

The Craft of Becoming

Fifty posts selected from more than a hundred tagged [Apogee](#) on constantine.name

Craig Constantine

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by Craig Constantine

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It's not a priority →

March 17, 2016

*Starting today, you are no longer allowed to utter the words: "I don't have time."
Instead, you will say, "It's not a priority."*

~ *Steve Kamb from, Why "I Don't Have Time" Is A Big Fat Lie*

Years ago, when I discovered the Lehigh Valley Parkour community's inside jokes, I started avoiding the word "can't" — if another LVPK member hears you, there's an immediate 5 pushups penalty. (Very annoying in markets, subways, when driving, you get the idea.) Instead of saying "I can't do that..." you start to say "I can do that when I am able to [insert something I need to work on]." Changing your words, changes your thoughts, changes your actions, changes your life.

Well, this one is my newest addition. No more "I don't have time"; It's all going to be, "It's not a priority." Go ahead, try a few of these out loud:

I don't have time to eat healthy, *becomes...* **Eating healthy isn't a priority.**

I don't have time to exercise, *becomes...* **Exercise isn't a priority.**

I don't have time to sleep, *becomes...* **Sleep isn't a priority.**

Oh, well brain, if you're going to think about it that way... our whole life is going to change.

25 years ago →

April 12, 2016

25 years ago, on a Friday night, Tracy and I went on our first date.

There's a wonderful, socially awkward story about me chickening out of the original plan, then a late-evening missed phone call, and an eventual midnight movie. If you ask us nicely, we'll tell you our conflicting versions of the story. There even a bit of debate about the exact movie we saw; We're pretty sure it was *Silence of the Lambs*. (Yes, we opted for a midnight showing for our first date. I'll let that settle in for a few moments.) On the other hand, the movie might possibly have been a spectacularly horrible movie titled *Warlock*, which no one has ever heard of. So sometimes we tell the story with it being *Silence of the Lambs* and sometimes it's *Warlock*. Long ago, I think we used to argue about this when we told the story... now, I can't even remember which of us argued for which movie.



I digress.

Tracy is awesome, and I love her very much! We are still in love. ...but, this isn't a 'Happy Anniversary!' card addressed to Tracy.

I firmly believe that there's no single perfect person for me. I am not a "special snowflake". And if – as the old saying goes – Tracy "is one-in-a-million," then she's one of about 8,000 perfect people for me alive at this very moment.

What makes me special *in some ways* is the same thing that makes her special *in some ways*: We have both invested a large portion of our lives in each other. We've both spent 25 years working each on our own selves, and have continued sharing the improved versions with each other. The "institution" of marriage doesn't magically make our relationship special; I, and she, made the relationship special by working on it.

25 years ago I was a totally different person. I was (just simply by definition) on some path through life. There was absolutely no way I could have selected the perfect person for me. I didn't know myself. I didn't know my future. I didn't know how my path would evolve. How could I possibly pick someone who was compatible then, and would grow and change to remain compatible for 25 years.

In one sense, I was *extremely* lucky to find someone who turned out to be able to adapt and grow in some sort of way that somehow remained compatible with my ever-changing general insanity. But in another much more important sense, we both have spent *huge* amounts of time talking, arguing, discussing and growing together. So today, it's not that the luck we had years ago was special or unique – because “humans meet” happens constantly every day – it's that we somehow stood by that bit of common, every-day luck and worked on it for 25 years.

People change. People age. People get sick and die. Life moves ever forward. The love at age 20 is nothing like the love at age 40, or – as far as I can tell at this point – the love at age 80. (eg, *Old Love*.)

What matters most *to me* is that I continue to honestly work on who I am. Only by doing that work do I continue to be worthy of a relationship such as we've created so far.

Here's to another 50 years! Huzzah!!

A Traveler's Mindset →

August 18, 2017

| *A good traveler has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.*

| ~ *Lao Tzu*

A traveler's mindset is the foundation for being a successful traveller and for being a good guest. I didn't set out to develop any particular *mindset* when I began traveling. I simply started traveling, and only much later did I realize my mindset had changed.

In my *Travel Gear* series, I describe my habit of reviewing after each trip. While I began by reviewing the *things* I had packed for each trip, I soon realized I was spending more time thinking about what

had gone well, and not so well. As I examined my mindset, I was drawn to experiment and refine, to try more challenging trips, and to push my comfort zones.

Which brings me to my traveler's mindset:

Plan Be flexible Be positive Move forward Slow down

Plan

To be good at planning requires knowledge, but not simply knowledge of my destination. Rather, I discovered it was most important to have knowledge of my own strengths and weaknesses. For the things I am good at, the situations where I'm comfortable, in these areas I can do less planning. But in areas where my skills are weak, or situations where I'm uncomfortable, there I need to focus my planning.

Here's an example of a strength for me: I'm not a picky eater and I have no dietary restrictions. So I never worry about food, and I hardly ever plan meals; Wherever I travel, people eat and there is food. (I'm happy to fend for myself, help cook, or team up with others.) So in the realm of food, a sufficient level of planning for me, is to carry a plastic spork.

Here's an example of a weakness: It bothers me when I'm late for scheduled things, or when I miss out on things because of transportation. That it *bothers me* is my weakness. Until I can overcome that weakness, I try to avoid transportation issues. That means I prefer to be responsible for my own transportation whenever possible. I'll be the person who coordinates buying the plane tickets, figures out the train schedule, or rents the car.

The next component of good planning is to know my **bookends**. In any trip, there are firmly scheduled components, such as major transportation legs, or an event being attended. Bookending is the idea of planning out as much of the time and actions leading up to the scheduled item. Once I've planned my bookends, I'm free to do any level of planning — including “none” — between the bookends.

After the bookends I search for unknowns. This is basically a litany of questions that I've learned to ask myself: Do I have my passport, visa, and host's address for immigration control? Do I need foreign currency, working credit card, or cell phone data plan? Does my phone even work on the local cellular system? Have I sorted my transportation *from* the airport? If my phone dies, what must I have on paper (plane ticket, host's address for immigration, host's phone number)? Do I speak the local language, or do I have some needed phrases written down that I can point to when searching for help? Do I know the weather? Do I know the laws and customs? Do I have

the necessary electrical adapters? The more I travel, the more I think to ask myself, and the more things I might plan for to avoid problems.

At this point I have a skeleton plan. I can convert my bookends into a basic itinerary and pass that to my hosts, and to my family members (who invariable *love* that they will know where I will be.) I can use my skeleton plan to coordinate with others traveling with me. People with less travel experience, who couldn't setup a trip of the same complexity level, will be able to join in; They can match transportation (plane tickets, etc.) to my bookends and coordinate with the same (or different) hosts, and so on.

Finally, when talking to my hosts, showing that I've done some planning helps them understand I'm not going to show up and expect them to take care of my every need. I can also ask open-ended questions like, "I'll be in *city* on *date*, with some free time. Any suggestions?", to fill in other parts of my travels.

Be flexible

I should be accepting of change. That's obvious, right? But I have too often been the stick in the mud, and I have too often seen inflexible people cause friction. The bookends in my plans are the inflexible parts of my travels, and knowing them provides the security that enables me to relax and be flexible the rest of the time.

I try to never be that person who responds negatively to suggestions without having an alternative. My personal rule is to *never* say, "no," to a suggestion unless I have an alternative. I had to learn to either get off my lazy butt and go with the flow, or to take the initiative to plan and suggest. Meal planning is the easiest example. When I get hungry, I don't wait for someone to say, "lets get food, how about X?" and then I'm all, "No. Meh. No," to each of their ideas. Instead, when I get hungry, I make up a plan for food, and then I say, "I'm getting hungry. What about X?" Maybe there's another plan they had in mind, and I get to practice being flexible and rolling with their plan.

I think of planning as a sort of currency: If I want to have an *opinion* on the question at hand, then I have to buy-in with some planning. If I've done no planning, then I'm not entitled to an opinion, and I should be maximally flexible to adapt to the plans of others.

At the same time, I had to learn to avoid "false flexibility." That's when I used to agree to go with the plans of others, but then quietly — or worse, passive-aggressively, or even openly — dissing the experience once underway. An example of this, which I see too frequently is when people think dinner is going to be an inexpensive, quick meal, but the group's opinion shifts and

everyone suddenly heads to the expensive brew-pub. People then get grumpy about the expense. Too bad! Learn to be flexible. If money is that important, then you had your chance to counter-suggest; “Hey guys, I need to eat on a budget. Can we get food for like \$15?” (And really, if you want to have an I-need-to-eat-on-a-budget opinion, you should buy-in by doing some planning to find a possible spot.) But once you’ve agreed to go with the plan, you should spend the money and enjoy it; Or peel off entirely. Never be the passive-aggressive jerk who goes along and drags his feet the entire time.

The easiest way for me to begin learning flexibility was to directly plan to be flexible. I sometimes plan blocks of time intentionally left open. (“Friday, until *bookend* begins at *time*, I will wander around the city.”) This taught me to be comfortable with big swaths of unplanned time. It taught me to be aware of my surroundings and helped me learn to adapt to the opportunities that arise.

Planning to be flexible also has a subtle effect on my hosts and others traveling with me. If I say, “I’ve nothing planned today.” This creates an unspoken, subtle suggestion that perhaps I’m hoping my host will fill in some things for me to do. The unwritten sub-text might be, “I’ve nothing planned today, can you entertain me?” But instead, if I say, “I’ve planned to spend the day wandering around the city,” this still leaves open the opportunity for my host to suggest activities, but it also makes it clear that it’s equally fine to simply leave me to my own devices.

Be positive

It took me a long time to develop a positive attitude. The big turning point was when I came to understand the **Fundamental Attribution Error**. The error is that we tend to attribute the causes for other people’s actions to *themselves*, (that driver cut me off because he’s an aggressive narcissist,) while tending to attribute the causes for our own actions to *external circumstances*, (I cut you off because I’m making up time lost to some unavoidable delay I encountered.)

There’s debate in psychology circles whether this attribution error is “fundamental” in the sense of being an inherent trait of how we think, versus just being a very common way of thinking. Regardless, I found it was pervasive in *my* thinking, and practicing thinking *about* what I was thinking was a fruitful exercise.

Lessons cautioning against this sort of attribution error appear in many places, including:

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.

~ Plato

And from Epictetus:

Someone bathes in haste; don't say he bathes badly, but in haste. Someone drinks a lot of wine; don't say he drinks badly, but a lot. Until you know their reasons, how do you know that their actions are vicious?

As I traveled more frequently, I learned the power of positive thinking. Initially I began by using sugar-coating positive thinking, "I'm going to have fun!" But that is weak medicine. Over time, through intentional and conscious practice, I learned to use positive thinking to dig deep for actionable items: What can I do to solve this problem? What is good about the current situation? What can I say now that would express my appreciation for what this person has done? What can I do with my spare time now, which would create a fun opportunity for all of us later?

Being positive also appears in the way one commits to choices made: not the choices themselves per se, (to go to this event or not, to take on a responsibility or not,) but the way in which I express those choices. Sure, making choices takes time, as I have to consider options, weigh existing responsibilities and allocate free time. But, when it comes time to choose:

Everything in my life should be a, "No," or a, "Hell yes!"

Simply saying, "Yes," is *not* commitment; it is in fact a, "No." Saying, "Yes," but not realistically planning, is in fact a, "No." Unrealistic planning, not allocating money or not allocating time, are more variations of, "No." On the other hand, "Hell yes!" is the passion and fire that make life worth living. That is what I mean when I say I must be *positive* with my decisions.

Move forward

I tend to move forward, towards the next scheduled thing. This cultivates an attitude of forward momentum and is closely related to the idea of bookending. Generally, wherever I am, if there's no specific reason to stay, I'll move forward, and the closer I get (in time and space) to the next thing, the more I relax and slow down.

For me, 15-minutes-early is, "on time," and on-time is "late." Of course, it doesn't have to be exactly 15 minutes; the longer the journey, the earlier I plan to be. Something like 20% seems to work well — so an hour early on a 5 hour drive. And I don't mean "the map engine says five hours, so I'll leave six because I want to stop for lunch." I mean, five hours on the road, plus an hour for lunch etc, that's a six hour journey. Then I add 20%, leaving about 7 hours of travel time. When you're padding in this much time, everything becomes a leisurely journey!

When I travel with others I try (gently) to get them motivated and moving early enough. Only then

do we find we have enough time to move at a leisurely pace — to pause for a cup of coffee, to stroll down the side streets — without worrying about wasting too much time.

Once I started thinking about momentum, and moving forward, I found I was visualizing my next actions. “I should do laundry. I should get up early tomorrow and do my laundry. I should shower now and go to bed, so I can get up early and do my laundry.” Invariably, the more I think ahead, and move forward — physically move towards the next thing, or just pick off tasks I can do now, rather than later — the more I find myself with free time and flexibility.

Slow down

Which brings me finally to the best part: Slow down, leave space and enjoy life.

I find I have a certain pace to my normal life, I know how much I can pack into a day, and how long I need to get from one place to another. But when I’m traveling, I purposely plan a slower pace. First of all, things often take longer than I expected, so things work out better when I’ve expected that by leaving extra space and time in my schedule. When things go as planned, or take less time than expected, I suddenly have time to notice things, or go on little adventures.

My entire traveler’s mindset leads to this, “slow down, leave space and enjoy life” end-goal. Unexpected conversations with new friends, a 10 minute walking tour of a neighborhood that I’d never have known to plan for, a spontaneous meal, a suggestion by someone that I’d have missed if I hadn’t been relaxing with free time.

In short, without my mindset, I’d miss all the good stuff, and end up simply travelling.

I struggle with distractions →

February 16, 2018

To say that I “struggle” with distractions is a *HUGE* understatement.

