing than be mediocre. Maybe it will break me later.

Siddhartha said, all is suffering. I say—indeed it is, and I will have it all. I will have as much suffering as I can handle, because it is life. Life is suffering, and it is joyful when you look at it from the correct angle. Right now, there is violence and combat running through our veins, from cells and bacteria to our respiration and the chemical and electrical reactions that are our thoughts. Right now, you have in your mind images of what is possible, and a counteracting force that says take it easy and relax. This is strife. This is conflict. If you embrace the strife and conflict, it will be hard and terrible at first. I do not recommend it, for the cost is great. But on the other side, when you have joined with strife, when you have embraced it, when you

have embraced life—excellence awaits. STRENGTH awaits. Not strength of muscles, nor controls. Strength of character, strength of purpose. STRENGTH, the virtue that makes all other virtues possible. But first, suffering is necessary. I don't recommend it. Not at all. But it's what I chose, and what I continue to choose. Give me suffering and strife, slowly enough to conquer each aspect of it, and I grow stronger. I grow excellent. Life is suffering. I embrace life. I embrace suffering.

## ***Bad Stuff That's Happened to You = Expensive Lessons You've Already Paid For***

Most people start feeling bad for themselves when something goes wrong in their life. The way I see it, something going wrong is an expensive lesson I already paid for—might as well take it.

A few years ago, I was doing squats in the gym with bad form and a fairly large amount of weight. I had two plates on each side and the bar... that's 4×45 + 35 lbs if I remember correctly = 205 lbs. That was fine, I had legs like tree trunks back then. But I had slightly bad form—when you do squats, you're supposed to push your ass backwards, not bend your knees forwards. Slight difference, but it wears on the cartilage.

One day my right leg started to buckle. I was in a power rack, and what you're supposed to do is drop the weight. But y'know, you don't necessarily think about that when your leg starts to buckle. So I threw all the weight onto my other leg and pushed up hard to re-rack the bar. Ripped some of the cartilage in my knee. Rehab, massive amounts of anti-inflammatories, and I have to stretch 5-10 minutes each day or my leg starts to hurt. Doctor said knees never fully heal, so it'll cause problems on and off forever. Ouch, kind of a bad thing to have happen in your 20's.

Last year, I was doing some Krav Maga. We were doing dry run drills of where you'd aim if you were hitting the other guy. These were common, but my shadow sparring partner was a little bit too macho and going really hard

and fast and pretty close to me. *Whish*. A fast elbow uppercut, almost connecting. *Whish*. Close again. But I didn't want to speak up, y'know, we're training martial arts here, not being soft.

*Whis- cr-CRRACK!*

His elbow-uppercut (hard, fast) connects with my jaw. I hit the ground. "Oh my God, sorry, are you okay?"—"rrrm, yeah, I'm okay." My jaw was hurtin' a lot that day and a fair bit for the next two weeks, but that wasn't the real problem—I didn't realize I'd chipped the bottom of my right incisor tooth until later.

So things like this suck, but I figure they're lessons I already paid for. What can I get out of them?

I still lift weights, but now I do it slowly, with low-ish weight and perfect form. Three seconds up, three seconds down. I try to specifically feel the force coming from the muscle group that should be working the weight. I also started health programs for my teeth, gums, skin, immune system, digestive system, back, and general stretching and cardio—I figure it's unpleasant to not have full mobility and have nagging injuries. So, okay, I learned this lesson early. Can I use it to make less mistakes for later? Maybe this one injury can teach me a lesson so I don't get 20 other common injuries later.

The chipped tooth? Yeah, that sucks. But that was actually a *great* lesson, if I could go back and undo that day I wouldn't, because that experience taught me something—I'm **responsible for my health and safety, and no one else cares about it as much as I do**. I was thinking, "This guy will be careful, he wouldn't want to hit me." But, it was my jaw/face/teeth on the line, not his. I should've said, "Easy man, slow down, you almost hit me that time." Not macho? Pfft. Before, I figured he'd watch himself. Now I realize—I've got to watch myself. I've got to look out for my health, my money, my safety, my career, my family, my life.

I know that sounds simple and obvious, but I think a lot of people don't realize that. I didn't fully realize it. Your broker or money manager

recommends a purchase to you—*look into it, he doesn't care about your money as much as you do*. No matter how good he is. No matter how loyal. You care more about your life than he does. When someone recommends a drug or food to you, *look into it*. No one cares about your life as much as you do. That lesson was precious, taking an elbow uppercut and dinging up a tooth was worth it.

And heck, even if it wasn't worth it—the price was already paid. There's usually a lesson to be learned from that sort of experience. You already paid for it. Might as well claim it now, it'll probably be useful later.

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# **ACTIONABLE**

## **Action**

Even if you never set foot in a gym your whole life, you owe it to yourself to read "[The 80/20 Rule of Lifting](#)":

*The value of the 80/20 rule is that it reminds you to focus on the 20% that matters. You should identify and focus on these things. So in bodybuilding, what are they? I would say that the 20% that matters includes:*

*Researching & following a good, fundamental, bodybuilding program. (Not a perfect one, it doesn't exist).*

*Putting in hard work in the gym, consistently, over a long period of time.*

*Following the rule of progression, and ensure that over time you are lifting more weight, more reps, or more sets.*

*Having good nutrition. Eating enough good stuff, and not too much bad stuff over the course of a day.*

*Getting adequate recovery.*

*Adjusting your plan periodically, based on your results and your experiences.*

*Which basically means: Train. Eat. Rest. Repeat. Week in and week out.*

*Focusing on the basics will give you 80% of your results.*

*So if that's the important 20%, what's the 80% that's trivial? Well in my opinion it's details like these:*

*Should I do 3 sets of 8 reps or 5 sets of 10 reps?*

*What's better, 1.25g protein per pound or 1.37g/lb, or 1.5 g/lb.?*

*I'm doing BB curls, should I be doing DB curls or EZ bar curls instead?*

*What's the best angle for incline barbell presses?*

*If I don't get 30g of protein within half an hour after training, is my session wasted?*

*How much should I be lifting for my height / weight?*

*Are DB flys better than using the Pec Dec?*

*Etc. Etc. Etc. Honestly, that stuff doesn't make a difference. Or rather, if it does it makes a relatively small difference (20%); or only makes a difference for a relatively small few who are at the limits of their physical development. For most of us average Joes, it just doesn't matter!*

People love getting caught up in the details. But the details aren't going to get you here from there. You need to get started. Action.

### **Lifting:**

- Go to the gym
- Complex lifts with good form
- Eat well
- Enough rest
- Everything else is details

Last week, Edan Maor reached out to me and invited me and the SebastianMarshall.com readers to test [Chatty](#).

We tested it out. It still has wrinkles to be ironed out in it, but it's promising. It's a super easy way to get real time, on-site chat on a site.

But there's details to be ironed out. When the Chatty team launched, Facebook Connect was the only way to log in, you couldn't chat without Facebook connect, there was no moderation privileges at all, and there was an annoying issue where Chatty would keep popping up every time you moved to a new page.

But you know what? *It doesn't matter, because the Chatty team is further along than 99% of projects ever get.*

## **Building a web app:**

- Pick a problem consumers have
- Solve the most basic version of that problem
- Get it in front of people who could use it
- Incorporate their biggest feedback
- Get it in front of more people
- Look to get money somehow
- Everything else is details.
- 

Ramit Sethi says about personal finance—"[We love to debate minutia.](#)"

Most people get caught up in the details and neglect the actually important things about personal finance, saving, investing. It's not that hard.

## **Personal finance:**

- Figure out your expenses.
- Cut places where high spending is producing low quality for you.
- Increase places where more spending would produce huge quality.
- Definitely minimizes expenses, fees, and nonsense that gives you no benefit.
- Lower your tax burden as much as you can.
- Build an emergency fund.
- Save some of your income each month, ideally in a tax-advantaged account.
- Everything else is details.
- 

At least once a week, I get someone telling me they'd like to start a blog and asking thoughts. But most of the questions I get asked won't matter at all.

## **Blogging:**

- Get a blog registered on your own domain
- Write and post on a regular schedule, ideally daily
- Keep that schedule sacred
- Get your blog posts in front of as many people as you can that are relevant
- Listen to feedback and adapt so your writing improves
- Keep writing a lot and getting it in front of people
- Everything else is details.

### **There's a time for details.**

If you become really passionate about something, maybe you want to become an expert in the field. In your profession, learning all the details can make for highly polished work.

There's plenty of good time for details. But there's one bad time—that's when you're paying attention to details instead of taking the big actions.

Don't let research and details get in the way of taking action. Narrow it down to the bare minimum you need to do to get started. Do that. Now you've started.

Action. Then details. Remember that.

Action first. Then details.

Action.

## ***ACTIONABLE: TRACKING***

"A man's whole life is a succession of moment after moment. If one fully understands the present moment, there will be nothing else to do, and nothing else to pursue."

—*Hagakure*

"To a sincere student, every day is a fortunate day. Time passes but he never lags behind. Neither glory nor shame can move him."

—*Zengetsu*

### ***What Gets Measured, Gets Managed***

*(Written in 2010)*

***"What gets measured, gets managed."***

—*Peter Drucker*

There is so much power in this quote. If you've never tracked yourself, you don't even know how much power there is in tracking. I couldn't even explain it adequately. You wouldn't believe me. You'd think I was exaggerating. **The simple act of paying attention to something will cause you to make connections you never did before, and you'll improve the those areas—almost without any extra effort.**

I'm not a believer in "free lunch" and I don't think the universe vibrates things to you just by thinking about them. But the closest thing to a free lunch getting vibrated to you by the universe is writing things down as they happen.

**Before I go any further, I need to give you one piece of advice—start small and build up, so you don't overwhelm yourself.** This is just being pragmatic. You want to build small wins, lock them so they become automatic, and then expand.

I also jot down the results every week (I use "week" very loosely, sometimes it's 5 days or 9 days, depending on what's going on). For instance:

### **Weekly review: 28 August to 5 September (9 days)**

*Basic Health:*

*How many days this week did I take a vitamin? 9/9*

*How many days this week did I stretch? 9/9*

*How many days this week did I exercise? 4/9*

*How many days this week did I do sit-ups? 6/9*

*How many days this week did I sleep eight hours or less? 1/9—damn, that's bad.*

*What was my hours per sleep on average this week? 8.9 hours per night. 80 hours/9 days = 8.9 hours per night. 9, 9, 11, 7.5, 10.5, 9.5, 9.5, 7.5, 6.5*

*How many days did I brush/floss this week? 7/9 and 4/9*

*What was my diet like this week? It was okay—high in carbs, but that's okay. I ate pizza, but still had high energy levels/felt good afterwards. I had a slightly sugary drink and popcorn one day, and felt bad after that. Ate some chicken/rice/duck/rice type meals a few times which were good. Next week I'd like to incorporate more vegetables.*

*How many times did I eat sweets this week? Physical sweets, zero. Slightly sugar drinks, 1 or 2.*

Look where I wrote "How many days this week did I sleep eight hours or less? 1/9—damn, that's bad." **As you can see, just by tracking I realize what's wrong.** I was sleeping more than I want to this week, and I also had

lower productivity and energy. Honestly, oversleeping seems to drain me. Just by writing this down, I notice that and adjust.

I realized a while back that I wanted to actively pay attention to how often I help someone. How much I reach out to people, give advice, do little nice things, take care of people, help them make money, help them do strategy, things like that. In July, I decided to track it. **I added to my weekly review, "How many times did I help someone this week?" Observe how tracking it changes things.**

*Review of four days: 6 July to 9 July (done on 10 July)—How many times did I help someone this week? Once online, maybe. Offered a few more times.*

*Weekly review 10 July to 17 July (8 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? Track in checklists [i.e., I wasn't tracking it daily, so I added it to my daily checklist after the end of that week]*

*Weekly review 18 July to 26 July (8 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? At least 6, maybe more.*

*Weekly review: 27 July to 5 August (10 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? Hmm... 2 or 3?*

*Weekly review: 6 August to 13 August (8 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? 3: Chase with writing, Chris with a few little things, David with business*

*Weekly review: 14 August to 20 August (7 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? 7*

*Weekly review: 21 August to 27 August (7 days)—How many times did I help someone this week? 7 :)*

I knew I wanted to help at least one person per day, and you see it go from "I don't know" to six the first week I start tracking it, then it settles in around 3 for a little while, now it's back to 7. Just noticing it and trying to work on, I

look for opportunities to reach out to people that are doing something in an area I'm experienced. I also write all over the place, "Drop me a line, I'm friendly" and try to get back with people promptly (*note—massive email surge from a couple days ago, but I'll get the inbox to 0 shortly, and thank you for writing me. New emails are always welcome as well*).

Please don't mistake for an altruist, though. Oh, not at all. I figure doing good and right by people is necessary for the kind of life I want and the kind of world I want to live in, and actively doing right everywhere you go means you walk into any room and feel like you belong there. Honestly, I help people as much for myself as for the world.

**Want to see the evolution of how I'm quitting sugar?** These are direct from my notes unedited:

*Review of four days: 6 July to 9 July (done on 10 July)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? 5 solid, 2 sugary drinks times, pretty bad stuff. Three were in transit—on the train, in the airport, and on the airplane. The fourth was ordering an ice cream at McDonald's for God knows why ... just a blatant mistake there. Also had an ice tea at McDonalds, damn those sugary drinks. Maybe iced coffee instead if I go back there? Also bought a sweet on the streets for no good reason just because I was a little hungry, which was no good. I suppose I just need to be aware of it and reduce it.*

*Weekly review 10 July to 17 July (8 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? Maybe six?*

*Weekly review 18 July to 26 July (8 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? Wasn't tracking this, but maybe 5 to 8? Which is really too much, no good.*

*Weekly review: 27 July to 5 August (10 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? Zero, maybe? Wow! Maybe once or twice, but yeah, not much. Doing well here.*

*Weekly review: 6 August to 13 August (8 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? 0 I think?*



*Weekly review: 14 August to 20 August (7 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? Zero? Awesome. I'm starting to turn sweets down automatically.*

*Weekly review: 21 August to 27 August (7 days)—How many times did I eat sweets this week? 1*

I slid backwards a little bit and had two semi-sweet drinks this week. The Vietnamese like to put sugar in all kinds of things that don't normally have it, and twice I finished the drink (a coffee and kiwi juice, respectively). **But as you can see, just the act of writing it down makes me aware of it, and the sugar is fading away.**

**Forcing yourself to write down areas where you're not taking action and want to be lights a fire under your ass.** This week I'm going out to get some cash. But I don't lie to myself, I'm not getting cash, and I mark it down every single week. I've got to not spend, keep an eye on bank balance. Also, I already wrote down and publicly committed to my financial goals in "[Mark This Down and Watch Me](#)."

Now, I'm not sitting on my duff this whole time. I'm building things, working on other projects, writing fairly prolifically here at the blog, and building up my next company. But just being forced to write down those 0's every weekly review is sobering. ***I'm not getting done something that needs to be getting done, and I'm forced to be aware of it.***

How about if you know you want to start a new goal, but aren't sure exactly how to go about it?

**Interestingly enough, you can add something to your weekly tracking and then just write down at the end of the week you weren't tracking it—that means you'll naturally consider tracking it the next week.**

For instance, I knew I wanted to track my budget, but it wasn't happening. So I added it to the weekly review, even though I hadn't really started tracking it daily:

*Review of four days: 6 July to 9 July (done on 10 July)—What'd I spend this week? Not sure, pretty low.*

*Weekly review 10 July to 17 July (8 days)—What'd I spend this week? Figure out expenses*

*Weekly review 18 July to 26 July (8 days)—Total: room \$144 (\$18/day), food \$46, coffee \$19, groceries \$31, transit \$2*

*-> I also bought vitamins for \$66, but that's a long term expense over the next two months, not an expense for just this week.*

*Total spent: \$223 for this week specifically, \$27 per day.*

**The amazing thing about tracking spending is it naturally goes down.** Having a coffee now and then in Hong Kong was costing me \$19/week, whereas instant coffee costs almost nothing. But don't think I'm depriving myself—I realized I wasn't getting a massage when I was thinking about my spending for the next week. All instant coffee + getting a massage for health is much better than cafe coffee + no massage.

**Unsurprisingly, my biggest expense was lodging/accommodation. But interestingly enough, the gears started turning in my head now that I'm writing those numbers down each week.** I thought—"How could I get this down?" I came up with a rough idea. I'd see if I could be someone's guest, and then spend about half of what I would spend on lodging on gifts, dinners, things of that nature, and lend my talents to their cause. I'm fairly skilled in a few disciplines, and I'm happy to put my talents to use for whoever is hosting me.

I joined Couchsurfing, but I haven't used it yet. When I updated everyone that I was visiting Vietnam, my friend who lives here said I could stay with him as he has an empty guest room. I planned to stay a short time before moving on, but it turns out we had a blast, and after the first week he said "stay as long as you like—seriously, as long as you like Sebastian"—which is very gracious and cool of him. I make a concerted effort to pick up the check for dinners when we're out and otherwise aim to spend at least half or

more of what I'd spend on lodging towards doing nice things. Then I spend 5-10 hours per week doing general strategy, teaching him on the topics I'm an expert on, spec'ing out a plan for him if he wants to do more creative work going forwards. I introduced him to a few people I know in business. I also run errands and stock his home with bread from this hybrid French-Korean bakery nearby. (It's a French bakery run by Koreans, so it has French bread, Korean-ish bread, and Vietnamese bread. Strange but good)

As an aside, he's quite talented as a manager and an executive, so we really had a blast talking on different topics, talking about politics and governance. He shared quite a few amazing stories about management and business, I shared on my expertise, and it's been a very virtuous good cycle. He's actually back in the States now and said I'm welcome to house-sit for him, which was very very cool and very appreciated.

