Your Life, Your Work
FIRST FREE YOURSELF

EDITED BY DAN SANCHEZ | WITH 11 NEW CHAPTERS

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Your Life, Your Work
First Free Yourself

Edited by Dan Sanchez
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You might be surprised to find yourself reading a personal advice book from FEE. Isn’t the mission of the Foundation for Economic Education to spread ideas about markets and liberty? What do those subjects have to do with career success and self-improvement?

As the essays in this book make clear, the broader freedom philosophy isn’t only a political and economic philosophy. It’s also a way of looking at the world that eventually becomes a life philosophy.

The human spirit thrives under freedom. When we’re free, our incentives line up just right, and our potential is unlocked. Our natural drive to improve our own lives through purpose-driven action is given free rein. Civility, friendship, and abundance are fostered as we engage each other in reciprocal service for mutual benefit.

These happy effects are undone to the extent that we’re unfree. When others restrict or dictate what we do with our persons and property (whether for their own gain or “for our own good”), we are obstructed from fully pursuing our own happiness.

This is true when it comes to compulsory political bonds: drug prohibition, business regulations, health care mandates, etc. But it is also true when we compulsively (even if voluntarily) submit to the wills of others: when give in to conventional wisdom and we let domineering parents, teachers, counselors, bosses, spouses, or friends intimidate us and determine the courses of our lives.
When we are the ones trying to lord it over others, we not only ensnare our victims, but entangle ourselves. We enfeeble ourselves by becoming dependent on the grudging (and therefore unreliable) service of others. And a meddlesome preoccupation with other people’s choices is invariably futile and only distracts us from attending to our own affairs.

This is not only true when we become hooked on political power, but also when we become moochers, busybodies, and petty tyrants in our personal and professional lives.

As Leonard Read, founder of FEE wrote,

The directing of, or the meddling in, the creative activities of others—the dictator role—is so compellingly corrupting that no person, interested in his own upgrading, should ever accept the role. If he has made the error of acceptance, abdication for his own mental and spiritual health would seem advisable.

Moreover, in both public and private affairs, freedom and enterprise are impossible without responsibility and independence. And dependence is inseparable from subservience. This is why privilege and the dole are disempowering and debilitating, whether the favors and handouts come from the government or from parents.

When everyone is hopelessly ensnared in each other’s affairs, life becomes less of a dance and more of a wrestling match: less of a tango and more of a tangle. Cooperation yields to conflict. Sweet harmony is drowned out by bitter discord.

In public affairs, we see this play out in the global contest of powers and the domestic clash of special interests. In private affairs, it manifests in the even more “domestic” tugs-of-war that occur within unhealthy relationships: between husband and wife, parent and child, boss and employee. Very often these conflicts arise out of a lack of freedom in the broader sense: when at least one party is not treating either
herself or the other person with dignity: that is, as an autonomous and responsible individual in charge of her own life.

The following essays explain how embracing the broader freedom philosophy can enhance your own life. They deal with how you can gain peace of mind and motivation by taking ownership over your own thoughts and feelings, how you can thrive and prosper at work by taking ownership over your own career, and how you can learn and grow by taking ownership over your own life-long education.

This book is about your life and your work: emphasis on “your.”
Part 1

Self-Improvement
Self-Discipline Must Be Selfish

Dan Sanchez

Today’s the day. The day you get serious about your work, your studies, your finances, your health, your life. Commence adulting.

You start strong, like you always do. You set up your to-do list. You make headway on a project.

But then, insensibly, as the day wears on, you start slipping. By the next day, you’re back to your usual routine. Instead of going to the gym in the morning, you spend an hour in bed scrolling through Facebook on your phone.

At the office, instead of, you know, working, you start the day with an hour on Reddit. At home, instead of pursuing that online side gig, or progressing through that Udemy course on Adwords, you binge-watch half a season of Luke Cage on Netflix and then go to bed way too late.

Why does this keep happening? Why can’t you ever get your butt in gear and keep it in gear? You know you’ll be happier, less stressed out, and headed toward a better life if you could just be more disciplined. So why can’t you act on that knowledge?
Who’s It For?

Here’s a question you might ask yourself. Who’s it for? The work, the learning, the exercise, the diet: all of the things you intend to do, but don’t. Who’s it all for?

“Myself, of course,” you might think. But is it really?

In elementary school, when you first learned to study and do desk work, who was it for then? It sure wasn’t for yourself. You were forced to do it. You did it for your teachers and parents.

When you first learned to eat healthy as a child, who was it for? That was probably also for your parents.

Sure your parents and teachers said it was “for your own good.” But they’d be lying if they said it was for your own chosen purpose.

Other-Discipline

Under the authority-based way children are raised, we all learned discipline through obedience. Obedience is not self-discipline. It is other-discipline. It is the discipline horses and dogs learn from their trainers and that slaves learn from their masters.

Many of us never truly learned self-discipline, but only other-discipline. Sure, some of the obedience-based habits we picked up stuck. But they start to fade as soon as we’re left without an authority figure. That’s why, even as adults, so many of us need the positive and negative reinforcement of bosses or instructors to keep us on task.

Even when real authority figures are not involved, we feel the need to create them in our minds. This is easy to do, because after a whole childhood and youth of constantly being judged by others, we have internalized our judges. That part of you that says, “I’m so stupid,” or “I’m so lazy,” when you don’t live up to certain standards is the spiritual residue (ghosts, if you will) of dozens of past authority figures.

Browbeating yourself into good behavior is not self-discipline either. It is obedience to the internalized expectations of others.
An Incentive Problem

Again, other-discipline is the discipline of the slave. Now, what does economics say about slave labor? As Ludwig von Mises wrote,

If one treats men like cattle, one cannot squeeze out of them more than cattle-like performances.

Slave labor is not only morally abhorrent, it is incomparably less efficient than free labor. That is because the incentives are radically misaligned. The slave does not benefit fully from his productive efforts. So he is rationally inclined to “shirk,” just as communist workers are inclined to slack off, because they are provided for according to their “need” and not according to their contribution.

Similarly, when performance in work and life is fundamentally for the sake of someone else (even if that someone else is an internalized authority figure), you too are rationally inclined to shirk.

That moment of resolve you had the other day was your inner classroom teacher fixing her gaze on you. To appease her, you obediently opened your workbook and started toiling. But as soon as her back was turned, you went back to goofing off.

True Self-Discipline

To achieve true self-discipline, you need an exorcism. You need to exorcise the ghosts of past taskmasters that are haunting your psyche. Your life’s endeavors need to become truly and deeply about you and for you.

In practice, this means you need to stop judging yourself: stop subjecting yourself to the withering judgment and debilitating authority of your internalized “other.” To paraphrase Mises, if you want more than cattle-like performance out of yourself, you need to stop trying to motivate yourself with the spiritual equivalent of a cattle-prod.

This is not to say you should stop assessing yourself. The difference between a self-judgment and a self-assessment is that the former has a moralistic, other-oriented flavor to it. A self-judgment says heatedly,
“I’m weak and useless” or “I’m not contributing enough to society.” A self-assessment says, in a rational, cool, even detached tone, “I have goal X. I can advance toward that goal, if I adopt improvement Y. I did not adopt Y yesterday. Perhaps I can adopt Y today if I try Z.”

Only when you re-align your incentives by thoroughly making your efforts about your own purposes, instead of the internalized expectations of others, will you finally stop shirking and indulging in unhealthy habits, and finally start living a satisfying life of self-confidence, excitement, ongoing achievement, and continuous growth.

For more guidance on this truly self-oriented, non-judgmental approach to performance and growth, I highly recommend *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey. You do not need to play tennis (I don’t) to learn a tremendous amount from this book. It uses tennis to convey many universal principles.

Dan Sanchez is Managing Editor of FEE.org. His writings are collected at DanSanchez.me.

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Character, Liberty, and Economics

Lawrence W. Reed

Over four decades I’ve written scores of articles, essays, and columns on economics; taught the subject at the university level; and given hundreds of speeches on it. In recent years the nexus between the economics of a free society and individual character has worked its way into my writing, speaking, and thinking with increasing emphasis. I now believe that nexus is the central issue we must address if our liberties and free economy are to be restored and preserved.

Activists in the free-market movement in the past 25 years have stressed the need for sound public-policy research and basic economic education. Think tanks and new media have sprung up to provide both. Though important, they are proving to be insufficient to overcome statist trends that are eroding our liberties. Why?

To some extent policy research is essentially locking the barn door after the horse has left. It targets politicians and the media commentators at stages in their lives when they are largely set in their ways and interested more in personal advancement than truth and liberty.

Economic education is certainly needed because young minds are not typically getting it in government schools. But even if economic education were dramatically improved, a free society wouldn’t necessarily follow. Just like public-policy research, it can be undone by
harmful themes in popular culture (movies, religion, music, literature, and even sports) and in the standards of conduct people practice as adults.

Even among the most ardent supporters of free-market causes are people who “leak” when it comes to their own bottom lines. A recent example was the corn farmer who berated me for opposing ethanol subsidies. Does he not understand basic economics? I’ve known him for years, and I believe he does. But that understanding melted away with the corrupting lure of a handout. His extensive economics knowledge was not enough to keep him from the public trough. We are losing the sense of shame that once accompanied the act of theft, private or public.

The missing ingredient here is character. In America’s first century, we possessed it in abundance and even though there were no think tanks, very little economic education, and even less policy research, it kept our liberties substantially intact. People generally opposed the expansion of government power not because they read policy studies or earned degrees in economics, but because they placed a high priority on character. Using government to get something at somebody else’s expense, or mortgaging the future for near-term gain, seemed dishonest and cynical to them, if not downright sinful and immoral.

**Politicians and Statesmen**

Within government, character is what differentiates a politician from a statesman. Statesmen don’t seek public office for personal gain or attention. They often are people who take time out from productive careers to temporarily serve the public. They don’t have to work for government because that’s all they know how to do. They stand for a principled vision, not for what they think citizens will fall for. When a statesman gets elected, he doesn’t forget the public-spirited citizens who sent him to office, becoming a mouthpiece for the permanent bureaucracy or some special interest that greased his campaign.
Because they seek the truth, statesmen are more likely to do what’s right than what may be politically popular at the moment. You know where they stand because they say what they mean and they mean what they say. They do not engage in class warfare, race-baiting, or other divisive or partisan tactics that pull people apart. They do not buy votes with tax dollars. They don’t make promises they can’t keep or intend to break. They take responsibility for their actions. A statesman doesn’t try to pull himself up by dragging somebody else down, and he doesn’t try to convince people they’re victims just so he can posture as their savior.

When it comes to managing public finances, statesmen prioritize. They don’t behave as though government deserves an endlessly larger share of other people’s money. They exhibit the courage to cut less important expenses to make way for more pressing ones. They don’t try to build empires. Instead, they keep government within its proper bounds and trust in what free and enterprising people can accomplish. Politicians think that they’re smart enough to plan other people’s lives; statesmen are wise enough to understand what utter folly such arrogant attitudes really are. Statesmen, in other words, possess a level of character that an ordinary politician does not.

By almost any measure, the standards we as citizens keep and expect of those we elect have slipped badly in recent years. Though everybody complains about politicians who pander, perhaps they do it because we are increasingly a panderable people. Too many are willing to look the other way when politicians misbehave, as long as they are of the right party or deliver the goods we personally want.

Our celebrity-drenched culture focuses incessantly on the vapid and the irresponsible. Our role models would make our grandparents cringe. To many, insisting on sterling character seems too straight-laced and old-fashioned. We cut corners and sacrifice character all the time for power, money, attention, or other ephemeral gratifications.
Character Is Essential

Yet character is ultimately more important than all the college
degrees, public offices, or even all the knowledge that one might accu-
mulate in a lifetime. It puts both a concrete floor under one’s future
and an iron ceiling over it. Who in their right mind would want to live
in a world without it?

Chief among the elements that define strong character are these:
honesty, humility, responsibility, self-discipline, self-reliance, optim-
mism, a long-term focus, and a lust for learning. A free society is
impossible without them. For example: dishonest people will lie and
cheat and become even bigger liars and cheaters in elected office; peo-
ple who lack humility become arrogant, condescending, know-it-all
central-planner-types; irresponsible citizens blame others for the con-
sequences of their own poor judgment; people who will not discipline
themselves invite the intrusive control of others; those who eschew
self-reliance are easily manipulated by those on whom they are depen-
dent; pessimists dismiss what individuals can accomplish when given
the freedom to try; myopic citizens will mortgage their future for the
sake of a short-term “solution”; and closed-minded, politically correct
or head-in-the-sand types will never learn from the lessons of history
and human action.

Bad character leads to bad economics, which is bad for liberty.
Ultimately, whether we live free and in harmony with the laws of eco-
nomics or stumble in the dark thrall of serfdom is a character issue.

Lawrence W. Reed is President of the Foundation for Economic Edu-
cation and the author of the forthcoming book, Real Heroes: Inspir-
ing True Stories of Courage, Character and Conviction. Follow on
Twitter and like on Facebook.

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Are You Not Selfish Enough?

Dan Sanchez

Have you ever read *How I Found Freedom in an Unfree World* by Harry Browne? I finished the 1973 book the other day; it was mind-blowing and life-changing. I’ve since restructured how I approach even the most elemental constituents of my life: my moment-to-moment actions and thoughts.

This mind-shift has had immediate, spectacular results. In the past few days, I’ve been dramatically more happy, more clear-thinking, and more deliberate. I’ve had more energy, yet also more serenity. Like Browne, I found freedom by learning to live free.

Harry Browne’s idea of freedom is more mental than physical, more spiritual than political. He doesn’t boil it down in quite this way, but this is my definition for the kind of freedom discussed in his book:

Living Free: Abstaining from preoccupation with the preferences of others and instead maintaining a clear focus on your own preferences.

Before you dismiss this as antisocial selfishness, note that this does not mean being oblivious to the preferences of others. The optimal route to one’s own goals often runs through the goals of others. That is to say, the best way to accomplish what you want is often by eliciting the help of others (whether in the form of goods or service), and the best way to elicit that help is often to appeal to their own preferences: i.e., by offering something they want in return. Such exchanges
can involve both the formal trades of business and the loose reciprocities of friendship.

Enlightened selfishness is sensibly sociable. (A whole other essay could be dedicated to the interesting similarities and profound differences between Harry Browne’s notion of selfishness and Ayn Rand’s.)

Freedom doesn’t mean ignoring the preferences of others; it means not compulsively imposing someone else’s preferences on yourself.

**Freedom from Social Anxiety**

When first adopting this rule for myself, I was amazed to realize how much of my attention was previously used up by worrying about external opinions. Such worries had a constant effect on almost all my thoughts and actions: even down to such basic behaviors as the expression on my face.

Even now, I still sometimes catch myself giving a meek smile as I walk by others as if to express, “I’m harmless and nice. Please like me!” I used to constantly fret over whether the way I was moving, communicating, or otherwise acting came off to others as hostile, weird, dumb, or unbecoming.

Instead of sensibly selfish, I was compulsively unselfish, or “otherish.” My “otherism” was making me neurotic, holding me back, and dimming my shine.

As part of my new philosophy, I’ve made it a point to no longer give a damn about such things. Instead, when I walk, I focus on the next thing I want to accomplish. When I talk, I focus on what I would like to know or convey, or on enjoying myself through conversation.

Relapses into my old social anxieties have become ever less frequent. Now I walk, talk, and act with the air of a man intent on his own purposes—because I am one.

An interesting side effect is that people now seem to treat me with greater respect and friendliness. The funny thing about not caring what others think about you is that it seems to result in others thinking more
highly of you. The reverse is also true. Social anxiety has the perverse consequence of generating the very awkwardness it fears.

**MYOB to the Max**

Again, living free is not being preoccupied with the preferences of others. This means not imposing the preferences of others on yourself. It also means not trying to impose your own preferences on others. It is “selfishness” in the sense of minding your own business (MYOB).

We often give lip service to the MYOB principle, but very few actually adhere to it. At most, we apply MYOB to strangers out in public, with the huge exception of politics; we’re more than willing to bomb or cage strangers for their own good or for not measuring up to our standards, as long as it’s through the intermediary of public policy.

But when it comes to people in our lives—family, colleagues, friends, etc.—MYOB goes right out the window. Because of their closeness and their impact on our lives, we consider their business to be our business. The closer they are to us, the more we feel the need to change them, to fix them, to re-educate them: even if it takes a steady barrage of reprimanding, bullying, nagging, whining, guilt-tripping, and petty criticisms and insults.

Even if it doesn’t involve violence, all of this amounts to trying to supplant someone else’s preferences with your own. It is another form of otherism: of preoccupation with the preferences of others, at the expense of focusing on your own preferences, at the expense of attentive minding your own business.

Such “aggressive” otherism can tie you down just as much as the “defensive” otherism already discussed. When you let yourself become preoccupied with the preferences of others, you make your own happiness contingent on the decisions made by others. And since you can’t really control those people, you thereby give up control over your own happiness.

Ironically, by trying to spiritually subdue the people in your life,
you actually subject yourself to an unhealthy dependence on them. You limit your own freedom when you try to limit theirs.

You free yourself when you free the other people in your life: when you abdicate the responsibility of improving or correcting them, whether for your sake or theirs.

**Detox Your Mind**

For me, this side of enlightened selfishness has been just as liberating as the other. It made me realize how cluttered my mind used to be: cluttered, not only with an irrational fear of external judgment, but with my own compulsive habit of constantly judging others.

It would be an interesting experiment to count the number of times somebody aggravated you in a single day. If you were brutally honest with yourself when making the tally, I bet you’d be surprised. Your imperfect spouse, your noisy kids, your nosy parents, that annoying colleague, that unsmiling cashier, that inconsiderate driver, that swaggering passerby; even people who likely will never feel the heat of your judgment, like that obnoxious celebrity or that monstrous politician. It all adds up.

That is a lot of toxic negativity throughout your every day. Aggressive otherism distracts you from your own affairs and corrodes your sense of well-being. And for what? It almost never does any good; you almost never manage to sustainably change the object of your scorn.

Therefore, aggressive otherism is a recipe for a chronic sense of frustration and impotence. Indeed, that is precisely what makes it so stressful; it is distressing to be preoccupied with things you cannot change: things like your coworker’s personality or the outcome of a national election.

I’ve found that enlightened selfishness just washes all that psychic acid away. Whatever foibles and vices I perceive in other individuals are their own business, not mine. There is nothing I can do to rectify the failings of politicians and other distant strangers. And if I try to fix
the supposed failings of those close to me, I will most likely just end up aggravating them and myself and damaging our relationship.

Once I accepted these truths, it became easy to kick the habit of reflexively judging people. I no longer felt the responsibility to judge and correct society or any part of it outside of my own skull. I have dropped that burden, and what a weight off my shoulders, what freedom, freedom to focus on the things I can profoundly and decisively improve: namely, my own affairs.

Now, when I catch myself mentally throwing shade at someone else, I shake it off and tell the other person in my mind, “You do you,” and return my attention to my own endeavors.

All of my relationships have benefited from this mindset shift, from my marriage to my career. Trying to re-educate the other person is the source of nearly all conflict in relationships. Without such a quixotic crusade, my relationships have become serenely simple; it’s all about enjoying the other person’s company and/or profiting from their freely-given cooperation.

If there is no such enjoyment or profit in the relationship, then there is always the option of exit; I am free to part ways and seek more suitable life/business partners, which is a much more effective recourse than trying to wring enjoyment or profit out of another person by forcing them to become more suitable to my preferences. Thankfully, all of my current relationships are good ones, so that hasn’t been necessary.

**Unleashed Potential**

Embracing enlightened selfishness and quitting compulsive otherism has swept away the entangling, encumbering cobwebs from my mind. Clearing the static of distracting preoccupations with the preferences of others has freed my precious time and attention to focus on improving my own life according to my own lights. And this has naturally involved redoubling my efforts toward the cooperative ven-
tures that most powerfully create joy and profit: my family, my jobs, my friendships, etc.

Now the world is my oyster. I no longer see the world as a minefield of obligations to appease or re-educate others, but as an open vista of opportunities to accomplish the things I want, often with the free and willing cooperation of clients, customers, vendors, colleagues, friends, and loved ones. As a result, my initiative, productivity, mental clarity, goodwill, and joyfulness have all ascended to a new level.

The Source of Otherism

This approach to life isn’t some philosophical artifice manufactured by Harry Browne. Sensible, sociable selfishness is the natural mindset of human beings. The only reason it is so rare is that almost all of us have had otherism spiritually beaten into us by psychological child abuse.

Throughout our formative years, domination parenting and regimentation schooling subjected us to a constant barrage of authority-dispersed carrots and sticks, praise and admonishment, training us to ever judge our own conduct according to imposed, external standards.

This made us addicted to the dopamine rush of being patted on the head and paranoid about the judgment of authority figures and classmates. We carry this neurosis throughout our lives. Even as grown-ups, we are still disapproval-phobic approval junkies, constantly jonesing for our next fix of external validation.

The flipside of this lesson is the conviction that others should continually judge their conduct by our standards, and that it is our responsibility to enforce those standards through force or peer pressure.

The upshot of this universal curriculum is a world full of guilt-ridden, meddlesome, virtue-signalling neurotics ever at war with each other and within themselves. Most of our problems, both personal and political, can be traced to this backward, abusive upbringing.

But don’t waste your energy blaming older generations for our
plight. Pavlovian conditioning and obedience training were the only kinds of “education” our parents and teachers knew, having been subjected to it themselves in their own childhoods.

Thankfully, Harry Browne was able to break this cycle of psychic violence by rehabilitating, deinstitutionalizing, and emancipating himself: by rediscovering the freedom and self-sovereignty that dwelt within him all along, and by broadcasting the message that it dwells in us too, that “You’re free—if only you’ll realize it,” as he put it.

**Wisdom, Serenity, and Courage**

To live free is to provide yourself with your own answer to the Serenity Prayer:

- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
- Courage to change the things I can,
- And wisdom to know the difference.

Living free is having that wisdom. It is granting yourself the serenity that comes with the acceptance of a basic fact: that you cannot ultimately control what others do or how they think of you. It is making room in your soul for the courage to unreservedly tackle the one thing you can fundamentally change for the better: your own life.

Your freedom is a saving gift you give yourself. Keep reminding yourself until it sticks:

- You’re free if you want to be.

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Two big problems vex everyone.

We go about our day without a clear sense of the cost of what we are doing at any particular moment as compared to what we might otherwise be doing. Also, we have a tendency to do what we want to do in the short term, while putting off progress toward our deeper long-term goals.

It’s universal. It make us feel kind of shabby and unproductive. When we overcome these problems, we feel amazing and productive.

One of my favorite books ever addresses these problems head on. It’s by Henry Hazlitt, the author (25 years later) of *Economics in One Lesson*.

In his economics books, Hazlitt presented simple and memorable rules for applying economics to understanding how the world works. It would end up as one of the bestselling economics books of all time. It continues to be an invaluable teaching tool for anyone just discovering economic logic.

He had previously written a book nearly as compelling. It was popular at the time, but today hardly anyone knows about it. It too was influenced by economic thinking. This was the dawn of the roaring twenties, just as alcohol prohibition was imposed on the country, expansionary credit was shortening time horizons, and Freudian psychoanalysis was becoming the popular rage.

By will power, Hazlitt means our intellectual and character-based capacity for achieving our aims. This requires syncing up our choices with our goals. It sounds easy until you consider how many people fail in this regard. We want to be thin and svelte but can’t lay off the buckets of ice cream or put the gym membership to use.

Think of how many people want to be rich but spend every dime as soon as they get it. Look at what happens to our New Year’s resolutions only a few weeks after we make them.

We have big aims but something goes wrong on the way to achieving them.

Hazlitt examined why this happens and what to do about it. He wrote the book while working as a financial journalist in New York, so the entire intellectual framework was heavily influenced by the economics literature he was reading. He was reading about issues like opportunity cost, long-term and short-term choices on the margin, and demonstrated preference. It must have occurred to him at some point that economics is a great way to understand the human mind and to better grasp the path toward self-mastery.

He begins his book with the dramatic claim that there is no will independent of desire. Desire is the driving force of our choices. The key to obtaining power over the will, then, is to master the desire. Our desires need to be cultivated and shaped with intelligence and deliberation so that we can make choices consistent with our goals.

In order to do this, we need to recognize a crucially important feature of all action. No desire in this world can be obtained save the sacrifice of some other desires. Desire leads to choice and every choice has a cost. The cost is that which you forego in the course of taking the steps necessary to achieve your goal. If you spend your evening checking
Twitter notifications rather than studying, the cost of your choice could be a low grade.

In our minds, we rank our preferences on a value scale. What we are doing right now ranks at the top, and the cost of our preference is the next-highest preference on our scale. Hazlitt points out that gaining consciousness of this hard reality—that every choice involves a trade-off—is the beginning of the cognitive end of will power. We need to know what we are giving up in order to make wise choices.

“The price of staying out late at night,” he writes, “is sleep, health, efficiency at business, money, and self-improvement. That is, these are the things that the man must pay, lose, sacrifice, in order that he may stay out late at night. Conversely, the price of sleep, health, efficiency at business, money, self-improvement, is the pleasure of staying out late at night that one gives up.”

There is a second dimension that involves time. Most of our goals in life are connected to something remote in time. We want to read the classics, travel the world, obtain professional success, finish school. But our goals are constantly dethroned by shorter-term desires. Getting thin, for example, is a goal months out into the future. Eating a bucket of ice cream allows right-now satisfaction. The action and the goal are incompatible in every discrete unit of time.

Will power involves coordinating our short-term actions with our long-term goals. This always involves a time trade-off: sacrificing now for what might be obtained later. This is part of the price, not just the immediate opportunity costs of your choice, but later ones as well.

Having presented the basic model, Hazlitt proceeds to explain a series of tips and tricks for obtaining better control over our lives. For example, he advises us that goals formed in the midst of regret rarely last. It is easy to desire future sobriety in the midst of a hangover or too long to be thin once you’ve finished a huge meal.

It is easier to swear to change once faced with the cost of your fail-
ure to change. The trick is to make actual change right now and not regret past failings.

He further advises us not to make vast numbers of resolutions. Make far fewer, and never out of disgust or passion. Resolutions should be realizable and rational, made with careful thought. Never forget that obtaining goals involves giving up easier paths and instead choosing the more difficult route.

Consider the price of all your ambitions, and never make the price too high. The price of studying is giving up a night of partying. The price of professional accomplishment might be to go easy on the drink or to forgo Netflix gawking. These are reasonable sacrifices. The price must be payable, else the ambition dies.

Hazlitt examines how our habits are so formative of our self-mastery. We all have habits that save us time and resources: how we tie our shoes, how we shave, how we put on our clothes. Work too can become a habit in the best way, but only through unrelenting repetition.

“Forming a new habit,” he writes, “is like forging for yourself a new path in the woods, through stubborn underbrush and prickly thorns, while all the while it is possible for you to take the well-worn, hard-trodden, pleasant path that already exists. But you can reflect that every time you travel through the new path you are going to tramp down more shrubbery and clear more entanglements from the way.”

This requires concentration, a learned skill, something you have to practice to feel and feel in order for it to become habitual. We need a program of work for daily achievement, and we must stick to it no matter what. It becomes easier once our minds and bodies come to expect it.

In passing, Hazlitt offers a wonderful critique of what was then (and remains) pop psychology. The popular teachings of psychoanalysis run completely contrary to self-control and self-mastery, he wrote. This popular myth imagines us all to be hopelessly victimized by our
subconscious, which is supposed to operate as a kind of puppet master over our will. It only becomes true if we believe it is true, writes Hazlitt.

The reality, says Hazlitt, is that we have more mental resources than we know. We limit ourselves based on our bad habits. There are such things as “second winds” and “third winds.” We just have to push to release them.

Hazlitt ends his book with two outstanding suggestions.

First, learn to fall in love with your work. This is how geniuses and great artists do amazing things with their life. They come to treat work as play. For example, they never worry about working too much or being too dedicated to their vocation. Distraction, not focus, is the enemy of will power.

Second, he warns that we can never bypass the need for moral courage. This begins in the life of the mind.

“One must have the courage to go where the mind leads,” he writes, “no matter how startling the conclusion, how shattering, how much it may hurt oneself or a particular class, no matter how unfashionable or how obnoxious it may at first seem. This may require the courage to stand against the whole world. Great is the man who has that courage, for he indeed has achieved will power.”

Hazlitt’s literary legacy is all of a piece, and this book is an important and overlooked part of it. To develop discipline over habits, the moral courage to carry out our convictions, the capacity to give up temporary pleasures in order to embrace the discrete steps that lead to greatness, these are all part of what he calls will power. This really is another way of celebrating the ways in which a free people keep their freedom or forget a new one once it’s been lost.

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What the Self-Esteem Movement Got Disastrously Wrong

Dan Sanchez

One of Saturday Night Live's most popular skits in the early 90s was a mock self-help show called “Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley.” Smalley, played by now-Senator Al Franken, would begin each show by reciting into the mirror, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me.”

This was a spoof of the “self-esteem movement,” which in the ’80s had been all the rage. In that decade, self-esteem became a hot topic for motivational speakers and almost a book genre unto itself. In 1986, California even established a self-esteem “State Task Force.” But by the next decade, the movement had degenerated into an easy late-night punchline. Even today, Smalley’s simpering smile is the kind of image that the term “self-esteem” evokes for many.

Generation Barney

The self-esteem movement is also widely blamed for its influence on American schools and families. In the name of building self-esteem, teachers and parents showered children with effusive, unconditional praise. In the name of protecting self-esteem, kids were sheltered from
any criticism or adverse consequences. The sugary rot spread to children’s television as well. Many of today’s young adults were raised on Barney the Dinosaur, who gushed with “feel-good” affirmations just as sappy as Smalley’s.

I am reminded of a moment from my own education career in the early 2000s. I had designed a classroom game for preschoolers, and one of my colleagues, a veteran early childhood educator, objected that my game involved competition and winners. “Your game can’t have a winner, because that means other kids will be losers,” she explained.

According to critics, this kind of mollycoddling has yielded a millennial generation full of emotionally fragile young adults who, in the workplace, expect praise and affirmation simply for showing up, and who can’t cope with (much less adapt to) constructive criticism. It is also partially blamed for the rise of politically-correct university “snowflakes” (aka “crybullies”) and their petulant demands for “safe spaces” on campus.

An Unknown Ideal


In *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (1994), his definitive book on the subject, Branden expressed deep dissatisfaction with prevailing discussions of the concept, especially after the movement became an explosive fad in the 80s. In that period, the concept of self-esteem was distorted by what Branden called “the oversimplifications and sugar-coatings of pop psychology.” Branden declared that:
I do not share the belief that self-esteem is a gift we have only to claim (by reciting affirmations, perhaps). On the contrary, its possession over time represents an achievement. [Emphasis added here and below.]

As Branden understood and explained it, self-esteem was an action-oriented, tough-minded concept. If Branden had been Stuart Smalley’s therapist, he would have advised him to stop mouthing empty self-compliments into the mirror and instead to start building real self-esteem through deep reflection and concrete action.

Branden especially deplored how badly education reformers were getting self-esteem wrong. He wrote:

> We do not serve the healthy development of young people when we convey that self-esteem may be achieved by reciting “I am special” every day, or by stroking one’s own face while saying ‘I love me’...

He elaborated that:

> I have stressed that ‘feel good’ notions are harmful rather than helpful. Yet if one examines the proposals offered to teachers on how to raise students’ self-esteem, many are the kind of trivial nonsense that gives self-esteem a bad name, such as praising and applauding a child for virtually everything he or she does, dismissing the importance of objective accomplishments, handing out gold stars on every possible occasion, and propounding an ‘entitlement’ idea of self-esteem that leaves it divorced from both behavior and character. One of the consequences of this approach is to expose the whole self-esteem movement in the schools to ridicule.

Branden further clarified:

> Therefore, let me stress once again that when I write of self-efficacy or self-respect, I do so in the context of reality,
not of feelings generated out of wishes or affirmations or gold stars granted as a reward for showing up. When I talk to teachers, I talk about reality-based self-esteem. Let me say further that one of the characteristics of persons with healthy self-esteem is that they tend to assess their abilities and accomplishments realistically, neither denying nor exaggerating them.

