

HELL YEAH OR NO

what's worth doing

DEREK SIVERS

Hell Yeah or No

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Derek Sivers

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Hell Yeah or No

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OPENING

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About this book

In my first book, [Anything You Want](#), I told the story of how I started, grew, and sold my company.

As part of selling the company, I signed a non-compete agreement that said I couldn't do the one thing I'd been doing since I was twenty-seven years old. So I had to make a real change in my life.

I thought a lot about **what's worth doing, fixing faulty thinking, and making things happen**. For the next ten years, I wrote for hours a day in my private journal, asking myself questions and answering them. When these thoughts seemed useful to others, I'd turn them into articles, which are now the chapters of [this book](#).

I write succinctly because I'm only introducing ideas. You can apply them to your life better than I can. But if you want to hear more thoughts or talk about them, go to the URL at the end of each chapter: **(sivers.org/_____)** There you'll find many interesting comments about that idea, and you can post your own.

Or just say hello at [sive.rs/contact](#) I love hearing from people who have found my work. I reply to every email.

— Derek Sivers, Oxford, England, 2019

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What if you didn't need money or attention?

You know that feeling you have after a big meal? When you're so full that you don't want anything more?

Ever wonder what that would feel like in other parts of your life?

We do so many things for the attention, to feel important or praised. But what if you had so much attention and so much praise that you couldn't possibly want any more? What would you do then? What would you stop doing?

We do so many things for the money, whether we need it or not. But what if you had so much money that you couldn't possibly want any more? What would you do then? What would you stop doing?

And then if you stopped doing all these things you're doing just for the money or the attention, what would be left? **Who would you be if you didn't do these things?** If you were completely satiated, then what? After an understandable period of relaxing, what would you pursue?

Don't say "sit around and do nothing," because that's still just relaxing. I mean after that, when you're ready to be useful to others again.

What would you do then, if you didn't need the money and didn't need the attention?

You don't have to be local

You can focus your time locally or globally.

If you're local, you focus on your community, doing things in-person. But this means you have less time to focus on the rest of the world.

If you're global, you make things for the whole world. But this means you have less time to be part of your local community.

Neither approach is right or wrong, but you need to be aware of the trade-off.

I lived in Woodstock, New York for three years. There I started my company, entirely online. I never met anyone in Woodstock. I just lived there, but didn't socialize there. My attention was focused globally, which helped my business grow quickly.

Then I lived in Portland, Oregon for three years. I worked every waking hour — super productive. I made great friends worldwide, but I never hung out in Portland. It was just my place to work and sleep. My attention was still focused globally.

Then I lived in Singapore for three years and decided to do the opposite — to get fully involved in my local community. I had an open door, said yes to every request, met with hundreds of people, and went to every event possible. I spent most of my time talking with people, and really got to know the Singapore community.

But something felt wrong. After a day of talking, I was often exhausted and unfulfilled. Two hours spent with one person who wants to “pick my brain” is two hours I could have spent making something that could be useful to the whole world, including that one person.

Then people in America started emailing to ask why I'd been so silent. No new articles? No new projects? Nothing?

So there's the trade-off. When I'm local-focused, I may be useful to my community, but I'm not being as useful to the rest of the world.

So I'm finally admitting: I'm not local.

I feel equally connected to many places. Just because I live in one place now, that doesn't mean I should ignore the others. To me, the emphasis on local stuff never felt right. When I lived in Woodstock and Portland, people asked what I was doing to promote the local music scene. I argued that I shouldn't favor Woodstock or Portland any more than Wellington or Prague. But that's just me.

Some people feel a strong separation between insiders and outsiders. If you're a part of their family, neighborhood, organization, or circle of friends, then you're an insider. Everyone else is an outsider.

Other people feel no separation. You're treated equally, no matter where you're from or who you know. There are no outsiders. You make connections based on who you are now, not where you've been.

Like your tendency to be introverted or extroverted, or conservative or liberal, these fundamental world views shape your approach to life and work.

A business can focus on growing their local market or on internationalizing. A musician can focus on doing local gigs or on reaching fans online. Very different approaches. Both are necessary. Neither is right or wrong. Just be aware that you can choose the local or global balance that works best for you.

Actions, not words, reveal our real values

I told my old coach that I really wanted to start my new company.

He said, “No, you don’t.”

I said, “Yes, I do! This is really important to me!”

He said, “No, it’s not. Saying it doesn’t make it true.”

I said, “You can’t ignore what I’m saying. I know myself well. I’m telling you what’s important to me.”

He said, “Yes, I can ignore what you’re saying and just look at your actions. Our actions always reveal our real values.”

I thought about that, but it sounded wrong to me. What about people who want to learn languages, or create businesses, but haven’t started yet? What about people who want to quit smoking or quit their jobs, but haven’t been able to yet?

He said, “**If they really wanted to do it, they would have done it.** You’ve been talking about this new company idea since 2008, but never launched it. Looking at your actions, and knowing you, I’d say that you don’t really want to start another company. You actually prefer the simple life you have now, focused on learning, writing, and playing with your kid. **No matter what you say, your actions reveal the truth.**”

Wow. Yep. He was right.

I had been fooling myself for years, telling myself I wanted to do this, but my actions proved otherwise. Yes, I wanted it a little bit, but I wanted something else more.

Now I’ve been sharing this thought with friends who talk about wanting something, but aren’t making it happen. Each time, they have the same reaction I did.

No matter what you tell the world or tell yourself, your actions reveal your real values. **Your actions show you what you actually want.**

There are two smart reactions to this:

1. Stop lying to yourself, and admit your real priorities.
2. Start doing what you say you want to do, and see if it's really true.

Keep earning your title, or it expires

Until yesterday, I called myself an entrepreneur. Now, I don't.

It's been years since I started a company, so I can't keep using that title.

Someone who played football in high school can't call himself an athlete forever. Someone who did something successful long ago can't keep calling himself a success.

You have to keep earning it.

Holding on to an old title gives you satisfaction without action. **But success comes from doing, not declaring.**

By using a title without doing the work, you fool yourself into thinking that future success is assured — thinking, “This is who I am!” But that [premature sense of satisfaction](#) can keep you from doing the hard work necessary.

Stop fooling yourself. Be honest about what's past and what's present. Retiring outdated titles lets you admit what you're really doing [now](#).

And if you don't like the idea of losing your title, then do something about it! This goes for titles like “leader,” “risk-taker,” and “good friend,” too.

Today I updated my [website](#) to reflect which of my accomplishments are in the past. It's liberating to speak in the past tense about what you've done, and **only speak in the present tense about what you're actually doing.**

Why are you doing?

It's crucial to know why you're doing what you're doing.

Most people don't know. They just go with the flow.

Social norms are powerful. The inputs that influence you are powerful. A great talk, book, or video can instantly change how you think.

But on your death bed, you don't want that horrible regret, feeling like you spent your life pursuing what someone said you should want, instead of what you actually wanted.

For example, if you want to make a lot of money, you need to admit that. If you want to be famous, you need to pursue that. If you want freedom and no responsibilities, or want to learn as much as possible, or whatever else, you need to realize it and embrace it.

Whatever you decide, you need to optimize for that goal, and be willing to let go of the others.

You can't diffuse your energy, trying to do a little bit of everything, or you'll always be in conflict with yourself.

For example, one way to make money is to take on a lot of responsibility, which means letting go of some freedoms.

One way to get famous is to let others make more money, while you take the spotlight. I learned this while living in Los Angeles, when I got to know some famous Hollywood actors and realized they're not as rich as you'd think. The richest people in Hollywood are the ones you've never heard of, because they've optimized their careers for money. They know that others are willing to take less money in return for more fame, so they profit from the other side of that deal.

Maybe the most important thing to you is learning, or creating, or giving. Maybe it's how many people's lives you can influence. Maybe it's how

deeply you can influence just a few people's lives.

Once you realize what you really want and admit it, you need to pursue it.

If you want freedom, then own a business but delegate all the work. You won't be learning or creating or giving as much as you could with a different strategy, but that's OK. You know freedom is what you're after.

Sometimes your best strategy is counter-intuitive. If you have a high paying job, but realize that charitable giving is what matters most to you, then the best strategy is not to quit your job to go hang mosquito nets in Africa, but actually to keep your job and make as much money as you can, while funding organizations in Africa that hang thousands of mosquito nets. (Unless your goal is just to look charitable. Then admit that to yourself, too.)

But whatever you choose, brace yourself, because people are always going to tell you that you're [wrong](#).

That's why you need to know why you're doing what you're doing. Know it in advance. Use it as your compass and optimize your life around it. Let the other goals be secondary so that when those decision moments come, you can choose the value that you already know matters most to you.

Some will always say you're wrong

Some people are into money. Some aren't. Some people are inspired by helping the needy. Some aren't. Some people are into fame, power, and prestige. Others are into anonymity and freedom from responsibility.

People have different preferences in different parts of their lives. Famous online, but anonymous in their neighborhood. Generous with time, but stingy with money. Introvert when working, but extrovert when not.

You have to [know your preferences well](#) because no matter what you do, someone will tell you you're wrong.

If you're not into money, many people will say you're foolish. If you're not into charity, many people will say you're greedy. If you're not into crowds, many people will say you're missing out.

Some careers come with excuses: The classic novelist thrives in solitude, alone in a cabin in the woods, writing books that reach millions. The classic journalist thrives in a crowd, talking with everyone, building the story from a thousand accounts. The quiet librarian. The aggressive lawyer. The flaky artist. No explanation needed.

But when you go against the stereotype, people get confused.

- The entrepreneur who's not into money
- The musician who avoids crowds
- The ambitious conservationist
- The artist who's into discipline

If you expect criticism in advance and take pride in your unusual stance, you can bash on with a smile, being who you want to be.

Then every time they say you're wrong, that's a sign you're doing it right.

Imitate. We are imperfect mirrors.

You know that song you love that you wish you'd written? Copy it.

You know that existing business that you wish you had thought of? Copy it.

Why? Because we're imperfect mirrors.

Like a funhouse mirror that distorts what it reflects, your imitation will turn out much different from the original. Maybe even better.

When a musician covers someone else's song, they reveal their own warped perspective, since we know what the original sounds like. Because of this, performing a cover song is actually a great way to define who you are as an artist.

When a musician writes a new song that imitates someone else's song, almost nobody notices the similarity. People don't make the connection unless you tell them the source of its inspiration.

So an entrepreneur can imitate someone else's business, and still be adding a great service to the world.

I used to believe that everything I did had to be 100 percent original. My old company had a competitor that offered credit card machines to musicians. Customers would tell me how much they loved that service, and even told me they wished we had it, too. But copying the competitor seemed out of the question. It took me a long time to swallow my pride and realize that I'd be doing my clients a favor if I imitated that idea. So I copied it, and it was one of the most successful things I ever did. Those little credit card machines made over \$8 million for thousands of musicians.

So look around at those existing ideas in the world. You can imitate them and still be offering something valuable and unique.

Loving what I used to hate

Be careful when you say you like or dislike something, because you could change your mind soon.

The first time I heard Tom Waits's music, when he was a guest on *David Letterman*, I thought it was so horrible that it must be a joke. Even years later, when I heard him again, I hated his music passionately. But then I heard his cover version of the Cole Porter song "It's All Right With Me", and loved it. So I got his album *Rain Dogs* and fell in love with it, then the rest of his music, too. The funny thing is, on YouTube I found his old performance of my new favorite song, then realized it was that same appearance on David Letterman that I'd hated so much before.

I had no prejudice against Indonesia at first. I was running cdbaby.com out of my bedroom in New York, selling CDs to the world. I started getting huge orders from Indonesia, shipping thousands of dollars' worth of CDs there. Then after a few months, the banks told me those were fraudulent orders placed with stolen credit cards, and they took all the money back. I cursed Indonesia as a "nation of thieves" and blocked all Indonesian orders on my site.

Ten years later I was living in Singapore and was invited to speak at TEDxJakarta. I listened to twenty Indonesian speakers telling their stories and showing their amazing work. It was so heart-warming and endearing. I spent a week in the home of my new Indonesian friends and fell in love with the people there. Afterwards I remembered I used to hate Indonesia. But experience erases prejudice.