This all cuts my expenses/burn rate down, which is good when I'm working on speculative endeavors and don't have cash coming in. I've got all the marketing and market research and product/service mix for my next company done, but we'll see if the market is really there. (It's business to business, so step one will be getting in front of someone who has budget authorization, and step two will be demonstrating the ROI... I see the ROI pretty clearly, but can I communicate it? We'll see)

This all got noticed by me tracking my spending. I also notice if I'm paying twice as much at one restaurant as another, but the twice-as-expensive one isn't any better... whoops, time to change. **You wouldn't normally notice the difference between a \$3 decent meal and a \$6 decent meal, but when they're written down right next to each other, it makes you think—is the food better at the \$6 place? No? Why don't I just always go to the \$3 place? And so, I do. What gets measured, gets managed.**

**Tracking general time is simple, easy, and effective. I just occasionally write down what I'm doing or what I finished. It takes seconds, and I'm not fanatical about it—just whenever I notice or right before going out.**

**For instance, I pay attention to who is talking about and linking to me, so I can thank them, connect with them more, and write on the topics**

that suit them:

The screenshot shows a Gmail inbox on the left with folders like 'Compose mail', 'Inbox (25)', 'Starred', 'Sent Mail', 'Drafts', 'All Mail', 'Spam', 'Networking (1)', 'Pending', 'People (6)', and '3 more'. The main content area displays a 'Google Alert - sebastianmarshall.com' notification. The alert title is 'Google Alerts to me' with a timestamp of '4:16 AM (21 hours ago)' and a 'Refresh' button. Below the title, it says 'Web 9 new results for sebastianmarshall.com'. The results list includes several items, each starting with 'Well, glad you asked - | SebastianMarshall.com: Strategy, Philosophy, Self-Discipline, Science, Victory.' followed by a link to a specific article or post. The right sidebar contains 'Sponsored Links' for services like 'Proven Writing Software', 'Don't Use American Book', 'Manuscripts Accepted', 'Budget English Editing', 'Blog articles', 'English Edits For You', and 'UK Income Tax'.

You can set this up easily, for free, at [Google Alerts](#).

I also use analytics tracking to see what's going on, and I check in with that daily. **It's fun, it's like leveling up in a video game, except it's the real world.** But I'll talk more about analytics in the next day or two, I want to do a full dedicated post to it.

In the meantime, remember—what gets measured, gets managed. If you want to improve an area, start paying attention to it. Even if you're just writing down how you're getting brutalized in that area or being undisciplined, that should help inspire you to move forwards. Even if you're just writing down casually, you might notice things like how much you're really spending on coffee, and how you'd prefer to go instant coffee and

spend that money on a massage. It's especially good for making sure you do little tedious things, like stretch and floss and take vitamins.

**If you want to get started, I recommend you start small. Your tracking system should serve you, you don't serve it.** Too many people jump in gung-ho, try to do something monstrous, and burn out and stop doing it.

## ***The Evolution of My Time/Habit/Life Tracking***

**"A complex system that works is invariably found to have evolved from a simple system that worked. A complex system designed from scratch never works and cannot be patched up to make it work. You have to start over, beginning with a working simple system."** -John Galt

I built a pretty good daily tracking template, and I evolved it over time. It's serving me pretty well now. I'd like to show you the evolution.

**Version 0**—I realized that tracking my time would be a good thing. I started writing down just one or two things per day.

Here's what my first day of tracking looked like:

*26 May—Success*

*Stretched, sit-ups, pushups.*

*Took a vitamin.*

*Did some writing on Critical Thinking.*

**Version 1**—About a month later, I formalized my daily tracking with some things I wanted to pay attention to every day. I created a template for the first time.

***\*\*THIS TEMPLATE RETIRED 18 JULY 2010\*\****

*General things to reflect on:*

*\*Be decisive. Look at it once, make a decision, done.*

*\*Live in the borderlands, awareness of the end in my heart*

*Time awake:*

*Total sleep:*

*Vitamin?:*

*Stretching?:*

*Walk/run?:*

*Sit-ups?:*

*Listen to audio?:*

*Food?:*

*Most key project:*

*Next milestones:*

*Objectives for today:*

*Time started:*

*Result:*

*Checklist:*

*\*What are my key life goals? Spent 5 minutes on this.*

*\*Is my urgent to do list clear?*

*\*Is my people to do list clear?*

*\*Look at my current to-do list. Is any of that suitable to do?*

*\*The second most important project right now is SebastianMarshall.com. Do something with that?*

*What is most important?*

*Now consider...*

*\*Networking, friends, counsel, helping people, factions.*

*\*What do I need to learn?*

*\*How to get cash?*

*\*Consorting.*

*\*Habits/Life Goals?*

*\*Brainstorming*

*End of day:*

*What did I do right to move me towards my goals?*

*What would I do differently if I had the day to live over?*

*–Plan tomorrow*

**Version 2**—The version 1 template worked pretty well. I wasn't sure what I wanted to pay attention to, so I listed some things and said, "Now consider..." which meant just think and try on those things. Eventually I nailed down some things that were important to pay attention to, and I formalized that into version 2.

---

**GENERAL:**

*\*Be decisive. Look at it once, make a decision, done.*

*\*Don't check email unless I'm ready to write back immediately*

*\*Set alarm at end of day*

*\*Stop and reflect periodically*

---

**START OF DAY:**

*Time awake:*

*Total sleep:*

*Vitamin C and Fish oil:*

*Stretching?:*

*Walk/run?:*

*Brush/floss:*

*Sit-ups?:*

*Listen to audio?:*

*Food?:*

*Breathe:*

*Borderlands:*

---

**MOST KEY ITEM:**

*Next milestones:*

*Objectives for today:*

*Time started:*

*Result:*

---

*PEOPLE:*

*Blog post?:*

*New People (FB, Twitter, emails):*

*Current people:*

*Help someone:*

*Consorting:*

*Emails in box, start:*

*Emails in box, finish (and—why they there?):*

---

*GENERAL:*

*\*What are my key life goals? Spent 5 minutes on this.*

*\*Expenses for the day (estimate)?*

*\*Cash gotten or worked towards today*

---

*END OF DAY:*

*What did I do right to move me towards my goals?*

*What would I do differently if I had the day to live over?*

*Plan tomorrow*

**Version 3**—Version 2 worked great, but I grew out of it. One of the biggest things was I was filling in my template with time tracking which was making things messy and hard to review later. I just cleaned up and made my template more pretty. I also renamed and made more accurate a few sections. I grew out of "Most Key Objective" because now I've often got 4-5 things to do in a day. So I mixed that in to think about at the start of the day and added a general time tracking section instead. Also, I added a "Challenges" section to pay attention to things I still get wrong some days.

---

*REMEMBER:*

*\*Be decisive. Look at it once, make a decision, done.*

*\*Stop and reflect periodically*

---

*START OF DAY ROUTINE:*

*Time awake:*

*Total sleep:*



*Vitamin C and Fish oil:*

*Brush/floss:*

*Stretching:*

*Check calendar, anything interesting?*

*Is there anything time sensitive?*

*What is my most key objective for the day?*

*Walk/run:*

*Sit-ups:*

*Listen to audio:*

*Food:*

*Breathe:*

*Borderlands:*

*Planning:*

---

*PEOPLE:*

*Blog post:*

*New People:*

*Current people:*

*Help someone:*

*Consorting:*

*Emails in box, start:*

*Emails in box, finish (and—why they there?):*

---

*TIME TRACKING:*

---

*CHALLENGES:*

*Did I start the day in my planner instead of online?*

*Did I only check email when I was ready to write back immediately?*

*Did I clear my active to do list before any screwing around?*

*Did I avoid getting into arguments with idiots online?*

*Did I only check a site once, then done with it?*

*Did I prioritize books/good learning instead of mindless surfing?*

*Did I avoid sugary food?*

---

*END OF DAY:*

*What are my key life goals? Spent 5 minutes on this.*

*Expenses for the day (estimate)?*

*Cash gotten or worked towards today:*

*What did I do right to move me towards my goals?*

*What would I do differently if I had the day to live over?*

*Plan tomorrow:*

*Set alarm:*

I currently use a much more advanced system, which I'm not going to spell out in this book. Instead I'll focus on the features.

## ***Ideas for Features***

"Reach Out" at the start of the day. Send a short note or question to someone I respect and admire that I haven't met or haven't talked to in a while. It takes not very long, but pays pretty big dividends.

"Do Sometime During the Time" now gets looking at my to-do list and doing one item off of it... pretty obvious in retrospect, but it wasn't there before. Some days I wouldn't look at my non-urgent to-do list... which isn't any good. These are good items.

I moved my "Time Tracking" section around. I moved "Relaxing" as in pure, good relaxing up and calling it good time, and I added two new categories in "Okay" time—drifting off in thought (Daydreaming) and doing little errands or buying food or whatever (General-life). Writing is now separated out in Excellent time as well.

Finally, I get a lot of mileage out of my "Challenges" section. At the end of the day, I answer all those questions. A great way to see if I'm on-track or off-track with things.

Two new questions: "Did I keep surfing under 60 minutes for the day?" which relates to the "Conceding Defeat—The Internet is Stronger Than I Am" post. And "Did I act on my key habit for the day?" which is where I evaluate the key habit I set earlier in the day.

## ***Fill Up Your Dead Time***

Running errands. Waiting in line. Waiting for a train, bus, or flight. Commuting. Driving in your car.

Dead time.

There's *a lot* of dead time, you might not even realize how much there is. If you can fill this time up with valuable things, you're going to have a much better life.

I used to try bringing a book with me for dead time, and it works sometimes. Now I listen to audio, which can be done pretty much anywhere. Waiting in line at an airport? Audio. Commuting? Audio. Getting groceries? Audio.

I can't stress enough how big of a difference this makes. Fill up the dead time. There's lots of it. You'll be amazed at all you can learn in the time that's normally slipping through the cracks.

## ***Prioritizing***

I doubt I'll ever build or get involved in a time tracking app—yes, there could be a better one, but it's a saturated space. It's a relatively small market, and there's a disproportionately huge amount of competition in it. There's already tons of offerings ranging from "satisfactory" to "pretty darn good"—I might build something in the space for kicks sometime, but it's not a business priority. There's just too much low hanging fruit in old world, billions-of-dollar industries that are massively underinvested in technology. Whenever anyone tells me they're building a time/goal-setting/etc app, I advise against it until they're doing it for non-business reasons.

Anyways. Prioritizing.

How do I prioritize? Six months ago, my answer would have been "haphazardly"—I just picked things somewhat arbitrarily and did them based on... whatever.

Since then, I've gotten a bit more systematic about it.

Every morning I fill this out -

---

*QUICK CHECKLIST:*

*Time started:*

*Vitamins, stretch, brush, breathe, posture:*

*Borderlands, celerity, gratitude, life goals:*

*Highest Impact Creative:*

*Highest Impact Enterprising:*

*Time complete:*

---

*CYCLES:*

*Target Expansion:*

*Target Maintenance:*

*Target World:*

*Other Priorities?:*

*Time complete:*

---

That's my morning routine.

What are those "Cycles"? They're bloody miraculous is what they are.

I realized a few things:

1.) "Expansion"—doing creative or enterprising work—won't happen automatically unless it's prioritized, and it's the thing with absolutely the most positive impact on life. So I prioritize it, and aim to do it first.

2.) "Maintenance"—there's generally ongoing commitments I've got to uphold. This is where I reply to letters, follow up with appointments, run errands, whatever. Generally, my mind starts to burn out on expansionary tasks after 5-10 hours of it at most since it takes a lot of mental horsepower. So I can shift gears to maintenance, and get in a few more hours of cleanup, cleanup, etc.

3.) "World"—I realized that working all the time doesn't max out productivity. Every day I try to define some activity to either do in the evening or split my day in half. Go shopping, go look at art, go visit with friends, go walk around, chill out in a cafe with nice music, see a tourist site, etc.

I try to somewhat explicitly schedule these. Like, if I'm up at 6AM, I might say I'm heading out at 4PM to go play around out in the world and I'm done working for the day unless I get inspired (I often do get inspired and work a few more hours at night, but explicitly stopping work unless inspired is good—and perhaps conducive to inspiration anyways)

The trickiest thing for me is building around other people's schedules. I'm working on projects or in correspondence with people in Western Europe, East Coast USA, West Coast USA, and Asia. That means I get appointments scattered all over the place, sometimes winding up with something silly like a 2-3 hour call at 11PM China time (11AM EST USA) followed by another call at 6AM China time... I look at on that the schedule and say, "Who is the idiot that set that up?"

(The idiot, of course, was me)

So I've got to get better at coordinating my calendar and appointments across timezones, and yet not burning out off of no sleep and not enough relaxation. It's a tricky thing, but life is really fantastic overall. One thing I've started doing lately is spending a lot more money—keeping myself in the nicest surroundings, taking taxis even short distances, etc. I've been meaning to write about this, but I was hyper-frugal as my dominant strategy for years. I'm getting away from that, because I need to spend more to keep myself going at the rates I'm going.

I think most people are at, maybe, 10% of their max capability. Probably more like 2%. That's where most of my life I've been. Lately I'm near 40-50%? It's intense. Better technology, better coordination, better planning are all necessary.

Speaking of which, one thing that's helped a lot is doing a fast weekly review in business. The senior partner at a company I just came onto is a savant when it comes to productivity—he's got basically six full-time projects going on, one in finance, one in IT, one in government, one in consumer goods, and a couple consulting things. He's amazing with technology. I take his recommendations wholesale—he actually convinced me to buy the Mac, for instance. It's amazing how much technology can serve you if you're systematic about it. He's also ultra-fast at planning, filtering things into the right thing, action, etc.

I use Wunderlist pretty extensively, a great free app that syncs across platforms. It only does a couple things, but it does them really well. You create a task, you set a date when it's due, you can see what's due today, tomorrow, this week, and what's overdue. You can share it collaboratively easily, and it syncs easily. Great app, it's helped a lot. That's one of the things I review.

Then I periodically review what my "Top Priorities" are—I'll list out the 4-5 active business projects and 3-4 life projects I've got going on and check the due dates on everything in Wunderlist, or skim things I haven't set dates on yet. I update this weekly, when I do the weekly business review (which goes surprisingly fast).

I try to prioritize expansionary activities, because they just don't happen if they're not prioritized. After that, the next thing I prioritize are things that are a "dependency" for someone else—if I don't get it, it hoses someone else.

I complete every item that's scheduled a day unless an amazing opportunity or an emergency comes up, in which case I reschedule. The exception is if I feel burnout setting in, which I'm being very careful to manage.

My fitness instructor, he always advises me "against being hardcore"—if I feel weak, sore, or not there during my workout, just quit for the day and get back at it. Maybe gains are slightly slower, but you avoid being injured which takes you out of the game.

I'm treating burnout the same way. On a day when it seems the weight of the world is on my shoulders, I finish any critical dependencies so no one else is hosed, but then maybe I reschedule everything and take the rest of the day off. I could theoretically grind out a few more low quality hours when feeling early burnout set in, but you risk giving up weeks of higher productivity if you do. Just like in fitness, I'm not trying to be hardcore—maybe I lose a few small gains here and there, but I want that sustainability so I don't get taken out of the game for a while.

A quick recap:

- I define "Cycles" every day—Expansion, Maintenance, World.
- I start with Expansion, because it doesn't happen otherwise.
- After Expansionary time, my next priority is getting in deliverables that are other people are depending on me for.
- I choose my Expansionary and Maintenance cycles based on my Top Priorities list.
- I do weekly review of all my top priorities. It only takes 20 minutes to make a quick list.
- I keep a bunch of tasks in Wunderlist that need to be done, and always do them on the day I pick or proactively reschedule. Things getting late is unacceptable under normal circumstances.
- With the exception that I listen to my body and mind—if I feel too worn out, I might clear the decks for the rest of the day and take a break. What you lose in a few hours of low quality work, you gain back in being fresh the rest of the time.

## ***Simplicity vs. Precision***

There's a tradeoff you're going to have to make a lot of the time: simplicity vs. precision.

Simplicity often lacks detail and nuance. That's why we build and do more complex things—to get more precise, specific outcomes.

**Choose simplicity unless there's a good reason not to.**

Complex systems have more of a damage of collapse. Add complexity carefully, and in a way where you can roll it back if the added-complexity doesn't add enough benefit.

If you look like at one of my time tracking sheets, you'll see a pretty complex thing. But it gradually, slowly grew into that. If you were starting from scratch, don't start with something complex. Start with something simple. Track 3 things max.

Consolidate as time passes. Cross out things that you no longer need to track, either because it's not relevant any more, it's automatically successful, or because tracking wasn't producing gain there.

I used to have a "Research" category and a "Learning" category on my time tracking. They're slightly different, but I combined them to "Research/learning"—I lose a little bit of fine grain detail, but gain simplicity. And simplicity is good.

Start with simple. Add slowly. Complexity is a huge tax and increases the chance of collapse. You should be getting a big gain if you're going more complex.

### ***Feature Example: Key Habit Today***

"Key habit" is my newest addition, and it filled a little hole I had in my template. Before, I had something like, "Most important thing to be achieved today," or "Most important objective," but those frequently fell short. Some days I didn't have any key thing to be achieved—I just had to deal with a lot of little loose ends and work to have a good day.

On the other hand, sometimes I had a tremendous amount of work to do on one specific thing, and that dominated and was more important than anything else.



"Key habit" is a nice compromise between those two extremes. In it, I could list spending time working on some large project, I could list a new habit I'm trying to adopt, or to something I'm trying to scale down and quit. If my surfing the internet time was too high for a while, the key habit for a few days in a row might be "Keep internet surfing under 60 minutes."