**Other-Esteem**

Branden also criticized those who:

...preferred to focus only on how others might wound one’s feelings of worth, not how one might inflict the wound oneself. This attitude is typical of those who believe one’s self-esteem is primarily determined by other people.

Indeed, what most “self-esteem” advocates fail to understand is that other-reliant “self-esteem” is a contradiction in terms. Far from building self-esteem, many of the counselors, teachers, and parents of yesteryear obstructed its growth by getting kids hooked on a spiritual I.V. drip of external validation. Instead of self-esteem, this created a dependence on “other-esteem.”

It is no wonder then that today we are faced with the (often exaggerated) phenomenon of young, entitled, high-maintenance validation-junkies in the classroom and the workplace. Their self-esteem has been crippled by being, on the one hand, atrophied by the psychic crutches of arbitrary authoritarian approval, and, on the other hand, repeatedly fractured by the psychic cudgels of arbitrary authoritarian disapproval.

Almost entirely neglected has been the stable middle ground of letting children learn to spiritually stand, walk, and run on their own: to build the strength of their self-esteem through the experience of
self-directed pursuits, setting their own standards, and adapting to the natural consequences of the real world.

Branden also noted that self-esteem is not promoted by:

...identifying self-worth with membership in a particular group (“ethnic pride”) rather than with personal character. Let us remember that self-esteem pertains to that which is open to our volitional choice. It cannot properly be a function of the family we were born into, or our race, or the color of our skin, or the achievements of our ancestors. These are values people sometimes cling to in order to avoid responsibility for achieving authentic self-esteem. They are sources of pseudo self-esteem. Can one ever take legitimate pleasure in any of these values? Of course. Can they ever provide temporary support for fragile, growing egos? Probably. But they are not substitutes for consciousness, responsibility, or integrity. They are not sources of self-efficacy and self-respect. They can, however, become sources of self-delusion.

This helps to explain the emotional fragility of young people obsessed with “identity politics,” especially the perverse pride in group victimhood that pervades the campus left. It also speaks to the agitation and resentment of today’s crop of white nationalists and other right-wing “identitarians.” As Ayn Rand wrote:

The overwhelming majority of racists are men who have earned no sense of personal identity, who can claim no individual achievement or distinction, and who seek the illusion of a “tribal self-esteem” by alleging the inferiority of some other tribe.

Authentic self-esteem promotes, not codependency and fragility, but independence, enterprise, resilience, adaptability, and a growth
mindset: exactly the character traits that individuals, young and old, need more of in today's economy and political climate.

It is nothing short of tragic that the confusions of the so-called self-esteem movement have turned an indispensable concept into an object of ridicule and blame. Far from being the source of our problems, self-esteem is the missing solution.

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Goals Inspire Us, but Systems Transform Us

Honest, realistic goals turn into habits, and that’s what changes our lives.

by T.K. Coleman

One of the commonly cited problems with a great deal of self-help philosophy is the overemphasis on positive thinking, affirmations, visualization techniques, and other motivational tools that produce short-term inspiration but that often fail to help people create lasting changes.

On a recent episode of the Accidental Creative podcast, Todd Henry addresses this issue in an interview with self-help author Gretchen Rubin who wrote a book, Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives, to help people break the frustrating patterns of self-defeating decisions that obscure their pursuit of happiness and health. Rubin argues that the key to a happy and healthy life is not merely a matter of positive thinking, but is more a matter of building constructive habits.

One problem that keeps us from doing this, according to Rubin, is our insistence on trying to adopt behaviors that we think are “right” or “good,” rather than focusing more on developing rituals that work for us. She encourages those who desire to create lasting change to be
honest with themselves about their already-existing habits and to try creating new habits that are consistent with the established ebbs and flows of their life.

If you are a person who hates or struggles with getting up early in the morning, for instance, she says it might not be wise to all of a sudden say “I’m going to wake up every day at 6 a.m. and go for a run.” These are the sorts of overzealous decisions that set us up for failure at the very outset. Moreover, they tend to destroy our confidence over the long-term, thereby making it harder for us to try again in the future.

Echoing the sentiments of Al Switzer’s entertaining and humorous TEDx talk, Change anything! Use skill power over willpower, Rubin warns against falling into the try harder trap:

Don’t rely on self-discipline … Some people want to fight their way through the day. People often say to me, “Well, I want to learn to make healthy choices.” Don’t make healthy choices. Make one healthy choice. Then stop choosing. Don’t every day decide whether to go to the gym … that’s going to exhaust you and drain you. You want to say “Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 8pm, I’m going to go to the gym.” And there’s no more decisionmaking. There’s no more thinking that over. There’s no selfcontrol. There’s no willpower. It just happens. And with a lot of behavior, that’s what you want to do. You want to put it on automatic, so you don’t have to use a lot of self-control.

In other words, our success is mostly determined not by in-the-moment self-control, but rather by our ability to effectively construct systems that naturally lead to progress. In How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big, Shane Parrish observes “systems trump goals.” Quoting Scott Adams, Parrish shares the following idea:

If you do something every day, it’s a system. If you’re waiting to achieve it someday in the future, it’s a goal. [O]ne
should have a system instead of a goal. The system-versus-goals model can be applied to most human endeavours. In the world of dieting, losing twenty pounds is a goal, but eating right is a system. In the exercise realm, running a marathon in under four hours is a goal, but exercising daily is a system. In business, making a million dollars is a goal, but being a serial entrepreneur is a system. Goal-oriented people exist in a state of continuous pre-success failure at best, and permanent failure at worst if things never work out. Systems people succeed every time they apply their systems, in the sense that they did what they intended to do. The goals people are fighting the feeling of discouragement at each turn. The systems people are feeling good every time they apply their system. That’s a big difference in terms of maintaining your personal energy in the right direction. Adams has looked for examples of people who use systems versus those who use goals. In most cases, he’s discovered that people using systems do better and they are more innovative. “The systems-driven people have found a way to look at the familiar in new and more useful ways,” he says in the WSJ.

The idea here is that a system is something you execute, while a goal is something you desire. A system can be implemented immediately. A goal might require you to wait for the right conditions. A system is process-oriented. A goal is results-oriented. A system allows for multiple successes. A goal is usually all or nothing. Reading for 20 minutes a day is part of a system. Being smart is a goal. Attending one social event a month is part of a system. Making friends is a goal. Exercising for 30 minutes a day is part of a system. Being physically fit is a goal.

To be fair to the complexity of language, we could easily dismiss everything written above as irrelevant or misleading if we insist on saying “a system is not what you, Shane, and Scott are saying it is” or “a
goal is not what you, Shane, and Scott are saying it is.” What’s important, however, is not the debate we could have over the labels we use to refer to these things. What’s important is realizing that we can’t create the results that matter most to us without involving ourselves in processes and practices that gradually transform us into the kind of people who organically realize those goals.

This reminds me of some very valuable ideas shared by James Clear in How to Change Your Beliefs and Stick to Your Goals for Good. In discussing the concept of identity-based habits, James says:

... [T]he beliefs you have about yourself can drive your long-term behavior. Maybe you can trick yourself into going to the gym or eating healthy once or twice, but if you don’t shift your underlying identity, then it’s hard to stick with long-term changes. Most people start by focusing on performance and appearance-based goals like “I want to lose 20 pounds” or “I want to write a best-selling book.”

But these are surface level changes. The root of behavior change and building better habits is your identity. Each action you perform is driven by the fundamental belief that it is possible. So if you change your identity (the type of person that you believe that you are), then it’s easier to change your actions. The only way I know to shift the beliefs that you have about yourself and to build a stronger identity is to cast a vote for that identity with many, tiny actions.

Think of it this way ...

Let’s say you want to become the type of person who never misses a workout. (If you believed that about yourself, how much easier would it be to get in shape?) Every time you choose to do a workout — even if it’s only 5 minutes — you’re casting a vote for this new identity
in your mind. Every action is a vote for the type of person you want to become. This is why I advocate starting with incredibly small actions (small votes still count!) and building consistency.

This idea comports very well with my own beliefs about the value of daily rituals. I identify three benefits of committing to daily processes that can be completed by the end of each day: 1) The self-mastery and skill development that results from performing challenging tasks based on commitment rather than convenience 2) the sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that comes from consistently meeting specific goals 3) The self-awareness and self-actualization that comes from repeated investment in constructive or creative action.

Both of my colleagues, Isaac Morehouse and Zak Slayback, have written excellent blog posts about how they use the power of self-imposed constraints to increase their personal freedom and productivity. In Some Rules I Have, Morehouse states,

One of the best ways to experiment and find ways to get more productive and happy is through testing various rules. It’s also a great way to learn about yourself.

In Rules for Myself, Slayback adds,

When we think of rules, we tend to think of regulations that are imposed on individuals and the groups into which they associate by some detached or outside power. The rules that govern employees in large corporations, the regulations that govern these corporations, and the case law that governs these regulations are just a few examples. Rules don’t have to be imposed by outside actors, though. We oftentimes either buy into rules implicitly (e.g., norms that govern our behaviors, attitudes, manners) or hold ourselves to specific rules. The latter can be thought of as rules imposed. An ideal version of ourselves — the
self that we want to strive to become — requires rules imposed on the non-ideal version to reach the ideal.

Goals inspire us, but systems transform us. The thing about goals, though, is that they have lots of sizzle. Goals often sound so impressive that they can seduce us into feeling like we’ve accomplished something merely by talking about them. Systems are far less glamorous than goals, but it’s the day-to-day rituals that make uncommon achievements truly realizable.

In Meditation from the Heart of Judaism, Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man warns against the all-too-common tendency to get addicted to an ecstatic experience. The antidote, according to Omer-Man, is the practice of embracing “noble boredom.” Noble boredom refers to all of the not-so-fun activities that make the fun activities possible. Noble boredom is the source and substance of a free and fulfilling life.

Goals don’t challenge us. Commitment to specific processes challenges us. The important thing is to not let ourselves off the hook by thinking only in terms of what we want. After identifying what we want, we need to do the hard, but rewarding, work of discovering and devoting ourselves to the disciplines that help us reinvent ourselves. By strategically creating our own rules, we gradually become the rulers of our own lives.

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What Epicurus Can Teach Us about Freedom and Happiness

Joey Clark

I had been covering the presidential election on talk radio, and my mind was a cracked and scrambled egg. So I picked up a book, at random, as a means of trying to put my Humpty Dumpty brain back together again. I started reading excerpts from Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* and slowly I felt more at ease, as though I was picking up on a long lost conversation with an old friend.

I imagine Lucretius himself felt he was carrying on with a long lost friend when he wrote *On the Nature of Things* as an ode to the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Though only fragments of Epicurus’ philosophy have survived from antiquity—biographer of the Greek philosophers, Diogenes Laërtius, claims he was “a most prolific author and eclipsed all before him in the number of his writings: for they amount to about three hundred rolls, and contain not a single citation from other authors”—his influence has proved to be monumental for those willing to carry on the dialogue he started.

Through the work of Pierre Gassendi, Epicurus’ thought inspired many Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Isaac Newton. Incredibly, Epicurus even appears to have intuited the thought of classical liberals and modern libertarians from Thomas Jefferson to Friedrich Hayek to Ayn Rand.
In his treatise, *Human Action*, Ludwig von Mises makes a claim about British economic theory:

It consummated the spiritual, moral and intellectual emancipation of mankind inaugurated by the philosophy of Epicureanism. It substituted an autonomous rational morality for the heteronomous and intuitionist ethics of older days. Law and legality, the moral code and social institutions are no longer revered as unfathomable decrees of Heaven. They are of human origin, and the only yardstick that must be applied to them is that of expediency with regard to human welfare.

So who was this fountainhead of a philosophy that “consummated the spiritual, moral, and intellectual emancipation” of the human race?

**Who Was Epicurus?**

Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher who claimed the cosmos was eternal and merely material, made up of atoms and void. Yet, breaking with his predecessor Democritus, he considered the universe indeterminate. In the realm of ethics, Epicurus taught that the purpose of human life was the pursuit of happiness, which could be achieved by the measured study of the natural world and adherence to a prudent and temperate hedonism.

He counseled men not to fear their own death, saying,

Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.
He considered friendship as the utmost means of securing wisdom, saying,

Friendship dances around the world, bidding us all to awaken to the recognition of happiness.... The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that in the limited evils of this life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.

He advised men to avoid vain ambitions such as the pursuit of fame, exorbitant wealth, and political power for their own sake. Rather, he thought wise men would be “strong and self-sufficient” and “take pride in their own personal qualities not in those that depend on external circumstances.”

To Epicurus, pain is a natural evil, pleasure a natural good, with the ultimate pleasure being the absence of bodily pain and tranquility of the mind. From his Letter to Menoeceus:

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.

Nevertheless, because Epicurus claimed the ultimate aim of happiness is to find pleasure—and not virtue or knowledge unto themselves—many of his contemporaries and later critics would
uncharitably accuse him of advocating debauchery, one even saying he “vomited twice a day from over-indulgence,” and that his understanding of philosophy and life in general was wanting.

One might hear the very same smear today from mainstream American partisans in regard to libertarians, i.e. that liberty lovers are simply “pot-smoking republicans” or libertines who barely understand life and are too drunk on utopian dreams to see clearly. In this same vein, many reproached Epicurus (as they do of libertarians today) for his aloof stance on politics as apathetic and his notion of justice as too transactional.

“Natural justice is a pledge of reciprocal benefit,” writes Epicurus in his *Principal Doctrines*, “to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another.” Elsewhere he writes, “We must free ourselves from the prison of public education and politics.”

Accordingly, Epicurus set up his own school, “The Garden,” where he offered philosophy to anyone, even women and slaves—an unheard of practice at the time, which many contemporary critics saw as proof of his penchant for depraved behavior. Why else would one invite women and slaves into one’s abode other than revelry? Was he actually going to talk to them about ideas?

Thankfully, we have Diogenes Laërtius to defend Epicurus from his detractors:

But these people are stark mad. For our philosopher has numerous witnesses to attest his unsurpassed goodwill to all men—his native land, which honored him with statues in bronze; his friends, so many in number that they could hardly be counted by whole cities, and indeed all who knew him, held fast as they were by the siren-charms of his doctrine ... the Garden itself which, while nearly all the others have died out, continues for ever without interruption through numberless successions of one director after another; his gratitude to his parents, his
generosity to his brothers, his gentleness to his servants, as evidenced by the terms of his will and by the fact that they were members of the Garden ... and in general, his benevolence to all mankind. His piety towards the gods and his affection for his country no words can describe. He carried his modesty to such an excess that he did not even enter public life.

Thoughtfulness and Synthesis: A Remedy for Cynicism

This is only scratching the surface, but the more I have studied Epicurus, the more I have found peace of mind in the midst of this horrible election. The more I immerse myself in his teaching, the more I can feel my cynicism, worry, and want melt away.

Of course, Epicurus alone is not enough to cure the cynicism in my heart, but by heeding his advocacy of prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, and friendship, I am more than halfway there. I am pleased to say “I too am an Epicurean,” just as Thomas Jefferson wrote to a friend in 1819.

In fact, Mr. Jefferson goes on in his letter to William Short, showing a penchant for synthesis and thoughtfulness rarely seen in American politics today, as he ventures a quick survey of moral philosophers throughout the ages (emphasis mine):

I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us. Epictetus indeed, has given us what was good of the stoics; all beyond, of their dogmas, being hypocrisy and grimace. Their great crime was in their calumnies of Epicurus and misrepresentations of his doctrines; in which we lament to see the candid character of Cicero engaging as an accomplice. Diffuse, vapid, rhetorical, but enchanting. His prototype Plato, eloquent as himself,
dealing out mysticisms incomprehensible to the human mind, has been deified by certain sects usurping the name of Christians; because, in his foggy conceptions, they found a basis of impenetrable darkness whereon to rear fabrications as delirious, of their own invention. These they fathered blasphemously on him who they claimed as their founder, but who would disclaim them with the indignation which their caricatures of his religion so justly excite. Of Socrates we have nothing genuine but in the Memorabilia of Xenophon; for Plato makes him one of his Collocutors merely to cover his own whimsies under the mantle of his name; a liberty of which we are told Socrates himself complained. Seneca is indeed a fine moralist, disguising his work at times with some Stoicisms, and affecting too much of antithesis and point, yet giving us on the whole a great deal of sound and practical morality. But the greatest of all the reformers of the depraved religion of his own country, was Jesus of Nazareth. Abstracting what is really his from the rubbish in which it is buried, easily distinguished by its lustre from the dross of his biographers, and as separable from that as the diamond from the dunghill, we have the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man; outlines which it is lamentable he did not live to fill up. *Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves, Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others.*

So, here we have Mr. Jefferson offering up to his friend in a single letter what Deirdre McCloskey has offered in three vast volumes as the basis of bourgeois virtue and modern Western achievement—a synthesis of pagan and Christian virtue guided by the light of reason and hope in man’s spirit.
Put simply, the Greek and Roman virtues are prudence, temperance, courage, and justice; the Christian virtues are the virtues of faith, hope, and love (but the greatest of these is love).

**The Sleep of Reason and Lack of Dreams**

By this standard, American politics has largely lost this balance in my estimation. This presidential election has shown both outright irrationality and a cynical game of over-reliance on prudence and love. We let our boundless ambition for power and wealth, as well as our untrammeled compassion, get the best of us.

Where is our temperance in the face of binary choices and ultimatums offered by the State? Where is our fortitude in the face of our so-called leaders’ fear mongering? Where is our hope in the future separate from the intuitionist, mystic’s approach that the State can do anything for us at any time, including impose our so-called virtue on others? Where is our sense of justice for those who differ from us, for those both foreign and domestic who wish to live differently and at peace?

Where is our balance?

Well, they have all gone out the window in one way or another.

“Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters,” says Goya, yet, “united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels.”

Life without reason, indeed, produces monsters, but reason without hope in ourselves and our character as a people, without a willingness to dream beyond the whims and ambitions of the political moment, produces an arid landscape for the mind. Little can grow in such a climate other than resentment, apathy, and conflict. And lo and behold, unrefined cynics are sprouting up left and right in this drought of 2016.

So, my message to you (and to myself) is balance, my friends, balance. Keeps your wits about you.
Do not fall into quietism or fatalism; seek happiness with a zeal—in friendships and long conversations, in the pleasures nature has provided us, in the fruits of our reason and imagination, and in the avoidance of vain ambitions for power over others.

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How to Attain Outer Excellence and Inner Peace

Dan Sanchez

Why are so many adults, young adults especially, so anxiety-ridden and uncomfortable in their own skin? Could it be rooted in the way children are raised? The following is my theory.

When we are young children, we are dependent on adult support for survival. We are also hardwired to crave and seek that support. When we don’t have it, we feel an anxiety that is, at bottom, an instinctive existential dread. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, because without such an instinct, children would not likely survive to adulthood.

In a fully healthy development toward adulthood, our craving and need for paternalistic support is gradually replaced by self-reliance. As we grow in our abilities to accomplish things for ourselves in the world, we develop what psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden called self-efficacy: our confidence in our own capacity to fend for ourselves; to meet life’s challenges with our own resources; to survive and thrive in the world with ever-greater independence.

An Imposed Addiction

However, many parents use their children’s physical and emotional reliance on adults as an emotional lever to manipulate them
into desired behavior using both praise (including rewards that signify approval) and rebukes (including punishments that signify disapproval). Instead of growing in self-efficacy, their children become permanently addicted to praise as a source of existential emotional security and permanently phobic toward rebukes as a source of existential dread.

Like an addict chasing highs, the child chases adult praise. Each dose of praise momentarily allays the existential dread, because it signals to the child that, at least for the moment, he has the adult’s vital support. But the child of manipulative parents quickly comes to realize that such support is fickle: that it may be withdrawn at any moment, as indicated by praise giving way to disapproval or indifference. So the effect of each dose of praise is fleeting and deeply unsatisfying. Before long, the existential dread creeps in again, and the child starts jonesing for his next fix.

In such a child, self-efficacy and growth toward independence is stunted, and emotional dependence on the judgment of others (especially authority figures) becomes overgrown and artificially prolonged. The child cannot fully explore, revel, and rejoice in his own pursuits and newfound powers, because he is neurotically preoccupied with the judgment of parents, as well as teachers and other authority figures.

**Chasing the Dragon**

Later in life, this is widened to preoccupation with the judgment of other authority figures (like bosses) and of peers. Thus the natural, biologically-functional dependency of childhood is extended unnaturally and counterproductively into adulthood.

The adult with low self-efficacy continues the never-ending, Sisyphean quest for existential emotional security by compulsively chasing external validation and fleeing external invalidation: “chasing the dragon,” as it is referred to with opiate addiction. He never feels truly secure, because he bases his security on the shifting sands of the
judgment of others, which are fickle and, unlike his own actions and powers, are fundamentally outside of his control.

And his pursuits of mastery in facing the challenges of life are hamstrung, because it is impossible to steadily advance toward mastery when one is neurotically preoccupied with such fleeting and superficial prizes as praise and the avoidance of censure. And growing mastery (especially in one’s job) is an important, stable, and powerful source of self-efficacy and existential emotional security.

Such an adult will have an uneasy, needy, anxious, even tortured soul.

**Reclaiming Control**

The challenge for such an adult is to break that dependency and to replace it with self-reliance and self-efficacy; to wean himself off of his addiction to signs of extrinsic approval (eagerly seeking praise at work, likes on Facebook, etc.) and to face down his fears of signs of extrinsic disapproval.

He must instead absorb himself in the intrinsic joys of developing his own abilities, in intrinsic fascination with his craft and his pursuits, and in the deeply satisfying pursuit of excellence and mastery (especially self-mastery) for the sake of his own long-term happiness, and not for the sake of positively impressing others in the short term.

Praise and the absence of disapproval will very often be a natural side-effect of such a mindset. But it should not be the overriding goal.

This, I believe, is the path toward both outer excellence and inner peace.

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Hack Your Habits
to Transform Your Life

Dan Sanchez

Has a New Year’s resolution ever made a permanent difference in your life? Maybe you stuck with it for the first week of the year. But dang it, January is cold. Some mornings it’s hard to just get out of your warm bed, let alone trudge to the gym, write a blog post, or meditate before work. By February, our best-laid plans are all but forgotten.

But it’s not really the cold that’s to blame. The problem was that your resolutions required perpetual resolve. But life happens, and inspiration inevitably fades. You can’t expect yourself to stay inspired year-round. You need to rest your success on something sturdier.

Instead of making specific resolutions, make one resolution that will beget a year full of resolutions. Resolve to regularly track, review, and shape your habits.

Groove or Rut?

Nothing is more powerful than the human habit. Individual actions are what make things happen. And establishing a habit is a meta-action that determines the general course of future actions.

To establish a habit is to pave the road ahead. Your path can either be a groove or a rut. By getting yourself in a habitual groove, you make
progress come easy. By getting yourself in a habitual rut, you condemn yourself to stagnation.

Habits comprise much of one’s character. And as Heraclitus said, “A man’s character is his fate.” You choose your fate by choosing your character. And you choose your character by shaping your habits.

By shaping your habits, you can radically transform just about anything about yourself. “I’m kind of lazy. I’m not good with money. I’m not an athlete.” These are not verities. They’re manifestations of habits, and all habits can be hacked.

**Apps for That**

In the hacking of habits, the trick is to track. Think of a way to measure the useful habit you want to establish or the hampering habit you want to minimize. Then set daily goals for yourself, i.e., at least 20 minutes on the exercise bike or practicing the piano, no more than 30 minutes on Facebook, complaining at a family member no more than 3 times, etc. Download timer and tally apps onto your smartphone to keep score. (I use Hours and Tally.)

Then, on some kind of calendar, mark the days that you meet your daily goal. (For this, I use the app Momentum.)

Do this only for as many habits as you can sustainably manage, at first perhaps no more than one in each of the major categories of your life: health, intellectual development, emotions, relationships, work, etc.

Now this is the key part. Review your habit projects every single day, ideally always at the same time. Assess how you’re doing. Look at your calendar and notice whether you’re having success streaks. Free-write in your journal (I use Evernote) about it.

If a new habit is sticking, can you raise the bar? Ramp up to 30 minutes on the bike? Go for zero times fussing at your family? (Believe me, achieving this last one is mind-altering and life-changing.) Has
your winning streak been so long, that you can consider the habit established? Can you move on to a new habit?

If a habit is not sticking, should you lower the bar to something more within reach? 15 minutes on the bike? 10 minutes? 5 even? Start with baby steps if necessary. Once you unlock a smaller, attainable achievement, you can always ramp up to larger ones later.

If it helps, draft a questionnaire for yourself that you can copy and paste into each daily journal entry.

**Sculpting a New You**

All details about your specific habit projects are negotiable. The key is to keep at the overall habit-monitoring meta-project. Keep seeking progress, however small. Sustained, small progress will inevitably accumulate into transformative changes in your life. By the end of the year, you’ll be a different person: a new and improved you.

If you continually hone and ramp up your health regimen, you’ll feel a year younger instead of a year older.

If you establish the habit of reading inspiring books and writing thoughtful articles every day, your perspective on life will be deepened and expanded.

If you monitor and reflect upon the way you think about and talk to other people, you can gradually but fully purge yourself of toxic mental and emotional habits, and radically improve your sense of well-being.

If you do one thing every day to develop a new skill, you’ll have that skill, and at an astounding level.

If you do one thing daily to build an online side-business, you’ll have had invaluable practical lessons in entrepreneurship and will likely have created a new income stream for yourself: maybe even a new career.

Again, none of your limits are immutable. Even a mountain of
limitations can be eroded away by the steady drip of a daily practice: by the almighty power of habit.

**Restore the Core**

Whatever you do, don’t condemn yourself over lack of progress. Self-condemnation is useless for your purposes. And remember, this is all about you and for you. No matter how many days you miss your goals, just keep checking in with yourself every day and keep adjusting. Did you miss your habit review yesterday? Don’t condemn yourself over that either, much less use it as an excuse to give up entirely. Just habit-check today: do it now, even.

Your daily habit review is your anchor, your lifeline, the essential core of all your self-improvement efforts. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how severely you relapse into a rut, you can always get your groove back by restoring your core: by returning to your daily habit review. Once you restore your core, you can start rebuilding out from that center and get back everything you temporarily lost.

As Will Durant wrote, paraphrasing Aristotle, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

You can determine your days and sculpt your soul. Just keep hacking your habits.

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Part 2

CAREER
Miserable in Your Job?
Here’s Why

Jeffrey Tucker

The unemployment rate today is at 5%, a statistical picture of bliss. The trend line suggests dancing in the streets.

Why are so few feeling it? These numbers tell us nothing about contentment, much less happiness. What if just having a job tells us very little about whether people are feeling secure and fulfilled?

In the end, professional work—which occupies the vast swath of our waking hours—isn’t just about getting a paycheck. It’s about feeling that you are valued and that your work matters. This isn’t the responsibility of the employer. It’s the responsibility of the worker to find a position that syncs up with his or her dreams—if such positions exist.

These days, that seems hardly to ever happen. It’s no surprise to hear from Gallup that only 1 in 3 workers report feeling enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace. It’s worse among millennials, 75% of whom immediately start working in an industry outside their field of study.

Think of your friends, family, and neighbors. Think of all those you know (and this may include you) who have jobs but are constantly unhappy about what they are doing, who their boss is, the work they do, and their business associates. I can think of many: perhaps even most of the people I know.
There is also the matter of financial insecurity. They have a job now but how long will it last? Fear of unemployment—which can happen in an instant—can keep a person up at night.

Over the last few days, I’ve had the occasion to interview a wide range of highly skilled employees for a professional position. It’s bad form to use a job interview to drill down and discover their discontent with their present job, but I can read between the lines. They are earning too little. They feel undervalued. Their boss is an idiot. They find no real meaning in their work. They can’t make a difference. They feel trapped and they want out.

Of course my sample is biased. I was talking to the entrepreneurially minded people who are taking affirmative steps to seek out a better life. They have jobs now but are ready for something more fulfilling, or at least to end their present misery. But what about those who are clinging to their jobs for dear life and don’t feel brave enough to put themselves on the market? Maybe they don’t think they have the wherewithal to do it.

**Something Is Not Right**

Does it have to be this way? Surely not.

Think of the employment contract as a market exchange. You give labor services. You get money that you can spend how you like. In economic terms, it’s an exchange like any other, same as when you buy a burger at the fast-food window or go to a movie. Both parties should benefit more because of the exchange than they would in its absence.

The relationship between employer and employee should be purely voluntary, mutually beneficial, and ultimately satisfying for everyone. Ludwig von Mises in 1927 described the position of labor under free enterprise in the following way:

In a private enterprise, the hiring of labor is not the conferring of a favor, but a business transaction from which both parties, employer and employee, benefit.... Since
employment is not a favor, but a business transaction, the employee does not need to fear that he may be discharged if he falls into personal disfavor. For the entrepreneur who discharges, for reasons of personal bias, a useful employee who is worth his pay harms only himself and not the worker, who can find a similar position elsewhere.

That sounds dreamy, doesn’t it? Even crazy given what we are used to.

It describes ever fewer people under current conditions. Even when Mises was writing, he noted the growing bureaucratization of private enterprise as a result of various government interventions. Every tax, mandate, and regulation imposes costs, distorts market signalling, blocks people from professions, traps people in jobs they don’t like, subsidizes bigness over creativity, and reduces labor mobility.

Look how much worse things have become in 90 years. These compromises of market freedom add up over time and take a huge human toll. In practice, these interventions have robbed the individual employee of a sense of controlling volition. If you don’t really face a range of employment options, if you are stuck and don’t know how to get out, if you cling to a job just because it pays the bills even though you are otherwise miserable, something is seriously wrong.

This is not how a market is supposed to work. Markets encourage happiness on all parties to the exchange. It is now a power relationship but a cooperative one.

Job Lock

The problem of workers feeling trapped has recently been described as job lock. If people believe that the right of exit is too expensive or too risky, they will put up with a terrible job for far too long rather than walking away. Instead of thinking of the labor contract as an exchange, they are just happy to be employed at all.

Recently economist Alex Tabarrok has been writing about one
aspect of employee discontent: people no longer move to find better work. Labor force mobility has been falling since the 1980s. This is because housing costs in highly productive areas of the country make those areas forbidding for lower-productivity employees. And why is housing so expensive in such areas? Tabarrok blames land use restrictions for the shortage in housing supply.

And let’s look at another example. Why is starting a job-creating business so difficult? Among a million artificial costs, there are minimum wages, which the big-box stores can afford to pay but start-ups cannot. Minimum wages and expensive employee mandates end up subsidizing big business bureaucracy over nimble start-ups that could otherwise be competing for labor resources. And this is precisely why big business pushes for minimum wages and even employer mandates. They can withstand them whereas their competition cannot.

This gives unhappy workers fewer options.

The Obamacare Disaster

There is another huge factor today: Obamacare. If anything, its terrible consequences on people’s sense of well being has been underestimated.

Ask anyone who hates their job why they don’t leave. The answer usually comes down to two words: health care. All the mandates meant to empower the working classes have done exactly the opposite.

Against all principles of basic human rationality, the Affordable Care Act forbids insurers from charging different premiums for the healthy and unhealthy. Just as absurdly, it required that all insurers provide a minimum set of services to those who buy in.

What this meant in practice were huge increases in premiums for those who would otherwise be paying far less. And it meant that people began paying vast sums for health care they would not use or, given soaring deductibles, could not actually afford to use.

But think what this meant for the problem of job lock. Those with
health care through an existing employer tend to cling to it for dear life, even if they hate their job, hate their boss, and feel zero satisfaction in their work. It has made the employee more dependent, more vulnerable to employer abuse, and less mobile than ever.

After all, within perhaps thirty days of being fired, the company’s benefits run out. Then what? You quickly run short of money, so you are looking for the best deal. But there is no more “best deal.” There are no more catastrophic-care plans that only cover big emergencies. There are limited exceptions for people under 30, but even these plans are loaded with benefits the young don’t need or want.

So then you have to go to the government exchanges, or else pay a fee. What do you buy as an unemployed, independent contractor? You pay a high price for a policy that you cannot afford to use because the deductibles are so high. And the high deductibles might be ok if the care were affordable, but it is not. It is ridiculously expensive. It turns out to be cheaper to pay the fee actually.