Same thing with weightlifting. For decades I mocked it as the mindless activity of dumb vain jocks. Then I kept reading scientific research showing that it's one of the best things you can do for your health. So I tried it and have loved it ever since.

Of course there are examples going the other way, too: food and music I used to like as a teenager but don't like anymore.

I have to smile, thinking about what my former self would say. But the former self is not always right. We shouldn't preserve our first opinions as if they reflect our pure, untarnished, true nature. They're often just the result of inexperience or a temporary phase. **Old opinions shouldn't define who we are in the future.**

The public you is not you

I hope you don't have to learn this lesson the way I did.

One day, I wrote [a blog post](#) sharing what I had learned while switching between the PHP programming language and Ruby on Rails framework. At the time, my blog had no readers, so I didn't think anyone would see it. I just wrote it for the record.

But when I woke up the next morning, my post was all over the tech news sites, and it was like I had insulted everyone's religion. There were over a thousand comments saying that I was a complete idiot and a terrible programmer.

At first I was upset and insulted, like anyone would be. Then, luckily, something switched in my head and I realized the most important point: **They weren't talking about me.** They were talking about a cardboard cutout that looked like me. A little online avatar that has the same name as me, but is not me.

I couldn't be offended when they said I was a terrible programmer, because they had never seen my code. I couldn't be offended when they said I was an idiot, because they didn't know me. They had read a few paragraphs of an article and spewed some insults. Their reactions had nothing to do with the real me.

Suddenly it was like watching a little videogame character get attacked. It was funny to watch, part of the game, and not personal at all.

Then I realized it was the same with compliments. I couldn't take praise personally, either. Some people have liked things I've written or made, and have said nice things about me. But those aren't the real me, either.

So the conclusion is this: **Public comments are just feedback on something you made.** They're worth reading to see how this thing has been perceived. You can even take it as feedback on the public image you've

created. All people know is what you've chosen to show them. So if your public persona is coming across wrong, try tweaking it.

Never forget that the public you is not you.

Character predicts your future

Many years ago, I worked in the music industry in New York City. Then I left.

Fifteen years later, I came back to New York and met with many of the people I hadn't seen since then.

Every single one of them had ended up about where you'd expect, based on their character.

The disciplined ones had succeeded. The temperamental ones had flamed out. The ones who'd acted like leaders were now leaders. The ones who'd blamed everyone else for their lack of results were still doing just that.

It didn't matter where they were before. What mattered was the direction they were headed. Some people had been unpaid interns at the bottom of the ranks, but their determination and smart approaches had led them to the top. Some had been famous or successful but seemed so fragile or combustible, and yep — they'd come tumbling down.

Character isn't fate or destiny. Character isn't DNA, decided before birth. Character is the result of your little choices and little actions.

How you do anything is how you do everything. It all matters.

Your actions are completely under your control, and seem to be the best indicator of future success.

Fish don't know they're in water

Fish don't know they're in water. If you tried to explain it, they'd say, "Water? What's water?" They're so surrounded by it that it's impossible to see. They can't see it until they jump outside of it.

This is how I feel about culture. We're so surrounded by it that it's impossible to see. Many things we think are true are really just our local culture. We can't see it until we get outside of it.

I was born in California and grew up with what I felt was a normal upbringing with normal values. I've been surrounded by artists and entrepreneurs for most of my life.

Last week I was speaking to a business school class in Singapore. I asked, "How many people would like to start their own company some day?" In a room of fifty people, only one hand reluctantly went up. I was surprised and confused. If I had asked this question in California, every hand would have gone up! I thought maybe the Singapore students were just being shy, so I asked individuals in the room, "Really? Why not?" Some of their answers were:

- "Why take the risk? I just want security."
- "I spent all this money on school and need to make it back."
- "If I fail, it will be a huge embarrassment to my family."

Then I realized that I was seeing the question through my local American culture. I had heard that America was the land of entrepreneurs and overconfidence, but I couldn't really see it until I was outside of it.

All of my Singaporean friends live with their parents. Even pretty successful ones, even married ones, even up to age thirty-five, live in their parents' homes. When I told a friend that I left home at seventeen, she was horrified. She said, "Isn't that insulting to your parents? Weren't they devastated?"

Then I noticed my local American culture again. I had heard that Americans emphasize individualism, rebellion, and personal expression, but I couldn't really see it until I was outside of it.

My culture isn't in the center. It's off on the edge, like one petal in a flower, like they all are. Not right or wrong — just [one of many options](#).

So I'm just a fish who didn't know he was in water. And in some aspect of your life, you probably are, too.

Are you present-focused or future-focused?

Everyone knows about being introverted versus extroverted, but there's another axis that makes a much bigger difference. It's present-focused versus future-focused.

Some people are mostly focused on the present moment. They live for today and do what feels good right now.

Some people are mostly focused on the future. They use today as a stepping stone and do what's best for their future selves.

I learned about this from the book [*The Time Paradox*](#), by legendary psychologist Phil Zimbardo, and it blew my mind. It helped me understand these people who had seemed crazy to me before. It also helped me understand why I act the way I do.

Check out these examples.

Present-focused people:

- Pursue pleasure, excitement, and novelty
- Focus on immediate gratification
- Especially appreciate life, nature, and the people around them
- Are playful, impulsive, and sensual
- Avoid anything boring, difficult, or repetitive
- Get fully immersed in the moment and lose track of time
- Are more likely to use drugs and alcohol
- Are better at helping others than helping themselves

Future-focused people:

- Delay gratification
- Are driven with self-discipline because they vividly see their future goals
- Tend to live in their minds, picturing other selves, scenarios, and possible futures
- Especially love their work
- Exercise, invest, and go for preventative health exams
- Are better at helping themselves, but worse at helping others
- Are more likely to be successful in their careers, but often at the expense of personal relationships, which require a present focus

Your time-focus is environmental. People who grow up in unstable places are more present-focused because imagining the future is hard. People who grow up in cold climates are more future-focused because they have to prepare for the winter.

Your time-focus can change in an instant. If you ask a present-focused person to describe their ultimate career and write down the steps to achieve those goals, their focus will change to the future. If you ask a future-focused person to name every background sound they can hear, or where their body is touching their chair, their focus will change to the present.

Your values change your focus. Being in love or making art pushes someone towards a present-focus. Ambition pushes someone towards a future-focus.

Both mindsets are necessary. You need a present-focus to enjoy life. But too much present-focus can prevent the deeper happiness of achievement. (I call this “shallow happy” versus “deep happy”.)

I wish all of this was part of a common understanding, the way we understand when extroverts want to go out for excitement, and introverts want to stay home with a book.

This concept even helps me understand myself when I'm acting out of character. If I'm acting too undisciplined, I realize it's because I've stopped vividly seeing my future. I can only see the present. If I'm acting too disconnected, I realize it's because I'm obsessed with my goals. I can see only the future.

I hope you find the idea as useful as I have.

Small actions change your self-identity

When we think about what's worth doing, we usually think of big things.

But when you hear the stories of how people got successful, they usually start with one little action:

- Saying yes when someone asked for volunteers
- Approaching a celebrity
- Reading one book or taking one course

That one little action changes how you think about yourself.

Having taken that one step, you start to think of yourself as brave, or an achiever, or a bit of an expert on a subject.

You do just one thing that makes you feel generous, so you start to act generous, so you become generous.

You do just one thing that makes you feel like a leader, so you start to act like a leader, so you become a leader.

The world treats you as you treat yourself. **Your actions show the world who you are.**

You won't act differently until you think of yourself differently. So start by taking one small action that will change your self-identity.

SAYING NO

15. [If you're not feeling "hell yeah!" then say no](#)
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18. [I'm a very slow thinker](#)
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If you're not feeling “hell yeah!” then say no

Most of us have lives filled with mediocrity. We said yes to things that we felt half-hearted about.

So we're too busy to react when opportunities come our way. We miss out on the great because we're busy with the mediocre.

The solution is to say yes to less.

If you're not feeling “Hell yeah, that would be awesome!” about something, say no.

It's an easier decision. **Say no to almost everything.** This starts to free your time and mind.

Then, when you find something you're actually excited about, you'll have the space in your life to give it your full attention. You'll be able to take massive action, in a way that most people can't, because you cleared away your clutter in advance. **Saying no makes your yes more powerful.**

Though it's good to say yes when you're starting out, wanting any opportunity, or needing variety, it's bad to say yes when you're overwhelmed, over-committed, or need to focus.

Refuse almost everything. Do almost nothing. But the things you do, do them all the way.

Saying no to everything else

[Steven Pressfield](#) called himself an author for years, but he'd never actually finished a book. Eventually, the psychological pain of not finishing kept building until he couldn't stand it anymore. He decided to finally beat the devil he calls "The Resistance".

He created a situation with no escape. He rented a cabin, brought his typewriter, and shut off all other options.

He said,

"I didn't talk to anybody during that year... I didn't hang out. I just worked. I had a book in mind and I had decided I would finish it or kill myself. I could not run away again, or let people down again, or let myself down again. This was it, do or die."

After a difficult year of wrestling with those inner demons and avoiding all temptations, he did it. He finished his first book. It wasn't a success, but it didn't matter. He had finally beat The Resistance. He went on to write many successful novels.

He told this story in the great book [Turning Pro](#), the third in his series of little books about the creative struggle, including [The War of Art](#) and [Do the Work](#). Read all three.

"[Hell yeah or no](#)" is a filter you can use to decide what's worth doing. But this is simpler and more serious. **This is a decision to stop deciding.** It's one decision, in advance, that the answer to all future distractions is "no" until you finish what you started. **It's saying yes to one thing, and no to absolutely everything else.**

Art is useless, and so am I

Art is useless by definition. **If it was useful, it would be a tool.**

For the past twenty years, I was obsessed with being useful. That one measure drove all of my daily decisions: “How can I be the most useful to the most people today?”

That question served me well but had its downsides. It kept me from playing and doing things just for me. It’s no coincidence that I stopped making music twenty years ago. It didn’t qualify as the most useful thing I could be doing.

A few months ago, I decided to stop trying so hard to be useful. I needed a little more me-time. I stopped spending hours per day answering strangers’ emails.

I started seriously learning my first foreign language. It’s totally useless to anyone else, but I love it. Now I realize why all my previous attempts to learn a language didn’t happen. It was always a lower priority under all of my useful goals.

I started playing music again, for the first time in twenty years. Not trying to be famous this time. No care whether anyone else ever hears it or not. This is just for me — just playing for its own sake and loving it.

It’s hard to relax into this mindset, after twenty years of the opposite. It’s such a luxury to not think about you, out there, and how you might value me.

At the top of every page of my website, I used to have a sentence that describes what I do — another way of saying how I might be useful to the stranger browsing my site. But I erased it last week.

For now, I’m nobody’s tool.

I'm a very slow thinker

When a friend says something interesting to me, I usually don't have a reaction until much later.

When someone asks me a deep question, I say, "Hmm. I don't know." The next day, I have an answer.

I'm a disappointing person to try to debate or attack. I just have nothing to say in the moment, except maybe, "Good point." Then a few days later, after thinking about it a lot, I have a response.

This probably makes me look [stupid](#) in the moment, but I don't mind. I'm not trying to win any debates.

In fact, I'll tell you a secret. When someone wants to interview me for their show, I ask them to send me some questions a week in advance. I spend hours writing down answers from different perspectives, before choosing the most [interesting](#) one. Then when we're in a live conversation, I try to make my answers sound spontaneous.

People say that your first reaction is the most honest, but I disagree. **Your first reaction is usually outdated.** Either it's an answer you came up with long ago and now use instead of thinking, or it's a knee-jerk emotional response to something in your past.

When you're less impulsive and more deliberate like this, it can be a little inconvenient for other people, but that's OK. Someone asks you a question. You don't need to answer. You can say, "I don't know," and take your time to answer after thinking. Things happen. Someone expects you to respond. But you can say, "[We'll see.](#)"

And maybe, through example, you can show them that they can do the same.