If I've been eating poorly, it might be, "Make every meal healthy today." If I'm drinking too much coffee, it might be, "Drink three coffees or less today." (I pretty consistently drink way too much coffee. I'm working on it.)

But on other days, I care very little about general habits like internet use, food, and coffee—perhaps because I've got massively critical deliverable or deadline on a project coming up. For instance, I've been super busy since I got to Beijing, and I haven't found time to do some writing that I've meant to do for a week. Today I've got, "Find some writing time" as my key habit. I got invited to a breakfast with two good guys I like a lot, but I had a two-hour call back to the USA around the time breakfast was happening. I could have dropped in for the tail end of breakfast maybe, but I've really got to get this writing down—so I managed to carve out 30 minutes for writing, even though I would have liked going to the breakfast. I'd like to find another 30 minutes later in the day for writing at least, which I think I'll be able to do.

My key habit four days ago was, "Get a good blend of social and work today"—I had a lot of work to do, but I also wanted to see three or four people I know. Trying to do both was my focus that day (I did it—it just meant I couldn't screw around at all and couldn't have any real downtime that day).

## ***Inconsistency with Habits? Start with the Hard Stuff First***

Let's talk about consistency with time tracking, and indeed, all habits in general.

My first start at tracking was in January 2010 in Taipei, Taiwan. I read this [excellent Lifehacker article](#) on Jerry Seinfeld's method of writing jokes every day, called "Don't break the chain"—he would try to do a little joke writing every day, no matter what, and then mark the calendar if he did.

Well, I implemented something like that, and I had *amazing* results that month. Really, January 2010 is one of the nicest months in my life. Damn near everything went right that month on all levels. Magnificent.

For some damn reason, Taiwan only gives Americans 30 days visa-free. It's, like, the only place I've been with visa waiver that only gives you 30. So I left after 30 days, sadly, because I loved Taipei. Really a great city. After that, I was in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand.

For some reason, I just stopped tracking after I was in transit. Then I kind of started again for 3-4 days, and then I didn't do it again for six months or so until I was in Korea.

WTF?

I don't know, man. Us humans, we're kind of defective and stupid in some ways. We identify something that's really, really good for us. We do it for a while. It works really well, increasing quality of life, happiness, productivity, and gets us closer to our most important goals...

...then we stop doing it for some damn fool reason.

Can't explain it. Don't understand. It's kind of crazy and stupid.

So yes, I've had false starts. I have two big thoughts for you here:

1.) Get *something* down. At the very end of the day, estimate what the day's breakdown is. Just open your file or notebook or whatever, and put *something* down. This isn't just for time tracking, it's for going to the gym, calling your Mom regularly, whatever that's important to you.

Like, if you're too worn out or sick or tired to go to the gym, go anyways, at least for 10 minutes. Go, do a super light workout, shower, go home. Then you haven't broken your general patterns and commitments. Breaking commitments completely makes it easier to break commitments completely more going forwards. But doing it just a little bit even strengthens the habit.

2.) Start with the hard stuff.

This is actually my one critique of your time tracking, which I like but I have one issue with—don't start with "Mail, News, Facebook, Forums"—don't do that. Start with your non-deadline, expansive, important creative projects, your programming or hustling or whatever.

When you start with the easy, no effort stuff, it's far more likely the more important, more challenging stuff doesn't get done. So I'd move it around.

Final thought—answering some "yes/no" questions at the end of the day is very good for me. This is my current set of them -

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#### *CHALLENGES:*

*Did I start the day in my planner instead of online?*

*Did I only check email when I was ready to write back immediately?*

*Did I only check a site once, then done with it?*

*Did I check "Current Targets" if I caught myself wasting time?*

*Did I prioritize books/good learning instead of mindless surfing?*

*Did I make war on procrastination?*

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Might be worth getting something like that. Just the first question, starting in the planner instead of online goes a long way towards making sure you track—because if not, you have to mark "No"—just make sure you do open it up at the end of the day at the very least, and write an ultra-short summary of the day. If you've fallen off track some, that's fine, but doing *something* goes a long way towards not getting negative inertia.

## ***Guest Essay: Nine Tips for Getting Started with Time Tracking***

*A very good guest post by Matt Mazur ([mattmazur.com](http://mattmazur.com)). Here's Matt:*

### **Nine Tips for Getting Started with Life Tracking**

Inspired by Sebastian's posts about the benefits of life tracking, I decided to try it for myself. After several false starts, I've now been doing it for almost two months straight and have had some great results. In this post I'll explain how my current tracking system works and I'll share some of the lessons I've learned along the way.

#### **How it Works**

Every Sunday morning I print an eight page document that I use throughout the week to track various aspects of my life. The first page is an overview, which I will fill out at the end of the week to summarize my results. The remaining seven pages are devoted to each day of the week.

Here's what the summary page looks like:

## Review for the week of February 20, 2011

### Summary:

- Exercise:	_____	Stretch:	_____
- Restaurants:	_____	Junk Food:	_____
- Blog Posts:	_____	Floss:	_____
- Hours of Sleep:	_____	Avg/Day:	_____
- Hours of Computer:	_____	Avg/Day:	_____

### Weekly Expense Totals:

- Haircut:	_____	Computer/Office:	_____
- Airfare:	_____	Books:	_____
- Hotels:	_____	Gas:	_____
- Entertainment:	_____	Gifts:	_____
- Household Goods:	_____	Transportation:	_____
- Clothing:	_____	Misc Auto:	_____
- Jewelry:	_____	Misc:	_____
- Restaurants:	_____	Snacks:	_____
- Groceries:	_____	Total Food:	_____
- Total Expenses:	_____		

### Observations:

---

### Notes:

- The top section of the page is for averaging out several of the items I track throughout the week
- Computer usage is monitored via RescueTime

And here's what the daily tracking pages look like:

**Sunday, February 20**

Approx. time asleep last night: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time awake this morning: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Approx. hours of sleep: \_\_\_\_\_

Restaurant: 0 1 2 3 4      Stretch: Y / N  
 Junk Food: 0 1 2 3 4      Exercise: Y / N  
 Blog Post: 0 1 2 3 4      Floss: Y / N  
 Snacks: 0 1 2 3 4 5  
 Fruits: 0 1 2 3 4 5

Breakfast: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Lunch: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Dinner: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Snacks: \_\_\_\_\_

Daily Summary: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Expenses	Cost	Category	Cash?
			Y / N
			Y / N
			Y / N
			Y / N
			Y / N

**Notes:**  
 - Junk Food: Coffee/Juice/Alcohol/Fries/Fried Foods  
 - Snacks: Anything I eat between meals  
 - Expenses list non-recurring costs (which are usually more in your control than recurring expenses like rent, utilities, phone bill, etc)  
 - Category refers to one of the categories listed on the summary page  
 - Every Sunday I double check the expenses with Mint.com to ensure I didn't miss anything  
 - I make a note in the "Daily Summary" section describing the key events of the day

I added notes at the bottom of each screenshot where I thought things might need additional explanation.

At the end of each day I fill out the tracking page for that day. When Sunday rolls around, I flip through the pages and aggregate the results on the summary page. Summarizing the results at the end of the week is a good idea because it lets you quickly gauge how you've done and it provides a quick reference so you can compare your progress with previous weeks.

This system works well for me and it might for you too. But getting to this point was not without its challenges.

Here's a few key lessons I've learned along the way, a few of which echo some of Sebastian's advice.

## **1.) Start small**

If you decide to make a big change in your life, like starting a daily life tracking routine, your best chance of success is to start with a small change and slowly expand it into something bigger. If you disrupt the status quo too much too quickly, you probably won't stick with it. When you begin, life tracking should barely have an impact on your current routine which means it should take as little time as possible to complete.

My first attempt at tracking was in November 2010. I typed up a daily tracking sheet in Pages, Mac's equivalent to Word, which I envisioned myself filling out daily. The problem was that it was way too long: one page, including lots of open ended questions ("What are your goals for tomorrow?") and fill in the blanks that required me to do research like "How many sign ups on Preceden and jMockups today?". It took me about twenty minutes to fill out. I stuck with it for about two days before quitting, justifying it by saying that I didn't have enough time to do this type of tracking. And I was right.

When I started up again at the beginning of the year, I started with a much, much simpler version that took about 30 seconds to fill out. As time went by, I slowly expanded it by adding new items. Even now, after nearly two months of adding to it, it only takes me about three minutes to fill out. You might decide that you want to track a lot more than I am and that's fine, but make sure you start with something that's quick and grow it from there.

## **2.) Never skip a day**

If you miss a day or two during the week, you're going to have a hard time going back at the end of the week and summarizing your results. How, for example, do you calculate the average numbers of hours you've slept if you didn't record it one day? You won't be able to without either guessing at the hours you slept that night or by qualifying your answer with "On the days I kept track..." which is next to useless. If you're want to compare your results week to week, there's nothing more frustrating than not being able to compare a week with another because you missed a day somewhere in there.

And along with the previous point, a short tracking sheet takes less time to fill out, which means you'll be less likely to miss a day.

### **3.) If you absolutely have to miss a day, fill it out as soon as possible**

I try to mark things on the tracking sheet throughout the day as I complete them and finish the rest right before I head to sleep. If I can't fill it out for whatever reason, I make sure to complete it at my first available opportunity the next day.

Do not wait more than a day to complete it. What time did you go to bed the night before last? What did you have for dinner the day before yesterday? Chances are it will take you a minute to remember, if you can remember at all. For accurate results, complete your tracking sheet as soon as possible.

### **4.) The type of questions you ask are important**

Yes/no questions are the simplest type of responses by far. If you're just getting started, I'd recommend starting with a few yes/no questions to cover a few key areas of your life. Answering a yes/no question takes about half a second. For my tracking, I don't even have to write a "Y" or an "N" because I include a "Y / N" next to the question so I can quickly circle the answer.

The easiest type of questions to answer next to yes/no are quantitative: How many blog posts? How far did you run? How many times did you eat that thing you're trying to stop eating? These could also be worded as yes/no questions, but for anything with a quantitative answer you should write the number, not just yes/no, because you get a higher fidelity when you analyze it later down the road.

Following quantitative answers, you've got fill in the blank: what time did you go to bed? What did you eat for breakfast? Etc. Because these are usually objective questions (i.e., there is a concrete answer), filling them out should not take very long.



At the other end of the spectrum are open ended questions: What are your goals for tomorrow? What mistakes did you make today? These require you to sit back and really think about the answer. These pay a lot of dividends, but are also the most time consuming to answer. You should avoid these until you've settled into a tracking routine.

### **5.) Make changes weekly, not daily**

During the first two or three weeks of tracking, I wanted to make changes to my tracking sheet almost daily. "Include this... don't include that." Resist the temptation to change it daily. It makes aggregating your results at the end of the week difficult and you'll also change your mind a lot a day or two after you originally decide to make the change.

If you want to change your tracking sheet, make a note of it and then on Sunday when you're preparing for the next week make the edits.

### **6.) Track what you want to change**

How do you decide what to track? Write down all the areas of your life where you want to improve and come up with questions that serve that end. Whether it's exercising more often, eating healthier, or writing more often, tracking how often you do it will help you gauge your progress and, magically, do it more often.

After you've met your goal for a specific area, continue tracking it for a few weeks until you're confident that you've made it a long term habit. For example, if your goal is to floss every day and you've been successfully tracking and doing it for several months, you can be pretty confident that it's part of your routine and that you'll continue doing it when you stop tracking it.

### **7.) You should not be able to do everything all the time**

Marking "No" for an item when it should be "Yes" is a bit unnerving at first, but don't feel like you have to do everything every day. In fact, if you are

accomplishing everything you want to do, chances are you're not challenging yourself enough.

Sebastian says aim for a 70% success rate—that sounds about right.

### **8.) Focus on one big change per month**

This one's inspired by Sebastian's New Years Resolution post in Get Some Victory: rather than make a whole bunch of sweeping changes to your life on New Years Day, split them up and try to accomplish one per month. A good tracking system should help you achieve these goals.

In January, for example, my goal was to cut out coffee and juice from my diet. This month I'm focusing on eating a healthier breakfast (oatmeal and fruit vs. Frosted Mini Wheats). Had I tried cutting out coffee, juice, and Frosted Mini Wheats on January 1, I'd have had a lot lower chance of succeeding than by breaking it up over the course of the few months.

The great thing about this is that you could conceivably go forever doing this: identify one area per month that you want to improve, focus on it for that month so you make it a habit, and repeat for the rest of your life. With a little bit of discipline, you can become the best possible version of yourself that you can be.

### **9.) For best results, develop your own system**

This system works well for me because I started with something simple and then developed it based on my own lifestyle and goals. By all means, gain inspirations from this system and from Sebastian's, but if you really want to get the most out of life tracking then you should develop your own over time. Experiment with different types of questions, figure out what you like and don't like, and discover what works best for you.

## ***ACTIONABLE: FUNDAMENTALS***

"Everything is training."  
— Rob

### ***The Neurosis of Long Term Habit Change***

Just had a smart conversation yesterday about this. It's been something I've been thinking on for a while.

There's a bit of a problem with long term habit change. If you're working on something that takes a while to achieve, you spend a lot of time falling short of your target and aware of it.

So, let's say you were currently drinking a lot of soda, and you want to quit.

You start replacing soda with other drinks, trying to order different things at restaurants, buy other things, turn friends and family down when they offer you a soda, get a bottled water instead of a coke at the movie theater with popcorn, etc, etc, etc.

Sometimes you go to a barbecue or a cheap lunch with pizza, and the only drink is soda. You try to just have nothing those times.

There's lots of opportunities to drink soda. If you were a big soda drinker, a gradual scaling-down of soda-drinking might take six months.

For that whole six months, there's going to be some neurosis and pressure. You're going to be aware of falling short every time you have a soda. It's likely you'll feel some disappointment or neurosis every time you cave and have a soda when you didn't plan to.

Then, one day, you've scaled down almost all the way, and then you quit entirely. BAM! You're no longer a soda drinker.

How long do you celebrate? I'm going to guess... less than two weeks.

And I think that's a huge problem with long term habit change. Six months of hard work, of being constantly aware of falling short, of the disappointment and neurosis from false starts and mistakes, and then... less than two weeks of feeling good about it, before on to the next thing.

Yes, you get all the health benefits. But you don't necessarily get rewarding feelings anywhere near the pressure and neurosis and disappointment while working on it.

I'm gradually becoming more aware of this. I don't have a perfect solution to it, but I think celebrating more often is a part of the puzzle.

Celebrate small wins, have a little moment of satisfaction when your consumption of soda (or whatever) improves a little bit, reflect on the wins and the changes, celebrate a little longer and bigger when you have large wins.

Also, perhaps less neurosis and disappointment when falling short? I'm not sure it's necessary... perhaps it can act like a spur in your side to some extent, but maybe it'd be possible to just adjust without feeling bad? Saying something like, "Ok, I fell short. Time to get back on track" without the neurosis?

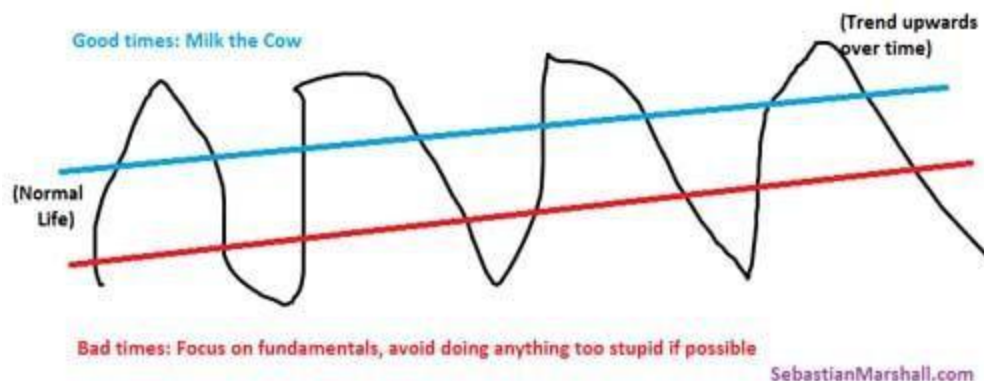
I'm reminded again of that Tomas Schelling quote from *Choice and Consequences*:

*Some people who run for exercise discover that the fear of quitting—not the fear of running painfully, but of quitting—becomes so severe that they are tempted to quit to get rid of the fear. Once they've run the course the mental agony is gone and the physical agony bearable; so they sometimes treat themselves at the end to a little extra when, anxiety gone and nothing at stake, they can at last run for the fun of it.*

Perhaps long term habit change is like that, to some extent. The neurosis and battling might be more difficult than the habit change itself.

Perhaps we can correct course without the neurosis, and celebrate more often? I don't know, I need to think on this more.

## ***Good Times, Bad Times***



I've been theorizing on this.

For most people, their emotions move in cycles. It's not always so predictable as the image, but there's going up and going down.

During normal life, you do normal life stuff.

But I think the lows and highs call for different approaches.

**When things are great, get as much as you can out of it.** This always seems like it'll last forever while it's happening, but it never does. Double down, triple down. If business is ridiculously good lately, pour the time in to max out the current opportunities before they (likely) fade away. Bank cash, etc.

The same goes for creativity. When you're having a highly creative day, run it out as much as you can. Resist the temptation to say, "Well, that's enough" and just go chill out or whatever. Max inspired time is rare. Milk that cow when you're max inspired.

**During bad times, re-double on fundamentals and try to avoid doing anything stupid.** Fundamentals keeps you from hitting the vicious downward spiral. Super basic stuff. Decent sleep schedule, eat well, drink enough water, time in nature, time socializing with people you like. If things start getting hairy, really knuckle down on the most very basic stuff. That helps fight off the downward spiral.

And then try not to do anything stupid. Don't spend a lot of money or make irreversible decisions if your judgment is faulty. Just keep gearing down on fundamentals.