Misery and Fear

Remarkable, isn’t it? The Affordable Care Act produced unaffordable health care. Functional plans are ever less available for anyone seeking to buy outside employer mandates. So, fearing the loss of health care and the Hobbesian world outside the protective shell of full-time employment, workers stay at their jobs even though they hate them. It has vastly worsened public discontent.

Miserable American workers are inclined to blame their bosses. They should be blaming their political leaders who have done so much to disempower workers in the name of helping them.

What do we do with the fear and misery that comes with a terrible job? Don’t give into them. Most people in most times and places underestimate the control that they in fact do retain over their lives. If you are in a bad job relationship, it’s time to walk away.

Beef up that LinkedIn profile. Get networking. Start looking.
Start marketing yourself and your services to other buyers. Maybe your ideal employer is yourself. Try your hand at entrepreneurship and start that business you’ve always dreamed of.

You are more valuable than you think. Unlike in the past, we have the tools and the networks that enable you to live a better life.

The freedom to walk away is one of the few freedoms we have left. Exercising that, and embracing a new life, could be the greatest decision you ever made.

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Your Career Is an Enterprise

Dan Sanchez

Economics distinguishes between workers and entrepreneurs in the market. These are often misconceived as mutually exclusive classes. Every individual wears many economic hats. Talking in terms of classes leads many people to pigeonhole themselves.

Those who don’t run a business often think of themselves as worker drones: as just another factor of production to be allocated by their entrepreneurial betters. They are the passive “employed” who, like land and capital goods, are inert matter to be put to use by their active “employers.”

From School Boy to Company Man

This mentality is imparted to us by school, where we are constantly “allocated” throughout our entire childhood and youth. We are earmarked and sorted into our classes, grade levels, and student “tracks.” We are assigned our classwork, our homework, our teachers. We are processed like unfinished goods through elementary, middle, and high school. This instills what Isaac Morehouse calls the conveyor belt mindset.

By the time we graduate from high school, we know of nothing else besides the conveyor belt. At that point, we are finally afforded some freedom and volition, but we are too institutionalized to take advantage of it. We are like the character Brooks in the film Shawshank
Redemption who, after serving decades in prison, has no idea what to do with himself as a free man.

And so instead of freedom we choose voluntary re-commitment. We get back onto the conveyor belt and proceed to the next station, which according to received wisdom is college, then perhaps grad school, then some “safe” profession.

Even in the working world we flee the frightening unfamiliarity of freedom. We limit ourselves to conventional options in the job market. Once we land a job, and feel safe within a fold once again, we revert to blissful irresponsibility over our lives. We delegate the responsibility for our own value-creation to our employer. We treat our first job as if it was the 17th grade and our bosses like our new teachers.

As in school, we passively await to be assigned tasks. We do not apply initiative and judgment to actively pursue value-creation. That just sounds like more work. And if school has taught us anything, it is that work is drudgery: something only to be done under compulsion. We trudge along the career path assigned to us, even if it kills us inside. We as “human resources” have been allocated by those who know better than us, and we must resign ourselves to our lot.

Universal Self-Employment

Stuff and nonsense. You are your own allocator, the ultimate employer of your own labor. Your value-creation, for yourself and for the market, is your own responsibility. Stop thinking of any firm you work with as just another involuntary institution that swallows you up and prescribes your every move. A job is partnership: a voluntary economic relationship based on free exchange. If the relationship is a good one, both sides will strive to create value for the other.

It is on you to seek out and develop mutually beneficial market relationships. And that requires treating your career as an enterprise, with you as the entrepreneur in charge.

Entrepreneurs pursue value for themselves by allocating the means
of production in a way that provides value for others. Successful entrepreneurs anticipate the uncertain future wants of those they seek to serve. Such anticipation takes judgment and insight.

All free individuals have at least one means of production under their own ultimate disposal: their own labor. To truly be free, and to fully pursue value for yourself in your career, you must embrace the responsibility of allocating your own labor, as all entrepreneurs bear the responsibility of allocating the capital goods they own.

Career success means anticipating and serving the wants of those you serve directly (the firm you work with and other partners in production), as well as those you serve indirectly (customers and consumers). It also means making big changes, even re-allocating your labor (quitting and finding different work), if you anticipate that you can create more value, for yourself and others, with different market partnerships.

As with all entrepreneurship, doing this takes judgment and insight. But since it is your own success on the line, and your own labor being allocated, it has to be your judgment, and your insight. You cannot outsource responsibility for your career and expect it to thrive.

**The Entrepreneurial Barista**

All work benefits from an entrepreneurial mindset. If you are a coffeeshop barista, there is no reason you cannot adopt an entrepreneurial approach to your work. What can make your co-workers’ jobs easier? Is there a frustrating hang-up in the workflow that can be eliminated? What can make the customer experience more pleasant?

To come up with and implement answers to these questions, you need to apply the distinctive attributes of an entrepreneur: judgment, insight, initiative, and anticipation of needs. Engaging in such problem-solving will enhance the value-creation of your work. And if you are in a job worth having, such enhancement will make your work more fulfilling and remunerative.
Alternatively, as a barista you can be a timeserver and a routinist, doing nothing more than clocking in and out, and following the procedures prescribed in the company manual. That may be enough to hold down the job, but it won’t allow you to thrive at work. Thriving at a coffee shop may sound like a tall order. Maybe it’s just a job to pay the bills while you pursue more fulfilling work or study. But apathy in any area of your life will spill over and spread bleakness into other areas.

Anything you do in life is worth doing deliberately, with care, and with creativity. Even in an entry-level or transitional job, if you tackle your work with an entrepreneurial spirit, you will develop and grow as a proactive, opportunity seizing adult. And that expansion of soul will serve you well throughout your career.

As T.K. Coleman often says, you have the power to be the predominant creative force in your life. But you can only seize that power if you also accept the attendant responsibility. That means shaking off the “worker drone” and “conveyor belt” mindsets you imbibed at school. It means treating your life and career as the great enterprise it is, with you and you alone at the helm.

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The Secret Weapon
Young People Have on the
Job Market...

Isaac Moorehouse

Nothing better to do.

The only things that matter when it comes to succeeding in the marketplace are:

1. The ability to create value for others.

2. The ability to persuade others of your value creation potential.

It’s not your school, your grades, your network, your knowledge or anything else you may have been told. Those things are only useful insofar as they help you do #1 or #2.

This should be an empowering revelation. Value creation opportunities abound. Yet it often makes young people feel intimidated. After years in classrooms acquiring few real-world skills and gaining knowledge that is basically an inferior version of what experts possess, how are they supposed to create value for anyone?

Here’s where the secret weapon comes in.

Value creation is not about having an absolute advantage over others at some activity. It’s about having a comparative advantage. This
concept, popularized by David Ricardo a few hundred years ago, is a powerful tool to understand and seize opportunity as a young person. It reveals the secret weapon called ‘nothing better to do.’

To have a comparative advantage at something simply requires that your opportunity cost is lower than others. What you have to give up to engage in that activity is less valuable than what they have to give up.

Young people with few skills and little experience don’t have a lot of high value options for how to use their time, so their opportunity cost tends to be very low. This makes their value creation potential high.

How does it work?

Imagine a CEO who is incredibly organized, detail-oriented, and something of a wizard at scheduling, logistics, travel planning, and utilizing all the best productivity apps and tools. She’s many times better at this than an aspiring 18-year-old. Yet for every hour she spends planning her travel and meetings, she gives up the ability to spend that hour selling a new client or planning the marketing expansion. Those are high-value activities, say with the potential to bring in another $30,000 in revenue. How much is excellent travel planning worth? Something, but less than that. Her opportunity cost is very high.

That 18-year-old, on the other hand, has nothing better to do. Even if it took him three hours to do the travel planning she could do in one, he would be giving up a lot less. He could no longer browse Facebook, read a textbook, watch Netflix, or play basketball. There is nothing bad about those activities, but none of them likely have the potential to create $30,000 worth of value for him.

If our 18-year-old realizes this, he has a powerful weapon. He can offer to take over scheduling for the CEO and free her up to do more valuable work. She might be reticent because it’s possible that he could actually create more work if he’s really bad. To reduce risk further, he
can go all in and offer to do it for free and demonstrate his ability by planning one mock trip to show her.

This requires no special skills, just a touch of creativity, persistence, and Googling. Yet if he lands the gig, even unpaid, he will be exposed to the world of a CEO and probably learn more in a month than he could in a year sitting in classrooms. He can observe the company and identify other areas to create value—other areas where his opportunity cost is lower than others—and potential parlay this into a really cool role there or at another company. Maybe he can even learn how to start his own.

So few young people try anything like this. They’re stuck spending endless hours and countless dollars getting a piece of paper that makes them identical to every other young person. They accumulate debt and expectations that make them feel the need to enter the professional world at a level of pay that, frankly, they can’t yet justify with their limited skill and experience. They feel it would be beneath them, after getting an expensive degree, to work for free or low pay to get a foot in the door. They are completely neutralizing their greatest asset, their low opportunity cost.

If you’re young and have little in the way of monthly expenses or valuable opportunities in front of you, rejoice. This means you can explore and test and try a great many things. Your ability to create value is tremendous if you look for places where others have a high opportunity cost and you do not.

Get off the conveyor belt. Break the mold. Go do some cool stuff.

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We are now in the fifth year of very choppy hiring markets for young workers. The latest unemployment numbers once again leave them out from posted gains. Not even the boom in temporary employment included them.

The United States has one of the highest rates of unemployment among 20-to-26-year-olds in the world. Nearly half of the U.S. army of unemployed is under the age of 34. As for those who are hired, there is a huge gap between wage expectations and paycheck realities, which is exactly what you would expect in a post-boom world. A survey by Accenture finds that more than 41 percent of recent U.S. college graduates are disillusioned, underemployed, and not using their college degrees in their work.

The young generation faces challenges unlike any that most people alive have seen. This situation requires new adaptive strategies. What follows, then, is my letter of advice to young workers.

**Dear Young Workers:**

Even if it weren’t for the economic stagnation, you would already be facing a tough market. That’s because you are showing up at the job marketplace nearly empty-handed. Our society long ago decided it was
better for you to sit in desks for 16 years than to gain any real work experience in the marketplace that is likely to hire you later.

Even if it were legal for you to work when you are capable of doing so—from the age of maybe 12 or 13—the government has imposed these wage-floor laws that price your services out of the market. Then you are told that if you stay in school, you will get a great, high-paying job right out of college. Then it turns out that employers aren’t interested in you. You are beginning to sense that employers think you have few marketable skills and have no demonstrated predisposition to produce.

Here’s the root of the problem: People have been lying to you all your life.

As a young child you were repeatedly fed slogans about the equality of everyone. The urges to compete and win were suppressed in your childhood games, while sharing and caring for others were exalted above all other values.

Then at some point—somewhere between the ages of 7 and 10—something changed. All that caring/sharing stuff ended and a world of dog-eat-dog began. You were expected to get perfect grades, to excel at math and science, to be perfectly obedient, to stay in school for as long as possible. You were told that if you did that, everything would work out for you.

It does work out for some. But only a small minority of people are disposed to both compliance and rote learning. And even for those people, not everyone gets what he’s been promised. As for the rest, there is no plan in place. Those who fall through the cracks are expected to make it on their own somehow.

How do you make it? It all comes down to remunerative work. And there’s the barrier you face right now. You have the desire and you are looking for some institution that values what you have to contribute. But you can’t find the match.

Consider: Why does any business hire an employee? It happens
based on the belief that the business will make more money with the employee than without it. The business pays you, you do work, and, as a result, there are greater returns coming in than there would otherwise be.

But think through what this means. It means you have to add more value than you take out. For every dollar you earn, you have to make it possible for the business to earn a dollar plus something extra. This task is not easy. Businesses have costs to cover in addition to your salary. For example, government mandates that businesses be insured. You have to be trained. There could be healthcare costs, too. There are uncertainties to deal with. All of these add to the burden that you place on the business, which adds to the costs of hiring you.

What this means is you have to be more valuable than you think. Why are minimum wage jobs so hard? Because it’s difficult for an inexperienced worker to be worth paying that much. The employer has to extract as much value as possible from the relationship with you just to make that relationship happen at all. That can’t happen right away because odds are you are losing the company money in the first months of employment simply because you are untrained. You end up scrambling like crazy just to earn your keep.

If you already understand this rule—that you must add more value than you take out—you now know more than vast numbers of young workers. And this gives you an advantage. While everyone else is grumbling about the workload and low pay, you can know why you are having to hustle so much and be happier for it. You are producing more for the company than you take out. Doing that consistently is the way to get ahead. In fact, it’s the key to life.

But in order to get ahead, you have to be a player in the first place. It does little good to sit around and wait for the right job at the right pay. Forget all your expectations. If something, anything, comes along, you should jump on it immediately. No job is too menial, despite what you have been told. The goal is just to get in the game. Yes, you have
much higher salary expectations, and those might be met someday. But not yet.

The first step is to get into the game at some wage, just something, somewhere. The fear that such work, whatever it is, is somehow beneath you is a serious source of personal undoing. Those who are willing to perform the most “menial” of jobs are the people who can make a good life for themselves. Just because you perceive the job as “menial” does not mean it is not valuable to others and especially, ultimately, to you.

You learn from every job you have. You learn how to interact with others, how a business runs, how people think, how bosses think, and how those who succeed get ahead versus those who fail. Working is a time for learning, as much as or more than school.

People’s number-one fear is that their job will somehow define their lives. Hence, they conclude that a job stocking shelves at Walmart will redefine or dumb down who they are. This notion is absolutely untrue. That job is a brick in your foundation.

In order to get any job, you have to do more than drop off a resume or file one online. You have to emerge from the pack. That means that you have to sell yourself like a commodity. You have to market yourself (and marketing is the least-appreciated and yet most-crucial feature of all commercial acts). That is not degrading; it is an opportunity. Find out everything you can about the company and its products. After you apply, you need to go back and back, meet the managers, meet the owners, all with the goal of showing them how much value you will add to their enterprise.

In this new job, success is not hard, but it requires discipline. Just follow a few simple rules. Never be late. Do first whatever your immediate supervisor tells you to do. Do it much more quickly and thoroughly than he or she expects. When that is done, do some unexpected things that add value to the environment. Never complain. Never gos-
sip. Never partake in office politics. Be a model employee. That’s the path toward thriving.

It’s not just about adding value to the company. It’s about adding value to yourself. The digital age has given us all amazing tools for accumulating personal capital. Get a LinkedIn account and attach your job to your personal identity. Start putting together that essential network. This network is something that will grow throughout your life, starting now and lasting until the end. It could be the most valuable commodity you have outside your own character and skills. Take possession of your work experience and make it your own.

While doing all this excellent work, you need to be thinking about two possible paths forward, each of them equally viable: advance within this one firm or move to another firm. You should go with whichever is to your best advantage. Never stop looking for your next job. This is true now and always throughout your life.

A huge mistake people make is to embed themselves emotionally in one institution. The law encourages this attitude by tying all sorts of advantages to the status-quo job you currently hold. You get health benefits, time off, scheduled raises, and it is always easier to stick with what you know. To do so is a mistake. Progress comes through disruption, and sometimes you have to disrupt yourself to make that progress happen.

To be willing to forgo the security of one job for the uncertainty of another gives you an edge. Average people around you will sacrifice every principle and every truth for the sake of security. People, with very few exceptions, fear the uncertainty of an unknown future more than the seeming security of a known status quo. They will give up every right and every bit of their souls for the promise of security (whether it be through a paycheck or an armed police officer), even to the point of personal misery or obeying a wicked despot (whether it be a boss or a dictator). You can break free of this tendency, but it takes courage, risk-taking, and a conscious act of defying convention.
You should always think of yourself as a productive unit that is always on the job market. You can go from institution to institution, always upgrading your skills and hence your wages. Never be afraid to try something new or to plunge into a new work environment.

Clever finance management here is crucial. Never live at the level that matches your income. Your standard of living, instead, should match your next-best employment opportunity, the one you have forgone or the one you might take next. If you stick with this practice—and it requires discipline—you will be free to choose where you work and to take greater risks. You will also develop a cushion should something go wrong.

At the same time, there could be advantages to sticking around one place, even as everyone else around you is moving from here to there. Even if that happens, you should still think of yourself as being on the market. You are governing yourself. Don’t let yourself be beholden to anyone, but understand also that no one owes you a living. That’s the only way to make clear judgments about your career path.

At every job, you are going to learn so much about human ethics, psychology, emotions, and behavior. Most of what you will learn will be enlightening and encouraging. Some of it, however, is not pretty and might come as a shock.

First, you will discover that people in general are extremely reluctant to admit error. People will defend an opinion or an action until the end, even if every bit of logic and evidence runs contrary. Sincere apologies and genuine admissions of error and wrongdoing are the rarest things in this world. There is no point at all in demanding apologies or in becoming resentful when they fail to appear. Just move on. Neither should you expect to always be rewarded for being right. On the contrary, people will often resent you and try to take you down.

How do you deal with this problem? Don’t get frustrated. Don’t seek justice. Accept the reality for what it is. If a job isn’t working out, move on. If you get fired, don’t seek vengeance. Anger and resentment
accomplish absolutely nothing. Keep your eye on the goal of personal and professional advancement, and think of anything that interrupts your path as a diversion and a distraction.

Second, we all want to believe that doing a great job and becoming excellent at something will lead to personal reward. This is not always or even often true. Excellence makes you a target of envy from those around you who have failed by comparison. Excellence can often harm your prospects for success. Meritocracy exists, and even prevails, but it is realized through your own initiative, and it is never just granted freely by some individual or institution. All personal and social progress comes about because you alone push through the attempts of everyone around you to stop it.

Third, people tend to possess a status-quo bias and prefer to follow orders and instructions; most people cannot imagine how the world around them might be different through initiative and change. If you can train yourself to imagine a world that doesn’t yet exist—to exercise the use of imagination and creativity in a commercial framework—you can become the most valuable person around. You might be among those who can be real entrepreneurs. You might even change the world.

As you develop and use these talents, and as they become ever more valuable to those around you, remember that you are not infallible. The commercial marketplace punishes pride and arrogance and it rewards humility and the teachable spirit. Be happy for your successes, but never stop learning. There is always more to know because the world is ever-changing, and none of us can know all things. The key to thriving in this life is to be prepared to not only change with it but to get in front of the change and drive it.

From where you are now, unemployed with few seeming prospects, your future might look hopeless. This perception is not true. There are barriers, to be sure, but they are there to be overcome by you and you alone. The world does not work like you were told it works
when you were a kid. Deal with it and start engaging the reality around you right now just as it is, using intelligence, cunning, and charm. You are the decision-maker, and whether you succeed or fail ultimately depends on the decisions you make.

In many ways, you are a victim of a system that has conspired against you. But you get nowhere by acting like a victim. You don’t need to be a victim. You have free will and the capacity for self-governance; indeed, you possess the human right to choose. Today is the day to start exercising it.

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Entrepreneurship Is for Everybody

Dan Sanchez

Entrepreneurship is for everybody. That may strike you as an exaggeration. “Surely not everyone is cut out to be an entrepreneur. It takes a certain kind of person to launch and run a business. Most people are better suited to earn their livings as employees.”

This formulation of entrepreneurship is far too narrow. Everyone is the sole proprietor of an enterprise: namely your own career. You are the CEO of “You, Inc.”

Like any entrepreneur, you have customer(s): in this case, your “employer(s).”

Like any entrepreneur, you have a product to sell: in this case, your labor.

Like any entrepreneur, you spend money to create, improve, and market that product. You purchase human capital-enhancing products and services from suppliers like training programs, programming books, and online course providers. You also use your labor to barter for valuable experience in the workplace. When you buy a suit for interviews, you are spending money on marketing your product.

All these costs could exceed your resulting “sales” (your additional pay), and in that case you incur losses, just like any entrepreneur. Or your sales could outstrip your costs and net you a profit.
To successfully manage your career, to truly thrive in the labor market, requires all of the character traits normally attributed to people who are “cut out” for entrepreneurship:

- A passion for value creation
- Innovativeness
- Insight into and anticipation of the wants and needs of “customers” (employers)
- Good judgment as to what will satisfy those wants and needs
- Vision
- Imagination
- Alertness to opportunity
- The ability to cope with uncertainty and risk
- Initiative

It is tragic that most people don’t think of their careers as enterprises, or of themselves as entrepreneurs. Instead they too often have an “employee mindset.” According to this mindset, all of the above qualities are only required of their entrepreneurial betters. The employee himself doesn’t need a passion for value creation; the boss decides for him how he is to create value by assigning him specific tasks. It is for the employee to dutifully perform those tasks, and that’s it.

With such a “worker drone” attitude weighing them down, too many people find themselves in a rut in their career and their lives. They see work, not as an exciting opportunity for advancement through value creation, but as a drudgery to be endured. Keep your head down, do your assigned work, learn the routine, hope to get incremental raises for time served, and pray you don’t get laid off.

Imagine if Steve Jobs had treated his customers (buyers of Apple products) the way most workers treat their customers (buyers of their
labor services). “Well, they keep asking for the Apple II computer, so I’d better just focus on continuing to give it to them.” He would have never developed the iMac, iPod, iPhone, iPad, etc. The world, and more to the point, he himself, would have been much poorer as a result.

Consumers of personal tech care more about value than about any particular product per se. Similarly, any boss who is himself an entrepreneur, as opposed to a bureaucratic functionary, cares more about value creation itself than about rule following and task completion per se.

Workers should see task assignments not just as responsibilities, but as starting points: clues for potential opportunities for greater value creation. This may involve going above and beyond the original tasks. It also may involve innovating altogether different ways of doing things.

A bureaucratic boss would be annoyed by such deviations from routine as uppity insubordination, and as needlessly creating extra hassles. An entrepreneurial boss would eagerly embrace the value-adding innovations, and facilitate the creation of more innovations by giving the innovator a bigger role. She would also know that other entrepreneurial bosses would happily bid away the innovative worker’s services if given the chance; so, to prevent that, she would increase the worker’s pay.

By intelligently and assertively pursuing value creation (and by staying on the job market), the entrepreneurial worker finds him or herself in high demand, and so is faced with greater opportunities: for higher pay, better benefits, better working conditions, more fulfilling work, a more fulfilling life.

This mindset is not only financially rewarding, but invigorating as well. Human beings are not constituted to be programmed automatons or beasts of burden to be yoked and driven. When we relegate ourselves to such a role, we become dejected and neurotic.

Our nature is to be purposeful actors, to be intrepid discoverers, to
boldly undertake ventures (“entrepreneur” is derived from the French equivalent of the English word “undertaker,” which was the term used by Adam Smith). Taking on life as an entrepreneur is what makes us fully come alive.

Down with the employee mindset. All workers should consider themselves “self-employed.” Your boss is your (current) customer (maybe one of several), not your “employer.” You are the ultimate employer of your own labor. Only you are ultimately responsible for your own value creation, your own pay, your own career. You are the entrepreneur in control of “You, Inc.” Entrepreneurship is for everybody.

The best way to learn entrepreneurship is to actually engage in it. But if you need a bit more inspiration to do so, try out FEE’s free online course “The Economics of Entrepreneurship.”

In this course, you will find further discussions of what it means to be entrepreneurial, as well as inspiring examples of successful entrepreneurs. In that course, you can also learn about the tremendous public service that entrepreneurs (including entrepreneurial workers) provide via their role in the market economy. Understanding that can contribute to your sense of fulfillment as you embark upon your career as a lifelong entrepreneur.

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How to Develop a Work Ethic and Be an Amazing Employee

Jeffrey Tucker

Talk to business owners about “kids these days” and you will get a wicked earful of epithets. Whatever happened to the work ethic? The answer to that question is not found in some strange corruption of the soul that has taken place in recent years, though that might be the result. The real issue has very practical roots.

No Prior Experience

Young people often enter the workforce following school with no previous job experience in a commercial space. There are high costs to this reality. They lack essential formation in what it means to be truly valuable to others. You can’t learn this from sitting in a desk and taking notes for 16 years. It’s a habit of mind that connects directly to habits of time and action.

The old bourgeois sentiment said that work is as good, or better, a teacher as school. It believed that it was essential for all young people to have jobs so that they could develop a work ethic before they became full-time professionals.

Today it’s not so easy for young people to get a job. Strictly
enforced laws prohibit remunerative work before the age of 16. A serious job is not viable until the age of 18, at which point college beckons and student loans make possible a work-free life. Wage floors discourage employers from taking risks with inexperienced employees. And the tight job market since 2008 has limited opportunities for even those who might want to work.

The work ethic is the casualty. This is sad and ridiculous because having a work ethic is not actually difficult. It requires very little other than focus and a handful of rules. They can be summarized: punctuality, the willingness to do what is asked of you, the discipline to stay on task, the drive for excellence, the capacity to be creative, the passion for discovery of unmet needs, and the adoption of a service-oriented mindset.

All these traits make up the work ethic. It can’t always be taught. It is best cultivated through experience. So let me begin with one of my own experiences.

**conversation overheard**

“This new Tucker kid is pretty useless,” said my boss to another manager.

They didn’t know I was listening because I was around the corner. I was 15 years old and working for a catering company.

“He never does anything,” he went on.

I was devastated to overhear this. But I was lucky at the same time.

I had just been hired from a busboy position at another restaurant. The new company was a scrappy outfit, not some well-organized franchise. Dirty tables, old food, stained pans, stacked plates, sticky chairs, grimy sinks, stinky napkins, piles of rolls, cups, and cooking stuff were strewn everywhere. The place was a dump. It was a like kitchen jungle of chaos and I had no clue what was what. It seemed like one big catastrophe.

I recall a sense of fear about the job because I didn’t know anyone
and I didn’t know this business. So I defaulted to extreme caution. I did what I was told to do. I washed some stuff and put away a few things, and then I was at a loss as to what to do next.

No one had time to “train” me. Everyone was too busy. I had no mentors. After I finished my tasks, I kind of just watched the clock. I felt anxious about it but I was too lost and confused to know the next step. So it’s true. I was kind of useless.

But this comment—I’m so glad I overheard it!—seared into my heart and then brain. Useless! What he meant was that I was costing the company more than I was being paid. Every hour I was there I was causing them to lose money. I had negative value as a human being.

I could have quit. But I was grateful for the job, and didn’t know where else to look. I could have hated on the boss and the manager. But what’s the point?

**Becoming Useful**

I had to change, had to do something different than I was. I had to become useful. That is to say, I had to contribute more value to the enterprise than I took out in wages. I had to become the kind of person that they wanted there because I made the business more successful. I had to become a person of positive value.

What to do? I blinked my eyes, blinked again, and looked around. Oh my, suddenly, the place looked completely different. Where I had previously seen an unfixable mess, a regrettable dump to which I had been assigned, I suddenly saw work undone. Things to do! Plates needed stacking, butter needed to be put in the fridge, the ovens needed cleaning, the floor was filthy, the hallway was a junk heap, the light bulbs needed changing.

No one else seemed to be doing these things. I went nuts and started working my tail off. No one told me what to do. No one said I was doing the right or wrong thing. Many things I didn’t really know
how to do. Still, I figured it out. In the course of a few days, I had transformed the place. I felt a sense of pride and even ownership.

I got curious about our next catered dinner. Where was it? What prep work needed to be done? What chairs and tables need to be cleaned to prepare? I asked these questions and jumped on tasks as soon as I heard the answers. I got ever better at finding things to do because I got to know the business better.

Within a few days, I was suddenly valuable, and the boss said so. Sure, I made mistakes. I put towels away in the wrong place and put some too-old food back in the refrigerator. Still, they liked that I had tried. I liked me. I kept the job and, after a month, I got a raise.

The Work Ethic

I didn’t know it then, but this was the cultivation in my own mind of a work ethic. This ethic is not so much about right and wrong. After all, leisure is a wonderful thing, even a goal, something fabulous and worth shooting for. Work is, to some extent, regrettable, or, as economists would say, carries with it a certain “disutility.” We do it in hopes of a higher standard of living, which is to say a better life.

To have a work ethic means to have an insatiable inner drive, to adopt the right values to bring about productivity as extension of the choices you make in your career. In a practical sense, it is a habit of doing what must be done, doing it with a relentless attention to excellence, and then developing a strong desire to do more than you are asked to do.

That means finding things that are undone and discovering ways to do them. The goal is to let these traits define who you are as a worker, and then come to love and embrace that identity.

Mastering this ethic is the best possible thing you can do for your own life. It doesn’t matter what the job is. The lesson applies to them all.

It is not about doing what you are told, though getting that much
right is a pretty wonderful thing. Truly, we all need to be reminded of this point. When the boss suggests something to do, it is absolutely incontrovertibly true that it must be done. Other priorities need to be moved down the list. The task must be completed.

There is nothing in this world that annoys a supervisor or boss or owner more than to have to remember and follow up on a task after it has been assigned, to return to the person to whom it is assigned in order to follow up to make sure it is done, only to find that it had slipped through the cracks. No one has time for that.

If you never fail to do what you are asked to do, and your boss gains a sense that you will always and everywhere do the thing you are asked to do, you can shine like a diamond.

If you do this, you are more than halfway toward being amazing. Already you are way ahead of your peers. Also, accomplishing the tasks doesn’t always have to be about pleasing the boss. Doing things that other people in the know suggest is also a valuable thing. Being a great colleague and friend to others besides your direct supervisor pays huge returns.

Six Types of Bad Employees

Another way to think about this subject is to contrast the great employee with six types of problem employees.

**The Braggart.** This is the person who never fails to trumpet to everyone even the slightest evidence of productivity. This usually backfires and ends up highlighting just how little the braggart actually does. The work ethic means not to brag or seek praise for your work. Your productivity will be noticed regardless. If anything, giving credit to others who help you makes others feel wonderful. This helps your karma, and you get the benefit eventually.

**The Complainer.** This person considers every task to be an dreadful imposition. Nothing is right, and everyone else is to blame if the
task remains undone. He or she encourages others to complain also, spreading discontent and whininess far and wide.

In contrast, the great worker joyfully embraces all opportunities to add value. It means to go beyond what needs to be done to develop that rare capacity to see the unseen work that could be done. Once you see this, you never run out of value to contribute. Then you become a source of real progress, which is defined by that which goes outside the assigned routine to discover what is new, all in service of others.

**The Hoarder.** This person deals with fears of job security by accumulating ever more responsibilities, refusing to ask others for help, publicly heaving with a sense of burden and suffering, and then never quite getting it all done while invoking the excuse of being overworked. The hoarder’s goal is to broadcast an impression of his or her own unique talents that no one else can possibly replicate. In contrast, a great worker is happy to share knowledge, allocate tasks, cooperate, learn from others and train others to be wonderful too, freeing more time for creativity.

**The Offloader.** This person is the inverse of the hoarder, but just as much a problem. The unteachable offloader imagines that he or she has been hired for a certain skill set and can learn no more. “I don’t do” and “I won’t do” and “I don’t like to do”... fill in the blank. It’s all about using a lack of skill as an excuse for laziness and fobbing work off on everyone else. In contrast, having a work ethic means a willingness to do that which is not fun, to learn new skills, to try new applications, to venture into unknown territory, and to add to one’s intellectual capital every day.

**The Gossip.** This person proves the adage that “idle hands do the devil’s work.” The gossip is consumed by internal matters of personnel and can’t resist dripping poison in others’ ears. He or she fosters division, suspicion, paranoia, and discontent. The workplace becomes a game of thrones.

In contrast, people with a work ethic do not wallow in office
politics. They ignore gossip, backstabbing, and trash talk. They do not organize into factions. If you can stay above it all, and just be amazing in every aspect of your career, you will come out on top.

**The Sneak.** This is the person who looks for any opportunity to appear to be working but not actually working. It becomes a game: get away early for lunch, return late, or leave the office when everyone is in a meeting. He or she uses work hours to goof off online while neglecting essential tasks, and has developed many ways to hide it with quick browsing tricks to switch screens. Every word becomes a little fib, and work life becomes a vast effort in subterfuge.

In contrast, a good employee doesn’t fear being found out because he or she has nothing to hide and can browse Facebook with confidence because all other work is done.

