

What I Think So Far

**Ideas, lessons, and advice
at age twenty-seven**

by Kevin Verre

Happiness, Depression, Education, Work, Technology, Politics, Health, Dating, Science, and more!

What I Think So Far is a collection of my thoughts on a variety of important topics. The chapters are filled with lessons, ideas, opinions, and advice.

This is the book I've always dreamed of writing! It's designed to help readers learn and grow. The purpose of the book is to share wisdom with young readers and give new insights to older readers. This book contains the lessons I wish I had learned sooner.

What I Think So Far

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Chapter 1. Introduction to Me and This Book

Who am I?

I've learned a lot since being born, but it wasn't easy! There is a lot of information I wish people had explained to me sooner or more clearly. I want to share what I've learned and what I think with you, the readers. That way, you'll be a little bit better prepared for the real world than I was.

I'm a twenty-seven year old author. I grew up in the United States and worked professionally as a software engineer. I moved across the country after college for work.

I wrote this book in 2016 and 2017. However, I started thinking about writing this book even earlier. For years I dreamed of writing a book like this. This is my first book, but hopefully not my last.

What is in this book?

This book contains several chapters, each about a different topic. The topics cover a wide variety of subjects. I've written about happiness, dealing with depression, education, work, politics, technology and design, religion, health, dating, and science. I think these topics are interesting and important.

My writing is a combination of my advice, beliefs, ideas, and questions. It's what is meaningful to me and what I wish I knew sooner. It's what I want to share with people of all ages alive today and pass on to future generations.

Generally, I write about ideas that I would've benefitted from hearing at some point in my life. Each section could almost be a little letter addressed to my past self -- at age seventeen or age twenty-two or even as recently as last week.

These subjects are very complicated. Sometimes I am only "scratching the surface" by writing about them here. There is much more that could be written about each of these topics. What I've written covers only parts of what I've thought about them.

These lessons are the ones that I think are most worth sharing. A concept is included if I think lots of people will find it helpful or if I think some people will find it very helpful.

Am I qualified to write this book?

I am not an expert on these subjects and I don't pretend to be. However, I am knowledgeable about these topics and I have spent time thinking about or studying them. I'm hoping I won't offend or upset any experts by writing this book. I love experts. I hope experts give me feedback on how I can improve the book. I hope that my writing avoids inaccuracies or misleading statements.

You don't have to be an expert to help people learn. The world has lots of opportunities to teach even if you're not an expert.

My writing is based on my own experiences and what I've learned from other sources. My learning experiences include graduating college, working several jobs, battling depression, my dating experiences, lots of reading, and more.

Beginning in college, I started reading as much nonfiction as I could. So some of my ideas come from other things I've read. I give credit to those sources.

Finally, there might be some value in hearing from me, someone who is a non-expert. A young person may be able to better connect with my stories about me and my friends because I am also a young person. Reading what I think might be interesting, exciting, or inspiring.

I remember imagining, before I started writing this book, that I would write a book when I'm really old and wise. But I realized I couldn't wait and I would be much happier if I wrote a book now while I'm still young.

You have chosen so many topics that I doubt there is an expert on all of them.

Who is this book for?

The main audience is young people such as high school students, college students, and recent graduates. They will learn the most.

But I think adults of all ages will also enjoy reading the book and learn something. The less you've studied these topics, the more likely it is that reading this book will cause you to think about something new. This book is really for anyone who wants to learn more about these topics.

Why should you read this book?

One of the goals of this book is to help teach others. You should read this book because you want to learn more about one or more of these topics. Hopefully you'll find the content helpful.

Many of the ideas in this book are things I wish I knew sooner. I was well-educated and school taught me a lot of academic material, but there was still a lot of useful material that it didn't cover. I'm constantly learning new things and I want to help other people learn new things as well.

You will learn how to be happier, how to be a better student, how to be a better manager, how to be a better employee, how to understand user-experience, how to better understand politics, how to be more attractive on dates, how to get better at self-development, etc.

You will learn what I think about these topics. You might find it interesting to hear how I feel and what I have to say. You might even disagree with me. I may even be wrong at times. It's valuable to understand what other people think.

