The Top Idea in Your Mind

July 2010I realized recently that what one thinks about in the shower in the  
morning is more important than I'd thought. I knew it was a good  
time to have ideas. Now I'd go further: now I'd say it's hard to  
do a really good job on anything you don't think about in the shower.Everyone who's worked on difficult problems is probably familiar  
with the phenomenon of working hard to figure something out, failing,  
and then suddenly seeing the answer a bit later while doing something  
else. There's a kind of thinking you do without trying to. I'm  
increasingly convinced this type of thinking is not merely helpful  
in solving hard problems, but necessary. The tricky part is, you  
can only control it indirectly.  
[1]I think most people have one top idea in their mind at any given  
time. That's the idea their thoughts will drift toward when they're  
allowed to drift freely. And this idea will thus tend to get all  
the benefit of that type of thinking, while others are starved of  
it. Which means it's a disaster to let the wrong idea become the  
top one in your mind.What made this clear to me was having an idea I didn't want as the  
top one in my mind for two long stretches.I'd noticed startups got way less done when they started raising  
money, but it was not till we ourselves raised money that I understood  
why. The problem is not the actual time it takes to meet with  
investors. The problem is that once you start raising money, raising  
money becomes the top idea in your mind. That becomes what you  
think about when you take a shower in the morning. And that means  
other questions aren't.I'd hated raising money when I was running Viaweb, but I'd forgotten  
why I hated it so much. When we raised money for Y Combinator, I  
remembered. Money matters are particularly likely to become the  
top idea in your mind. The reason is that they have to be. It's  
hard to get money. It's not the sort of thing that happens by  
default. It's not going to happen unless you let it become the  
thing you think about in the shower. And then you'll make little  
progress on anything else you'd rather be working on.  
[2](I hear similar complaints from friends who are professors. Professors  
nowadays seem to have become professional fundraisers who do a  
little research on the side. It may be time to fix that.)The reason this struck me so forcibly is that for most of the  
preceding 10 years I'd been able to think about what I wanted. So  
the contrast when I couldn't was sharp. But I don't think this  
problem is unique to me, because just about every startup I've seen  
grinds to a halt when they start raising money  or talking  
to acquirers.You can't directly control where your thoughts drift. If you're  
controlling them, they're not drifting. But you can control them  
indirectly, by controlling what situations you let yourself get  
into. That has been the lesson for me: be careful what you let  
become critical to you. Try to get yourself into situations where  
the most urgent problems are ones you want to think about.You don't have complete control, of course. An emergency could  
push other thoughts out of your head. But barring emergencies you  
have a good deal of indirect control over what becomes the top idea  
in your mind.I've found there are two types of thoughts especially worth  
avoiding  thoughts like the Nile Perch in the way they push  
out more interesting ideas. One I've already mentioned: thoughts  
about money. Getting money is almost by definition an attention  
sink.  
The other is disputes. These too are engaging in the  
wrong way: they have the same velcro-like shape as genuinely  
interesting ideas, but without the substance. So avoid disputes  
if you want to get real work done.  
[3]Even Newton fell into this trap. After publishing his theory of  
colors in 1672 he found himself distracted by disputes for years,  
finally concluding that the only solution was to stop publishing:  
  
 I see I have made myself a slave to Philosophy, but if I get free  
 of Mr Linus's business I will resolutely bid adew to it eternally,  
 excepting what I do for my privat satisfaction or leave to come  
 out after me. For I see a man must either resolve to put out  
 nothing new or become a slave to defend it.  
[4]  
  
Linus and his students at Liege were among the more tenacious  
critics. Newton's biographer Westfall seems to feel he was  
overreacting:  
  
 Recall that at the time he wrote, Newton's "slavery" consisted  
 of five replies to Liege, totalling fourteen printed pages, over  
 the course of a year.  
  
I'm more sympathetic to Newton. The problem was not the 14 pages,  
but the pain of having this stupid controversy constantly reintroduced  
as the top idea in a mind that wanted so eagerly to think about  
other things.Turning the other cheek turns out to have selfish advantages.  
Someone who does you an injury hurts you twice: first by the injury  
itself, and second by taking up your time afterward thinking about  
it. If you learn to ignore injuries you can at least avoid the  
second half. I've found I can to some extent avoid thinking about  
nasty things people have done to me by telling myself: this doesn't  
deserve space in my head. I'm always delighted to find I've forgotten  
the details of disputes, because that means I hadn't been thinking  
about them. My wife thinks I'm more forgiving than she is, but my  
motives are purely selfish.I suspect a lot of people aren't sure what's the top idea in their  
mind at any given time. I'm often mistaken about it. I tend to  
think it's the idea I'd want to be the top one, rather than the one  
that is. But it's easy to figure this out: just take a shower.  
What topic do your thoughts keep returning to? If it's not what  
you want to be thinking about, you may want to change something.Notes[1]  
No doubt there are already names for this type of thinking, but  
I call it "ambient thought."[2]  
This was made particularly clear in our case, because neither  
of the funds we raised was difficult, and yet in both cases the  
process dragged on for months. Moving large amounts of money around  
is never something people treat casually. The attention required  
increases with the amount—maybe not linearly, but definitely  
monotonically.[3]  
Corollary: Avoid becoming an administrator, or your job will  
consist of dealing with money and disputes.[4]  
Letter to Oldenburg, quoted in Westfall, Richard, Life of  
Isaac Newton, p. 107.Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.