**More Value In than Out**

The “work ethic” isn’t just about the sweat of your brow and saving your soul. It is really about your own individual interest. The reason you are hired is to contribute more value than you take out. If you do that, you ascend. If you do not do that, you are not long for this job, and you become just another one of the “kids these days.” It’s the most simple and the most profound application of economics because it directly affects your life.

All of these traits are difficult to adopt without real-world experience. But sadly, for young people, the world is conspiring to deny them the chance to gain such experience. The necessary work ethic needs to be a personal commitment, something adopted with conscious deliberation and applied in every aspect of your professional life.

The more valuable you can be to others in a marketplace, the better and more wonderful life you can have. And therein lies the beauty of the market. It calls us all to excellence and creativity in the service of others, and enables all of us to assist in making the world more wonder-
ful. That’s not only good for prosperity. It’s also good for the human spirit itself.

To be sure, bosses have their own issues of a different sort. A great boss can energize an entire enterprise while a bad boss can disable and de-motivate even the best workers. But that’s a subject of a different article.

As I look back over what I’ve written here, one big supposition underlies my point: the existence of a functioning market economy with a vibrant commercial sector. If the labor market is bogged down, if there are no consumers to serve, if people aren’t rewarded for productivity, if there is no space for the exercise of creativity, none of this applies.

Therefore, one final caveat: it is probably the case that none of this applies to government work. Here productivity, creativity, and consumer service are punished. How to survive such a setting? My only suggestion is to walk away. Go somewhere where the work ethic can indeed save your soul.

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Success Is More About Mindset than Skillset

Barry Brownstein

On a busy afternoon at a Market Basket supermarket in New Hampshire, all fourteen checkout aisles are usually open. The checkouts are staffed almost exclusively by teenage cashiers and baggers; on a recent visit, I counted 24 teenagers in the front, and even more stocking the shelves throughout the large store.

At Market Basket, salaries for part-time teenagers are in the $8–$9 an hour range while full-time employees start at $12 an hour. To some, such as New School economics and urban policy professor David Howell, jobs like these are “crappy.” Recently, while commenting about increasing the minimum wage, Howell asked, “Why shouldn’t we in fact accept job loss? What’s so bad about getting rid of crappy jobs, forcing employers to upgrade, and having a serious program to compensate anyone who is in the slightest way harmed by that?”

Market Basket is a chain of 77 New England supermarkets employing over 25,000 people. To the arrogant, supermarket jobs may seem like menial dead-end jobs. Yet, for many of these teenagers their Market Basket experience is a stepping stone to a meaningful work life. Many are earning income working while in high school and college to pay for their educations. Some may go on to careers at Market Basket.

It is not hard to imagine what would happen to these jobs if a
minimum wage of $15 an hour was imposed. Currently, due to a culture of customer service, there are no automated self-checkouts at Market Basket. A dramatic increase in labor costs would almost certainly be accompanied by the introduction of automated checkouts and, in the future, perhaps robotic stockers.

As importantly, the low prices the chain is known for would end too. Low supermarket prices may not be an issue for the elite making pronouncements about what jobs are “crappy,” but for families on a budget shopping at Market Basket low prices increases quality of life.

**Jobs Teach Mindset**

In his classic essay “Self-Reliance” Ralph Waldo Emerson observed how much lies fallow in us: “The power which resides in [every man] is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.”

When a teenager or young adult applies at Market Basket, they may not know what they can do until they try. They may not have learned the discipline of showing up on time or of not reacting to perceived slights from peers or adults. They may not have learned how to be resilient in the face of everyday challenges. They may see the world as owing them something instead of looking for ways to create value for others.

Your mindset, explain Paul Stoltz and James Reed in their book, *Put Your Mindset to Work* is “the internal lens through which you see and navigate life.” Elements of our mindset may be invisible to us but still influence everything we do.

From a survey of thousands of employers, Stoltz and Reed have found that employers value mindset more than skillset:

Given the choice between someone with the desired mindset who lacks the complete skillset for the job, and someone with the complete skillset who lacks the desired mindset, a total of 96 percent of the employers surveyed
picked mindset over skillset as the key element in those they seek and retain. When asked which is more likely, a person with the right skillset developing the desired mindset, or a person with the desired mindset developing the right skillset, 98 percent of employers confirmed the latter.

Stoltz and Reed observe “If your skillset is about what you can do, then your mindset is about what you see, think and believe.” The top six mindset traits that Stoltz and Reed’s survey reveals are honesty, trustworthiness, commitment, adaptability, accountability and flexibility. Other important mindset traits to employers include determination, purposefulness, drive, and collaborative focus.

**Mindset-Centered Training**

Founding CEO of Southwest Herb Kelleher put it this way: “If you don’t have a good attitude, we don’t want you, no matter how skilled you are.” Southwest is known for evaluating potential hires for how well they fit into the airline’s culture of collaboration and friendliness.

Market Basket employment practices echo those of Southwest: they look for attitude in a candidate. One Market Basket manager explained that they look for people who are honest, who want to be there and who are “willing to learn.” Then after hiring, “the [Market Basket] system really takes care of the rest.”

What of the teenager or young adult who lacks elements of a winning mindset? If they find themselves with an entry level job at companies like Market Basket, the corporate culture will help them develop one.

At Market Basket, there is a palpable *esprit de corps* which is part of a learned mindset of collaboration. Male employees, including baggers and stockers, are required to dress in white shirts and ties, which becomes part of their new learned mindset of professionalism. Every
employee wears a nametag that also includes how long they have been employed at Market Basket. The labor-intensive Market Basket store culture of engaging customers personally results in taking a customer to an item’s location, rather than telling them the aisle to go to.

How accountable are these helpful employees? Since they were hired, how much has the mindset of accountability grown in them? Did they learn on the job that a “not my job” attitude won’t get them far. For some, “What more can I do?” is learned behavior.

Market Basket is known for promoting entirely from within. MBAs not steeped in Market Basket culture need not apply. Those employees who establish their worth through diligence, hard work, and making suggestions to improve the operations of the store begin to rise up the management chain.

Many of Market Basket’s teenage employees learn important life-long lessons about business. They learn to succeed by creating value for others. They learn that collaboration and communication is highly valued. They learn that in order to succeed and be happy at work, they must put aside the idea that a job is merely a list of responsibilities and orders to carry out. Those who stock the shelves are trained to observe and inform managers about items that are selling fast and need more shelf space. They learn that work can improve the lives of other people. If they don’t serve the customer, someone else will.

In their book *We Are Market Basket*, marketing professor Daniel Korschun and journalist Grant Welker observe: “At Market Basket, associates are aware that they are not just selling groceries; they are raising consumers’ standards of living through low prices... Executives remind associates frequently and explicitly. Their purpose at work is to make people’s lives better.”

Market Basket’s low prices and generous service generate such consumer loyalty that in 2014 when the family owned business was the subject of an ownership dispute, customers, employees and suppliers all boycotted the store until the original ownership was restored.
Economics professor Walter Williams has called the minimum wage the “maximum folly.” As $15 an hour minimum wages become more common and entry-level jobs are eliminated, we might ask: has folly become cruelty?

To succeed in life, a winning mindset is essential. Our mindset improves through entry-level jobs where we find out that we are not the center of the universe. For those who have not learned the essential elements of how to succeed in the workplace, “crappy” jobs are not only a source of money, they are a source of learning a winning mindset that will improve their income throughout their lifetime. What could be crueler than cutting them off from that opportunity?

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Economics Helps You Deal with Difficult People

Dan Sanchez & Isaac M. Morehouse

You wake up to the realization that you have an important meeting in 30 minutes. You leap out of bed, throw some clothes on, grab your keys, and rush out the door. You’re halfway to your car when you see it.

Somebody has slashed your tires.

You’re a 30 year old startup founder, but suddenly you become a 60 year old curmudgeon. “Hooligans! Scum of the earth! If I ever got my hands on them, I’d…”

Then you stop, and a strange calm comes over you. Is it your meditation practice kicking in? No, the look on your face is not one of serenity, so much as one of curiosity and resolve.

It’s not a moment of zen, but of economics.

Far fetched? Actually, no. The economic way of thinking can be a powerful tool for dealing with life’s challenges. In fact, you might even say that economics can be a form of self-help.

Understanding Action

The kernel of economics is the concept of human action: of purposeful behavior. Action involves seeking goals according to one’s own preferences, which are influenced by incentives.
And all action is rational in the sense that it is based upon available information, however incorrect and incomplete, and upon ideas, however fallacious and flawed, about cause and effect, means toward ends.

This may seem pretty common sense, but all too often we seem to disregard these truths. When faced with the problematic behavior of our fellow human beings, we often dwell on the moral defects or perceived absurdity of that conduct. “He’s just a monster.” “She’s just irrational.” “They’re just a bunch of idiots.”

To take an extreme example, after 9/11 and at the beginning of the Afghan War, when asked by the press of his estimation of Osama bin Laden, a top U.S. general could only offer the answer, “He’s a madman.” Nothing about the terrorist’s motives or cause, however sinister and unjust. Nothing about his strategy, however diabolical. Just, “He’s a madman.” With such a crude approach to assessing a mortal enemy as this, it is no wonder that the War on Terror has failed so spectacularly.

Such a response might make one feel superior and self-satisfied, but really it’s self-disempowering. It stops, dead in its tracks, all analysis, all understanding, all progress toward solutions. It can lead to despair of having any kind of influence on others whatsoever. And it drastically dwindles one’s toolkit for effectively dealing with human actors. Individuals considered as nothing but mindless inhuman obstacles can only either be avoided or overcome with force.

Transcending Office Politics

But what if neither option is on the table? For example, what if you’re dealing with a co-worker who is always looking to sabotage you at a job you don’t want to quit? You can’t just hide from him in the storage closet. You can’t just smack him in the face with a keyboard, like James McAvoy did to Chris Pratt in the movie Wanted. Without the economic way of thinking, all you can do is simmer in resentment. Maybe you’ll find petty consolation (and even some lulz) in trying
to make his life miserable in return, like Jim Halpert putting Dwight Schrute’s stapler in Jell-O in *The Office*.

Economics reminds us that, however depraved, however imbalanced, however impaired, all human beings act according to preferences, information, and incentives. So when someone gives you grief, instead of stewing in contempt and judgment, try grappling with and modifying those preferences, that information, and those incentives.

*Why* is that colleague trying to sabotage you?

Maybe his preferences are such that he cares more about his own career advancement than about being part of a functioning and collegial team.

Maybe these preferences are shaped by incentives that arise from the fact that your company started moving away from private clients and toward government contracting. So the organization has become more bureaucratic and hierarchical, and less geared toward efficiency and service. In such a context, it’s not surprising that he would place rank-climbing above collaborative value-creation.

Maybe his information, gleaned from his life experiences, tells him that the only way to climb the corporate ladder is by pulling someone else down.

Now that you have an idea where he’s coming from, you can consider whether you can change those preferences, that information, and those incentives.

Can you alter the incentive structure by convincing your CEO that the government contracts are changing the organizational culture for the worse, and that the company should shift back to private clientele?

Can you induce a preference shuffle in your nemesis by helping him with one of his projects, thereby showing him the benefit of cooperation for one’s career?

Can you change his information by recommending to him a book
that explains how it is value-creation and not resume-padding that will make his career and work life thrive?

**Lifehacking**

The economic way of thinking can also help you better deal with the person who can at times be your worst enemy: yourself.

Too often we assess ourselves as crudely and unproductively as we assess others, again dwelling on judgment. “My relationships keep failing because I’m just a bad person.” “I can’t lose weight because I simply have no self control.” “I keep making bad career decisions because I’m such an idiot.”

What a useless kind of evaluation!

Again, you, like all other human beings, act according to preferences, information, and incentives. So, instead of wallowing in self-loathing, think about how you can hack those preferences, that information, and those incentives.

How can you hack your information so as to alter your choices? Maybe the diet you’ve chosen is unsustainable, and you need to do research to find one that you can stick to without always feeling hungry. Maybe you and your partner have mismatching expectations for your relationship, so you need to talk it out and come to understand each other.

How can you hack your incentive structure so as to adjust your preferences? Is living at home sapping your self-reliance? Why not move out? Is being in school squashing your initiative and enterprise? Why not drop out? Is your job at the DMV or some other government office making you indolent and surly? Why not quit?

**From Pathology to Play**

When you treat yourself and others as pathological creatures, as senseless, stubborn beasts, life becomes a dreary slog to be suffered
and endured: like trying to squeeze your way through a vast herd of heedless cattle.

But when you look at humanity through the lens of economics, correctly seeing yourself and others as purposeful beings with dynamic preferences, information, and incentives, life becomes play: a massively multiplayer game full of creative challenges in which the best strategy is to win friends and influence people.

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Make Your Job Amazing: Advice for the Young and Employed

Jeffrey Tucker

I recently had the opportunity to speak to a group of young professionals, all newly employed and embarking on promising careers. So smart! So well educated! And yet I worry because, like most people their age, their experience in the workplace is limited.

They probably expected me to talk about one of my favorite subjects: technological trends and their implications for human liberty. Instead, I decided to talk about something more practical and pertinent: how to be amazing at your job, and sustain that throughout your life.

Common sense? Not so much. How to be a good employee (in your own interest) is not a topic discussed in school. It’s something discovered through trial and error. At some point in the past, people learned this early because they had jobs from a young age.

No longer. The laws against “child labor” are severely enforced. High minimum wages lock out new entrants from the labor market. And that market is less fluid due to mandated benefits and health care. As a result, many people wait until the age of 23 to step into the workforce.
By the time they get there, they feel lost and confused. They do not thrive. Sometimes they lose their jobs for reasons that they find mysterious and confusing. They end up blaming the boss, their coworkers, and capitalism itself—any scapegoat will do. Then they join the throngs of disgruntled twenty-somethings who are hoping that democratic socialism will fix their problems.

There is another way. You can take control of your own job life. You can thrive despite the barriers. As a followup to my piece on being unemployed, here are ten principles for being employed early in your career.

1. **Bring more value in than you take out**

   No one hires you as a reward for your good behavior, your grades, or even your degree. These can be helpful signalling mechanisms. But none of them constitute the reason for your job. They assist none at all in keeping a job and building a career. You are hired to provide value to the firm or organization. The value you provide needs to be higher than they value you take out. That’s the whole reason for the exchange.

   Your resume does not do that. Your charming personality does not do that. Your friendliness to the boss and coworkers does not do that. Only your productivity as a worker accomplishes the goal.

   To become valuable means not confining your job to what you were hired to do. This is a common problem. New workers set limits on what they will do given their low salary. They draw boxes around their tasks and refuse to expand them.

   “No way will I take those boxes to the dumpster on my measly salary.”

   “I’m not answering emails on the weekend.”

   “I will not keep my notifications on after 5pm.”

   “I’m not using this new application. I don’t like it.”

   Establishing your own limits on your productivity is a gigantic error. The goal of work is to be as valuable as possible. You should be
looking for ways to do this. You need to create ways to do this. Your job must grow ever bigger. Indeed, you want to become indispensable. You only get there by finding ways to make yourself useful. Increases in compensation and status come later. If they do not, get another job.

2. Do what your immediate supervisor asks

Maybe this instruction seems obvious. It is not. So let’s be as clear as possible. A manager assigns tasks all day. It’s a huge pain in the neck to follow up on all of them. It becomes an impossible juggling act, following up on Tuesday what was assigned on Monday, and following up on Wednesday what was assigned on Tuesday plus the leftovers of what was assigned on Monday.

The single most annoying thing about managing people is discovering that you can’t count on people to do the minimum tasks they’ve been assigned. No manager should ever have to follow up to make sure the job is done.

It is not up to you to establish your work priorities at the expense of assigned tasks. When your direct supervisor asks for something, drop other things you are doing to make it happen. If you cannot do that, explain why a few other things (name them) need to come first. But as soon as it is possible, do the thing that is being asked. If you do it, you would be thought of as dependable, i.e. very valuable.

One other thing in this context: show up on time. You would be surprised how many people don’t do that.

3. Take a lower salary

People think that getting the highest-possible salary is the goal. That’s not true. If you take a lower salary, you are not only more likely to be offered the job; you will also be lower down the list of expendable employees when the time comes to cut staff (or make opportunities for higher paid staff).

A lower salary also helps to keep your standard of living low.
Strange as it sounds, this is actually benefit early in your career, because it frees you to move quickly when the opportunity arrives and you can be flexible concerning where you work.

Getting a high salary immediately also harms the range of other possible jobs you are inclined to accept later. If for whatever reason, you start earning a six-figure salary out of college, you might quickly discover that this is an unrepeatable event. No other employer can possibly match such a high salary. Then you will be disposed to keeping that job even if you hate it. You will wear “golden handcuffs.”

It’s far better to accept a lower salary while retaining your freedom to stay on a job market in which you have many choices about where to work.

4. Be creative in your work

The bare minimum that an employee must accomplish is to perform the required tasks. But that is only the first level of achievement. Employees that are successful are those who look for things to do.

I recall a job I had when I was 15. It was at a catering company and I was charged with washing dishes. I did that, then I didn’t know what else to do. No one told me. So I watched the clock until it was time to go home.

Then one day I happened upon a conversation between the owner and the manager. They were speaking about how worthless I was! I was mortified! But it also changed my perspective. I began to look for things to do. It was easy. There were light bulbs to change, pans to scrub, floors to mop, and so on. That afternoon, I became the hero of the firm. My job was suddenly secure. I had a future.

If you think there is no more work to do, you are surely wrong. There are unlimited things to be done. Finding them and acting on them requires an entrepreneurial outlook.
5. Take out more than salary; gain skills

There is much more to get out of a job than just money. More importantly, you are seeking new skills. You are seeking experience. You are seeking to extend your network. You are seeking success that others can see and that you can parlay into future positions.

This also means that you need to focus on gaining all these things. Consider skills, for example. If there is a piece of software you do not know but would like to learn, ask your boss for the opportunity. The company might be willing to pay for your training. That you would ask, in any case, is a credit to you.

Imagine the day when you show up to the office with a certificate that, for example, confirms that you are certified in Google Analytics. Or you have won an award. Or that you were the champion at a weekend event in some field. This not only impresses your current boss; it gives you substantial accomplishments to list on your LinkedIn profile.

6. Be a good colleague and forget the pecking order

What if you are given a promotion and put in charge? You now have employees that you supervise.

Remember that the least effective kind of leadership is that which is based on a title. Just because a piece of paper declares you to be in charge of something or someone doesn’t mean that your authority will be recognized, much less appreciated, by others.

It is better to accept a lowly title and earn your advancements by being a good servant to others. Your authority increases because you are now respected and appreciated by others. Never pass up a chance to assist someone else. You will become their benefactor and they won’t forget it.

To be a good friend to others is the best possible way to advance in any company. That means being a good listener. It means offering help when others need it. It means not seeking praise for your greatness but
rather quietly accomplishing more. Others will notice over time, and you will be trusted with ever greater responsibility.

7. Stay on the market

If you have ever looked for a job or been interviewed, you know it is not easy. Selling yourself is a skill in itself. If you find a steady job and imagine that you will hold it forever, your skills at finding and interviewing for jobs will atrophy.

This is why it is a good idea to stay on the job market even when you are happy in your current employment. You need to test your worth on the market. As I wrote above, it is a mistake to become used to a salary that is too far above its replacement level on the job market.

Truly, you never know: a better position could come along and you will happily move to another job.

Is staying on the market a betrayal of your current employer? Not in any way. If you are ever called on this, it is easy to answer: “Oh yes, I always keep my resume up on LinkedIn and I’m happy to entertain an offer. But I have no real desire actually to accept an offer. I’m very happy where I am.”

8. Live within your means

It’s always tempting to enjoy the fruits of your financial successes. But it is far more wise to live simply and establish a great financial cushion for yourself. What if a good opportunity comes along in a startup but it requires that you cut your salary? What if you have to work for free for a few months? You need to be in a position to do this. This also means limiting debt. Debt restricts your options. It should be paid off with your income stream as soon as possible.
9. Never let success go to your head

Let’s say you succeed. Was it your doing alone? Of course not. Managers and entrepreneurs who believe this, and promote this myth, can be some of the most annoying people.

In this world, our own successes will always depend on collaboration with others. To take full credit is to believe a lie. All credit should be accepted “on behalf of all those who have worked so hard to achieve this dream,” as the magnanimous line from banquet speeches goes. It’s absolutely true.

The moment you start taking credit yourself is the instant that others begin to resent you and plot your downfall, which takes us to the last point.

10. Watch out for the evil eye; if you are fired, be magnanimous

We like to believe there is perfect justice in this world. If you work hard, you get ahead. That might often be true. But not always. Sometimes your achievements inspire envy. It calls forth people who want you to be punished for your successes. These people might be your co-workers. They might be your bosses who fear your rise.

This is another reason to stay on the move. In order to be appreciated for your achievements and skills, you might have to move onward to a new firm.

A final word: the termination of your employment is a fact of life. Sometimes it is not due to your failures but to your successes. Whatever the reason, you need to have a speech prepared in your head. It should go something like this.

“I’m disappointed of course, but I do want to say thank you so much for the opportunity to work here. It’s been a great experience, and I’ve learned so much. I will always consider you my benefactors as I continue to build a career elsewhere.”

If you say such a thing, you will immediately make your bosses
question their judgement, which is a nice thing. It also means that you can use your present job as a bridge to your next one.

Getting fired is not the worst thing that ever happened to you. It is an opportunity to learn, to get out there, and to see what you are worth on the labor market. It could be the beginning of something wonderful. It’s the same with quitting a job. It’s one of the few freedoms we have remaining to us.

You are the productive unit in your life. You—not some institution, not some boss, not some bureaucrat. Caring for your personal human capital and becoming as awesome as possible is worth focus, time, and maximum personal energy. It’s the most important step in not only a great job but an amazing life.

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Over the last couple of weeks, I’ve been assisting in the hunt for a new employee. It’s for a technical position, so there are some minimum skill-level qualifications for the job. We advertised on LinkedIn, mainly, but also other places. I even posted the job on my social feed.

We ended up with some 200 applications. Most we rejected immediately because the applicant did not meet the minimum qualifications. I guess I can’t blame people for trying, but it doesn’t really make sense to apply for a job if your resume misses the mark completely.

We ended up with about 30 people to call back for 10 minute interviews conducted via Skype. At each interview, I reviewed the resume quickly before it began. So I already understood the minimum that you get from the resume: experience, education, where the person lives, age, and so on. (If you don’t have a LinkedIn account, it’s already clear that you are not serious about job hunting.)

What is the interview attempting to discover? I’m looking for personality, attitude, erudition, more detail on skills, a general sense of collegiality, and a deeper understanding of the person in question. In the
course of doing this, I saw the same mistakes over and over. Also, some people took the extra step to be memorable and compelling.

As a result of these conversations, here are some pro-tips. Consider this as a follow up to my advice for young unemployed workers.

**Don’t try to fake your skill level.** Many people would try to exaggerate their knowledge of a software platform. They quickly find themselves in the weeds as they attempt to fill in details. This is the moment in which the person’s word becomes non-credible. This is a devastating thing to happen at a job interview. You are far better off saying what’s true: “I don’t know that software, but I’ve used similar systems. I’m also a very quick study on software. If I get this position, I’ll study up and be prepared before I begin.” And if you do not understand the question, there is nothing wrong with asking for more detail.

**Don’t be ambiguous on crucial details.** The purpose of the interview is to discern a greater degree of truth about you and your suitability for the position. Ambiguity sets off alarm bells. If you won’t move to do the job, just say so and then explain why hiring you as a remote worker would be good. If you are unemployed currently, it’s best to just say so and perhaps offer a reason why. If you won’t consider the position for less than a certain amount of money, and you are asked this question, be upfront about it.

**Don’t flatter the interviewer pointlessly.** It’s fine to say nice things about the institution and the individuals. It’s a plus that the person being interviewed knows about where he or she is applying. But laying it on too thick, going on about the glories of the interviewer as a person, is odd. It signals that the person being interviewed might imagine that a job is really about connections and favors rather than productivity and skills. A job is not a favor, much less a sinecure; it is an exchange of value for value. It doesn’t speak well of any employer that he or she would be swayed by flattery.

**Do be a warm human being.** I get that people are nervous for an interview. But if you look on camera like a deer in headlights, that’s a
problem. Try to relax and be a normal human being. Smile, for example. Laugh and be charming, if you can. In one interview I conducted, the person was walking around her apartment with smartphone in hand and earbuds. I found it charming and enlivening. I was left with the impression of someone who is active and scrappy and that’s good.

**Do ask questions.** It should be obvious that any prospective employee has questions about the job. Ask them! It’s surprising how few people actually do this. Maybe they fear that asking questions would signal some doubts about the whether you want the job. Actually, the opposite is true. It suggests that you are a careful shopper of employers. You are looking for a good fit. It’s irresponsible to accept a job that is not right for you. You want to make sure. That’s a good thing. It impresses any prospective employer that you are asking for more detail on the work environment, the expectations, the lines of communication, the office hours, and so on.

**Do sell yourself.** It’s right to think of the employer as a prospective buyer. The seller is yourself. You are selling your labor services. Ideally, the buyer (the employer) wants to believe that he or she will obtain more in service than will be paid in wages. The employer also wants to believe that the employee will benefit from the exchange too. Your job is to make the sell. That means selling yourself. Maybe this sounds odd but think of yourself as a piece of talking furniture in a furniture store, and the employer is a customer that walks by. It’s up to you to get their attention and make the case, effectively saying, “pick me, I’m wonderful, you will be happy with your decision.”

**Do tell a story.** Part of selling yourself means presenting yourself as more than just a resume. One way to do this is to tell a story of how you created value at your current job. You can tell about a challenge you faced, a method you found to solve the problem, how you worked to transition from an old system to a new one, or whatever comes to mind. It needs to show that you are earnest, creative, hard working, and interested in making progress happen. Resumes can’t do this. The
job interview is the right time to make your skill set come to life. One approach that is popular is the STAR method for organizing your stories. To present the situation, task, action, and results might seem overly formal but the structure is a good exercise to practice before the interview.

**Do say that you would love to have a job offer.** This might seem strange but only one person out of the 30 or so people I interviewed actually said something like: “This job sounds perfect for me. I’m excited about it. I hope you choose me. I think we’ll both be happy about this.” I was trying to figure out why people don’t say such an obvious thing. It might be that they are waiting to look at the salary, that they have some doubts, that they have several other applications out there. All that is fine. But you still need to get the offer. It’s your human right to decline it, of course, but in order to say no, you first need the opportunity to do so. At the very least, then, you should openly say that you will like an offer. People who say this stand out from the pack.

**Conclusion**

People apply for jobs too infrequently. Once they have what seems to be a secure position and good pay, they take themselves off the market. Then something goes wrong, and they scramble and get desperate.

This is not the way to go about it. Digital tools like LinkedIn mean that you can always stay on the market. There might be something better out there. You don’t know until you try. It is not somehow a betrayal of your current employer to be on the market. You can always say no. But, face it, if the offer is good enough, you might take it. Staying on the job market also means that you can refine your talent in doing interviews.

Fear not that you will be turned away. It’s not an absolute rejection. Employment decisions are made on the margin. You might have been the second choice of hundreds of possible candidates. That’s a
good thing. It’s a highly competitive market out there right now, and you will improve with each interview. Remember, the one person ultimately responsible for your ongoing employment and earning power is you.

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Part 3

LEARNING

vs

SCHOOLING
Seven Ways
School Has Imprisoned Your Mind

Isaac M. Morehouse & Dan Sanchez

Young America is suffering a quarter life crisis. The job market is in the dumps and has been for as long as millennials can remember. Twenty-somethings are anxious about the direction of the country. The more politically aware among their generation are on pins and needles about the looming presidential election.

If you are in that frame of mind, we advise embracing “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” as an old prayer puts it. The fact of the matter is that there is little you can do to sway the political course of an entire nation. Neither your vote nor your advocacy will determine who will win the presidency.

But that doesn’t mean you are powerless. You can’t hope to liberate a whole country, but you can do a great deal to liberate yourself. Doing so requires the other part of the Serenity Prayer: the “courage to change the things I can.”

The first step toward self-emancipation is certainly not supporting or opposing a presidential candidate. Neither need it be civil disobedience, evasion of government directives, or resistance to the authorities. There is much lower hanging fruit to be had than that.
The impediments to our freedom are not limited to the guns, handcuffs, and prison cells that threaten us with violence if we disobey the powers that be. We are also burdened with spiritual chains. These bonds are the self-limiting habits of mind and false presumptions that weigh us down throughout life. They were fastened on our minds through compulsory schooling: by the state monopolizing most of our waking hours throughout our most formative years. The mindset installed by schooling makes things much easier for the government, which can rely on us to largely police ourselves. We have virtually been deputized as our own spiritual prison wardens.

So the first step to self-emancipation is what Zak Slayback, author of The End of School, calls “deschooling.” But this involves not just unlearning disinformation, but unlearning attitudes. Even if you have already shaken off the indoctrination, you may still be burdened with the conditioning you were subjected to at school. And that may be holding you back in your career and your life in general.

The good news is that these mental shackles can be unlocked, once you are aware of them. And doing so requires no political campaigning or confrontation with the authorities. This liberation is yours for the taking.

Here are seven horizon-limiting mindsets that almost everybody has picked up from their schooling to some extent.

1. The Conveyor Belt Mindset

“The conveyor belt does all the work. You just have to sit still and get moved to the next station. Everyone moves in the same direction. Everyone makes progress at the same pace, based on external factors like age.”

In school you don’t have to do much of anything to go from grade to grade. It takes a greater act of will to not move to the next stage. This mindset is killing you. It places the locus of control outside of yourself. It lures you into assuming, so long as you obey the rules,
you’ll get handed the next piece of paper, promotion, or quality of life enhancement.

Get off the conveyor belt. It’s leading you to soul-dead mediocrity and perpetual frustration and envy when you see belt-jumpers excel fast and free. Don’t get mad. Join them.

2. The Permission Mindset

“Raise your hand and wait to be called upon. Get in single file lines. Even your basic biological needs cannot be met without permission. You get a hall pass to go to the bathroom. You eat only when scheduled.”

This is what James Altucher might call the “Pick me!” mindset. It’s the belief that your own desires and actions - your very freedom - is something conferred upon you by authority. It’s waiting to get the call, hoping to get chosen for the job, anxiously awaiting the results and decisions of processes and actors over which you have no control. “If only I ask in the right way, they’ll say yes!”

This supplicant mindset is poison. It’s what opens the way for despots in society at large and desperation in your personal life. It’s time to choose yourself. Don’t wait for permission. Just do it.

3. The Student Mindset

“You are a student. Your task is to memorize what teachers tell you. This phase in life is for absorbing information through books and lectures. You study. You cannot try things in the real world until you theorize about them for a few decades.”

“The student is not a practitioner. The student can’t put ideas into motion until passing a test. Everything is pass/fail, not open exploration and experimentation. Everything has a grade. Students don’t play. They don’t work. They study.”

Nonsense. Freedom comes from the complex creative interplay
of doing and thinking in tandem. Play, work, and learning are not separate phases or activities.

You are not a student. You’re a lifelong learner.

4. The Teacher Mindset

“You’ve graduated from studenthood. Your job is to have the answers and provide the structure. You must know everything and be the expert. Everyone’s fate is in your hands. You must train them to do what they couldn’t if left alone. You must grade them. They either pass or fail.”

Real learning and living doesn’t look anything like the teacher-student structure in schools. No one knows the answers. People have varying degrees of knowledge, ability, and skill, but learning is dynamic and respect must be earned by action, not given by title.

The sooner you can drop the teacher mindset the sooner you can collaborate with others, coordinate, persuade and influence. You aren’t there to make people into the “right” shaped widget. You’re one node in a network that has no standardized measures of success.

5. The Worker Mindset

“Work is for survival. It sucks. You must be coaxed into doing it. You studied to be able to work and now you work to be able to live. You do exactly what the boss wants you to do and no more. You get a specific job with a specific title and that defines not only your activities but your personality.”

This approach to work is blind to reality. Work is not pain or dullness by definition. The best things in life require work. They’re hard, but they’re fun. Work isn’t just a means to a dangling carrot, it’s a process of discovery and fulfillment itself. But only when intrinsically motivated. You’ve got to choose your work.

