Coffee Shop Contemplations

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Contents

i

Introduction

Welcome

Thank you for buying this book. It's a compilation of contemplations that I wrote and published in 2012 on hackmake.org with a couple new essays written specifically for you. There are 20 or so pieces which have only slightly been edited from the versions that you can read in full online. So why did I publish this book? Because no one told me I couldn't.

When I started my weblog in January of 2012, I wanted to become a better writer. That's a never-ending pursuit but I think I've made good progress and learned a lot along the way. One lesson I learned was that you can get away with breaking convention. Sometimes you might even be better off doing it differently. My site looks different than most blogs and the things I write are a little unconventional. This book is the same thing. It's shorter than most, it hasn't been professionally edited, reviewed, or consulted upon. It's an experiment on what I can do on my own without knowing any rules of how things are supposed to work.

I also believe that ideas can't wait. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to have written a sentence in this book or spill an idea that can change somebody. Maybe something I wrote could have just been what you needed to start your project, quit something you hate, or push with just a little more effort. It would be selfish for me to withhold that idea because I'm scared to publish something. Life happens quickly, we don't have time to wait around and fret. We all need ideas and encouragement. We need the people who have taken it upon themselves to lead to keep doing it. To not wait. Your thing might not be perfect but your imperfect words may be just what someone needs to hear to create something.

So, onward. If by the end of these pages you've chosen to remove some clutter from your house or your life, rethought how the tools in your life impact what you do, you write a sentence, blog post, or book, or close your eyes and meditate for even a minute, then we can call my experiment a success.

Manifesto

This was the first post on hackmake.org. I've been able to stay close to these principles and though the way I explore some of these ideas are a little different than first proposed, this is the genesis and is published here for posterity.

These are some guiding principles for Hack/Make.

> Value simplicity over superficial minimalism.
> Choose tools instead of technology.
> Deliberately reduce inputs which steal attention.
> Focus on what I love and do those things.

These articles will be about things I love, new things, and how either have or hopefully will improve my life. It could be lifestyle changes, things I've bought or things I've gotten rid off. Things I've introduced into my life that have simplified it or made it complex (for the better). I'll write about technology that has helped me and times when technology distracts me.

I'm writing to hold myself accountable and writing for people who have the determination to make a life they already love even better. Making can be hard. Life isn't a "4 hour work week". There's people who let things happen and people who make things happen. If you're still reading this, you're the latter.

I want to achieve an understanding of things I can do that will improve my life, then do those things. I'll explore those situations but most importantly, I'll try to answer why they matter so much. Most 'life hack' blogs

just talk about cool things that you can use or do to improve your life but rarely talk about what it is about them that's so helpful. I could argue that this thing has changed how I do that but if the why doesn't align with what matters most to you, it's irrelevant and won't help you. We all have different problems we're trying to solve with hacks and even complex solutions but by approaching them with even a basic understanding of what you're trying to solve and why this thing might help you, you're going to succeed, or learn something valuable along the way. As I explore this path and mind-state my goal is to answer the why as often as possible so I can refine it and work towards making every day the best possible.

Hack/Make

When a new year falls upon us, people quickly learn the difference between goals and resolutions that are created and goals and resolutions that are attainable. Whether it be getting in better shape or to start saving money, making steps towards these goals can be intimidating and we often fail because of not knowing what we're getting into or how to approach the problem we're trying to solve. Knowing tips and tricks can help make small progress and relieve pressure you feel to get started but these little hacks aren't always the best way to get things done. There are big and small things we can do to improve our situation and make life goals happen.

A hack in the technology world is a messy or quick fix for something. It's a workaround to fix a bug or implement a new feature quickly. A hack tweaks code or changes hardware's ability, stretching it beyond its intention to fix something or to add functionality. Hacks are rarely elegant but that's not the goal. Hacks are like duct tape: you can create things out of duct tape and improve things with duct tape but it's likely that the problem could have been better solved using a couple bolts or a weld.

Every situation we want to improve needs a solution. The solution is something you design and create. You make it. Not only do you make the solution, you make it happen. The concept of life hacking isn't new but the hard work it takes to truly make your life better is usually ignored. It's ignored because it's hard. Really hard. Hacks are popular because you think that by adding some cool apps to your MacBook, using a Grid-It in your bag, or cooking meals in batches and freezing them in little bags labeled by day will improve your life. They might help a bit but they are

only part of the solution.

Using a continuous series of hacks is a bit like quickly iterating in the software industry. You try a hack (and maybe call it a feature) to see how it works and if you or your users thinks it's an improvement, you keep it. You continue the cycle until you have a set of hacks but not a feature set. Duct tape over duct tape. The problem with this type of iteration is that when you are looking too closely at immediate solutions you lose focus on your direction and can easily iterate yourself down the wrong path. When you make, your choices are deliberate because you are following a blueprint you already set out. You can focus on your solution while keeping in mind how making it relates to greater aspects of life.

These two approaches aren't exclusive. Hacks can take away some of the pain of getting started and can help you in the process of making. Making is the heavy lifting that is needed to do things properly. You'll be in better control of your solutions by using a mix of hacks and makes.

Simplicity & Design

Active Ownership vs. Minimalism

Minimalism is attractive. Clean lines, clean desks, and universal simplicity can be calming and the systematic removal of all but complete necessities can reduce distraction. A core goal of minimalism is that by removing everything 'extra', you may become freed by the constraints, dogmas, and physical implications they impose. Minimalism works to display the essence of something by removing anything but the purest basic form. Dependence is only placed on the base form of a concept, desire, or product. The output of this is less clutter in your apartment and your brain which demands less attention, less maintenance, and creates less of a cognitive deficit.

Cognitive deficit is caused by an overwhelming amount of stressors, open loops, and plain *stuff* on your mind and will reduce clarity of thought and impact mental capacity. The Wikipedia explanation gives examples of learning disabilities and drug-induced states as situations where a cognitive deficit exists but I think that everything in our lives—when not controlled—can combine to create a deficit. A cognitive deficit is caused when the cost of attention is greater than the returned value of something. Simplified, it's when a thing costs you more in brain power by having it around than having it improves your life. Relevant to minimalism, reducing the amount of belongings to your name can diminish the amount of time you spending thinking about, caring for, and paying attention to them. That pile of stuff you don't use under

your bed is an open loop and commands more cognitive power than you realize. Minimalists recognize this and got rid of that pile.

Active ownership, which differs from minimalism, is about investing your limited attention, money, space, and time to what you value so that those things will thrive. Being vested in something makes you care more about it. You can't do or have everything, so when you choose to take active ownership, it becomes a commitment to it and decisions and compromise have to be made about what commands your limited attention. As a result of the explicit choice you make in how you spend your attention, you reduce the things around you to what's most valuable. What's not valuable gets cut from your attention budget. You end up with less around you and are more focused on the basic forms of things, like with minimalism.

Active ownership and minimalism share values but are rooted in different theories. In minimalism, the focus is on removal, where having less leads to gaining more. Active ownership is about having the things that matter most to you and leaving behind everything that doesn't. It's not about having less because less stuff will simplify your path to enlightenment, but about taking an active role in what is around you, what you take in, what you believe and say, what you do and who you are. Active ownership assumes active responsibility where minimalism is dependent on the absence of everything extra—even what's out of your control—to be effective. Having less of something doesn't automatically mean that you'll appreciate and value what remains but when you are making active decisions about where you invest your limited attention, you choose what to love rather than being forced to love only what you have left.

This process of actively owning, continuously editing what you do, and explicitly choosing what's around you results in a deeper passion for those things and is worth investing in.

Foolproof

Simple doesn't mean something isn't complex just that it's not complicated. Simple means the sum of the parts is easy to grasp and understand. But simple isn't easy. Simple isn't an excuse for doing something big or hard.