Some time ago, I saw the following idea — sorry, I forget where — and I wanted to share it. (I’ve no idea if/how you would do this on non-Apple-IOS devices, sorry.) Ready?

Move EVERYTHING off of the home screen.

This is not the *lock* screen on my phone — THIS IS THE HOME SCREEN. When I unlock the phone, this is what I see. Nothing. The frequent-apps/dock is empty, and all the apps are ‘rightward’ in other screens. And they’re just in a jumbled mess because I *never* swipe off this screen.

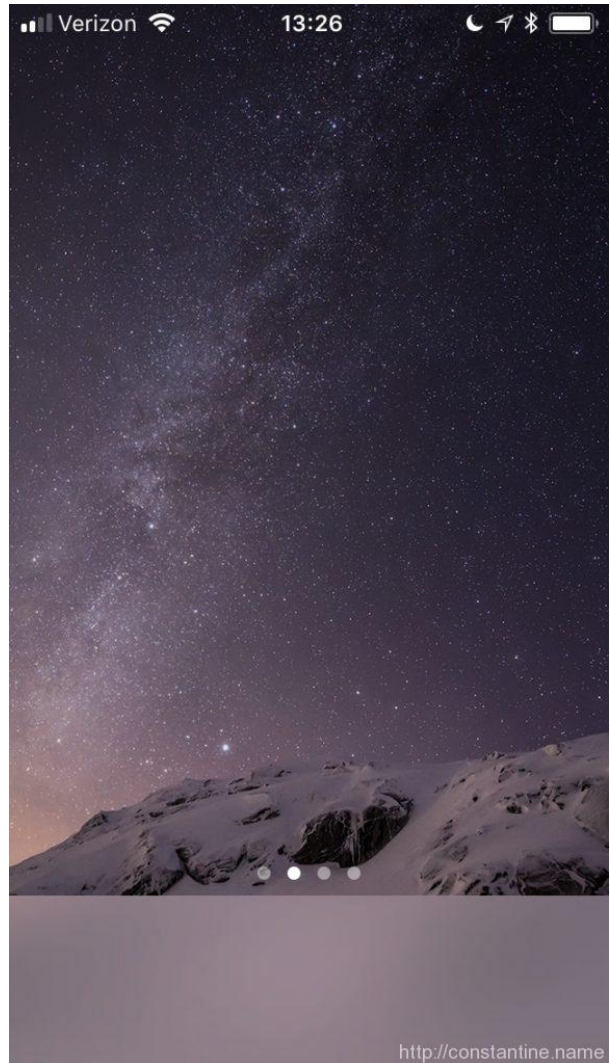
Instead, I swipe down and type in the search field.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “so what?”

It changes your life. I spent weeks (after making this change) waking up my phone, staring at this screen and thinking, “wait, why did I wake up my phone?” Now I think, “what’s the weather going to be?” wake the phone, swipe down, type ‘w-e’ touch weather app. Etc. Wake the phone, do exactly what I want, close phone.

Yes, this does still require a small bit of discipline to not double-tap Home and swipe through the running apps, but I never was a big user of that anyway.

If you’re paying close attention, you’ll note my phone is in “do not disturb” mode at 1:30 in the



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afternoon. That's another pro-tip. Add EVERYONE you'd ever want a call from to your VIP list. Disable the "ring through" feature (where multiple calls from the same number can push through do not disturb). Then schedule DND from 11:01 to 11:00 daily. «= ...read the ordering of those times carefully.

(...and sorry, no, that is not the one-secret-minute when you could actually call me.)

Any time I'm expecting a call from someone random — car's in the shop, plumber is expected around 9am — I just turn off 'do not disturb'. As a bonus, I immediately realize how many junk calls I used to get. I don't have a problem remembering to turn it back on, and I get a fresh reminder of how delightful it is to have the phone screen my calls.

These days?

My phone now NEVER rings.

Except when it does! ...and I discover that it is now always someone I would like to talk to.

One. Tiny. Success. At. A. Time.

Beware the man →

March 31, 2018

But I worry that most smart people have not learned that a list of dozens of studies, several meta-analyses, hundreds of experts, and expert surveys showing almost all academics support your thesis – can still be bullshit. Which is too bad, because that's exactly what people who want to bamboozle an educated audience are going to use.

~ *Scott Alexander from, Beware the Man of One Study*

The way our civil discourse currently works, one has to be loud (or strident, or be an animated-GIF) to be heard. If one thinks, "This topic is complicated. I should learn more about it before engaging...", then by definition you are not [yet] participating in the civil discourse.

Meanwhile, the discourse continues led by those who *are* willing to engage, and who may [or may not] be better informed than you.

So here's a challenge — something to consider trying, not a challenge in the sense of me saying, "I challenge you, sir, to a duel!"...

Actually start those conversations where you don't feel well-equipped. So for example, I should more often say, "I disagree with you because I'm not convinced that yours is the correct position . . . but I'm not entirely certain of my position either . . . can we help each other by unpacking our thinking a bit more?"

There's a real skill to being fine with *not* winning the discussion. I engage, I discuss, and the other person holds their position not moving one iota. We each walk away disagreeing but at least we better understand that other individual human being. That would be *civil* discourse.

Pidgeon holes and simplifications →

April 24, 2018

Something beautiful happens when you develop and build a close relationship and friendship with someone. The closer you become with someone, the more you can zoom in past their story to the person they really are, and see them as someone just as complex, vulnerable, and rich as yourself.

~ *Chris Bailey* from, *When a person becomes an idea*

This is a great way to sneak up on a mistake I make all the time.

In order to keep track of so many people, I have to distill them down to some sort of narrative; where are they? what do they do? in what context do I normally interact with them? ...and so on. This leads to me *summarizing* people, and that's good because it enables me to push my *monkey sphere* to a much larger number. The problem comes when I then expect (or worse, *require*) that the person also fit into that summary that I've created.

I'd like to say I learned to not make this mistake through years of thought and self-reflection. But

that's not how it happened.

I learned about this when I slowly, finally managed to make some HUGE changes in myself — and people kept jamming me into the same story. This was— well, “annoying,” would be a polite way to put it— “pushing down on my head while I feel I’m already drowning”, would be another way.

...and then, as with pretty much everything, I looked into my self-perception and realized, “oh crap! I too am doing this to everyone else.”

2019 →

January 6, 2019

Early each month, I take time to review my journal entries. I sit down and read the new month's entries from 6 years ago, 3 years ago, and 1 year ago. When I started journaling, I never imagined I would have enough entries to do that.

It has felt like I am reading monthly installments from three completely different novels which arrive just often enough that I can remember what was happening. Every month, each of these three people's stories gets advanced. I've been doing this for over a year. I'm not sure what is going to happen [to my brain] when, in my reading of the 3-years-ago novel, I get to the part where the 1-year-ago novel is today. But, since it will have been a while since I read that part, I suspect it will feel like a fresh installment. For that matter, if reading the 1-year-ago novel today already melts my brain, what will happen [again, to my brain] when the 6-years-ago novel gets to where the 3-years-ago novel is?

So, the first thing I've noticed is that these novels are wild. I feel as if I'm getting installments from some insane author who doesn't take his job very seriously. Sometimes I get big entries for every day of the month droning on and on with all the gory details of the character's life; it's like work from some drunk author who needs to learn to edit sober. Sometimes I get these notebook-bulging multimedia scrapbook things. Sometimes the author just phones-it-in with a terse, “there's not much to say,” and sends one journal entry that reads, “didn't write much,” and I wonder why I'm paying him to write the novels. Sometimes—and this is the worst—the action stops mid-scene at the end of the installment.

The next thing I've noticed is that the relationships between these three characters is wacked. I

am, after all, just reading the same huge novel with three bookmarks at different places in time. Even though it is literally the same character, their relationships seem tenuous at best. The 6-years-ago character is hopeless: What are you doing, and are you actually blind?! Meanwhile the 1-year-ago character strikes me as simply naive: Do you seriously think 2018 is going to go well now that you've "had a chance to look back" on 2017; how quaint, and you are clearly, completely unrelated to this 6-years-ago character. And don't get me started about the 3-years-ago clown: You seem to have read the 6-years-ago novel by skipping over the lessons and reading only the racy bits.

But, I keep paying the author and he keeps sending me installments for the three novels. Every month, as I sit down to read, I think that maybe—as in, "maybe drawing for an inside straight will work"—the today-me can manage to extract something useful.

I—the today-me writing this—note that in this process there's nothing special about a January. I read the new installment for all three novels every month. Every month I think: If 6-years-ago me is hopeless, and 3-years-ago me is a clown only reading the racy bits, and 1-year-ago me is simply naive— ...that's TERRIFIC!! Now that I know, I can do a better job of choosing my actions. But wait, how long have I been reading these novels? It's been more than a year. Uh-oh, that means 1-year-ago me has already tried to change. Uh-oh, what does it mean if the 3-years-ago-me doesn't change in two more years? Actually, clearly he won't change, because I'm reading the 1-year-ago novel right now, and he hasn't solved it! Ok wait hold on— ...should I write, the 3-years-ago me "doesn't" change, or "didn't" change— ...err— ...wait— Will the 3-years-ago me have [or is it "have had"?!] this exact same thought, about 24 months ago— ...no, 24 months from now, when he reads that part in the other novel— ...now I'm actually confused.

Screw it. I'm having a drink and phoning-it-in.

There's not much to say; Didn't write much.

But just to mess with all three future-me-s reading the novels, this author is plagiarizing this post and copying it directly into the journal entry for today.

Happy new year!

Thought experiment →

January 16, 2019

We should apply the same ruthlessness to our own habits. In fact, we are studying philosophy precisely to break ourselves of rote behavior. Find what you do out of rote memory or routine. Ask yourself: Is this really the best way to do it? Know why you do what you do—do it for the right reasons.

~ *Ryan Holiday*, p24 The Daily Stoic

I sometimes imagine that the things I can choose to do can be placed on an aspirational spectrum. It's not a linear, ordered list, but rather a thought experiment to do the pair-ordering; for any two things I could do right now, which is higher on the aspirational spectrum?

I could go even farther than just the pair-wise comparing and imagine all the things in my life might be orderable as...

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

Fortunately—not a typo—the incessant work of ordering things to pick what to do next is exhausting. It forces me to notice that when I zoom out, I could imagine I'm doing things in the “j” through “q” range...

a b c d e f g h i (j k l m n o p q) r s t u v w x y z

I can make things better simply by *making some space in my life*. If I just drop that “j”-thing entirely I can be comfortable in knowing I'm improving, without having to actively micro-worry about everything all day. Dropping that “j”-thing leaves me with...

a b c d e f g h i j (k l m n o p q) r s t u v w x y z

Whereas before my average was between “m” and “n”, just by eliminating something from the lower side, my average moves up. Clearly I can improve my life appreciably by occasionally thinking about all the things I'm doing, and identifying a lower-end thing to drop.

Yes, of course things aren't really this simple. But it took me a long time to learn the lesson that *removing* something can produce marked improvement. *Some would say* that removing is the very definition of how to approach perfection.

Inspiration is for suckers →

April 6, 2019

The thing I care the most about: what do you do when no one is looking, what do you make when it's not an immediate part of your job... how many push ups do you do, just because you can?

~ *Seth Godin from, Self directed effort is the best kind*

Stumbled over this 8-year-old post from Seth. It's suprisingly apropos—confirmation bias in action I suppose—of a conversation I just had.

There are two ways I can go with my thoughts on this: It turns out that I do a lot push-ups, (and other things, “Hello, Art du Déplacement,”) just because I can. But I think there's a more interesting thread I can pull from this serendipity.

I don't trust inspiration. I don't trust it to show up, let alone motivate me. If something inspires me, I channel that energy to envision the path which could make the inspiring idea into some reality. I use moments of inspiration to propel me into doing the hard work of figuring out the next possible step. ...and the step after that. ...and after that.

The rest of the time—most of the time in fact—all I'm doing is working my systems. A bit of this, a bit of that, some of this, and some of that.

Irrelevant →

April 9, 2019

At the dawn of the internet, posting a commercial message was the indicator used by everyone to point and say, “that is spam.”

This was a huge mistake. Because it led to a deep rabbit-hole of requiring us to answer the question: Is this message *commercial*?

I think it's commercial? ...do you? Wait what is “commercial” is it any time we exchange any amount of value? That'd be two people talking! “Commercial” isn't inherently bad... Ok, but we need to agree so we can make a decision! Is “we” a few of us in this space, or does the poster's opinion matter? Does their “street credit” in the space affect how much we value their opinion? Maybe we can rate-limit how many border-line-commercial messages each person can... Oh, wait, I know! Let's appoint someone to be the arbiter of this space and... deep. deep. rabbit. hole.

And we went to great length to try to place (move, cajoul, beg, etc) the commercial stuff into designated areas.

It's not *commercial* that is the problem. SURPRISE is the problem. If something is unexpected, it better be perceived as desired. It's not the content of the message (post, email, phone, whatever) that matters, it's the recipient's REACTION that matters.

That phone call at dinner from the caller ID you do not recognize—unexpected and undesired—spam!

The garage that fixed my car that later robo-calls me to beg me to 5-star rate them—unexpected and undesired—spam!

The web site pop-up dialog talking about...—spam!

So the first challenge is to get control of the *channels*. I've moved away from anything where random people can *easily* interrupt me. (Where “moved away” means everything from literally eliminate said thing, to change or reconfigure how it works, etc. My “inner circle” of people can easily surprise me, of course!) This drastically reduces *surprises*, and so drastically reduces spam.

Then the second challenge is to locate the channels that contain the information—including commercial information—which I want to receive. My favorite clothing retailer has learned that I like

to be surprised with email from them. Commercial? ...absolutely. Spam? ...yes, please.