Tilting my mirror (motivation is delicate)

Motivation is delicate.

When you notice your motivation fading, you have to seek out the subtle cause. **A simple tweak can make all the difference between achieving something or not.**

An hour outside my city, there's a little mountain range. The other side is gorgeous. But the road that crosses the mountains is very twisted, with sharp turns every few seconds. The first two times I drove across, my kid threw up in the back seat. It's also stressful because I'm surrounded by mountain scenery but I can't take my eyes off the winding road. Though I drive at a normal speed, the other cars follow impatiently on my tail, because many of them drive this road every day.

Crossing the mountains takes only half an hour, but I always arrive exhausted. The stress was affecting my motivation enough that I wanted to stop visiting.

So one day I tried a new approach: I drove really slowly. Now the turns didn't make my kid sick. Now I could afford to take a few seconds to glance sideways and appreciate the scenery. Now it wasn't stressful, except for one thing: the impatient queue of cars behind me. I care (perhaps too much) about other people, so just seeing them in my mirror made me go back to driving faster than I wanted, which brought back all the original problems.

So I made one simple tweak: I tilted my rear-view mirror up towards the ceiling so I couldn't see anything behind me.

That little tweak changed everything!

Now it feels like I'm almost alone on this gorgeous mountain drive. Going at my own pace, not influenced or stressed by anyone else.

There's a passing lane every few minutes, so when it comes, the other cars whiz by me. But for thirty minutes, they're not my problem. When I get to the other side of the mountain, I put my mirror back.

Now I visit all the time — no stress at all.

You know I'm going for the metaphor here:

- Social media comments
- Distracting environments
- Discouraging family members
- Your email inbox

Even the toughest of us have delicate motivation.

When you notice that something is affecting your drive, find a way to adjust your environment, even if that's a little inconvenient for others.

Quitting something you love

Personal change needs some space to happen. To bring something new into your life, you need somewhere to put it. If your current habits are filling your day, where are these new habits supposed to go?

The English word “quit” comes from old French, meaning “to free” or “to release”.

We know about quitting something that’s bad for you, or something you hate. But what about quitting something you love?

I rebel against anything that feels like addiction. When I hear myself saying “I need this,” I want to challenge that dependency and prove my independence.

It’s usually something tiny. For example, I used to keep mints in the car. One day when I ran out, I thought, “Oh no! I need more!” But as soon as I felt that need, no — time to quit. No mints in the car since that day.

Sometimes it’s something big. I used to have an awesome job. I loved it so much that I became too comfortable. So [I made myself quit](#). That made me figure out how to be a full-time musician.

Ten years ago, I felt addicted to America. It was my comfort zone. I loved it too much. I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. So I made myself quit. I haven’t lived there in ten years, and probably never will again. People often ask if I miss it. Any regrets? Not at all.

I still love everything I quit. But not as much as I love all this room for change.

How will this game end?

Imagine that I'm going to auction a \$100 bill. The bidding starts at \$1.

The regular rules of auctions apply with one change: if you are the second-highest bidder, you don't get the \$100 bill but you still have to pay what you bid. OK? Go.

I get bids for \$1, \$2, \$3. Why not? Someone might win \$100 for only \$3! But the bids keep coming.

Once they get to \$99, the person offering \$98 thinks, "Uh oh. The other person isn't backing down." They raise their bid to \$100, so as not to be the second-highest bidder and lose it all.

But now the person offering \$99 raises their bid to \$101. Better to lose only \$1 than \$99, right? Soon they're offering me well over \$100 to buy a \$100 bill, just hoping the other person quits first.

The real problem was not thinking it through in advance.

When the game starts, it's easy to think short-term and say, "Ooh! Good deal!" Then when it's too late, you slowly realize, "Uh-oh. What have I done?"

A lot of people get into bad life situations this way. A homeowner buys a house at the top end of their budget. A romantic falls for someone who's already in a relationship. Later they complain about how they're so in debt, or their sweetheart is cheating.

Before you start something, think of the ways it could end. Sometimes the smart choice is to say no to the whole game.

Solitary socialite

For the past ten years, I've answered up to two hundred emails per day. I sit alone in my little office for hours, engaging with everyone's stories and questions for a few minutes each.

Then when friends want to hang out with me, I say I need some me-time first. They wonder why, since I've been alone all day, so I explain how I've actually been very social and connected with so many people.

I like what I do, so I'm not complaining — just explaining. **It's unusual to be physically alone, but extremely social.** A solitary socialite.

At first I thought this was a new internet thing. But for decades, there have been people who talk on the phone all day. Before that, there were people who just answered paper mail all day.

It works for me. I love people one-on-one. When I'm not answering emails, I'm often talking on the phone with one of my dear friends across the world, getting into great conversations for hours.

But it's a strange life. The solitary socialite.

Getting out of a bad state of mind

The last time I was in really bad state of mind, I used these five steps to get out of it. I've shared this with a few friends in a similar situation, and they said it helped. I hope it works for you too.

1. Ask myself what's wrong in this very second.

Am I in physical pain or danger? No. I've got mental pain, but that's just me imagining things or remembering things. None of it is real.

If I put aside the mental torture I'm giving myself, the only thing that's real is this physical moment. Is it so bad? No. It's not perfect, but not horrible. I look around and appreciate that I'm not in hell. It's a nice place, nice trees, nice food, and has some nice people.

Of course the mental anguish is still there, but this question is a nice reminder that the pain is all in my head.

2. Observe now. Act later.

When I'm feeling cloudy, my decisions and actions will be cloudy too. So I wait a few days before acting on anything. I watch the emotions pass by like a thunderstorm. And the longer I wait, the [smarter I get](#).

3. Raise standards. Say no to anything less than great.

When I'm down, I avoid anyone who doesn't rejuvenate me. They're not allowed in my life right now, not even for a minute. No big explanation needed. No compromise. No favors.

Everything I'm doing that isn't good for me. Everything I'm eating or drinking that isn't making me more healthy. People who are "fine" or who I "kill time" with, but don't actually love and enjoy? Nope. Not good enough. I say no.

Raising the bar not only gives me a huge feeling of self-worth, but also empties my time. Empty time helps me think clearly, because there's more time to process and reflect.

Empty time has the potential to be filled with great things. Time filled with little things has little potential.

4. Focus on my goal

The empty space from #3 helps me remember what I'm really doing with my life.

Creating, learning, improving, whatever. It's the ten-year-plan type of stuff. Clearing the clutter helps me see the horizon.

It's a huge energy-filled feeling of "Oh yeah! That's where I'm going! I had forgotten! I can see it now! Let's go!"

Focus helps me say no, because once you can clearly see where you're heading, you're less likely to let anything get in your way.

5. Do all the necessary stuff

When I'm upset, I don't feel like doing anything but wallowing in it.

But despite feeling that way, I brush my teeth, make healthy meals, take the kid out to play, do the dishes, pay the bills, take my vitamins, clean up, and go to bed early.

These tasks are so mundane, but they help me to feel on top of things. When everyday responsibilities are done, my mind is less distracted.

When I ask, "What's wrong right now?" — and I see this clean house, paid bills, and happy child — I can answer "nothing!"

Going through the motions, even though I don't feel like it, is peaceful. I think and process in the background as going about real life.

It's a great reminder that I have to eat, even if I'm not feeling hungry. I have to clean the house, even if my mind is a mess. I have to sleep, no matter what!

Like #1, above, this step separates the mental anguish from the physical reality. It keeps me focused on what's real versus what I'm just imagining.

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

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There's no speed limit

Whether you're a student, a teacher, or a parent, I think you'll appreciate this story of how one teacher can completely and permanently change someone's life in only a few lessons.

I was seventeen and about to start my first year at Berklee College of Music.

I called a local recording studio with a random question about music typesetting.

When the studio owner heard I was going to Berklee, he said, "I graduated from Berklee and taught there, too. I'll bet I can teach you two years of theory and arranging in only a few lessons. I suspect you can graduate in two years if you understand there's no speed limit. Come by my studio at 9:00 tomorrow for your first lesson, if you're interested. No charge."

Graduate college in two years? Awesome! I liked his style. That was [Kimo Williams](#).

I showed up at his studio at 8:40 the next morning, super excited, though I waited outside before ringing his bell at 8:59.

He opened the door. A tall man in a Hawaiian shirt and a big hat, with a square scar on his nose, a laid-back demeanor, and a huge smile, sizing me up, nodding.

(Recently I heard him tell the story from his perspective. He said, "My doorbell rang at 8:59 one morning and I had no idea why. I run across kids all the time who say they want to be a great musician. I tell them I can help, and tell them to show up at my studio at 9:00 if they're serious. Nobody ever does. It's how I weed out the really serious ones from the kids who just talk. But there was Derek, ready to go.")

After a one-minute welcome, we were sitting at the piano, analyzing the sheet music for a jazz standard. He was quickly explaining the chords based

on the diatonic scale — how the dissonance of the tri-tone in the 5-chord with the flat-7 is what makes it want to resolve to the 1. Within a minute, he started quizzing me.

“If the 5-chord with the flat-7 has that tri-tone, then so does another flat-7 chord. Which one?”

“Uh... the flat-2 chord?”

“Right! So that’s a substitute chord. Any flat-7 chord can be substituted with the other flat-7 that shares the same tri-tone. So reharmonize all the chords you can in this chart. Go.”

The pace was intense, and I loved it. Finally, someone was challenging me — keeping me on my toes — encouraging and expecting me to pull myself up quickly. I was learning so fast, it felt like the adrenaline rush you get while playing a video game. He tossed every fact at me and made me prove that I got it.

In our three-hour lesson that morning, he taught me a full semester of Berklee’s harmony courses. In our next four lessons, he taught me the next four semesters of harmony and arranging classes.

When I got to college and took my entrance exams, I tested out of those six semesters of requirements.

Then, as Kimo suggested, I bought the course materials for other required classes and taught myself, doing the homework in my own time. Then I went to the department head and took the final exam, getting full credit for those courses.

By doing this in addition to completing my full course load, I graduated college in two and a half years. I got my bachelor’s degree when I was twenty.

Kimo’s high expectations set a new pace for me. He taught me that “**the standard pace is for chumps**” — that the system is designed so anyone can keep up. **If you’re more driven than most people, you can do way**

more than anyone expects. And this principle applies to all of life, not just school.

Before I met Kimo, I was just a kid who wanted to be a musician, doing it casually. Ever since our five lessons, I've had no speed limit. I owe every great thing that's happened in my life to Kimo's raised expectations. A random meeting and five music lessons showed me that I can do way more than the norm.

Twenty years later, Berklee invited me to give the opening keynote speech to incoming first-year students. Go to sive.rs/berklee to see it. Kimo knows how much he means to me, and we're friends to this day.

Relax for the same result

A few years ago, I lived in Santa Monica, California, right on the beach.

There's a great bike path that goes along the ocean for seven and a half miles. So, fifteen miles round trip. On weekday afternoons, it's almost empty. It's perfect for going full speed.

So a few times a week, I'd get on [my bike](#) and go as fast as I could for the fifteen-mile loop. I mean really full-on, 100 percent, head-down, red-faced sprinting.

I'd finish exhausted and look at the time: **forty-three minutes**. Every time. Maybe a minute more on a really windy day, but basically always forty-three minutes.

After a few months, I noticed I was getting less enthusiastic about this bike ride. I think I had mentally linked it with being completely exhausted.

So one day I decided **I would do the same ride, but just chill**. Take it easy, nice and slow. OK, not *super* slow, but dialing it back to about 50 percent of my usual effort.

And ahhh... what a nice ride. I was relaxed and smiling and looking around. I was barely giving it any effort.

I saw two dolphins in the water. A pelican flew right over me in Marina del Ray. When I looked up to say "wow!" he shit in my mouth. I can still remember that taste of digested shellfish. I had to laugh at the novelty of it.

I'm usually so damn driven, always doing everything as intensely as I can. It was so nice to take it easy for once. I felt I could do this forever, without any exhaustion.

When I finished, I looked at the time: **forty-five minutes**.