Make the projects you undertake easy to understand by simplifying your goals and clearly knowing your intent. The actions it takes to complete can be complex—hard to execute or take a lot of time—but doing the hard work to make something simple will make your projects foolproof.

Good Design is Long Lived

Dieter Rams, industrial designer for Braun:

> Good design is innovative. Good design makes a product useful. Good design is aesthetic design. Good design will make a product understandable. Good design is honest. Good design is unobtrusive. It is long-lived. Good design is consistent in every detail.

I've been thinking a lot about sustainability in the things I create. For me, anything that's important must be set up in a way that's sustainable. It doesn't mean sustainable forever but something I can maintain and commit a high level of attention and respect for a reasonable period. If I don't think a new thing can be—or I want to—sustain it for the foreseeable future it's not simple enough for me to adapt.

Why? Sustainability tests the utmost value of something. Commitment is tough to presuppose. Commitment comes from understanding the value of something and choosing to partake in it long term. Without that understanding, it's hard to commit. But sustainability is easier to determine up front. It's the difference between asking yourself, "are the logistics for this worth my time long term?" and "is this something I understand, respect, and am passionate about enough to be a part of?" You can only get

a true sense of what it takes to commit after something has been sustained long enough to get a good measure of your passion for it.

If you want to love the things you have and do, consider up front if they have a good, long-lived design.

Have Taste and Be Opinionated

In creative pursuits, having taste and being opinionated are important to make great things. Taste is about knowing what's good and opinion means choosing *only* what's good.

You probably can think of a person from work who dresses well and has good taste in clothing. They are always wearing the newest styles and their walk to the office kitchen is like a runway show. They've chosen to care a lot about looking good and making a fashion statement so they invest their time and money honing their taste as styles change and as new designs come out. That person spends a lot of time browsing online shops and flipping through the magazines. They express themselves through their clothes so their taste is an important part of who they are.

Some people are really opinionated. They have thoughts on every current pop culture topic and strongly stand by their beliefs. They can argue to support and defend their opinions and, if they are good, maybe will make you change your mind about something.

Start developing and honing your taste. If you want to build apps, go find some of the best. Buy them, play with them, learn them. Learn what's fun about it or what makes the experience of using it really smooth. Try to discern what's good and what's not about food, or wine, or coffee. Pay attention to the nuances of flavors. The characteristics and makeup of coffee or wine impact the over tones. Figure out why. When you start to discover

that *why* you start to deeply understand the values that people appreciate when they search for something to satisfy their taste. Only through understanding that is when you can learn to design and create something tasteful and beautiful.

This same understanding is what lets you be opinionated—and be right. The annoying type of opinionated people are the ones who argue something when they aren't informed about the topic (or are just plain wrong). By deeply knowing something you should be able to make a stance about *why* it's right.

Design is all about decisions. You need to chose where to put things or which things to cut from a design and choosing how to fit project objectives into a functional design. All of those things are choices and without being opinionated, it's going to be tougher to make the call about what stays and what goes. Without basing those opinions in an understanding of good taste, a decision might be made but might not be the best choice for the design.

When you're designing, be it a website, a solution to your home improvement project, or a painting you're doing, your taste is your ability to discern what's beautiful, useful, and well made. When you become opinionated about design you start choosing to only settle with the best.

Design is Problem Solving

I spent a few hours at the Museum of Modern Art last weekend, and it inspired new ideas and made connections in themes I've been thinking about. There was a small exhibit there called Born out of Necessity. The exhibit displayed pieces that have been designed as a response to a desperate need or designed as art to solve a problem imagined and foreseen in the future.

The opening dialog to the exhibit, posted on the wall near its entry was this—words masterfully capturing the essence of design:

> Among the most common and enduring definitions of design is "problem solving." A problem arrives, the designer analyzes it and distill it into goals, and these create a roadmap to a solution, working with the means at her disposal. These include the budget, the materials and techniques she can afford and master (for an object like a chair, a lamp, or a bicycle, for instance), or the code and software she favors (for a digital product, such as an interface or interactive map). She must also consider the requirements of distribution and marketing, if the product is meant for wide dissemination. If she is good, the process, simple and linear, will result in an elegant, functional economical and meaningful solution, the splendid outcome of an insipid syllogism.

[...]

Goals and means come together in design process, a remarkable synthesis, whose ambition is to distill an object that is much more—in significance, functionality, innovation, and elegance—than the sum of its parts.

Many of the points, design being problem solving, it being about constraints and requirements, and the process of creating something elegant and meaningful, are all great ideas on their own but connected in that way created a beautiful picture of what design is.

The elements of the exhibit fortified the elements of design. In most cases, they were real-world products solving real first and third-world problems. This wasn't some design being shown off on dribbble.com—something that will never ship—but functional things and elegant things that help people survive. Simple products like the Leatherman Wave multi-tool, something I carry with me in my bag, earplugs, and some more advanced technology like the One Laptop Per Child device and architecture designs that save structures from collapsing in earthquakes.

All of these things served a purpose. There was intention in their creation to improve people's lives. Some were simple by design and some were simple by constraints of manufacturing, technology, or materials, but they all managed to mold what they had into something great. The true definition of make. I left MoMA that day with a lingering thought I haven't been able to put into words until writing drew it out of me.

Design, in the meaning so aptly put above, isn't about creating, it's about understanding. The process can be simple and linear but more often, the process of design is rough and becomes more so when the problems are more personal or greater in nature. But here's the important part of what I learned: you have what it takes to start designing now. Design is discovery, exploration, and distillation. It begins with analysis and you're in as good a place as ever to begin exploring and learning more about problems.

Start. Then try to understand. Don't worry about where you are now because nothing can ever be fully understood—so there is no destination for you to arrive at. With understanding will come a clearer picture of what a functional, elegant, simple, and meaningful solution is. That's when design is problem solving: not only because of the product you created as a

solution, but your process of overcoming and solving your way through making it happen.

Tools

Tools

Humans are one of the few intelligent beings that understand the benefit of using tools. We've been doing this for a while now, but in the last century our access to these tools has changed drastically. We no longer have to hit a couple rocks together to fashion a tool, we can just launch the App Store. This accessibility has solved many problems but has also created a big one that affects how we accomplish things. We now have an overabundance of tools and this can mean spending more time in the tool shed then out building things.

Bret Viktor, in his Brief Rant On The Future Of Interaction Design states the purpose of tools:

> A tool addresses human needs by amplifying human capabilities. That is, a tool converts what we can do into what we want to do. A great tool is designed to fit both sides.

The goal of a tool, whether it is the hammer or the bicycle, is meant to increase efficiency of a human action while it accurately addresses the problem it solves. A tool that fits your capability (hammer with ergonomic handle) but doesn't do much to solve your need (hammerhead made of jello) isn't effective. This is easy to understand when we're working with tangible problems and physical tools but technology has brought the innovation of tools beyond human action to human cognition. The bicycle greatly improves human transport efficiency and, famously, the Macintosh was first introduced as the "bicycle of the mind". Like a tool should,

the Macintosh was the first computer that truly fit human capability rather than just human need. The GUI and the mouse allowed new people to harness the power of the computer and as software evolved, new problems could be solved too. There is a point though where technology becomes a hindrance—an anti-tool—when it distracts from the greater problem it's trying to solve.

It's easy to get into a cycle of trying new tools to solve problems we have, or maybe just solve better than our current tool. Choosing the right tools for the job is essential to be most productive so we longingly search for whatever can make that difference. This endless cycle can happen when we misunderstand our capability, our need, or both.