Value creation is what matters, not a job. You may earn money any number of ways from any number of people, but the defining
characteristic of the kind of work that earns money is that which creates value for others. There’s nothing inherently valuable in dullness, and nothing inherently dull in value-creation.

6. The Recess Mindset

“Play is an escape. It’s irresponsible in excess. It must be limited. If you study and work hard enough you can earn some tiny shred of play.”

“Recess is vacation, summers off, weekends, retirement. It’s the belief that the majority of your life is drudgery endured for brief glimpses of freedom and indulgence.”

This mindset not only prevents learning or working from being joyful, it ruins leisure. The desperate week-long escape becomes a bender. A mere numbing of the senses to the reality of an unfree life, not a deeply fulfilling experience.

Seth Godin put it well when he said, “Instead of wondering when your next vacation is, maybe you should set up a life you don’t need to escape from.”

7. The Major Mindset

“What do you want to be?” “What’s your major?”

“Your interests must be career-ified and tracked. Everything must be given a title and every action must be a step in a clear path to that one thing that will define you.”

In reality your major doesn’t matter. What you want to be might not exist by the time you “grow up.” What makes you come alive probably hasn’t been invented yet.

Shed the pressure to find your calling and immediately plot a perfect path toward it. Instead, just don’t do stuff you hate. Everything else is fair game. As long as you’re not doing stuff that makes you dead inside, you’re moving closer to creating a life you love.
One Improved Unit

Maybe none of this applies to you. Perhaps you were unschooled or you were willful enough to pass through an entire childhood of schooling spiritually unscathed. Otherwise, personal freedom requires first facing up to the fact that you have been institutionalized, and then getting to work de-institutionalizing, or deschooling, yourself.

Only a people who first free themselves spiritually and individually can hope to free themselves physically and as a society. It is impossible to liberate people, as Voltaire said, “from the chains they revere.” And the first order of business in improving society is, as Albert Jay Nock said, “to present society with one improved unit.”

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Stop Pushing Your Kids Into “Safe Spaces”

Dan Sanchez

For human potential, few things are more dangerous than a “safe space.” A flourishing life requires what Nassim Taleb calls “antifragility”: the adaptive capacity to self-improve in response to challenge and adversity.

When young people are artificially insulated from the trials of life, they are deprived of the opportunity to develop this vital virtue: to become antifragile. The prolonged fragility that results is often used as an excuse by parents for extending dependence, which only prolongs fragility still further.

The campus “safe spaces” that college students have loudly demanded are political in nature. Critics justifiably worry that such safe spaces are danger zones for free speech, open discourse, mutual understanding, and intellectual growth. However, what is far less recognized is that colleges long ago became “safe spaces” in an even more dangerous sense.

This was brought home for me recently when I attended a college graduation. The commencement address, delivered by a student elected to the honor by his classmates, was not very political, yet it was positively dripping with the “safe space” ethos.
Those Who Carried Us

“Where do you come from?” he asked the audience. To illustrate his own answer, he told a story from his childhood. He recalled falling asleep in the family car and waking to find himself cradled in his father’s arms. “My baby tired?” his father cooed while carrying him into the house. After being gently deposited into his bed, he opened his eyes to see his mother’s doting gaze.

The student’s punchline was to reveal that he was 14 years old at the time.

An artful speech opening, to be sure, but a troubling one at the same time.

“Being carried” was the explicit theme of the rest of the young man’s speech. He discussed all the ways in which, just as his father carried him to bed, he and his classmates have been lovingly “carried” by others throughout their lives.

He spoke of all the parents who, that very day, would once again help their graduating children pack their clothes and fold their bedding. He told the story of how one year, he had neglected to pack up his dorm room until the day before he was leaving the country, and how a group of his classmates came to his rescue and packed it up for him.

He related another story of how one of his professors had invited his class to her home for dinner at the end of the semester. He didn’t attend, because he was ashamed of his poor academic performance. His professor nonetheless had a home-cooked meal delivered to him to make him feel better.

The commencement speech contained little-to-no celebration of individual achievement or excellence. Far from it, what was celebrated were such “community” experiences as partying together and submitting papers late together (often both on the same day, he noted).

He returned to the original question, “Where do you come
from?” and answered that we all come from the communities of people who carry us through life: parents, friends, and teachers.

The crowd was clearly touched, but I was rather appalled. A number of questions sprang to mind.

A group of people who “carry me”: is that a healthy notion of “community”? Surely it is important to be grateful. And “community” is indeed all about mutual service. But “being carried?” Is the condition of an invalid really the best operating metaphor for your life? Is being languid, neglectful, and needy what you want to emphasize on graduation day?

Is gratefulness for “being carried” the only thing you can think to celebrate after four years during the physical and cognitive prime of your life? Are there no teachers to whom you are grateful for inspiring and challenging you to grow and excel? Can you speak only of collective gratitude and say nothing of individual pride? In addition to “where you came from” can you not spare a word for “what you have achieved?”

Judging from the crowd’s reaction, the speaker was well-chosen by his classmates, for he had clearly tapped into the contemporary college zeitgeist. With such a prevailing culture, it is no wonder that so many college graduates suffer a “failure to launch,” moving back in with their parents and remaining financially dependent for years on end.

Safe Space U

What undergirds that culture is the modern college experience itself.

Going off to college is generally considered a rite of passage: the child taking flight and leaving the nest. But in truth, it’s an artificial extension of childhood dependency. While the son or daughter is no longer living at home, mom and dad still generally pay for almost everything. Thus, it marks an expansion of freedom without a commensurate expansion of responsibility. It is no wonder that for so many,
college is largely a four-to-five year party. The parental welfare state can be just as debauching and debilitating as the governmental welfare state.

College has become a “safe space” in the sense that it keeps the student safe from self-responsibility. Insulated from the economic demands of life, the student is deprived of the opportunity to develop independence, enterprise, self-discipline, and antifragility.

Neither are these vital traits picked up by the “good students” who buckle down and work hard in college. Instead of learning to navigate the real world, these “high achievers” merely become expert at jumping through artificial hoops set up by authority figures. Instead of self-discipline, they develop “other-discipline” or obedience, just as they did in grade school.

In the workplace, past “star students” tend to require extensive instruction and routines, and have difficulty creating value on their own initiative. They gravitate toward “safe” careers with a defined set of hoops to jump through (graduate school, certificates, licenses, professional associations, government-imposed standards, etc.). If, because of the economic and technological change that is an unavoidable aspect of life, any of these paths prove not to be “safe” after all, such hoop-jumpers lack the antifragility necessary to adapt, and so often sink into a personal crisis.

The Role of Nurture

These problems are merely an extension of the backward way we have come to approach parenting in general. As Nathaniel Branden wrote in *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*:

"The proper aim of parental nurturing is to prepare a child for independent survival as an adult. An infant begins in a condition of total dependency. If his or her upbringing is successful, the young man or woman will have evolved out of that dependency into a self-respecting and
self-responsible human being who is able to respond to the challenges of life competently and enthusiastically. He or she will be “self-supporting”—not merely financially, but intellectually and psychologically.

A newborn infant does not yet have a sense of personal identity; there is no awareness of separateness, not, at any rate, as we who are adults experience such awareness. To evolve into selfhood is the primary human task. It is also the primary human challenge, because success is not guaranteed. At any step of the way, the process can be interrupted, frustrated, blocked, or sidetracked, so that the human individual is fragmented, split, alienated, stuck at one level or another of mental or emotional maturity. It is not difficult to observe that most people are stranded somewhere along this path of development. Nonetheless... the central goal of the maturational process is evolution toward autonomy. It is an old and excellent adage that effective parenting consists first of giving a child roots (to grow) and then wings (to fly). The security of a firm base—and the self-confidence one day to leave it.

Thus, in the upbringing of a child, there is indeed a place for “carrying” and “safe spaces.” Human beings don’t come into this world fully-developed and independently capable. Parents must provide safe spaces and do a lot of carrying early on.

First the mother carries the child in her womb, which is the ultimate safe space. Being carried, enveloped, sheltered, completely dependent, completely irresponsible, and completely unfree is not only developmentally appropriate but absolutely necessary at that stage. The fetus is not even capable of suckling yet, and so must passively feed through the umbilical cord.

But then birth occurs, and the doctor or midwife “cuts the cord,” which is the first major symbolic step toward the child’s separateness,
selfhood, and autonomy. Yet even then, the infant still cannot walk or even crawl, and so must be carried in the arms of his parents.

The cute helplessness of the child, and the heart-rending sounds of her cries, evoke affectionate, nurturing sentiments in the parents. The parental nurture and affection that follows is comforting and delightful to the child.

All of these behaviors and emotional reactions are survival mechanisms. The child has urgent needs, nearly all of which must still be provided for by the parent. For the child, happiness and the absence of distress is, at first, mostly a function of receiving parental nurture and affection (which is an indicator of nurture), since nurture is decisive for survival. The early “safe space” provided by parents is essential for the child’s short- and long-term psychological well-being. Also important for survival is the parent protecting the child from herself: i.e., keeping her from eating harmful things or from crawling into deadly dangers.

The Importance of Action

But, from the beginning, and ever more so as the child matures, there is another source of joy for the child: independent action. This too is ultimately a survival instinct. Such joy is a reflection of the child’s growth toward being able to provide for her own needs.

Delight in action begins in infancy. Babies revel in learning how to operate their own bodies. I remember my daughter doing “superhero” poses as a newborn: repeatedly extending her arms and staring in fascination at her tiny fists. Infants are also tickled by their own vocal improvisations. Eventually such enthusiastic explorations culminate in such developmental milestones as learning to grab and manipulate objects, to crawl, to walk, to speak.

We see the inherent human drive to learn in the way children, from toddlers on up, love to emulate adults, and frequently object to parental “help,” insisting “I want to do it!” or often even “I want to do it by myself!”
Such joy in intrinsically-motivated, independent action is one of the two main sources of lifelong learning and mental development. The other one is experiencing the consequences, both good and bad, of such actions. By enduring minor tumbles, children learn how to stand and walk steadily, and how to maintain due control when they are running about. By enduring social repercussions, children learn how to treat other people respectfully and kindly. For example, they learn a little lesson every time a friend withdraws from play after being mistreated.

Growing up is a process of the child drawing ever more joy and instruction from her own actions, and becoming ever less reliant on parental nurture, affection, and intervention for her happiness and safety.

Some parents cannot countenance such a diminution of their own relative importance to their child, and so react by becoming controlling and intrusive. They constantly nudge and nag the child into preferred behavior. If the child plays a little bit wildly or treats a friend a little bit rudely, the busybody parent swoops in to “correct” the child instead of letting her experience the instructive consequences of such actions. Hyper-restrictive parenting for the sake of “child safety” has become so extreme that it has triggered a backlash in recent years.

This is often only the beginning of years of “safe space” “carrying” that continues straight through college.

The Bane of Schooling

Even for the children of many of the best parents, a dark shadow is soon cast over their ebullient life of self-development: the spectre of school. From kindergarten onward, for the bulk of her waking hours, the child’s self-actualizing and self-educating pursuits are arrested, as she is coercively subjected to obedience training. The busybody parent is joined by an army of busybody teachers and administrators in the work of interfering with the child’s self-development.
Autonomous actions are then often punished as “willful disobedience,” as her life becomes regimented. Teachers force-feed her “nurture” in the form of praise for obedience, and eventually she becomes addicted to such external validation, and is weaned off her intrinsic appetites for independent pursuits. Her growth toward greater autonomy is stunted.

As the child is schooled, she regresses: more of her happiness and instruction again becomes dependent on “nurture” and stems less from the pleasures and lessons of independent action. Instead of joyously reveling in and learning from her own pursuits, she either becomes a “good student” by learning to obsequiously undertake pursuits assigned to her by authority figures, or internalizes the message that she is a weak and/or worthless person (a “bad student”) because she fails to do so. In either case, she forgets the joy of passionate learning through autonomous action.

In preparation for school, many parents frustrate the self-development of their children even earlier, by enrolling them in pre-school, scheduling them for nonstop structured activities, and generally fussing over their behavior and doings.

Let Them Walk

Schooling, from the first day of kindergarten to college graduation day, is thought to be a great promoter of growth and development. Parents think they are doing their children a favor by forcing them to undergo fifteen thousand hours of regimented, artificial “preparation” while insulating them from the freedoms and the trials of real life. But the only true preparation for the freedoms and trials of real life is to gradually, but as quickly as possible, face those freedoms and trials yourself.

By being subjected to school, young people are cotton-balled and stifled in a series of safe spaces, and their spirit of self-reliance and self-exertion is atrophied from being “carried” and held fast by parents and
teachers for far too long. For most, college is merely the final stage in a long sequence of imposed stunting situations.

14-year-olds are old enough to walk themselves to bed. In fact, they’re old enough to work. If they were allowed to do so, by the time they reached “college graduation age,” they could very well be capable, experienced, and connected enough to achieve lift-off in their lives: even to fully support themselves. They would also enjoy more self-confidence and self-efficacy, and would thus be free of many of the anxieties that plague so many young people today.

Parents take heed: beyond a certain point, carrying is not caring.

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You Graduated!
Now Begins Your Rehabilitation

Zachary Slayback

Congratulations, Class of 2016! You’ve completed your long formal schooling journey (unless you’re doing grad school) and graduated college. Sure, you may be the most indebted graduating class in history (until 2017, that is), and there’s a good chance you’ll be employed in a position that doesn’t actually require a degree. But you went for the gold in terms of the way success was defined for you, and you are now ready to take on the world!

If you haven’t applied yet, you are probably thinking over what kind of position you want for your first job. You may anxiously peruse the “Required Skills” sections of job listings and try to think of ways to twist those all-nighters popping between Facebook and the textbook for “Intro to 15th Century Basket Weaving of the African Diaspora textbook” into skills like “SMB Prospecting” and “Strong Verbal and Written Communication.”
School Versus the Market

Regardless of the job you apply for and its required skill set, you will need to do one very important thing if you want to succeed as a young professional in the 21st century: deschool yourself.

Unless you want a job that discourages innovation, entrepreneurial thinking, and an efficient mindset, deschooling yourself is the best single thing you could do in the professional development arena to set yourself apart from your peers.

To understand what deschooling yourself entails and why it is so important for success as a young professional, first look at what being schooled means.

After 16 years of sitting in classrooms, turning in assignments, working to deadlines established weeks in advance, planning out your path semesters-early, and jumping through hoops to move to the next level in the game, the idea that what matters in the world is the value you produce for other people comes as a shocker to many.

It doesn’t matter how much time you spend sitting in meetings, on conference calls, working on that quarterly report late at night; if you don’t actually create more value for your employer or for your customers than they are willing to pay you, you won’t succeed with them (let alone rise through the ranks to the next level in the game like before).

Even worse, you won’t have a rubric or a syllabus set out in front of you to explain how you can create this value. You won’t have office hours. You won’t have a tutor you can pull aside and ask for advice. You will have to figure out through a process of complex and oftentimes-conflicting signals what your supervisors, colleagues, and customers want.

You may get passed over for a promotion for the guy who comes from a considerably worse school or hasn’t been at the same company as long. You may find that even though you followed your business school textbook down to the tee, your business is floundering.
You may find yourself completing your appointed tasks but unable to find ways to create value in between: sitting around waiting for the next assignment to come your way. (Think back to high school when if you finished your in-class work early you could read your book or daydream until the end of the period.)

And employers notice. One of the biggest hurdles of training a new employee is getting them out of the schooled mindset: getting them to realize that there is no assigned reading, there are only occasional assignments, and it is up to them to figure out how to get to the next step in their career. An employee who just sits around waiting for the next thing to do is a drag on the whole operation.

The fact that you have these little habits—waiting for assignments, looking for obvious rubrics and the way to the next level, feeling a tinge of resentment to those who get ahead when you are the one who has put in more time/work/has more credentials—doesn’t make you a bad person. It’s to be expected after spending the entirety of your memorable-life thus far in a set of institutions that reward this kind of behavior. What you have to figure out now is how to do away with them and cultivate habits to succeed at navigating the open systems of profit and loss and value creation in the marketplace.¹

Deschooling yourself is cultivating these habits. It’s moving from a mindset of “when’s the due date?” and “what’s on the test?” to “what other projects can I undertake and complete with the time I have?” and “where can I add value?”

How to Deschool Yourself

This process can differ between individuals, but it starts with one simple truth:

The world owes you nothing except for the value you create within it.

You are not owed a promotion because you have been at the company longer than your colleagues. You are not owed profit
because you opened a business. You are not owed page views because you put a lot of effort into your tumblr.

Start with this truth and work from there. When you find yourself lagging behind your goals and expectations, look to where you can create more value. Look to where you can hack the systems set up in a thoroughly-schooled world.

Learn a skill set you didn’t study in school. Just because you didn’t study coding doesn’t mean you can’t learn it. You don’t need an English degree to learn how to write better.

Read books you didn’t have time to read. You don’t have to wait until summer to read about what interests you. Pick up a novel and enjoy it alongside a book that helps you at what you do.

Do things that aren’t assigned to you. The biggest secrets are those that nobody knows how to design assignments to find. Go find them.

Don’t expect syllabi and finals. Every day is a final.

Know that the hoop-jumping of your student years only goes so far. If you want to really get ahead, you have to tear down the hoops entirely.

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1 “The marketplace” isn’t something just for entrepreneurs and businesspeople. It’s something for all of us. Given that people exchange not only money but also time, favors, and energy when they see themselves as being able to get something of equal-or-greater value out of the exchange, “the marketplace” can refer to navigating relationships with investors, entrepreneurs, and business people, but it can also refer to landing your poetry to be featured in a magazine,
or how to barter with a local during your next big bike trip, or any number of things that involve interacting with people outside of a schooled setting.
Ditch College, Get a Real Skill, Live a Good Life

Jeffrey Tucker

Scene one: I needed a haircut and someone suggested I go across the street to the Aveda Institute. Fine. My hair was cut by a student who was grateful to be working on a regular person, not a manikin. She had another six months in training before she could become a certified cosmetologist with a credential to work at any salon, cosmetics counter, or spa in the country. It was my first exposure to this institution that was founded initially as a cosmetics line.

Scene two: I met a brilliant young woman with top scores and a great chance for admission to a top college. Her goal from childhood had been to become a physician. Then one day she realized that this future actually sounded miserable. She didn’t want to hang out in dingy operating rooms, struggling with bureaucracy. What she really loved was hair, makeup, and fashion. Why not follow her dream? Instead of college, she enrolled in the Aveda Institute. She can’t be happier.

Scene three: I’m getting my haircut somewhere else and I ask the lady cutting my hair where she moved from. Washington, D.C., came the answer. How did she end up cutting hair here? It was closest to her house that she bought in Atlanta because she liked the neighborhood and the house was affordable. So she could choose to work anywhere
she wanted? Yep. Why? She graduated from Aveda, which is the best credential she can have in this industry.

So I’m thinking about this. Here is a school (there are dozens around the country) at which enrollment lasts about one year and costs between $15–20K to attend. This compares to the four years and $100–400K you will spend on a college degree. Many people who leave college are lost and confused, with few skills, no work experience, and no network to tap into for jobs. Aveda graduates have real skills, can work anywhere, and tap into a vast network.

It was the first I’ve heard of this school. The more I look at it, the more it seems inevitable that such models are going to replace college for many people in the years ahead. It makes no sense to spend all that time and money getting a degree that has marginal benefit in the job marketplace. Yes, it is necessary if you are pursuing a career in medicine, law, accounting, engineering, or academia.

That accounts for a small percentage of people who pay for college degrees. We keep hearing about how a college education is connected with higher earning power but the cause and effect relationship here is complicated at best. Some people argue that it is entirely illusory. Meanwhile, real-life experience in fields outside those requiring college credentials is showing something very different.

Meanwhile, Aveda seems to be thriving, and its students and graduates seem very happy, with as much upward mobility as they desire. The one in Atlanta that I visited was teeming with male and female students, all working very hard to master a trade. There are others in New York, D.C., Chicago, Nashville, and many other parts of the country.

I thought I could easily do some research on when these schools started and how many people attend them. Not so. Not even the Wikipedia entry on Aveda mentions their highly successful training programs. It seems to be flying beneath the radar, growing based on industry reputation alone. I’m sure their products are great, but the schooling is the disruptive innovation here.
Scene four: I was invited to attend a data science meetup in Atlanta. It was held at the headquarters for the General Assembly, which is a training camp for the management of digital properties. The meetup was fun, but what really stood out was the very existence of this institution. General Assembly teaches front-end development, project management, beginner website creation, social media skills, and high-level coding. Their classes range from one evening to three months. The pricing of the service depends on the class. The resulting credential is impressive on the resume, and, like Aveda, you tap into a vast network of people.

Unlike the typical university, General Assembly seeks close connections with the surrounding business community. They host socials a few times per week. They bring in business leaders and technicians to give lectures. Many of the teachers here are actually workers in real world enterprises around town. General Assembly is there to facilitate an exchange of knowledge between practitioners and aspirational workers.

It turns out that there are other such institutions in town, including Iron Yard. And around the country there are Code Camps. The tech industry is the fastest moving and among the most profitable in the country, so it makes sense that the industry would demand actual credentials and skills, none of which are provided by the stodgy old-world institutions of colleges and universities.

The tech industry may have given rise not only to all the wonderful new technologies that have changed our lives so fundamentally but also to a new form of education itself. These camps could point the way toward a new path after high school. Why precisely should a person spend yet another four years sitting in a desk, listening to a lecturer, when he or she could be working while training and getting better at a skill for which there is a real market demand?

We all know people in their twenties who look back at their college years and wonder why it all happened. For many of them, the time
they took off to get their degree was misspent. Many graduated without any real awareness that jobs actually do require people to bring value to the firm. No one is going to pay for an undergraduate degree. Employers pay for services rendered, not a resume. The only purpose of the resume is to signal the highest likelihood of success at doing a real job.

Stay in School?

For a very long time, young people have been told that the key to success is to “stay in school.” But what happens when life experience begins to tell them the opposite? Or perhaps the definition of what constitutes school needs to change. Work can be school. Education can be combined with work. Education should be structured not just to impart abstract “knowledge,” but actual know-how. And what if it turns out that doing things differently also turns out to be more fun in any case, not to mention more financially rewarding?

By analogy: for generations, Americans were also told that the single greatest and safest investment they could ever make was to buy a house. That illusion blew up in 2008. Now people see houses for what they are: good for some purposes, bad for others, and by no means a guarantee of high future income.

So it is for college. The difference is that most people don’t know it yet. Meanwhile, these many institutions offering real training for the real world are thriving as never before.

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I’m going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach learning.

Pain, Prestige, or Purpose?

Average people learn what they need to avoid pain. Elite people learn what they need to get the grade, ace the test, win the award, gain certification, impress people, and obtain honors. Ascendant people don’t care about accolades or awards or tests or stickers or stars. They learn exactly what’s needed to solve a problem that matters to them, exactly when it’s needed. No more, no less. No sooner, no later.

If you want to be average, avoid pain and learn like a lab rat. If you want to be elite, bulk up on tons of just-in-case knowledge so you’ll never look dumb and you can chase prestige and external validation. If you want to be ascendant—the best of the best creators, dreamers, doers, and rebels—find meaningful challenges and projects, pursue them, and learn what you need to complete them.
Tasks vs. Tests

Mitchell Earl built a horrible website. He got an ‘A’ for it.

The website sucked because Mitchell didn’t particularly want or need a website at the time. It also sucked for the same reasons it helped him ace the computer class in which he built it. He spent the semester on it. It met all of the specific course requirements—hyperlinks, number of pages, content, layout—and followed the recommended steps. It was meant to be a digital resume of sorts, but it was ugly and useless in the real world. In fact, Mitchell didn’t use it after the class, as it would have lowered rather than raised his professional value.

Oh, and he didn’t remember any of the techniques he used to build the site once the class was over.

A few years later Mitchell was in Praxis and eager to improve his writing, build an audience, signal his value, and discover meaningful work for his entrepreneurial tendencies. He wanted a good website. So he built one in a few weeks. He took some tips from the Praxis community, ignored others, picked up a few new skills via YouTube, and put together a great site. To this day he can tell you how to integrate WordPress with opt-in forms, customize themes, improve SEO, get hosting setup, and a lot more. (He used those skills to build a new website for his business partner, where he now works.)

When he had a specific task that was meaningful to him based on his own desires, Mitchell built a vastly superior product in far less time and retained specific skills that he had to pick up to do it. He only learned exactly what the task demanded, not what the test required. This made the learning faster, more intense, more fun, and more useful.

Just-in-Time vs. Just-in-Case

My son is really into video games, art, design, and entertainment media. He’s a creator. Having learned myself the slow, hard way how important marketing and sales skills are to creators, I’m always trying
to impart bits of wisdom to him. He might need it when he decides to sell his creations some day!

He ignores me.

There’s nothing in his daily experience that demands the advice I supply. It’s just an old guy giving him insight without any current context. That’s exactly how I felt in college marketing classes. There were all these words and charts and concepts and case studies that really didn’t mean anything for me. Sure, someday when I’m trying to promote a product, “Target Market” will be important. Yet when that day actually came, the classroom cramming did nothing for me anyway. I aced my classes but had to learn from scratch how to market when I needed it to survive. Any sooner and the info was worse than useless. I developed a bias against what would later be important concepts because I despised being forced to chase grades by memorizing stuff that didn’t help me achieve my goals.

When it Matters, Once is Enough

The entire modern education apparatus is built on just-in-case learning. Better know how to multiply fractions, just in case you find yourself tasked with preparing a report on some data someday. Better know when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, just in case...well I’m not really sure there even is a case for that one unless you want to be a guest on Jeopardy. Otherwise Google it.

I talked to a bright young guy (an executive at a growing startup) who sent me a financial report to proof a few months ago. I noticed a mistake. He calculated the percentage increase from month to month incorrectly. I pointed it out and sent a four-step explanation I found on Google, he laughed about forgetting, said thanks, fixed it and never had that problem again.

Yet how many hours had he been forced to sit in a classroom doing a unit on percentages? And for what? When he needed the knowledge—prior to an important board meeting—he found it fast.
Oh, and my son learned more about marketing in one evening of playing Mario Maker than I did from all those classes.

**Real Learning Is Hard but Sneaky**

I played a lot of LEGO as a kid. My kids do now. It’s a pastime full of pain, anguish, and maniacal, “Just one more minute I’m almost done”’s late into the night.

When you have a vision for a build and you must—must—find a way to solve it with imperfect pieces, your brain is stretched and your creativity awakened. It’s hard work that can even take a physical toll (ever bent over digging through a bin of plastic blocks for an hour?). It’s frustrating. But it’s deeply meaningful and fun. You’re on nobody else’s timeline. If I asked my kids if they were learning anything while playing they would laugh.

Yet I’m totally convinced, just like me, they’re learning more from LEGO than they would if I made them do algebra instead.

Real learning happens when you’re absorbed in solving a real problem, one that matters to you. It took a complete abandonment of lessons and a deep personal interest in Calvin & Hobbes for my son to learn to read. The same pattern can be spotted in all real learning.

**Knowledge is Overrated**

Knowing a bunch of stuff isn’t that valuable. Knowing what you need to know to solve a problem, reach a goal, or become a better version of yourself is hugely valuable. Often this requires first figuring out what’s non-essential and ignoring it. Conscious ignorance is hugely valuable. What you don’t waste time or energy worrying about—what you don’t memorize just for prestige or fear of embarrassment—are what determine how much room you have left to learn what does matter. (This is also why I advocate completely ignoring the news.)
Don’t be Prepared, Be Hungry

It’s not about what you know, or even who you know. It’s about what will improve your life, how to learn it, how much of it to learn, and when.

Goals and dreams are better than grades and information. Meaningful tasks and challenges are better than memorized facts and textbooks. Go do some cool stuff and go be what you want to be. When you need to learn to take the next step, you will. And it will be better than any arbitrary data-cram for any class.

Average people can learn the basics when shoved. Elite people can learn that plus a bunch of other stuff that’s meaningful to others, not them. Ascendant people discover who they are, who they want to be, and learn what it takes to close the gap between the two.

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What Is Self-Directed Education?

Dan Sanchez

This essay bears good news. Great parenting is much easier and more fun than most people think, even if you homeschool: in fact, especially if you homeschool.

• You don’t need to be an expert, whether in education or any given subject matter, for your child to learn.
• You don’t need to be a taskmaster for your child to become self-disciplined and successful.
• And you don’t need to regularly rebuke your children over their behavior for them to learn good manners and grow up to become decent, moral people.

You can relieve yourself (and your child) of these onerous burdens, because kids teach themselves.

This is the fundamental insight underlyng Self-Directed Education, a burgeoning movement and philosophy that has grown out of ideas associated with homeschooling, unschooling, peaceful parenting, Montessori education, and other child-centered approaches.

As biopsychologist Peter Gray wrote in his book Free to Learn:

“Children come into the world burning to learn and
genetically programmed with extraordinary capacities for learning. They are little learning machines.”

We are all born autodidacts—self-educators—blessed with an instinctive drive to acquire, exercise, test, and improve new abilities that will help us thrive in life.

As children grow more aware of the world around them, they yearn to engage with it, and to do so with ever greater independence. They see how adults and older kids use their minds and bodies to do wondrous things—moving, communicating, performing, creating, etc.—and this inspires them into emulation.

This is not to say there is no fundamental difference between children and adults. Children are not yet fully independent. They cannot provide for themselves, and they mustn’t be allowed to toddle into deadly danger. As such, they need adults to give them a considerable degree of protection and provision. They also need affection, which serves as emotional assurance of such life-securing support.

But, what children do not need (and what is almost always imposed on them) is continuous external direction in their daily doings. Children can be trusted to self-direct, and to self-direct toward ever greater self-actualization.

As John Holt, who coined the term “unschooling,” wrote in his book How Children Learn:

“All I am saying in this book can be summed up in two words—**Trust Children.** Nothing could be more simple—or more difficult. Difficult, because to trust children we must trust ourselves—and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted. And so we go on treating children as we ourselves were treated, calling this ‘reality,’ or saying bitterly, ‘If I could put up with it, they can too.’ What we have to do is break this long downward cycle of fear and distrust, and trust children as we ourselves were not trusted. To do this will take a long leap
of faith—but great rewards await any of us who will take that leap.”

This is not to say that parents have no role in the education of their children beyond basic life-support. Great parenting means facilitating self-directed education by providing children with access to resource-rich environments, and then stepping back and allowing them maximum freedom to engage with those resources however they please: in other words, freedom to play.

Some of these resources are material: toys, stuff for building, natural materials, etc. Children are naturally drawn to manipulate, explore, and experiment with stuff: especially new things.

And children especially need access to what Dr. Gray refers to as, “the tools of their culture.” For children in hunter-gatherer societies, this meant, “knives, digging sticks, bows and arrows, snares, musical instruments, dugout canoes, and the like.” For children in the modern world, this means cooking utensils, cleaning instruments, handiwork tools, creative materials, books, computers, and other hi-tech devices: yes, even the much-maligned smartphone and tablet of “screentime” infamy.

Just as hunter-gatherer children learned to play with primitive tools by observing their elders, modern children need to see adults and older children using the tools of their work and pastimes. So access to “human resources” is just as important as material resources. Parents must first and foremost provide access to themselves. And from there, children should be allowed to branch out to other family members and non-related friends of all ages. Any member of a child’s community can serve the child as a model to emulate and as a playmate to interact with.

Such play is how children self-educate. They observe others doing things they themselves cannot yet do. They try their hand by roughly mimicking the behavior. They request help when they need and are ready for it. And they obsessively repeat new behaviors over and over again. During these reps, they compare their own actions and results
with the actions and results of their models, notice discrepancies, and refine accordingly. And they continually challenge themselves to approach the performance levels of their elders.

This is how children learn to walk and to talk. And if our teach-erly ministrations don’t interfere, it is also how they can smoothly teach themselves to read, write, draw, sing, dance, sport, build, or undertake anything else that interests them.

Voluntarily following self-directed pursuits is how children learn such virtues as self-discipline, industry, and grit. And social play is how children learn how best to treat other people: in other words, how they learn morals and manners.

The flipside of the insight that kids teach themselves is the unset-tling realization that adults, in trying to be good teachers, too often obstruct and sidetrack the efforts of children to self-educate: especially once children are enrolled in school.