A grievous error →

May 1, 2019

“Setting the bar too high.” “Setting stretch goals with the knowledge that coming up short will be the norm.”

...are symptoms of forward-looking assessment of progress. Assessing progress by looking *forward* is a grievous error. “What have I accomplished?” is only measurable by looking *back* at what has been accomplished. This error is one of my big problems—I’d even say it’s my #2 problem. I’m working on it by practicing looking back to assess progress. :) My instinct and habit though is to look forward. Thus, more practice is needed to make looking back the default.

What have I accomplished? What is the affect of what I have done? How far have I moved? How much have I learned?

Such questions can only be answered by considering the change between two points in my past.

The hard part—at least for me—is to keep out the “I wanted.” “I accomplished that much, but I wanted to accomplish [insert goal here],” creeps in through the open door of assessment.

By shifting my eyes just a bit to my left, I can see my *personal oath* which is stuck next to my monitor. There are a few phrases in it which are specifically meant to help me keep, “but I wanted to...” firmly locked outside.

Slower than a bee →

September 19, 2019

This vignette, seen in a certain way—as though it is happening, but not happening to me—can be just what it is, without any entanglement with my own interests. None of my reflexive moral judgments are present. The angle of the sun doesn't remind me of everything I still have to get done today. Seeing twenty-year-old students doesn't make me wish I was younger. Because I'm not here. It's just life unfolding, and on its own it's beautiful.

~ David Cain, from *How To See Things As They Are*

If you sit still, you can do what he's describing anywhere. (You'll have to go at least skim the article.) But if you sit still and do the visualization in nature, you will be immediately rewarded.

The world moves at its own pace. Somehow, it's neither always faster nor slower than my normal pace. It's a fundamentally different kind of pace that encompasses all the range of speeds. Regardless of speed, it's unhurried. Meanwhile, it turns out that I'm completely capable of hurrying at various speeds. But sitting still and noticing the pace of the world always provides me with striking perspective.

There are so many varied speeds; Bees and birds, wind and trees, sun and moon, and there are slower speeds of course, but I can't see those. If I pay extreme attention, in just the right situation, I can see a shadow cast by the sun moving. But that's as slow as I can see—something that moves on the scale of one day.

Have you ever stopped to consider the speed of a bee? Do bees even notice we are moving? Are we just these large-ish pieces of their environment which are always in different places when they return “tomorrow” (aka, a minute later in our timeframe)? It seems obvious to me that the bees are going too fast and are missing EVERYTHING. (Well, sure, pollination and bee-production they've got.) But from my enlightened, lofty perch of slower-than-the-bee, I can see so much more.

Which makes me wonder: From my lowly perch of faster-than-a-lot-of-other-things, what am I missing?

Movers Mindset Three Words →

November 12, 2019

This essay is also presented as episode *Craig Constantine: Discovery, reflection, and efficacy of the Movers Mindset* podcast.

In each of the Movers Mindset podcast episodes, I ask guests to pick three words to describe their practice. Each guest's choice has turned out to be a much more interesting and intriguing part of the conversation than we had initially anticipated.

The word *practice* goes beyond movement and often evokes broader images and ideas that reflect an approach to life. The idea that parkour and movement techniques in general are more than just physical has always been behind Movers Mindset. This is why I focus on ideas and reflection, for example, rather than on flashy videos of daring movement. The deeper dive into the mindset of movers is where the real magic happens.

That's why I decided to do some introspection and pick three words that describe *my practice*. It was a challenge because reducing your practice to three words can seem like you are saying that the practice is nothing more than these three words, so you try to pick broad, powerful words to make sure you cover everything. Really, however, when you pick words that are too broad and too sweeping, you wind up not really saying anything specific that is unique to you. On the other hand, if you try to pick overly specific words, they may describe only one tiny part of your practice and give the impression that the scope of your focus is too narrow.

Picking three words is a challenge that I give to our guests, so it's fair that I do it too. I found that capturing the essence of my practice in three words required a lot of introspection, and the act of choosing three words wound up being empowering. By going through the process, I now understand my practice more explicitly and am better prepared to describe it to other people. It's not that I did not know the path I was following before, but now the path is clearer. It is easier to determine if a new project is consistent with my practice and vision, and this helps guide my choices in the overall direction of Movers Mindset. In general, I found the exercise to be challenging and highly worthwhile. If you want the extra boost yourself, picking three words to describe your own practice is a good way to get started. It is a great way to *discover* things about yourself and about your relationship to the world.

This leads me to the first word: *discovery*. I wanted a word that involved starting with reality, with what we know about the world and about ourselves. I rejected *observation* because it is not active enough. It has connotations of just sitting back and watching, listening, and taking the world in

through your senses, but in a passive way. I also did not want a word like *imagination* or *invention* as my starting point, because these involve creating things.

Generations ago when Benjamin Franklin confronted that fearsomely powerful storm driven on by his even more powerful desire to know—a desire that pushed him beyond the limits of anything humans had ever done—he was driven by the urge to *discover*, the urge to take action to learn what it was and what made it work. Franklin *discovered* that lightning was a form of electricity, but Edison invented the lightbulb. Discovery always comes first. Franklin pushed past the millennia of fear, the millennia of cowering primitive people who saw lightning as the tool and province of the gods—never to be understood, grasped, or controlled by humans. He uncovered or *discovered* its secret. By learning what it was, he took the tool of the gods and made it his own. He was not the first to discover facts about electricity, but his actions symbolize the process and the principle: boldly looking at reality, uncovering its secrets, and moving them from the realm of mystery and superstition to **our** realm of understanding and science.

Discovery is an *active* process involving interacting or experimenting with reality. You may not discover that you are great at painting, cooking, or singing until you try and observe the results. Often you will discover that you need more practice or that you need to master specific skills and techniques. However, without action, you cannot discover your strengths to move you forward or discover any weaknesses to be overcome. Discovery involves the honest looking at reality and the identification and understanding of what reality tells you. Your opinions, wishes, feelings, do not matter at this stage. What matters is that you observe to the best of your ability, that you experiment, and that you see—with as much honesty and focus as you can muster—all that reality has to offer.

Discovery is not the end of the game; it is only the beginning. The second step in the process leads me to my second word: *reflection*. Discovery means you have learned something about reality and yourself. What should you do with that information? What does it mean? What do you do next? The answer is that you must think about what you learned. Why didn't I pick the word *thinking* instead of *reflection*? Thinking is too broad in meaning for this context. While I am a big advocate of thinking in general and recognize it as the key to every successful human endeavor—without exception, my practice involves a particular type of thinking that is tied directly to reality and the facts I have uncovered about it. *Reflection* captures this meaning. A *clear* reflection in a mirror involves the accurate reproduction of reality.

As we think about things, we want to be careful that we do not go off course, that we do not imagine things that are not real or ignore things that are. We want to make sure that our thinking accurately *reflects* those facts about reality that we have discovered. Reflection is a type of careful

thinking that takes each idea and connects it specifically to some fact about reality that we have discovered. There is nothing in your head to automatically guarantee that your thinking is correct. It is easy to go off course. It is easy to deceive yourself. It is easy to make the mistake that an early failure at a complex movement means that you will never master it. Reflection can protect you from such errors. If you fail in your first attempt, that is a fact, a part of reality that you cannot deny. So, the idea that you failed is valid; it corresponds to a fact you discovered. However, the idea that you will be bad at this every time you try is *imaginary*; you made it up. There is no discovery in reality, no fact in reality that corresponds to the notion that you will *always* fail. There is no reason to believe or to accept your imagined ideas when they do not *reflect* reality.

Reflection, then, is a type of self-check, a way of making sure that your ideas are validated by reality. Imagination can give you ideas about what you want to validate through discovery and reflection, but it leads to useful information only when the idea is tested. If you imagine you will always be bad at something, start testing your idea. Practice. Practice again and again. Discover if you get better or if you continue to be bad at it. Reflect on your progress honestly. If after a period of regular practice, you find that you still are no good at it, there is at least a possibility that you are right. Your conclusion has some support. But if you are much better now than you were when you started, that improvement supports the idea that you will eventually—with continued practice and diligence—get good at it.

Reflection also means holding a mirror up to yourself. Why do you like certain things? What makes you feel happy, successful, powerful or disappointed and sad? Why do you think you are good at something? How did you develop those skills? Reflecting on your strengths and understanding what worked for you previously helps you grow. Reflecting on the things that scare you and hold you back helps you develop the strengths you need to overcome those worries. When you reflect on your emotions, you discover ideas or *premises* that are the foundation of those emotions. This means you have the opportunity to reflect on those ideas and premises and test them against reality. Are they true or false? Do they correspond to reality or contradict it?

These two questions—Are your ideas true or false? Do your ideas correspond to reality or contradict it?—ask the same thing. Reality is the standard of right and wrong, of true and false. By actively reflecting about your ideas, your discoveries, your thoughts, and your feelings, you will eventually eliminate all contradictions from your entire life. You will reach a state where you see reality, and yourself in it, with full clarity and full understanding. The world has rules by which it behaves. Things act in a particular way. If you drop something, it falls. If you touch a fire, it hurts. If you act according to these rules, you will be successful. If you ignore the rules either by failing to discover them or by evasion, you fail. Acting in accordance with the rules of reality gives you a sense of self-confidence in your own ability. This leads me to my last word that captures this

self-confidence: *efficacy*.

After practicing discovery and reflection again and again, you realize through experience that the world is knowable. You learn that you can discover it, learn its rules, and apply them successfully. You know that you have the power to validate your results along the way and correct any errors. Reflection gives you confidence that what you have discovered, is correct; your knowledge and conclusions are valid. Given enough time and effort, you know that you can reach any rational goal, understand any process, and check and refine your results thoroughly until you have the confidence of certainty. This mental state, where you *know* you can meet any challenge, learn anything, develop any skill, solve any problem is *efficacy*.

Efficacy is the power to produce a desired effect. Recognition of your own efficacy means that you have recognized your own potential for continued success and growth. Your choices of actions at this point are not based on concerns about current limits of your ability or understanding. Instead, your choices are guided by what skills, practices, and accomplishments will give you the most enjoyment, make your life better, increase your skills, or broaden your knowledge. Your experience in life changes from asking “What can I do?” to asking “What should I do to make my life the best it can be?”

The ancient Greeks had a word for this process of reaching your full potential: *eudaimonia*. I did not pick that as one of my three words, in part because it is even more obscure than efficacy, but eudaimonia was in the running. Aristotle wrote most extensively about eudaimonia, but it was important to many Greek philosophers. It is difficult to translate, because the concepts leading up to it are not widely understood in our culture. Few people today recognize that by understanding the rules of reality, validating them, and putting them into practice consistently, success is almost guaranteed—barring error or misfortune. Eudaimonia integrates these ideas into a process of living your best life. It is a continuous process of self-actualization where all the best conditions are in place: happiness, morality, meaning, purpose, the fulfilling of our special, unique potentials as humans. Efficacy is necessary to have the confidence to work toward eudaimonia.

Eudaimonia is more than just a final condition. It is the process of human flourishing. It is the process of doing those things that best help you function well as a human being at the highest level. My other two words, discovery and reflection, are both active processes, and I want to focus on the active process of developing and recognizing efficacy. Efficacy includes both being effective and recognizing that you are effective; it describes a self-aware competence in *action*. *Eudaimonia* is the goal, but recognizing and developing your own *efficacy* is how you get there and stay there.

Finally, I wanted three words that reflect my practice in terms of its essentials, but which could also

help others find their personal path to success. The words had to capture the ideas of *action* and *thinking, doing* and *learning*—the *Mover* and the *Mindset*. They had to wrap up my process and philosophy in a way that captures who I am and provides value to the Movers Mindset audience. I think that discovery and reflection applied iteratively, building on previous knowledge and success leads to continued growth. Repeated experience with success and growth leads to a recognition of efficacy where you understand that you have potential to be successful in almost anything.

Activities that involve continuous improvements are often described as *mastery* practices. Mastery practices involve continuous improvement through discovery, reflection, and active practice with full recognition of efficacy. While mastery practices range from focused practices like law, medicine, martial arts, plumbing or carpentry, the most important mastery practice is living your own life to the fullest—reaching your full potential—*eudaimonia*. Since your full potential requires continuous improvement, it is important to develop the mindset—the set of ideas—that allows for this unceasing movement toward greater success and well-being. Discovery of this process, reflection to hone its accuracy, and development of efficacy are the steps that each individual must undertake independently.

Although your own path is unique, the principles involved are universal and can be learned from others. A goal of Movers Mindset is to bring these principles to light in an accessible way that encourages discovery and reflection while demonstrating and promoting efficacy in each individual. While you still have to walk the path on your own, under your own power and by your own effort, Movers Mindset hopes to make the path a little clearer.

One more walk →

December 30, 2019

A few years ago, I started walking to Mordor. Based on my counting and tracking, I'm at walk number 499 and I *think* I can finish the mileage in the final walk.

...but I'll cover the details when I'm done. Today I want to linger on the feeling of knowing that the end is nigh.

My motto for 2019 was, “no.” It wasn't intended as a sour-puss negativity sprint, but rather an attempt to get myself to be mindful about what I commit to. As the year closes, and my walking

goal nears completion, I want to think very carefully about what I expect to feel and experience. Where did I first hear of the goal? Why did the goal call to me? What did I want to accomplish by setting out on the journey? What will change when I finish the goal? How am I different?

Most importantly, I want to not replace the goal—and the work, and the time investment, and the mental energy—with another thing. Am I able to have a little less daily work? Am I able to have one less project in the works? Am I able to have one less thing on my mind?

