Unstriving

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Successometer

Since I was a kid, I have built my self-esteem on a feeling of "forthcoming greatness". Whatever I actually accomplished I never paused to be proud of, and I never sweated the failures either. It was all just a stepping stone to something completely different and undeniably awesome, a "life mission" that will be important and meaningful and finally confer on me the title of #SuccessfulPerson. Until that moment came, I just needed to know that I was growing, progressing, improving, *optimizing*.

But upon entering my second gigasecond I'm starting to realize that this mindset makes little sense going forward, and was perhaps delusional in retrospect as well. But if I give up on rapid improvement and impending awesomeness, I don't know what can possibly replace them.

By all objective metrics, I'm as successful today as I could hope to be a decade ago. I'm happily married, well inside the richest 1% globally, have found my tribe and earned some respect in it. I should be able to relax and take some satisfaction in my current situation. And yet the thought that in 5 years my life will look exactly like it does today fills me with dread.

What's the problem? Jordan Peterson's fourth rule says: *compare yourself with who you were yesterday, not with who someone else is today*. I do *both*, and *both* are a problem.

I seek to be inspired by awesome people, but it is then inevitable that I compare myself to them. There could be many blogs that are worse than Putanumonit, but I don't have the time to read them. I read SlateStarCodex and the very best curated articles from elsewhere, and in comparison to those Putanumonit seems quite shabby. Offline too, one of the main perks of success is associating with successful people. Being involved in the rationality community in NYC means I hang out with Spencer Greenberg, who runs an Effective Altruism startup foundry while doing social science research and innovative meetups in his spare time — making me feel less than impressive.

But that's not even the main issue. I'm never jealous of other people's success for one, and I know that the people I look up to probably feel inadequate when they read about Elon Musk. It's the comparison to who I was yesterday that's more insidious.

Comparing myself to my old self means that my internal successometer measures only the derivative of my life's trajectory, not my actual situation. This means that as I improve and achieve things it becomes ever *harder* to maintain the pace of personal growth that makes me subjectively satisfied. The better I do the lower my successometer

goes, and more I am tempted to chase "new challenges" like quitting my job to start a company. I don't even have a great idea for a company, and there's certainly nothing wrong with my day job, it just feels like the only option to keep that part of my psyche satisfied.

The Buddha tells me to relinquish this drive and the illusion of forthcoming greatness. After all, there's no guarantee that this mental state is actually helping me succeed, rather than just making me restless and unhappy for no reason. But since right now it's still part of me, the threat that I may lose my drive to improve and optimize scares me out of trying to simply drop that sentiment. At the very least, I would have to replace it with another framework for making sense of my life, past and future.

But what could that be? Who would be against striving, optimization, and excellence?

Mediocrity

Survival of the Mediocre Mediocre is almost good enough to betray its own thesis. Venkatesh Rao defines mediocrity not as middling performance on some well-defined measure, but as a general resistance to well-defined measures and their siren calls of optimization. Instead of rewriting the essay, which you should read anyway, here's a low-effort summary of the differences between excellence and mediocrity.

Excellence	Mediocrity
Be the best at one thing	Be just adequate at everything
Check all the boxes	Only care about what gets you in trouble
If there's room to improve, do it	If there's room to slack off, do it
Give it all you can	Keep as much as possible in reserve
Play to win the (finite) game	Play to keep playing the (infinite) game

Excellence reaps rewards in measurable achievement and works best for winner-take-all well-defined competitions. It is also what earns public admiration because it is legible. An athlete excels at a particular sport gains many fans even if they are atrocious performers in every other area of life like relationships, personal finance, or being able to read.

Mediocrity, on the other hand, helps survive unending scrambles like evolution by natural selection. Rao gives the examples of avian dinosaurs, mediocre by the standards of both dinosaurs and modern birds, who survived the Cretaceous extinction by flapping around mediocrely. Mediocrity gives you optionality and the slack to adapt to new opportunities and challenges.

Unfortunately, mediocrity is never satisfying. Before the asteroid hit, the proto-birds couldn't know that it was coming, and couldn't feel superior to the majestic apex predator dinos. And after the cataclysm, they don't get any credit either — the mediocre

always appear merely lucky and opportunistic from the outside.