Finally, I hope you get enjoyment out of reading this book! It is fun and entertaining to read about these topics.

Why did I write this book?

Writing this nonfiction book is a thrilling experience! For years I've been having thoughts that I wanted to express and teach. But until now, I haven't expressed myself much. I love learning and teaching. I love when what I teach helps others live better or happier lives.

One of my goals is to spend time making the world a better place to live. I want to empower others. Writing an educational nonfiction book is one way I can achieve that goal.

I wanted to create a book that many different readers appreciate. If you find a chapter or section that you love, I hope you share it or talk about it with your friends and family.

Writing also forced me to learn and become smarter. I explored my ideas in greater depth. For some topics, I learned a lot while doing research for the chapter. I also learn when people read my writing and give me feedback.

One of the unexpected side effects of writing this book was that I grew a lot. In addition to getting smarter, I think I got more mature.

Another reason I wrote this book is that I think my life will be better off for having written it. This book might open up new opportunities for me or introduce me to new people.

Finally, I hope my writing inspires other people to write educational nonfiction, too. Maybe this book will inspire someone else to create a really great new book, article, or blog post.

Writing this book means a lot to me. It is probably the most exciting thing I've done in my life so far! It didn't even feel like a choice because I couldn't imagine my life without writing the book. It's a project that I will be proud of for the rest of my life.

Goals for this book:

- Share my knowledge and empower readers
- Express my opinions
- Learn from research while writing
- Create a book that readers love and want to share
- Learn from reader feedback
- Create new opportunities for myself
- Inspire others to write, create, and share
- Create a book that I am proud of

How is this book formatted?

Each chapter covers a different topic. The chapters can be read in any order. Each chapter is divided into many different small sections.

Each reader will have their own favorite chapters and sections. At different points in your life, different sections might be more valuable to you.

What if I change my opinion? What if I am wrong about something?

I am expressing what I think and feel right now. I'm only twenty-seven years old. It's likely that I will change my mind or be proven wrong on some of the ideas in this book. This is completely OK. I am comfortable expressing what I think even though it could be wrong. Expressing myself helps me learn because people can respond to what I am thinking. I can always release an updated version of this book with corrections and changes.

This book is not about giving authoritative answers. In addition to sharing my beliefs, I also make hypotheses and propose ideas or theories. I try to cite other authors when I can. I sometimes mention that I am not confident about an idea. I try to acknowledge when what I say is controversial. I have MANY questions still. Every day I am presented with things I don't know. The more I learn, the more I find things I don't know.

What we think and feel is not permanent or even consistent. It can change at any time. I consider myself to be a "work in progress". I'm sure my ideas and beliefs will change as I get older and get more experience. Like a good scientist, I am willing to change my opinions as I get new evidence and as I grow.

What if you disagree with something I write? What if you aren't convinced?

Generally, people don't like (or hate) being told what to do or what to think. This is a big problem for an advice book.

If I try to share with you an idea or piece of advice that you disagree with, you might resist it rather than changing your mind. I'm sure everyone can think of a time where you tried to influence another person but only ended up frustrated at how they didn't change.

When I criticize someone or advise someone, it might have the desired effect or it might backfire. Telling them what is correct and why can actually make the other person disagree more! And they might even get mad at me.

What is the best way for me to convince you of something you don't agree with? By empowering you to make your own conclusions. Trying to convince you that my answer correct isn't very effective. Instead, I should treat controversial ideas as a problem we are both trying to solve together.

So for any advice I share, read it as if I was just bouncing the idea off of you. I want to be respectful of your opinions and experiences. You should feel like we're a team of detectives trying to work together to answer questions about the various topics in this book.

What if I write something that you already know?

Please do not worry if I write something you already know. Don't be offended or insulted if I write something that seems obvious to you.

For one thing, it's not going to harm you to read something you already know. Secondly, there's a chance that someone reading this book won't already know it. I will try not to write things that are extremely obvious.

Also, sometimes I will write something cliché. Some readers find clichés to be very annoying, so I want to offer my apologies to those readers. (In fact, sometimes I might write something cliché without even recognizing it is a cliché!)

What if there is something that has already been written about?