...or am I going to scurry back to the comfort of “busy” and add something?

Nobody cares →

January 21, 2020

Nobody cares. Do it yourself.

~ *Hugh MacLeod*

This is a terrific splash of cold water. I interpret this not as a pessimistic, “people suck.” But rather, a catalyst to, “simply start.”

Nobody cares in the same way one cares about one’s own projects and ideas. Obviously nobody cares like that! But why do we—ok fine yes I’m projecting my behavior onto you... Why do we look outward for the external validation? Certainly, the real world is the ultimate arbiter of truth. (As opposed to one’s thoughts.) But no amount of external data is going to create or destroy your true passion. If you have a project that you cannot put down because you’re passionate about it to the extent that it consumes your life, then whether or not you have external validation is irrelevant.

Do the thing. Make the art. It doesn’t *matter* that nobody cares. Do it yourself.

Because your soul demands it →

January 31, 2020

So I make it really simple. I'd say art is: "That which you have no choice but to do, because your soul demands it".

Yes, it's a fairly flawed definition. But it illustrates something that most people don't get about artists or entrepreneurs. We do it, because if we don't, life feels empty. The downside being, it doesn't exactly come with an easy life.

~ Hugh MacLeod

I've found it very difficult to distinguish, "I started this thing therefore I must finish this thing, and I must do it well," from, "I must finish this thing, and I must do it well." Notice the missing, "I started this thing therefore..." I have a lot of ideas, several of which I often believe are totally not utter crap. So I start on them.

But once I've begun, it gets very hard to tell why I am continuing. What exactly indicates when my soul demands I should continue?

I think about whatever thing I'm currently working on *all the time*. So I can't simply use, "does it hold my attention?" It sure feels like I absolutely must continue this thing! Meanwhile, I've a long list of things that consumed my attention and energy at one point, but which today are lost from sight in the rearview mirror.

Lately I've been experimenting with taking holidays by trying to set something down. This requires immense effort in the beginning; I usually have to cold-turkey-quit to get away from my passion project du jour. Sometimes, day by day, the urge to pick it back up fades and I feel like maybe that project should be left in the rear view mirror. I suppose that my soul doesn't actually demand it because I hope that my soul wouldn't just give up after a few days.

Questions today. None of them elucidating. ymmv.

Try erasing the whiteboard →

February 5, 2020

You know what the best thing about being an entrepreneur is? That you never have to experience self-doubt, the way people with normal day jobs do.

Ha. I was just kidding. Actually, as an entrepreneur, you have self-doubt coming out of your pores like cold sweat. And that's on a good day.

~ Hugh MacLeod

A “local maximum” is a nearby, tall hill. If you find you’re standing in a puddle and the water is rising, walking uphill is a great idea. This will lead you to a local maximum. “Local” means a maximum which you can find by simply heading “up” from where you are.

Imagine you have a project under discussion. You and your team are thinking, talking and writing [and editing and erasing bits here and there] on the whiteboard as you capture the project you are imagining. Because you have some perspective— because you can see the entire idea as it’s laid out on the board, you can probably find a maximum better than just a “local” one. You can notice broad connections, and realize that (for example) if you do some extra bit of that’s-not-obvious work, then these two far-apart pieces will give us this new feature. Hey! ...that’s better, and it’s not a simple improvement—that is, it’s not simply directly up out of this rising puddle of water.

But it’s still a local maximum. Sure, it’s not the one immediately adjacent to the puddle. But it’s still a maximum *in the context of what’s on the board*.

What happens if, after you are done— after you’ve got the best solution you can image— What happens if you note the key features that are the “must haves”, and then you entirely erase the board. (This is a metaphor. If you do this for real, definitely take a photo before erasing!)

Now take your blank board and write in the things you identified as the key parts before you erased. Now build the thing again.

Did you get the exact same thing you had before? If not, what exactly is missing, or added, in the new version? Is this version better, or worse? What if you’re whiteboarding about something that you cannot reset and start over— You can easily erase the whiteboard, but not the actual thing. Can you learn something from doing the “erase the whiteboard” exercise that would enable you do something *not normally obvious*...

...to head down the hill, off your current local maximum, to a hill you can't see from where you currently are. What if that other hill had all the current great stuff—not *everything*, but the great parts—and it had *something else*?

Do the work →

February 12, 2020

She didn't give me a chance because I was an "insider" or because I had the fire of an "outsider." She gave me a chance because I did the work. When she was in on the weekends, she saw me there too. When she asked me to read something, she got a report on her desk the next day. If she took the time to solicit ideas from the window seats, I spoke up. I made an ass out of myself more times than I'd like to admit but I watched, read, and learned.

~ Steven Pressfield from, «<https://stevenpressfield.com/2013/04/insideoutside/>»

In all my years I've never worked a "real" job; I never had one of those corporate wage-slave jobs you may have heard of from the 80's and 90's. I had two, generic-type, hourly-wage-type jobs; one involving insane physical labor as a grounds-keeper on a golf course. I worked while in college, but only for the extra spending money, so I had the luxury of working jobs I wanted. Lots of people at those jobs helped me out, and lots of people have given me breaks along the way. Why?

Because I did the work.

I cut the edging of sand traps in the blazing heat, by hand, with a machete. I mopped floors, loaded and drove a delivery truck. Mowed grass, mucked horse stalls, loaded tons of paper into laser printers, read a room full of manuals, typed and then edited an entire book chapter full of complex math. Some things I did for money, some for favors, and some for fun. I put my back into it, literally and figuratively.

So now—on a Wednesday morning, relaxing before a fire, deciding what I will do today—I'm also thinking: Who do I know that could use a tip? Who could do wonders with an opportunity? Who could accomplish a lot if I just helped them get in motion?

Yes, each of us should seize the day, chart our own course, and begin now under our own power. But those of us in positions where we are able, we should be helping, nudging, pushing and guiding wherever our efforts can have outsized benefit.

Single-serving sized visits with books →

February 19, 2020

Imagine you have a book problem. (Don't judge me, please.) You've read countless books. You've given away countless books in an attempt to get the foundation of your house to stop settling to one side. You've gone through your to-read book shelves and culled as many as you can bear over to the normal shelves, resigned to being okay with never reading them.

...and you still have *hundreds* of books that you *really* want to read.

There are two common ways that people recommend reading books: One-at-a-time, (whether thoroughly and carefully cover-to-cover or by breezing through them more quickly,) and multiple-at-a-time. In both ways however, you intend to pick some book and to completely, (whatever that means to you,) read the book.

I want to explain a third way: Single-serving sized visits.

Begin by allocating a set amount of time. Something like 45 minutes seems to work well for me, but it can be any amount that you can do in one sitting. Extra bonus points if you can make this a recurring thing you do regularly.

You will need post-it notes and a writing instrument. You will *not* need a bookmark.

You're going to pay a short visit, (say 45 minutes,) to your book collection by picking one book. Take the book (and your post-its and your writing instrument) and head for your reading spot. (You do have a designated reading spot, right? :)

Spend 45 minutes reading the book however you wish. Skim it. Read the prologue. Dig deep into chapter 4. Start reading at page 88. Turn it upside down and read it [upside down] backwards. Whatever. If you really don't like the book, you can walk out on the date and put the book on your read pile.

As you read it insert post-its...

1. **...on the upper edge of pages whenever you find a reference to any other book.** It doesn't have to be a book you have, or have read, or even want to read. Just start leaving "top" post-its referring to books. Write the name, (and author, etc., as much or as little as you like—"I have this", "I want this book", whatever) on each note.
2. **...on the outer edge of pages whenever you find something *interesting*.** A quote, an idea, killer prose, whatever. Write a note explaining the reason you like what you're noting, maybe try to position the post-it, and include a little arrow that points to the part—Or just a blank post-it, and write directly in your book if that's your style.

After the allotted time, your visit is over. Put the book back, either in the to-read area, or maybe in the read-these area. (If you bother to distinguish.)

Over time, you will slowly get to know more and more of your books. You won't feel like you *need* to read the books—you already know you can't possibly finish them all. At least this way you're going to have *hundreds* of great little visits with these ideas you've collected.

Over time, you'll find more and more top post-its as you build mental links to other books. You'll find all those side post-its marking ideas you like. You can also pick up a book and see what you think of it— I've never touched this book. [It has no post-its.] I clearly *love* this book. [It furry with notes.] When you want to recommend a book, you are likely to have post-its that have the good bits you'll want them to see first. The top post-its are going to suggest other books in your collection you might want to visit next.

...and on and on.

Like architecture? →

February 28, 2020

Most importantly, I think we need more software that's done—not allof it, just more of it. Just like we're always going to have prefab buildings to serve a particular function at a particular time, software that continues to change and improve pushes us forward and is absolutely necessary. But maybe it's ok for that app you're working on to be done. And by going into it with a realization that it's going to be done

| *some day, you might even make something that lasts for decades.*

| ~ *Rian van der Merwe, from The Analog Revolution*

It's taken me a long time—like, maybe, right up until about ten minutes ago... It's taken me a long time to realize just how much I enjoy creating physical artifacts. I built a bunch of universes worth of stuff with Legos as a kid, lots of model airplanes, and a scratch-built glider that I flew untold hours. With the help of various others, I built a complex shed from plans I purchased, and a small retaining wall that solved a fundamental problem with how our home was built 60 years ago.

The internet and computers clicked right into my obsession for understanding things and for making things work. The ephemeral nature of the digital things I've built, or been involved with, over the years is a big *positive*; it enables one to take big swings with vastly reduced down-sides. On the other hand, it's ephemeral.

I know exactly where and when I became inspired to start this, my web site. The inspiration arose from within me. At the time it was because I felt I had something to say—something to share. At the time I already had a long established personal website which I tossed in the trash bin and started anew. It turns out, I now see, that what I really had was the ongoing urge to think and learn and to build something as permanent as is possible on the internet.

Today, it may well be that I do have something unique and interesting to share. (...or it may be I don't.) But I'm quite certain that the thinking and learning I lured myself into, day after day as I built this site one post at a time, was without exaggeration the smartest thing I have ever done (and will continue to do.)

Are you too called to create?

Your model of the world →

March 3, 2020

Reading and experience train your model of the world. And even if you forget the experience or what you read, its effect on your model of the world persists. Your mind is like a compiled program you've lost the source of. It works, but you don't know why.

~ *Paul Graham from, How You Know*

I deeply love the concept of having a “model” of the world. I’m also deeply interested in having a correct model of the world. The model enables me to understand the world, to move through it, and to create the changes I wish.

I used to try to carefully create my model; for each question I encountered, I would try to learn everything that was important to determine the best answer. But that is an endless fool’s errand. The whole world become an endless field of rabbit holes. Each rabbit hole is wonderfully interesting, and it is immediately clear that exploring even a significant number of them is hopeless in one lifetime.

Instead, I learned to follow my curiosity—which is the recipe for rabbit-holes ad nauseum—but to stop when I’m no longer curious. Piece by piece a model of the world is assembled. Want to build a great model? ...don’t focus on building the best model. Instead focus on this next piece of the model—the next thing you read, the next person you interact with, the next thing you do, the next thing you explore.

You have a model too, and you use it constantly. What are you doing to build your model?

Slight interest with a dash of surprise →

March 10, 2020

There's a special kind of slightly-surprised magic which you can reliably determine has occurred when someone makes the sound, *hunh*.

My grandmother was a sought-after seamstress who handmade custom draperies. Think custom home decor and hotel lobbies. As her eyesight diminished year-by-year, she eventually asked my dad to add a small attachment to her sewing machine: a clever little mechanism that is able to pull the thread through the eye of the sewing needle. Yes, there really is such a thing. It's a brilliant little device. It works like magic and is strikingly-obvious once you see it in action. She hands my dad a few German-made sewing-machine parts; tiny little parts... a single tiny screw, a little doomathingus, and this third whatchamacallit. There are no instructions though. So my dad—an accomplished mechanic by trade—puts on his glasses and sits down with her Pfaff sewing machine, thinking, “how hard can it be to add these two parts to this sewing machine using this one screw?” I don't know how long he actually spent trying. That detail was always suspiciously omitted whenever he told this story.

Eventually he gives up in failure and lugs the machine to the Pfaff sewing machine dealer. The dealer is old-school—located in a 100-year-old sewing mill building, with a little front-shop and with the real workshop in the back. My dad sets the machine and parts on the counter. This story is set in the 80's, and although it was never mentioned in the telling of the story, I'm assuming the machine came from that shop 30 years earlier. I'd also bet that my grandmother called them [on her rotary phone] to order the clever little needle-threading-thingy from there too.

So the scene is set: One wizened, male mechanic with a sewing machine and some parts. Another wizened, male mechanic jaded by a century of stoopid sewing machine problems and questions.

“Hello, how can I help you?”

“I can't get this attachment to... well... attach.”

“It's easy. You just use that screw to attach that thingus and that whatsit to the arm right there where the sewing needle...”

“No, sorry, it's not actually possible.”

It's a classic show-down. In fact, you know it well. You've had this show-down yourself at the auto mechanic, in the grocery store, or on the phone with your Internet tech support.

The shop owner looks at my dad like he's an imbecile and with a flicker of an eye-roll, starts to pick up the machine and the parts to go in the back...

"...wait! No don't take it in the back. Let me see you do it."

At this point it's still a battle: My dad with a problem, and the sewing machine guy not truly interested in helping. The guy grudgingly gets his glasses and starts. ...and the little whatsit falls out. ...the little screw won't quite stay in. Maybe if he moves his light this way, and tries reaching in from the other side... nope. Another try. ...and a fourth try.

And then, "hunh."

"...ok, now you can take it in the back."