Patrick Rhone, the author of the fine MinimalMac.com and *enough*, talks about the tools he chose for writing his book. Like many of us, a simple text editor syncing text files with Dropbox, was the solution Rhone went with.

> Once the initial drafts were complete, I imported the resulting text files into a wonderful program called Scrivener. I had tried it many times in the past but never quite took to it. As someone who was used to writing straight to plain text files, it seemed a bit overkill to me. It also struck me notably as something that was more designed for those who write chapter-based fiction. Therefore, it did not seem like the right fit for a short-form essayist like me.

Rhone ended up learning how to use some of the features in Scrivener, but before that, it was a tool that fit someone else's problem but not his capabilities or needs.

There are tools and anti-tools in everything we try to solve.

We use analysis as a tool to determine our needs and capabilities but this turns into an anti-tool when the analysis becomes the objective and not a method to an outcome. When we focus on looking for a perfect solution rather than realizing that the solution is just a tool to fix our problem, we lose sight on what we are trying to accomplish. We fashion a perfect hammer when we need to build an entire house. It's the difference between

ideas and execution—an idea is a tool but if it just sits in the toolbox and never gets used to build something, what's the point of it?

Finding a balance, or as Rhone addresses in his book—what's good enough—is a combination between properly understanding and addressing our needs and capabilities and then being comfortable with the solutions we chose. We can constantly be iterating on our decision to make it work better and smoother or we can be satisfied with our current implementation and focus more on the goal.

A tool is only that, a thing to help get something done. Start thinking beyond the tool and focus on making that something something great.

Tools Are Just That

We're lucky to have an abundance of tools—insanely great ones—to use in our daily life. Consider the technical feat of some of your tools. I use a MacBook Air that's 0.68 of an inch thick and not even 3 pounds, an iPad that has the most incredible screen in a consumer device that didn't even exist two years ago, and an iPhone that has more computing power than PCs from recent years in the palm of my hand. These devices run incredible software that are created, often, by independent developers that care about how people feel using the apps and have the accuracy of pixel-perfect design.

We're spoiled. The quality of these tools makes it easy to be distracted from the fact that they are just tools. Yes, they make our lives and work easier, they can make it more meaningful, and can connect us together. Even with this, they are just the medium or method that we do and create.

You aren't your tools or even the output of your tools. I see developers listing their choice of text editor, the newest, most expensive Adobe suite, and whatever other tools they use on their website just as prominently as the work they've created, like somehow the apps they pick make them better at what they do. Clients don't care about your tools, they care about your work. Don't define your work by the tools you use. A great writer can sit down in front of any tool and write—paper and pen, Apple Extended Keyboard II, typewriter, or distraction-free whatever. Their tools are a method to create and what comes from their tools is a product of their genius, not some software.

Still care about your tools. Use the best that you can but understand that

better tools don't necessarily make you a better creator. Use them in ways that liberate you to create. Don't let the fear of damaging your tools stop you from using them as they were intended. A wrench shouldn't get left in the toolbox just so it doesn't get scratched up; yet it shouldn't be left in the rain. See tools as the gear that equips you to create but not the sole thing that enables you.

Own your tools—know them and care for them—but don't let them own you.

Adjustable Wrench

Design is distilling ideas and understanding meaning, creating something simple that's reflective of the concept. When designing what Hack/Make would be, I chose an adjustable wrench for the logo. One of these was always in my Dad's toolbox. Its main purpose was to turn the heads of nuts and bolts of different sizes. With a quick spin of the dial that same wrench could fit all kinds of different bolts, something that a standard box wrench couldn't do. I always ended up using that adjustable wrench for other things too. Sometimes I'd need to lightly tap the end of a nail, nudge a piece into position, or get some extra leverage to pry something. This tool handled the challenge.

That meant a lot to me and was something I wanted to convey through what I write. The adjustable wrench was designed for a purpose and part of its design was to be flexible but within a certain set of constraints. Though an adjustable wrench could get by temporarily as a small hammer, it wouldn't never be a screwdriver. It was flexible but there was a limit in how adjustable it was. You couldn't use the same adjustable wrench to turn a plastic bolt on your son's toy tool bench as you'd need to tighten down the hubs on a tractor. The tool was designed to be able to make something and at the same time had some qualities that you could take advantage of when you needed a quick hack.

To be flexible and adaptable but within limitations and constraints. To design with purpose but have the ability to stretch beyond that intention. To be an instrument that creates and inspires others to create. That's what a well designed tool is.

A Craftsman's Tools

A skilled craftsman uses tools to accomplish something with greater efficiency so they can either get more work done in the same amount of time or get something done sooner so they can get on with their lives. They do it so they can go home and see their family, have more time for their hobby, or go make something new.

Your focus for completing things should be about what's left for you to do when you're done. Be productive to have more time to spend with friends not just to test drive a new app you read on some blog. Getting really good at getting things done will come when you have great reasons to be productive. Changing the tools you use may still happen—craftsman will upgrade their tools too—but your changes will be deliberate because they'll be all about what they help you output.

Focus your attention on where you want your successes to be and not just the tools that will help you get there.

Writing

Jotting Notes and Stealing Ideas

I don't read back through my Field Notes often enough. Its 48 pages don't get filled quickly enough either. But as I sat down and flipped through the last few months of scribbling, I noticed something: it's full of great stuff. The best ideas aren't mine though. There's wisdom from books I'm reading, things from sermons and podcasts, and conversations I've over-heard. There's the odd good thing that I can claim ownership of, though it's probably nothing that hasn't been thought of before. There's also lots of crap—doodles and bad math, rhymes and prose that aren't worthy of any place other than getting shoved back into my pocket.

Paging through the little book, I found that even though the ideas weren't all novel or penned by me they became mine in the way they were threaded—connected—page by page, in the same messy scribbles, in the same voice and shorthand, all working together towards the same goal. They're just as much mine, now that I pulled out a pen and made a mark, as the person who first put them to paper. Writing that idea down made it real for me and put it into existence while not taking anything away from anyone else. It's a positive transaction. Steal as many ideas as you can. Piece together the things other smart people do and say and build them into your platform.

When you capture an idea it's just a small piece of something bigger. Something you can't really picture or describe yet. But when you look back through the pages you start to see how the ideas connect and the shape of

something begins to come together.

Cultivate that. Put back into it. Keep stealing so it can keep growing. Then share those ideas so someone else can steal.

Please Learn to Write

More than any other hack, mastering language and communication will help you get things done. It will improve small things, like make meetings more efficient (or not necessary at all) and cut down on the amount of email you have to deal with. It will help you see the parts of an idea so you can thread them together. But ultimately it will build people's trust in you. You'll be given permission to do better things more often.

Learn to write and you will learn to connect the pieces that shape great ideas.

The English Language and Your Ideas

Words are powerful. Mastering the English language will make your life easier. Where it's common for language to be filled with ready-made phrases, or business speak—"Let's touch base later so we can drill down on this", or "Going forward, I think we need a paradigm shift to really get some synergy"—speaking clearly is necessary to get projects done.

The problem with this broken communication isn't new. George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language" (first published in 1946), outlines these issues while relating them to the presentation of political ideas. Whether it's political speeches or your blog post, you need to put in the effort to get your ideas across. Even with clear communication, it doesn't mean your idea will be well received, but, Orwell believes:

> You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.

Success in communicating your ideas comes from truly understanding what you're trying to accomplish so that you can translate it into things

that can actually be said or done. The higher altitude something is, the harder it is to explain.

> When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.

Having a clear, concrete idea allows you to find the right words to express it.

> What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them.

