The Power of the Marginal

June 2006(This essay is derived from talks at Usenix 2006 and  
Railsconf 2006.)A couple years ago my friend Trevor and I went to look at the Apple  
garage. As we stood there, he said that as a kid growing up in  
Saskatchewan he'd been amazed at the dedication Jobs and Wozniak  
must have had to work in a garage."Those guys must have been  
freezing!"That's one of California's hidden advantages: the mild climate means  
there's lots of marginal space. In cold places that margin gets  
trimmed off. There's a sharper line between outside and inside,  
and only projects that are officially sanctioned — by organizations,  
or parents, or wives, or at least by oneself — get proper indoor  
space. That raises the activation energy for new ideas. You can't  
just tinker. You have to justify.Some of Silicon Valley's most famous companies began in garages:  
Hewlett-Packard in 1938, Apple in 1976, Google in 1998. In Apple's  
case the garage story is a bit of an urban legend. Woz says all  
they did there was assemble some computers, and that he did all the  
actual design of the Apple I and Apple II in his apartment or his  
cube at HP.   
[1]  
This was apparently too marginal even for Apple's PR  
people.By conventional standards, Jobs and Wozniak were marginal people  
too. Obviously they were smart, but they can't have looked good  
on paper. They were at the time a pair of college dropouts with  
about three years of school between them, and hippies to boot.  
Their previous business experience consisted of making "blue boxes"  
to hack into the phone system, a business with the rare distinction  
of being both illegal and unprofitable.OutsidersNow a startup operating out of a garage in Silicon Valley would  
feel part of an exalted tradition, like the poet in his garret, or  
the painter who can't afford to heat his studio and thus has to  
wear a beret indoors. But in 1976 it didn't seem so cool. The  
world hadn't yet realized that starting a computer company was in  
the same category as being a writer or a painter. It hadn't been  
for long. Only in the preceding couple years had the dramatic fall  
in the cost of hardware allowed outsiders to compete.In 1976, everyone looked down on a company operating out of a garage,  
including the founders. One of the first things Jobs did when they  
got some money was to rent office space. He wanted Apple to seem  
like a real company.They already had something few real companies ever have: a fabulously well  
designed product. You'd think they'd have had more confidence.  
But I've talked to a lot of startup founders, and it's always this  
way. They've built something that's going to change the world, and  
they're worried about some nit like not having proper business  
cards.That's the paradox I want to explore: great new things often come  
from the margins, and yet the people who discover them are looked  
down on by everyone, including themselves.It's an old idea that new things come from the margins. I want to  
examine its internal structure. Why do great ideas come from the  
margins? What kind of ideas? And is there anything we can do to  
encourage the process?InsidersOne reason so many good ideas come from the margin is simply that  
there's so much of it. There have to be more outsiders than insiders,  
if insider means anything. If the number of outsiders is huge it  
will always seem as if a lot of ideas come from them, even if few  
do per capita. But I think there's more going on than this. There  
are real disadvantages to being an insider, and in some kinds of  
work they can outweigh the advantages.Imagine, for example, what would happen if the government decided  
to commission someone to write an official Great American Novel.  
First there'd be a huge ideological squabble over who to choose.  
Most of the best writers would be excluded for having offended one  
side or the other. Of the remainder, the smart ones would refuse  
such a job, leaving only a few with the wrong sort of ambition.  
The committee would choose one at the height of his career — that  
is, someone whose best work was behind him — and hand over the  
project with copious free advice about how the book should show in  
positive terms the strength and diversity of the American people,  
etc, etc.The unfortunate writer would then sit down to work with a huge  
weight of expectation on his shoulders. Not wanting to blow such  
a public commission, he'd play it safe. This book had better command  
respect, and the way to ensure that would be to make it a tragedy.  