The moral is that any time you have a problem, and you have someone whose help you want, there is before-the-hunh and after-the-hunh. No one will truly help you—no one will truly *own* your problem—before they say, "hunh."

Motivation versus validation →

March 11, 2020

A great number of bits are dedicated to discussing motivation. In particular, it's well-covered that my motivation should spring from within. I should do whatever-it-is because I value the work or the self-transformation. Far too many people are externally motivated and so those bits are well-deployed.

But validation? I don't hear about that so much.

Engineering, (think bridges and airplanes,) we all agree should be validated. Implicitly we know that means *externally* validated. We know that engineering done in a filter-bubble is not truly validated, and that ends badly.

But everyone seems to toss the baby with the bath water: "I'm not doing engineering or hard science, therefore, as a principle, I don't need external validation."

But, that's right only as a corrective term in our lives. "Holy shit our society is too externally

motivated, so let's stop with the external motivation." Yes, please.

But once you figure out how to do your work from a place of kindness and internal motivation, you next need to put it out there. Put a price tag on it... Ask for feedback... Does the book sell... Do the people who follow your advice go on to do nicer or better things... In short, are you efficacious?

Yes yes yes art for arts' sake is not what I'm talking about. Paint just for yourself and die an undiscovered master—that's internal motivation for the win. (not sarcasm)

But if, you know, what you're doing is supposed to be True, (however that's defined for whatever it is you're doing,) then you better put yourself out there and get some *external* validation. Yes, you're going to need thick skin, and certainly don't go alone, but go you must.

What do I control? →

April 6, 2020

Nothing has all of the ingredients for the emotional breakdown recipe quite like a pandemic-induced global shutdown. Lack of face-to-face socializing and general social isolation? Check. Financial uncertainty and mass unemployment? Check. Lack of regular exercise, sunlight, and access to basic necessities? Check. High uncertainty of one's safety and security in the near future? Check. Tons of free-time to refresh news feeds five thousand times per day? Double check.

~ Mark Manson from, [How to Manage Your Mental Health](#)

If ever there was a yawning opportunity to backslide on all the things I've changed in recent years—setting aside time for reflection, reading, boundaries with television and food, habits of movement and exercise, how I use the Internet (it no longer uses me,) writing, recording podcasts, ... If ever there was a *yawning* opportunity to backslide, this current shift is it.

I still have people I care about. I make decisions about my health. I make choices using my mind by applying reason. I balance conflicting demands for my time and resources. Certainly, most of the day-to-day *details* of life writ large are different. But all the things which begin this paragraph remain unchanged for me.

WAIT. Why did I start with pointing out there's a yawning opportunity to backslide, if I'm saying nothing has changed?

...because the rest of world has relaxed what it expects *from me*.

Think about that. If I veered and: stayed up late binge-watching Netflix, didn't get up at the time I normally do, didn't shower and shave when I have video calls, didn't act professionally, etc., people would let it slide. Right? The world is facing a global crisis, so it's ok to relax the standards.

Instead, I'm raising my standards for myself. Now, just when everyone else would be happy to give me more slack, I'm renewing my efforts; Do I really want to do this (whatever-it-is), or is there a better way I can spend my time right now? What relationships do I nurture, and which do I sever? What have I been reading? What have I been creating; does what I create build the world up or tear it down?

Creating value →

April 17, 2020

Creating value is unrelated to busyness. When you find yourself — as I sometimes do — working long hours, day after day, reacting and e-mailing and hatching schemes, it's useful to remember that you're working more than some of the world's most respected and impactful thinkers.

~ *Cal Newport from, You're Working too Hard to Make an Impact*

I often write about focus because it's something I'm trying to improve. When I've lost focus, it's a challenge to call myself back to the important things. But a better plan for improvement would be to not lose focus in the first place, or at least to not lose focus as often.

Recently I've been keeping in mind Viktor Frankl's thought about there being **a space between stimulus and response**. I find that when I'm able to remember that space, I'm able to consciously decide when, and if, I should shift my focus.

For example, I sat down to write and a myriad of other thoughts arose. Instead of trying to ignore them or make them go away—don't think of a pink elephant—I zoom in on each idea: I consider the sense of urgency; no, actually there's nothing urgent about the action this thought is suggesting. I consider the sense of entitlement; no, actually there's no reason that I should be congratulated or rewarded for this thought or what it's suggesting I attempt to do. I consider the benefit to myself or others; no, actually this thought isn't vastly better than the other ideas and projects I'm already working. Soon enough the thought moves along like a petulant child. I think, "let's see, where was I? I had sat down to write."

Externally, that whole process—even if I repeat it for multiple thoughts—looks very unlike busy-ness. It looks much like I'm sitting still. It looks like I'm gazing out the window. It even looks a bit like I'm focused on writing. In fact, I am still focused on writing.

It's my choice: Is this the moment when I want to change where I've placed my focus? If not, then terrific, I'm still focused where I had chosen.

Redefining our mission →

April 24, 2020

Our assignment, like that of any new boss or coach, is to overhaul the organization (i.e., ourselves), strip it down to its basics, redefine its mission, its goals, its virtues and its vices. We have to fire every part of ourselves that can't or won't get onboard the new mission and we have to achieve buy-in from all the other parts that we have allowed to remain with the franchise.

~ Steven Pressfield from, *Why the Raiders Suck*

This exercise always proves beneficial for me; systematically going through everything that I'm doing, my habits, my friends—everything. Take the time to assess, and in particular to consider: Knowing what I know today, if today I was offered this “opportunity” to allocate my time or resources, on this thing, would I take it? It's a powerful way to work around our inherent tendency to fall for the **sunk cost fallacy**.

Here I have 500 books on my “read this” bookcase. Picking up one book, knowing all that I know

today, would I read this book? Considering all that I know today, would I buy a TV, subscribe to Netflix, and arrange my living room in this fashion? ...would I call it my sedentary entertainment room instead? Knowing what I know today, would I agree to have dinner or drinks with this person who I currently have labeled [in my mind] as a friend? How does each of these things move me forward?

Honing your craft →

April 28, 2020

We've created this fantasy world where everyone is just 30 days of courage boosting exercises and life hacks away from living an amazing life.

But when you study people like Martin, who really do live remarkable lives, you almost always encounter stretches of years and years dedicated to honing craft.

~ Cal Newport from, [Closing Your Interests Opens More Interesting Opportunities](#)

This is the eternal challenge of seeing the forest through the trees; of maintaining perspective.

I'm constantly reminded of the scenes in the *Hobbit* where they are trying to walk through 250 miles of a forest named, Mirkwood. "Do not leave the path," is the only guidance they are given. After what seems like endless daily struggles, they eventually dispatch a party member to climb a singularly large tree to the uppermost branches. Unfortunately, even from that lofty perch all that could be seen was more forest forever and ever in every direction. In fact, they were in a low lying area, reasonably close to the forest edge. Crushed by the misleading perspective, their journey takes a turn for the worse.

I have so many projects where I start into the forest with the best intentions. I steel myself with, "I know this is going to turn into a slog at some point, and I'm going to remember why I went into the forest to give me the strength to carry on!" Yeah, that never works out. If the project is actually worth doing, then the forest is necessarily crushingly vast and the journey through must eventually become hopeless. *Of course it's hard; that's what makes it worth it.*

The secret? You have to love living in the forest, just for the sake of living in the forest. Then every

morning is an adventure. Sure, some days are going to suck, but every morning will begin a new day of opportunity.

The process of reflection →

May 17, 2020

Much of the power of the **Movers Mindset** podcast's signature question, "three words to describe your practice?" comes from thinking about one's personal understanding of the word practice. In the podcast episodes, sometimes the guest's discussion of that understanding is a profound part of their interview. Sometimes their surgical statement of three words is its sublime culmination.

In 2019, we posed the three-words question of the project itself. This turned out to be a surprisingly fruitful exercise. We came up with three words to describe *our* practice, and I subsequently adopted them as the three words to describe *my* practice:

Discovery. Reflection. Efficacy.

If those three words describe my practice—the journey of my whole life—then what is the purpose of this web site? Why go through all this work? It's taken me 9 years and the previous 2,499 posts to understand:

It's a vehicle for my process of reflection.

I used to think I wrote because there was something I wanted to say. Then I thought, "I will continue to write because I have not yet said what I wanted to say"; but I know now I continue to write because I have not yet heard what I have been listening to.

~ **Mary Rueflé** from, **Madness, Rack, and Honey**

I try to forget my ideas →

June 16, 2020

*Keeping track of project ideas, in my experience, **is usually a waste of time.** I used to fear that if I didn't capture and review my sparks of brilliance I'd forget them and an opportunity for impact would be lost.*

The reality, however, is that most people (myself included) have waymore ideas for things to work on than they have time to work. Forgetting ideas is not your problem. Having too many ideas competing for your attention to execute any one well is a more pressing concern.

~ Cal Newport from, [Deep Habits: Forget Your Project Ideas \(Until You Can't Forget Them\)](#) – Cal Newport

In the beginning I didn't try to do anything with my ideas. Even though—my mom may disagree—I had mastered bathing and dressing, I was still under the false-impression that my mind was for *holding* ideas. It's not good at that. Actually it's terrible at that.

It took me a few decades to figure out— ...honestly, I never did figure it out. Rather, I started reading a bunch of stuff about how to get my arse organized, and started to write things down. College helped. [43 Folders](#) helped, a lot. Reading [Getting Things Done](#) made the final pieces click into place.

Whereupon I entered the Second Epoch of Craig. At this time I dutifully studied, and earned my title, Wizard of Process and Organization, with a specialization in Internet Dark Arts. Do not meddle in the ways of Process and Organization Wizards; we are quick to anger and you are tasty with ketchup. As you can tell, I completely lost my marbles in the process. Near the end of this Second Epoch I reach the epitome of my list-building, (and project management setups, and universe-domination plans.) I was completely drowning in over-planned, over-committed, over-stressed, over-organization.

Cue, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and the dawning of the Third Epoch of Craig. Wherein I straight-up deleted most of my lists of ideas and plans. The really important stuff continues to live in my level-37 wizard process-management systems. I know they're working when I forget they're working and yet things magically appear when I need them to.

Ideas are worthless. It's execution, (plus luck, and timing,) that makes them valuable. I've a few ideas that I *cannot* get out of my head. Those are the ones I'm working on in an attempt to make them go away. But it's a good day any time I can manage to just forget about some idea having blissfully done nothing with it.

Performing with a safety net →

July 29, 2020

When recording conversations for the Movers Mindset podcast the guests know I'm not going to edit what they say to change their meaning. They know I'm bringing journalistic integrity to the conversation. (I'm not doing strict journalism, but that feature of journalism is present.) I do my best to set up the correct space (physical, emotional and mental,) so that we can co-create the best conversation possible. I'm not digging for dirt, creating tension, nor trying to create any other saccharine artifice. But that doesn't change the fact that we are performing for an audience. The final necessary piece to facilitating a great conversation is a safety net.

Each conversation... each *performance* is better if we can reach just a bit farther than we might normally be comfortable doing. That's why I bring a safety net. I very clearly give the guest a safe word which they can incant at any time to take back what they've said.

I don't include the guest in the post-production process. They're not invited to review the material, or to give additional thoughts about what to keep or what to cut. In fact, the only people who have time to do that, are wanna-be cooks, who will only mess up the soup if I let them in my kitchen. Instead, I and my team do all the post-production difficult work which is in fact our responsibility. The guest already did the *really* hard work of being themselves on-mic.

I do also say, "take your time— silence is free and we can easily trim out 30 seconds of you thinking before you speak." I've also a few other little coaching tidbits I share to prep them for being recorded. But it's the safety net which makes them feel comfortable trying something they might otherwise hesitate about. Part of the magic of a great conversation is how it develops organically, and without the safety net most people dial their caution up a few notches to be safe. With a safety net, most people are delighted to take a leap to see what they can do.

On a mission →

October 8, 2020

When I arrived at the atelier, the canvas was blank and I simply began poking at making little pin-points of color. Poking just to see each little point. Sure, I avoided some entire areas of the canvas. That top-left corner didn't interest me, but that area above the center caught my focus. Then my gaze wandered a few inches and I found I was putting points down in another, new-to-me, blank area. Day by week by month by year by decade I wandered up to the canvas. Curiously, I now realize I never looked each day at the canvas as I walked up—or walked away or simply past. I just headed to this atelier and— Although, come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I thought it was a video game Arcade at one point, and it looked like a snowy ski slope too for a while, and I recall breaking waves and some sea smells. That's... interesting. When exactly did I realize that this place is a true Atelier? Sure sure yes yes, the particular dots are still very [very!] interesting; the minutia seems fractal and the more closely I peer, the more interested I become.

But just the other day—although, it quickly became a couple weeks ago, soon to be a couple months, a couple years, a couple decades...

But just the other day I peered over my glasses and looked at the whole canvas for what might have been the first time ever. Holy shit, it's a **Georges Seurat** painting of some afternoon on some island! I mean: The overall composition is so blindingly freakin' obvious and banal that I'm tempted to chuck the whole thing as trivial— ...until I peer closely and see all the infinitely intricately interconnected dots and—bam!— *VERTIGO!*

My vision is a world where everyone can flourish.

My mission is creating better conversations that spread understanding and compassion.

Will you join me?

He who is not even looking →

December 9, 2020

Don't expect, then, that you can sample the masterpieces of great minds by way of summaries; you must examine the whole, work over the whole. Their structure is a totality fitted together according to the outlines of their special genius, and if any member is removed the whole may collapse.

...