This message should be especially easy for lovers of liberty to understand. Human beings, both adults and children, thrive under freedom. And authoritarian interventions, no matter how well-intentioned, generally muck things up: whether the intervener is an over-bearing teacher or a busybody bureaucrat.

As Gray wrote:

“Nature does not turn off this enormous desire and capac-ity to learn when children turn five or six. We turn it off with our coercive system of schooling.”

Free play is the natural work and study of children. And, even for adults, the highest, most productive and creative forms of work and study are indistinguishable from play. Displacing the free play of children with adult-imposed, coerced work and study only serves to cripple the child’s self-educating spirit and to stunt the child’s development.

The main lessons imparted by coercive education are (1) that work and study are fundamentally boring endeavors to pursue grudgingly for someone else’s sake, and not your own, and (2) that submissiveness
and blind compliance will be rewarded in life, and so are prime virtues, while initiative and self-driven enterprise will be punished, and so are dangerous vices.

As Holt wrote:

“In short, children have a style of learning that fits their condition, and which they use naturally and well until we train them out of it. We like to say that we send children to school to teach them to think. What we do, all too often, is to teach them to think badly, to give up a natural and powerful way of thinking in favor of a method that does not work well for them and that we rarely use ourselves.”

If you would like to explore these ideas further, I highly recommend the following books and resources. Let the self-education begin!

**Books**

*Free to Learn* by Peter Gray  
*How Children Learn* by John Holt  
*How Children Fail* by John Holt  
*Dumbing Us Down* by John Taylor Gatto  
*Weapons of Mass Instruction* by John Taylor Gatto

**Organizations and Websites**

- The Alliance for Self-Directed Education (self-directed.org)  
- Freedom to Learn (Peter Gray’s blog at Psychology Today)  
- Whole Family Learning  
- FEE  
- Praxis: a self-directed education and apprenticeship program for young professionals  
- The Libertarian Homeschooler on Facebook
Our current compulsory schooling model was created at the dawn of the Industrial Age. As factories replaced farm work and production moved swiftly outside of homes and into the larger marketplace, 19th century American schooling mirrored the factories that most students would ultimately join.

The bells and buzzers signaling when students could come and go, the tedium of the work, the straight lines and emphasis on conformity and compliance, the rows of young people sitting passively at desks while obeying their teachers, the teachers obeying the principal, and so on—all of this was designed for factory-style efficiency and order.

The Imagination Age

The trouble is that we have left the Industrial Era for the Imagination Age, but our mass education system remains fully entrenched in factory-style schooling. By many accounts, mass schooling has become even more restrictive than it was a century ago, consuming more of childhood and adolescence than at any time in our history. The first compulsory schooling statute, passed in Massachusetts in
1852, required eight to 14-year-olds to attend school a mere 12 weeks a year, six of which were to be consecutive. This seems almost laughable compared to the childhood behemoth that mass schooling has now become.

Enclosing children in increasingly restrictive schooling environments for most of their formative years, and drilling them with a standardized, test-driven curriculum is woefully inadequate for the Imagination Age. In her book, *Now You See It*, Cathy Davidson says that 65 percent of children now entering elementary school will work at jobs in the future that have not yet been invented. She writes: “In this time of massive change, we’re giving our kids the tests and lesson plans designed for their great-great-grandparents.”

While the past belonged to assembly line workers, the future belongs to creative thinkers, experimental doers, and inventive makers. The past relied on passivity; the future will be built on passion. In a recent article on the future of work, author and strategist John Hagel III writes about the need to nurture passion to be successful and fulfilled in the jobs to come. He says:

One of my key messages to individuals in this changing world is to find your passion and integrate your passion with your work. One of the challenges today is that most people are products of the schools and society we’ve had, which encourage you to go to work to get a paycheck, and if it pays well, that’s a good job, versus encouraging you to find your passion and find a way to make a living from it.

Passion-Driven Learning

Cultivating passion is nearly impossible within a coercive schooling structure that values conformity over creativity, compliance over-exuberance. This could help explain why the unschooling, or Self-Directed Education, movement is taking off, with more parents migrating from a schooling model of education for their children to a
learning one. With Self-Directed Education, passion is at the center of all learning. Young people follow their interests and pursue their passions, while adults act as facilitators, connecting children and teens to the vast resources of both real and digital communities. In this model, learning is natural, non-coercive, and designed to be directed by the individual herself, rather than by someone else.

Self-Directed Education and unschooling often take place in homes and throughout communities, but increasingly individuals and organizations are launching self-directed learning centers geared toward homeschoolers with both full- and part-time options. These centers make Self-Directed Education more accessible to more families in more places, and each has a unique philosophy or focus. Some are geared toward teens and value real-world apprenticeships and immersion; others are makerspaces that emphasize tinkering and technology, and so on. In Boston, for instance, the JP Green School in the city’s Jamaica Plain neighborhood serves as a part-time self-directed learning space for homeschoolers and unschoolers with a focus on sustainability and nature connection. Co-founder Andrée Zaleska says:

People educated in coercive models will be damaged for life (most of us are). The lack of respect shown to their autonomous selves as children translates into a lifelong tendency to “get what they need” by any means necessary...We are part of a growing counterculture which finds traditional schooling damaging in ways that are intertwined with the general brokenness of our culture.

Instead of complaining about the education status quo, entrepreneurial individuals are building alternatives to school that challenge it. Centered around passion and an overarching belief in individual self-determination, these entrepreneurs—who are often parents, former school teachers, and others who have become disillusioned by coercive schooling—are freeing young people from an outdated and harmful mass schooling system. Enlightened parents and innovative
entrepreneurs may be the key players in constructing a new education model focused on freedom and designed for the Imagination Age.

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Wise Parenting Uses Natural Consequences, Not Artificial Ones Imposed by Force

Dan Sanchez

The great slogan of classical liberalism is “Life, Liberty, Property.” Essentially this means, don’t murder, enslave, or steal. And this in turn is essentially what we teach children when we say no hitting, bullying, or grabbing. Yet, when kids are introduced to the concept of government, suddenly murder/hitting (war, police brutality), slavery/bullying (conscription, regulation, prohibition, imprisonment for victimless “crimes”), and stealing/grabbing (taxation, fiat money inflation, eminent domain) are okay if the perpetrator has a certain badge or title.

We add injury to inconsistency when we ourselves inflict upon our own children assault/hitting (spanking, slapping, and worse), slavery/bullying (ordering our kids around), and stealing/grabbing (confiscating and redistributing toys and other belongings, or never allowing them to own anything in the first place).
The Freedom Philosophy Applied to Parenting

For many libertarians, “Life, Liberty, Property” is encapsulated in the principle of non-aggression. Should this principle extend to children?

Some libertarian theorists contend that because children are not capable self-owners, they must be held “in trust” by their guardians, and that therefore parental coercion, short of abuse, is justified. Even, for the sake of argument fully granting this, it would obviously be foolish and disastrous for a parent to assert such “justified coercion” to the hilt, controlling each and every move the child makes. It is easy to see how such complete, though “conditional,” quasi-slavery would be nearly as damaging to the moral and mental development of the child as complete chattel slavery is to the character and psychic health of the slave.

But what is true of the extremes is just as true of the approach to the extremes. Temporary and incomplete quasi-slavery (like that of the child under his parents in many cases), even if consistent with libertarianism, is morally and psychologically damaging to the individual for similar reasons as permanent and incomplete actual slavery is as well.

After all, it makes sense that when one is preparing for a future challenge, one should practice under the conditions that characterize that challenge. If you practice under wildly different conditions, you will end up prepared for something else entirely, and poorly prepared for the actual challenge. As Herbert Spencer wrote,

Were your children fated to pass their lives as slaves, you could not too much accustom them to slavery during their childhood; but as they are by and by to be free men, with no one to control their daily conduct, you cannot too much accustom them to self-control while they are still under your eye.

We wonder why, after years of allowing them very few decisions, our children end up such poor decision-makers. We give them little
responsibility and wonder why, as young men and women, they are so irresponsible. We endeavor to inculcate strict obedience to every parental dictate, and wonder why every generation is so servile and submissive to the state.

But if unchecked by parental authority, will not a child yield to his impulses, to the detriment of his socialization, education, and even physical safety? How can the child mature, if there are no consequences for misbehavior?

Two Kinds of Consequences

It is not a question of consequences or no consequences. The question concerns the kind of consequence. There are two kinds, as distinguished by Spencer in his groundbreaking and foundation-laying essay on education.

On one hand there are the artificial consequences imposed by authority. “If you tease your sister, I will send you to your room.” “If you break that, I will spank you.” Such consequences may indeed, however ineptly, inculcate “good habits” that would serve the child later in life. But it will also inculcate a broader habit of appeasing involuntary authority.

Furthermore, good habits, inculcated in this way, then rest chiefly upon internalized authority, and not on a true understanding of what makes those habits good. This is not true prudence, but merely residual obedience. Such a basis, if it holds at all, can lead to an inflexible life ridden by irrational guilt. Often however, it is a thin reed, that will snap once the child is out from under the parental gaze.

On the other hand there are natural consequences imposed, not by arbitrary authority, but by the laws of justice and physical and social reality. Spencer called these “true consequences” or “natural reactions,” and they are far more constructive and edifying than the other kind.

To extend Spencer’s analysis, misbehavior can be divided into 4 categories:
1. Personal Vices (unwise behavior)
2. Interpersonal Vices (non-violent antisocial behavior)
3. Injustices (violent antisocial behavior)
4. Catastrophically dangerous actions (behavior with high-probability risk of loss of life, limb, or liberty).

The natural, constructive, and edifying consequences of each are:

1. Personal Vices: Consequences imposed by physical reality
2. Interpersonal Vices: Non-coercive social consequences
3. Injustices: Coercive (if necessary) and proportionate restitutive and protective justice

The natural consequences of unwise or antisocial behavior (like a child being careless with her Gameboy or rude with her siblings) are the ones given by physical (a broken Gameboy) and societal (not being invited to play cards one evening) reality, not the ones given by authority (spanking, forced labor, confiscation, etc.).

The former will teach a child to treat her possessions better so as to deal better with the material world and her friends better so as to deal better with society. The latter will teach a child to treat her possessions and friends better so as to appease the giant bully she’s trapped with (It will also teach the child to resent the parent for physically assaulting, expropriating, or enslaving her for reasons she doesn’t fully understand.)

Unlike those imposed by parental authority, the consequences imposed by material reality and non-coercive society follow the child into adulthood. By letting physics and society give her the consequences (as long as those consequences don’t threaten life, limb, and
Learning vs. Schooling

(liberty), you teach her how to be a better free person in the world. By giving her coercive and violent consequences yourself, you only teach her to be a better slave.

The only cases in which consequences imposed by force are called for (other than to immediately save life, limb, and liberty) is, with children as with adults, when it a proportional and restitutional response to force initiated by the child.

Justice is the natural, constructive, and edifying consequence of injustice. If your child aggresses against you, another adult, or another child, it is beneficially instructive and moral to take from the child’s possessions to make the victim whole. (This is one of the many reasons it is important to allow the child to fully own things in the first place.) But this never justifies spanking. Physically assaulting your own child does absolutely nothing in the way of providing restitution to a victim; it only creates one more victim.

Here is an example of this approach from my own recent parenting experience. The other day, my wife and three-year-old daughter were playing Chutes and Ladders, and my wife said something in a silly voice. My daughter must have been cranky, because she loudly and rudely told her mommy to not say that.

Rather than scold her in return, my wife just looked a bit sad, and went into the other room. I was working at the dining table, and sweetly explained to my daughter how what she said made her mommy feel. She said “No!” so I too withdrew, saying, without a hint of harshness, “bye bye,” and returned to my work.

My little girl sat there for a moment, and then went to find her mother in the other room, hugged her, and said, “I’m sorry Mommy.” My wife said “it’s okay,” we had a family hug, and they happily returned to their game.

We afford our daughter her dignity and freedom as an individual, yet also assert our own dignity and freedom to withdraw our company if we are being mistreated. This way, she learns to avoid being
rude to avoid the natural consequences of being rude, and not simply
to appease intimidating authority figures that won’t always be present.
That is how children learn character, and not mere obedience.

Thinking Outside the Authoritarian Box

This approach to parenting, which may be termed “Spencerian”
after Herbert Spencer, is like libertarianism in that they are both so rad-
ically different from the authoritarian ways we do things now, that peo-
ple are prone to simply dismiss them out of hand at first.

People are so habituated to automatically resorting to coercive
solutions to social and family problems, that their powers of imagina-
tion totally break down when faced with the idea of either a society or
a household without masters. “Who will build the roads?” is akin to
“How else will she be made to learn?”

Murray Rothbard skewers the “who will be build the roads” objec-
tors by pointing out that if the provision of shoes had long been a state
monopoly, people would be baffled at the thought of the market pro-
viding shoes.

And who would supply shoes to the public if the govern-
ment got out of the business? ... Which people? How
many shoe stores would be available in each city and
town? How would the shoe firms be capitalized? How
many brands would there be? What material would they
use? What lasts? What would be the pricing arrange-
ments for shoes?

Similarly, the authoritarian approach has been so long the modus
operandi of parents, that they can’t fathom doing without it. “If I can’t
strike, boss around, or confiscate things from my child, how will I influ-
ence her?”

Of course, while not every detail can be predicted by proponents
of liberty, the market does manage to handle shoes, and it would man-
age to handle roads. And both, far better than the state.
Similarly, while general best practices and sample solutions can be offered, not every detail of parental practice can be unerringly prescribed to other parents (especially of children they’ve never met) by proponents of the freedom-based approach to parenting.

But devoted, imaginative, venturesome, and principled parents can figure out what non-coercive solutions work for their child’s individual needs. And whatever unique particular approach the parent arrives at, the child will be far better off for not having gone through the first 18 years of her life spiritually shackled to another person’s will.

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It’s said that sadness isn’t the opposite of happiness—boredom is. With this in mind, is it any surprise that children, adolescents, and young adults today are so unhappy? Is it any surprise that so many turn to extending their schooled lives into structured activities as long as possible? Is it any surprise that when people don’t know what to do, they simply go to graduate school?

To understand this mass unhappiness and boredom with life—and the sudden uptick in quarter-life crises—look at where these young people have spent most of their lives.

What we see today in Millennials and younger is something henceforth unseen in the United States: a fully-schooled generation. Every young person, save the occasional homeschooler, today has been through schools. This means rich and poor, established and unestablished, and developed and undeveloped young adults have all been put through roughly the same exact system with the same general experiences for the last two decades of their lives.

School teaches them that life is broken into discernible chunks and that learning and personal development are to be seen as drudgery.
Rather than teaching them how to foster a love of learning, a constantly-centralizing school regime in the US today teaches them to look for standards to be measured against. Rather than helping give them the cognitive and philosophical tools necessary to lead fulfilled lives in the context of the world in which they live, schools remove them from this world and force them to develop these skills only after 18–25 years of being alive. Rather than allowing them to integrate themselves into the broader scheme of life and learn what they get fulfillment from achieving and what they don’t, school leaves fulfillment to five letter grades and a few minutes of recess.

We destroy the love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards, gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or A’s on report cards, or honor rolls, or dean’s lists, or Phi Beta Kappa keys, in short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else.—John Holt

In short, school teaches apathy towards education and detachment from the world. School removes people from being forced to learn how to get fulfillment from a variety of activities and subjects and instead foists a handful of clunky subjects onto them hoping they meet state standards for “reading,” “mathematics,” “writing,” and “science.”

**Extended Childhood**

Not only this, but they’ve had childhood extended further into adulthood than any other generation before them. A young person today is considered a “child” much longer than a young person was 20 or 40 years ago. To treat a 16 year-old as a child in the 1960s would have been insulting. Today, it is commonplace.

Adult children wander the hallways of universities and workplaces
today, less-equipped to find purpose and meaning than their predeces-
sors. They can’t be entirely blamed for their anxiety and depression—
their parents, teachers, and leaders put them through an institution
and created a cultural norm that created the world they live in today.

Once you understand the logic behind modern schooling,
its tricks and traps are fairly easy to avoid. School trains
children to be employees and consumers; teach your own
to be leaders and adventurers. School trains children to
obey reflexively; teach your own to think critically and
independently. Well-schooled kids have a low threshold
for boredom; help your own to develop an inner life so
that they’ll never be bored.—John Taylor Gatto

This is the perfect formula for creating a group of constantly bored
people. They’ve been deprived of a chance to find meaning for them-
selves in subjects by engaging with them on a deep level and internal-
izing the responsibility necessary to live in the world. They’ve been cut
off from opportunities to make real connections with people based
on more than a lottery of ZIP codes for a decade. They’ve been taught
that achievement is getting to the next level set by people outside of
themselves.

Sadness isn’t the opposite of happiness—boredom is. A fully
schooled generation has created a generation of bored adult children.
It’s no wonder young people today seem so unhappy.

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How the Education System Destroys Social Networks

Jeffrey Tucker

I was at a restaurant for lunch and had time to visit with the waitress, who turns out to be a college graduate from a good institution. She has a degree in European languages. Here she is waiting tables with nondegree people, some five years her junior, some 10 years her elder.

She is making good money, but so are her co-workers. You have to wonder: given her position, what was the professional advantage to her of those four hard years in school and the $100K spent on them? What were the opportunity costs?

This is not another article to disparage the value of a college degree. I would like to raise a more fundamental question. It concerns the strange way in which our education system has overly segmented our lives into a series of episodic upheavals, each of which has little to do with the other, the value of one accomplishment being oddly disconnected from the next stage, and none of them directly connecting to our professional goals except in the unusual case.

From the earliest age until adulthood, we’ve been hurled from institution to institution in a way that eventually sets young people back from developing continuity of plans and a social support system to realize their goals. At the end of it all, people find themselves back
where they started: figuring out their market worth and trying to find a buyer for their services.

Instead of drawing down on accumulated capital, they end up starting fresh at age 22. Even after years of building social capital, they are drawing down on a nearly empty account.

There is something seriously wrong with this system. Shouldn’t our investments in our friendship networks extend across and beyond the stages of our development to make more of a difference in our lives?

**The post-graduation diaspora**

In a couple of months, for example, many millions of high school students will graduate. Celebration! Sort of. It’s great to finish school. But what’s next?

Many students find themselves devastated to lose the only social group and friendship network they’ve ever known. They worked for years to cultivate it, and in an instant, it is blown apart. They are left with a piece of paper, a yearbook of memories, a transcript, and, perhaps a few recommendation letters from teachers—recommendations that do them little good in the marketplace.

“Don’t ever change,” they write in each other’s yearbooks. The sentiment expresses a normal longing to hold on to the investment the students make in each other’s lives, even as everything about the system tries to take that investment from them.

Is this the way it should be?

Then, the same group, or at least many among them, look forward to college, where they are mostly, again, starting from scratch in a social sense. It can be very scary. College students begin their new experience isolated. They work for another four years to develop a network—a robust social group—to find their footing and to establish both a reputation and sense of self. This is the only world they’ve known for years, and they have invested their hearts and souls into the experience.
The social fabric ends up rich and wonderful, with intense friendships based on shared lives.

Finally, after four years, the graduation march plays, the tassel is moved from one side of the cap to the other, and the whole social apparatus goes up in smoke—again. Then, another diaspora.

Once again, students find themselves nearly alone, with few hooks into the world of commerce and employment. They have a degree but few opportunities to monetize it. Their social network is of limited use to them. All they have, yet again, is a piece of paper. Plus they have recommendation letters from professors that still do them little good in the marketplace.

This not always the case. There are workarounds, and digital networking is helping. People join fraternities and social clubs, and those can be useful going forward. But it might take years for these connections to yield results. The more immediate question is this: What do I do now? Lacking a broad sense of the way the world works, and missing any influential hooks into prevailing networks, a college grad can often find herself feeling isolated once again, starting over for the third time.

The failure of the central plan

This is the system that the civic culture has created for us. For the years from the ages of 14 through 22, students’ primary focus of personal investment and social capital building is centered on their peers. But their peers are just the same as they are: hoping for a good future but having few means to get from here to there.

Why does this keep happening? Looking at the big picture, you can start to see a serious problem with the educational system politicians have built for us. It is keeping people “on track”—but is it a track that prepares people for the future?

A core principle of the education system, as owned and controlled by government, is Stay in school and stay with your class. This is the
emphasis from the earliest grades all the way through the end of college. The accidents of birth determine your peer group, your primary social influences, and the gang you rely on for social support.

To be “held back” is considered disgraceful, and to be pushed forward a grade is considered dangerous for personal development. Your class rank is your world, the definition of who you are—and it stays with you for decades. Everyone is on a track as defined by a ruling class: here is what you should and must know when. All your peers are with you.

Many factors entrench this reality. The public school system is organized on the assumption of homogeneity, a central plan imposed from the top down. It didn’t happen all at once. It came about slowly over the course of 100-plus years, from the universalization of compulsory schooling, to the prohibition of youth work, to the gradual nationalization of curricula.

In the end, we find the lives of young people strictly segmented by stages that are strangely discontinuous. Where are the professional contacts that result? Where are the friends who can smooth your way into the world of professional work? They aren’t among your former classmates. Your peers are all in the same position you are in.

Laws that lock people out

The workplace might help to mitigate this problem, but it’s incredibly difficult for young people to get a regular job thanks to “child labor” laws that exclude teens from the workforce. For this reason, only one in four high school kids has any real experience outside their peer group. They miss all the opportunities to learn and grow that come from the workplace—learning from examples of personal initiative, responsibility, independence, and accountability.

There are extremely narrow conditions under which a 14-year-old can find legal employment, but few businesses want to bother with the necessary documentation and restrictions. A 16-year-old has a few
more opportunities, but, even here, these young people can’t work in kitchens or serve alcohol. The full freedom to engage a larger community outside the segmented class structure doesn’t come until after you graduate high school.

By the time the opportunity comes around to do authentic remunerative work, a student’s life is filled with other interests, mostly social, but also extracurricular. Instead of working a job, people are doing a thousand other things, and there seems to be no time left. It’s not uncommon for people to graduate with no professional experiences whatsoever to draw on. Their peers are their only asset, their only really valuable relationships, but these relationships have little commercial value.

How natural is any of this?

If you look at the social structure of homeschooling co-ops, for example, younger kids and older kids mix it up in integrated social environments, and they learn from each other. Parents of all ages are well integrated too, and it creates a complex social environment. The parents know all the kids and, together, they form a diverse microsociety of mutual interests. This is one reason that homeschooled kids can seem remarkably precocious and poised around people of all ages. They are not being artificially pegged into slots and held there against their will.

A better way

When you read about the experiences of successful people in the late 19th century, they talk of their exciting and broad experiences in life, working in odd jobs, meeting strange people of all ages and classes, performing tasks outside their comfort zone, encountering adult situations in business that taught them important lessons. They didn’t learn these things from sitting in a desk, listening to a teacher, repeating facts on tests, and staying with their class. They discovered the world through mixing it up, having fabulous and sometimes weird
experiences, being with people who are not in their age cohort. They drew on these experiences for years following.

The system to which we have become accustomed is not of our choosing, and it certainly isn’t organic to the social order. It has been inflicted on us, one piece of legislation at a time. It is the result of an imposed, rather than evolved, order. Why wait until age 22 to get serious about your life? Why stick with only one career choice in the course of your appointed 40 years in professional life? Why retire at the young age of 65, just because the government wants you to do so?

Think about this the next time you attend a graduation. Are the students shedding only tears of joy? Or, in the sudden mixture of emotions, is there also the dawning realization that they are witnessing the destruction of a social order they worked so hard to cultivate? Are they also overwhelmed with the knowledge that, in short order, they will have to recreate something entirely new again? Where is the continuity? Where is the evidence of an evolved and developing order of improved opportunities?

The most important question is this: What are the alternatives?

Bring back apprenticeships. Bring back remunerative work for the young. Look beyond the central plan, and don’t get trapped. Rethink the claim that staying in school is an unmitigated good. Find other ways to prevent your heavy investments in others from dissipating; ensure instead that they will pay more immediate returns. Our friends should remain in our lives—and yield a lifetime of returns.

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Spark and Fuel: How to Help Your Child Learn without Resorting to Compulsion

Dan Sanchez

How can you truly facilitate your child’s learning? More important than what to do is what not to do.

First, what is learning? Learning is the accomplishment of a cognitive improvement: either new knowledge or a new skill. All improvements are made for the sake of the better pursuit of purposes.

Now here’s the key for not getting in the way of your child’s learning. Never force your child to acquire an improvement that is for the sake of a purpose that is not yet her own. Don’t force them to learn something while using the lame teacher excuse of, “trust me, this will come in handy later.” The child should never have to try to acquire a new improvement (knowledge or a skill) only for the chief purpose of appeasing you or anyone else.

You can compel study, but it will be a grudging study, and it won’t stick. In fact it will counterproductively foster an aversion to the subjects that are forced upon the child. Later in life, once the obligation to appease a parent or instructor drops out, so too will the pursuit of study. This is why so few graduates of the American school sys-
tem become devoted autodidacts once they finally pass through their 16-year gauntlet of compulsory scholarship.

**Little Autodidacts**

Children are natural learners. Unbidden, they hungrily seek new knowledge and skills from early on. There is no danger in a free child not developing a love of learning, so long as they are not trapped in a stimulus-impoverished environment. What truly endangers the spirit of learning is the threat of being crushed by forced study. As Maria Montessori stressed, adults are more likely to impede learning than foster it: especially given the currently backward learning philosophies that currently reign.

The chief role of the parent in the child’s learning process is not that of a home-based schoolmaster, but that of a provider and a playmate. Provide and play, every day, and watch as your child eagerly teaches herself.

Your job is to provide the spark and the fuel, not the fire itself. Present pursuits to your child in a way that elicits her voluntary interest. Instead of forcing your child to acquire improvements for the sake of purposes that are not yet her own, you inspire her to develop her own purposes by sparking her interest in something new. Then you fuel the flame that you sparked. Offer to show her new improvements (knowledge and skills) that will help her achieve those goals, along with useful materials. Only then will she truly, deeply, and gladly pursue a course of learning that you think will benefit her. Your role is to inspire ends, not to impose means.

**Friendship Instead of Drills**

Take learning to write, for example. Don’t put a workbook in front of her, and force her to slog through its exercises. Instead, try suggesting a correspondence between her and one of her older cousins or another pen pal, even before she can write at all. Read to her what her
friend has written; make it interesting like you would when reading a story, with humor, commentary, and funny voices.

Then offer to transcribe her response for her, making sure she can see what you’re doing when you handwrite the letter. As long as you’ve previously refrained from sheltering your child from diverse social situations, your sociable child will leap at the chance; no coercion necessary. This will spark her interest in long-distance, written communication. This will have become a purpose of her own. This is the “Spark” stage.

Then comes the “Fuel” stage. The flame will grow with every exchange, as the long-distance friendship blossoms. Feed the flame by gradually offering to show her how she can help you write the letter. Children love to mimic beloved adults, so again, she will leap at the chance, after having watched you compose so many letters; even if it’s just to, at first, write a single word. Again, no coercion necessary.

Eventually, as she gets the hang of learning to write, and she sees the bright promise of the independent pursuit of her own goals emerging on the horizon, you can provide her materials (sample letters, books, and yes, even voluntarily-used workbooks), and begin to step back as she teaches herself.

At a certain point, the flame will become a wildfire, expanding so rapidly that it increasingly finds its own fuel, growing ever less dependent on the fuel supplied by you.

Help your child grow into a self-driven, curious, passionate, happy human being—not by being her taskmaster, but by being a helpful guide to the wonderful opportunities that abound in this marvelous new world in which she has found herself.

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16 Big Myths about College and Success in Your Early 20s

Isaac M. Morehouse

If you’re exiting high school you’re probably being given a lot of advice. You’re bombarded with stats about average earnings, degrees, majors, resumes, seizing this time in your life, etc. It’s all pretty standard, conventional fare: Go to the best college you can get into, get good grades, major in something with lots of job opportunities, have a nice resume, apply for jobs, get a decent starting salary and a business card.

But what seems like common sense is actually quite a bit of nonsense. It’s all built around a narrative, and that narrative is the story of a bunch of averages and aggregates, not you. You have unique goals, interests, abilities, and opportunities. Making decisions about your life based on some 45-year-old’s view of macroeconomic trends isn’t sensible at all.

All the common advice is stuck in what I call the conveyor belt mindset.

It goes something like this:

You are plopped onto a production line at whatever stage you’re supposed to be based on arbitrary things like your age, class, and
gender. Then you let the belt do the work. By essentially doing nothing but what you’re told, you get handed certificates at each next stage. 18? Unless you did something truly outrageous, here’s your diploma. 22? Here’s your degree. Degree? Here’s your job (or so you’re led to believe).

Most people believe this and live it. It’s revealed in the kinds of questions we ask strangers. “What grade are you in?” “What’s your major?” “What kind of job do you have?” If your answer is not the appropriate one for your age and assumed station in life, people worry. “I dropped out of school to do X” is cause for concern to almost everybody, no matter what X is. “I’m a sophomore at university Y” is cause for comfort to almost everybody, no matter what you’re actually doing with your time at Y. So long as you’re at your station, no one much cares if you’re productive, happy, successful, fulfilled, or free.

Parents obsessively check their child against a list of averages on everything from height to reading ability to earnings and stress if junior is not “on track.” No one really ever asks who built the track, where it’s going, or whether junior has any interest in arriving there.

Before you do anything else, you’ve got to get off the conveyor belt.

Once you do, you can begin to ask the right questions. Questions about your unique situation, and how you can build a fulfilling life. It might look nothing like anyone else’s. It might not even exist yet. You might have to create it. It might not fit into their prefabricated definitions of success. Who cares. They don’t have to live your life, you do.

So here you are, freestanding and not moved along by the inertia of tradition and the good opinion of others. What to do next? Don’t yet try to answer what you should do. Instead, figure out what you shouldn’t do. Let’s examine some of the recommendations you’ll be getting and see how they hold up.

Here are a bunch of things you’ve probably heard, and why they might be wrong...
“It’s worth it”

Three really important words: Compared to what?

“Yeah it’s boring and expensive and totally unrelated to the value I want to create in the world, but it’s worth it.” This is one of the most common yet unexamined proclamations about the education-career conveyor belt.

What is it supposed to be worth if it’s not clearly creating value for you? So some chart somewhere shows degree holders earning more money. Compared to what? Compared to non-degree holders. That’s irrelevant. The relevant comparison is the money, time, freedom, and fulfillment of a degree holder compared to that same person doing something else instead of getting the degree.

A degree is only worth it for you if all the time, money, and monotony is more valuable than your next best use of those same resources.

Wow. When you realize 4+ years and 5+ figures go in to the average degree, it starts to really seem suspect. What else could you do in that time?

Spend a year traveling the world, a year working for an amazing startup (for free even!), a year reading 100 books and podcasting. That’s just three years and probably $10k. You’d have a wealth of knowledge, a global network, a great job under your belt, and a story unlike anyone else. All for ⅔ the time and ¼ the cost of sitting in classrooms trying not to fall asleep.

The bar is pretty low. “Worth it” doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s got to be compared to the possible alternatives. If you’ve never sat down and made an exhaustive list of all the things you could do with that time, money, and boundless flexibility of that phase of life, then you’re in no position to declare college “worth it.”
“It’s free so you can’t turn it down!”

There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch. If you have a lot of grants or scholarships, or if your parents put aside a college savings fund and will cover tuition it doesn’t mean college is free. The idea that it doesn’t make sense to turn down anything “free” is a good way to end up miserable and shackled to “good deals.”

If something you don’t want or need is on sale buying it doesn’t mean you saved money. Not only that, you spent a lot of time—time that could have been spent doing any number of lucrative, fulfilling, valuable activities. Doing things you don’t value just because others say they’re too good to turn down is a way to put yourself in shackles.

Your freedom and your definition of what’s valuable is too important to subjugate to the perceived value of others.

Turning down “can’t pass!” opportunities to do what resonates with you is the first step to self-directed living.

“Only drop out if you have a billion dollar idea”

I call this the Steve Jobs fallacy. It’s a weird double standard. Stick to the conveyor belt and no one demands wild success from you. They’re proud when you get into college. They’re proud when you get a degree. They’re kind of proud, if they’re still paying attention, when you get a job. They don’t think you’re a failure if you aren’t changing the world with a billion dollar startup. They think you’re awesome for nabbing a $40k job as a bank teller. Rarely do they ask whether you’re happy or fulfilled or really living a life you want.