Audiences have to be enticed to laugh, but if you kill people they  
feel obliged to take you seriously. As everyone knows, America  
plus tragedy equals the Civil War, so that's what it would have to  
be about. When finally  
completed twelve years later, the book would be a 900-page pastiche  
of existing popular novels — roughly Gone with the Wind plus  
Roots. But its bulk and celebrity would make it a bestseller  
for a few months, until blown out of the water by a talk-show host's  
autobiography. The book would be made into a movie and thereupon  
forgotten, except by the more waspish sort of reviewers, among whom  
it would be a byword for bogusness like Milli Vanilli or Battlefield  
Earth.Maybe I got a little carried away with this example. And yet is  
this not at each point the way such a project would play out? The  
government knows better than to get into the novel business, but  
in other fields where they have a natural monopoly, like nuclear  
waste dumps, aircraft carriers, and regime change, you'd find plenty  
of projects isomorphic to this one — and indeed, plenty that were  
less successful.This little thought experiment suggests a few of the disadvantages  
of insider projects: the selection of the wrong kind of people, the  
excessive scope, the inability to take risks, the need to seem  
serious, the weight of expectations, the power of vested interests,  
the undiscerning audience, and perhaps most dangerous, the tendency  
of such work to become a duty rather than a pleasure.TestsA world with outsiders and insiders implies some kind of test for  
distinguishing between them. And the trouble with most tests for  
selecting elites is that there are two ways to pass them: to be  
good at what they try to measure, and to be good at hacking the  
test itself.So the first question to ask about a field is how honest its tests  
are, because this tells you what it means to be an outsider. This  
tells you how much to trust your instincts when you disagree with  
authorities, whether it's worth going through the usual channels  
to become one yourself, and perhaps whether you want to work in  
this field at all.Tests are least hackable when there are consistent standards for  
quality, and the people running the test really care about its  
integrity. Admissions to PhD programs in the hard sciences are  
fairly honest, for example. The professors will get whoever they  
admit as their own grad students, so they try hard to choose well,  
and they have a fair amount of data to go on. Whereas undergraduate  
admissions seem to be much more hackable.One way to tell whether a field has consistent standards is the  
overlap between the leading practitioners and the people who teach  
the subject in universities. At one end of the scale you have  
fields like math and physics, where nearly all the teachers are  
among the best practitioners. In the middle are medicine, law,  
history, architecture, and computer science, where many are. At  
the bottom are business, literature, and the visual arts, where  
there's almost no overlap between the teachers and the leading  
practitioners. It's this end that gives rise to phrases like "those  
who can't do, teach."Incidentally, this scale might be helpful in deciding what to study  
in college. When I was in college the rule seemed to be that you  
should study whatever you were most interested in. But in retrospect  
you're probably better off studying something moderately interesting  
with someone who's good at it than something very interesting with  
someone who isn't. You often hear people say that you shouldn't  
major in business in college, but this is actually an instance of  
a more general rule: don't learn things from teachers who are bad  
at them.How much you should worry about being an outsider depends on the  
quality of the insiders. If you're an amateur mathematician and  
think you've solved a famous open problem, better go back and check.  
When I was in grad school, a friend in the math department had the  
job of replying to people who sent in proofs of Fermat's last theorem  
and so on, and it did not seem as if he saw it as a valuable source  
of tips — more like manning a mental health hotline. Whereas if  
the stuff you're writing seems different from what English professors  
are interested in, that's not necessarily a problem.Anti-TestsWhere the method of selecting the elite is thoroughly corrupt, most  
of the good people will be outsiders. In art, for example, the  
image of the poor, misunderstood genius is not just one possible  
image of a great artist: it's the standard image. I'm not  
saying it's correct, incidentally, but it is telling how well this  
image has stuck. You couldn't make a rap like that stick to math  
or medicine.   
[2]If it's corrupt enough, a test becomes an anti-test, filtering out  
the people it should select by making them to do things only the  
wrong people would do. Popularity in high school  
seems to be such a test. There are plenty of similar ones in the grownup  
world. For example, rising up through the hierarchy of the average  
big company demands an attention to politics few thoughtful people  
could spare.  