So you start with the idea and let that choose the words. Dumping meaningless words and phrases from your vocabulary is a start but how do you shape your words into something concise? Orwell offers some steps to form clear sentences:

> A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:
>
> 1. What am I trying to say?
> 2. What words will express it?
> 3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
> 4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?
>
> And he will probably ask himself two more:
>
> 1. Could I put it more shortly?
> 2. Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Relentlessly desire to express your ideas clearly. Put in the effort to remove abstraction from them and constantly edit your ideas and words. It will take more time and way more effort but by doing this, you will gain the trust and understanding of the people around you and grant yourself the permission to do cooler stuff.

Tips on Writing and How They're Really Just Tips on Life

I've found a few things in what's nearing a year of doing it regularly that have helped me in writing. Some are things that help me write better and some are things that just help me write, no matter if it's good material or not. When I thought more about these things, I realized that they were universal, not just a writing technique or tactic, but something that's applicable to things at a higher level. Here are a few things I've learned.

Write in Markdown. I'm just going to get this out of the way first. The rest of the post will assume you're smart enough to adopt writing in Markdown. It's a syntax to ease writing for the web and it makes reading and formatting what you write so much easier. The clean syntax will also help you edit your writing since you're have a good overview of what the output will be.

Get to the point early. When I find myself rambling and not really getting to a clear point, I finish my sentence, start a new line, hit the # a couple times—that's Markdown—and create a new header titled "Why". The why is the meat of the post I want to be writing—the functional component, if you will—which anchors the entire post. Without the why, the how doesn't matter. When I've pegged the why, I can usually go back, edit and write the rest of the post more succinctly. Both are important, but the

why informs the how. Get to it early, and your ideas will be clearer and better threaded through your writing.

USE COMMENTS TO HELP GUIDE YOURSELF. Maybe an idea comes up but it doesn't really fit where you are. Jump down a few lines and use an inline HTML comment. It'll look like this:

```
<!-- This is an idea I want to come back to. -->
```

A series of comments will help you create a linear outline and make it easier to visualize the progressions of your ideas through the piece. I often use comments to spit out words that I know aren't any good and just need to get them out to start formulating my thoughts. Comments can be proposed headers that you just haven't found the right words for yet, or maybe what developers call pseudocode: notes that capture the basic idea of what you want to accomplish in a chunk of writing.

In code, it can be something like this:

```
//loop through $tweets and print each tweet
```

The function to do that can take more than a couple lines of code but plain-English pseudocode can help you quickly capture your intentions so you aren't chasing the wrong problem or forget what you're trying to solve.

WRITE EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE IDEAS. Most of the better stuff I've written or posts that have gained the most momentum haven't been ideas that began as grand or novel. A lot of them were link posts I thought I had about a sentence worth of input on. But when you dig and often when you just let your mind be quiet and allow words to percolate, something inside of you makes words. It sounds weird but if you've experienced it you know exactly why I mean. The more you just start writing even when you don't have ideas, the more the ideas will appear as magic from your creative soul. Mumbo Jumbo or not, I dare you to try it. Find a blog post to link to, write a couple sentences, but don't stop there. Keep writing and follow this next tip. You'll be surprised what you've got in you if you just let it come out.

WRITE PAST THE FIRST LOGICAL CLOSE. I've been trying to push myself to go deeper in the things I write. If I have a clear idea, it often can be straightforward to lay that idea out and wrap it up. But I try to not just end there. This, for example, could easily have been a list of a few tips that have helped me write better but I decided to push myself further than that and not to stop at the first place it made sense. I don't let myself stop where it first feels comfortable because I know—with a little more of the clackity noise of the keyboard—some bigger, greater ideas may just fall out onto the page. Sometimes they don't and I just delete the extra crap that came out, but more often than not, what I end up with is much better.

WHAT IT MEANS IN LIFE

WRITE IN MARKDOWN. OK. This isn't as applicable as the others, but do it anyway.

GET TO THE POINT EARLY. Use this in emails, phone calls, awkward conversations with your girlfriend or spouse, meetings, and when you're not sure exactly how to say what's on your mind. Be concise and just lay things out. Remind yourself why it is you're doing something. If you can't remember, you probably shouldn't be doing it. Make the point of the things you do and say clear and you'll have more confidence that the things you do and say are the right things. Keep the point clear and you'll build trust with the people around you.

USE COMMENTS TO HELP GUIDE YOURSELF. Jot notes. Write things in your Field Notes or use a journal app like Day One. Make plain-text notes or write something down in Evernote. Where it is doesn't matter but what matters is this: you will start to see arrows that show up along the path pointing you in a place you need to go. Like writing, ideas will come up before they are ready to happen but if you don't capture them, they can be lost. Don't worry about how everything will fit together right now, just capture these signs in whatever comments you can and eventually things will start to connect. Your job is to collect the pieces and when you have enough of the parts, it will be obvious how they fit together.

GO PAST THE FIRST LOGICAL CLOSE. If you wrap it up early, if you give in and give up, you'll only get that much returned. I've found so many places

where just a little bit more effort and a little bit more thought has pushed ideas and relationships much further than if I just settled where they made sense at first. Ever been in a meeting and just when things are wrapping up, someone says, "Wait. How about this?" Then they drop the big idea you've all been digging for for hours. That's what I'm talking about. That person's mind endured through long discussions and was able to pull out the genius when everybody else's brain closed up shop. You want to be this person. So dig deeper and don't settle. Don't wrap things up when you first think they're done: that's just when you're getting rolling and the greatness is about to show up.

Always let the greatness show up.

For the Sake of Becoming

Pursuing being better led me to writing. Through writing, I've been able to have synapses connect and connect with people who inspire and teach me. I'm a better person for it. Now, writing is something I do because I have to.

Writing has become a solace for me. A way to internalize and externalize an over active, over achieving, unsettled mind. When I'm lonely and confused, feeling disconnected and lost in pursuit of what could be, I turn to writing as a way to make sense of it all. We're all searching for the same thing. A pursuit of tools, frameworks, methodologies, and workflows are all a way for us to help bridge the gap between where we are and where we want to be; to bring closer together what we imagine and what we want to exist. We search in hopes of finding clues that lead us in the direction of something greater. Hacks can help because they are often a clue that the way you do something can be done better. That it can be smoother and you can be more effective. You may remember the first time—a moment of enlightenment, if you will—that you recognized that some tool or method offloaded something from you; the first time a tip or trick made you better. It hit part of your intrinsic, humanist desire to create tools that make us better people.

We try to discover tools that relieve our burdens without realizing the relief leads us down a path to new burdens.

Writing has become a burden for me. This need to make words and my drive to make good and useful things has collided like great sheets of mantle rock and produced a precipice that I need to climb each time I sit before a keyboard. The burden of making complicated ideas simple has become a distraction from just connecting ideas and sharing them. In the same way, our tools can be these traps. A piece of software can hold the power to unlock our creative mind by collecting the distractions, bad ideas, and stuff that's not worth focusing on so we can make something great. But our drive to improve and perfect can often turn this pursuit on itself. An introspective process—metaphorically "sharpening the axe"—puts our creative focus on tailoring our process so we can better create but ends up trapping ourselves from creating. We convince ourselves that the investment into our software will pay off in our creation and sometimes it does—but the focus of our creative potential needs to remain on greater things.

For me and my burden, I don't just desire to methodically become a better writer but to do better things with my writing. Unlocking something in myself and letting words flow out while clearly communicating ideas is something I strive for and matters to me. Being a better writer gets me towards my goal, as being better with your tools advances you. Grasping what's the method and what's the matter can help you overcome indulging in one and lead you to start doing one for the sake of the other.