When you're low creatively, this is a great time to do tedious consolidation. Clean the kitchen, clean all your gear up, clean up the files on your computer, get taxes and licenses or whatever filed and renewed, deal with bureaucracy and nonsense—this will free up your time to milk the cow more when you're max creative.

Okay, this is my new plan. Normal life during normal times. Milk the cow as much as possible when things are unusually great. Fundamentals and trying to avoid being stupid when things are bad.

## ***If You Have Too Many Goals You're Not Doing, Read This***

So, your goal—anyone's goal—is basically to get the most success you can as quickly as you can in the way most suitable/enjoyable to you, right?

I ask because that's pretty obvious, you probably want to do that. But you've got a lot of goals, and some of them are quite big and significant.

What I've found is trying to change 10 things at once—and have big changes that'll take years to complete—is not the the best way to get the most success as quickly as possible in the most suitable/enjoyable way.

Rather, I look to have a 70% success rate on a weekly basis. So I set some goals each week and try to execute on them. If I succeed above 70% (do everything perfectly) I add something new or increase difficulty the next week.

If I fall short—only doing 1 out of 5 that week—I scale back to what's most important, and try to succeed at 70% the next week.

I've found trying to improve 30 things at once is a great formula for falling off a cliff and getting nothing done.

70% success rate. So pick, like, 2-5 things. Set some objectives with them. Try to succeed at 3-4 out of 5 in a given week. If you're succeeding higher than that, increase difficulty or add more, especially once your goals are stable/habitual/almost-automatic.

If you're below that, SUBTRACT SOME STUFF AND FOCUS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT.

I don't know, maybe other people work differently, but I think 70% is a good number. It means you're always stretching and not too comfortable, but you're also succeeding more often than failing. It's been the best rough

spot I've seen for a mix of constant improvement and motivation. 100% success rate can lead to complacency or setting goals too low, get too far below 50% and it hoses motivation.

So yeah. You want to wake up at a set time, do a morning routine, etc? Aim for 70%. If you're hitting a 0% success rate, then scale back to something easier.

Paradoxically, it actually takes more discipline to do this, to really drill down and focus on something and actually do it, instead of having a big list of stuff you're not actually doing.

Try it out. Aim for 70%. Adjust accordingly after you play with it, everyone's ideal targets will probably be a little different.

## ***The Seven Questions That Bust a Productivity Slump***

For productivity slumps, focus on re-gearing the fundamentals. It's almost always the following things -

How's your eating?

Are you drinking enough water?

How's your sleep schedule?

Are you deciding the most important things to do for the next day before going to sleep?

Are you reviewing and working on the most important things right away the next day?

Also think about if you've gotten fitness time, full relaxation/disengagement, and time in nature lately.

If you do those seven things—eat well, drink water, sleep on schedule, plan tomorrow before sleeping, start on what's most important, exercise, fully



relax regularly, and get some time in nature—that almost guarantees busting out of a slump. If you're in a slump, you're almost certainly not doing one of those.

Review, change the ones that are out of line, and you'll break out—and feel great in the process.

## ***On Refining Diet***

I eat pretty well and take pretty good care of myself. But it's taken quite a while to get here—before 2006, I had a pretty standard American diet. Lots of pizza, junk food, fast food, liquor, soda, sweets, etc. I smoked cigarettes, cigars, sheesha, and other kinds of tobacco.

Since then I've refined my diet and I eat pretty well. I have more energy, feel better, look better, and God willing, I'll live a lot longer as a result. It's a gradual process though, and I'm still improving. There's a few things I use to do it:

First, I'm all about **incremental improvement**—I think trying to crash change your diet is unlikely to work unless you have immense amounts of willpower and self-discipline. If you do have these Herculean amounts of will and discipline, you know who you are and don't need my advice. If you're more mortal, then you'll want to pick one or two things to be refining in your diet at a time.

Second, there's two ways I quit food or habits I don't like—"**hard quitting**" (**cold turkey**) and "**soft quitting**" (**gradually reduce my consumption and eventually eliminate it**). I pick which of these routes to go based on how convenient it is to quit something outright and if there's any detox process. If there's detox (like there was with nicotine), I think it's better to just get it over with once instead of constantly feeling deprived as your body re-adjusts to its new biochemical levels. The most successful method for quitting smoking is cold turkey, isn't it? Something like 80% of successful attempts to quit smoking are cold turkey? I don't have the

statistics on hand, but that's the general idea. Quitting something like sugar, bad oils, or excess salt might be easier to do incrementally, since you need to replace the consumption with something else.

Which brings us to third point—I **actively introduce new good behaviors before and during the time I quit something**. Now, I don't know if the following is a good strategy, but it's what I did—when I started cutting down the sweets I ate, I increased my consumption of the kinds of salty foods I already ate: Chips, french fries, nuts, etc. Later I cut the salt content back. I don't know if that's a good habit, but it's worked okay for me. I also try to actively introduce fruits and vegetables before I quit something—it's hard to go from no fiber food that's highly processed to stimulate you immediately to fruits and vegetables. Fruit tastes bland compared to ice cream. So I introduce fruits and vegetables first, get comfortable with them, then increase my consumption of them as I decrease or eliminate bad consumption.

Fourth: I **learn along but am very skeptical of new scientific findings until cross-tested and largely verified**. I've spent *a lot* of time learning about nutrition and biochemistry, and I'm starting to get a feel for what's right and what's wrong. Take alcohol, for instance—bad science studies conclude that drinking a glass of wine a day is good for your health. *Nonsense*. Liquor wrecks havoc on your body, really really bad. Any small heart gains are offset by the hell liquor wrecks on your kidneys, liver, and blood. Besides, there's lots of ways to make your heart work, like just doing 15 minutes of quick exercise. So why is this "wine is good for you" utter nonsense spread? Because wine is drunk by successful people, in prosperous countries, and by people who also appreciate life and relax. But that doesn't mean the wine itself is good for you—the health gains from being successful, living somewhere prosperous, and taking time to relax and enjoy life. If you did a study taking two groups of very similar people who don't drink and introduced wine to half of them, they'd almost certainly be less healthy and have lower longevity as a result. Studies that survey consumption and health miss the point—wine *correlates* with long life, but it almost certainly doesn't make you live longer.

Refining my diet:

In late 2005/early 2006, I started actively introducing good foods into my diet: Plain oatmeal, tuna, and eggs were the big three.

2006 I made the big push—I "hard quit" (cold turkey, never consume again) alcohol, soda, all recreational drugs, cigarettes, caffeine, and pork.

My diet was pretty stable at that point for a while. I made gradual refinements around the edges—introducing more beans, eggs, chicken, and good protein. I started eating oatmeal almost every single morning, and quit eating sugary breakfast cereal.

In 2008 I'd done some research, and it seems like caffeine is good for metabolism. I re-introduced caffeine to my diet, primarily coffee, tea, and energy drinks. Eventually I became kind of skeptical of what they put in energy drinks and dropped those. I quit cigars in 2008, making sheesha the last kind of tobacco I smoked (and rarely, at that).

In 2009 I stopped eating mammals—I think eating lower on the food chain is smarter. Honestly, it's not for ethical reasons—I'd go deer hunting or bear hunting, I'd just sell or donate the meat afterwards. As much as I loved steak, I figure there's no health reason to ever eat steak instead of chicken or fish. Lower caloric density, more protein, easier on digestion. Some people point out the joy/taste aspect—for me, I don't care so much about that. If as a result of no tobacco, liquor, drugs, pork, beef, sugar I get less short term pleasure, but I live 2-5 years of good quality life, that's such an incredibly easy trade. Two years is 700+ days of seeing sunrises and sunsets, reading books, writing, doing science, following the new technology (I think some marvelously amazing technology is coming out going forwards), giving advice to my kids, playing with my grandkids, playing with my great-grandkids, making new friends, staying in touch with old friends... who would trade those experiences for some consumption? And I mean, c'mon, a good piece of chicken is pretty delicious. We're not talking about suffering here, we're talking about replacing a good steak with a good piece of chicken. There's so many ways to prepare chicken, turkey, tuna, salmon, swordfish, crab—I eat pretty well.

I quit sheesha in 2009 as well, meaning no tobacco at all. This is following a couple conversations with friends—sure, it's cleaner and probably the best way to smoke tobacco, but it's still not so great.

In 2010 I've been making incremental improvements. I've been soft quitting sweets and sugary drinks. This is harder than it sounds, people offer you cookies to be kind, or I order an iced tea in a foreign country and they serve one with sugar. It's tricky. I'm comfortable drinking 100% fruit and vegetable juice, which has some of the bad effects of a sugar rush followed by crash, but at least offers some nutrients in return. So that's an option.

I've been trying to find the best way to eat good quick food quickly. One of the defining things of good food to put in your body is that it has reasonably high fiber, but high fiber foods usually take a while to prepare which is a hassle. I prefer tuna on brown rice, but that's not always readily available when traveling. I'm okay with tuna on brown bread, but I'll always prefer rice to bread if it's an option.

## ***Universally Useful Skills***

### **What are some universally useful skills?**

Almost anything important you'd want to do, you'll need to work with other people to some extent. Getting better at communicating is always good. Writing, negotiating, speaking. Conflict resolution. Whatever you'd call what's described in "How to Win Friends and Influence People." Some basic understanding of sales. All useful.

Next up, I'd like to put forward the idea that ***numbers are either your friend or your enemy, and there is no middle ground***. Being able to do basic arithmetic *fast* is underrated—it has a ton of value. It's easy to train up—before you get a bill or check from somewhere, try to figure out roughly in your head how much it should be. See if it matches the bill. This helps you get your mind around opportunities and costs pretty quickly and helps you check to make sure things aren't going wrong.

Probability and statistics have a *ton* of value in them. I learned by studying advanced baseball statistics and I enjoyed that, but there's probably other ways. Variance is super important to understand. Getting your mind around how random can be really, really random is important.

Being able to do percents, and percents of percents has a lot of value.

Basic financial accounting has a lot of value to anyone—it also helps you get your mind around numbers.

After that, ***execution and get-stuff-done skills*** are important. This could be individual stuff like building good habits, keeping a clean environment, and training yourself how to focus. Defining a scope and your goals/objectives with anything you're doing. Some of the basic formal or informal project management stuff helps.

Underrated in this category are things that you have to do a lot of—things like typing fast, knowing how to set the agenda for a meeting or phone call so you cover everything quickly, and how to handle email without it ruining your life.

***Health, obviously.*** Yeah, there's a ton of contradictions all the time, but it's still worth learning a little about your anatomy, the basic systems of your body, and how they wear out and fail over time (or don't, and keep working well). Nutrition. Exercise. Basic info about cardiovascular systems. Learn something about addictiveness—tolerance building, chemical addiction vs. psychological addiction, toxicity, etc.

I'd also encourage you to work towards ***clear thinking***—rationality in the vein that Eliezer Yudkowsky writes about at LessWrong is important. It's worth spending some time to learn about how language works and how your mind works.

That's just off the top of my head—I'm sure I missed a number of important ones.

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## ***ACTIONABLE: DEALING WITH SHIT***

"Persuade thyself that imperfection and inconvenience are the natural lot of mortals, and there will be no room for discontent, neither for despair."

—Tokugawa Ieyasu

### ***Conflict with an idiot manager? Your solution in two words: auctoritas and gravitas.***

On small-scale team and project management.

On a technical level, there are two books that are relevant: *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael Gerber and *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* by Lou Gerstner.

E-Myth is about how small organizations can handle what's going on, but how they grow up to be dysfunctional organizations without processes. Also, there's a funny (in a morbid sort of way) story about how a motivated first hire comes on, starts bringing order to the chaos, but then gets frustrated and abruptly quits one day because they can't handle the chaos and the fact that they're running the entire business and not compensated or treated well enough for doing so. That story, incidentally, reminds me a lot of you.

"Who Says Elephants..." is about Lou Gerstner turning around IBM. He took over IBM when it was a sinking ship and a massive bureaucratic mess and he turned it around. Good story.

But the problem isn't what organization skills or processes you need, unfortunately.

**The problem is that you don't have the relevant *auctoritas* or *gravitas*.**

Those were core Roman concepts, they're Latin words, let's dive into them.

"Auctoritas" translates *almost* to authority, but not quite. Wikipedia gives this nice definition: "The 19th-century classicist Theodor Mommsen describes the "force" of auctoritas as "more than advice and less than command, an advice which one may not safely ignore.""

Auctoritas, roughly, is official authority/power in a situation. It's a mandate to clean things up and make them better. Now, technically, someone with a lot of auctoritas might have no actual command over a situation. They might not have the ability to mete out punishments if something isn't done. But they are, broadly, seen as important people who *really* ought to be listened to. It's not command (Latin: "*imperium*"), but the next level down from it. The ability to give advice which people can't safely ignore.

Gravitas is something else. There's no word in English quite like it—in conversation, I actually use the word "gravitas" if someone needs more gravitas. "Gravity" comes close. Wikipedia: "Gravitas was one of the Roman virtues, along with pietas, dignitas and virtus. It may be translated variously as weight, seriousness, dignity, or importance, and connotes a certain substance or depth of personality."

They're related concepts. In my mind, I see "auctoritas" as somewhat external (being a police officer) and "gravitas" as somewhat internal (having exceptionally good judgment). Of course, regardless of how much you have of either, you need whoever you're communicating with to know it.



The company you're in? It seems like you don't have *auctoritas* or *gravitas* in their eyes.

That's a big problem. If people won't listen to you, you can't change things. Your manager sounds like a bonehead, and boneheads are afraid of giving authority over to competent people who will likely replace or obsolete them quickly if put in charge. It's a bad thing.

For you to turn things around, you need to get some *auctoritas* or *gravitas* with someone relevant. Done correctly, they're largely cyclical. You conduct with serious *gravitas*, you get a reputation for excellent, you get relevant *auctoritas* given to you, you conduct yourself well in that role and build more *gravitas*, etc, etc, etc.

But having an idiot with *imperium* (command) in control of the efforts makes all of this tricky. Very tricky.

The "[How to Get a Raise](#)" post Three Minute Plan is relevant -

*1.) Work hard on tangible stuff, document and claim credit for doing it, and notify people with what benefit the work provides. This sounds maybe stupidly obvious, but a lot of non-technical people don't understand the value in something. So, "Upgraded XYZ so our website loads faster, which is proven to make customers more likely to buy according to ZYX paper"—I know, what a waste of time, right? Wrong! It's going to make you a lot of money. Tell people what you did.*

*2.) Before you go to ask for more money, prepare a BATNA (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement)—if they say no, what will you do? You need to know this. Having other offers is obviously good. Savings are good. You don't even have to mention your BATNA, but you need a Plan B. Most people don't make one of these, so if their first attempt doesn't go swimmingly, they're in trouble.*

*3.) Go in and stress how much more you'd like to do going forwards. This is huge. Do not mention what you've done in the past, except in the context of how it proves how much more you can do going forwards. So go in and say,*

*"Hi boss, as I mentioned in all my various weekly reports, I've been learning new stuff and kicking massive ass. [that was step one] Recently I've picked up some new skills, and I've been getting recruited for a bunch of projects [step 2], but I really like working here. Actually, I think I can deliver even more value here, if I take on new responsibilities. I'd like to train a successor to gradually take over my current role, while I do ABC-stimulating-enjoyable-task that will bring the business new money. I don't even want to be compensated much more for it—I'm going to be bringing in lots more value/assets/sales/cash/whatever, but a moderately small raise is enough for me because I like working here so much." Then lay out what you're asking for.*

But swap out "get a raise" with "get additional auctoritas given to you" (or hell, get a raise while you're at it).

But it's still tough going. Broadly speaking, you need tangible proof of all your wins and you need to get to the point where you can give them an offer they can't refuse—you'll take the company to the next level if given the relevant authority, or you're out the door.

It takes a while to get there, but I know people who have done it successfully. It's tough and not necessarily worth doing it, though—much easier to seek out a place you already admire and join up there. But if you bargain hard and you're willing to handle the stress, you could gradually take over where you're at.

And realistically, that's what you're going to have to do. You're going to need to officially or unofficially take over. The person you're working for sounds like a moron beyond all hope. It's easy enough to deal with people who are malicious, petty, selfish, greedy, corrupt, or controlling. All those people's motivations can be understood and worked with (though not necessarily enjoyably). But idiots? You can't work with idiots. You can't appeal to their interest, because they're too stupid to have interests.

Sadly.

It reminds me of Carlo M. Cipolla's Fifth Corollary of Stupidity from "[The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity](#)":

**"A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit.** The result of the action of a perfect bandit... is purely and simply a transfer of wealth and/or welfare. After the action of a perfect bandit, the bandit has a plus on his account which plus is exactly equivalent to the minus he has caused to another person... When stupid people are at work, the story is totally different. Stupid people cause losses to other people with no counterpart of gains on their own account."

Your manager sounds stupid. Thus, doing things to destroy others without commensurate benefit to self. You can't bargain with people like that very effectively...

Anyways. I don't mean to paint a bleak picture. You *could* fix things where you're at. You start by building your *gravitas*—your individual prestige, self-discipline, knowledge, and self-control, and individual personal authority. You leverage that into getting a bit of relevant *auctoritas* if possible. But it's tricky when the person with *imperium* is a mean-spirited moron. Mean-spirited is workable though unpleasant, but morons aren't workable.

Regardless, build your personal *gravitas* which will serve you everywhere, and document everything effective you to leverage that into *auctoritas* eventually, and you might eventually need to have a showdown over who has *imperium*. You don't need *imperium* if you've got enough *gravitas*, but you definitely need to get a moron's *imperium* off your back.