[3]  
Someone like Bill Gates can grow a company under  
him, but it's hard to imagine him having the patience to climb the  
corporate ladder at General Electric — or Microsoft, actually.It's kind of strange when you think about it, because lord-of-the-flies  
schools and bureaucratic companies are both the default. There are  
probably a lot of people who go from one to the other and never  
realize the whole world doesn't work this way.I think that's one reason big companies are so often blindsided by  
startups.   
People at big companies don't realize the extent to which  
they live in an environment that is one large, ongoing test for the  
wrong qualities.If you're an outsider, your best chances for beating insiders are  
obviously in fields where corrupt tests select a lame elite. But  
there's a catch: if the tests are corrupt, your victory won't be  
recognized, at least in your lifetime. You may feel you don't need  
that, but history suggests it's dangerous to work in fields with  
corrupt tests. You may beat the insiders, and yet not do as good  
work, on an absolute scale, as you would in a field that was more  
honest.Standards in art, for example, were almost as corrupt in the first  
half of the eighteenth century as they are today. This was the era  
of those fluffy idealized portraits of countesses with their lapdogs.  
Chardin   
decided to skip all that and paint ordinary things as he  
saw them. He's now considered the best of that period — and yet  
not the equal of Leonardo or Bellini or Memling, who all had the  
additional encouragement of honest standards.It can be worth participating in a corrupt contest, however, if  
it's followed by another that isn't corrupt. For example, it would  
be worth competing with a company that can spend more than you on  
marketing, as long as you can survive to the next round, when  
customers compare your actual products. Similarly, you shouldn't  
be discouraged by the comparatively corrupt test of college admissions,  
because it's followed immediately by less hackable tests.  
[4]RiskEven in a field with honest tests, there are still advantages to  
being an outsider. The most obvious is that outsiders have nothing  
to lose. They can do risky things, and if they fail, so what? Few  
will even notice.The eminent, on the other hand, are weighed down by their eminence.  
Eminence is like a suit: it impresses the wrong people, and it  
constrains the wearer.Outsiders should realize the advantage they have here. Being able  
to take risks is hugely valuable. Everyone values safety too much,  
both the obscure and the eminent. No one wants to look like a fool.  
But it's very useful to be able to. If most of your ideas aren't  
stupid, you're probably being too conservative. You're not bracketing  
the problem.Lord Acton said we should judge talent at its best and character  
at its worst. For example, if you write one great book and ten bad  
ones, you still count as a great writer — or at least, a better  
writer than someone who wrote eleven that were merely good. Whereas  
if you're a quiet, law-abiding citizen most of the time but  
occasionally cut someone up and bury them in your backyard, you're  
a bad guy.Almost everyone makes the mistake of treating ideas as if they were  
indications of character rather than talent — as if having a stupid  
idea made you stupid. There's a huge weight of tradition advising  
us to play it safe. "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps  
silent," says the Old Testament (Proverbs 17:28).Well, that may be fine advice for a bunch of goatherds in Bronze  
Age Palestine. There conservatism would be the order of the day.  
But times have changed. It might still be reasonable to stick with  
the Old Testament in political questions, but materially the world  
now has a lot more state. Tradition is less of a guide, not just  
because things change faster, but because the space of possibilities  
is so large. The more complicated the world gets, the more valuable  
it is to be willing to look like a fool.DelegationAnd yet the more successful people become, the more heat they get  
if they screw up — or even seem to screw up. In this respect, as  
in many others, the eminent are prisoners of their own success. So  
the best way to understand the advantages of being an outsider may  
be to look at the disadvantages of being an insider.If you ask eminent people what's wrong with their lives, the first  
thing they'll complain about is the lack of time. A friend of mine  
at Google is fairly high up in the company and went to work for  
them long before they went public. In other words, he's now rich  
enough not to have to work. I asked him if he could still endure  
the annoyances of having a job, now that he didn't have to. And  
he said that there weren't really any annoyances, except — and he  
got a wistful look when he said this — that he got so much  
email.The eminent feel like everyone wants to take a bite out of them.  