It's about becoming. Becoming is cyclical and perpetual. When you think you've "arrived", you're only just at the beginning of a new place. In this cycle of becoming is where you have to give and take between the burden and the solace of creating great things. At times, you'll be burdened by your desire to make something insanely great. That will lead you into a path of suffering and discouragement; a place of character building and of gaining understanding. In the other season of that cycle comes actualization and a freedom to create the great things you just struggled to find in yourself. There are seasons where you hack your way through a dense forest of friction. It seems endless and you feel lost until you finally manage to get though it. In this side of the cycle is when you search for and need the tools and workflows to capture ideas. You dig and hack to find something that fits and is comfortable to capture your thoughts and put them in a place you trust. You try to reduce the friction to get these ideas in a safe place because they are fragile and can be easily lost. It can be heartbreaking to lose an idea that you feel is going to get you through the struggle and the

suffering into a season where you have the freedom to create. In that place of freedom you can connect the ideas you fought tirelessly to preserve and start to fit them together into something much greater than yourself. This season is rewarding and the things you can pursue feel endless—until it does end; until that end becomes the start of a new place and your freedom becomes burden again.

It's in this flow of becoming that we sometimes find ourselves lost. I've felt it strongly and it hurts. A momentum you had becomes this pressure to become better and that pressure becomes oppressive. But understanding this flow of becoming—the flow of creativity and the flow of relationships and the flow of success and the flow of suffering; the flow of life—is the catalyst to greatness. Letting this flow happen and to suffer and prosper, thrive and survive respectively and cyclically is to live for the sake of becoming.

Mindfulness

On Suffering

In the forward for Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, Harold Kushner, author of the best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, introduces a theme that threads through Frankl's recount of his three years spent in Nazi concentration camps:

> Life is primarily not a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power as Alfred Alder taught, but a quest for meaning. The greatest task for any person is to find meaning in his or her life. Frankl saw three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person), and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it.

Frankl's endurance through the concentration camps taught him that all but one thing can be taken away from a man. His things, his family and loved ones, his voice, freedom, and health can be taken, but the last of the human freedoms that can be stolen is the ability "to chose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to chose one's own way."

No matter your position, wealth, fame, or spirituality, you will continuously encounter affliction throughout your life. No more or less of anything worldly or heavenly will help you allude suffering. You can't chose to avoid it, only how you deal with it when it comes. The choice you are given is what attitude you respond to suffering with. The form and timing

of suffering varies greatly but the choice to respond accordingly is equally present in all.

Suffering is inevitable and when it comes, choose to respond with grace and courage.

Having courage in difficult times, which Frankl suggests as a source of meaning in our lives, determines how we respond to the hardships presented. We can't choose what we are dealt but we are in control of our response. Responding to suffering with grace and understanding requires courage to counteract the visceral response of anger and vengeance. The accurate response to suffering also requires patience, control, and a reflexive understanding of the situation.

I don't intend to answer the eternal question of *why* suffering exists but it *does* exist, so it only makes sense that there is a greater meaning to each of our struggles. How can we determine what this is and what we can do with it?

Much of our society lives only to serve themselves. They build up possessions, relationships, and beliefs that are to satisfy their curiosity of the question of existence. As suffering is inevitable, it follows us through life and will oppress us, deflate us, and slow us down. Life can be lived without questioning anything beyond ones self but when suffering begins the questions of *why* begin. Those questions are prompted because they are core to suffering. Suffering doesn't happen without a *why* and answering that question helps validate that instance of suffering.

Suffering is only valid if it's for some greater cause. To not suffer in vain, seek answers and understanding.

Understanding suffering comes from experiencing it. Over time, we develop a tolerance to the pain, anxiety, and frustration of these hardships and grow an understanding of it. You learn to leverage the hardest parts and appreciate the parts of it that push you forward. The more of these situations we experience, the better we grasp how they can benefit and improve our lives. Suffering doesn't disappear the more we pursue it but we learn to endure it because of our understanding of its role in a greater cause, for or beyond ourselves.

Frankl's release came when he recognized and understood the greater gain

of his suffering in concentration camps. He envisioned himself, a professor and psychologist, lecturing on the psychology of concentration camps. He began to see his troubles as a psycho-scientific study rather than meaningless oppression. He quotes Spinoza's *Ethics* as a mantra:

> Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.

Through mindfulness we can form a clear understanding of why our case of suffering is important to our greater character and cause. Grasping this requires a perspective of courage, strength, and longevity rather than oppression, stress, and hopelessness.

The more we pursue and persevere through suffering the less we suffer.

Suffering is relieved by a clarified understanding that comes from mindfulness, which is rooted in courage and hope. Courage and understanding comes from experiencing suffering. To suffer with meaning requires an understanding of the suffering's value in life. Don't try to avoid suffering; realize that it is inevitable. Embrace your choice in navigating suffering and respond to it in a way that brings clarity and understanding. Understand the connection between your suffering and a greater cause.

Make suffering a search for meaning.

Rain or Shine

We set ourselves up for success or failure by the commitments we make and follow through on. Failure is always an option but not always a choice— sometimes it's inevitable. The choice you have is to show up, rain or shine.

Do you love baseball so much that you would keep playing in the rain if you could? Would you commit to running in the morning or biking to work everyday, rain or shine? Would you stick by your girlfriend, best friend, wife, coworker when everyone else has given up on them?

Some people commit to the wrong things and they choose to be greedy and hurtful all the time. They've trained themselves to do this by being that way on the best and worst of days.

Train yourself to behave, do, create, meet, and explore the way you want to by doing it no matter what. Being committed means showing up regardless of how tired you are, how messed up things are, or how little you feel you have to offer. You can't just say you'll be a good leader, husband, friend, mother, boss, and then pull it off when the time comes. You have to practice and commit to the lifestyle, attitude, and behavior so that when the hard parts of it comes along, you're better prepared to ride out the storm.

What is it you will do rain or shine?

Appetite and Limiting Hunger

> "It is necessary to handle yourself better when you have to cut down on food so you will not get too much hunger-thinking. Hunger is good discipline and you learn from it."
> –Ernest Hemingway

Our bodies have natural needs and desires. When we need more our bodies start telling us. Our appetite defines what it is we seek to satisfy our hunger.

I have a regular dinner menu that is simple, healthy, and satisfies me. I've had the same thing for dinner three or four times a week for nearly the last six months. I'm intrigued by foodies but wonder about their appetite. Are they so driven to explore the palates of different recipes and cultures that they are unable to enjoy the simple staples anymore? I enjoy great food but it's not something I depend upon. My hunger is elsewhere so I choose not to spend the time and money on searching for recipes, shopping, and cooking. I focus my appetite on other things.

What is it you're hungry for? If it's something broad like "success", do you know what the next steps are for you to "succeed"? What if you're hungry to be a writer? If that's your hunger, it can be satisfied if you just keep on writing. Do you know what can satisfy your hunger?

It's great to be hungry for big ideas, big change, and big successes but having an appetite for the simple staples that will lead you to something bigger

helps focus what you pursue.

When we define what we're hungry for we recognize what other things matter less. Limits are created; not limits as to what we can attain, but limits on what we choose to pursue. Focus.

When we "get too much hunger-thinking", as Hemingway puts it, we are distracted. We think about all the different things we want to do, most of which we never pursue. Learning how to suppress your hunger for things that don't matter turns your hunger to the appetites that do matter.

Be hungry for things that are bigger than you. Be hungry for things that are true and good. Have such an appetite for them that you will suffer for and because of them. Suppress your appetite for anything else.

Find your hunger and stay hungry.

Mindfulness of Concentration

Of all things we practice, our minds should be what we sharpen the most. Where many achievements require money or strength of body, strength of mind grants you more opportunity. Focus, simplicity, conciseness, attitude, respect—all are outcomes of a mind like water where your attention is adequate in the moment and your response is equal to the force.