## ***Designers: Get Paid By Being A Primadonna***

If you're a designer, or any creative professional, this might be the most important thing you read this year. My sensationalist headline aside, it's not about money or being a primadonna. It's about defining how you work,

working how you define, having an environment of trust and respect and creativity, and otherwise getting the life you want.

Sadly, many creatives just trust that that'll happen... and it doesn't. They get taken advantage of. This needs to stop.

Some things in here are scary. You don't need to do what's unnatural to you, you don't need to do anything in particular in here, and you don't need to rush yourself. Any given suggestion in here might increase your income by 20% and cut your "client stress" in half.

I'll tell you my story in a moment, so you can assess my credibility and see if this is workable advice. (It is.) I'll give you recommendations on where you can learn more. In exchange, I ask just one thing—if at any point while reading this, you think, "This is one of the most important things I've read this year"—then you immediately share it with as many people as you can that you think it would help.

I think that's fair, do you?

Are you nodding?

I think that's fair. If this is one of the most important things you read this year, you share it. I'll lay it all out. Brace yourself for the occasional foul language or hyper-controversial point, I'm trying to tone down my foul language but still struggle with it.

## **SEVEN REAL WORLD BUSINESS THINGS THAT ARE PROBABLY TRUE**

We need a strong foundation. To understand how to work with a business, you need to understand the goals and thinking of a typical businessman. I think the following seven things are true for 90%+ of the cases you'll deal with.

1.) Businesspeople want to increase profits, profit centers, and asset growth. They want to minimize costs and cost centers.

- 2.) Almost nobody knows what anything is "intrinsically" worth. [1]
- 3.) The more subjective the judgment is, the harder it is to assess its worth.
- 4.) Nobody gives you what you're "worth" in the abstract. They give you what you force them to give you. [2]
- 5.) Most designers aren't very good, according to Sturgeon's law [3]. You'll need to show you're good to be known as good.
- 6.) Additionally, most designers will let themselves get screwed, so the default inclination of many people is to try to screw you. And finally -
- 7.) Good soldiers don't get paid. [4]

[1] Only one definition of "worth" has stood the test of time. In Rome in the year 100 BC, Publius Syrus said, "Everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it."

[2] This one sounds harsh, but I believe it's true. We'll discuss how you can force things to work out correctly without being unfriendly or nasty or corrupting your artistic ability in a moment.

[3] Sturgeon's Law says, "Ninety percent of everything is crap." It's a cheeky way of saying, "The most excellent people at something produce far, far better work than the rest."

[4] This makes me sick to my stomach, by the way. Humanity is screwed up in some ways. There are a few rare people who spread the wealth around. Hannibal Barca types. Genghis Khan actually did this, and it was a big key to his success. But don't assume someone is hyper-virtuous unless they REPEATEDLY demonstrate it. Nobody gets trust that "they're good for it" until they TANGIBLY prove it. Talk is cheap.

**WHO? ME?**

I'm Sebastian. Nice to meet you.

I'm currently working on a \$700,000 contract and made \$38,500 in the last two weeks. After I make the money, I'm going to go blow it on my friends, charity, art, and stupid shit. I used to worship money, but don't any more. Actually, I've started tearing currency into pieces during speeches I give to make a point. (It's a powerful effect. I'll explain it tactically in a moment.)

Who am I? I'm a little crazy, to tell you the truth. You kind of have to be to get anything done in the world.

You can read about me more in my recent "[An Introduction to Cyclothymia](#)" or declaring war on the publishing industry in, "[An Open Letter to Simon and Schuster CEO Carolyn Reidy](#)."

I have, at various times in my life, been extremely talented and high-performing, and been a total mess. I have basically zero regard for non-virtuous authority, I have minimal respect for stupid traditions, and I don't believe that kissing the ass of someone you don't like and blindly hoping things are going to get better will result in a good life.

I'm never sure which details to share to people when I try to explain who I am. I dropped out of two high schools, left home at age 16, got a full ride scholarship at age 17 anyways, dropped out of university at 19, and wound up working and traveling through 60+ countries. I write a lot—you can find 600 articles and over 3 million words of writing on this blog alone. 95% of it is relatively mundane looks into time tracking, goal-setting, probability, money, finance, history and historical events, strategy, excerpts and reviews of nonfiction, and so on.

I like people, and during social periods I'll correspond with 100 new people per month, help them out at no cost, while simultaneously keeping up correspondence with 20 to 50 "core people" in my life. If this sounds like a lot, it isn't—Gandhi used to write 30 letters per day. I got the idea from him.

Between audio, paper, and digital, I go through about 150 books per year.

I achieve all this because I've cut all the bullshit out of my life, and do basically whatever I want each day. I don't surf the net, my entertainment is reading, writing, and connecting with smart people. 95%+ of the time, I don't have a phone. If it's urgent, call the general I'm reporting to, or one of my captains and they'll know where I am. If you don't have any of their phone numbers, then I've got more important things to do than be interrupted immediately by your call. (Sorry.)

The lessons I'm presenting in a moment are a result of my personal experience and learnings, as well as a mentor who makes around \$200,000 per month and owns property in seven countries (he's 41 years old), a CEO friend running a \$20 million company in a developing country who had massive power struggles with his board (I was staying at his house when it was happening, and learned *a lot* from that), and from Judd Weiss. You can google Judd, he became a self-made millionaire at age 24 and is a pretty big deal in Los Angeles. I'm really honored I got to meet him, Judd straightened me out to how things really work. Presidential candidates and authors and all sorts of people regularly want to speak at Judd's mansion in Bel Air. Peter Schiff was there last week.

So, these are the people I've learned from. I'll also reference and recommend the books "Pitch Anything" by Oren Klaff, "Winning Through Intimidation" by Robert Ringer (swap "designer" in mentally for "broker" when he's talking about people screwing you, and the book works perfectly), and Donald Trump's "Think Big and Kick Ass in Business and Life" (obnoxious title, surprisingly excellent read).

I, of course, have my own crazy stories and will share some of them. A recent post I wrote mentioned paying a designer "peanuts" and a number of designer acquaintances were upset. That's understandable, but they were missing context—I offered 3x the going rate in the classified ads, the designer asked me for 3x more, but that's still relatively peanuts since he'd worked on top campaigns for things like Versace. But he was making 9x the classified-ad-quality rates. Anyways, I always feel bad when I offend people that I like callously, so I'm writing this post to make it up to you.

## **SOME GUIDELINES FOR GETTING WHAT YOU'RE WORTH (AND LIVING A HAPPIER LIFE IN THE PROCESS)**

### **Point #1: Primadonnas get paid...**

You can get paid by being extremely solid and not demanding anything if you're working with someone who has demonstrated that they're a big thinker, that they like to share wealth, that they always pay promptly, that they have massive integrity, that they have massive respect for you, who are extremely prompt, and who would rather die than be dishonored...

...and good luck finding someone like that by accident.

We should note that going extreme-primadonna is what you'd call a *high variance strategy*—meaning, it will produce huge wins or spectacular failures. It's not something to jump into.

But think about the designers you know, or any creative professionals. Is it the solid, law-abiding good citizens that get the massive wins? C'mon now, I'm on your side but we must be realists. Isn't it the semi-reckless, rebellious, demanding, slightly cocky and eccentric people that get paid the most, have the best social and sex lives, are most often courted and having people want them?

Now note—you don't need to go extreme primadonna, and I don't recommend it. We can, however, break down the elements of what's working for them, so you can deploy a select few of them in your own life to get better results.

### **Point #2: ...and good soldiers, by and large, do not get paid on time or in full.**

Let's face it. 90%+ of people would rather have the money in their own wallet than put it in yours.

They'll look to grind you, knock you down, they won't move you up if they feel your rates are too cheap, and will otherwise not look out for your



interest.

There's a certain naiveté among artists, that people will just look after you and take care of you. It simply isn't true.

I kept waiting for it to be true. But it isn't true.

Here, I'll explain why. I'm hiring a lot of people lately for that \$700,000 thing I've got going on. I'm teaching a colleague HR, how to evaluate people's personality and see if they'd be a fit, how to assess if they can be independent and develop their skills, their ambition levels (I want close to max ambition), and so on.

We reject a lot of people. I don't like doing it, but culture is fragile and delicate. The single bad apple ruins the whole barrel and becomes a net negative. And my colleague says something funny. Not "ha-ha funny", but "Jesus Christ Almighty, humanity is in bad shape" funny.

He says, "It feels good to be on the side rejecting people."

I don't think so. I hate it. I hate wasting people's time. It's all we've got and it's so precious.

But this is a kind, sweet, good guy. But he's been so beaten down that as soon as he gets a bit of power he starts to transform into a vampire. (I scolded him, and expressed that, *NO*, it does not feel good to reject people.)

That's the world. People, even good people, *like* to wield arbitrary power over others, and 90%+ of people in power aren't really qualified or virtuous to be there.

Read "Winning Through Intimidation" by Robert Ringer, or "Pitch Anything" by Oren Klaff if you don't believe me. These are entire books devoted to theme of dealing with power-craziness. I really truly people that the vast majority of people don't treat people who "soldier on" very well, but will pay you if you're both highly competent and highly demanding.

### **Point #3: You need to be good if you're demanding.**

Really good. Like, the top 10% of your craft at least, if not top 1%.

So, work on your craft.

The good news is, you're probably better than you think. Read Derek Sivers's "[Obvious to you. Amazing to others](#)" post for a shot of inspiration.

Also read about [The Dunning-Kruger Effect](#), which says that competent people consistently underestimate themselves. If you're thoughtful and work at your craft, you're probably already within spitting distance of being excellent or already there.

Okay, the philosophical part is basically complete. Primadonnas get paid for some reason which we'll explore, good soldiers do not (because most people become vampires when they get into power), but you do have to be good if you're going to be demanding (but you're probably better than you think you are).

### **Point #4: A strong code of conduct can achieve 90% of the good results without the stress.**

I'm comfortable doing battle with people. It's my makeup. Someone attacks me, I get up and get excited to fight. When someone escalates, I escalate more. Always. Never put me in charge of a nuclear arsenal.

But that might not be you, eh? In fact, it's not most people, which is why most people don't get what they're worth.

Well, okay, I've got something that gets most of the combat results. I'm going to bold this so you pay attention -

**Set hard rule principles, and start acting on principle instead of tactically. That's my biggest piece of advice for having a better life.**

I believe life works like this—most people don't think at all, and go by routine. This leads to life in a swamp. (No disrespect intended to people living in swamps.)

Of the people who do think, most people think tactically. They think, "What should I do?" This leads to slightly-better-than-swamp, but you're still frantic.

The next level up is thinking strategically. Very few people do this. This is saying, "What am I trying to accomplish?" instead of "What should I do?" Instead of latching on to any particular action, you keep the end goal in mind. This is surprisingly hard to do, and will lead you to a very healthy, happy, wealthy, engaged life if you do it—staying away from frantic tactics and being strategic, I mean.

There's an even higher level, though. This is acting *philosophically* instead of strategically. This acts, "What is right and wrong? What's worth living and dying for? What do I stand for? Who am I?"

Then acting in accordance with that.

If you read my last week of entries, I'm a man on fire. My output has been nuts. I've built an insane amount of wealth and been compensated for it.

Why? I largely abandoned strategy and have been acting on principle. My main principle? Everyone will value my time extremely highly, treat me very well, I'll deliver the highest level of service and ability that I can to them, they'll honor that and use it immediately, I'll be treated with extreme respect and gratitude, I'll be extremely grateful too, we'll buy gifts for each other, I won't accept any pay from someone that they don't willingly excitedly give (the first time I tore some money into pieces was after I won a bet, and a friend grudgingly gave me the money—I said I don't want it if you're not downright excited to pay me and interact with me, because money is bullshit and not worth worshipping or chasing, whereas doing cool and meaningful things with good people is worthwhile, etc).

I would like to make a generational impact on the world. This requires that everyone around me treat me very well, or get out of my life.

I communicate these points to people, and it's up to them if they want to work with me. Many will not be interested. This is good. Of the ones who are interested, we'll establish common guidelines and we'll live by those. I'll keep my word to you, or apologize deeply if I fall short. (I will fall short, because I'm human, but I'll lay it all out in getting there.)

And your word? You'll keep it to me, or it's a big deal if you don't.

As a designer (or any creative professional), you too can do this. It will get you 90% of the results of being a primadonna, cut your stress in half, and it's not hard to do.

Here's my code again for working with people—you could adopt it for yourself, if it's useful to you:

Everyone will value my time extremely highly, treat me very well, I'll deliver the highest level of service and ability that I can to them, they'll honor that and use it immediately, I'll be treated with extreme respect and gratitude, I'll be extremely grateful too, we'll buy gifts for each other, I won't accept any pay from someone that they don't willingly excitedly give.

**Point #5: Don't play games with game-players. Skip negotiation and contracts.**

I studied contract law at Boston University from an adjunct professor who had been a corporate lawyer and had worked for the IRS and other federal agencies. The dude gave me a very good education.

I've written dozens of contracts in my life. I have kind of an idle curiosity of contracts, and I've read a lot of random big company contracts for the heck of it. I've also had contracts broken down and explained to me by people like Judd, various mentors, and other people doing high stakes negotiations with companies like Ferrari, Boeing, Microsoft, and so on.

I've put a lot of time into learning contracts.

And here's what I can safely tell you—I don't know shit about contracts.

People will outright lie about the terms of a contract. I just had a contract presented to me that was instantly voidable. It said that in order for me to be able to execute the deal, I had to hit certain numbers with no equity, no debt, extreme growth, and beat the whole industry's profit margin.

It was impossible. And on the off chance I did it, I'd have received terrible terms anyways.

None of this was obvious. They're terms like, "Debt to free cash flow ratio is limited to..." and "Equity shall not be raised without the agreement of all shareholders" and "Profit margin shall exceed XX%."

Quick glance? It looks fine. Look closer—it's a crock of bullshit.

You can't win that game.

I can't win that game, and I actually know how to play it.

So I said, "This is a fucking insult. You must think I'm an idiot. You were wondering where the line with me was? You just found it. I quit."

And then I got \$30,000 instead of \$17,000 to keep me around. (I actually originally wanted \$50k, but I was ground down, and I just took it instead of fighting more, because I need to actually work instead of scheme and fight with schemers).

Pardon my rambling. The point? Unless it's totally impossible, reject multiple page-long contracts. Whoever wrote it knows better than you. Any simple deal can be written in one page. If it's under \$100,000 on a one-off job and there's no regulations in play, then there's no excuse for a bazillion pages.

So state that. "Sorry, I don't understand contracts. I only sign one page contracts that are very simple."

Maybe two pages. Maybe give a little. But this comes from being principled instead of chasing down any money. Do you really want to work with someone that is going to paper-fight you? Look, if someone thinks you're a star, they'll re-write their contract for you.

**Point #6: Likewise, use anti-negotiation. Don't play the negotiation game.**

Tell people how you work. I like this one -

"I will give you my price, and you will say yes or no. It will be fair. I don't like to negotiate, haggling is cheap and ruins art, and makes both parties uninspired and destroys trust. I will give you a very fair quote, and I will deliver extensively more value. You just say yes or no. 'No' won't hurt my feelings. Okay?"

Then quote a fair price. I hate the stupid negotiation game. What a waste of time. It builds no value. I'll discuss terms. I don't want to haggle over price. It's so... low level... it gets people uninspired... whenever anyone wants to work with me, I just pay what they're asking or more than they're asking. If they ask for more than I want to pay, I just say no and wish them well. If they want a whole lot and they're excellent, I see if it can be structured on performance or paid over time or otherwise play with the terms.

You can't work with everyone. If you're doing high end design, you can't compete with "customize a template a little for \$80." Don't even bother. You're going to explain your service quality, tell them that you'll give a quote, tell them the quote will be high but you'll deliver even more, and then do it.

**Point #7: Design work is a commodity. So don't do design work.**

Again, the hierarchy is something like,

Not thinking < Tactics < Strategy < Philosophy

Philosophical people get treated the best and paid the best and live the best lives.

The non-thinking designer says, "Yes, I'll color on the page for you for \$50."

The tactical designer says, "I'll find a good way to color the page for you."

The strategic designer says, "I'm going to understand your fundamental goals for this piece, and make this piece work hard for your goals." (Note: Being strategic is enough to get paid a lot and live well.)

The philosophical designer says, "The nature of art is art, and the nature of commerce is commerce... I can make a beautiful and amazing piece of art, that will serve all of your strategic and commercial goals, and will also be a timeless aesthetic. I can do this if you treat me with the highest levels of respect and dignity, give me the resources I ask very promptly, and so on. I am an eternal devotee of this craft, and I can fuse art and commerce into extreme practical beauty, *for you*, if you are enlightened enough to work with."

**If you haven't heard about how Paul Rand worked, you need to study him. Steve Jobs called him 'the greatest living designer' shortly before he passed away in 1996. He was philosophical and principled about design.**

I took many of the cues I got from him. He similarly said that he'd do a piece of work, he would not modify it after it was done, and the client would say yes or no, and pay him very well.

**Point #8: Do remember to be strategic, too.**

Understand the client's goals, and repeat the goals back to the client, and have the client write down their goals in their own form.

### **Point #9: Educate the client on how to work with you.**

Say something along the lines of, "I'm going to teach you how to work with a high level designer. I'm an artist, fundamentally, but also very practical about achieving your goals. To that end, you wouldn't want your artist to come in and demand that you change your business plan fundamentally. Likewise, no good designer can work with an executive who wants to change something just to assert himself. Saying, 'Put a panda in there!' destroys visual harmony and balance, and makes design look cheap. Yet, many executives who have not studied aesthetics and visuals do just that. ... You are hiring me and paying me a lot because I am an expert and very good at what I do. If you don't believe I'm very good at what I do, you shouldn't hire me. Once you do hire me, you'll trust me and my recommendations. I'll ask you for feedback in the areas it's necessary, but with a very high level professional, you can't just mess with their work randomly unless you've got a very good reason. I will understand your goals and make you look very good, and make everyone look very good, and be pleasant to work with—so long as you understand how to work with a skilled professional artist."