Wait — what?!? How could that be? Yep. I double-checked: forty-five minutes, as compared to my usual forty-three.

So apparently all of that exhausting, red-faced, full-on push-push-push I had been doing had given me only a **4 percent** boost. I could just take it easy and get **96 percent of the results**.

And what a difference in experience! To go the *same* distance, in about the *same* time, but one way leaves me exhausted, and the other way, rejuvenated.

I think of this often. When I notice that I'm all stressed out about something or driving myself to exhaustion, I remember that bike ride and try dialing back my effort by 50 percent. It's been amazing how often everything gets done just as well and just as fast, with what *feels* like half the effort.

Which then makes me realize that half of my effort wasn't effort at all, but just unnecessary stress that made me *feel* like I was doing my best.

Disconnect

All the best, happiest, and most creatively productive times in my life have something in common: being disconnected.

No internet. No TV. No phone. No people. Long uninterrupted solitude.

When I was twenty-two, I quit my job and spent five months alone in a house on a remote part of the Oregon coast. Practicing, writing, recording, exercising, and learning. No internet. No TV. No phone. No people. I drove into the city only once a month to see friends and family. The rest of the time, I was completely disconnected.

In those five months, I wrote and recorded over [fifty songs](#), made huge improvements in my musicianship, read twenty books, and got into the best physical shape of my life.

When I was twenty-seven, I moved to the [woods of Woodstock](#) and did that again. Months and months of lovely solitude. That's how I started CD Baby.

It's not that I hate people. The other best times in my life were with people. But it's interesting how many highlights were just sitting in a room in that wonderful creative flow, free from the chatter of the world. No updates. No news. No pings. No chats. No surfing.

Silence is a great canvas for your thoughts. That vacuum helps turn all of your inputs into output. That lack of interruption helps you [flow](#).

Every business wants to get you addicted to their infinite updates, pings, chats, messages, and news. But if what you want out of life is to **create**, then those are your obstacles.

People often ask me what they can do to be more successful. I say disconnect. Even if just for a few hours. Unplug. Turn off your phone and Wi-Fi. Focus. Write. Practice. Create. **That's what's rare and valuable these days.**

You get no competitive edge from consuming the same stuff everyone else is consuming. It's rare, now, to focus. And it gives such better rewards.

Unlikely places and untangled goals

I once went without food for ten days, and that was fine. But the two things I can't do without for long are solitude and silence. (Freedom from people and their noises.)

I was on a holiday in Ireland with seven members of my family, all packed into a van, exploring the country. A week after they left, I had to be at a conference in Dublin. So in-between those two events, I wanted nothing but solitude and silence.

An [Irish friend](#) suggested that I stay at [Mount Melleray Abbey](#), home of the [Cistercian](#) Trappist monks, known for their silence. They provide a guest room that's free for whoever asks. That sounded perfect, so I emailed and asked. They said yes, so I prepared for a solid week of silence. I took my family to the airport, and drove to the abbey.

When a monk met me at the door and showed me the way to my room, I was surprised when he spoke. I thought we'd all just be silently gesturing. He told me meals would be served twice a day down the hall.

At dinner time, I went down the hall, again expecting silent gesturing. But instead, there was a room full of thirty other guests from around the world, all chattering away. I tried to sit alone, but there was no way to do it.

One loud American latched on to me and bombarded me with shallow questions. I gave vague one-word answers, but that wasn't enough to stop him. I quickly ate and retreated to my room again. I thought about how I'd avoid this chatter for the next six days.

The next morning, I tried to get to breakfast early, but I wasn't early enough. The loud American was there with follow-up questions about my religious beliefs. He started to introduce me to everyone.

I guess they came here for different reasons than I did.

I went back to my room, packed up, and left a thank-you note for the monks, before driving off into the unknown.

I realized I could get more silence at a hotel, so I went to [Lyrath Estate](#) in Kilkenny. It was off-season, half-price, spacious, and mostly empty. I hung around all their various sitting rooms and balconies, writing for six silent days, speaking only one sentence a day if I ordered dinner. It was just what I wanted.

It made me think about all the unlikely places we can get what we want.

Some people think they need to go all the way to Thailand to meditate, or to India to learn yoga. But of course these are things they can do for free at home.

Some people think they need to travel to a country to learn its language. But check out [Moses McCormick learning more than a dozen languages from Ohio](#), or [Benny Lewis learning Arabic from Brazil](#).

Some people think they need to pay a fortune to a university for a great education. But the top schools have all their courses online for free.

And this idea isn't just about locations. Some people think they need expensive equipment to start a new hobby, certain clothes to look the part, or for everything to be just right. But resourceful people know they don't.

It's so important to separate the real goal from the old mental associations. **We have old dreams. We have images we want to re-create. They're hard to untangle from the result we really want.** They become excuses, and reasons to procrastinate.

When you're extremely unmotivated

Like everyone, I get those times when I'm unmotivated to do anything. Brain dead. No energy. Everything feels like, "Why bother? What's the point?"

But I've finally figured out what to do with those times.

Like everyone, I have a list of boring chores that need to be done but that I've been putting off for years. I never do them because I'm always more excited about something else.

During my last unmotivated funk, I realized that because nothing is exciting me, that means nothing is exciting me more than this boring necessary stuff. And since I don't want to waste my inspired times on brainless work, **this is a perfect time to do those dull tasks.**

So I made a list of these necessary things. I grumbled and complained, but I used some caffeine and got through them. It actually felt pretty good.

Conventional wisdom tells us to do the important and difficult thing first. But doing this boring work moves me from a state of doing nothing to doing something. It makes me feel like doing something important again.

So the next time you're feeling extremely unmotivated, do those things you never want to do anyway.

Think like a bronze medalist, not silver

Imagine the Olympics, where you have the three winners of a race standing on the podium: the gold, the silver, and the bronze.

Imagine what it's like to be the silver medalist. If you'd been just one second faster, you could have won the gold! Damn! So close! Damn damn damn! Full of envy, you'd keep comparing yourself to the gold winner.

Now imagine what it's like to be the bronze medalist. If you'd been just one second slower, you wouldn't have won anything! Awesome! You'd be thrilled that you're officially an Olympic medalist and get to stand on the winner's podium.

Comparing up versus comparing down: Your happiness depends on where you're focusing.

The metaphor is easy to understand, but hard to remember in regular life. If you catch yourself burning with envy or resentment, think like the bronze medalist, not the silver. Change your focus. **Instead of comparing up to the next-higher situation, compare down to the next-lower one.**

For example, if you aim to buy “the best” thing, you may feel like gold when you get it, but when the new “best” thing comes out next year, you'll feel that silver envy. Instead, if you aim to buy the “good enough” thing, it will keep you in the bronze mindset. Since you're not comparing to the best, you'll feel no need to keep up.

I've met a lot of famous musicians. The miserable ones were upset that they weren't more famous, because they'd bitterly compare themselves to the superstars. The happiest ones were thrilled to be able to make a living making music.

On the other hand, when you're being ambitious, trying to be the best at a specific skill, it's good to be dissatisfied, like that silver medalist focusing on the gold. You can use that drive to practice and improve.

But most of the time, you need to be more grateful for what you've got, for how much worse it could have been, and how nice it is to have anything at all. Ambition versus gratitude. Comparing up versus comparing down.

For funnier thoughts on this, search the web for [Louis C.K.'s "everything is amazing and nobody is happy"](#) and [Jerry Seinfeld's "silver medal"](#) routines.

Imagining lots of tedious steps? Or one fun step?

If we hate doing something, we think of it as hard. We picture it having many annoying steps.

If we love doing something, it seems simple. We think of it as one fun step.

If you ask someone who hates running how to do it, they'll say, "Ugh... First you put on running clothes. Then you have to stretch. Then you put on your shoes. Then you go outside. Then you get all sweaty. Then you have to cool down. Then you have to shower. Then you have to change. Who has the time?"

If you ask someone who loves running how to do it, they'll say, "Easy! You just put on your shoes and go!"

Once you realize this difference, it's helpful to notice how you think of a project.

Even if you say you want to do something, if you catch yourself thinking of it in many tedious steps, maybe you don't really want to do it. Why would you? It sounds awful.

People often ask me about starting my company. "It must have been so difficult! That's a huge undertaking! How did you manage all of that?" But I just answer honestly, "There was really nothing to it. I just made this little website, and people liked it. That's it." I barely even remember the details. In my head it was just one fun step.

Now I have to pay attention to that, with each new project I start. How many steps am I picturing?

Procrastination hack: change “and” to “or”

My unwritten condition for when to exercise was this:

When it's a nice day, *and* I've finished my work, *and* I haven't just eaten, *and* I'm feeling energetic.

But of course that rarely happens, so I wasn't exercising enough.

My coach suggested I change “and” to “or”.

When it's a nice day, *or* I've finished my work, *or* I haven't just eaten, *or* I'm feeling energetic.

Now I exercise quite often.

Do you have a list of conditions you need to have met before you do something?

Try changing “and” to “or.”

There are always more than two options

People sometimes ask my help in making big decisions. They're usually trying to decide between two options.

But that's not a decision — that's a self-created dilemma! You have to remember that there are always more than two options.

When someone says they have only one option, they're really saying, "I have no choice," and you know that's wrong. At the very least, add "do nothing" and "go insane" as options.

When people say they have only two options, it means they got stuck. Once people get two options, they start comparing the pros and cons of those two, and forget to think of more.

As an example, a friend was trying to decide whether to stick with his frustrating job or quit to start his own company. I suggested some other options:

- Build your new company outside of work hours. Do this until the income from the new company is 50 percent of your salary; then quit.
- Show up to your job, but secretly just work on your own company all day. Do this until you get fired.
- Bring your new-company idea to your boss and propose it as a division of their company, so you can stay on salary.
- Do neither, and move to New Zealand to be a tour guide.

After exploring more options, my friend realized that he didn't actually want to start a new business, but was just avoiding fixing his current situation.

Great insight comes only from opening your mind to many options. Brainstorm them all, from the hybrids to the ridiculous. It takes under an

hour, but has always helped my friends feel less stressed, think clearly, and get excited about decisions that used to feel like dilemmas.

Beware of advice

Imagine that you hand someone your camera, and ask him to take a photo of you. He does, but when you look at the photo later, you notice that he took a photo of himself by mistake.

Imagine you've got a big question like, "Should I quit my job and start my own company?" You go ask the advice of some successful people you respect. Because they can't know everything about you and your unique situation, they'll give advice that's really just a reflection of their own current situation.

So let's look at some ways that advice is biased.

Lottery numbers: When successful people give advice, I usually hear it like this: "Here are the lottery numbers I played: 14 29 71 33 8. They worked for me!" Success is based on so many factors. Some are luck. Some are not. It's hard to know which are which. So which do you learn from?

Underdog opinion in their context: Someone giving advice doesn't want to say what's been said too much already. But he's basing that on his surroundings, not yours. So if everyone around him is quitting their jobs, his advice to you will be to keep your job. That advice has nothing to do with what's best for you — it's just the opinion that seems under-represented in his environment that day.

Creative sparks: You ask, "What should I do, option A or B?" He replies, "Zebra!" He's treating the situation as an invitation to brainstorm, giving a crazy suggestion just to open up [more options](#). Like an [Oscar Wilde quip](#), it was meant to be mostly entertaining, maybe useful, and probably not correct.

The problem is taking any one person's advice too seriously. Ideally, asking advice should be like [echolocation](#). Bounce ideas off of all of your surroundings, and listen to all the echoes to get the whole picture.

Ultimately, only you know what to do, based on all the feedback you've received and all your personal nuances that no one else knows.

Switch strategies

Life is like any journey. You need to change directions a few times to get where you want to go.

Early in your career, the best strategy is to say yes to everything. The more things you try, and the more people you meet, the better. Each one might lead to your lucky break.

Then when something is extra-rewarding, it's time to switch strategies. **Focus all of your energy on this one thing.** Don't be leisurely. Strike while it's hot. Be a freak. Give it everything you've got.

If by chance it was a dead-end road, then switch your strategy back to trying everything.

