Hard But Good

I'm getting old. It's not great in many areas, but there's one silver lining. I began to get to know more about myself and to understand and embrace my strengths and weaknesses.

One example is that I understand that I thrive on challenging projects. If a project is too easy, I struggle to stay focused because it lacks interest. I find satisfaction in solving analytical puzzles that demand my full attention, engaging my mind, body, and soul. I am drawn to projects that have not been attempted before or are considered difficult by many. I enjoy breaking down a large project into smaller pieces, transforming a vague question into a tractable problem, and methodically checking off items on a lengthy to-do list.

I hold a PhD from a top department in my field and currently work as a professional researcher and data scientist. However, my academic performance was poor until high school, and none of my teachers believed that I would attend a reputable college. It's not that I hated learning; I hated school. I thoroughly enjoyed learning, reading, and solving problems. The pressure to study solely for exams and grades did not motivate me. High school subjects became more enjoyable because they were more challenging. College courses were even more fun because they presented an even greater level of difficulty. My years in graduate school were the best of my life. They provided me with valuable skills, perspectives, and unforgettable experiences. It was during this time that I became dedicated to my physical training as well. I joined martial arts clubs and learned how to properly condition my mind and body. Additionally, I completed my first half marathon during this period. Running has become an integral part of my daily routine.

Simply doing challenging work alone, however, is not enough for me. I find greater motivation when I understand the significance of my work. I enjoy learning and occasionally conduct research out of pure curiosity. However, there are moments when I desire to engage in research that directly benefits people, especially those who are disadvantaged.

I come from a working-class family. My dad worked as a factory worker for 32 years, and unfortunately, my mom was left alone after my dad passed away from cancer. Financial stress was a constant part of my life. I was fortunate to receive both departmental and external fellowships during my graduate studies. However, due to my family background and the fact that my wife was unable to work during my early years of graduate studies due to visa restrictions, I had to take on side gigs to make ends meet in the Bay Area, one of the most expensive places in the United States.

Like many immigrants in this country, I hustled to obtain a better education, develop my skills, and secure a place for myself and my family. I will never forget that arduous journey. The past is also a part of who I am.

I want to do hard but good work for people struggling to do better for themselves and their loved ones. I want to help us find terms under which we can all work and live together. That's why I have become a social scientist and conduct both basic and applied research.

Doing hard but meaningful work encapsulates my motivation strategies. It reflects what fires me up when I wake up in the morning and the relentless passion that continues to guide my life and career decisions.