The problem is so widespread that people pretending to be eminent  
do it by pretending to be overstretched.The lives of the eminent become scheduled, and that's not good for  
thinking. One of the great advantages of being an outsider is long,  
uninterrupted blocks of time. That's what I remember about grad  
school: apparently endless supplies of time, which I spent worrying  
about, but not writing, my dissertation. Obscurity is like health  
food — unpleasant, perhaps, but good for you. Whereas fame tends  
to be like the alcohol produced by fermentation. When it reaches  
a certain concentration, it kills off the yeast that produced it.The eminent generally respond to the shortage of time by turning  
into managers. They don't have time to work. They're surrounded  
by junior people they're supposed to help or supervise. The obvious  
solution is to have the junior people do the work. Some good  
stuff happens this way, but there are problems it doesn't work so  
well for: the kind where it helps to have everything in one head.For example, it recently emerged that the famous glass artist Dale  
Chihuly hasn't actually blown glass for 27 years. He has assistants  
do the work for him. But one of the most valuable sources of ideas  
in the visual arts is the resistance of the medium. That's why oil  
paintings look so different from watercolors. In principle you  
could make any mark in any medium; in practice the medium steers  
you. And if you're no longer doing the work yourself, you stop  
learning from this.So if you want to beat those eminent enough to delegate, one way  
to do it is to take advantage of direct contact with the medium.  
In the arts it's obvious how: blow your own glass, edit your own  
films, stage your own plays. And in the process pay close attention  
to accidents and to new ideas you have on the fly. This technique  
can be generalized to any sort of work: if you're an outsider, don't  
be ruled by plans. Planning is often just a weakness forced on  
those who delegate.Is there a general rule for finding problems best solved in one  
head? Well, you can manufacture them by taking any project usually  
done by multiple people and trying to do it all yourself. Wozniak's  
work was a classic example: he did everything himself, hardware and  
software, and the result was miraculous. He claims not one bug was  
ever found in the Apple II, in either hardware or software.Another way to find good problems to solve in one head is to focus  
on the grooves in the chocolate bar — the places where tasks are  
divided when they're split between several people. If you want to  
beat delegation, focus on a vertical slice: for example, be both  
writer and editor, or both design buildings and construct them.One especially good groove to span is the one between tools and  
things made with them. For example, programming languages and  
applications are usually written by different people, and this is  
responsible for a lot of the worst flaws in   
programming languages.  
I think every language should be designed simultaneously with a  
large application written in it, the way C was with Unix.Techniques for competing with delegation translate well into business,  
because delegation is endemic there. Instead of avoiding it as a  
drawback of senility, many companies embrace it as a sign of maturity.  
In big companies software is often designed, implemented, and sold  
by three separate types of people. In startups one person may have  
to do all three. And though this feels stressful, it's one reason  
startups win. The needs of customers and the means of satisfying  
them are all in one head.FocusThe very skill of insiders can be a weakness. Once someone is good  
at something, they tend to spend all their time doing that. This  
kind of focus is very valuable, actually. Much of the skill of  
experts is the ability to ignore false trails. But focus has  
drawbacks: you don't learn from other fields, and when a new approach  
arrives, you may be the last to notice.For outsiders this translates into two ways to win. One is to work  
on a variety of things. Since you can't derive as much benefit  
(yet) from a narrow focus, you may as well cast a wider net and  
derive what benefit you can from similarities between fields. Just  
as you can compete with delegation by working on larger vertical  
slices, you can compete with specialization by working on larger  
horizontal slices — by both writing and illustrating your book, for  
example.The second way to compete with focus is to see what focus overlooks.  
In particular, new things. So if you're not good at anything yet,  
consider working on something so new that no one else is either.  
It won't have any prestige yet, if no one is good at it, but you'll  
have it all to yourself.The potential of a new medium is usually underestimated, precisely  
because no one has yet explored its possibilities. Before   
Durer  
tried making engravings, no one took them very seriously. Engraving  
was for making little devotional images — basically fifteenth century  
baseball cards of saints. Trying to make masterpieces in this  
medium must have seemed to Durer's contemporaries the way that,  
say, making masterpieces in   
comics   
might seem to the average person  
today.In the computer world we get not new mediums but new platforms: the  
minicomputer, the microprocessor, the web-based application. At  
first they're always dismissed as being unsuitable for real work.  