Eventually your focus on something will pay off. Because you're successful, you'll be overwhelmed with opportunities and offers. You'll want to do them all. But this is when you need to switch strategies again. **This is when you learn to say “[hell yeah or no](#)” to avoid drowning.**

Now you admit you've arrived at your first destination. This is where you stop following old directions, and decide where you're going next. The new plan means you need to switch strategies again.

Don't be a donkey

Are you trying to pursue many different directions at once?

Are you frustrated that the world wants you to pick one thing, because you want to do them all?

The problem is thinking short term — assuming that if you don't do all the things now, they won't happen.

The solution is to think long term. Do just one thing for a few years, then another for a few years, then another.

You may have heard this story: Buridan's donkey is standing halfway between a pile of hay and a bucket of water. It keeps looking left and right, trying to decide between hay and water. Unable to decide, it eventually dies of hunger and thirst.

A donkey can't think of the future. If he could, he'd clearly realize that he could first drink the water, then go eat the hay.

Don't be a donkey. You can do everything you want to do. You just need foresight and patience.

If you're thirty now and have six different directions you want to pursue, then you can do each one for ten years, and have done all of them by the time you're ninety. It seems ridiculous to plan to age ninety when you're thirty, right? But it's probably coming, so you might as well take advantage of it.

You can fully focus on one direction at a time, without feeling conflicted or distracted, because you know you'll get to the others.

We've all done this on a small scale. When something is urgent and needs to be done that day, you focus. For a minute, you get distracting thoughts, like "Wow, it would be nice to go watch a movie now." But you put it out of your mind because you know that if you just focus on this one thing now,

you can get it done and do the other stuff afterwards. So, expand that situation into months or years. Focus on one thing at a time, knowing you can do the other stuff afterwards.

Most people overestimate what they can do in one year, and underestimate what they can do in ten years.

Think long term. Use the future.

Don't be short sighted. Don't be a donkey.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

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I assume I'm below average

Ninety-six percent of cancer patients claim to be in better health than the average cancer patient.

Ninety-four percent of professors say they are better-than-average teachers.

Ninety percent of students think they are more intelligent than the average student.

Ninety-three percent of drivers say they are safer-than-average drivers.

When I learned this, it shook my soul. At first, like almost everybody, I thought, “Yes, but I really am above average!” Then I realized I was doing it again.

So I decided to gamble on the opposite. Now I just assume I'm below average.

It serves me well. I listen more. I ask a lot of questions. I've stopped thinking [others are stupid](#). I assume most people are smarter than me.

To assume you're below average is to admit you're still learning. You focus on what you need to improve, not your [past accomplishments](#).

Many people are so worried about looking good that they never do anything great. Many people are so worried about doing something great that they never do anything at all.

You destroy that paralysis when you think of yourself as just a student, and your current actions as just practice.

Everything is my fault

I used to get mad at people. They lied. They betrayed me. They disappeared.

Do you hear the pattern? “They this. They that.”

When someone upsets you, it’s human nature to feel it’s their fault. But one day I tried thinking of everything as my fault.

I created the environment that made them feel they had to lie. I mistook their neutral behavior as betrayal. I made it more appealing for them to disappear than to communicate.

It felt so good to think it was all my fault!

This is way better than forgiving. When you forgive, you’re still assuming that they’re wrong and you’re the victim.

But to decide it’s your fault feels amazing! Now you weren’t wronged. People were just playing their part in the situation you helped create.

What power! **Now you’re the person who made things happen, made a mistake, and can learn from it.** Now you’re in control and there’s nothing to complain about.

This philosophy feels so good that I’ve playfully decided to apply this rule to the rest of my life. As soon as I catch myself blaming anyone for anything, I decide it’s my fault.

- The guy who ran away with my investment? My fault. I should have verified his claims.
- The love of my life who suddenly dumped me? My fault. I let our relationship plateau.

- Don't like my government? My fault. I could get involved and change it.

Doesn't that feel more powerful? Try it. Maybe instead of "fault" you prefer the word "responsibility," but the idea is the same. Think of every bad thing that happened to you, and imagine that you happened to it.

I love being wrong

Most of the time, I feel smart, successful, and driven — like I've got it all figured out. But last month a bunch of stuff knocked me on my ass. I've never felt so wrong.

I vulnerably called on friends for help. They gave me a bunch of good advice, and helped me see things from a new point of view. Each different perspective made me feel good for a while. Then I fell back into the whirlpool of destructive thoughts.

Whenever something has gone wrong in my life, I've asked myself, "What's great about this?"

Usually I find an answer. But this time, my only answer was, "Nothing. This just sucks." I tried asking it again every day or two, but the answer was the same.

Eventually, I had an epiphany. **I actually love being wrong**, even though it cracks my confidence, **because that's the only time I learn. I actually love being lost**, even though it fuels fears, **because that's when I go somewhere unexpected.**

I pursue being wrong and lost in small doses. I love little lessons that surprise my expectations and change my mind. If we're not surprised, we're not learning.

So I finally figured out what's great about this. Getting knocked on my ass made me humble as hell. It'd been years since I'd called for help. It'd been years since I was so open to advice.

I smiled, thinking of how much I'd learned from my friends this past month. I realized how ultimately happy it makes me to be so empty, even if it really hurts at first. **It's better than thinking I've got it all figured out.**

Singing the counter-melody

My advice and opinions may sound strange on their own.

Do you know what [musical counterpoint](#) is? Underneath the main melody, you have a [counter-melody](#) that goes against it, and together they make harmony. This is different from harmonizing, where someone sings along with the melody at an interval. The counter-melody is a separate melody that could stand on its own, but is mainly there to complement the main melody.

Well, if my advice and opinions sound strange, it's because I'm just the counter-melody.

I know I'm not the only voice you hear. There's a common message we all hear these days. Let's call that the melody.

I may love that melody, too, but I don't want to just duplicate it. So I try to think of a good counter-melody.

I do it to [compensate](#) for something I think is missing in the common message. **My public writing is a counterpoint meant to complement the popular point.**

Of course I don't think the stuff I say is the only way to go. I'm just the counter-melody.

Really I hope you listen to the combination. Eventually you'll find yourself singing along with the melody you like best, or making up your own.

What are the odds of that?

Three true stories:

In 1992, in Tokyo, I dated a girl named Masako. After our month together, she moved to London. We lost touch.

In 2008, I was in London for a few days. I wondered if Masako still lived there, sixteen years later.

A minute later, she walked by.

“Masako!”

“Derek?!”

In 1993, I had a pen-pal from Argentina named Lucia. She was studying Norwegian and planned to move to Oslo, Norway, some day. We lost touch.

In 2007, my band was on tour in Oslo for a few days. I was sitting in a park, wondering if Lucia ever moved there.

A minute later, she walked by.

“Lucia!”

“Derek?!”

Today I’m in Singapore. I went to the library to write. It was very busy, with nowhere to sit, so I walked from room to room before I finally found the last free seat.

I noticed that the guy next to me was reading a book I recommend often: [*Ego Is the Enemy*](#).

I said, “Great book!”

He said, “I got it because of you. You’re Derek, right?”

His name is [Thomas](#). We had emailed a few days ago.

Some people like to think that there are no coincidences. They say, “What are the odds of that?” as if to mean that it can’t be chance. Life feels more amazing to them if it all has meaning. (Seeking patterns in randomness is called [apophenia](#).)

I like to think that everything is a coincidence. Life feels more amazing to me if [it has no meaning](#). No secret agenda. Beautifully random.

What are the odds of winning the big lottery? Fifty million to one? Ah, but that’s if you’re being egocentric and thinking only of yourself! Someone always wins it. **So what if you look past yourself and ask, “What are the odds that this rare thing will happen to someone?”** Almost 100 percent.

That’s a nice reminder when the odds seem impossible. Amazingly rare things happen to people every day.

two three four ONE, two three four ONE

One of my favorite musicians is [Fela Kuti](#) from Nigeria.

I used to play guitar in an Afropop band that did a lot of Fela Kuti songs. The bandleader explained that what we know as the “one” — the downbeat, the **start** of a phrase — is considered the **end** of a phrase in West African music. Instead of “ONE two three four, ONE two three four,” it’s “two three four ONE, two three four ONE.” Instead of “How you get to town?” it’s “You get to town, how?”

Most musicians first record songs in the studio, then go perform them in concert. Fela Kuti did the opposite. He performed only new unrecorded songs in concert. Then once he recorded them in the studio, he’d never perform them again. I couldn’t help but notice the similarity. It’s as if to him, the recording was the end of the life of a song, instead of the beginning. It makes just as much sense if you think about it that way.

Which of course makes me wonder about all the other beginnings and endings and things we just take for granted as fact, but make just as much sense as their opposites.

232 sand dollars

When I was twenty-two, I lived alone on the Oregon coast for a year, just [practicing](#), [recording](#), [dreaming](#), and going for long runs on the beach.

I had been coming to this beach since I was a baby, and had spent hundreds of hours walking every bit of it. As a kid, the golden jackpot was to find an unbroken [sand dollar](#) shell. It had happened maybe five times in my life.

But that year I lived there, on a weekday afternoon when I had the whole beach to myself, I found one: an unbroken sand dollar. A few minutes later, I found another! Thirty seconds later, another, and another, and another! I carried them in my pocket at first, but found so many that I had to take off my shirt to use as a bag.

By the time I got home I had collected 232 unbroken sand dollar shells. I put them all out in the sun to dry, amazed at my good luck. I bragged to my family. I tried to think of all the things I could do with 232 sand dollars.

After two days the excitement wore off. I realized I was never going to do anything with them. Now it was just stupid for me to keep all of these sand dollars sitting there doing nothing. **The excitement was in finding them, not keeping them.**

The next day was a big holiday so the beach was going to be filled with tourists. So at 6 a.m., I took all 232 sand dollars and went for a long walk on the beach — tossing them in the sand, one at a time, very spaced out, so all the tourist kids could find a few.

As I was heading home, I got the quiet satisfaction of watching two kids scream with excitement at finding one.

I hope I live my life like this.

My favorite fable

A farmer had only one horse. One day, his horse ran away.

His neighbors said, "I'm so sorry. This is such bad news. You must be so upset."

The man just said, "We'll see."

A few days later, his horse came back with twenty wild horses following. The man and his son corralled all twenty-one horses.

His neighbors said, "Congratulations! This is such good news. You must be so happy!"

The man just said, "We'll see."

One of the wild horses kicked the man's only son, breaking both his legs.

His neighbors said, "I'm so sorry. This is such bad news. You must be so upset."

The man just said, "We'll see."

The country went to war, and every able-bodied young man was drafted to fight. The war was terrible and killed every young man, but the farmer's son was spared, since his broken legs prevented him from being drafted.

His neighbors said, "Congratulations! This is such good news. You must be so happy!"

The man just said, "We'll see."

WHAT'S WORTH DOING?

- 44. [Obvious to you. Amazing to others.](#)
- 45. [Happy, Smart, and Useful](#)
- 46. [How to do what you love and make good money.](#)
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Obvious to you. Amazing to others.

Any creator of anything knows this feeling:

You experience someone else's innovative work. It's beautiful, brilliant, breath-taking. You're stunned. Their ideas are unexpected and surprising, but perfect.

You think, "I never would have thought of that. How do they even come up with that? It's genius!"

Afterwards, you think, "My ideas are so obvious. I'll never be as inventive as that."

I get this feeling often. Amazing books, music, movies, or even amazing conversations. I'm in awe at how the creator thinks like that. I'm humbled.

But I continue to do my work. I tell my little tales. I share my point of view. Nothing spectacular. Just my ordinary thoughts.

One day someone emailed me and said, "I never would have thought of that. How did you even come up with that? It's genius!"

Of course I disagreed and explained why it was nothing special.

But afterwards, I realized something surprisingly profound:

Everybody's ideas seem obvious to them.

I'll bet even John Coltrane or Richard Feynman felt that everything they were playing or saying was pretty obvious.

So maybe what's obvious to me is amazing to someone else?

Hit songwriters often admit that their most successful hit song was one they thought was just stupid, even not worth recording.