Rao treats mediocrity or excellence not as immutable qualities (although for a dinosaur, they are) but as *intentions*, stances one can adopt towards life. Before deciding which one to commit to, let's see which one has worked for me so far in life. Here's my excellent biography:

I got into the best high school in Israel and by age 15 was already taking college classes in math. At 16 I was a certified tennis instructor and started making money coaching. I competed in national math Olympiads. I joined the most selective non-combat unit in the Israeli military for my service and pursued a dual degree in math and physics. After the military, I joined a hedge fund and studied for the GMAT in parallel which got me into a top-20 business school in the US. Then I came to New York, got a job at a successful financial company, and started a successful blog.

So aspirational. Much excellence. Very optimizing. Wow! How can this be the life story of a mediocrity?

I was in a good high school and put so little effort in that I was almost expelled in 10th grade. My spare time was mostly spent playing soccer and card games with friends but a few of us managed to study and pass a special simplified university entrance exam. Despite taking a fraction of the regular university course-load, my grades were always close to the median and ultimately it took me 8 years to finish my BSc from the day I started. I was the worst tennis player by far at the instructors' academy and passed because a teacher took pity on me and gave me 15 minutes to demonstrate a left-handed serve. I placed 3rd in math Olympiads. I was dismissed from the most selective non-combat unit in the IDF for, I kid you not, "not striving for excellence". I completed my service in a down-to-earth technology division where my peers were all officers while I remained a sergeant. I joined perhaps the most pointless hedge fund in Israel, got no training, made no profit, and left shortly before the entire company shut down. I got rejected by 6 out of the 7 business schools I applied to. I came to NYC because I failed to secure a full-time offer after an internship in a big company Atlanta. My job is in financial regulatory software, a lucrative niche without fierce competition. In 2015 I was part of a client engagement so dysfunctional I had literally nothing to do for days on end — so I started Putanumonit. While Spencer Greenberg's blog is literally called <u>Optimize Everything</u>, mine merely encourages the reader to put a number on it. <u>It doesn't even have to be the best number</u>, whatever works is fine.

Which narrative is true? I think they both are. Reflecting on my life honestly, I have to conclude that a lot of my success is due to lucky circumstance. But also to a combination of mediocrity and excellence. The common motif of my life is <u>ambling along</u> without too much focus and determination, noticing an easy opportunity that I have the slack to exploit, and then summoning quality effort when it's needed: passing entrance exams, building the product that established me at my company, writing <u>the post that launched Putanumonit</u>.

This is what Rao calls "mediocre mediocrity": being just OK at being just OK. My life is mediocrity interspersed with occasional outright failures (the army unit, the job in Atlanta) and occasional bursts of excellence.

Unfortunately, even with this awareness, it's very difficult to commit to mediocrity. What if I just slack off for years and neither opportunity nor asteroid shows up? Do opportunities even happen to people after 30? Perhaps after a gigasecond of exploration, this should be time to exploit, to pick an important project and pursue excellence. But which project?

The Project

It's quite likely that the most important pursuit of the next decades of my life will be parenting. And ironically, I think that the *best* way to parent is to be a deeply mediocre parent.

I'm not the first person to notice that Something is Wrong with Kids These Days (TM) and to tie it to an almost pathological drive by parents to *optimize* childhood. Helicopter parenting. Snowplow parenting. Tiger moms. Academically tracked selective preschools and elementary schools where 6-year-olds chant "We are college bound!" in unison. **Something is wrong, really wrong**.

And it's not just wrong for the kids, it's wrong for the parents too. Parents are sacrificing every bit of slack they have to give their children one more unasked-for advantage, driving their child to a slightly more prestigious violin teacher who lives half an hour further away. And once a parent has sacrificed money, time, their social life and romantic life, it's is very hard to accept that your child is, merely a *not bad* violin player. He may grow up to play bass for the rock band at the local state college! Ma'am, why are you crying? Ma'am?

There's a lot of evidence that all this optimized child-rearing does not make children any more optimal, only miserable. Mediocre parenting isn't guaranteed to produce excellent children either, but it should at least be a lot more fun.

I don't know if I'm ready to commit to mediocrity wholeheartedly, to give up on striving and optimizing and feeling unsatisfied. But writing this self-therapeutic essay at least makes it seem less scary, a viable life strategy. And perhaps I never get to choose mediocrity, it chose me a long time ago.