# The Most Precious Resource is Agency

Simon Sarris Jul 1

The world is a very malleable place.

When I read biographies, early lives leap out the most. Leonardo da Vinci was a studio apprentice to Verrocchio at 14. Walt Disney took on a number of jobs, chiefly delivering papers, from 11 years old. Vladimir Nabokov published his first book (a collection of poems) at 16, while still in school. Andrew Carnegie *finished* schooling at 12, and was 13 when he began his *second* job as a telegraph office boy, where he convinced his superiors to teach him

the telegraph machine itself. By 16 he was the family's mainstay of income.

Readers (and often biographers) tend to fixate around the celebrity itself, when people became famous or fortunate. But the early lives, long before success, contain something revealing. Before you grasp, you have to reach. How did they learn to reach?

In my examples the individuals were all *doing* from a young age, as opposed to merely schooling. And while they may not have wanted to work, the work was nonetheless something that both they and society felt was *useful:* something purposeful and appreciated. In a sense they had useful childhoods.

Do children today have useful childhoods?

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Agency is the capacity to act. More subtly: An individual's life can continue, with a certain inertia, that will lead them on to the next year or decade. Most people today more-or-less know what they are going to be doing for the first *twenty-or-more* years of their life—being in some kind of school (the "doing" is almost more "being told what to do"). Beyond that age there is of course the proverbial worker, in modern stories usually an office worker, who is often so inert that he becomes blindsided by a sudden yank of reality (that forces him out of his inertia, and in doing so the story begins).

Gaining agency is gaining the capacity to do something differently from, or in addition to, the events that simply happen to you. Most famous people go *off-script* early, usually in more than one way. Carnegie becoming a message boy is one opportunity, asking how to operate the telegraph is another. Da Vinci had plenty of small-time commissions, but he quit them in favor of offering his services to the Duke of Milan. And of course no one has to write a book, or start a company. But imagine instead if Carnegie or Da Vinci were compelled to stay in school for ten more years instead. What would have happened?

## Conservation of Agency

History happens only once, it never repeats. I find it striking just how early, and how varied, the avenues were that allowed one to pivot off-script, to do something differently than everyone else. For a 13 year old today, what is the equivalent of being a telegraph office boy, where he can learn technology while contributing? What about for a 16 year old? 21 year old? What is today's equivalent to being a studio apprentice of Verrocchio?

Where are the studios, anyway?

The world until recently was overflowing with onramps of opportunity, even for children, and we seem to do poorly at producing new ones. Modern complexity may have erased some avenues for agency (no boy can meaningfully learn the telegraph), but I suspect how we have oriented

the world, not technology, is the main problem. 13-year-old Steve Jobs called Bill Hewlett and received a summer job at HP, which would be unsurprising in Carnegie's time, was certainly surprising for 1968, and is obviously verboten today.

We seem to have a political (public) imagination so shallow that it cannot conceive of what to even *do* with children, especially smart children. We fail to properly respect them all the way through adolescence, so we have engineered them to be useless in the interim. We do not *need* children to work, that is abundantly clear, but by ensuring there is *nothing* for them to do we are also sure to destroy more onramps towards making meaningful contributions to the world.

Much of the fault for this lies in an attempt at systematizing skill and knowledge transfer so thoroughly that people begin to conceive of it as the task of school, rather than a normal consequence of work. Because of this shift, childhood contains the age where one can intuit very well how the world works while being prevented from acting upon it meaningfully. Instead of an adolescence full of rites of passage, where one attempts to master something and accept responsibility, we have made it full of waiting, and doing work—for school is work—that nearly everyone knows is fake. After a time all children spot this fakeness, and all honest educators note it:

Who could blame young adults for thinking that work is

fake and meaningless if we prescribe fake and meaningless work for the first two decades of their existence? By confining *meaningful* work to an adult-only activity, it is little wonder that adolescence is a period of great depression. It would be surprising if it was not. Even for smart children, education endlessly ushers them towards an often far and always abstract future, so far and abstract that some children seem to apprise the opposite of agency, they take on a learned helplessness, and downplay that the future is a reality at all.

(The tail end of this problem is precisely what the Thiel Fellowship illustrated, and went on to solve for as many people as it can.)

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This is not worship of employment, but a simpler observation: It seems that the more you ask of people, and the more you have them *do,* the more they are able to later do on their own. It is important to note that while we shouldn't allow children to be bobbin boys, no one would describe Steve Job's summer job at 13 as his exploitation. We should be thinking much harder about making sure children can make meaningful contributions to the world.

Seizing opportunity requires opportunity to exist at all. And I suspect the downplaying of agency in childhood not only creates fewer opportunities for great people, it must also create more marginal people. Ushering everyone into

an endless default script is disastrous when underlying conditions or assumptions change. Even when they don't, some people exit academia almost terrified to leave (to interact with the "real world"), a kind of Stockholm syndrome. How could we celebrate a higher learning that creates something so pathetic, the opposite of a readiness for life?

(Systematized youth is by far not the only culprit of a loss of agency. By attributing success and failures almost exclusively to outgroups, systems, society, etc., modern ideology seeks to actively downplay agency.)

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There is no reason the world must stay this way, the internet has already rebirthed some informal skill transfer that once existed. This constitutes a beautiful reawakening of meaningful work for anyone interested, and is one of the most significant changes from prior decades. For that matter there might be more tools than ever for clever parents to route around the destruction of a meaningful adolescence, but that does not make it less disquieting.

(There are good reasons that programming is now the typical industry for precocious children. It is something parents can still allow their children to do despite systematized schooling, and it is also one of the few industries with a permissionless culture. You don't have to ask anyone. You don't have to get a building permit or be a

professional. You can just create. This too is a big change from the pre-internet era, and incidentally the reason I became a programmer. I wanted to make things, school did not offer avenues to create, but Geocities did. In fact it was one of the only sources in my childhood simply saying, *you don't have to wait for professionals to tell you how to make stuff, you can just make stuff. Start typing*.)

The act of creation causes imagination, not the other way around. To understand this is to understand the ecology that fosters the unique. Agency is precious because the lucidities that purposeful work and responsibility bring are the real education. The secret of the world is that it is a very malleable place, we must be sure that people learn this, and never forget the order: Learning is naturally the consequence of doing.

This topic, like always, cannot be said to be finished, and must contain others at a distance.

Yours,

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*Heading image: The Education of Achilles by Eugène Delacroix, 1862*

*Final image: View of Florence, by Corot, 1840*

*The two painters became lifelong friends in 1847.*
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