And yet someone always decides to try anyway, and it turns out you  
can do more than anyone expected. So in the future when you hear  
people say of a new platform: yeah, it's popular and cheap, but not  
ready yet for real work, jump on it.As well as being more comfortable working on established lines,  
insiders generally have a vested interest in perpetuating them.  
The professor who made his reputation by discovering some new idea  
is not likely to be the one to discover its replacement. This is  
particularly true with companies, who have not only skill and pride  
anchoring them to the status quo, but money as well. The Achilles  
heel of successful companies is their inability to cannibalize  
themselves. Many innovations consist of replacing something with  
a cheaper alternative, and companies just don't want to see a path  
whose immediate effect is to cut an existing source of revenue.So if you're an outsider you should actively seek out contrarian  
projects. Instead of working on things the eminent have made  
prestigious, work on things that could steal that prestige.The really juicy new approaches are not the ones insiders reject  
as impossible, but those they ignore as undignified. For example,  
after Wozniak designed the Apple II he offered it first to his  
employer, HP. They passed. One of the reasons was that, to save  
money, he'd designed the Apple II to use a TV as a monitor, and HP  
felt they couldn't produce anything so declasse.LessWozniak used a TV as a monitor for the simple reason that he couldn't  
afford a monitor. Outsiders are not merely free but compelled to  
make things that are cheap and lightweight. And both are good bets  
for growth: cheap things spread faster, and lightweight things  
evolve faster.The eminent, on the other hand, are almost forced to work on a large  
scale. Instead of garden sheds they must design huge art museums.  
One reason they work on big things is that they can: like our  
hypothetical novelist, they're flattered by such opportunities.  
They also know that big projects will by their sheer bulk impress  
the audience. A garden shed, however lovely, would be easy to  
ignore; a few might even snicker at it. You can't snicker at a  
giant museum, no matter how much you dislike it. And finally, there  
are all those people the eminent have working for them; they have  
to choose projects that can keep them all busy.Outsiders are free of all this. They can work on small things, and  
there's something very pleasing about small things. Small things  
can be perfect; big ones always have something wrong with them.  
But there's a   
magic   
in small things that goes beyond such rational  
explanations. All kids know it. Small things have more personality.Plus making them is more fun. You can do what you want; you don't  
have to satisfy committees. And perhaps most important, small  
things can be done fast. The prospect of seeing the finished project  
hangs in the air like the smell of dinner cooking. If you work  
fast, maybe you could have it done tonight.Working on small things is also a good way to learn. The most  
important kinds of learning happen one project at a time. ("Next  
time, I won't...") The faster you cycle through projects, the  
faster you'll evolve.Plain materials have a charm like small scale. And in addition  
there's the challenge of making do with less. Every designer's  
ears perk up at the mention of that game, because it's a game you  
can't lose. Like the JV playing the varsity, if you even tie, you  
win. So paradoxically there are cases where fewer resources yield  
better results, because the designers' pleasure at their own ingenuity  
more than compensates.  
[5]So if you're an outsider, take advantage of your ability to make  
small and inexpensive things. Cultivate the pleasure and simplicity  
of that kind of work; one day you'll miss it.ResponsibilityWhen you're old and eminent, what will you miss about being young  
and obscure? What people seem to miss most is the lack of  
responsibilities.Responsibility is an occupational disease of eminence. In principle  
you could avoid it, just as in principle you could avoid getting  
fat as you get old, but few do. I sometimes suspect that responsibility  
is a trap and that the most virtuous route would be to shirk it,  
but regardless it's certainly constraining.When you're an outsider you're constrained too, of course. You're  
short of money, for example. But that constrains you in different  
ways. How does responsibility constrain you? The worst thing is  
that it allows you not to focus on real work. Just as the most  
dangerous forms of   
procrastination   
are those that seem like work,  
the danger of responsibilities is not just that they can consume a  
whole day, but that they can do it without setting off the  
kind of alarms you'd set off if you spent a whole day sitting on a  
park bench.A lot of the pain of being an outsider is being aware of one's own  
procrastination. But this is actually a good thing. You're at  
least close enough to work that the smell of it makes you hungry.As an outsider, you're just one step away from getting things done.  