There are many other books and writings available by many other authors. I'm not worried that some of my ideas or opinions have been written about elsewhere. The purpose of this book is NOT to write information that you can't find anywhere else.

Instead, this book's value comes from its unique organization and expression of that information. I try to write things in a way that are easy to understand. I write about the things that I think are most important.

What is the best advice I can give you?

I get asked this question a lot when I tell people that I'm writing a book of advice.

In the chapter on Happiness and Depression I discuss ways to examine your thinking. Your negative thinking can make a situation much more frustrating than it needs to be. You might have fears or beliefs that aren't true that are making you feel worse. So the best advice I can give is to examine your unhappy thoughts.

My favorite chapter, however, is the chapter on Technology, Product Design, and User Experience. I love talking about how things could be designed better.

Why write a single book that covers a variety of topics?

I found the idea of writing a book that covers many topics more inspiring than the idea of writing a bunch of separate pieces. I like that so many of my thoughts are packaged together in one place.

To me, all areas of my life are connected. When one area improves, it makes it easier to improve the other areas.

There are disadvantages to writing a book that covers an ambitious number of topics. This book takes a lot of effort to write and edit because it tries to cover so many different ideas. Also, writing many short pieces may be more appealing to readers. They could more easily find a single piece that they love in its entirety.

Is this book finished?

I'm still adding new sections and content to try to make the book better. I want to add more personal stories for examples and more good lessons. I think I could add more to make the book even better.

Why isn't this book funnier?

I purposely didn't include many jokes while writing this book. The reason is that I wanted this book to be concise, informative, and easy to read.

I might go back and add more humor throughout the book.

Request for discussion and feedback

I want to hear your opinions on what I write in this book. I want to learn from you as well as share things with you. I know other people will have different opinions, points of view, and feelings. What lessons, ideas, and advice would you want to share about these topics?

Don't be afraid to challenge what I have to say or think critically about this book. You might even have a great idea for something I should add to this book. I can publish a new version or edition of this book with changes based on the feedback I get.

Please do not attack me in your feedback. It's not pleasant or helpful.

In addition to direct feedback, express your own ideas in other ways too. Don't be afraid to write your own books or articles. Talk to people about the things you feel are important. You'll almost always be glad you spoke up.

Contact the author

You can send me an email at WhatIThinkSoFar@gmail.com

You can also send in anonymous feedback using this form:
<https://goo.gl/forms/OmT94SqLLg6MS0Ts1>

There is also an official website for the book: www.WhatIThinkSoFar.com

Chapter 2. Happiness and Depression

Introduction: My depression and my quest for happiness

My own depression is the most personal topic in this book and also the most difficult to write about. I try to be as open and honest as I can in this chapter.

I started experiencing depression when I was 18 years old and graduating high school. I wasn't enjoying things like I used to. I was worried I might try to end my own life. It was scary and frustrating. I reached out to the school's counselor.

Since then, I've learned a lot about depression. I talked to psychiatrists and therapists. I wanted to learn how I could treat it. I wanted to learn how to be a happy person.

Right now, I'm feeling pretty good. But there have been lots of ups and downs in my happiness and in my depression over the past several years.

This chapter shares some of what I've learned from my experiences. My hope is that it will help everyone live happier lives, whether they have depression or not.

Disclaimer

I am not a psychologist and I am not an expert. I try to write about my own experiences and the things I've learned. But these experiences may vary widely from person to person, so I try to be careful about making generalized recommendations.

There is much I could still learn about depression and happiness. Please contact me if you have suggestions or corrections.

My own experience with depression

During college I was still depressed. I felt like my life was miserable. I couldn't feel happy.

I started seeing a therapist and getting medication. Both of these helped a lot. The medication helped me with many of the symptoms. The therapy helped me see things differently.

Thankfully, I eventually got better. I still feel depressed occasionally, but it is infrequent, not as severe, and doesn't last as long.

The medication was very helpful in treating me. The medication takes a while to have effect, but they are very helpful in relieving symptoms. It helps me have the chemicals I need to feel good when good things happen instead of being miserable no matter what.

A couple of times I tried to stop taking the medication (with the doctor's permission) because I felt like I didn't need it anymore. But after two months of not taking medication I felt awful again and went back to the doctor.