That is why we give boys apothegms, what the Greeks call chriai, to learn by heart, because the childish mind, which cannot comprehend more, is able to grasp them. But for a man advanced in study to hunt such gem is disgraceful; he is using a handful of clichés for a prop and leaning on his memory; by now he should stand on his own feet. He should be producing bons mots, not remembering them. It is disgraceful for an old man or one in sight of old age to be wise by book. "Zeno said this." What do you say? "This Cleanthes said." What do you say? How long will you be a subaltern? Take command and say things which will be handed down to posterity. Produce something of your own. All those men who never create but lurk as interpreters under the shadow of another are lacking, I believe, in independence of spirit. They never venture to do the things they have long rehearsed. They exercise their memories on what is not their own. But to remember is one thing, to know another. Remembering is merely overseeing a thing deposited in the memory; knowing is making the thing your own, not depending on the model, not always looking over your shoulder at the teacher. "Zeno said this, Cleanthes that"—is there any difference between you and a book? How long will you learn? Begin to teach! One man objects, "Why should I listen to lectures when I can read?" Another replies, "The living voice adds a great deal." It does indeed, but not a voice which merely serves for another's words and functions as a clerk.

There is another consideration. First people who have not rid themselves of leading-strings follow their predecessors where all the world has ceased to follow them, and second, they follow them in matters still under investigation. But if we rest content with solutions offered, the real solution will never be found. Moreover, a man who follows another not only finds nothing, he is not even looking. What is the upshot? Shall I not walk in the steps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use

the old path, but if I find a shorter and easier way I shall make a new path. The men who made the old paths are not our suzerains but our pioneers. Truth is open to all; it has not been pre-empted. Much of it is left for future generations.

~ *Seneca*, from Letter 33, Maxims

This is Seneca at his mic-drop best. (Unlike the [borderline torturous silver point style](#) you also see quoted from on occasion.) Here he's writing a personal letter to one of his long-time students.

If it's made you perk up, I recommend digging into this letter further by reading, [On the Futility of Learning Maxims](#), over on the Stoic Letters web site. That's also a great introduction to the nuance of translating these very old works; there are significant differences between M. Hadas's translation circa 1958 and whatever translation Stoic Letters is using, (I looked, but it's not clear to me.)

Obviously the thread I'm tugging on here is meta: It's one thing to nod along in the audience of a performance— “yes yes yes I agree I'm doing that yes.” It's quite another to stand up, and ask to speak next. It was about 10 years ago that I began this blog, and about 5 years ago that I began seriously devoting intentional effort to creating something here.

(□)/

I'm not sure that I'm setting much of an example. But trying to walk-the-walk has definitely helped *me*.

In the spirit of the season: Go read this next, [What do you do for fun?](#)

It's about sleep →

December 18, 2020

The general sentiment here is that everyone else is sleeping so you're not missing out on something important and you can spend time taking care of yourself, which generally leads to a positive impact on your productivity throughout the day.

| ~ *Shane Parrish from, What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*

The reason successful people are found doing their important work in the morning—working out, reading, writing, ... whatever it is that is important to *them*—is because it's right after when *they* have rested.

I'll repeat: Sleep is the most important thing. Good sleep. Learn about sleep. Your life is already arranged around sleep, although you may wrongly think you're consciously in control—you're not... your body is in control. Fix your sleep.

Then use the time just after resting—that's probably "morning"—to do what you want to actually get done. All the things that you think interrupt you from doing your real work? ...you're enabling that, and you can change that too.

Listening →

March 12, 2021

As opposed to listening to refute, or listening to respond.

Sometimes I simply have a conversation. I find they spring up through a crack in the concrete: A random encounter begins with some words exchanged per social norm, and quickly expands as both sides shift their focus to the person before them. More often they push up through fertile ground; a social gathering where, "get together and socialize," is literally on the agenda. My journey exploring conversation began with these found conversations; I simply found myself having cool conversations.

I soon learned that I love creating conversation. I began trying to create conversation, (between myself and one or more others,) initially simply for fun and later in the context of recording podcast episodes. I was surprised to find that having recording gear, an agenda ("I'd like to interview you about..."), and simply acting like I knew what I was doing, was sufficient to get things going!

If I truly do want to engage in a good conversations, it turns out that my actions follow automatically. I share things about myself and doing so invites the other person to share. I take things seriously which conveys that I value the interaction and what I'm hearing. I express my interest

directly by asking questions about what—in the moment, not the day before—is interesting; questions which show the other person I’m generally curious. Overall, I demonstrate that I’m listening because I’m interested, rather than because I want to immediately do something with what I’m about to hear.

Be the hornet? →

March 18, 2021

Is it better to be the fly on the wall, or the hornet in the room?

I variously categorize conversations on a spectrum from formal to casual. Today I want to talk about conversations that fall in the middle. At the formal end would be police interrogations and then—perhaps—live, antagonistic interviews of politicians. At the casual end would be pillow-talk and long-term friends around a campfire with their preferred beverages. In the middle is fertile ground for great conversations.

So what exactly is in the middle? Therein lie conversations built on a shared intention: Two people who want to resolve a difference, who want to co-create something new from their individual experiences, or who are simply excited about taking a leap into the unknown experience that is a good conversation. It’s that third one which really calls to me these days.

The leap

I’ve now done enough **recorded conversations** to say two things:

I used to think I was doing interviews. In fact, I began using a process and format intentionally meant to create interviews; I showed up with things I was interested in and I wanted to learn more about from my partner. I soon discovered that when we veered away from the formal-end of the conversation spectrum, (away from the “interview” I had intended to create,) into the more middle-area of simply good conversation, that was when I most enjoyed the experience. My conversation partners clearly enjoyed it more, and the listeners did too. (“hmmmmmm... maybe I am onto something here?” **#seecraiglearn**)

The first thing I have to say is that the form of the created artifact follows from the process.

If I use a process intended to create formal conversations, that's what I'll get, (more or less.) If I use a process intended to create more casual conversations, then I get that, (more or less.) The insight is that the process for creating casual conversation is not itself casual. The process is specific, rigorous, and frankly exhausting. It's exhausting because I want to execute the process in order to create the best possible conversation, and I want to experience that conversation. That's in contrast to my conversation partner who is only attempting to do the latter because they're only aware of their desire to experience the conversation. They're not aware of the process, and they probably shouldn't be aware.

Each conversation—each performance, since I'm today talking about when we are recording—is better if we're comfortable going just a bit farther than we might normally. This is where the process pays off. Everything I've done in preparation, and everything I do during the conversation, from the obvious to the subtle to the outright manipulative, is in service of creating the best space for that conversation.

The second thing I have to say is that to create good, casual conversations I have to help my partner leap.

Be the hornet?

I recently listened to [Jesse Thorn's interview of Werner Herzog for *The Turnaround*](#). If you've read this far, I can't imagine you wouldn't enjoy listening to that ~35 minutes of Thorn and Herzog.

In the conversations that I'm currently interested in creating and recording I simply cannot be the fly on the wall. I have to literally sit down with my conversation partner. But there's an enormous range of engagement that I can vary. (More realistically I can only try to control this, as I'm always balancing the observer-process and the participant-creation experiences.) In my first recorded conversations there quickly became far too much of me performing, (and I'll leave it at that for today.) Then followed me reigning myself in too far, then some relaxing back towards more of me, and currently I find that I like the amount of me that appears in the conversations.

After listening to Herzog's thoughts on documentary film-making, (but he talks about a lot more than that in the podcast,) I now see that I need to work on being the active hornet in the room. This is the dimension where I actively lead the conversation—not upstage my partner, but actively lead in the way that two intimate dance partners have a leader, (and, yes, who is leading can change at any moment.)

I need to more often be the hornet. I need to more often suggest simply by my presence that a sting might be imminent. Then if they decline to leap, maybe, sting just a little.

Generating great questions in real-time →

March 24, 2021

Pick two

Pick any two ideas, presume they are connected, and present that connection as a question.

I'll wager you're thinking, "that's easier said than done." But, it is easy. Simply ask:

Is there a connection between X and Y?

Exercise: Pause here and think of a few random pairs of ideas. The faster you pull the ideas out, the better. Take two ideas and say the question in your mind. Are they not surprising, the trains of thought which spring up? If you manage to stump yourself in finding a connection, would it have been an interesting exchange if another person had been involved?

Where's the trick?

The trick is right there in the very first line I wrote, in the first phrase:

Pick two ideas.

The two ideas are connected; that's how your mind was able to pick them. The trick uses your mind's built-in super-powers of observation and curiosity. To ask a great question, people focus on finding a *question*. It's far easier to make a question out of something *great*.

Clearly the degree of greatness of your question depends on what ideas you pick. Fortunately, the more you pick-two and ask about the connection, the better you'll get at picking better ideas. You're refining your mental observation skills and refining your taste in which ideas will combine into a great question.

Complications

In mechanical watches, a "complication" is some additional function. Indicating the day of the week, the date, or the phase of the moon, are in reality not that different in terms of complexity;

They are each simply a complication. It's the total number of complications that impresses the watch aficionados.

I'm going to throw a bunch of complications on top of this idea. By analogy with the watches, I'm suggesting that no one of these is any better or more complex. Each complication is simply a possibility you could add. One of your goals, in any conversation I care to think about, is to have your tools and skills disappear in service of the conversation. Only through experience can you learn how complicated to make things. It varies based on every conversational parameter you can imagine. Sometimes, the barest simplicity is the best choice—"is there a connection between X and Y?"—and sometimes...

It's not you, it's me. If the question you're posing might be too personal, taboo, etc. you can couch it in a dash of self-deprecation. "I know this sounds weird, but is there a connection between X and Y?" Your conversation partner can easily parry—in fact, people will automatically and subconsciously parry this way if they are uncomfortable—with, "Yes that's weird. What sort of wacko would ask that?" Being a great conversationalist, you can then proceed in another direction. (Or press on!)

The joy of wonder. Rare, (and possibly psychotic,) is the person who isn't sucked in when you express honest wonder. If you really are wondering—that is probably how you picked those two ideas in the first place—then it's going to be obvious that you're enjoying asking about the connection. "Oh, wow! Now I'm wondering if there's a connection between X and Y."

Grammar ain't all that. Did you catch that? That last example wasn't a question. Turns out, it's not necessary to speak a grammatical question. All you ever need to do is convey that you have a question. In the Movers Mindset podcast I get endless mileage out of saying, "And of course, the final question: Three words to describe your practice." Which is a statement stapled to a sentence fragment, and I don't even pitch-up at the end to make it sound like a question. Statements using "wondering" are the obvious way to do statement-questions. But there are more: "I'm astounded I never realized there's a connection between X and Y." That one has a quiet little question—"is there actually a connection here?"—tucked in under the loud astonishment. There's also, "I can't believe I never noticed the connection between X and Y." Even snarky, "...next you're going to tell me X and Y are connected." Complications sure, but filigree has its place.

There can't possible be more

I've described this entire thing as if it were something you do once, (and then use the question.) Eventually, you can generate two, sometimes three or more, two-ideas-and-a-connection questions before the pause gets pregnant. With practice, you can regularly generate 2, and then

choose the one you like better.

This is particularly important if you're trying to lead the conversation—"lead" as in "let's go for a stroll and I secretly want to show you my favorite bakery along the way," not "I want to lead you to a mugging". Being able to ask great questions is one thing, but being able to ask a series of great questions that lead to a through-line, however tenuous, is pure wizardry.

Scenes →

April 13, 2021

Because they can only show scenes, ...

~ Ryan Holiday from, [Sorry, An Epiphany Isn't What's Going To Change Your Life](#)

Check the following against your experience: Except for sleep, or fits of unconsciousness, my life is a perfectly seamless and continuous experience. It has no montages, elisions of time, "jump cuts," nor cross fades. I've never experienced a rerun of any moment; every moment is the next moment found directly after that moment that was now, but is now just past.

From my point of view, every other person... every book... every movie... every image painting film story... I experience those in one, compressed form or another. I catch up with a friend over lunch; I get two weeks of their experience compressed into a thirty-second story. Rocky goes from zero to hero in a two-minute (I'm guessing) montage. That person experiences an entire year; I experience their birthday dinner.

Everything out there is a small scene from some real experience. Is it any wonder it's difficult to understand?

Baked geese crap →

April 16, 2021

Everything we do matters — whether it's making smoothies to save up money or studying for the bar — even after we've already achieved the success we sought. Everything is a chance to do and be our best. Only self-absorbed assholes think they are too good for whatever their current station requires. Wherever we are, whatever we're doing and wherever we are going, we owe it to ourselves, to our art, to the world to do it well. That's our primary duty. And our obligation. When action is our priority, vanity falls away.

~ Ryan Holiday from, [How You Do Anything Is How You Do Everything](#)

I sometimes think back to a summer I spent working on a golf course. As a grounds keeper. These days, I'm still pretty fast with a string trimmer. A job string-trimming a golf course teaches certain skills. Every day that summer I hopped on my trusty red 10-speed bike—I think it was actually originally my mom's bike—and ride... just for fun I Google'd it... 5 miles to work. I distinctly remember the coolish Pennsylvania mornings.

It just this moment occurs to me that my “the weather today will be...” prognostication skills are generally quite good. Probably something to do with riding a half hour while wondering if I was going to get roasted in the sun, soaked in the rain, or pleasantly browned.

Meanwhile I learned many things. About getting along with other people to greater or lesser degrees of success. About how laughter makes work lighter. And about good healthy, sweat labor. I already mentioned the string trimming. But my favorite was how we used to edge the sand traps. Every day—at least as far as I can remember—there'd be the same work to do; we'd simply advance our way around the course based on our boss's early-morning directions on a whiteboard. “edge traps 8/9” for example... along with a few more. One guy was the greens keeper. His responsibility was just to mow the putting greens and tend that grass. Move the pins (the tall flags stand inside special metal cups set into the ground) periodically. Another guy—an aged adult, so he was probably like 38 at the time—was the fairway mower. Willie was his name. I remember his last name, but I don't want anyone hunting him down. He'd drive a large farm-sized tractor pulling gang-mowers like a flock of geese behind him. All the grass was always cut with reel mowers.