A huge step, admittedly, and one that most people never seem to  
make, but only one step. If you can summon up the energy to get  
started, you can work on projects with an intensity (in both senses)  
that few insiders can match. For insiders work turns into a duty,  
laden with responsibilities and expectations. It's never so pure  
as it was when they were young.Work like a dog being taken for a walk, instead of an ox being yoked  
to the plow. That's what they miss.AudienceA lot of outsiders make the mistake of doing the opposite; they  
admire the eminent so much that they copy even their flaws. Copying  
is a good way to learn, but copy the right things. When I was in  
college I imitated the pompous diction of famous professors. But  
this wasn't what made them eminent — it was more a flaw their  
eminence had allowed them to sink into. Imitating it was like  
pretending to have gout in order to seem rich.Half the distinguishing qualities of the eminent are actually  
disadvantages. Imitating these is not only a waste of time, but  
will make you seem a fool to your models, who are often well aware  
of it.What are the genuine advantages of being an insider? The greatest  
is an audience. It often seems to outsiders that the great advantage  
of insiders is money — that they have the resources to do what they  
want. But so do people who inherit money, and that doesn't seem  
to help, not as much as an audience. It's good for morale to know  
people want to see what you're making; it draws work out of you.If I'm right that the defining advantage of insiders is an audience,  
then we live in exciting times, because just in the last ten years  
the Internet has made audiences a lot more liquid. Outsiders don't  
have to content themselves anymore with a proxy audience of a few  
smart friends. Now, thanks to the Internet, they can start to grow  
themselves actual audiences. This is great news for the marginal,  
who retain the advantages of outsiders while increasingly being  
able to siphon off what had till recently been the prerogative of  
the elite.Though the Web has been around for more than ten years, I think  
we're just beginning to see its democratizing effects. Outsiders  
are still learning how to steal audiences. But more importantly,  
audiences are still learning how to be stolen — they're still just  
beginning to realize how much   
deeper bloggers can dig than  
journalists, how much  
more interesting   
a democratic news site can be than a  
front page controlled by editors, and how much  
funnier  
a bunch of kids  
with webcams can be than mass-produced sitcoms.The big media companies shouldn't worry that people will post their  
copyrighted material on YouTube. They should worry that people  
will post their own stuff on YouTube, and audiences will watch that  
instead.HackingIf I had to condense the power of the marginal into one sentence  
it would be: just try hacking something together. That phrase draws  
in most threads I've mentioned here. Hacking something together  
means deciding what to do as you're doing it, not a subordinate  
executing the vision of his boss. It implies the result won't  
be pretty, because it will be made quickly out of inadequate  
materials. It may work, but it won't be the sort of thing the  
eminent would want to put their name on. Something hacked together  
means something that barely solves the problem, or maybe doesn't  
solve the problem at all, but another you discovered en route. But  
that's ok, because the main value of that initial version is not the  
thing itself, but what it leads to. Insiders who daren't walk  
through the mud in their nice clothes will never make it to the  
solid ground on the other side.The word "try" is an especially valuable component. I disagree  
here with Yoda, who said there is no try. There is try. It implies  
there's no punishment if you fail. You're driven by curiosity  
instead of duty. That means the wind of procrastination will be  
in your favor: instead of avoiding this work, this will be what you  
do as a way of avoiding other work. And when you do it, you'll be  
in a better mood. The more the work depends on imagination, the  
more that matters, because most people have more ideas when they're  
happy.If I could go back and redo my twenties, that would be one thing  
I'd do more of: just try hacking things together. Like many people  
that age, I spent a lot of time worrying about what I should do.  