We're clearly bad judges of our own creations. We should just put them out there and let the world decide.

Are you holding back something that seems too obvious to share?

Happy, Smart, and Useful

There are three things to consider when making life-size decisions:

- What makes you happy
- What's smart — meaning long-term good for you
- What's useful to others

We have a tendency to forget one of these. For example:

Smart and useful (but not happy)

This is the stereotype of the strict parent who says, “You will go to the best school, get perfect grades, get a degree in law or medicine, and make lots of money. What you want does not matter. This is what's best for you and your family.”

Smart and useful isn't bad. It's rational, like a machine. **But happiness is the oil.** Without it, the friction kills the engine.

Happy and smart (but not useful)

This is the stereotype of the “lifestyle design” or self-help addict: always learning, always improving, and obsessively focused on how to be happy and create the perfect life.

They look for “passive income” instead of focusing on doing something that's [really valuable to others](#).

Happy and smart isn't bad. The self-focus feels great at first. But you can't actually [pull yourself up by your bootstraps](#). **Ultimately you must be lifted by those around you.**

Happy and useful (but not smart)

This is the stereotype of charity volunteers. After getting expensive university degrees, they spend years flying to exotic impoverished places to dig wells and thatch roofs.

But if a graduate's time could be worth \$200 per hour, yet they're doing work that locals could do better for \$10 per hour (and without airfare and hotels), then they're actually doing a disservice to others. (For more thoughts on this, find two articles online: "[Efficient Charity: Do Unto Others](#)" and "[The Reductive Seduction of Other People's Problems](#).")

In this same category are people who stay at the same jobs for life without improvement, and the musicians who always perform at the local venues but never make good recordings.

Happy and useful isn't bad. These people are doing good for the world, so it's hard to find fault. **They have great intentions but lame strategies — wasted effort and unused potential.**

Just happy (not smart or useful)

This is the [parable of the Mexican fisherman](#).

Some say, "Just be happy. That's all that matters." It sounds so simple, it must be profoundly true, right?

But, as in Aesop's fable of "[The Ant and the Grasshopper](#)," you'll be full of regret if you think of nothing but today and don't prepare for tough times.

And you'll be very unrewarded if you serve only yourself, not others.

So...?

When life or a plan feels ultimately unsatisfying, I find it's because I've forgotten to find the intersection of all three:

- What makes me happy
- What's smart

- What's useful to others

How to do what you love and make good money

People with a well-paying job ask my advice because they want to quit to become full-time artists.

But full-time artists ask my advice because they're finding it impossible to make money.

(Let's define "art" as anything you do for expression, even just blogging or whatever.)

For both of them, I prescribe the lifestyle of the happiest people I know:

- **Have a well-paying job.**
- **Seriously pursue your art for love, not money.**

Let's look at the ingredients of this plan. First: **balance**. You've heard about balancing heart and mind, or right-brain left-brain, or whatever you want to call it. We all have a need for stability *and* adventure, certainty *and* uncertainty, money *and* expression.

If you have too much stability, you get bored. If you don't have enough stability, you panic. So keep the balance.

Do something for love and something for money. Don't try to make one thing satisfy your entire life.

Each half of your life becomes a remedy for the other. You get paid stability for part of your day, but then need creative time for expression. So you push yourself creatively, expose your vulnerable art to the public, feel the frustration of rejection and apathy, and then long for some stability again. Each half is a remedy for the other.

About the job: Be smart, and choose [something that pays well with a solid future](#). Look for statistics in your area about what pays the best when factoring in the required training. You'll probably need to study for a few

years to build up the rare skills that are well-rewarded. **This is a head choice, not a heart choice**, since you're not trying to make your job your entire life.

About your art: Pursue it seriously. Take lessons. Make weekly progress. Keep improving, even if you've been doing it for decades.

If you don't progress and challenge yourself creatively, it won't satisfy the balance. Release and sell your work like a professional. Find some fans. Let them pay you. But your attitude is different than someone who needs the money. You don't need to worry if it doesn't sell. You don't need to please the marketplace. You don't need to compromise your art or value it based on others' opinions. **You're just doing this for yourself — art for its own sake.** And you're releasing it because that's one of the most rewarding parts — important for self-identity — and gives you good feedback on how to improve.

Your main obstacle to this amazing life will be self-control. You'll need good time management to stop addictions like social media and video-watching, and make your art your main relaxing activity. You'll need good mind management to not think of your job after you leave the office.

Most full-time artists I know only spend an hour or two a day actually doing their art. The rest is spent on the boring work that comes with trying to make it a full-time career. So skip the art career and just do the art.

And that's my advice for a rewarding life. I've met thousands of people over the last twenty years — many of them full-time musicians, many of them not — but the happiest people I know are the ones that have this balance.

Don't expect your job to fulfill all your emotional needs. Don't taint something you love with the need to make money from it. **Don't try to make your job your whole life. Don't try to make your art your sole income.** Let each be what it is, and put in the extra effort to balance the two, for a great life.

What do you hate not doing?

When we wonder what's worth doing, we ask ourselves, "What do I really love?" or "What makes me happy?"

That question never really goes well, does it?

Maybe it's because there's a long list of things that make us happy, and we need to narrow it down further. Or maybe because the things with the deepest rewards don't always provide shallow pleasures along the way.

So try this question instead:

What do you hate **not** doing?

What makes you feel depressed, annoyed, or like your life has gone astray if you don't do it enough?

Answers to this double-negative question seem to be better indicators of what's really worth doing.

You don't need confidence, just contribution.

Years ago, I was so confident and so naive. I was sure I was right and everyone else was wrong.

After I [sold my company](#), I felt ready to do something new, so I started to [learn](#). But the more I learned, the more I realized how little I knew and how dumb-lucky I had been.

I continued learning until I felt like an absolute idiot. By then I was paralyzed, unable to create anything new.

I'd [start to make new things](#), but then see how stupid they revealed me to be, so I'd stop. I lost all confidence. I spent a few years completely stuck.

Eventually, some new thoughts helped:

- **Learning without doing is wasted.** If I don't use what I learn, then it was pointless! How horrible to waste those hundreds of hours I spent learning, and not turn it into action. Like throwing good food in the trash, it's morally wrong.
- **[This isn't about me.](#)** How I feel in this moment doesn't matter — it will pass. Nobody's judging me because nobody's thinking of me. They're just looking for ways to improve their own lives. [The public me is not the real me](#) anyway, so if they judge my public persona, that's fine.
- **The work is the point, and my work is unique.** If I can do something that people find useful, then I should. It doesn't matter if it's a masterpiece or not, as long as I enjoy it. I've got my own weird angle on things that's [a useful counter-melody](#) in the big orchestra of life.

I'm glad my old confidence is gone because it thought I was right, and maybe even great, but not anymore.

Now I aim to make my work — my little contribution to the world — just unique and useful.

Let pedestrians define the walkways

A new college campus was built, but one thing was still debated:

Where in the grass should we put the paved walkways?

Some people thought the walkways should go around the grass, to leave it green. Some thought the walkways should cut across diagonally.

One professor had the winning idea: **Don't make any walkways this year. At the end of the year, look where the grass has worn away.** That shows where the students are walking. **Then just pave those paths.**

Brilliant.

I think about this idea applied to life plans or business plans.

As time goes on, we get smarter. We learn more about ourselves or our customers — what we or they really want. Therefore, we're at our dumbest at the beginning, and at our smartest at the end.

So when should you make decisions? When you have the most information, when you're at your smartest: **as late as possible.**

Like the college campus, you can do without walkways for a year.

Resist the urge to figure it all out in advance. Realize that now, in the beginning, is when you know the least.

When people expect you to make these decisions in advance, get used to saying, "We don't know yet." Then tell this simple story about walkways to show them how wise you are.

Don't start a business until people are asking you to

When you bake a cake, you need to do first things first. You need to get the ingredients before you turn on the oven. You need to bake it before you frost it and slice it.

I meet a lot of people who want to start a business. Some don't have an idea yet. I don't understand this. It's like wanting to wear a bandage when you don't have a wound.

Most have an idea but no customers. For them I always say, "Don't start a business until people are asking you to."

This is not meant to be discouraging. It just means you need to get the ingredients before you turn on the oven.

First you find real people whose problem you can solve. You listen deeply to find their dream scenario. You make sure they're happy to pay you enough.

Don't [announce](#) anything. Don't choose a [name](#). Don't make a website or an app. Don't build a system. **You need to be free to completely change or ditch your idea.**

Then you get your first paying customer. Provide a one-on-one personal service. Then you get another paying customer. **Prove a real demand.**

Then, [as late as possible](#), you officially start your business.

Parenting : Who is it really for?

Since my son was born five years ago, I've spent at least thirty hours a week with him, just one-on-one, giving him my full attention. But I've never written about parenting before because it's a touchy subject — too easily misunderstood.

So why am I writing about it today? Because I realized that **the parenting things I do for him are also for myself**. And that's an idea worth sharing.

Here are the things I've been doing for my son since he was born:

Cultivating a long attention span

Whatever he's doing right now, that's the most important thing. So I encourage him to keep doing it as long as possible. I never say, "Come on! Let's go!"

We'll go to the beach or forest, and make things with sticks and sand for half a day before he's ready to switch.

Other families come to the playground for twenty or thirty minutes, but we stay there for hours.

Nobody else can play with us like this. Everyone else gets so bored.

Of course my adult mind wanders to all the other things we could be doing. But I let it go, and return to that present focus.

Entering his world

I'm very ambitious and try to do a lot with my life. But when I'm with him, I stop everything else. Phone off. Computer off.

I try to see things through his eyes — to put myself into his mind. When he gets upset, I try to remember what it was like to be his age and relate at that

level.

When he makes up stories, I enter his invented world. If he says we're cats in Paris, we're cats in Paris. The minotaur is chasing us? We both run.

Of course I'm tempted to check my phone. Most of us have that addiction now. But I ask myself, "What's more important?" and leave it off.

Broadening his inputs

I want him to have a wide range of inputs into his senses.

We go play in as many different forests, beaches, mountains, and towns as possible, touching and smelling everything we can.

I play very diverse music in the background. When we play at home, he's listening to [Persian traditional](#), Indian classical, '60s jazz, [glitch](#), Bartok, Stevie Wonder ([from '72 to '76](#)), lots of Bach, [Bulgarian choir](#), or whatever.

We've had season tickets to the [New Zealand Symphony Orchestra](#) since he was three, and never miss a concert. I took him to the opera [Carmen](#), and he was riveted from start to finish.

We get a few new books from the library every week and read together for an hour every night.

We watch a huge variety of movies, but always from start to finish without interruption, so he gets the full story arc. For the big Disney blockbusters, we watch the Portuguese or Chinese translations.

And now, my point:

The reason I'm finally writing about this is because I realized that **I'm doing all these things for myself as much as for him.**

By cultivating his long attention span, I'm cultivating my own.

By entering his world, I'm letting go of my own, like meditation.

By broadening his inputs, I'm broadening my own.

I thought I was being selfless. But actually, like most things we consider selfless, they benefit me as much as him.

P.S. You won't find his name or face online. I don't think it's right to put someone online without their permission. He'll put himself online when he's ready.

OK Milt, I'll start writing again

Yesterday I procrastinated, tinkered, and wasted time, doing nothing of any value.

Then this morning, I found out that one of my best friends died yesterday. He was out on a bike ride on a quiet street when a car swerved into the bike lane, [killing him instantly](#).

We shared my online music account. I see he had just downloaded the entire Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young catalog yesterday before he left on his ride.

I've been crying off and on all morning, thinking about what we do with our time — what's worthy and what's a waste.

Time really is limited. We can't pretend it's not. Time spent doing one thing is time spent not doing something else.

It's so easy to waste time doing stuff that's not important, not really fun, and not useful to anyone, not even yourself.

It's so hard to fight the [resistance](#) to do the more difficult but more important thing. Finishing that book. Writing that song. Launching that project.