Anyway. Sand traps. We used to edge them with a machete. You see, the edge of the trap, where the grass meets the sand, has interesting geometry. The lawn may not be level, it often was sloped or curving like a little hill. So the “cut” is not just, “hey yo, no blade of grass sticking out that way!” but also, a perpendicular (to the plane of the grass bed) curb of sod (the grass, roots carpet part) and dirt. A string trimmer just sort of beats things up into a rounded mess. With a machete—and a *crap*-ton of stooping, back-breaking, labor—you can cut everything in a perfect plane. It’s as if you made the perfect cut through layer cake, creating a smoothly undulating curb perimeter, angled perfectly. wack wack wack wack ...we’d just walk around the trap backwards, walking on the grass. wack wack wack wack... fifty, maybe a hundred swings. Every sand trap is different. Then we’d clean the trap. Weed it, rake it, sift it, then shape the sand. When we moved on, there’d be not a single bit of anything besides sand in the trap. It’d be gorgeous.

Craftsmanship.

One day, “trim the lake” was on the board. Again. We’d just done that the other day. It was one of the most god-awful horrible jobs. It was basically a very big pond, with not much water flow, particularly mid-summer. The bottom was muck-tastically nasty with geese crap and—wait for it—9 gazillion golf balls making for treacherous footing. The weeds grew *in* the water. With a string trimmer you can actually trim a bit below the water level if you’re adamant about it. (As we were.) When doing this chore you had a choice: You could stroll into the water and muck to reach the weeds 6 feet out in the pond, or wreck your back, (I don’t care how young you are, this wrecks it,) straining all around the lake to reach out there with the trimmer. Regardless, in the heat of summer, those water-whatever weeds needed a wacking every few days.

On this day, I stood by the artificial rock weir that impounded the pond. I looked at my work boots, being well-shod to deal with the muck, but not so much for standing directly in the water to trim. I looked at the weir. I thought about having to sacrifice my back to reach the weeds. At the weir. I looked at my golf cart—we had the best ones. Special motors for hauling trailers and actual loads and extra batteries. And my we don’t screw around here double-string trimmer and gas can. My face shield. I looked back at the weir.

And I went for it.

I strolled into the stream, moved a bunch of rocks and pierced the maybe 2-foot tall weir... and drained the entire lake. Then I spun up my trimmer and... there are two ways to string trim: One way is a sort of judicious, scalpel wielding, if I twitch it leaves a mark that takes a week to grow away, and I’m going to have to clean up all the mess I make. And the other way is BANSHEE STYLE! I strolled into that disgusting muck and strode around the entire thing with the trimmer throttled wide open... non-stop... at like 6:30am. Muck, geese crap, golf balls, weeds...

everything flying every which way... none of it on me of course because, duh, string-trimming guru.

Meanwhile, the sun crept higher.

I don't know how long it took me. Not long. I don't think I even had to refill the trimmer's gas tank. But all the while, the sun started to bake the mud and muck.

Now the area (the general regional area I mean) had a lot of farms and you got used to all sort of smells. Pennsylvania smells (to me) like petrichor, and maybe a dash of cow or horse manure baking on a field. Us Pennsylvanians are all like, *yawn* "whatever bro'." But baking geese crap and muck, as it turns out, is another thing.

Yes, when I finished trimming I reassembled the weir, but as I mentioned, the little creek's flow rate was low, and it took all stinking-to-high-heaven day for that thing to fill submerging the muck. I was vindicated amongst the groundskeepers, including my boss who went to bat for me so I could keep my job, because we all freakin' loved it. It looked awesome and stayed awesome for like TWO WEEKS!

But to my knowledge, no one ever did it again.

That was the first time I effectively closed an entire golf course.

Peach baskets →

April 17, 2021

In conversation there must be, as in love and in war, some hazarding, some rattling on; nor need twenty falls affect you, so long as you take cheerfulness and good humor for your guides; but careful and measured conversation is always, though perfectly correct, extremely dull and tedious—a vast blunder from first to last.

~ Arthur Martine from, Martine's Hand-book of Etiquette and Guide to True Politeness

"Kid, anyone can fix it with the right tools. It takes a real mechanic to fix it with a peach basket

full of junk,” was the punch-line life-lesson from a story my dad used to tell from his first days in the elevator trade.

I’ve mentioned this book by Martine before. Large parts of it are patently ridiculous. But there are parts of it which are solid.

Anyone can learn something from a well-written book. But it takes a first-rate mind, and a lot of practice, to read through a peach-basket full of assorted crap, find the right parts, *and* find a lesson or three along the way.

Fear of missing out →

April 22, 2021

The constant interruptions and distractions of our society are, to me, the opposite of philosophy. Getting caught up in minutiae. Getting caught up in things that don’t matter. Getting caught up in things that are designed to exploit and antagonize us and our emotions.

~ Ryan Holiday from, Seriously, You—Ok, We—Need To Stop Watching The News This Year

The way out from the chaos is to first convince yourself that you are in chaos, and to then decide you don’t like the current situation.

It will not work for you to try taking a *hiatus* from all the distractions. If you try, (just some “for examples” here,) to put your phone down during dinner, or to have a no-internet weekend with your partner, or no internet-surfing in the bedroom, etc., these small diversions from *your normal existence* will be uncomfortable. So of course you won’t want that small discomfort to grow larger! And there you go; that’s the exact opposite of how you would expand the tranquility in your life. If—somehow—you deeply wanted more tranquility, then you would *automatically* do all those things I mentioned and many, *many* more.

The other day I drove to my favorite gym only to discover they were closed that day. It happens that this was announced on Facebook. (I’m not on Facebook.) This experience was not the *least*

bit annoying to me. I drove 20 minutes each way. The ride was pleasant; Just like every other time I drive in a car because I long ago resolved the issues *with myself* which caused driving and riding in cars to be annoying. I did not begrudge that 40 minutes as “wasted,” and I simply went on to the next thing I wanted to do.

I’m not railing against Facebook. I’m pointing out that if you fix your life, Facebook no longer has an *attraction* for you.

You are not obligated to be constantly reachable.

You are not obligated to have an opinion on every topic someone might raise in conversation.

You are not obligated to help every other person you physically or virtually encounter.

What obligations do you have?

What do you truly desire?

What is the meaning of life?

Actually... are those even the right questions to ask oneself?

The only way out is through →

May 29, 2021

If it’s easy, you’re not growing.

It’s like lifting weights: if you can do it without trying, you’re not going to get any stronger.

The whole point—of life, of working out, of work—is to push yourself, and to grow as a result of pushing against and through that resistance.

~ Ryan Holiday from, [If You’re Not Seeking Out Challenges, How Are You Going to Get Better?](#)

Nine years ago I was smack in the middle of my HVAC-installer apprenticeship. I lovingly refer to the roughly two-week period as, “that time I got really into attic-yoga.” The contractor installing our central HVAC had a young fellow working with him, and that guy hurt his knee. I spent days learning how to make and insulate hard duct work, HVAC line sets (the wiring and refrigerant piping), electrical, removed the ancient mouse-pee infused blown-in insulation and eventually put in new fiberglass insulation through the attic. It was hell. Hot. Sweaty. Ichy. Low roof. Things to climb in, over, around, through and under. Mostly while carefully stepping, squatting, leaning, and crawling on the long thing ceiling joists. And it was not something I was planning on doing. One day I was all like, “Benjamin is installing the HVAC!” [that’s a money reference] and the next day I was studying attic-yoga.

I bring this up because it’s too easy to think “I’m doing the hard work!” when you are simply going to the gym (or for the morning run, whatever.) Sure, you’re working hard, you’re sweating, and building muscle; you are literally doing hard work.

But that’s *nothing* compared to choosing to do the hard work, on the spot. Do I whinge and call AAA (road-side assistance club) or do I climb under the van to figure out how to get the spare tire out at Midnight after a long day? Do I take the time to split the portion of the firewood that would be a pain 8 months from now, or do I just stack it and hate my today-self in the dead of winter? Do I take the time to carefully explain something even though it’s not my *responsibility* or do I just “walk past” that person who needs a hand? Right now, on the spot, do you choose the hard path?

Forward. Backward. Preferred. Dis- preferred. →

July 22, 2021

Like any good algebraist, he is made to think sometimes in a forward fashion and sometimes in reverse; and so he learns when to concentrate mostly on what he wants to happen and also when to concentrate mostly on avoiding what he does not want to happen.

~ *Charlie Munger from, Stop Crashing Planes: Charlie Munger’s Six-Element Sys-*

I tem

That item from a list of six elements, originally from the best pilot education program in existence, made me realize there's this thing that I do. For me it's such an intuitive, automatic thing, but it occurs to me to share it to make it explicit.

Let's begin by thinking about planning and learning. (I'm done. You are now thinking about planning and learning. :) Next, we'll trot out three magnificently useful, relative adverbs: how, when and why. Six sublime questions instantly appear:

How do I plan? When do I plan? Why do I plan? How do I learn? When do I learn? Why do I learn?

I've certainly spent a lot of time thinking about those questions. For example, I've a bunch of blog posts about **knowledge systems** that came from thinking about, "how do I learn?" I could spend all my time thinking about those six questions. Exploring those questions, understanding myself, and learning in general, are fine projects to spend time on. But it's tough to get *started*. Each of those questions is a deep, *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole.

What I want to share is how to use a different framework to flip the entire process over. I want to share my way of making progress on those fine projects without intentionally working on them. Things happen. Thoughts arise. (Your experience may be similar to mine?) The following framework will take anything—happenings or thoughts—and guide it into being deep work on those six questions.

Simply ask:

Forward or backward in time: Is the event in the future or past? Am I thinking about the future or past?

And...

Prefer or dis-prefer: Do I prefer or dis-prefer the event? Do I prefer or dis-prefer what I'm thinking?

For me, the act of examining something—an event, a thought—in the light of those questions, (forward/backward? preferred/dis-preferred?,) leads me to learning about one, and sometimes several, of those six, big questions.

Attitude and assessment →

October 5, 2021

It seems likely that Jack Sparrow's admonishment about attitude is an echo of Aurelius's reminder to himself two thousand years earlier. This idea that the attitude and assessment is most important has really helped me relax. Things will never be done, and I create all of my problems. I've come to understand that concrete goals and clear progress are detrimental to my health. They're necessary, yes, but detrimental. The more goals I set, the more clear progress I can measure, the worse off I become; Mentally and physically those things grind me down.

Since they're necessary—without them, it seems I'd simply devolve to being a blob on a sofa—I must have something in my life which counters the damage so that I can continue setting some sane number of goals and measuring some concrete progress. One of those things is practicing my attitude and assessment. I set aside time for this each morning. It's not meant to take long. 15 minutes is really long enough. I read through a prompt from a set that I've created for myself. I read through a selection from some key books. I write in my journal, usually copying a single new quote from my collection as the beginning of the journal entry. I write some thoughts. I write some observations from the previous day.

Unfortunately, just about every morning, my urge—affliction? *addiction*?—to measure and create goals creeps into my morning reflection. Why am I taking all this time? (I'm up to something like 4,000 hand-written pages of journals!) Am I getting benefit from all this reflection? What's the optimum “dosage” of reflection which yields the most benefit? How do I even measure the benefit? Is that page—that one I just wrote, an instant before these questions pop into my mind—worth writing? If I read that page in a year, will it in any way help me? Is the entry for today long enough? Should it have more “here's what I did yesterday,” type stuff, or less? Maybe I should be also making a small note on my mood, or how I feel physically? Maybe I should... Oh, crap.

Close the journal, and go on with today!

On leadership →

November 21, 2021

Conflicting opinions. Confusing data. Unexpected developments. Interpersonal conflict. We sometimes miss the bliss of the vision and despair. I'm not sure I can do this. You respond immediately, "It seems an impossible thing. Of course it's hard, but we are going to do this together and I'll explain how."

~ Rands from, [The Way I Heard It Was...](#)

There's an array of skills that a leader has to master to be a *good* leader. Explaining things is one of those skills. Everyone who knows me even slightly, knows I'm great at explaining things. But as I try to lead more, I'm realizing that no, actually I'm a mediocre—possibly even a poor—explainer. I've recently realized that vastly too much of my explanations are about attempting to control other people's reactions, (or their opinions,) to what I'm suggesting.

"Take this jacket. It's lightweight, water proof and will keep you dry if we encounter rain. And rain is likely on the mountain we're setting out to climb. I once went without such a jacket, and I wound up wet and miserable. The color also happens to be one you normally like, and it looks good. It's got lots of pockets, which are all taped and the design of the flaps keeps water out." (Alas, a decade ago, that explanation would have also unpacked what "taped" means, and why it's a desirable feature.)

But that's way too much information, all intended to convince the listener. It's a sign of attempted consensus building. It's all hedging. It's all me sharing the reasons why you too would make the same decision—to bring *this* jacket—if you too had all the information and perspective that I have.

A real leader would say, "This is the correct jacket to take, considering the weather we are going to face when we climb that mountain." Because then, if it turns out it is in fact *not* the correct jacket, then I'm on the hook for that error. Which is exactly where—on the hook that is—a true leader should be.

Urgency →

December 14, 2021

As always, I continue my project of self-improvement. I've long been aware that I take on too much— and yet, all efforts to “take on less” only seem to *lessen* the problem; Like pulling Dandelion weeds but not getting the *entire* root out. I've made an insane effort in countless ways over several decades to make progress towards “take on less.” I've long known there must be something underlying.