Likewise, try to explain when things can be changed and not. Over time, you'll see common problems happen, and all of them can be preempted. If clients are scope-creeping with you, add a "Scope creep" discussion before you start working together. It would sound something like this, "This is what's called a scope. I trust you know the term already? It just means 'the stuff we agreed to do.' It's very important that once we start working, the scope doesn't change. Oh, I can do a little tweak or fix an error. But many times a businessperson doesn't understand that changing the scope is akin to doubling or tripling the hassle of working together, and they still want things on time and at the previously lower-scope agreed rate. It might sound simple to also turn my logo into a t-shirt design, put it on some pens, and baseball cap, but I'm a professional and I don't like shoddy work. If you want me to adapt the design to other creative areas, I can do that but we need to discuss separately after we're mostly complete with the current scope of work."

### **Point #10: Be an asset-builder and profit center.**



Again, everyone hates and wants to lower costs. People want to increase assets and profits.

You should explain and back up how design can lead to increased sales, increased repeat purchases, give you more trust and authority, and so on. Phrase in terms of the client's main interest, but add others.

Repeatedly stress that they're making an *investment* into a durable and long-lasting *asset*. Costs get cut, assets get invested in.

**Point #11: Pre-frame and set expectations correctly. Then, deliver on expectations.**

Let's say you're making an abstract design. I actually just had my current project get an abstract design from the high level guy, and my whole staff hated it because it was just some abstract lines. Instead, they wanted some kitschy friendly nonsense.

The fact is, *almost all* of the world's most enduring top designs are somewhat abstract. LOLcats might be friendly and cute and fun, and give an instant dopamine jolt, but the novelty wears off. If your logo was a LOLcat five years ago, it would have been awesome. Now, it would look tired and petty.

I'm not a designer. You probably know more about this stuff than me. Lots of negative space? Harmony of colors? Good fonts and typesetting?

Yeah. I don't know a damn thing about that, and neither do the vast majority of your clients. So, educate them beforehand.

Say, "Look, do you want a high end design? High end designs often look strange and ugly when you first see them, but then they grow on you and become enduring. Here, I'll show you some examples." Show some examples. "I'm going to give you a design like that, if you want it, and probably no one at the company will like it at first. That's to be expected. If you want a panda or a LOLcat in it, people will like it immediately, but the

novelty will wear off fast and it'll be kitschy. I'm happy to go high end, if that's what you want, so long as you understand that high end designs are intended to occupy mindscape and stand out as really unique, not to be an instant dopamine jolt the first time you see them."

**Point #11: Emphasize paying for production, not headcount.**

Everyone in the world is stupid, so they refuse to pay you more even if you do 10x the quality/quantity of work of a normal person at your job. Lately, I've gotten a lot of abuse from short-sighted and ignorant people for insisting I only pay above market rates in any long term working relationship.

Idiots!

I don't give two fucks about headcount. I want *production*. In fact, I dislike headcount! I don't want stupid, ineffective people in the room at a bargain. The space they're taking up could be better used by having a lamp there.

See, I've got a market researcher that I'm paying somewhere around 5x the market rate of what I could get for a normal person. She's a top, award-winning scholar. She produces 5x what a normal person would per week, and it's higher quality. To quote Teddy KGB, "Give that [wo]man her fucking money!"

Most people are idiots, and don't think like this. You need to try to get them to. It's hard. Maybe just find people who are smarter to work for. Everyone tries to get headcount cheaply, instead of paying for production.

Emphasize that you've been a top producer everywhere, and that they're paying for *your production*, not for being in the room. In fact, they shouldn't want you in the room unless you're 10x better than average and 100x better than a hack. You evaluate yourself more highly than that, and it's dangerous to have people around who evaluate themselves super highly if you don't think the same.

**Point #12: Use some multiplication and bullshit charts. I don't know why this works and I think it's ridiculous (it doesn't work on me), but it does work.**

Whoever is paying you needs to justify it. Make some charts and graphs about how an expensive logo correlates with making a lot of money or high share price.

Or something. I don't know. I think this is stupid, but it seems to help with most people so they feel like they're getting something tangible.

**Point #13: Study and use anchoring.**

This would be its own thousands-of-words post. Just throw out a lot of huge numbers.

Here's an example. I just had a designer write me asking for advice. He's out of work. He said he wanted to make \$2k per month. "Only" \$2k he said. You know what? It's going to be a fight for him to get it. I don't know how good he is, but even if he's a star he's going to struggle.

Here's what I recommended to him. First, read everything [Charlie Hoehn wrote on his blog](#), and especially key in on the free work approach. It works well. Charlie hasn't written a lot, and it's all pretty good, so just read it all.

Second, if you want \$2k per month, after you've done some free work successfully, then say, "My end goal is be making \$15,000 to \$18,000 per month, and to deliver far beyond that... but I love working here, I'll take whatever you offer. Seriously—I won't negotiate, whatever you say, I'm going to say yes. So, say whatever number you think would be a *fantastic* deal for you, and I'll say yes, because I love it here. Take a few minutes to think about it if you want, I'll go get an ice cream and come back."

Give them 10 minutes. If they think you're good at all, you'll get more than \$2k doing it that way. If you ask for \$2k, maybe you'll get \$2k, or maybe not.

**Point #14: Stop fearing prosperity. Go after the big deals, and seize the big opportunities. Just do what you normally do, it might be enough.**

This deserves its own post. I kept not seizing big opportunities in the past because I was afraid. I've since said I'm only going to work on seven-figure stuff, which is about \$3000 per day. (Actually, I want to make closer to \$7000 per day, so I can sponsor lots of art, and build statues and bridges, and orphanages, and things like that.)

Now, you can't get there working on small stuff. I'd like to be seven-figure plus, or at least huge amounts of fun and interesting meaningful stuff if I'm not generating \$3k per day. But anyways, I need to overthrow entire multi-million dollar markets to get there, which is what I'm now starting to do. It's surprisingly not hard, though I should remind you that I've put *immense* amounts of work and study in for years and years to get here. Magical thinking isn't enough—you have to be good, and work on big things.

Oh, as a side note, thinking that money is bullshit helps a lot. It's just money, y'know? I'm offering to fly friends out to work with me, I tell them to think about a \$10,000 idea on the plane flight. We'll see how it works out, maybe I'm crazy and will be bankrupt in six months, but my math and logic *seem* to work out okay. Anyways, stop being intimidated by money and go after big stuff. Money is bullshit and having money doesn't make a person special. Actually, lots of people with money are assholes, and besides, if they aren't going to help you and aren't on your side and aren't going to pay you reasonably, then what the fuck are they worth to you? Nothing, right? So go for big stuff, and be flippant and demanding and philosophical about it, cuz why not?

**Point \$15: If you don't like money, spread it around.**

I'm giving out money like candy lately [5], and it seems to be working. I'm tearing it up, I'm taking people out, I'm flying them around, and otherwise running my fortunes into the ground.

[5] *In pre-response to hundreds of stupid emails—"No."*

I have a friend whose goal is "to become financially independent"—actually, I have lots of friends like that.

You know what? It's bogus. Expenses increase with income. You'll always be trapped if you're a slave to that stuff. I've helped hundreds or even thousands of people in my life. Before I went on my crazy spree lately, I called a bunch of them up and said, "Hey, I'm about to go totally fucking nuts, and I'll be dead broke in six months if it doesn't work. If I called you up and said, 'Hey! I'm broke and need 10 grand! I need a contract to bang out a quick 10 grand for you! I'll do an awesome job!', then, would you find work for me?"

Everyone said yes. Okay, talk is cheap, but I'm feeling pretty safe. That's before even getting to all the people who would lend me \$500 (enough to live for a month in a developing country) and not care when they're ever paid back (there's at least a few dozen people I'd just give \$500 to and say 'whatever, don't worry about it' ... and I've done favors for a hell of a lot of people) ... anyways, I realized I'm never going to have to worry about money, so I can stop playing scared.

Imagine that! I can just do cool shit. So I'm throwing money around, and more seems to be coming in. It's interesting, isn't it?

Maybe this is bad advice. Maybe wait until *after* you get the first big contract to do it. But if you're freaking out about some contract you're going to get, just remember, "I can always spend this on a bunch of cool stuff, and my friends, and do some charity, and sponsor some cool art" and then do it. It's just money, y'know? It's nothing to make a big deal out of.

**Point #16: Keep it social instead of transactional if you can. Make it very clear that you're going to deliver inspired, divinely created work, and it's not up for negotiation.**

There's a great scene in the mob movie "Donnie Brasco."

Al Pacino and Johnny Depp exchange envelopes for Christmas. In each one? 10 crisp new \$100 bills.

Pacino says to Depp, "That's very generous of you, thank you."

Now, what *really* happened? They give each other white envelopes. There's no change in net worth.

Or, did they just demonstrate loyalty to each other? Hmm... clearly something happened there.

Transactional relationships are all numbers. It's fine to be transactional if you're in a one-off deal. Plenty of times I'm negotiating to buy a stupid hat or pair of aviator sunglasses or something and the person selling it wants to mark it up 20x, and I want to haggle them down to only 5x.

The haggling doesn't matter in this case, since we'll never see each other again.

But if we're going to interact more? Then haggling is a no-go: it destroys goodwill, since *it makes things transactional*.

Do *everything* you can to stay relational/social instead of market/transactional. When you present your work, add in touches like chocolate or little gifts. Whenever I pay someone for a creative work, I try to wrap the cash in a nice letter addressed to them, and include fine chocolate with it.

People remember the chocolate more than the cash.

Money is so... bourgeois, I guess? I think I finally get it. Money's important, it's a great way to move things around. You've got some wheat over here, you turn it into money so you can get some camels over there. Neat.

But it's not to be worshipped. Actually put the time in to *really take care of* your clients. Chocolate, little cards, things like that. Be a trusted advisor. Over deliver on work. Incidentally, you'll get paid way more, but you need to deliver *even more than that*.

It's a very virtuous cycle. When you start seriously looking out for your clients in every way, for real, great things happen. Transactional relationships are about paying as little as you can for as much as you can get. Social relationships are about giving as much as you can and far exceeding what you get.

Transactional relationships suck. Social relationships are good.

**Point #17: Use numbers that are hard to divide, like \$777 or 22%. You want to put a mental break in so it can't get transactional.**

It's just a tactic that works. Ask for pay that's a symbolic number. 8888 RMB in China, or 777 euros, or \$1776 USD. NEVER make a bonus a multiplier of your pay or the pay of whoever works for you, if you can avoid it. They'll say, "Oh, that's 40 hours of work as a bonus?" Everyone multiplies and divides instinctually. Pick symbolic numbers and it helps fight off the transactional vibe.

**Point #18: There need to be consequences for breaking their word. Immediately escalate and fight. Also show that that's costing them and setting them back.**

My newest contract has a downright insane clause in it. After a short grace period, there's a 10% penalty per week for late payment. \$1000 on time, \$1100 one week late, \$1210 two weeks late, etc, etc.

This is because this client had demonstrated multiple times that they don't care about paying me on time, and didn't care about making me whole. When a client is late in paying you, they need to be reminded that that's not acceptable. You should tell them, "Look, I don't take this personally, but it is a breach of trust and makes it hard to work together. I always assume you're as good as your word, and I just trust you. I'm comfortable running RIGHT on the line if payment is due from you, because I know you're as good as your word. So if I'm on the line and even laying out my own cash on supplies for you, and you pay me late, we've got big problems."

It's up to you whether you want to ask for a token gesture or more cash, whether you want to contractually require it, or just throw a fit if someone screws up in paying you. But you can't let it go unnoticed. When I've paid people late in the past (even a few days late), I always included a 10% bonus as an apology, and to make myself feel the pain. You need to make people feel pain when they don't pay you on time, or otherwise break their word.

**Point #19: Beware the ratchet. Ratcheting is fundamentally evil, however it's frequently deployed from the vampire playbook because it is effective.**

I passionately hate ratcheters. Ratcheting is when you promise ABC in exchange for XYZ. I deliver XYZ to you. You fail to deliver ABC. I then ask, "Hey, what the hell? You promised ABC." Then if you're going to be a ratcheting bastard, you say, "Oh... well, I'll give you ABC after you do 123 additionally for me."

Oh no you won't! You'll be reminded of our original deal, and pay RIGHT NOW, and YOU WILL NOT RATCHET ANYTHING. There will be no extra terms, no extra guarantees, and no new negotiation. You're also burning goodwill for every minute that passes going forwards, you're not going to get what you want, and if you want to work together going forwards, you'll remedy this immediately (in fact, you should inflict some pain on yourself so you're not tempted to try this bullshit again).

Ratcheting is evil, but very effective. It's holding the carrot in front of the donkey, and never giving it to the donkey.

Don't be a donkey. Don't let people ratchet you.

**Point #20: Stop soldiering after they break their word, until it's remedied ++.**

"Don't you trust me?"



"Oh I trust you, however, you've just failed to deliver. That destroys a good working relationship, and you need to remedy it."

When they (inevitably) complain about their problems and make excuses, "I understand. I also have problems. I could tell you that I've bought supplies for this project on a credit card and need to pay it off, I could tell you I need to feed my kids, I could tell you my father has leukemia and I'm paying for his treatment, but I won't, because it's irrelevant to you. I'm a professional and you're a professional. That means you pay on time, or you talk about in advance if there's going to be a problem and we work something out. I'm very happy to try to work something out if you let me know far in advance that there's going to be problems."

### **Points 21 and Onwards -**

This is getting too long already and I just flew an acquaintance out from America to put a deal together with him, I've got to go meet him at the Starbucks by the metro station. Here's a bunch more points, you can ask if any of them aren't clear -

\*If you can, make them pay for you to present to them, unless you love them, in which case do it for free and make it very valuable. Don't go halfway and do something uninspired.

\*Tell people to give you all kinds of tools and nonsense. You'll get paid more, and you'll get what you want. Demand food, drinks, coffee, music, assistants, whatever. This is absurd, but you'll actually get paid more. I'm being ridiculously demanding lately and people are giving me what I want.

\*Ask, "What's the goal?" Is it to be friendly, or to get your needs met?

\*Write things down. Take them out and show them. People are funny about remembering what's most convenient for them. Paper doesn't lie.

\*Have *them* write it down, if possible.

\*Before you ask someone to sign on to a deal, ask them, "What do you expect to get out of working with me?" Have them say all of it, and write it all down. Professionalism, something beautiful, a great experience, a total professional, the exact design specs, etc, etc, etc. Print it. Show it to them and say you've delivered on all of it when they (inevitably) drag ass.

\*Use analogies and jokes.

\*"This is a fucking clown show."

\*Explain the asset value.

\*Do a tradeoff table.

\*Draw things on paper that are smart, leave them around when you're gone.

\*If they keep jerking you around, give ultimatums without giving ultimatums. If you have a go-between, "Look, he didn't say explicitly he'd quit if he wasn't made whole, but he was pretty upset..."

## **CONCLUSION—GET PHILOSOPHICAL, DON'T TAKE CRAP, GET WHAT YOU WANT**

Start living a principled life and things get easier and more enjoyable.

The rabbit hole goes pretty deep—I keep learning and re-learning and re-re-learning this stuff.

I do think artists deserve to be treated better, but that means demanding to be treated better.

If you take only one thing from this piece, it's to lay down a set of principles about what your time, your art, and your life are worth, and to explain them in advance. In the process, educate people about how best to work with you, and immediately call someone out when they start disrespecting your principles and your life.

We're on the planet for a brief blink of an eye, a single warm teardrop on the cold oceans of eternity. It's too short to share that time with people who won't respect yours, and yet eternally long when shared with people doing beautiful and creative things. Godspeed.

## ***Arguing With Peasants Shows a Lack of Self-Discipline***

I updated [My Time/Habit/Life Tracking](#) about three weeks ago. In it, I added a "Challenges" section:

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### **CHALLENGES:**

*Did I start the day in my planner instead of online?*

*Did I only check email when I was ready to write back immediately?*

*Did I clear my active to do list before any screwing around?*

*Did I avoid getting into arguments with idiots online?*

*Did I only check a site once, then done with it?*

*Did I prioritize books/good learning instead of mindless surfing?*

*Did I avoid sugary food?*

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Note one in particular—"Did I avoid getting into arguments with idiots online?"

This can be hard to do if you're on a discussion site. But now, I think I've got a rule that covers when to discuss and get into it with people, and when not to.

**The rule—no arguing with peasants.**

What's a peasant? Or, to be more precise, who is a peasant?

A peasant is someone who is: 1.) Ignorant, 2.) Tribal, 3.) Has no power, 4.) has a strong opinion, and 5.) refuses to consider alternative opinions or change their mind.

Let's go through all of those.

1.) Ignorant: The argument the person is making isn't cohesive or otherwise makes no sense.

2.) Tribal: It's a tribal argument, so people from their tribe will support it even though there's holes in it.

3.) Has no power: So on the off chance you changed their mind, it wouldn't matter, because the person is just unemployed or a student. It's worth it to take a try to change the mind of someone who can make a difference even if it's unlikely, but on the off chance you finally convince a peasant—nothing happens.

4.) Has a strong opinion: Weakly held stupid opinions can be changed, and you're doing a nice thing. Once you get into a combination of ignorant, tribal, powerless, strongly opinionated people, you're not going to be able to change them.

5.) Refuses to consider alternative points or change their mind: If a person will even consider an argument and reply coherently, you can have a discussion with them. If someone thinks through each point, they might still disagree with you at the end, but maybe you two can learn a little of each's point of view. Peasants ain't learning anything.