I spent this morning thinking about what doesn't matter and what does. For me, writing is about the most worthy thing I can do with my time. I love how the distributed word is eternal — that every day I get emails from strangers thanking me for things I wrote years ago that helped them today. I love how those things will continue to help people long after I'm gone.

My friend was a brilliant conversationalist, one of the brightest minds I've met, but he never put his thoughts into writing. **It's extra-sad that his thoughts are gone, too.**

So this lesson is dedicated to you, Milt Olin. I'm going to start writing again.

FIXING FAULTY THINKING

- 53. [Unlearning](#)
- 54. [Subtract](#)
- 55. [Smart people don't think others are stupid](#)
- 56. [The mirror: It's about you, not them.](#)
- 57. [Assume men and women are the same](#)
- 58. [Moving for good](#)
- 59. [Learning the lesson, not the example.](#)
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- 61. [Projecting meaning](#)

Unlearning

Things I learned in the past are now wrong. Times have changed.

Beliefs that were true are now false. They were based on old limitations that are now gone.

Ways that used to work don't work anymore. The old road collapsed. There's a tunnel through the mountain now. When the old map is wrong, we can't just draw a new line on it — we need to get a new map or we'll be following closed roads.

Sometimes the world is the same, but my situation has changed. What got me here won't get me there.

The solution is deliberate unlearning.

1. Doubt what I know.
2. Stop the habit of thinking I know it.
3. Require current proof that it's still true today. Otherwise, let it go.

Where I had expertise before, I don't now. People ask my advice on things I knew well years ago. It's tempting to think I still know the answer, but instead I have to admit, "Sorry. I don't know."

It hurts to go from feeling like an expert to feeling like an idiot. But it's crucial to go through that pain or I'll never grow.

John Cage said, "I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."

Alvin Toffler said, "The illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

Many people learn only in their first third of life, so schools don't teach unlearning.

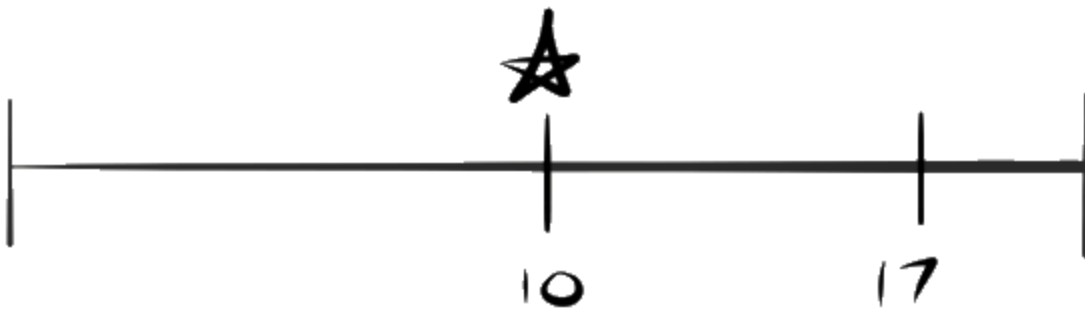
We want to see the world clearly and know what's what. But once we're past the first stage of wisdom, the next stage involves adapting to new changes.

We don't get wise just by adding and adding. We also need to [subtract](#).

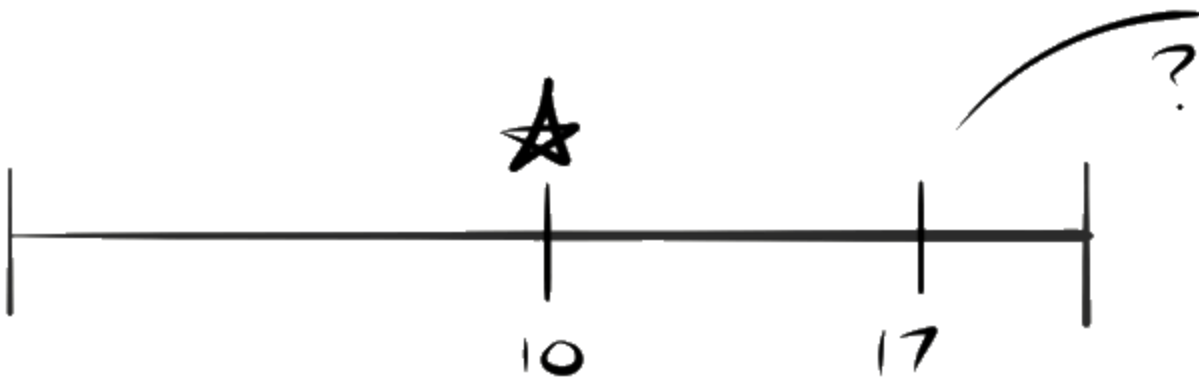
Subtract

Life can be improved by adding, or by subtracting. The world pushes us to add, because that benefits them. But the secret is to focus on subtracting.

Imagine a number line, with 0 on the left and 20 on the right. Say I want to be in the middle, at 10. But I'm at 17.



“What can I add to get to 10? I tried adding 8 but that didn’t work. Maybe 3 would help. I should go all out and add 50.”



No amount of adding will get me to where I want to be.

The adding mindset is deeply ingrained. **It's easy to think I need something else. It's hard to look instead at what to remove.**

The least successful people I know run in conflicting directions, are drawn to distractions, say yes to almost everything, and are chained to emotional obstacles.

The most successful people I know have a narrow focus, protect themselves against time-wasters, say no to almost everything, and have let go of old limiting beliefs.

More people die from eating too much than from eating too little. Most of us have too much baggage, too many commitments, and too many priorities.

Subtracting reminds me that what I need to change is something already here, not out there.

Smart people don't think others are stupid

The woman seemed to be making some pretty good points until she stopped with, “Ugh! Those people are just so stupid!!”

She could have said Southerners, Northerners, Liberals, Conservatives, Chinese, or Americans. It doesn't matter. She just proved that she wasn't being smart.

There are no smart people or stupid people, just people being smart or being stupid.

Being smart means thinking things through. It means trying to find the real answer, not the easiest answer.

Being stupid means avoiding thinking by jumping to conclusions. Jumping to a conclusion is like quitting a game. You lose by default.

That's why saying “I don't know” is usually smart — because it's refusing to jump to a conclusion.

So when someone says, “They're so stupid!” it means they've stopped thinking. They say it because it's satisfying to jump to that conclusion.

So if you decide someone is stupid, it means you're not thinking, which is not being smart.

Therefore, smart people don't think others are stupid.

The mirror: It's about you, not them.

If you see a gorgeous painting that fascinates you, does it matter if you find out the artist didn't pay her taxes? Would you stop enjoying the painting?

If someone shows you a great way to memorize names, does it matter if you find out that person is an alcoholic? Would you no longer trust their memorization techniques?

When I buy a book that has a picture of the author on the cover, I rip off and trash the cover before I even leave the store. I don't care who the author is. All that matters are the ideas inside the book and what I do with them.

James Brown was my biggest musical influence. I even named my band "Hit Me" in homage to him. I had posters of him on my wall. But when I worked at Warner/Chappell Music in the early '90s and they told me he was coming to the office that day, I went home early to avoid meeting him. I didn't want the complete flawed man to taint that flawless music that changed my life.

Maybe the examples seem silly, but it was important to me to remember that **what matters is what I get out of their work, not the person who made it.**

I often tell people about a great book I think will help them, but sometimes they dismiss the book because they heard something they didn't like about the author. What I think they're really saying is, "Now that I've proven that the messenger is not perfect, I don't have to listen to anything they say."

But the act of reading a book is really about you and what you get from it. All that matters is what you do with the ideas, no matter the source. Apply them to your own life in your own way.

It was never about them. It's about you.

Assume men and women are the same

Men say, “Women can never make up their minds.”

But actually both men and women are equally indecisive.

Women say, “Men think one thing but say another.”

But actually both men and women are equally indirect.

We think the differences between our group and another group are greater than they are.

But the differences *among* men, and the differences *among* women, are much bigger than the differences *between* men and women.

So instead, [to compensate for your tendency to exaggerate those differences](#), just assume that men and women are the same.

They’re not the same, but if you follow this rule, your thinking will be closer to correct than not.

Moving for good

You are the way you are because of what you've experienced.

Your country, family, town, random circumstances, and friends have shaped the way you think. If you had grown up on the other side of the world, you would have a different set of values and thought patterns.

But if you keep experiencing the same things, your mind keeps its same patterns. Same inputs, same responses. Your brain, which was once curious and growing, gets fixed into deep habits. Your values and opinions harden and resist change. If you don't flex, you lose your flexibility.

You really learn only when you're surprised. If you're not surprised, then everything is fitting into your existing thought patterns. **So to get smarter, you need to get surprised, think in new ways, and deeply understand different perspectives.**

With effort, you could do this from the comfort of home. But the most effective way to shake things up is to move across the world. Pick a place that's most unlike what you know, and go.

This keeps you in a learning mindset. Previously mindless habits, like buying groceries, now keep your mind open, alert, and noticing new things. New arrivals in a culture often notice what the locals don't. ([Fish don't know they're in water.](#))

Don't think of yourself as visiting. Say that you've moved here, and mean it. Commit. Immerse. Go native.

Form deep friendships with locals. Ask lots of questions. Ask people to explain and show you how things are done. When they state a fact, ask how they know. When they state an opinion, ask for examples.

At first, their values and methods will feel wrong. You'll feel the urge to tell them how their lives or ideas could be better — more like what you know. But try to understand a perspective where they are right and you are wrong.

Eventually, you'll realize that your beliefs were not correct — they were just the local culture of where you grew up. You're a product of your environment.

Every country has a shared and working philosophy. Dive in and really try to understand it. This is one of the best things you can do for your brain. Stay immersed at least until you feel yourself saying “we” instead of “they.”

Then, if you want to keep your brain actively learning and growing forever, keep moving across the world and immersing yourself like this for the rest of your life.

Learning the lesson, not the example.

Learning how to read metaphorically was a major turning point in my life.

When I was nineteen, attending Berklee College of Music, I had no interest in anything but music. Then a teacher made us read the book [*Positioning*](#), which is a straight-up business book. I thought, “Business? Yuck! I’m at music school, not business school! I just want to be a musician, not some corporate suit!”

Then he showed us how we could apply that book’s business lessons to our music. Even though the book makes no mention of music, he told us to translate the examples to whatever we’re doing.

In other words: **Don’t focus on the example itself. Use it as a metaphor, and apply the lesson to my situation.** It sounds obvious now, but I’d never looked at it that way before.

I realized I could advance my music career by reading [books that make no mention of music](#). In fact, I’d have a competitive advantage by doing so, since most musicians won’t!

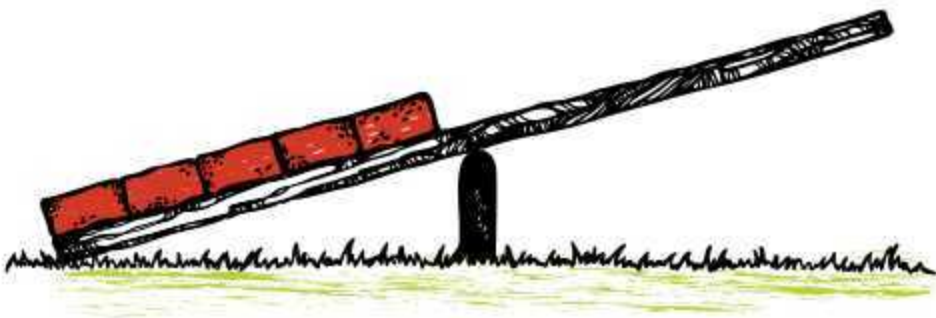
Now here I am, twenty years later. I write little articles to share the lessons I’ve learned. But in the comments, I notice that people sometimes focus on my random example, instead of on the greater lesson.

Nobody else knows your exact situation. So learn to see past the example, focus on the lesson, and apply it to your own life. Think in metaphors.