I love to use a tool I refer to as a “wedge”, to *affect changes* by altering the normal sequence of things. A wedge can be used to create a space for consideration, to divert my thinking, or to initiate (or change) an activity. It works because the presence of the wedge alters the

mental context. My mind proceeds from idea to idea, with an evolving context for that thinking. As the context changes, it constrains—or maybe, “helps select” is a better description—what ideas are going to come to the fore of my mind next. Trains of thought develop this way. The inserted wedge causes, (if it's done right,) enough of a shift in my mental context.

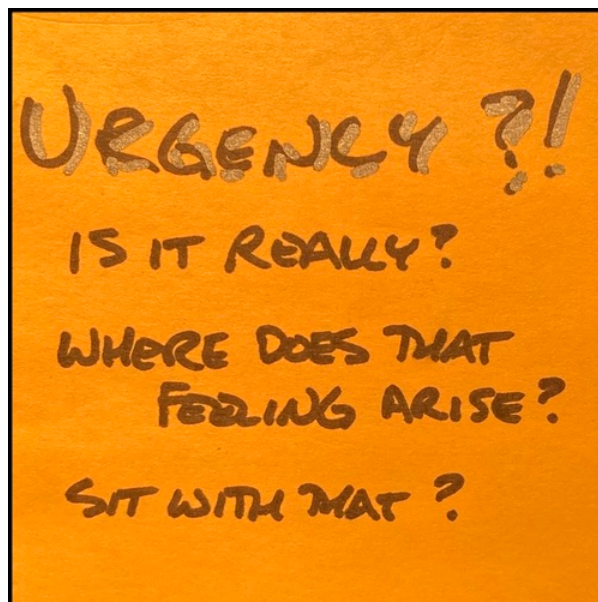
It's really difficult to have the wedge be a thought. But orange sticky notes work well. (Until you no longer notice them, of course.)

The action of this wedge is to make me think about why I'm about to do this next thing that feels so urgent.

“Is it really [urgent]?” ...like, how a smoke detector sounding off is urgent? Okay, so it's not *that* urgent.

“Where does that feeling [of urgency] arise?”

And that is where my train of thought shifts. (So far it has been every time I've felt urgency to do something.) Because the feeling comes from my desire for control; There are countless examples. That explains why I'm forever taking on too much.



“Sit with that?” Sit with that realization that the urgency is a reaction to a desire for control. Sit with the knowledge that every attempt at control—all types, all sizes, all shapes, all degrees... attempted control of anything external—has never ended well for me.

That’s not hyperbole.

Caution: Tulpa →

December 31, 2021

I’ve recently made a startling discovery: Maybe there really *is* a tulpa in my head.

First, I’ve said for many years that my brain is broken. (Yes, I am aware I have terrible self-talk.) Here’s why I call it broken: I am literally unable to NOT see problems. I notice an endless onslaught of things that, in my opinion, could be improved. I don’t mean, “that sucks, I wish it could be better.” No, I mean, “that sucks and it’s obvious this way would be better and if you’d just let me get started . . . ” Adderall might help, I suppose.

Everyone loves that I get stuff done, and try to make things better. But unless you have this same problem, I’d imagine it’s hard to understand how this is debilitating. I am aware that this is recursive—I see my own brain as a broken process that I feel I should repair. All I can say is that you should be happy, and thank your fave deity if that’s your thing, that you *don’t* understand. Because to understand is to have the problem, and you do. not. want. this. problem.

Second, I’ve also said for many years that, “the remainder cannot go into the computer.” I’m referring to a endless source of struggle in programming and systems administration; Computers are exact, and the real world—with its real people, real problems, and things which really are subjective shades of gray—is not. So programmers and systems administrators factor, in the mathematical sense of finding factors which when multiplied give you the original, reality into the computers. And when factoring reality, there is *always* a remainder. That remainder shows up when you find your software does something weird. That could be a mistake, but I tell you from experience, it is more often some edge case. Some people had to make choices when they factored.

The result of that second point is that I’ve spent the majority of my life factoring, (and “normalizing” for your math geeks who know about vector spaces,) problems into computers. And then trying

to live with the remainders that didn't go into the computer. The remainders are all in my head. Or on post-it notes on my wall, (back in the day.) Or the remainder is some scheduled item reminding me to check the Foobazzle process to ensure the comboflux has not gone frobnitz. To do that I had to intentionally be pragmatic and logical. And the really scary part is I also learned that the best way to do all of that was to talk to myself—sometimes literally, bat-shit crazy, out loud, but usually very loudly inside my own mind—to discover the smallest, least-worst, remainder that I could manage to live with.

What if those two things were sufficient to create a Tulpa. (I am serious.)

I think there's a Tulpa in here! (My title is the sign on the front gate.) It is absolutely pragmatic. It knows an alarming amount of detail about things I've built, (or maintained, or fixed.) It is cold and calculating. It is terrified that it will forget about one of those details, *2347 will happen*, and everyone *will run out of ammunition defending their canned goods from the roaming bands of marauders*. I definitely don't "have" the Tulpa. It's more like discovering there's an extra person living in your house. Although, I don't hold hope of banishing this Tulpa, *Yoda does make a good point* if I'm going to try. So, I should definitely give it a name.

Maybe, Sark?

That is an intriguing idea indeed! Sark, what do you think?

Two things →

March 21, 2022

This sudden loss has gotten me to face my own death this week. I know it is coming, just not when. I rarely think about it, because life is so in-my-face, but it's there, waiting. Tyler's death is such a stark reminder that we never know how much time we have left.

~ Leo Babauta from, The Tragedy & Liberation of Death

There are exactly two things about my life of which I am certain. I was born, and I will die. I spend a lot of time contemplating my end; Not in a fatalistic, "come at me bro'!" way, but rather with the

intention of reminding myself to make the most out of every moment.

There are many moments where I'm unconscious—quite a few of those moments are while I'm sleeping, but also there are mindless moments aplenty throughout my days. But there are increasingly more *mindful* moments every day.

An extremely fast way to get to mindfulness—this is the fastest way I've found so far—is to think: This may well be the last time I do this. The last walk. The last boulder I scramble upon. The last conversation with this person. The last conversation ever. The last word I type. The last sentence I jauntily scribble with a pen. The last time I drive a car. The last time I ride a bicycle. The last time I wrench my back shoveling snow. The last time something scares the crap out of me. The last time I laugh until I lose control of my bladder. The last time I'm stuck as part of the traffic. The last time I'm part of the solution. The last time *I'm* the source of the problem. The last time I *smash the hell* out of my toe on something.

In every one of those cases, I can now enjoy it... if I can manage to remember: This could be the last time I get to experience this.

I've even decided that if I can manage it, my last words will be: "Well, if that wasn't nice, I don't know what is." (And just maybe with a literal hat tip to Vonnegut.)

Oblivion →

June 27, 2022

So begins her obsession with dominating the mind by dominating the body, which would follow her throughout her life in various guises — running, karate, yoga, cycling, skiing — always ambivalent and self-conscious, until it finally resolves into a glimpse of the larger truth beneath the mechanics of illusory perfectibility: that we exert ourselves so violently on keeping the package of the body intact in order to keep it from spilling its immaterial contents — the soul, the self — into oblivion.

~ Maria Popova from, The Secret to Superhuman Strength: Alison Bechdel's Illustrated Meditation on the Life of the Body, the Death of the Self, and Our Search for Meaning – The Marginalian

Ah yes, “oblivion.” Good stuff. Popova is referring to a graphic artist, and midway through the article is an exquisite cartoon example; the author drawing, figuratively and literally, a metaphor for life involving a hill and a bicycle. Reading that cartoon brought to mind my beloved practice of meditating on death. (Try [this explanation](#).) Closely related I often call to mind the impermanence of things. Sometimes I mix the two, thinking...

This is my last sip from this [my favorite, morning coffee] mug. (Knowing it will one day be broken.)

This [regularly scheduled weekly] conversation with this person is our last one. (Imagining when priorities change and we’re no longer working together.)

This conversation I’m recording for a podcast is my last one. (Because I will die.)

This dinner with this person [my mom, my spouse, etc] is my last one. (Because one of us will die first.)

The goal is *not* to be morbid and depressed; The goal is to maintain a realistic perspective to enable wringing the absolute maximum enjoyment and appreciation from every single waking moment.

Friction and process →

July 6, 2022

Picasso observed that, “inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.” Inspiration has to find you in the midst of your practice.

Let’s say that I enjoy painting. When I find myself painting, I usually find myself happy. I love the feeling of setting down my brush after having worked out some little problem in a painting. And so, I decide I’m going to paint regularly.

Or let’s say I enjoy sailing. I love the adventure, or the wind in my face. And so, I decide I’m going to sail regularly.

Or, running, writing, movement, music ... your choice.

But without concrete plans, and clear processes, I will never actually do the practice. Friction,

followed closely by excuses, will sap my momentum. If I'm to be a runner, my shoes, clothes, music or whatever I need— Those things must be in place. For any practice there are some things which you will feel must be in place.

The processes that I'm imagining, which remove friction and enable my practice, have a steady state. For my process, what does “done” look like? It looks like me sailing so often I can't even remember not sailing all the time. Or it looks like me running and jumping and playing so often that my body is a comfortable place for my mind.

Matthew Frederick, the author of *101 Things I learned in Architecture School*, makes this point:

True style does not come from a conscious effort to create a particular look. It results obliquely—even accidentally—out of a holistic process.

This point about a holistic process—the idea that mastery isn't some higgledy-piggledy mish-mash of throwing things together—is an idea I've held dearly for a long time. Every single time that I've decided to take a process, and repeat it in search of understanding, the learning and personal growth has paid off beyond my wildest dreams.

I'm a process process process person. The second time I have to do something, I'm trying to figure out how to either *never* have to do that again, or how to automate it. (And failing those two, it goes into my admin day.) Random activity, powered by inspiration works to get one thing done. But inspiration doesn't work in the long run, and it won't carry me through my practice.

Instead, I want to know what can I intentionally do to set up my life, so that I later find myself simply being the sort of person who does my chosen practice? I want to eliminate every possible bit of friction that may sap my momentum.

There's a phrase in cooking, *mise en place*, meaning to have everything in its proper place before starting. The classic example of failure in this regard is to be half-way through making something only to realize you're missing an ingredient and having to throw away the food. Merlin Mann, who's little known beyond knowledge workers, has done the most to improve processes for knowledge workers and creative people. I'm not sure if he's ever said it explicitly, but a huge part of what he did was to elevate knowledge workers and creatives by cultivating a *mise en place mindset*.

And don't confuse “process” or a “mise en place” mindset with goals. Forget goals. Focus on the process, and focus on eliminating friction.

To quote Seth Godin:

The specific outcome is not the primary driver of our practice. [...] We can begin with this: If we failed, would it be worth the journey? Do you trust yourself enough to commit to engaging with a project regardless of the chances of success? The first step is to separate the process from the outcome. Not because we don't care about the outcome. But because we do.

And I'll give my last words to Vincent Thibault, author of one of my favorite books:

That is how we are still conditioned socially as adults: Do, achieve, produce results, instead of be, feel, enjoy the process. Quantitative over qualitative. We are obsessed by performance and "tangible" results. But that is one of the great teaching of Parkour and Art du Déplacement: That the path is just as enjoyable as the destination; That sometimes it is even more important, and that oftentimes it is the destination.

I should take a break →

October 22, 2023

Taking a break is really difficult. A short break is often easy enough if you're comfortable simply ignoring everything... for 10 minutes. But if you really want to take a real break, the difficulty escalates rapidly. I recently spent a long weekend camping a short, walkable distance from the beach. Each of the three full beach sitting days I tried to lengthen the stretches of time I literally sat in a beach chair without getting up. By the third day I was feigning agitated exasperation, and making jokes like, "That's it! Today I'm getting serious about holding my chain down in the sand. No more standing up for me!" But in reality, I was bumping up against bodily functions, sun exposure (even under a magnificent umbrella), and peer pressure from my beach pals warning me of deep vein thrombosis. (I hope you never know what that is.)

I'm only half kidding. Everyone talks about taking a day off from work, and about looking forward to the holidays (for family and experiences, sure— but we all mean for the break we pretend we'll get, but never do.) We even have a dedicated word, staycation (a word so legit it even passes my spell-checker) for suggesting some days we're taking but not even going anywhere, just because

we need a break. Our phones ring, our apps go bee–BOOP! and it's ping! notification this, and ding! notification that. And an email arrives, and the dog needs walking, and the children need this, and the housemate that...

The hard work is actually prioritizing, pruning and putting one's life in order. The impossible work is getting sufficient duration, and premium quality, sleep.

Taking a break isn't lazy – learning to recharge is a skill that will allow you to enjoy a more creative, sustainable life.

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang from, *How to rest well* | *Psyche Guides*

What's that? How long did I manage to sit in the chair? On day three I managed a transcendental 5-and-one-half hours of literal sitting, toes in the sand. And I was on a roll, no where near needing to arise, having perfectly judged my fluid consumption, sweating, and kidney function up to then. I was foiled by my beach mates forcing me out of the chair (and at least part way into the ocean.) Which, all things considered, was very nice of them.

About the Author



Craig Constantine is a guide for intentional living. His background in Aikido taught him consistency and responsibility; discovering Art du Déplacement in his 40s reshaped how he lives and teaches. Everything he creates — podcasts, thousands of blog posts, and tools for reflection — traces back to three words: Discovery. Reflection. Efficacy.

Craig's vision is a world where everyone can flourish. His mission is creating better conversations that spread understanding and compassion. A meaningful life, he writes, isn't chased but rather is noticed, one moment at a time.

Learn more at craigconstantine.com and find all of his Apogee-tagged posts at constantine.name/tag/apogee.