The thing is—you *want* to reply to peasant comments. You think, this person is so stupid and making such glaring errors, I could just point them out to him! But no, this is not the case. Time spent arguing with a peasant shows a severe lack of self-discipline.

Here's an example of a peasant comment I almost replied to:

*I once saw a slogan on a T-shirt that said "Labor creates all wealth". I would suggest that if your first reaction to that slogan is anywhere in the range from "that's an exaggeration, but yeah, it's mostly true" to "HELL YEAH!", then you are (should be?) a socialist.*

*The various flavors of socialism, from anarcho-syndicalism to Marxism to Scandinavian-style social democracy, represent different answers to the question of "OK, granted that labor creates the wealth, but in a country with one iron mine, five steel plants, and twenty steel-consuming factories, who decides how resources get distributed from the mines to the steel plants to the factories?"*

That was on Hacker News. Does it fit our definition?

- 1.) Ignorant: Yup. No understanding of economics or how wealth is created at all.
- 2.) Tribal: Definitely.
- 3.) Has no power: I seriously doubt this guy is doing anything of value.
- 4.) Has a strong opinion: "HELL YEAH!"
- 5.) Refuses to consider alternative points or change their mind: This one is more of a guess—but I'm thinking so.

There's obvious debunking that could be done—the first one I'd point out (almost did) is that trade creates wealth, if for no other reason than people like variety. So if you have 10 potatoes and I have 10 carrots, and we swap some of them, we're both wealthier. I could point out accountants and bookkeepers create wealth by helping people make decisions. I could point out that two managers given the exact same team and resources will produce wildly different results.

If you said, "All of that is labor," then you've got a tautology. If everything a human does including bookkeeping, trading, buying, and selling is all labor, then sure, all wealth is created by labor... but that includes all the moving around of private property by merchants, financiers, classical bankers, and so on—which probably isn't what our friend here meant.

I caught myself. I was about to argue with someone who saw a T-shirt that said "All wealth is created by labor" and he really liked the T-shirt. He holds this view strongly, and he probably doesn't even understand his own argument. That's before even getting into the fixed pie fallacy in the second part of that comment—the idea that there's some fixed amount of wealth (mines, foundries, plants, factories) and that the product of them gets distributed. No, no, no. You don't like the way things are, build a new factory. Yes, you really can. [Yeah you—you could be an entrepreneur](#). Start small. You could do it.

But I won't even try to convince him, because that'd be arguing with a peasant. He's not going to change his mind. I'm not going to learn anything insightful by arguing with him except maybe getting a pulse on how people who don't think very much think. But I could do that by just doing some google searches and reading blogs in that space.

I'd take the time to make careful and articulate arguments to someone who could make policy, or someone who runs a company, or someone who has any influence or whose decisions and thought processes matter. But even if not, if a person made halfway intelligent arguments, or their arguments were based on individual ideas rather than tribal ideas, or if they seemed genuinely willing to change their mind, or if their position wasn't strongly emotionally held—yeah, if any of those were true, I'd try.

But in this case? No way. It'd be undisciplined of me to argue with this guy. So I didn't! I stopped myself and read a good book for a little while before doing some work and going to bed. Hurrah for self-discipline! And no arguing with peasants if you're disciplined! "HELL YEAH!"

## ***How to Get a Raise***

My "[How to Get a Raise](#)" comment became one of the most popular I've ever made at Hacker News—obviously this topic is important to people. I'll repeat the short version here, and I'll also give more detailed analysis for people who like to know why things work.

The question was, "Why do business analysts and project managers get higher salaries than programmers?"

My reply:

**Because programmers don't ask for more money often enough.**

Seriously.

**Here's the three minute version of doing it:**

1.) Work hard on tangible stuff, document and claim credit for doing it, and notify people with what benefit the work provides. This sounds maybe stupidly obvious, but a lot of non-technical people don't understand the value in something. So, "Upgraded XYZ so our website loads faster, which is proven to make customers more likely to buy according to ZYX paper"—I know, what a waste of time, right? Wrong! It's going to make you a lot of money. Tell people what you did.

2.) Before you go to ask for more money, prepare a BATNA (Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement)—if they say no, what will you do? You need to know this. Having other offers is obviously good. Savings are good. You don't even have to mention your BATNA, but you need a Plan B. Most people don't make one of these, so if their first attempt doesn't go swimmingly, they're in trouble.

3.) Go in and stress how much more you'd like to do going forwards. This is huge. Do not mention what you've done in the past, except in the context of how it proves how much more you can do going forwards. So go in and say, "Hi boss, as I mentioned in all my various weekly reports, I've been learning new stuff and kicking massive ass. [that was step one] Recently I've picked up some new skills, and I've been getting recruited for a bunch of projects [step 2], but I really like working here. Actually, I think I can deliver even more value here, if I take on new responsibilities. I'd like to train a successor to gradually take over my current role, while I do ABC-stimulating-enjoyable-task that will bring the business new money. I don't

even want to be compensated much more for it—I'm going to be bringing in lots more value/assets/sales/cash/whatever, but a moderately small raise is enough for me because I like working here so much." Then lay out what you're asking for.

Business people learn how to do this. You're leaving lots of money on the table and not getting a chance to work on cooler stuff that you'd like to do if you don't do this.

- 1.) Regularly update with the work you completed, and the benefit it provides.
- 2.) Decide what you want, and what you'll do as Plan B if your current company won't give it to you.
- 3.) Go stress that you'd be able to produce more value if you transition your role to a more highly paid and enjoyable one.

Be friendly and complimentary. Whenever possible, try not to ask for more money for the same role from the same company—people hate price increases, so it's better to expand your role to something that's also more enjoyable and produces more in their eyes. If you want a raise for doing the same exact work, it's probably good to start looking outside the current company as well for other offers.

### **Analysis:**

The above is probably all you need to get started. But for people who like to know the details behind everything...

Before we continue—I've pretty much never been salaried, so my views here are from being taught by successful people and reading lots. I generally look to back up my friends and help them when I can, and I've helped around a half dozen people do this process with a 100% success rate. I'll email a couple people I know to ask if they're cool with me sharing the back-and-forth of revising letters they've written to their bosses. That'll be up in the next couple days if I can get permission.



Alright, analysis –

**\*If you don't ask for money periodically, you're likely to be underpaid.**

This isn't always true—some people try to build no-negotiation cultures that pay just based on seniority and skill. Steve Newcomb of Powerset (acquired by Microsoft for \$100 million) described in his excellent hiring/staffing article "[Cult Creation](#)" that he doesn't negotiate salary—he has a set scale, so he doesn't have to engage in adversarial behavior with people coming onboard. Joel Spolsky [follows a similar process](#).

But these are the exceptions to the rule—in most places, you'll receive more money if you ask for it. You'll receive more desirable assignments if you ask for them. And so on. If you absolutely can't and won't negotiate, you'd do well to look for a talented employer with a favorable set salary scale. If you're not at one, then you should ask for more money fairly often to get what you're worth. But, just asking without preparation isn't the way to go, hence the rest of the advice, such as...

**\*Work on tangible stuff, document and claim credit:** Steve Friedl's "[So you want to be a consultant...?](#)" is one of the definitive essays on that consulting. He describes how it's crucial to give whoever is paying you "the warm fuzzy feeling." Part of that is letting them know what you're working on -

*Anybody who's dealt with a lawyer has gotten a bill that said*

*Review documents ..... 40 hours*

*...and for most of us, the lack of visibility into work done is maddening.*

*Your customers should never think this about you: list your work in detail to say what you did, and — if necessary — who asked you to do it. Which of these two line item details would you rather see from somebody you're paying real money to?*

*Consultant #1—Email system administration ... 3.25 hours.*

*Consultant #2—Investigated email system problems per Martin; found that MS Exchange required a patch to deal with the latest Outlook IMAP queries; re-optimized all the message stores and tested with several email clients. ... 3.25 hours.*

*Your detail should ring a strong bell with the customer, with him nodding his head on every item while he reviews your invoice. This gets you paid sooner and gives the customer The Warm Fuzzy Feeling™.*

This is true when you're salaried as well, because...

**\*Non-technical people frequently don't know the value of technical things.** The more specialized the world gets, the less we understand roles outside of our own. There's a very, very good chance you understand your job much more than your boss, especially if he's never done your exact kind of work.

If you're doing work your boss doesn't understand, how does he know how well you're producing?

Answer: He doesn't. Unless you tell him. The person who describes what they're doing and why it matters regularly will seem much, much more productive than the person who doesn't.

**\*Benefits are necessary:** It's key to translate the benefit of what you're working on into something your boss/employers value. Every savvy businessperson loves revenues and hates costs. If you're a cost, they want to reduce your work. If you're bringing in revenues, they want to expand your work.

It's really that simple. Okay, let's say your job is to sort schedules for rotations of personnel and machinery somewhere. *You're a cost to the business and they'd prefer to reduce the people doing that role any way possible.*

On the other hand, if you can translate your work to revenues, then they love you and want more of you.

So you're going to report in with what you're accomplishing. Think creatively about how you can stress the revenue and profit potential of what you're doing. Something like, "I made some tweaks to our rotations this week, because it's proven we produce more product and with lower defect rate by this new kind of rotation... this should save costs, lead to higher quality, and a better reputation for us... also it makes our particular plant look really good."

See that last one? That's big. Don't just stress benefits to the company—also show how you're making the people you work with look good. Everyone wants to look good. If you're making people look good, that bodes well for you.

Don't just mention the work by itself. "Did maintenance on a machine." Instead, describe the maintenance, and then add a benefit—"Did XYZ specific maintenance, which should lead to a longer life and higher output from the machine. That should save costs and increase production, as well as keeping operators safe and happy, and making us all look good."

**\*Recap on reports:** It's up to you to figure out how you can tactfully put together reports that stress the good things going on. If you're a manager, you probably already know the general channels. If you're not, you should still be reporting in to your boss(es) with what you're accomplishing. As in Friedl's example above, give specific detail. But then go a step further—how can you describe the task you did in a way that benefits the end goal of the company and makes the people around you look good? If at all possible, tie it into more revenues somehow. You really want to be a profit center rather than a cost center. Profit centers get expanded. Cost centers get cut.

**\*BATNA:** Have I stressed enough that you should read many books on negotiation? I feel like I write that in any article on business. But again—go read 3-4 books on negotiation. Really, it might be one of the best things to ever happen to you. BATNA—Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement—will be thoroughly covered in one of them.

And still, most people who've read books on negotiation forget to do this. You need a fallback plan. You need to know what you're going to do if this doesn't work. BATNA—a backup plan—removes desperation. It also gives you a benchmark for how good an offer is. If you get offered an increase in pay of 30%, but a significant increase in hours and boring travel, is that worth taking? Well, that depends on your BATNA. You can't answer that question without knowing what your other options are. Figure out your backup plan and other options before entering into any negotiation.

**\*Stress how much you'd like to do going forwards.** Some years back, I'd built a logistics/distribution system with a guy I knew and got along with. I'm going to keep the details vague here, but he was responsible for finance at the company (note: you're *always* responsible for finance in any business you own, always, no matter what). The hard initial work was done, we'd hit profitably and were growing at a good clip, and the business didn't take that much time to run besides time we put into expansion. The lady at the warehouse we had was super good and handled most of the hard stuff, and we paid well.

Long story made very short, when I was out in Dubai for a while and not paying close attention, my partner had some serious financial trouble hit and stole quite a bit of money from the company.

I was crushed. I called up my friend [Judd Weiss](#) (I've mentioned him before), and asked, "Dude, what the hell's going on here? How could he do this? I've been so good to him, we've been through hell together, and now this..."

And Judd explained to me that you've got to be really, really careful about what your value is going forwards. I said, "So, it's a 'what have you done for me lately' kind of world, huh?"

Judd says, "Sebby, no. It's not a 'what have you done for me lately' kind of world. It's a 'what are you going to do for me going forwards' kind of world."

That's not to say people are bad people... we humans just have a funny way of rationalizing our actions.

Generally speaking, don't expect loyalty or pay or compensation for things you did in the past. You get loyalty and pay and compensation for things you're going to do going forwards.

I know the idealists are gritting their teeth and cursing. I'm not saying this is *good*. I'm just saying it's the way things are.

There's exceptions. I pride myself on fanatic, near unreasonable amounts of loyalty to people who do right by me. But the more time passes, the more I realize that much of the world doesn't work like that.

When you go in to ask for more money, stress what you can do going forwards, not what you did in the past. Which brings us to our next point -

**\*Don't mention what you've done in the past—people hate that.** It makes people feel guilty and makes you sound entitled. They might agree to what you're asking, but you've killed the warm fuzzy feeling.

Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, said something along the lines of, "You work two weeks, you get paid on Friday, and then we're even."

Take that attitude too—you get hired or contracted for a specific thing, you get your pay for that, and you're even. Even when someone really should "owe you one" for something you did, you'll still get much more goodwill by saying, "Nah, you don't owe me anything, it's really a pleasure working together."

Stress what you're going to do going forwards, not what you did in the past. If you just did something *monumental* for the company or your boss and you want to ask for something, ask for it right away. So if you saved the company \$200 million, then you might say, "Hey, I'm really happy and honored that I was able to do that, that was really cool... boss, I was wondering if we have any bonuses that are available for people who do

such massive savings? That'd be cool and I think would help inspire others to innovate and invent for the company."

Note that even then, you're stressing the future benefits to paying you—it could inspire others to do the same.

**\*Make it easy:** If you want more money, make it very easy for whoever to say yes. If you're salaried, a big question would be who would replace your current role? You can say, "I'd like to train a successor to gradually take over my current role," or you can mention someone who is already ready and is appropriately in line for a promotion, or you could stress taking additional responsibilities in addition to maintaining the current role. But as with anything, the easier you can make it, the more likely it is to work.

**\*"I think I can deliver even more value here, if I take on new responsibilities."** Ideally be more specific than that, but that's the gist of it. Stress how giving you more money creates more money somewhere for the company. If you're in a role currently far away from revenues, it's up to you to be creative in justifying how giving you more money produces more money. People want to cut costs. People want to expand profits. Much better to position yourself the latter if at all possible.

**\*A note of clarification**—"I don't even want to be compensated much more for it—I'm going to be bringing in lots more value/assets/sales/cash/whatever, but a moderately small raise is enough for me because I like working here so much."—you can actually ask for a lot of money after that. Say modest raise, then ask for whatever crazy amount you want to. You can also ask for non-monetary things.

**\*Be friendly and complimentary.** Specifically, not adversarial or demanding if you can help it. People want to help and work with people they like. Be likable if possible.

**\*If you want a raise for doing the same exact work, it's probably good to start looking outside the current company as well for other offers.**

A mentor of mine is Projects Director at one of the most profitable architectural firms in the Middle East. He came from *nothing*, dropped out of middle school, and was working on construction as a teenager. Eventually by being somewhat bold when the foreman didn't show up for a while, he was able to take a foreman's position.

He explained this to me: "They were never going to promote me above foreman. They saw me as just another laborer, thinking I should feel really lucky just to be a foreman. So I had to apply to another company to be a site manager. I worked hard and had a good reputation, so I got the job. But then, you see, they'd never see me as better than a site manager. To them, I was just a foreman and I should feel really lucky that I've got this job that I do..."

He followed that plan to rising through the ranks by changing companies. In his case, he did it by moving to what the next booming place would be—working in China, the Asian Tiger economies, other places as they variously had construction/expansion booms.

Sometimes you have to go elsewhere to get paid.

## ***CLOSING***

### ***Don't know what you're doing with your life?***

**I don't know what I'm doing with my life, can you advise something?**

Well, perhaps I can.

**How did you spend your formative years?**

Well, my path is kind of a crazy one that goes all over the place. I left home at 16 and just scrapped and struggled and survived for a while, eventually wound up going to university, then dropped out to take up entrepreneurship, struggled mightily at it for a year or two before breaking through, and then it's been a mix of highs and lows since then. Not anything resembling a normal path.

**Did you know what you wanted to do or had a plan in place already?**

Nope, I barely figured out my calling in the last year or two. All I knew before that was what I *didn't* want, which is what normal people have. I looked at the normal person's life and was horrified, and wanted nothing to do with it.

What I *did* want, though, I didn't know... I mean, the non-mainstream path isn't so well-illuminated. There's not so much advice on how to walk it.



**I know the old adage is to follow your passions but how do you turn that into a means of sustenance?**

I think following your passions is overrated to some extent. I mean, yes, follow your passions, but it's not a magical solution to all problems. There's this general advice that, "Follow your passions and things work out" and I'm just not sure it's true. Yes, follow your passions, but also do other things right.

**Okay. So here's my thoughts.**

When I was younger, I knew I didn't want a normal life, but I didn't know what I did want.

I thought about it, and I decided I'd start building skills, resources, experiences, and mobility. I figured that I'd eventually figure out what I wanted, and then older me would be happy that younger me got cash and skills and resources and contacts.

There's not so much detail in your email for me to give precise advice, but I think all of the following are useful to more or less extent:

- Starting to study and develop your own ethical system
- Making good friends, advisors, and mentors who are strong and decent people
- Learning universally useful skills
- A few credentials
- Putting money in the bank
- Getting your credit up
- Studying history to learn what's possible
- Establishing good habits that'll carry you through life
- Becoming very fit and healthy
- Learning how to think

... and so on.