There have been several things during my life that caused me a lot of stress: self-criticism (I'm difficult on myself and a perfectionist), my career, my education, and my relationships (dating, friends, or family), and my difficulty finding my purpose in life. This stress probably made me more likely to get depression.

In hopes of helping me feel better, I also tried a few different journal writing exercises. For example, I started writing down (privately) how I was feeling. I also started studying a thought-examination process by Byron Katie called "The Work". I describe "The Work" at the end of this chapter. I think counseling or therapy is usually more helpful, but writing exercises can help too.

A brief introduction to depression

Depression is when your brain does not function properly, causing you to feel extreme sadness. A depressed person will not be able to feel appropriate happiness when joyful things happen. A depressed person will also feel much worse in response to stressful situations.

There are different types and degrees of depression. A mildly depressed person may be able to hide their depression very well, especially if they have some good things going on in their life. A severely depressed person may not be able to do much besides sleep, eat a little, and waste time.

Symptoms of Depression

Symptoms can include: difficulty enjoying life, inability to enjoy or be interested in the things you used to care about, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, thoughts of suicide, difficulty falling asleep, oversleeping, feeling fatigued and low-energy regardless of sleep, low self-control/willpower, loss of appetite or overeating (along with either weight loss or weight gain), moodiness, frequent sadness, anger or irritability, low motivation, low ambition, low self-worth, indifference towards everything, loss of interest in social interaction, wishing you had never been born, and difficulty focusing or making decisions.

Those are all symptoms I can remember experiencing at one point or another.

Some experiences I had when I was really depressed included: Having a very low appetite so that I lost a lot of weight unintentionally, staying awake at night crying, feeling like I was irritable or in a bad mood during the day, wishing I had never been born, not having the self-control/willpower to do the things I wanted to do, trouble focusing on tasks, being unable to enjoy the things I liked to do (like dancing), and even imagining suicide. During the worst month I could barely get out of bed.

Tell your doctor, psychiatrist, or therapist all your relevant symptoms, feelings, and thoughts. This helps them diagnose you and treat you. You can even write down your symptoms and give them written notes.

Negative thoughts I've had during depressed times in my life

Looking back on the most challenging times in my life, I can remember some of the painful thoughts that I had. I didn't know how to examine these thoughts and deal with them. Instead, I dwelled on them. This only made them worse. All of the thoughts turned out to not be true. (The end of this chapter discusses treating negative thoughts.)

When I was in my teens I had thoughts like: *I am a loser, I don't come from a good enough family, I am sub-human, I am unattractive, I don't have enough friends, my life is miserable and hopeless, I wish I had never been born.*

When I was in my twenties I had thoughts like: *I am a failure, my future will be dreadful, I am not a good programmer, I will go broke, I won't be able to find happiness, my first book will never be good, if I don't become a super successful person then I will be a failure, my life is miserable, I am suffering.*

I can see now that I didn't need to be worried about these fears. They are all false, and most of them are ridiculous!

Everybody has at least a few concerns like these. But when you're depressed these thoughts can feel overwhelming.

Depression as a lens through which you experience the world

I like the metaphor of depression as a lens or filter through which you experience the world. Your brain is how you understand, perceive, feel, believe, and know. Depression is a problem in the brain that is going to change how you do all those things.

When you're depressed, every activity seems more stressful and tiring. At the same time, every happy moment seems less rewarding or interesting. You feel different from normal people because you know the things that make them happy won't make you happy.

Treating depression means peeling back the layers of depression so that your brain can perceive things normally again.

Suicide and suicide prevention

Tragically, some percentage of the population ends their own life by committing suicide. Curiously, this does NOT only happen to people with objectively terrible lives. Instead, suicide can occur in people with seemingly great lives or people with potentially great futures. People with suicidal thoughts can be successful and smart in addition to depressed and struggling.

If you're having suicidal thoughts, go see a doctor or a therapist.

I believe these suicides happen to people whose brains are structured in such a way that cause negative emotions to overpower rational thinking. A depressed person might see their future live as miserable, hopeless, or scary even when their life doesn't have to be.