Contrast that to the demands placed on a college drop-out. If you drop out and don’t become the next Steve Jobs, everyone will say, “See I told you to stay in school!” Even if you’re doing something you love and making a good living, a lot of your family and friends will have this nagging sense that you never really reached your potential.

This is baloney. You can build whatever kind of life pleases you. If college doesn’t help you become the person you want to be, don’t do it.
Your choices aren’t limited to loser or billionaire status just because you drop or opt out.

“**You’re already this far, so it only makes sense to finish.**”

This is the sunk cost fallacy. It’s the same thing that keeps casinos in business. “I’m already in for $20, so even though I have a terrible hand I might as well pay another $10 to stay in.”

It’s gone. It can never be recovered. You will never get back the money or time you’ve put in.

This fallacy isn’t just for gamblers. It plagues everyone from investors to your friend who makes you wait in a long line to see a mediocre movie because, “We’ve already waited half an hour and I don’t want that to be for nothing!”

I hate to break it to your friend, but it was for nothing. Past expenditures that can’t be recovered shouldn’t factor into decisions about the present and future. It doesn’t matter that you sunk three and a half years and 50 grand into college. What matters is whether the next six months and ten grand is better spent on college than all other alternatives. Remove yourself from your prior experience. If you had never spent any time or money on college and someone offered to put you through lectures for a year if you paid upwards of five figures, would that be your ideal way to spend those resources? If not, don’t.

Quitting doesn’t make it all for nothing, it makes it all for whatever it is you’ve gained up to this point. If that wasn’t worth it, why would the next semester or year be? Looking only ahead and not behind, what gets you closer to the kind of experiences and life you will enjoy?

“**Don’t burn any bridges. Keep your options open.**”

If you drop out or don’t go to school, you may not ever be able to go back! If you turn down the job you hate, you may never be able to
get it later! If you choose to take that exciting opportunity you’ll close off all those options!

   Good.

   One of the first steps in your personal emancipation is to realize that the world is full of options and things currently in front of you are not the only from which to choose. But there is a difference between options and opportunities.

   Options are theoretical. Opportunities are actual. Options are statistical probabilities. Opportunities are singular, concrete instances. Options can always be added on, and the option set can always grow as an aggregate bundle, so there is no urgency or scarcity in options. Opportunities are temporary and cannot be aggregated. Each is too unique and cannot be replicated.

   It’s easy to say no to awesome opportunities because they might reduce all the theoretical options. You’ll end up, to paraphrase Peter Thiel, totally prepared for nothing in particular.

   Keeping doors open is not inherently good. Doing things you love means reducing other abstract possibilities. Likewise, saying no to things you don’t love might mean burned bridges. Again, good.

   Stop leaving doors open. Start burning bridges.

   Not only do you need to stop looking for so many options, you should begin actively slamming doors to ensure you can never again walk through them.

   If you know a door leads you to a life that would make you unhappy shut it.

   If you’ve peeked through a particular portal and seen something that makes you a little dead inside slam the door and burn it behind you. Otherwise you might be tempted to go through it later if someone dangles the right price in front of you. You might be tempted to say yes to something you hate, which might be the saddest of all fates.

   I’ve met a number of young people who spent a summer interning in Washington, DC and told me after the experience that they
hate the entire political scene and would never want to become one of those people. Many of these same young people, when the fantasyland of subsidized education comes to a close and the need for a steady job begins to weigh on them, confide things like, “I can’t publish that blog post or I would never get hired by policy group X in DC!” They are careful not to burn bridges, “just in case.”

But if the bridge takes you someplace you know you don’t want to go burning it should be a top priority! There’s a reason Odysseus had himself tied to the mast.

How many people live lives they hate because they couldn’t say no to the salary? How many wallow in misery because they left the door open too long? How many knew a particular path wouldn’t make them happy but they failed to cut off the option and when push came to shove they couldn’t say no to the status or short-term gains in the moment of weakness?

Boldly, definitely choose to do things that make you come alive. If you don’t know what they are, simply start by boldly, definitively not doing things that don’t. Don’t look back, look ahead.

“Build your resume”

GPA, honor rolls, clubs and memberships, etc. etc. There is no end to the list of things you’re told to do to pad your resume. Guess what? Your resume hardly matters, and less every day.

What matters is your ability to create value and your ability to prove it to others. Everyone has a resume with general “skills” like Leadership listed. Everyone has a diploma or degree. What does that prove? That you followed the rules long enough to not get kicked out. I guess that’s something in the eyes of some people, but it’s a pretty thin calling card these days.

Forget about building your resume. Build yourself. Focus on doing things that help you become who you want to be, not just add bullets
to a static list of what you’ve done. Do things that make you better. Do things that create value. Build a brand and narrative to signal it.

An interesting and deep network and a set of experiences and real skills with tangible outcomes will top a piece of parchment. Build product not paper.

“Follow the rules”

There’s this idea that if you just hunker down and follow the rules, you’ll be rewarded. That’s true while in school, but the real world doesn’t care much for rules.

Fundamentally, all school rewards following rules above all else. Entrepreneurs—those who find new, better, faster, easier ways of getting results—are called cheaters or troublemakers in the school setting.

But outside of the classroom value creation is rewarded, and the most valuable innovations are often the ones that break all the rules.

Forget the rules. Solve problems in new ways. Don’t wait your turn, seize opportunities and test ideas now.

“Pick a good major. Pick a growing industry”

Sure, if you’re going to major in something I guess “good” is better than not-good. But what does that really mean?

This advice is usually given as a way to encourage you to go for the guarantee. Well, I hate to break it to you, but there are no guarantees. No major is going to start spitting jobs and money at you automatically. Furthermore, you need to know if starting salary is even something that matters a lot to you, or if other things matter more.

Anyway, your major doesn’t really matter. Outside of fields where it’s legally required, what you major in goes from the most important thing in the world to one of the least the minute you step outside the walls of the academy. Your double major doubly so.

Who you are and what you can do matter. And if you’re trying to pick based on industry aggregates about job placement, you might
have the wrong mindset. The jobs in demand in five or ten or twenty years probably haven’t even been invented yet. Entrepreneurship—increasingly valued whether working in a company, starting a venture, or freelancing—cares not about majors.

Instead of worrying about a major, focus on the skills, knowledge, network, experience, and confidence that are transferable across all careers and categories. As you discover what you love and are good at you’ll narrow down to more specialization. Until then, stop thinking about majors. Real world opportunities are not so generically and conveniently labelled.

“It will be good to have just in case”

A lot of people readily admit that their schooling is boring, dull, expensive, and not helpful for what they really want to do in life.

But they say, “I’m going to stick with it because it will be good to have, just in case.”

I find this a very odd course of action. If you know your top plan is A, why would you completely neglect it and instead spend all your resources on your plan B or C?

Getting a degree “just in case” comes at the expense of focusing on what you really want to do. Furthermore, your degree won’t magically cover your backside should you fail at plan A anyway. If you know you don’t enjoy it and you don’t even really want whatever opportunities it’s supposed to open up, why do it?

Building a vague, nebulous backup plan with four years and six figures is getting in the way of building the actual life you want to live.

“Find companies with job openings and apply”

Blasting resumes to generic job postings isn’t likely to result in the career of your dreams. The beauty is, every company is hiring all the time. They just need to see the value.

Focus on companies or projects or industries or people you want
to work with, not official job titles or descriptions on a jobs board. When you’ve ID’d things that look really fascinating to you, do something valuable for them. Build a website, do a study of their competitors, create a prototype. Go to them and show them how much you love what they do, what you’ve done to help them, and tell them you want to do more.

All the best jobs are not being advertised. They are being created by ambitious, tenacious people who are committed to providing value.

“Get qualified and certified so you can do X”

Just start doing it now.

“Get a good starting salary”

Get a good starting experience. A few thousand dollars may seem like a lot in the prestige or daily expenses column when you’re young, but in the grand scheme it’s peanuts compared to the value of what you spend your time on and who you become.

Go for the best, most amazing opportunities you can, whether they pay a dime upfront or not. It won’t take long to discover that, when you’re doing things that resonate with you, you’re valuable and able to make money at it.

Otherwise one day you might end up with a high paying job you hate and no skills you can take elsewhere.

“Get something with your degree”

After you get a degree there’s a feeling of desperation that, now that you’ve sunk all that money and time, you’d better use that degree for something that requires it.

This is a load of nonsense and likely to hem you in to a life you’re unhappy with.

By all means, if you have an engineering degree and you love engineering, you should start doing it! But if you’ve got a fancy degree
that applies to nothing in particular, or applies to something you don’t really enjoy, stop feeling pressure to “use” your degree.

I know young people who have turned down opportunities they really wanted to take for no other reason than that, “I could have gotten that without this expensive degree.” Well that’s a bummer, but don’t let the mistakes of your past shake you to more mistakes in the future.

Don’t be a slave to what you once thought you wanted. Do what you want to do now, regardless of what your degree says.

“Make your parents proud”

This one will drive you mad. Don’t worry about your parents. Make yourself proud.

The thing is, nearly all parents really just want you to be happy. They simply lack the imagination to conceive of paths to happiness other than the few they know about like doctor, lawyer, or Fortune 500 middle manager.

If you fully and genuinely—without bitterness—go after what you want and they see you happy, they will come around more often than not. If not, too bad. It’s your life and you’ve got to wake up with yourself every day. Be who you want to be.

“Earn and invest your money”

Maybe. But when you’re young what little cash you have isn’t all that valuable compared to the energy, creativity, and potential you have.

Focus less on investing money into a retirement plan answerable to forces totally out of your control and hoping it will magically make you rich when you’re old. Focus more on investing yourself into people, experiences, and skills that you have the ability to change and that can compound quickly.

Invest in yourself. Invest in things that make you more valuable. You are a better investment than the stock market. But don’t mistake
spending money on yourself for investing in yourself. Don’t let the common narrative or sticker price be confused with value. It’s entirely possible that a $20 book on marketing will yield more return on investment than a $60,000 degree.

“Get a job with a good future”

Just get in the door with that first job and ride the company into the sunset with annual cost of living increases, right? Wrong.

This is an extension of the education conveyor belt mindset into the world of careers, and it’s not really even possible anymore, if it ever was desirable.

YOU are your future. Not your job or the company you happen to get paid by. They won’t do the heavy lifting in providing you money, opportunity, and fulfillment. You have to. You may get paid by one or many companies at any time, you may freelance, you may start a business. In all of these, YOU are the company, “Me, Inc.”

Your future is in your hands and can’t be outsourced to any institution, educational or professional.

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I have many times heard the following refrains about education:

“It’s not about learning any one particular thing. It’s about learning how to learn.”

“It’s not about solving any particular problem. It’s about learning how to think.”

The speaker often assumes that kids best learn how to learn and how to think at school. They consider it perfectly fine if the things kids learn in school will not be directly useful to them outside of school because the “meta-skills” of effective learning and thinking are transferable skills that can be applied to picking up marketable knowledge and skills later in life.

But such imposed learning is antithetical to an even more fundamentally important transferable skill: passion.

Passion is the self-motivated devotion to a pursuit. Passion is the ultimate transferable skill, because it is the most powerful motivator for learning and creating in any field.

By definition, passion cannot be taught through compelled lessons. It is a plant that can only grow wild, that cannot be nurtured by anything else except freedom.

Children are born passionate. And, with sufficient freedom, their passion grows with time and experience. At times, passion will reach the pitch of obsession. Children will become obsessed with one
particular activity (a sport, a video game, a creative art, etc.) or subject (a line of toys, dinosaurs, etc.).

To adult eyes, the obsession may seem pointless or excessive. How will exhaustive knowledge about Pokemon ever advance a child’s prospects? But the important part is not that the child is learning about Pokemon per se, but the fact that the child, by following his bliss (to use Joseph Campbell’s phrase), is learning how to immerse himself in something.

This, again, is the ultimate transferable skill. Later, it is this built-up propensity for self-motivated immersion that the individual can harness to master any art, any craft, any trade: from graphic design to computer programming to running a business.

But parents, teachers, and school officials often do their utmost to squelch the development of passion. Children are redirected from their own interests to the pursuits that adults consider more important. And even imposed pursuits are never allowed to be delved into too deeply. In an effort to make the child “well-rounded,” his pursuits are constantly interrupted and rotated. Only shallow explorations are ever allowed.

By the time the child exits the school system, his capacity for passion—for the self-motivated devotion to a pursuit—is completely atrophied. He can no longer follow his bliss, because he has forgotten such a thing even exists. The only thing that can propel him forward toward accomplishing anything is extrinsic motivation and direction from authority figures. At work and in life in general, he is rudderless. He is either towed by others or floats aimlessly through life.

I remember having, in my early childhood, a succession of what I then called “fevers.” A certain subject would dominate my interest for months. But eventually, I would become sated, and move on to the next thing. I would become obsessed with dinosaurs, animals in general (I remember collecting the scientific names of species from issues of National Geographic), and then later He-man, Transformers, etc.
Then my susceptibility to catching such fevers was stunted and worn down by the apathy-fostering grind of compulsory schooling. But after graduating from college, my capacity for passion sprang back with a vengeance. Re-learning the skill of obsession was one of the most important stages in my de-schooling process.

After suffering an existential crisis, I became obsessed with researching theology and cosmology. After realizing I didn’t understand the world around me, I became obsessed with teaching myself world history. After I discovered the ideas of liberty, I became obsessed with teaching myself Austrian economics and libertarian political philosophy. Following my bliss along these paths of obsession eventually led me to a fulfilling and successful career. My only regret is that such a happy development was so long delayed by the life-devouring, spirit-stunting ordeal of being schooled.

Don’t yield to the temptation to frustrate your children’s passions, to check their obsessions. Trust their choices. Let them cultivate their inborn capacity for self-directed devotion to their own pursuits. Passion is their most precious asset: the keystone skill that can beget all other skills. Don’t steal it from them. Let them build it up. It will make you proud some day.

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Your Life, Your Work
Part 4

Personal Finance
I’ve never thought of myself as someone who knows much about personal finance or investing. Yet I keep reading scary statistics about how the average American has less than $1,000 in savings, the typical family has $90,000 in debt, and most cannot pay for a $500 emergency. Furthermore, the lack of good money habits cut across all income levels. I have friends who make far more money than me, but recently complained that they could not take advantage of Amazon Prime Day discounts because pay day was too far away. Friends who amass huge bank accounts, where their money slowly rots from inflation, or gets invested into CD’s, or useless and expensive mutual funds. Friends who panicked when the market crashed, and converted their securities to cash at the worst possible time.

Americans, you can do better! You can save and be a successful investor without becoming an expert or hiring one. By my estimate, a majority of American households would be worth a million dollars by their 40’s if they start early and make a concerted effort.

There are three parts to maximizing your net worth: (1) maximize your earnings (2) minimize your cost of living and (3) maximize the return from your investments.
I will share my financial story so you can see that I learned these lessons the hard way.

**First, I invested my student loans in the stock market — in the early 2000s**

I purchased my first mutual fund at 15, with the first $500 that I earned. That was a smart start, but I followed up with a common setback: I wasted 5 years of my life getting three useless university degrees. A university degree may be necessary for many careers, but in my case, I learned virtually nothing that I used in my career as a software developer.

I made university as cheap as possible by going to a state school and applying for tons of scholarships. I saved money by not having a car until I was 24, worked as a student worker, and had summer jobs. Because I lived so cheaply and worked while at school, I was able to invest my student loans in the stock market, which as you may recall did not do very well in the early 2000’s. I sold my stocks and paid off 100% of my student loans when the interest-free period elapsed, and decided to go with a professional advisor from then on.

**Then, my broker bet everything on sub-prime mortgages**

From 2005 to 2007, I lived cheaply and I sent a significant portion of my income to a broker. Whatever he was doing seemed to be working. What I did not consider is that the market itself did very well—I failed to compare his returns with overall market performance.

When the recession hit in 2007, I lost over 60% of my original investment. Only later did I learn that he invested in subprime mortgage REITs that gave him kickbacks in the form of commissions. His incentive was to sell me funds with the highest commission—not those that controlled risk or maximized my return.
So I fired the professionals and make a killing investing on my own.

After watching my life savings dwindle away for all of 2008, I created a forum thread with an investment strategy based on Peter Schiff’s Crash Proof in January 2009. I transferred everything to E*Trade and invested almost every penny I had in the markets. My return for 2009 from my investment fund was 58%—I made back everything I lost in 2008.

That was a good start, but it was only a start. I invested very little additional capital over the next several years because I started spending...
most of my money on a nice car, restaurants, a fancy wedding, and an apartment that was soon overflowing with stuff I barely used.

My first year investing on my own. Green is my investment account, blue is S&P 500

Then I got rid of all my possessions, moved to China, and adopted a minimalist lifestyle

In 2010, I was making a good income working for an big-name ad agency in midtown Manhattan. I was making great money, but I was not very happy. I worked crazy hours and never saw my wife. The cost of life and taxes for a NYC resident are crazy high, and my friends and relative rarely had time for a vacation. I wanted to see more of the world while my wife and I were still young.

So, I found a job in Shanghai, China. It paid a fraction of what I was earning, but my wife and I decided that life is short, and if we did not see the world while we could, we would always regret it. We only brought with us what we could fit into the two suitcases allowed by the airline.

Once we got to China, we knew we would have the same limitation when we moved on, so we decided not to buy anything we could not carry when we moved to our next destination. Over the next five years, we lived in a series of tiny apartments in central Shanghai (one of the most expensive cities in the world). Yet because we had so few possessions, we felt liberated, not constrained. We found that we did not miss the vast majority of our stuff, and we could move anywhere in the world with just our baggage.

After five years, we decided to move back to the USA. We were able to fit all the possessions for three people in standard airline baggage, plus five medium boxes than we shipped via China Post.

I let a robot manage my life savings and worry about the details

When I returned to the USA, I reviewed what my E*Trade account had been doing while I was in Asia. I saw that it had grown
badly unbalanced—investments that had been successful dominated my portfolio, and moved me away from my intended strategy. To stay true my plan, I would have to re-balance my portfolio multiple times per year, buying and selling many stocks and driving up my costs.

That’s when I decided to switch to a robo-advisor, which would implement my strategy automatically, while minimizing taxes by investing funds in the right tax-category and performing tax loss harvesting.

After some research, I decided to go with Personal Capital, although there are several cheaper options if you don’t care about having access to a personal advisor when you want it.

**Summary: how to make a million bucks by age 40**

Here is a summary what I’ve learned over the last 10 years:

1. Take responsibility for your own career
2. Develop money-saving habits
3. Don’t let your possessions control you: adopt a minimal lifestyle
4. Get rich slowly: select your trading strategy, then automate it

**1: Take responsibility for developing your career path**

Remember that your career is an enterprise. If you want to increase your compensation, you must increase your value to your employer. Do what your employer asks, but also discover what builds value for your employer and focus on that.

Keep in mind that making the value you create visible within your company is your responsibility. Stay on the market and explore new opportunities even if you are happy where you are—this will help you understand your value.

If you get in a rut, be entrepreneurial: there were several times in my career when I felt stuck in a job or a position that either didn’t have the career path that I wanted or did not pay what I was worth. I took
on several freelance projects that boosted my income or helped me leverage into a career shift. It’s not hard to find these opportunities if you’re always looking for them.

2: Develop money-saving habits

The money you are able to invest each month is a simple difference of your earnings minus your expenses. Every small change can make a small difference over many years. Eliminating a $4 coffee every day over 30 years will add $142,000 to your retirement. That’s why I bring my lunch to work, and commute to the office by bike.

To visualize my financial status, I use mint.com and personalcapital.com to track all my expenses and investments. (Mint.com is better at tracking personal expenses and keeping a budget, while Personal Capital is better at more complex situations and investments.) I can quickly identify if a spending category is out of normal range, and I don’t forget about recurring expenses and subscriptions. Mint.com also gives me a nice graph of my net worth from 2008 to today, which helps keep me motivated.

3: Practice minimalism

The real savings in my lifestyle come from minimalism. Here is Joshua Millburn’s take on it:

I understand that my possessions can be replaced. Someone recently asked me what I would grab if my apartment caught fire. “Nothing,” I responded. “Everything I own is replaceable.”

Minimalism is not a radical lifestyle. Minimalism is a tool I use to get rid of unnecessary stuff and live a meaningful life—a life filled with happiness, freedom, and conscious awareness. Because I strip away life’s excess, I’m able to focus on the important parts of life: health, relationships, passions, growth, and contribution.

Here are some ways that a minimalist lifestyle saves us money:
• By biking to work, we are able to eliminate the need for a second car. This saves us $10K/year.

• By keeping possessions to a minimum and owning only what we use, we avoid the need to use a garage or spare room for storage. We can easily fit everything we need to live in a small apartment.

• If we really need something we don’t have, we borrow it.

• We buy very little prepared food. We (well, mostly my wife) can make just about anything from a small set of ingredients. Raw food is cheaper and the result is healthier.

• We visit our library to borrow books, e-books, and movies, as well as passes to local parks & zoos.

• We work out at home using body-weight exercises and swim at the apartment’s pool—no gym memberships needed.

• We buy our daughter’s clothes from resale shops and sell them back when she grows out of them.

• We have a capsule wardrobe. Everything hanging in my closet right now is for use during this summer. Clothes for other seasons are in storage. I don’t own anything I won’t wear over the course of a year.

• When we moved to China, I digitized all my books by sending them to 1DollarScan.

• I can fix shoes, furniture, and most electronics. (It’s not hard to learn.) I buy nice shoes and resole them many times before I wear out the upper. I know how to replace a fuse in a microwave, change the air filter in my car, and I own a glue for every material in the house. I know how
to Google repairs—and I know when to let the experts handle them!

Don’t buy a home:
The New York Times has a great calculator for whether buying or renting makes sense, but if you’re working hard for that million, it generally does not. Yes, buying will generally save you money over renting in the long term, but consider this:

Even if you could buy a new house with cash, chances are that your investments will appreciate far more than your home. So you have to take out a mortgage.

Now you have to worry about the costs of buying the home, paying the mortgage, performing maintenance, and big hassles if you want to move somewhere else. It’s better for you to stay flexible, focus on your family and career and let someone else take care of all the maintenance. (Another great perspective on this.)

4: Get rich slowly

After maximizing the spread between your income and your expenses, you need to leverage the magic of compound returns by investing it in the market.

There as many opinions on investment strategies as there are investors, but unless investing in the market is your full time job, you will probably not beat the market. You may get lucky, but chances are that if you try timing the market, you will be guided by your emotions, and buy high and sell low. Even the best money managers in the world can’t beat the market.

So my suggestion is: just invest in the market. The whole market, not just the S&P 500. You can either invest in an index fund like VTI (USA) + VEU (not USA) or use a robo-trader which buys individual stocks (this can lower costs and save on taxes).

I use Personal Capital. I can’t speak for other robo-traders, but Personal Capital re-balances my portfolio not only by asset class, but
also by market sector, so I’m positioned to benefit from growth in any industry.

The only two questions you need to decide are: how to split domestic versus international stocks, and what to invest in alternative investments (such as gold, REITs, and Bitcoin). If you have trouble with these questions, use the default from a robo-trader, or use my strategy:

My portfolio asset allocation:

Allocation by sector (industry):

An aggressive portfolio can “beat the market” while controlling risk but that’s not the primary goal:
Can I really make a million by 40?

The average historical market return is about 10.7%. A 10.7% return means your money will double every 6.5 years. If you start investing at age 20, and invest $16,300 each year, you can expect just over a million dollars by 40. Saving $1,360 per month is not possible for a typical American, but becomes doable if you follow the career and lifestyle principles mentioned above. (Delaying the start of your career with a college degree would push your million into your mid-40’s.)

David Veksler is the Director of Technology at FEE.

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1 Before accounting for inflation, with dividend reinvestment, and an aggressive portfolio. Read another perspective on $1M by 40, and 12 tips for retiring at 30.
How to Be a Charitable Lazy Millennial

Eileen L. Wittig

This weekend I was out running errands when I realized I had survived for hours without any coffee (no wonder I was cranky about the traffic). Obviously a local coffee shop with a mustache decal on the front window would be ideal, but I wasn’t in the hipster neighborhoods so I had to accept what literally was right in front of me: Starbucks. I got in line, looked up from my phone, and saw a sign, placed conspicuously between their menus: Share the spirit! Buy one holiday drink, get one free to share.

“Aw man, too bad I don’t have anyone with me,” I thought. It seemed like such a waste to pass up free coffee. It pained me. But then I realized how stupid that was. I was in the middle of a huge line. So I did the unthinkable and actually turned around to make eye contact with, and speak to, the person behind me.

The person turned out to be a thirty-something man with his young daughter. “Are you getting one of the holiday drinks?” I asked them. “I think my daughter was just going to get a water,” the man responded, “but I think my wife would probably like one.” “Perfect!”

Three awkward minutes later he asked which of the holiday drinks I’d tried, and what I thought of them. In the end he just decided to get what I was getting. (No, not pumpkin, and not peppermint. How basic
do you think I am?) It took forever to get our drinks, because it isn’t truly Starbucks if it doesn’t take for literally ever, but eventually I gave the man his coffee, said I hoped his wife liked it, and left.

That was it. That was all it took. I didn’t have to go online to find a charity I liked and go through the process of entering my credit card information. I didn’t have to listen to someone nervously give a spiel they’d been trained to memorize. I didn’t have to listen to someone waxing eloquent about their passion making me feel like the slime of the earth for giving less than half my life’s savings. I didn’t have to have a conversation longer than five short sentences per person. I didn’t have to go anywhere I wasn’t going to anyway. But it had the same effect.

That particular promotion has since ended, so it’s a little harder to do this thing since you’ll actually have to spend money on it. But on the other hand, it won’t require any conversation at all—you just have to say to the cashier, “add $5 to my total and subtract $5 from the person’s behind me,” or words to that effect. If you’re in a drive-thru it’s even easier because you won’t have to deal with that person’s thank yous. (Because let’s be real, you kind of just want to do it and get out of there so it’s all over. You have coffee to drink and fries to eat.)

It’s one of those things people say we should do, and we nod, and then never do it. We have this idea that it’s going to be awkward and kind of weird and we’re not even exactly sure how to go about doing it. But now that I’ve given you a script, it should be easy.

We’re constantly looking for new ways to make our own lives easier, and there’s nothing wrong with that. It doesn’t occur to us that we could be using those same things, or the time they save us, to help make someone else’s life easier too. And really, if you can do it while still being lazy, what excuse is left?

Eileen Wittig is the Associate Editor and author of the Lazy Millennial column at FEE.

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Financial Responsibility
Is About Habits, Not Budgeting

David L. Veksler

What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you hear “personal finance?” I bet it’s “balancing a checkbook.”

Do you know anyone who does it? I don’t. Like most people under the age of 40, the only checks I ever write are to the government—to pay for taxes and speeding tickets. Everyone else has moved on. Like most Americans who don’t live in a log cabin in the backwoods, I use a bank account and credit cards that keep a record of all my transactions.

No doubt a written record of transactions was essential during the first five thousand or so years of civilization—until we got online bank accounts and apps with bots who know how to navigate the archaic interfaces of the banking websites and automatically compile an intuitive real-time infographic of your financial status. There’s a category of thousands of apps now in the Android and Apple app stores.

In 2016, I re-integrated into the Western financial system after half a decade in cash-only China. As soon as my plane landed, my feed was flooded with ads for apps promising to budget my spending, repair my credit, and invest for retirement. Popular gimmicks include
redirecting the spare change from purchases into savings, safe-keeping a few dollars each month for a big purchase, and keeping certain categories of spending to a monthly budget.

**Apps Won’t Cure Your Affluenza**

The sense that emerges from these apps, as well as surveys of spending habits, is that Americans have lost self-control over their wallets. Young people are spending more than their entire paycheck each month (the millennial savings rate is negative 2%), and only by various means of self-deception and outside intervention (via hidden or protected savings accounts) can they ever save a few pennies for anything beyond momentary whims.

For those afflicted by a lack of good finance habits, I have news: The whole concept of “budgeting” as we know it is flawed and counterproductive. Financial responsibility and abundance requires developing good habits and a healthy relationship with material possessions.

Suppose that you were overweight because your diet was mostly junk food. What if I asked you to start following a “calorie budget?” Eating a bunch of carbs will cause your blood sugar to spike. When you suddenly cut off their source, your blood sugar will drop and you will get tired, moody, and develop an insatiable craving for more sugar. Failure is inevitable.

Bad spending habits work the same way: you buy whatever fills your craving at the moment. The sugar high is replaced by the rush of getting a shiny new thing. Soon after, the high wears off, and the craving for more stuff returns. Instead of driving up your blood sugar and destroying your arteries, you are driving up your debt and destroying your retirement prospects.
We’re Addicted to Junk

It’s no coincidence that modern Western societies are the first to have a large portion of the population addicted to both things and food—for the first time in history, we have the wealth (and credit) to buy a near-unlimited supply of both stuff and food. Something similar has happened with our sleep: artificial lightning plus the ever-present Internet divorced sleep from daylight, causing an epidemic of both sleep deprivation and insomnia. People stay up late seeking cheap stimulation, drug themselves with coffee in the morning, and stumble through their lives.

I often see people buy a thing as a substitute for the experience the object provides. For example, many people will buy a gym membership because they want to get in shape. But having bought the membership, they make no effort to use it, because they act as if the purchase itself will achieve their goal. Likewise, people buy books they never read as if owning the book itself will bring knowledge.

Our addiction for stuff does not only affect our credit cards. Like the fat we accumulate from a bad diet, our stuff accumulates and becomes an anchor which ties us down. The 21st century demands that work be nimble and mobile—seizing opportunities whenever they may be. I followed opportunities across states, countries, and then continents during my brief career. This is impossible to do with a house, the stuff filling it, and the debt to pay for it all weigh you down. When I got an offer to work in Asia, my wife and I packed two suitcases each and got on a flight. Five years later, we flew back with the same four suitcases.

Develop an abundance mindset

Don’t budget. Don’t save the spare change from every transaction, or hide it in a hidden bank account. Beware the scarcity mindset—saving is not an act of suffering and denial, but an act of exchanging a momentary pleasure for a longer-term value: the big-ticket item
you are saving up to buy, such as a house or retirement. $1 saved and invested today becomes $10 in 30 years if you invest in the market.

Three Steps to Responsible Spending Habits

1: Monitor and reflect on every transaction. Use Personal Capital or Mint to track every transaction across all your accounts and cards. Instead of reviewing your credit card statement once a month, set up push notifications for every transaction. Develop an intuition for how much you spend for every category. At first, you won’t have the self-control to stop yourself before you buy stuff. Reflect on every purchase and think about whether the pleasure of spending money now is worth delaying a life of financial success and independence.

2: Discover what makes you happy. Focus your energy on things that make you a happier and healthier person, not distractions and momentary pleasures. I save a fortune each year by biking to work, bringing my lunch to work, and living in a small apartment. At the same time, I’m not afraid to invest time, money, and energy into hobbies that I’m passionate about.

3: Make your money work for you. There is only so much you can save every month. Long-term financial success requires investing in yourself by increasing your income and making your money work for you while you enjoy life. Develop your career, and make your money work for you through smart investments.

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Part 5

Lifestyle, Culture, and Politics
The year was 1835.

In a small skirmish near Gonzales, Texas, 130 Texan revolutionaries defeated a small force of Mexican infantry sent to capture the garrison cannon.

This wasn’t just any artillery—the cannon had been gifted to the town of Gonzales by the Mexican government 4 years prior. Now, with war on the horizon, the Mexican government wanted it back.

The Inspiration

The Texans responded with a legendary act of defiance: they raised a small flag above the town that read, “Come And Take It.”

And thus began the Texas War For Independence.

For thousands of years, revolutionaries who wanted to change the
world had few options: They could play politics, protest, or fight. (The latter was a last resort to violence. The former was simply a threat of violence—not much better, and a marginal improvement at best.)

Inherent in all of these strategies is an “us versus them” mentality—a tribal paradigm and a zero-sum game of we win, they lose. Today, more and more people are looking for another way.