So here are some things I'd recommend, in no particular order:

- Get the book *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa. This is one of my favorite books, and it should help you develop some of your ethical system and learn about how to channel raw potential. It's also a really good and fun read.
- Read the sequences on LessWrong—Go to <http://www.lesswrong.com>, click sequences, read almost all of them. These will teach you how to think better.
- Go to Wikipedia once a week, and put in a historical leader or era of history, and start reading. I like Sengoku Japan, and think Hideyoshi Toyotomi and Ieyasu Tokugawa are good people to study. I like Rome and Britain too. Renaissance Italy is good. The founding of America is good. Shah Jahan, Saladin, the Prophet Muhammad, all good. Zhuge Liang and Sun Tzu, good. The Meiji Restoration in Japan. The Teutonic Knights, founding of Prussia, and how it became a warlike country. Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington. John Rockefeller, Cosimo Medici, Lorenzo Medici, Meyer Rothschild, all good to study. There's lots more, too. Don't get overwhelmed by this list, just occasionally plug a name or era into Wikipedia, and start learning. You don't know what's possible unless you study history. Also, I mostly gave you statesmen and businessmen, there's lots of people from other fields worth learning about too (though you probably shouldn't emulate "pure artists"—people who do art in addition to other things, like Thomas Jefferson, tend to do well. But pure artists often have miserably bad lives, so you don't want to start by emulating pure artists... it's not worth it)

- If you're taking general university courses, take accounting. It's really useful, but it's too boring to self-study. It's probably the course most suited to the current university system of all of them. Take accounting.
- Start learning general social skills. I recommend you read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—but don't read it cover to cover. Instead, read one chapter per week, and then practice the ideas from it. That's what I did, and I saw massive increases from that.
- Learn how to negotiate. Read 4-5 books on negotiation. I think *Critical Conversations* is probably the best one to start with. Get comfortable haggling, but realize that good negotiation *far* transcends haggling.
- Oh, here's a pragmatic note. You're American, yes? Okay, do you have a credit score? If not, here's the easiest way to get one. Go to your bank, put a small amount of money in a certificate of deposit, and get a secured loan against it that pays off automatically. Basically, the CD will pay you 2% interest or whatever, and the secured loan will cost 3% interest... so if you put \$1,000 into the CD, you lose \$10 to do this, but it massively increases your credit score (it's automatic payment of revolving credit, which is good for a few reasons—I won't get into the exact details, just trust me and do it). You can do it with as low as \$100 I reckon, I did it with a \$1000 and it was good. After a few months of this, you'll have an established credit history. I'd recommend you apply for the Amazon credit card, which gives a big discount on books, so you can get \$50 of free books or something. Then you get points which you can use for more free books later. Much later on, when you have higher spending, you'll probably want an AMEX gold card, but secured loan + Amazon credit card is probably enough for now. **Do this ASAP, I lost a lot of money once when I couldn't get a mortgage on a very good buy because I didn't have a credit history.** Trust me on this. By the time you start thinking of needing credit, it's too late to build it. Do it now.

- Never, ever, ever get into debt. Just don't do it. If you have debt (student loans, credit cars, etc), pay them off as soon as you have any cash at all. Debt is okay for a mortgage on a house, and that's about it. I think education debt is a bad idea personally, and that universities exploit young people who don't understand the value of money yet, but I'm in the minority on that. Maybe take university debt if you need to, but much better to save and pay cash if possible. If you take on debt, absolutely no buying toys or partying with your money until your debt is paid off. Debt *cripples* a man's ability to do what he wants with his life. Stay away from it at all costs.
- Train yourself to do arithmetic fast. There's more value in being able to add, subtract, divide, and do percents fast than in any other kind of math. Whenever you see numbers, try to do them in your head before using your calculator. It sucks, but it's very useful when you're doing a business deal or shopping and it'd be out of place to pull a calculator out. You really want to be able to do relatively large numbers fast in your head... when you see food for sale, divide the price by the weight to see the cost per unit of larger and small containers. Stuff like that. It sucks at first, but then it becomes second nature. This is very useful.
- You'll never go wrong learning programming or any other kind of technology.
- Learn to type fast. There's many, many games that teach you how to type fast—you can get ones that explicit train you how to type fast, or games where you input complex commands by typing. This will serve you well, you're going to spend lots of time typing in your life. You have to know how to touch-type without looking at your hands.
- Consider taking up a martial art. We had a thread on the site recently with feedback about which is best, you can refer to that. I still

recommend Krav Maga, but there's lots of good discussion and feedback on other arts.

- Go to the [bodybuilding.com forums](http://bodybuilding.com/forums), and start reading everything about nutrition and training. Don't bother with supplements for now, supplements don't do very much unless you've got the fundamentals down. Study the sections on losing fat and building muscle, so you understand how to do it. Gradually improve your physique. Every morning, I stretch and do sit-ups. I usually take a long walk, swim, hike, or lift weights 3-4 times per week, and sometimes every day. The time it takes to exercise is more than made up by needing to sleep less, having higher energy, and thinking more clearly.
- If you try to become excellent, normal people will judge you. Fuck them. Seriously, I said it and I meant it. Fuck 'em. I gradually quit drugs, drinking, tobacco, refined my diet, quit sugar, etc, etc.—every time I heard discouragement and crap from people. Fuck them. When I dropped out of high school, I heard discouragement and crap from people. When I dropped out of university to start building a company, I heard discouragement and crap. When I started traveling, I heard warnings and discouragement and crap. If you try to be excellent, you're going to constantly be hearing warnings and discouragement and crap. Listen a little if the person seems to know what they're talking about, but don't be discouraged. If you're trying to be expansive and they're telling you to be cautious, they're probably wrong and you're probably right. No one else says this, so I'm happy you emailed me—I'll say it. Fuck them. They're not bad people per se, but people do terrible things. I quit sugar or starting eating healthier and people want to drag you back down, "C'mon, have one slice of pizza... it's just a bite of cake... c'mon, you can have one drink..."—I still can't explain exactly why people do it, but I think it's to protect their own identity. As you become excellent, you show them what they *could* be, and it *hurts* them. Viscerally. So don't be too upset, your excellence hurts people to some extent. Expect constant discouragement from normal people. Eventually you'll build a social circle of high-

achieving, ambitious, expansive, cool, worldly, giving, encouraging, awesome people, and then you'll be successful and normal people will envy and hate you, but you won't care because you'll have transcended it. So yeah, discouragement and warnings and crap? We all get it on the road to success. Don't take it too seriously. Don't hate people for doing it, but don't give in either.

- I strongly recommend tracking your time for a while, to see where it goes.
- Start filling up your dead time. Bring a book or audio with you when you're running errands, commuting, things like that. Life is precious, either explicitly relax, or do something valuable. Staring off into space slack-jawed doesn't relax/recharge. So either take some breathes and really really relax in the dead time, or read, or listen to audio.
- Definitely start listening to audio if you don't yet. This is huge, you can pick up massive lessons in no addition time for it. Audiobooks, audio programs, podcasts. Your phone probably plays mp3s, if not, buy a phone that does or an iPod, buy a used one if you don't have much money. Used they're quite cheap. Listen while you walk, while you get groceries, while you wait in line, while you're commuting, things like that. That converts dead time into good time. I'd recommend Brian Tracy's "The Luck Factor"—probably my all-around favorite program for re-listening ability. Tony Robbins is good. There's some good podcasts out there—37Signals has some good podcasts. I listen to lots of audiobooks too. This one is big, start listening to audio if you don't.
- Take a few deep breathes once per day. The cost of this is trivially easy, and the results are very large compared to the energy cost. You'll feel more alert, awake, stronger, and healthier.

I guess I could go on forever, but this essay has already gotten quite long. Those are some general guidelines for what to do if you're not sure what you want yet. Start building skills, credentials, money, contacts. Study some history to see what's possible. Study rationality and learn how to think. Learn practical skills, like how to do arithmetic fast, type fast, get along with people, negotiate. Establish good habits.

These all prepare you to be really exceptional once you do have an excellent mission or goal at the end of the road. Once you find what you want to do, you'll be very happy you prepared.

## ***Guest Essay: Greatness and Humility***

A few days ago, I wrote an open letter to a good friend of mine—"[I Think Greatness is Something You Are, Not Something You Do](#)"—I said to him, I'm not a great man, just a normal man working on great things. Greatness is something you do, not something you are.

To give you some background, my friend Brendon is just one of the most amazingly good people in the world. He takes care of everyone around him, his mind, body, and spirit are sharp. He's a black belt, an excellent programmer, a philosopher, a [Shodan in Go](#) (actually, even stronger than that—he's a Shodan under the Asian rankings, so probably even higher in America), a hard worker, extremely loyal, a clear and free thinker, widely read and knowledgeable, and again—an amazingly good guy. I've learned *a lot* from him (notably, he taught me how to play Go, sysadmin Linux, understand basketball at a very high level, improve at martial arts, improve my fitness, and other good stuff—we'd usually go drink green tea and play Go at Samurai Restaurant in Boston, go fight in the park, talk philosophy out at nightclubs, do stuff like that).

He wrote back to me about greatness and humility. I think this is a really beautiful piece, so I asked him if I could gently edit it and put it up. He graciously agreed. It's long, but go ahead and just start it and give it whatever time you have—there's a lot of amazing insight in here.

## **Brendon on Greatness and Great Humility:**

Don't forget great humility.

Not the sniveling fish for comments type.

Not the aloof, ungrateful for appreciation and support type.

Not the proud, unable to accept a compliment as a gift type.

But the type that transcends words, because it cannot be said. Because there's no reason to say it. Because there is only one reason to hold true humility; only "nobody" is free to do "anything."

I defend my humility violently, rejecting immediately most praise I receive. That entire beautiful post you wrote, I can't stop the voice that counters, he is not describing you. He is describing the archetype of you in his mind, that only exists in the faintest inkling of your potential. What a blessing that you are able to hold such a high position in the life of such an awesome person. That is an excellent accomplishment to be proud of. What a gift to be able to give, to have the ability to call that figure to the mind of another person. I will strive to continue to make you feel that way, because I know it will strengthen you, deepen our trust, and bring about a better world.

But I don't believe it.

"I" have never done anything for me, the consciousness alive in this moment. You say I'm smart? Yes, the evidence I see implies that I am better able to perceive and categorize reality than 99.99% of humans. I do agree with that. But what does that belief buy me? To say "I am smart" implies that I identify with having mostly correct and good ideas. I have ideas that I believe. Maybe they are correct. If not, that will become apparent and I will change them. I will share my beliefs, and the reasons I believe them, and act on them, strongly or weakly to the best of my ability. I will strive to identify and discard false beliefs, and to continue to test and strengthen true ones. That is enough.



You say people like me? To be a compliment, that implies one of my goals is to be liked. It is very much not, and I have had to fight to make it so. Any feeling you may have that "no one dislikes me" is a scar of a long insecurity, of caution in insulting, offending, or otherwise upsetting people. It is a value I have chosen to move away from.

To accept myself as wise, talented, or able in any way can ONLY serve to make me defend that, which can ONLY hide the ways that I am not. I share this philosophically, in normal conversation I never would, and think the expression in anything but plain honesty is ugly... but truly I feel it, and would rather it stayed that way, with only me feeling it. I share it philosophically because you seem to appreciate my thoughts, and because writing helps me clarify my thoughts, and because I love wisdom and sharing wisdom and exposing my wisdom to as much light and scrutiny as possible. But truly, I could care less if you believe it, and would rather you don't, because wanting to APPEAR humble can only distract me from the actual task of BEING humble, seeing myself as I am, and striving to improve.

So, if you really want to compliment me, please, don't call me smart or wise or strong or talented or successful. I do appreciate your support and the gift of your words, but I cannot fully accept them, ever.

There are a few words I do accept though. I'm not sure actually why they are different. But they are. Humble, meant in this sense, is a virtue I strive to hold, and see as a key to my success and happiness. Curiosity. Honesty/Integrity. [Kiai](#). And, a new one, that in many ways is a gift from you... greatness. One I have always held, but maybe not nurtured or defended as violently as I should. The courage to ignore limitations and strive unafraid towards the outer reaches of what is possible. That's a good one.

I think what I like about these words is that they are a constant choice, rather than a goal. People look at a strong man and say, wow, how did he become so strong? That I could be so strong... to some degree, strong falls in both categories. Here I mean "powerful", "influential". Words are such

flimsy things. But you understand. If I say, "I am powerful," I must now defend my power. When power is not my aim, and when weakness is actually the path to victory, I will fail, because "I" am powerful.

The last thing I have to say, Sebastian, is no, you are not alone. My greatness will be different than yours, as will most. I detect a scent of frustration, of wishing me to break free. I do understand that I am in this piece more of a literary device, a subject to an excellent piece of writing inspired but not directed at me.

But make no mistake. I may make the playfully Japanese statement that my success is but a salute to your greatness. The language plays with the Japanese self abasement, which I enjoy, and the sentiment is true. But don't take that to mean that I see you as a mystical "great man", above what I myself can achieve.

To the contrary, in saluting your greatness, I salute all greatness. I cannot truly appreciate your glory without nurturing in myself the love of the same heights, and the courage it takes to reach them.

I may not be reaching out to the world at the moment, in the same way that you are. It is true. I have considered this, especially having someone I admire as much as yourself as an exemplar out building, creating tangible value for others, and actively working every day to achieve goals I consider admirable. But I don't think it's important to my goals right now. I dunno, maybe I'm wrong. I'm always open to thoughts on ways I can improve my life, and I hope I've convinced you that I'm usually willing to test my beliefs. But when I look at my life over the last weeks, even months and years, I honestly feel pretty good about my trajectory. Plenty of room for improvement, but very few major goals I don't feel like I'm working towards more and more each day.

I will take your post one step further. Greatness is not something that you are. Greatness is not something you do. Greatness is something you are doing. Greatness is the state of striving for the most that is possible, because it is the best thing a man can do with his life. You do not "become" great when you achieve or do a thing. Rather, I believe it is your greatness that

causes you to achieve and do a thing. I realize this is a bit full circle from your original statement, but I don't think I am disagreeing. But "great" is not like "smart," a passive ability that lies dormant or can be invoked to accomplish a goal. Rather, "great" is like "honest." A choice, one that seems like a bad idea on the surface, but is in fact one of the highest goods that is.

You are not alone my friend. You face your battles alone, but the war is being fought all around us. Consciousness is striving everywhere to break free of the rules that bind it. It is not important what you do or achieve. But that you do and achieve them is critical. That everything you do, you do with the entire weight of your consciousness behind it, that we might escape entropy and create timeless beauty, a singularity of order in an empty void... the intention is enough. Your accomplishments are merely the expression of this spirit, but the spirit itself is what propels us forward.

Your battle is yours. Mine is mine. But greatness draws greatness forward, and your outward, visible example will draw much to you. I face my days these days with more power and certainty and intention than I have ever known before. I have your words and example to thank for much of that. But it is not the source. The source is what drove me to find you in the first place, and to become the kind of man you would admire and benefit from. The source is what drives me to write these ideas to you that I feel to be true, despite the fact that I have never thought them or heard them before. And eventually, it will drive me to share them with the further world, and every passing day draws me closer to those ideas that I want to share.

But today, I turn my attention to the fundamentals. I will exert my will over my body. I will communicate my spirit and intentions through my actions. I will achieve what I desire to with my career, do it excellently and with great enjoyment.

And that is my greatness. Why? Because it is what I desire to be doing more than anything else. No further greatness exists.

That day that I may turn my greatness on the world, to create great works of truth and beauty and power... yes, that will be a good day for greatness everywhere, and I understand your longing for it, because I too long for it,

am drawn to it like a moth to a flame, draw from it and feed on it and serve it.

Perhaps I do not speak of how I want to be one of the greatest strategists of our age. Perhaps I should. That is a branding and marketing and communication consideration. As I read that, I don't think you actually care that you are recognized in history books. Rather, I see that as a statement of your abandonment of caution and limitations with regard to your potential. (Maybe this is me projecting... maybe it is important to you that you end in a history book. Maybe you should! It would certainly result in leading many men to greatness!) As it is, I don't think it will serve me well with most of my relationships to project an overwhelming "aura of greatness". I have, for all basic intents, solved the money problem. I can persist in this state, which lets me focus on my top priorities, and that is a good thing worthy of protection. An aura of personal greatness, outside of excellence in my work, is not a positive attribute of an "employee". If I told my boss that I intended to be the greatest philosopher and spiritualist of our generation, to found a spiritual practice dedicated to the art of perfecting humanhood... well, there's a 50% chance he would think that was awesome, and a 50% chance he would think I was nuts. If he thinks it's awesome, it doesn't really help my goals. If he thinks it's nuts, well...

Anyway, this is all the more reason why my connection to the great men in my life is so important and valued, and why I pour so much energy into preserving these relationships. Because, to a large degree, I am an iceberg underwater. But to a few, I get to express and communicate the entire enormity of what I feel, and see it reflected and magnified back to me. It's more important than air.

And you are not the only one gripped with terror at the enormity of it. Heh. I get nervous sending my thoughts to you, and I'm pretty convinced you don't have a shred of self righteous condescension or insecure breaking down of another person left in you. I can't even imagine the battle that publishing my first book is going to be.

But I have still yet to spring to life before my alarm, to get out of bed and start my day voluntarily. My ability to exert my will over my body, and

more, to convince my body and mind to cooperate with my conscious desires, still battles this battle. Is that a less noble battle than to become the greatest philosopher of our age? What is winning? Rule an empire, fist full of rice. Rule a life, fist full of ashes. Though you may master your every whim, accomplish your every goal, still all you can hope is to hold a place of honor on your children's mantle. That and the battle. To fight the battle in front of you, with every second you have.

Anything's possible. Namaste. My humble efforts at success are but a salute to the greatness of House Marshall. Your friend, Brendon.

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## ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***



Me?

I'm just a guy.

The first year of this site, I was writing about time tracking, history, travel, goal-setting, probability, reviewing nonfiction, and some interesting but fairly mundane stuff.

Then I woke up one day and realized that life doesn't just give you what you want—you have to go get it. I started being radically honest, radically transparent, and demanded to be treated well by everyone in my life, to the highest possible standard ...

... and it's amazing what a difference it makes.

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