They also might behave irrationally, making their situation worse. For example, the brain makes you want to stay in bed and sleep instead of spending time doing the things necessary to be happy. The ultimate irrational decision is to end your own life when there were ways to overcome your problems without being so destructive.

Suicide is very tragic for the family and friends of the victim. These people may have been able to see the rational solutions to the problems. They might have felt that the victim had the opportunity to live out the rest of his or her natural life happily.

I had a cousin commit suicide. I wish I had known that was a possibility and reached out to him more. Maybe I could've been able to prevent it. Or maybe there was nothing I could have done.

Suicide is also tragic for the victim. Even in a suicidal, depressed state, the victim might not see suicide as a good option. Instead it is seen as the better choice because all the other options seem worse. In other words, the victim might have chosen *not* to commit suicide if he thought there were better options. But the irrational, depressed thinking makes other options feel unobtainable. This is how I felt when I had suicidal thoughts.

I remember imagining my own suicide. I didn't want to have those thoughts. Deep down I didn't even want to die, I just wanted the feeling of hopelessness to go away. I also didn't want to bring emotional pain to the people who knew me.

If I had committed suicide, the note I would have written would go something like, "I'm disappointed I didn't live to my full potential, but it's too painful to continue. Sorry to my friends and family."

I remember investigating different methods of suicide. For example, I remember thinking to myself that I did NOT want to kill myself by jumping in front of a train because that would be too bothersome for the people trying to ride the train. Even when I was at my most depressed I still wanted to be as considerate as possible to everyone else.

Suicide prevention is difficult because people can be very secretive about their suicidal thoughts. They might even isolate themselves socially.

Treating depression

Luckily, depression can be treated and prevented. There are a variety of methods to help you do this.

There are medications that can help regulate the chemicals in your brain. This helps you have the same feelings and responses as a healthy person.

There is also “cognitive therapy” that helps change the way you think. This is usually done by talking with a therapist. If you think you have depression, talk to your doctor about a plan for treating it.

When treated properly, the symptoms of depression become less frequent and less severe.

Curiously, physical exercise is supposed to be very good for depressed people. In my own experience, I have found that I am generally less depressed if I am exercising a lot. Of course, when you’re really depressed you don’t want to exercise.

Depression is a serious problem and it’s not all that uncommon. By attempting to treat it, we are creating opportunities for lives to be happier, healthier, more productive, and more fulfilling.

Antidepressants

The purpose of antidepressant medication is to normalize the chemistry in your brain. There is a common misconception that antidepressants make you feel happy or unreasonably good. But antidepressants won’t make you feel great about things that are bad.

What they actually do is allow a depressed person to feel how a normal, healthy person feels. In a normal, healthy person, you feel good if good things are happening and feel bad if bad things are happening.

Causes of Depression

Depression is related to anxiety. Both are caused by the chemicals and neurological structures in your brain. When you’re sad, worried, stressed, or angry much of the time, it makes it easier for you to feel that way again in the future. This creates a downward spiral of negative feelings.

Thinking sad thoughts even started to feel good, even though ruminating on them only made me more depressed. I also tend to daydream a lot and set very high expectations for myself. I rarely live up to my own expectations.

Some factors that can affect the likelihood of depression are genetics, life experiences, worries, expectations, self-esteem, stress, diet, and exercise.

Willpower

Willpower gives you the ability to do a certain tasks even though you don’t completely want to do the task. Willpower lets you do chores that aren’t inherently super fun. It takes a lot of willpower to stay focused on a homework assignment I don’t care about, but it takes very little willpower for me to eat a slice of delicious pizza.

Willpower is a very important topic because people with depression can suffer from very low willpower and motivation. For example, I really wanted to get a chore done but did not have the

willpower to do it. I just did nothing instead. When I lack willpower, I feel extremely lazy and I procrastinate.

Willpower is different than energy or tiredness. I could have low willpower but still be energetic and awake.

A brief introduction to neurology

The brain is very complicated. It is very powerful because it can learn and remember a large amount of knowledge. It is also very "flexible" in the sense that there is a huge variety to the things the brain can learn, think, sense, and understand.