Overcompensate to compensate

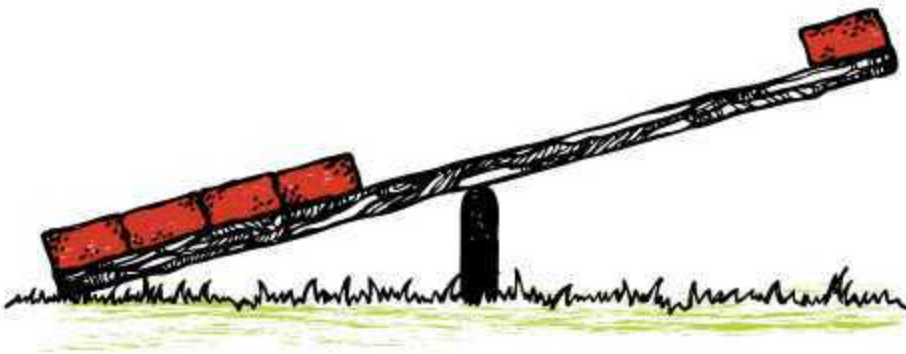
You have something you want to change: a thought process or habit you want to fix.

Let's use the metaphor of a bunch of bricks on a seesaw. Right now all the bricks are stacked on one side. This is the way you have been.



To make a change, **most people don't do enough.**

If you do something small and sensible, it's like moving one brick to the other side. You're still unbalanced.



You think you made the change, but it's not accounting for:

- a lifetime of doing it the other way,

- the environment that made you that way, and
- the pressure from friends to stay that way.

To make a change, you have to be extreme. Go all the way the other way. **It will feel like overcompensating**, but you have to stack a huge pile of bricks on the other side.



This new you sounds extreme and exciting. You'll think you're going to be completely changed.

But actually the old stuff is still there. So really this is what you needed to do to balance — to compensate for that cultural baggage, self-identity, habit, and history.



Once you're balanced, the new perspective will sink in and become your new normal.



Projecting meaning

Chinese characters look complicated, but they're mostly made up of smaller, simpler characters. For example:

- language 语 = words 讠 + five 五 + mouth 口
- thanks 谢 = words 讠 + body 身 + inch 寸
- younger sister 妹 = woman 女 + not-yet 未
- you 你 = person 人 + bow ㄣ + small 小
- name 名 = evening 夕 + mouth 口

I love learning these because every character is like a tiny poem.

A language is words that five mouths speak?

When you say “thanks”, you speak words that give a body an inch of space?

Your name is what's spoken by a mouth in the evening? That's kind of romantic.

The stories are so vivid. I try to imagine the historical or cultural meaning behind each one.

...

Talking Heads was a great band from 1975 to 1988. Their lyrics were evocative and mysterious — specific but vague — and made you wonder what they were really about.

David Byrne, the main songwriter of Talking Heads, later said that most of their lyrics were just random. He would write little phrases on pieces of paper, throw them into a bowl, and shuffle them. Then he'd randomly pull some out of the bowl and put them into the song.

He did this because he liked how **the listener creates meaning that wasn't intended**. Hearing one phrase next to another makes you assume they're connected in a meaningful way. But nope. It was just random. You made that meaning yourself.

...

I got [a Chinese dictionary](#) to find out the meaning behind the words I was learning. I found out that many of them are just phonetic! Those components were not chosen for their meaning; they were chosen just for their sound! **So I've just been putting the meanings into them myself**. They actually had no meaning.

But even knowing that, I choose to keep doing it. It's poetic. It's beautiful. Making stories helps me memorize them.

But how many other things in life really have no meaning?

She was born April 12. He was born September 12. What does it mean?

One day you ride your bike instead of taking the bus. That day your usual bus gets into a big accident. What does it mean?

A black cat crosses your path as you walk under a ladder on Friday the 13th. What does it mean?

Nothing at all. **Nothing has inherent meaning**. It is what it is and that's it. **We just choose to project meaning onto things**. It feels good to make stories.

Even if presented with proof that an event is totally random or neutral, we decide it has meaning anyway. It makes life more poetic and beautiful.

And what if you've projected some bad meaning onto something and it's getting you down? Know that none of it is true. You're the one who put the meaning into it. You can just as easily take all the meaning out of it.

SAYING YES

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After fifteen years of practice

Since the age of fourteen, I was determined to be a great singer. But my pitch was bad, my tone was bad, and everyone said I was just not a singer.

At seventeen, I started taking voice lessons and practicing two hours every night. I'd go into a soundproof room to sing long tones, scales, arpeggios, and specific song phrases over and over.

At eighteen, I started touring, performing two to four shows a week, always as the lead singer. Often they were outdoor shows, sometimes with no PA system at all, so I had to learn to project to be heard.

At nineteen, I was still practicing two hours a night but still having a problem with pitch. People kept telling me I was just not a singer — that I should give it up and find a real singer.

Then I heard [Warren Senders](#) singing Indian vocal music, and his pitch was so perfect that I went rushing up to him afterwards to ask how he did it. “How are you able to hit the notes so perfectly dead-on? Are you just naturally good at this?”

He said, “No! When I first started singing, not only was I not within an inch of the note — I wasn't within a football field of the note! I was horrible!”

“So how did you do it?”

He jabbed a finger in my chest, and looked me in the eye. “Practice. Thousands of hours of practice, and eventually I got it. I can show you how.”

That year, I took a bus out to his house every Wednesday night, and he taught me some [esoteric ways of thinking about singing](#).

I continued touring for years, always as the lead singer — still taking voice lessons with different teachers in different cities — still practicing tones, scales, and trouble spots for an hour every night.

At twenty-five, I recorded my first album. When I gave it to a record producer who was a real mentor to me, he gave it a focused listen and then said, “Derek, you’re just not a singer. You really need to stop trying. Admit you’re a songwriter, and find a real singer.”

But I bounced away from that meeting unfazed. I knew I just had more work to do. I toured for three more years after that, always pushing, always practicing, always determined to be a great singer.

At twenty-eight, I started noticing that my voice was getting good! I recorded a few new songs, and for the first time, I really liked the vocals!

At twenty-nine, I had done it. After fifteen years of practice, and about a thousand live shows, I was finally a good singer, at least by my own standards. You can judge for yourself at sive.rs/music, where my old recordings are at the bottom, and new recordings are at the top.

Someone who heard me for the first time said, “Singing is a gift that either you’re born with or you’re not. You’re lucky. You were born with it!”

I had to remember this story now because I’m spending most of my time doing new things I’m not good at. **It’s overwhelming to feel so in awe of the people who seem to do it naturally.** I’m just a beginner. It may take me another fifteen years, but I’m determined.

Goals shape the present, not the future.

You have a goal you've been putting off.

You want to do it someday.

You've been meaning to take real action on it, but could use more motivation.

Let it go. It's a bad goal.

If it was a great goal, you would have jumped into action already. You wouldn't wait. Nothing would stop you.

The purpose of goals is not to improve the future. The future doesn't exist. It's only in our imagination. All that exists is the present moment and what you do in it.

Judge a goal by how well it changes your actions in the present moment.

A bad goal makes you say, "I want to do that someday." A great goal makes you take action immediately.

A bad goal is foggy, vague, and distant. A great goal is so clear, specific, and close you can almost touch it. (This is crucial to keep you going.)

A bad goal makes you say, "I'm not sure how to start." With a great goal, you know exactly what needs to be done next.

A bad goal makes you say, "Let me sleep on it." A great goal makes you say, "I can't sleep! I was up until 2 a.m. doing this, then got up at 7 a.m. to do it some more."

A bad goal makes you say, "That'd be nice." A great goal makes you say, "Oh my god! Yes! That would be amazing! I can't wait!"

A bad goal makes you say, “I’ll do it as soon as I do this other stuff.” A great goal is so interesting and important that you can’t be distracted.

Some goals seem great. They impress your friends (“I’m going to bike across India”), satisfy an old wish (“I want to go into space”), or are good for you (“I’m going to lose thirty pounds”). **But unless it changes your actions, right now, it’s not a great goal.** Find another variation that excites you.

Seeking inspiration?

The word “inspiration” usually means “something that mentally stimulates you.”

But “inspiration” also means to [breathe in](#).

The meanings poetically combine when you think of yourself breathing in thoughts, filling your body with ideas. **But don’t forget to breathe out.**

People surf the web, reading pithy articles, looking for inspiration. People listen to hours of podcasts, looking for inspiration. Musicians, writers, artists, and everyone else, all scouring the world for inspiration.

Breathing in, and in, and in, and in.

Yet most of them aren’t feeling inspired enough. They’re looking for more, thinking that something else out there will truly inspire them.

Want to know why? **Because nothing is truly inspiring unless you apply it to your work.** (*“work” meaning your life’s output, whether creative, business, or personal*).

In other words, your work, itself, is the inspiration.

You may hear something or see something that gives you a new idea. But it’s only when you stop and think of your work through this new perspective, that you actually jump up and go turn the idea into reality. That’s the real inspiration that everyone is looking for.

Inspiration is not receiving information. Inspiration is applying what you’ve received.

People think that if they keep reading articles, browsing books, listening to talks, or meeting people, they’re going to suddenly get inspired. But constantly seeking inspiration is anti-inspiring. You have to pause the input and focus on your output.

For every bit of inspiration you take in, use it and amplify it by applying it to your work. Then you'll finally feel the inspiration you've been looking for.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Possible futures

I occasionally get a big vision for my future — a huge project that will take many months or years. Something exciting and very worth doing.

I'll do a bunch of research, make a bunch of plans, and feel like I've made a big decision on a new direction in life.

Then a month later, I have a completely different vision. Something unrelated to the previous one. Something I'm *more* excited about.

And the process repeats.

I used to feel bad about this. Like I should stop having new ideas for the future, and just stick with one. I used to feel bad for not acting on them.

Then I made a little change that made a big difference: on my computer, I made a folder called "Possible Futures." For each big plan, I make a new file in that folder and put all of my ideas and research into it.

Now I can daydream all I want, not feeling bad that I'm not taking action, because it's clear that **each plan is just one of many possible futures.**

This collection of plans also reminds me that **I love daydreaming, just for its own sake.**

I've got seventy-two different futures in there as of today. A few times a year, I read through them all. Some seem stupid now, but some get more and more enticing with time.

When I finish a big project and I'm feeling ready for a new future, I open this folder and pick one to make real.

If you think you haven't found your passion...

I hear so many people say, "But I haven't found my true passion!"

It's dangerous to think in terms of "passion" and "purpose" because they sound like such huge overwhelming things.

If you think love needs to look like *Romeo and Juliet*, you'll overlook a great relationship that grows slowly.

If you think you haven't found your passion yet, you're probably expecting it to be overwhelming.

Instead, just **notice what excites you and what scares you on a small moment-to-moment level.**

If you find yourself diving into a book about programming and playing around with it for hours, go for it! Dive in deeper. Maybe that's your new calling.

If you keep thinking about doing something big, and you find that the idea both terrifies and intrigues you, it's probably a worthy endeavor for you.

You grow by doing what excites you and what scares you.

Whatever scares you, go do it

Sometimes people ask me if there's one motto or rule of thumb I use most often. This is it:

Whatever scares you, go do it.

For thirty years, I've been following that rule for both small and big things in life, and it's served me well.

On a small level, it can be that little nervous moment, when you're scared to talk to someone intimidating. You notice you're scared. Aha! Whatever scares you, go do it. So you go talk to them.

On a big level, it can be that huge terrifying idea that won't go away. Starting a business. Visiting a country. Quitting your job. Whatever scares you, go do it.

Fear is just a form of excitement, and you know you should [do what excites you](#).

Best of all, **once you do something that scared you, you're not scared of it anymore!** As you go through life, doing everything that scares you, you fear less and less in the world.

Legendary psychologist [Abraham Maslow](#) said it well: "Life is an ongoing process of choosing between safety (out of fear and need for defense) and risk (for the sake of progress and growth). Make the growth choice a dozen times a day."

I heard that as a teenager, took it to heart, and made this rule. Whatever scares you, go do it.

About the Author

If you want to know more about me or my work, go to sive.rs. It's all there.

Anyone who reads my books is my kind of person, so please go to sive.rs/contact to email me and say hello. Ask me anything or just introduce yourself. I reply to every email.

— Derek



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