Our minds often wander. This can lead to great discoveries about ourselves and is a time to process what's in our heads. We need to put ourselves into moments where we can be bored so that our minds can explore and think. But we also need to be mindful of when concentration is the tool we need.

Attention is finite but we control our attention with practice. It takes a lot of work, self control, and willingness to become better at it but wrangling yourself so your mind can be sharp and in the moment is a skill that is better employed than a deep working knowledge of software or systems.

Mindfulness and concentration take time. You need to slow yourself down and allow your mind to work things out. But as we sharpen this tool, we train our minds to act and think quicker. Quicker thinking means getting things done faster. I don't encourage rushing through it—mindfulness is the exact opposite. Using tools that let you work quicker, doesn't necessarily mean the work is sloppier or done with less attention or finesse. It's the same with the mind; you'll move through thoughts quicker. It takes practice to get better and sitting meditation

helps.

Along side your pursuit of finding and improving your tools and methods, focus your mind on concentration and you will gain a great power of potential over the things you do.

To Bow is to Thank and Respect

I've begun exploring the basic concepts of Zen through the book Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. Zen has come up often in my recent readings and I felt it was worth properly looking into. I don't expect learning about Zen will change who I am but I think it will open up ideas and provide insight.

The book has introduced me to the concept of dualistic ideas. It's complex but the basics as I understand it is that things which we have semantic differences for—like mind and body, me and you, breath and vision—are actually one. We should be practicing without dualistic ideas.

At this point, the skeptic in me starts to push back on some of these "we're all one energy" ideals until they begin to connect to something that's relatable. This book teaches that meditation should be done in the lotus position so that "when we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one." This symbolizes the oneness of the body and mind and puts our body in a "right"—meaning correct, not the opposite of left—position so that our mind can also be right. I give you this example of dualism as background.

In exploring Zen, I wanted to approach it in a way that connects the oft ancient parables and exemplar teachings to our modern world. This lesson

on humility can be lost unless modernized:

> By bowing we are giving up ourselves. To give up ourselves means to give up our dualistic ideas.
>
> Usually to bow means to pay our respects to something which is more worthy of respect than ourselves.

My understanding of these passages is this: when we bow, we get over our egotistical view of ourselves and see that you and the person you are bowing to are equal; that you have things to learn from them and things to teach them. By bowing, we respect the person and the things they do. They are worthy just as we are.

Bowing isn't culturally relevant to most of us but we can still acknowledge our respect to people through simply saying "thank you."

Ever been thanked when you should be the one giving the gratitude? When it happens to me it brings a feeling of mutual regard. It shows that they think I bring some value which is worthy of their esteem. They don't see dualism between themselves and me.

Giving up yourself—being humble—is a tool in getting things done. The reality for many is that doing good work requires permission. Being liked and respected by your peers grants you opportunities to do more and making strong mutual relationships gives you access to the people and resources you need to ship work you can't do on your own.

Bow to the people around you and through thankfulness you will lead a simpler path of practice.

Living Declaration

There's no room for indecision in a declaration. It's not, "let's give this a shot" or "I'll try." A declaration is a stance—a strong one. It's standing your ground to opposition, stating your failure, or defining truths. Declare war. Declare bankruptcy. Declare one's love.

It's also public. Declarations aren't fruitful if they happen in your notebook or as a quiet thought. They are meant to be told from the mountain tops, shared with people, and understood together. Declarations are made so that people can be accountable to the beliefs that are declared.

Too often we won't declare anything. We stay quiet about our beliefs, our work, our values, our goals, our vision because people will say they are stupid. They'll say we are wasting our time.

Make more declarations. Make everything you are a declaration and with everything you do, support that purpose.

Meditations on Being Better

A Simple Guide to Getting Better at What You Do

You're reading this because you have the ambition to do something better with your life; to be better. Maybe you've been working the same job for years while that young hot-shot got a promotion before you or you're in a long-term relationship and you know your partner is getting bored. Whether it's professional or personal, you're not getting better at that thing because you're scared and you don't know what to do next. There are so many options and you don't know which one is the right way. You're afraid of what might happen when you get out of your comfort zone. If you're doing life right, you'll always be going out of your comfort zone so follow this guide to help ease your way into getting better at what you do.

Stop Wasting Time

You're scared to do anything cool so you just sit on Facebook instead. I understand, I've been there. You have a perfectly groomed list of things you want do in your fancy, polished GTD list but it's been years since you checked anything off of that list besides picking up milk. If you want to go do awesome things and get better at life, it takes a lot of time and you're

wasting tons of it. Get over the fear of missing out and spend less time reading the dramas of peoples' lives. You're wasting your time on things that don't matter when you could be doing a lot better things. You don't need some transition strategy to wean yourself off of time wasters. Grow up. Turn the TV off. Quit that game. You're going to need that time to learn how to be so much cooler.

Research How to Be Better

As much as you think you have the gusto to just log off of Facebook and start being better, it doesn't work that way. You're going to have to spend time figuring out what it takes to be better. You're going to need to read books that teach you how to be valuable, how to be creative, how to get things done, and how to find meaning. You'll need to read blogs that challenge you. Listen to smart people who struggle with the same problems you have. You need to learn from other peoples' wisdom. They've already gone through this and can teach you about it.

Right now, you're paralyzed about doing something great because you don't know where to start. You don't know how it will end, or how you'll get through it. The thing is, it's really easy to figure out. You're not the only person struggling with this and when people are having problems, they go to other people for help. Not sure where to start? Try the Google. Find a blog or forum about how to get yourself out of debt. Go to the library and ask for a book. It sounds lame, but you're never going to get better if you don't start somewhere.

Don't Be Scared of Being Scared

All of the cool things I've ever done began with me being scared. The first time I rock climbed, and whenever I push myself to climb something difficult. The time I went skydiving. When I moved to New York City alone to work for a startup and a boss I had never met in person. The time I walked 35 miles straight in 13 hours around Manhattan. I was scared to do

all of those things and was usually scared while doing those things. Don't let that stop you.

Learn to be OK with scary things so that scary things won't stop you from being awesome. Scary things won't stop happening. If you're doing it right, they should happen more often. Scary things usually mean that you're going in the right direction—out of your comfort zone. You'll just learn to deal with your fear and not let it stop you. The worst case scenario that you've got stuck in your head is false. That fear is unfounded. You're more likely to die—or at least be a boring, lame person—if you don't do what you're scared of.

People will tell you what you're doing is stupid. They'll say you're wasting your time. They say these things because they wish they could be doing what you're doing but are too scared themselves. They're jealous because you're not letting fear stop you. They're trying to sabotage you. Leave these people behind. You shouldn't be doing things for other people's approval anyway.

Go Do Something About It

So you've read a couple things and you subscribe to a blog about being awesome. Great! You're scared about what comes next but you've promised yourself that's not going to stop you. Wonderful. But you're still no better at what you do and no cooler. You haven't gotten that raise and your girlfriend still thinks you're boring (probably even more now that you've been reading all those relationship forums). What next? You need to go do something about it. It doesn't even really matter what it is, it just needs to be step in the right direction. Do something that makes you feel alive for once. Break the rules if you need to. Do something ballsy. If you're really scared, do something small first. Pretty quickly you'll get the good feeling that comes from being better and cooler. You're going to want more of that and you'll do cool things more often.

Don't betray your ambitions. Be driven by them. Stop over thinking it and go do something great. This is the most important part and once you do it, nothing else matters. Don't give a shit about what other people think— they're just jealous because you're doing something world-changing.