Go and Make It

It turns out, we don’t have to fight for a better future. We can create one.

What would happen if we harnessed the same revolutionary spirit of “Come And Take It,” and reimagined a more creative, entrepreneurial declaration? “Go And Make it.”

The New Era

What if we stopped attacking people for a cause and started attracting people to a cause? What if we became creators instead of mere critics and conquerors? Rather than waging war—either figuratively (in arguing) or literally—what if we channeled all of our passion and energy into disruptive acts of creation?

What if we bypassed electoral politics and established a more cooperative era...one in which the best ideas win?
In this new age, politicians would be replaced by innovators. Political capital would be replaced by creative capital.

Social change would not be planned by bureaucrats. It would emerge from the collective creativity of artists, scientists, and entrepreneurs working in cooperation.

Can you imagine a future like this? Is it possible? If it were, we would probably expect futuristic ideas like floating cities, digital currencies, and space travel to become a reality in our lifetimes.

Yesterday’s revolutionaries resisted tyranny with swords, rifles, and cannons. Today’s revolutionaries are able to disrupt the status quo peacefully—with software code, 3D printers, and digital currencies.

This paradigm shift isn’t just philosophical—it’s also practical. Think about it: the costs of agitating, electioneering and protest are high. When you go and make it, you criticize by creating.

Creating is more effective than conquering. It creates prosperity, stability, and cooperation.

Like What?

Consider Uber—rather than organizing political protests against the taxicab economic cartel, innovative entrepreneurs simply created a better solution. Airbnb turned middle-class homeowners into entrepreneurs, almost overnight. It is now the world’s largest “hotel” chain.

Praxis reimagined higher education, and created an alternative to college that’s less than the cost of one semester at most universities.

3D printing technology is democratizing manufacturing, and making it easier than ever for visionary startups to bring new products to market.

Crowdfunding is decentralizing the world of finance, and making it possible for just about anyone to attract investment capital.

It’s no longer about who you know…it’s about what you create. And that’s a good thing.

Today’s revolutionaries are not guerilla warriors, political assassins,
or resistance fighters. They are software programmers, scientists, and entrepreneurs. Some will succeed and others will fail, but the games of tit-for-tat and king of the mountain are being replaced by solutions that make nearly everybody better off.

In the coming age of biohacking, social technologies, even floating ocean cities—the fastest way to change the world is not to dare our enemies to come and take it.

It’s time to rally around a new banner.

Go and make it.

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Virtue Signaling: Why Political Debates on the Internet Are So Often Pointless

Dan Sanchez

Have you ever noticed how frustrating it is to argue with people about politics on the Internet: like trying to use your head to knock down a brick wall? Well, keep in mind that the feeling is probably mutual.

But also consider the practical utility of that brick wall: the rational interest many people have in being close-minded and wedded to false beliefs. As economist Bryan Caplan has written:

...irrationality, like ignorance, is sensitive to price, and false beliefs about politics and religion are cheap. If you underestimate the costs of excessive drinking, you can ruin your life. In contrast, if you underestimate the benefits of immigration, or the evidence in favor of the theory of evolution, what happens to you? In all probability, the same thing that would have happened to you if you knew the whole truth.

False beliefs about economics and political philosophy may be
devastating in aggregate, but for the individual the cost of choosing to embrace fallacy is negligible. So, as Caplan argues, it is perfectly rational for many to stubbornly cling to false but “emotionally appealing” beliefs. There are no individual, internalized costs that could possibly outweigh whatever emotional benefit the false belief might have.

Caplan wrote the passage quoted above in 2006. Last year, British writer James Bartholomew coined a term and crystallized a concept that is highly complementary to Caplan’s analysis: virtue signaling.

Virtue and Vanity

Most of what passes for political discourse on the Internet does not consist of actual attempts to persuade. Rather, the opiners are like preening birds, chirping for anyone within earshot to signal that, “I am a decent, virtuous person,” usually adding, “unlike the troglodyte rightwingers or degenerate leftists I’m denouncing.”

Such virtue signaling is socially profitable. When others in your social set detect that you faithfully subscribe to that set’s orthodoxy, they become better disposed toward you. This can result in professional, social, even romantic opportunities.

And just as holding a comforting false belief is rock-bottom cheap, so is expressing a socially-advantageous false belief.

But in addition to this rational interest, there is a compulsive, pathological component to virtue signaling as well. That part is baggage from the way we are all raised as kids.

Political Tattling

When children are free to learn from undirected experiences, they learn to conceive of truth as something that guides the successful pursuit of their own goals. But in the domineering, tightly-directed environments of school and the modern household, we condition our children to conceive of truth as received wisdom handed down by authority.
Children are largely deprived of the noble joy of discovering truths as revealed by successful action. Instead they are left with the ignoble gratification of pleasing a taskmaster by reciting an answer that is marked “correct.” And this goes far beyond academics. For the modern child, learning “good behavior” is not about discovering through trial and error what kinds of behaviors are conducive to thriving socially. Instead, it’s about winning praise and avoiding censure from authority figures.

Thanks to this conditioning, we have all become approval-junkies, always on the lookout for our next fix of external validation: for the next little rush of dopamine we get whenever we are patted on the head by others for being a “good boy” or a “good girl,” for exhibiting the right behavior, for giving the right answer, for expressing the right opinion.

This is why the mania for virtue signaling is so ubiquitous, and why orthodoxies are so impervious. Expressing political opinions is not about hammering out useful truths through the crucible of debate, but about signaling one’s own virtue by “tattling” on others for being unvirtuous: for being crypto-commies or crypto-fascists; for being closet racists or race-traitor “cucks;” for being enemies of the poor or apologists for criminals.

Much of our political debate consists of our abused inner children basically calling out, “Teacher, teacher, look at me. I followed the rules, but Johnny didn’t. Johnny is a bad boy, and he said a mean word, too. Teacher look what Trump said. He should say sorry. Teacher look what Hillary did. You should give her detention.”

You can’t expect much enlightenment to emerge from this level of discourse.

An Alternative Approach to Advancing Liberty

This may make the situation seem hopeless for advocates of the freedom philosophy. How can we convince the public about the
virtues of freedom, when they are only concerned with signaling their own virtue and are so heedless of argument and reason?

One solution might be to focus on how the freedom philosophy can benefit people in their own lives individually.

For example, children thrive and develop wonderfully under freedom: when their parents adopt unschooling and peaceful parenting. Parents can deny this; they can cling to their false authoritarian beliefs about child rearing. But, unlike with public policy questions, being wrong on the question of parenting is extremely expensive on the individual level. Parents can choose to virtue signal that they, like all “decent” people, support public schools and condemn their kids to a decade-plus sentence of forced desk labor, but only if they pay the cost: ending up with alienated, stressed-out, frivolous kids with no spirit of enterprise.

Unlike with policy debates, parents actually have a direct, internalized stake in arriving at the right answer to the parenting question. Once parents accept that the freedom philosophy is true when it comes to their children, it will be easier for them to see how it is true for society in general. And children raised in freedom are more apt to recognize its virtues across the board as well. It’s hard to imagine an unschooled kid growing up to be an authoritarian adult.

Also, adults who have already been institutionalized by schools and made neurotic by domineering parents often imbibe a docile, dependent, permission-based mindset that holds them back in their career and in life in general. And they often find themselves gravitating toward unfree environments, routines, and relationships that compound the damage done in their childhoods.

Understanding the freedom philosophy (especially the character-building nature of liberty and the character-corroding natures of both power and servitude) can be an individual’s first step toward breaking free from these destructive mindsets and environments. (Indeed, even many libertarians have not deinstitutionalized themselves in this way.)
And again, concerning this question, the seeker of self-improvement actually has skin in the game, and so has every interest in being open to a philosophy that can turn his/her life around.

This is the kind of approach that the exciting company Praxis has taken: using the freedom philosophy, deschooling, and the spirit of entrepreneurship to help launch the careers and change the lives of young people from all across the country.

Imagine a world-wide libertarian community that consists of fewer Internet virtue-signalers and would-be politicos, and an ever-rising number of entrepreneurial, wealth-building, value-creating, life-affirming individuals who astound and inspire all who know them. What exemplars of, and walking arguments for, the greatness of liberty such men and women would be.

Maybe freedom lovers should stop expending so much energy bashing our heads against the brick wall of policy disputation, and instead try the open door of appealing to self-interest: by promoting the freedom philosophy, not just as a political philosophy, but as a life philosophy.

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Why I Rent a Tiny Apartment Rather than Buy a Big Home

David L. Veksler

For one hundred plus years, Americans have been told that owning a home embodies the ideal, an essential life goal. After the housing crash of 2008, that unquestioned ideal is no more. What precisely is wrong with renting? And what is wrong with renting something small?

These days, I live in Atlanta, Georgia. A few days a week, my wife and I take our daughter to the park next door, which is in an upscale neighborhood. Occasionally we strike up conversations with the other parents there. Sooner or later, the question of where we live comes up, and we casually mention that we live in an apartment complex. I still remember the first reaction to my answer—I was instantly branded as a member of the lower-class. At this point, any chance of a play date or further social connection was permanently rejected.

Home Ownership and Social Status

It’s true—my family of three lives in a small one-bedroom apartment. It’s a pretty nice apartment, in a good neighborhood, but that’s irrelevant. The fact that I have not bought a house for my family makes us outcasts, poor, financially irresponsible, or otherwise unsuitable for
social company. Wouldn’t any responsible parent get a home for their children?

Most Fridays, some friends of ours come over to our complex so our kids can play in the pool. Having a pool next door is one of the perks of living in an apartment complex. Living next to a big city park is another. Living next to my office, so I can get to work in less than five minutes is a third. I spend less of my life in traffic—and I spend it on my bike.

If the parents at the park bothered to ask, they would learn that living in a small apartment is a lifestyle choice, not something we do out of financial necessity. In fact, chances are good that our financial situation is better than theirs—and a big part of that is our decision not to buy a home. I’m won’t rehash the reasons for that here—read these posts.

What I want to address is the American habit of treating the home as a spaceship—a self-contained ecosystem which is expected to provide for all their needs.

It Takes a Village

When I was a little boy growing up in Ukraine, from the age of six on, I would wander our village all day, coming in only for meals. Often I would have to be found and dragged in. I wandered around the stadium and construction sites, using the frames and air ducts of buildings as makeshift jungle gym, the piles of sand as targets for jumping from the second floor.

When I moved with my family to San Antonio, Texas as a teenager, I spent summers exploring the city by bike, even as temperatures soared past 100 degrees. From my bike, I saw the contrast between people who in air-conditioned bubbles and those who embrace everything their city has to offer.

From the time I was a small child to today, my home has always been a place to eat and sleep, and occasionally work. However, when
I want social company, entertainment, play, adventure, a place to concentrate on work, or relax, it is far lower on my list of options.

A Different Ideal

My ideal home has two rooms: a bedroom to sleep in, and a kitchen to cook in. These are things which I have personal preferences about and am willing to maintain.

Everything else, I would prefer to outsource for someone else to maintain. Every extra square foot or possession is a liability—something I have to spend time and money maintaining rather than enjoying life.

The other day, our three year old daughter was playing with her rocking horse. She had flipped it over and was pretending that it was a kitchen stove. She asked me if I wanted some eggs and then pantomimed in surprising detail the process of cracking eggs, washing hands, frying eggs over easy, and serving them to me.

I remarked to my wife that perhaps Sophie needs a play kitchen. She said no—first, as I just saw, her imagination served her just fine, and second, she knows how to cook many foods because she has helped her mommy many times in a real kitchen. She has her own kitchen utensils, including a sharp knife and a vegetable peeler, and helps out to the best of her physical and mental abilities.

The real world is her playground. When she needs to burn off energy, she goes to the park. When she wants to be creative, she plays with legos and paint. When she wants social company, she plays with us or friends. (We have a maximum of an hour of screen time per day.)

The real world is my playground too. When I want to relax, I meditate in the park. When I want to exercise, I ride my bike around the city. If I want adventure—well, the Appalachian trail starts less than two hours North from here. When I want to concentrate, I go to the office next door. When I want social company, I go to the pool or cafe. When I want entertainment—well, usually I’m too busy living my
own life to follow the stories Hollywood comes up with, but my laptop screen works just fine.

There are many examples I could give, but my point is: your house is not a spaceship lost in space. Whether you have a family or live alone, make the whole world your home. It’s far bigger and more wonderful than any poor imitation you could try to recreate on your own. I’m not saying that you should never buy a house. Just don’t make it your life ambition, much less try to fit your entire life inside it.

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Post-Election Advice
to Optimists, Pessimists,
and Cynics

Dan Sanchez

Whatever you’ve been feeling since the election, it’s probably been pretty intense.

To the Pessimist

Maybe you’re thinking: this is the end, the final season of the Netflix show “America,” in which every episode is darker than the last until the grim finale. That your life’s prospects have dimmed. What kind of lives will your children have?

You have been anxious for a whole year, as the most ugly and bizarre presidential campaign in memory trudged on. And now that it has culminated in catastrophe, you’ve slipped into despair and maybe rage. You may even be grappling with depression or an urge to be violent. I’ve heard mention of busy suicide hotlines and universities offering Trump-related grief counseling. I’ve seen videos of beatings, vandalism, and arson.

Serenity and peace be with you. Know this: you and you alone are the predominant factor in your life. Your prospects are a function of the care you devote to your own affairs. Figures like presidents do limit
Your horizons. But you only compound the harm they inflict on you when you give them your precious attention. You may think you are fighting Trump, but you are actually yielding to him: voluntarily yielding to him your personal power, even beyond the self-sovereignty he and others take from you involuntarily.

You have negligible sway over national affairs, but profound influence over your own. When you fret over the former, you distress yourself over things you cannot control. By making such fretting a permanent part of your life, you condemn yourself to endlessly recurrent bouts of deep frustration and feelings of impotence.

Such burdensome emotions are debilitating. But what is most debilitating is the fact that you are constantly squandering precious time, effort, and emotional reserves that could have otherwise gone directly toward actually improving your own life. Toward creating opportunities for yourself and your family. Toward circumventing and thereby nullifying the impositions and threats made by men like Trump.

To the Optimist

Maybe instead you’re thinking, this is the beginning, the first step toward an America made great again; what an epic time to be alive! You may even be inspired to join his army of supporters: to show up for him at rallies or wield your powers of disputation for him online.

This kind of “optimism” can be just as debilitating as the above kind of pessimism, and for the same basic reason. It too involves a fruitless and costly preoccupation with the choices of others: choices over which you ultimately have no control.

Resting your hope for the future on faith in an all-too-human savior figure is fraught with personal risk and moral hazard. Politicians especially are notorious for failing to live up to their promises. As the Bible says, “Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in
whom there is no help." If you do, you will sow the seeds for the bitter fruit of disappointment in the ripeness of time.

Moreover, even if you welcome Donald Trump’s presidency and how it unfolds, it will unfold with or without you. The Donald doesn’t need you to wear his hats or shout his name. His supporters, like his detractors, are a sea of humanity. Your support would be but a drop in an ocean. Even if you think the rising tide of that sea will lift your boat, the drop you contribute to that tide would be negligible.

But if you instead expended that same scarce attention, time, effort, and energy into improving your own life, the impact would be the opposite of negligible.

Donald Trump won’t help you finally figure out a diet and exercise regimen that you can stick to. He won’t put in the work and creativity necessary to land you that high-paying gig or promotion. He won’t fix the lock on your door to keep your family safe. All of those things are up to you.

The Donald doesn’t need you. Your life needs you: all of you.

To the Cynic

Maybe you’ve transcended both of the above kinds of illusions, yet you are fixated on the spectacle nonetheless. Perhaps you are indulging in a bit of schadenfreude: relishing “delicious liberal tears.” How you get your kicks is your business, and not mine. But, in case you are in a stage of personal development where you find this question useful, ask yourself: is indulging in spitefulness worth it? Does it fill your thoughts with corrosive ill will? Is it distracting? Does it contribute toward you becoming the person you want to be? Are there higher, more constructive forms of entertainment you might enjoy more fully?

Screwtape’s Campaign

I close with a letter that has been making the rounds online. Apparently, it is Screwtape Letters “fanfic” and not actually written
by C.S. Lewis. But it would have fit perfectly in the book, and it is very pertinent to the inner Sturm und Drang afflicting Americans right now:

My Dear Wormwood,

Be sure that the patient remains completely fixated on politics. Arguments, political gossip, and obsessing on the faults of people they have never met serves as an excellent distraction from advancing in personal virtue, character, and the things the patient can control. Make sure to keep the patient in a constant state of angst, frustration and general disdain towards the rest of the human race in order to avoid any kind of charity or inner peace from further developing. Ensure that the patient continues to believe that the problem is “out there” in the “broken system” rather than recognizing there is a problem with himself.

Keep up the good work,

Uncle Screwtape

Originally published at FEE.org on November 10, 2016.
Hundreds of liberty-loving students, professionals, and entrepreneurs recently gathered in Atlanta for the first-ever FEEcon, an event celebrating the ideas of freedom and free enterprise. Judging from attendee feedback, it was a smashing success.

But it raises an interesting question. A skeptic might ask, “Isn’t a gathering of individualists a contradiction in terms?” Such a critic might have been even more flabbergasted had he attended. The conference was successful, not only because of meticulous planning (perhaps another shocking word in this context), but because of the communal spirit of the attendees.

Here were freedom-minded individualists following instructions and schedules, adhering to rules, moving in groups, and behaving conscientiously toward each other.

Here were apologists for capitalism generously sharing ideas and their precious time with one another, generally without the promise of pay.

Many of those who shared most generously were admirers of Adam Smith, who famously wrote of the importance of self-interest, and of Ayn Rand, who explicitly denounced altruism and even wrote a book titled “The Virtue of Selfishness.”
What explains this seeming paradox? How can adherents of a philosophy so preoccupied with the prefix “self” (self-interest, selfishness, self-ownership, self-reliance, etc.) be so considerate and solicitous toward others? Wouldn’t you expect them to be narcissistic and misanthropic, miserly and hermit-like?

Smithian Self-Interest

The truth is, the self-interest-centered individualism of the centuries-old classical liberal tradition has never been antisocial. Indeed, from the beginning, one of its main objectives has been to explain and promote human communities.

Adam Smith, one of liberalism’s founding fathers, analyzed the effects of “self-love” for the purpose of explaining how a market society works. He famously wrote in the *Wealth of Nations* (emphasis added):

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages.

Smith explained how, through the market, the private “selfishness” of the individual inadvertently advances the public good:

> Every individual... neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it... he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.

Many consider this aspect of the market society to be excessively calculating, even cynical, leaving no room for authentic fraternity. Some go so far as to demand the abolition of capitalism in favor of
socialism in order to fully restore benevolence and the intentional promotion of the public interest in the hearts of humankind.

Others grudgingly concede the necessity of self-interest in economic matters, but want to keep it quarantined in the marketplace, and even there to have its excesses mitigated by “public-minded” governmental and moral regulation. They seek to exclude toxic self-interest from the non-commercial aspects of society: from matters of friendship, family, civil society, etc. In these realms, altruism must reign, lest self-interest breed destructive antagonism.

As some skeptics of the free market have eagerly pointed out, even Adam Smith regarded selfless benevolence as an essential part of the human condition. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he wrote:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.

20th Century Selfishness

Yet, Ayn Rand and her protege Nathaniel Branden (who co-authored *The Virtue of Selfishness*) would have none of such half-measures. Rand’s Objectivism was not merely a political and economic doctrine, but a thoroughgoing life philosophy. And according to it, altruism was an absolute vice, and selfishness an unmixed virtue.

And Harry Browne, in his popular book *How I Found Freedom In an Unfree World*, also advanced a profoundly self-oriented life philosophy. His idea of personal freedom entailed a complete psychological emancipation of the individual from the demands of others, and a careful avoidance of what he called “the unselfishness trap.”

These 20th-century strands of individualism were even more radically self-oriented and anti-altruistic than their 18th-century predecessors. Many consider them to be a bridge too far: perhaps several
bridges. To them, Smithian self-interest was already unpleasantly calculating, but Randian selfishness goes to noxious and antisocial extremes. Many blame such schools of individualist thought for the Reagan-era rise of capitalist greed that, to this day, threatens to sink the world economy in a whirlpool of rampant fraud and predatory business practices.

Are these concerns well-founded? Does selfish individualism need to be tempered by the imposition of at least some selfless collectivism, lest the Gordon Gekkos of the world drive the world to destruction while spouting “greed is good”? Does the wild ego need to be tamed, if not by governmental checks, at least by moral hectoring to guilt-trip individuals into considering the well-being of the tribe?

Rand, Branden, and Browne certainly didn’t think so.

As Ayn Rand wrote:

Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights...

Nathaniel Branden pointed out that:

Contrary to the belief that an individualistic orientation inclines one to antisocial behavior, research shows that a well-developed sense of personal value and autonomy correlates significantly with kindness, generosity, social cooperation, and a spirit of mutual aid...

And Harry Browne clarified that:

An efficiently selfish person is sensitive to the needs and desires of others. But he doesn’t consider those desires to be demands upon him. Rather, he sees them as opportunities—potential exchanges that might be beneficial to him. He identifies desires in others so that he can decide if exchanges with them will help him get what he wants.
Self-Interest and Honest Business

As individualists have long emphasized, self-interest draws individuals toward mutually advantageous exchanges: toward “doing business” with one another.

Moreover, contrary to the caricature of the greedy businessman who would sell his own mother down the river for an extra buck, self-interest also draws individuals toward doing honest business with each other.

And this is not mainly because they are self-interested in staying out of jail. As Edward Peter Stringham demonstrated in his book *Private Governance: Creating Order in Economic and Social Life*, what keeps businesspeople honest is not regulation (which actually fosters moral hazard), nor even primarily the government enforcement of contracts or laws against fraud. What primarily disincentivizes commercial criminality is what Adam Smith called “the discipline of continuous dealings.” As Stringham wrote:

According to Smith, with repeated interactions people have an incentive to follow through with their contracts or else others will not want to deal with them.

And such reputational concerns are a matter of self-interest: of the realization that, for the sake of one’s own interests, “honesty is the best policy,” as is justice in general.

Self-Interest and Human Society

Indeed, human society itself originated out of self-interest, and not, as some claim, out of a human capacity for pure, selfless benevolence. As Ludwig von Mises wrote in *Human Action*:

Within the frame of social cooperation there can emerge between members of society feelings of sympathy and friendship and a sense of belonging together. These feelings are the source of man’s most delightful and most
sublime experiences. They are the most precious adornment of life; they lift the animal species man to the heights of a really human existence. However, they are not, as some have asserted, the agents that have brought about social relationships. They are fruits of social cooperation, they thrive only within its frame; they did not precede the establishment of social relations and are not the seed from which they spring.

In other words, society is a prerequisite for, not a result of, selfless benevolence. The ultimate source of society, according to Mises, is the human individual’s pursuit of his own improved sustenance, security, and flourishing through the division of labor:

The fundamental facts that brought about cooperation, society, and civilization and transformed the animal man into a human being are the facts that work performed under the division of labor is more productive than isolated work and that man’s reason is capable of recognizing this truth.

This is necessarily the case since:

But for these facts men would have forever remained deadly foes of one another, irreconcilable rivals in their endeavors to secure a portion of the scarce supply of means of sustenance provided by nature. Each man would have been forced to view all other men as his enemies; his craving for the satisfaction of his own appetites would have brought him into an implacable conflict with all his neighbors. No sympathy could possibly develop under such a state of affairs.

Only the abundance offered by the division of labor could have ever led pre-humanity to extricate itself from the dog-eat-dog law of the jungle, the Hobbesian war of all against all, the state of “nature,
red in tooth and claw.” And only to the degree that such an escape was made was the luxuries of friendliness and a spirit of community extending beyond the pre-human pack even conceivable. Again, Mises:

What makes friendly relations between human beings possible is the higher productivity of the division of labor. It removes the natural conflict of interests. For where there is division of labor, there is no longer question of the distribution of a supply not capable of enlargement. Thanks to the higher productivity of labor performed under the division of tasks, the supply of goods multiplies. A preeminent common interest, the preservation and further intensification of social cooperation, becomes paramount and obliterates all essential collisions.

Humans become “socialized,” not by sacrificing their own interests for the sake of a deified abstraction called society, but by pursuing their own self-interest through harnessing the division of labor, which is almost always more productive than isolated labor owing to the Law of Comparative Advantage. As Mises put it:

If and as far as labor under the division of labor is more productive than isolated labor, and if and as far as man is able to realize this fact, human action itself tends toward cooperation and association; man becomes a social being not in sacrificing his own concerns for the sake of a mythical Moloch, society, but in aiming at an improvement in his own welfare.

Man is, as Aristotle said, the social animal, not because he is kind-hearted and community-minded. Homo sapiens is social, kind-hearted, and community-minded precisely because he is sapient: wise enough to understand that his own interests are better served through cooperation and peace than through isolation and predation.

And according to Mises, the pursuit of self-interest through the
division of labor not only explains the origin of society, but its continued evolution:

The factor that brought about primitive society and daily works toward its progressive intensification is human action that is animated by the insight into the higher productivity of labor achieved under the division of labor.

Economic partners will not want to continue dividing their labor with you if you murder their brothers, abduct and enslave their children, or raid their storehouses. Thus the self-interested pursuit of the division of labor fosters the discipline of continuous dealings, which in turn drives the development of such basic societal norms as the general renunciation of murder, kidnapping, and theft (also known as the rights to life, liberty, and property). It also drives the development of less-fundamental norms like manners, which further grease the gears of cooperation and decrease social friction.

Self-Interest and Education

This explains the rise of friendly norms in broad strokes, but how does it actually occur on the individual level?

The individual’s basic character—the way she habitually deals with fellow humans, including her basic moral principles, her manners, and her other social virtues—is formed in childhood through education.

By “education,” I do not mean “schooling.” Education is social learning: learning from others, whether through listening, observation, or interaction. Education occurs with or without school. (In fact, virtually all schooling has been an outright hindrance to education.)

Many assume that the way to educate and “socialize” a child is by conditioning her to suppress her self-interest: to foster in her due regard for others through paternalistic controls, exercises, rewards, and admonishments. The idea is that, without being inculcated into a certain degree of selfless benevolence and concern for the collective, a
child’s natural, unchecked self-interestedness will make her narcissistic, cold, cruel, and in some cases even sociopathic.

However, as developmental psychologist Dr. Peter Gray demonstrates in his must-read book *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*, character education does not primarily occur through involuntary, top-down, engineered “instructions” in virtue, but through the unplanned lessons that emerge out of social interactions in general, and especially with other children of various ages through voluntary social play. As Gray writes:

Social play (that is, all play that involves more than one player) is, by its very nature, a continuous exercise in cooperation, attention to one another’s needs, and consensual decision-making. Play is not something one has to do; players are always free to quit. In social play, each player knows that anyone who feels unhappy will quit, and if too many quit, the game ends. To keep the game going, players must satisfy not only their own desires but also those of the other players. The intense drive that children have to play with other children, therefore, is a powerful force for them to learn how to attend to others’ wishes and negotiate differences. Research in our culture has shown repeatedly that even preschool children engage in enormous amounts of negotiation and compromise in the context of play...¹

In free play, playmates have the right to quit, just as in the free market, potential economic partners “reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.” So the self-interested pursuit of play, like the self-interested pursuit of the division of labor, fosters the discipline of continuous dealings, which in turn cultivates the childhood development of morality and manners. Playmates will not want to continue playing
with you if you hurt their bodies with blows or hurt their feelings with cruel words.

It is through the experience of actually socializing, and not through adult finger-wagging, that children truly learn what kind of behavior is prosocial (that which wins, preserves, and builds relationships with playmates) and what kind of behavior is antisocial (that which drives playmates away). Children are naturally play-loving, so they have every interest in adopting pro-social/pro-play behavior. When this behavior becomes habitual it becomes what we call the child’s burgeoning “character” and “personal code of conduct.”

The self-interested pursuit of free social play is how children learn morality and manners, in order to win friends and influence playmates. Tragically, for over a century, the compulsory schooling movement has been waging an ever-growing war on free social play. This war has fully enlisted parents as well, as manifested in the present-day ubiquity of helicopter parenting. The decline of play has contributed to a wide range of emotional and psychological problems, especially among young people today.

**Self-Interest and Generosity of Spirit**

In the 1930s, Dale Carnegie wrote a book that has, ever since, informed adults about the basic social principles they could have learned as a small child through enough free social play, and that could have been reinforced by later work experience (which has since been all-but abolished for minors).

Anyone who has read Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* knows that the book basically counsels the reader to be abundantly friendly, kind, considerate, and solicitous toward others. Such advice might be found in any book of morals. But what has made Carnegie’s book such a perennial bestseller and such a life-changing read for generations of people is that, through case study after case study, he convincingly shows how such conduct is exceedingly good
for business and leads to a flourishing, happy life. The convincing presentation motivates readers to actually try out Carnegie's advice, and they invariably discover that it works like a charm.

As Carnegie's readers see confirmed by experience, behaving in a friendly and generous way toward others they encounter in their lives is in their own self-interest, because it builds good favor, or what is known today as “social capital,” and such social capital generally yields exceedingly good returns. For people who try it long enough, being friendly and generous eventually becomes a habit, and even a source of immediate pleasure, and thus an end in itself.

The universal effectiveness of Dale Carnegie's teachings should put to rest the concern that self-interest, unchecked by governmental regulations or moral dogmas, would at worst break down society, and at best create a coldly calculating one. There is no unit of account for social capital. And one can’t be consistently friendly and generous without learning to love it and without it becoming second nature.

The Paradox of Self-Love

Thus, it makes perfect sense that a conference full of self-interested, commerce-oriented individualists and entrepreneurs would go so swimmingly. While others may strive for self-aggrandizement through the exercise of power (perhaps excused by posing as victims) and through vanity-infused virtue signaling, individualists are more likely to seek self-advancement through voluntary exchange, which includes not only formal trades, but the loose reciprocities of courtesy and friendship.

When it is not simply a matter of neurotic and compulsive obedience to expectations (and there is nothing commendable about compulsory virtue), conspicuous altruism is often paradoxically a vehicle for a posturing and self-righteous moral narcissism.

The flipside of this paradox is that what Adam Smith called “self-love” is actually the only solid bedrock for an authentic love of one's
fellow humans, as well as the only firm foundation for a friendly and flourishing society.

1 Gray cites the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky to further elaborate how morality emerges out of play:

   Play is freely chosen activity, but it is not free-form activity. Play always has structure, derived from rules in the player’s mind.

To play is to behave in accordance with self-chosen rules.

...every form of play involves a good deal of self-control. When not playing, children (and adults, too) may act according to their immediate biological needs, emotions, and whims, but in play they must act in ways that they and their playmates deem appropriate to the game. Play draws and fascinates the player precisely because it is structured by rules the player herself or himself has invented or accepted. The student of play who most strongly emphasized play’s rule-based nature was the above-mentioned Vygotsky. In an essay on the role of play in development, originally published in 1933, Vygotsky commented on the apparent paradox between the idea that play is spontaneous and free and the idea that players must follow rules:

‘The ... paradox is that in play [the child] adopts the line of least resistance—she does what she most feels like doing because play is connected with pleasure—and at the same time she learns to follow the line of greatest resistance by subordinating herself to rules and thereby renouncing what she wants, since subjection to rules and renunciation of impulsive action constitute the path to maximum
pleasure in play. Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse. At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rules of the game and what she would do if she could suddenly act spontaneously. . . . Thus, the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become a desire.... The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse. Such a rule is an internal rule, a rule of self-restraint and self-determination.... In this way a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality. 

Vygotsky’s point, of course, is that the child’s desire to play is so strong that it becomes a motivating force for learning self-control. The child resists impulses and temptations that would run counter to the rules because the child seeks the larger pleasure of remaining in the game. To Vygotsky’s analysis, I would add that the child accepts and desires the rules of play only because he or she is always free to quit if the rules become too burdensome. With that in mind, the paradox can be seen to be superficial. The child’s real-life freedom is not restricted by the rules of the game, because the child can at any moment choose to leave the game. That is another reason why the freedom to quit is such a crucial aspect of the definition of play. Without that freedom, rules of play would be intolerable.
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