I also spent some time trying to build stuff. I should have spent  
less time worrying and more time building. If you're not sure what  
to do, make something.Raymond Chandler's advice to thriller writers was "When in doubt,  
have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." He followed  
that advice. Judging from his books, he was often in doubt. But  
though the result is occasionally cheesy, it's never boring. In  
life, as in books, action is underrated.Fortunately the number of things you can just hack together keeps  
increasing. People fifty years ago would be astonished that one  
could just hack together a movie, for example. Now you can even  
hack together distribution. Just make stuff and put it online.InappropriateIf you really want to score big, the place to focus is the margin  
of the margin: the territories only recently captured from the  
insiders. That's where you'll find the juiciest projects still  
undone, either because they seemed too risky, or simply because  
there were too few insiders to explore everything.This is why I spend most of my time writing   
essays lately. The  
writing of essays used to be limited to those who could get them  
published. In principle you could have written them and just shown  
them to your friends; in practice that didn't work.   
[6]  
An  
essayist needs the resistance of an audience, just as an engraver  
needs the resistance of the plate.Up till a few years ago, writing essays was the ultimate insider's  
game. Domain experts were allowed to publish essays about their  
field, but the pool allowed to write on general topics was about  
eight people who went to the right parties in New York. Now the  
reconquista has overrun this territory, and, not surprisingly, found  
it sparsely cultivated. There are so many essays yet unwritten.  
They tend to be the naughtier ones; the insiders have pretty much  
exhausted the motherhood and apple pie topics.This leads to my final suggestion: a technique for determining when  
you're on the right track. You're on the right track when people  
complain that you're unqualified, or that you've done something  
inappropriate. If people are complaining, that means you're doing  
something rather than sitting around, which is the first step. And  
if they're driven to such empty forms of complaint, that means  
you've probably done something good.If you make something and people complain that it doesn't work,  
that's a problem. But if the worst thing they can hit you with is  
your own status as an outsider, that implies that in every other  
respect you've succeeded. Pointing out that someone is unqualified  
is as desperate as resorting to racial slurs. It's just a legitimate  
sounding way of saying: we don't like your type around here.But the best thing of all is when people call what you're doing  
inappropriate. I've been hearing this word all my life and I only  
recently realized that it is, in fact, the sound of the homing  
beacon. "Inappropriate" is the null criticism. It's merely the  
adjective form of "I don't like it."So that, I think, should be the highest goal for the marginal. Be  
inappropriate. When you hear people saying that, you're golden.  
And they, incidentally, are busted.Notes[1]  
The facts about Apple's early history are from an interview   
with Steve   
Wozniak in Jessica Livingston's   
Founders at Work.[2]  
As usual the popular image is several decades behind reality.  
Now the misunderstood artist is not a chain-smoking drunk who pours  
his soul into big, messy canvases that philistines see and say  
"that's not art" because it isn't a picture of anything. The  
philistines have now been trained that anything hung on a wall  
is art. Now the misunderstood artist is a coffee-drinking vegan  
cartoonist whose work they see and say "that's not art" because it  
looks like stuff they've seen in the Sunday paper.[3]  
In fact this would do fairly well as a definition of politics:  
what determines rank in the absence of objective tests.[4]  
In high school you're led to believe your whole future depends  
on where you go to college, but it turns out only to buy you a couple  
years. By your mid-twenties the people worth impressing  
already judge you more by what  
you've done than where you went to school.[5]  
Managers are presumably wondering, how can I make this miracle  
happen? How can I make the people working for me do more with less?  
Unfortunately the constraint probably has to be self-imposed. If  
you're expected to do more with less, then you're being  
starved, not eating virtuously.[6]  
Without the prospect of publication, the closest most people  
come to writing essays is to write in a journal. I find I never  
get as deeply into subjects as I do in proper essays. As the name  
implies, you don't go back and rewrite journal entries over  
and over for two weeks.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Sarah  
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