35 Mile Lesson

Yesterday, I walked the 35 miles (56 KM) around the island of Manhattan. I did this to see new parts of the city and as a personal challenge. We walked as a group for 13 hours with only a few breaks along the way. This was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Here are some lessons the challenge taught me:

Both your body and mind will give in to exhaustion eventually. Make your mind outlast your body and your body will outlast exhaustion. When every step is painful, it takes a strong mind to move a weak body. Even the strongest body will fail without the mind pushing it to take the next step.

Practice meditation. Being aware of discomfort—or outright pain—but choosing to not let it stop you is the ultimate mindfulness. This comes with practice. If you can't meditate in the best of conditions, you won't be able to in the worst, when you need it most.

Depend in yourself but rely on others. You're not going to find someone to carry you across the finish line. Finishing is all on you but your friends, teammates, and family will be able to encourage you to take the next step even when you think you can't. Find people who you can rely on to help keep you going.

Embrace the suck. Embrace doesn't mean love, enjoy, or seek out, it means to understand that the suck is part of the journey. Accept it as that.

More people fail than finish. This is because there are more reasons

to quit than to keep going. Find a good reason to stick it out and follow this through to the end.

Push adventure harder to earn more scars and stories. Life's exhilarating moments usually take some physical toll. Start playing with fire more. It's good to get burned sometimes. Make that diving catch; get bruised. Our world is pretty safe so push the bounds of risk. You'll be OK.

Don't forget to look up and enjoy the view. The last few miles were the hardest part. Putting my head down and pushing on was what I felt I needed to do but looking up and seeing the New York skyline— finding something to enjoy when everything else sucked—gave me perspective and payoff for what I was in the middle of.

55 people started and eight finished smiling, sore, and with a new perspective of the city's limits and their own.

Navigating Unknown Territory

Exactly a year from my arrival to New York, I felt the need to get away from the city. I took a train out of dodge and went hiking. I knew where I was leaving from and where I was planning on staying the night but in between I didn't know exactly how I'd come and go.

I found my way through Penn Station, connected on to my final destination, and found the pathway from the tiny, side of the road train stop to the trail head where I would disown the city for a couple of days.

As I made my way from the red-blazed trail onto blue, then yellow and back on red, I realized something. "For this being the wilderness, these trails are really well marked." See, there are other people who come here more often and have already blazed a trail. They've left a clear path, clean it up after storms, and make sure it's well marked so it's easy to follow. They even have maps so you can plan your trip or not get lost along the way.

I had gotten from my apartment, the underground maze of the subway, and a beehive of people in Penn Station the same way I would get through the bush to my campsite.

I have my way to work memorized but I didn't know the way from the uptown A subway into Penn Station to connect to the train I have to catch. The station is busy and a bit overwhelming but if you remember to look up pretty often you'll notice signs pointing you in the direction you need

to go. There are people who posted these signs because they knew the way and knew you would need a hand.

Through these backcountry trails, it's a lot less busy—practically desolate. The lack of bustle, people to follow, and crowd to blend into can be intimidating and make you feel lost and alone. Yet, if you keep your head up you'll keep seeing the trail blazes along the way, marking your path. It's smart to carry a map, to plan your way ahead of time, and know the mileage but plenty of people get along fine just looking for the next marker.

Sometimes you'll be blazing your own trail. You'll be in a place where no one has ever been before and you have no one to follow. It's easy to lower your sight to what's just in front of you. It's scary to look much further ahead than your next step. But to find your way around the wilderness like they have for hundreds of years—to bushwhack, blaze a trail, orienteer and pioneer—you use a compass to find a landmark in the right direction ahead of you, your bearing, and then you keep your head up and walk to that place. You need to keep an eye on what's in front of you so you don't trip on rocks or step on snakes but you keep looking up to that spot on the horizon, your bearing, your true direction, your destination, and keep heading that way.

There are directions on how to be better posted all around us. Remember to look up and look out for the signs.

Chances are that wherever you're planning on going—with your career, your hobby, your relationship—someone has been there before. They've left a trail marked and all you have to do is keep your head up, look for the signs, and ask if you are heading in the right direction. There might even be a map. Someone knew that you would need a hand finding your way so they drew out some of the directions for you already. If you don't know the map exists because you haven't searched for it or were too proud to open up the map you had in your hands, you're losing out of the knowledge and experience of people who've blazed a trail ahead of you.

Moving through unknown territory is an endless loop. You look up to make sure your steps are in the right direction then you look down to make sure your step is safe and secure. You don't want to step on loose ground or something that might bite you. Too much looking down and you lose your bearing. Too much looking up and you might step on something

you regret. But all along the way you use the markers that other people have left behind for you. Take advantage of the wisdom and experience that other have and passed along because they knew you would need it.

You'll get lost if you don't.

20,000 Feet

Managing Your Areas of Goals and Responsibilities

Areas of Responsibility are the places, things, people, and projects you care about enough to do and where others rely on you for something. They're different for each of us depending on the kind of work we do and the shapes of our families and friendships. These areas define who we are since they are how we spend our time and attention.

Understanding these areas gives you a high-level look at what you need to be good at, efficient at, better at, and what you can let slip or cannot drop. You might have five or twenty areas, and they won't all be equally as important to you. By gaining this view at 20,000 feet, as David Allen puts it in his book Getting Things Done, you're able make better decisions about what you need to doing:

> Listing and reviewing these responsibilities gives a more comprehensive framework for evaluating your inventory of projects.

Defining What's Important

We usually have a general idea of what we're responsible for or want to make a focus, but listing them out—as with defining anything—helps set a clarity of vision for how you should be spending your attention.

Where you can really gain is by adjusting your areas of responsibility, to more appropriate life areas based on what you want to be doing with your attention, not just what you are currently responsible for. Travel may not be a current responsibility of yours, but you've been dreaming about it and want to be putting more time into that. Shouldn't this be given a reasonable ranking in the areas you spend your time?

I defined this list in order of importance of what matters to me and how I want to be spending my time in both my personal and work life:

- Life
- Good Person/Brother/Friend/Son
- Adventure
- Writing
- Technical/Systems
- Finances
- Household
- Work
- Execution
- Project Planning
- System Administration

What's Important to You?

Make a list like this for yourself. Don't just put what you currently spend your time doing but use this list to shape how you want your life to look. It'll take some time, and it's worth considering if the areas that are part of your life now are something you want to keep, or if you can remove things and simplify. What have you been dreaming of but haven't made a priority? What falls through the cracks but shouldn't any longer?

We're going to connect this list into your system to better track progress and be prompted to create and do projects that will help you improve in each of these areas.

Your Areas Should be "Actionable"

You've got this fancy list of projects and actions listed out, but what helps you decide what to do next? Contexts are great for filtering out tasks you physically can't do based on limitations—"you can't mow the lawn from your iPhone". I've made my list of important areas and projects with a hierarchy matching the list above to organize my life based on what matters. Shaping your list of actions based on the areas in your life helps outline what's most important to you and as a result, what actions should be on the top of your stack. This order is important so that the areas of focus at the top of your list—what's most important to you—is given their appropriate positioning. Whatever system you're using, consider shaping the order of how you add and complete tasks around the areas you defined and what it is you value most. When you sit down to catch up on some emails, if you've defined that your relationships take priority, as I have at the top of my stack, then that email to your Mom should happen before work stuff.

Keep Working Towards What Matters to You

I've read about people who suggest avoiding the clutter of tracking projects and areas even when they are empty of tasks. To me, once I've defined something as being important and it represents a section of life I want to be focusing on, it being empty is a problem. It means that I'm not working towards something in that area. If my Adventure list is empty, I'm not planning a trip. Reviewing and seeing that I don't have plans in place to improve my life when I've chosen it to be a focus gives me a kick and prompts me to start doing something there. Maybe it's just adding a few single actions or the nudge I needed to start researching that big trip I want

to do, keeping these areas in view and in a reviewable system means that I don't lose focus on what I set out to improve on.

Functional Component

The systems in our life are meant to help automate much of what we do so we can think about something once and more easily make ongoing decisions about what we want to be doing. By defining what areas are important to you and shaping your to-do list around that, you make it easier on yourself every time you look at the list. You don't need to choose whether it's more important to go pick up something at the hardware store you have on your Household list or go get that thing you're wife asked of you. You've made the decision that your relationship is most important and will take trump on other tasks every time and the list of things you should be doing reflects this. You also have a way of reviewing the things you want to be doing from a high-level and can push yourself in the right direction when you notice that you're not working on a certain area like you should.

Put what's important to you first so the things that matter get your attention.

The Speech

My brother asked me to be the best man at his wedding. Besides doing some day-of organization, I knew that the speech I had to give was going to be my hardest job.

A good idea for the speech popped into my head many months before the wedding. I was quick to get what was bouncing around up there into a text file for safe keeping. I would go back to tie it all together as it got closer to the wedding. Months later, as I went to read through what I already had drafted and make final edits I realized most of it really sucked but the main idea was still decent.

I knew I couldn't disappoint the idea.

Keeping that idea as the focus, I started just typing—a weird feeling when your conscious gets out of the way and words just come out. When I snapped back to reality, it seemed like the words that appeared on screen were actually pretty good. That scared me.

It scared me because most wedding speeches suck. It usually ends up being a time when Uncle Jim stands up, half in the bag, and rambles on for ten minutes about this one time he and the groom... if you've ever been to a wedding, you know what I mean. The words that I had weren't that. They were something different. OK—I didn't know the words were good; I only had a feeling. Sometimes something is just different and I confuse that with good.

So I had something unusual on the page. And that's what scared me.

This speech was a chance for me to create a moment and leave it with my brother and his new wife for the rest of their life. I didn't want to be Uncle Jim. I wanted this moment to mean something. But part of me thought I was better off just scrapping what I had and doing something less unusual. My instinct told me to go hide or at least just try harder to not stand out.

I managed to fight all of that off. I'm comfortable public speaking but I was nervous to deliver this to my brother and his wife with everyone else watching. I managed to get through the speech and keep emotions from overflowing. The moment I finished, I felt a small win. I had done this thing I was scared of doing and had stuck to my beliefs of doing good things, things that matter, and things that push people forward. I sat back down at the table to the nods of approval from my family at the table and privately enjoyed my little win.

After the dinner, as Best Man/Project Manager of the wedding day, I rushed off to go help with something. That win had its moment and passed into memory.

But something I hadn't been expected started happening. I was waiting to use the restroom and someone I didn't directly know from the bride's side of the family came up to me and said something like, "Great speech. I think that was the best thing I've ever heard at a wedding." I was kind of stunned and told him thanks—that I really appreciated that. It happened again later during the reception and dance. I was on my way to the dessert table, as you do, and a couple people pulled me over to their table to introduce themselves and tell me how much they enjoyed what I had delivered. Again, all gratitude from me.

You're probably not that interested in my story or care that I felt warm and fuzzy for, like three hours. But here's the important part—why I'm telling you this:

Sometimes being scared is an arrow pointing you and telling you of a direction you need to go. That fear is the realization that you're about to do something that will change things for you or others and you simply cannot back out of it. Learning to recognize that sign won't make life any easier. The truth is it'll probably make things harder but great work isn't easy and the more you feel this fear, the more you need to keep moving in that direction.

Having Big Things Happen

This was a guest post as part of a series called "Actually Getting Big Things Done" on BetterMess.com. I worked with Michael to edit this post from something that began very different; an unusual process for my writing style. What I learned in that process was this: when working with smart people who are passionate about the same things, you'll be able to get more big things done if you submit to the process. It's humbling to realize after some back and forth conversation that a thing you wrote is going to be better if you remove your favorite part. If you can get over yourself to make something better, you put yourself in a position to learn and like I talk about in the article, become ready to make big things.

The first thing to grasp if you want to get big things done is this: You don't do big things—you do and big things happen.

The process starts with starting. Fire before you aim or are even ready.

It's natural for us geeks to read the Wikipedia entry, install the software and tools, and fantasize for too long before we actually start creating. We practice it in our heads while following blogs about it until we feel ready. By the time you feel ready, it's often too late; someone else filled that open job opportunity or jumped on the same idea you had and took the domain.

Fire

Start now. You won't be great right away and your thing won't be a big thing yet but you're on your way. Get some momentum going so you can learn where to improve and then adjust your course rather than waiting until you think you've got your course figured out.

For a while, I hesitated writing because I didn't think I was very good. I excused myself because I didn't have good ideas anyway. People who get in front of the keyboard often enough will tell you that they aren't good either. But they start typing and stuff comes out. Without first putting pen to paper, you won't be able to edit, to fix, and to publish.

Aim

Once you've pulled the trigger, aim towards your values and virtues not your goals. Use your values as a guide to make your decisions intentional. Goals will shift and outcomes will be different than what you expect so let strong values direct you.

What are your values? Live fast, die young? Family first? Sacrifice nothing for quality? There's no single right answer. It is up to you to figure that out but once you get an idea about what matters to you, it's much easier to adjust your course since you have a better understanding of the characteristics of what you want to accomplish.

These are a few things I want to accomplish in what I do now and in the arc of my life as a whole: to design and make beautiful things, to build technology for communication, and to use writing as a catalyst for myself and others to *do* in the hopes that eventually that thing will become a big thing. Those concepts are broad but having them defined brings clarity on what I should be doing short-term and helps me focus on each next step to satisfying what I want to do long-term.

The truth is I usually don't know what I'm doing or where I'm going—I make it up as I go. I got a lot better at what I do when I accepted that. When you get to that point, you make things a lot easier on yourself by

surrendering some of your weaknesses and your own conceptions and allow yourself to rely more on systems, processes, and people. You're a lot more willing to seek support, find tools that can help, and ask questions. It helps to know what you don't know so get good at googling if you don't have someone to ask. As long as you're curious, you'll find answers that will help you towards your long-term vision and to the next step in the process.

Ready

The next step in this process is being ready. It's not ready as in waiting to go, it's actively becoming better so that when your thing gains momentum or opportunities arise, you can be in that moment and act without hesitation.

By firing, you can begin to learn and use the knowledge gained to inform better decisions. By aiming, you align your actions with your values. By being ready, you are prepared to act with the strength of your conviction.

Stop waiting. Start before it's too late, let your values direct your vision, and be prepared for opportunities that will arise. If you do, you'll find a lot more big things happening with your name on them.

OK, What Now?

Hopefully this book triggered something inside of you and you now want to search for answers. Maybe it's to develop a feel for design, set yourself up with better fitting tools, to write, or start some sort of mindfulness practice. Here are a few places you can start exploring:

- Start writing, no matter what it is.
- Go to my friend Michael Schechter's blog, BetterMess.com. Here's a good place to start: bettermess.com/start-here/
- A post I wrote on Hack / Make about my writing tools: hkmk.co/writing-tools-workflow
- Develop your taste and design feel by being more critical about the things around you. Find better coffee, download some new apps and become opinionated about what you like and don't like about them
- Read Julien Smith's blog inoveryourhead.net. Start with his best: inoveryourhead.net/best
- Listen to any of the Back to Work podcast episodes then go read about the stuff that Merlin Mann does. He's smart and you should listen to him: 5by5.tv/b2w
- Follow Patrick Rhone on Twitter and say Hi to him. Then read the stuff he writes: patrickrhone.com

This is only a short list for what's a life-long learning process. It doesn't matter as much *where* you start but that you get started. Go now.