But the brain isn't magic! Its flexibility and power comes from being made out of approximately 100 billion neurons. A single neuron is not all that useful, but it can be connected to other neurons via synapses. A single neuron can have hundreds of synapses. Chemistry, physics, and electrical signals allow neurons to change how they are connected to each other.

This system of many neurons with many possible connections and changing connections is very useful. It allows us to learn and remember and change how we think. Neurons remind me of LEGO blocks because the a large collection of blocks can build a huge range of different structures.

The brain's flexibility gives it the possibility to be extremely smart in many different ways. But that flexibility also makes it vulnerable to developing emotional disorders.

Some people online ask, "Is depression a genetic flaw that will eventually be removed from the gene pool via natural selection?" To me, I don't think so because I don't think it is as simple as that. I think of depression as a symptom of the brain's powerful flexibility, which is generally a good thing. I don't know all the details though.

Emotional health

Some common, undesirable emotions are: rejection, guilt, low self-esteem, anger, fear, disappointment, frustration, hopelessness. An emotionally healthy person will have an appropriate emotional response to situations. It's normal to feel negative emotions every once in awhile when something undesirable occurs.

An emotionally unhealthy person, however, will have a negative emotion too frequently or have a bad reaction to that emotion. For example, people can react with depression, anxiety, panic, or rage.

Treating emotions with emotional first aid

I read a cool book called *Emotional First Aid* by Dr. Guy Winch, a psychologist. It introduced me to the concept of "emotional first aid". In physical health, first aid is the treatment that we can do ourselves without a doctor to handle small problems and prevent worse problems. Emotional first aid

are things we can do to treat our small emotional injuries. This can help prevent more serious problems in the future.

The book covers different types of emotional “injuries” such as rejection, loneliness, low self-esteem, and failure. The author gives examples of patients who had these problems and how their thoughts about the problem made it worse. The suggested remedy often involved thinking critically so that we don’t unfairly blame ourselves or unrealistically feel hopeless.

The value of having a good support system

We all have problems. We all have irrational fears and feelings. We all have misconceptions. Having a good support system can help prevent emotional challenges become debilitating mental health issues.

What makes up a support system? To me, it encompasses a very broad range of things in your life. Almost anything could be a part of your support system.

My support system includes family, friends, and sometimes even acquaintances. It includes a doctor and a therapist. It includes examining my thoughts in a journal. It also includes my beliefs about myself, my knowledge and training, my goals, and my ability to manage negative thoughts.

Supporting others online

As a programmer, I’m curious about how technology can be used to help support people. There are a couple websites already that I think help a lot of people.

There are very real limitations to websites like these. It relies on volunteers who might not be very well trained or knowledgeable.

But there are also very real benefits. There are many people with “easy” problems that can be helped without needing an expert. Online resources like these can be a valuable tool for some people. They can also help lead people towards more professional tools.

I’ve been spending time on BlahTherapy and various online communities within Reddit. I listen to and talk to people about their problems. I’ve learned a lot about what people are going through and how to be better at supporting them.

Supporting others online with BlahTherapy.com

Users of BlahTherapy.com enter are paired with another user in a private chat room. You can designate yourself as either a “Venter” or a “Listener” each time you request to chat. And each chat room consists of one Venter and one Listener. The two can type to each other.

I've used this service many times as both a Venter and a Listener. Having someone listen to you can be very powerful. It can give you new perspective.

Sometimes the venters are teenagers, other times they are adults. The problems tend to be about relationships, career, or family.

Anyone can be a Listener, and the quality of listener varies. Some listeners are very good at listening and are very helpful, but others are not attentive or understanding enough. I've spent a lot of time as a listener and I'm much better at helping people feel better than when I first started.

There is also a section of the website that allows users to chat with trained psychologists for a fee.

Supporting others online with /r/SuicideWatch and /r/Depression

Another website is the "Suicide Watch" section of Reddit (www.reddit.com/r/SuicideWatch). Users who are suicidal can post written calls for help here. Other users can try to write responses in the hope of helping to prevent suicides. I think these expressions and conversations can help prevent suicide in some cases. When I have free time I will read the posts of suicidal people and try to respond with messages that I think will help them.

Sadly, some of the users who create posts here do end up committing suicide. I know this because I got a message from a parent thanking me for my effort but also informing me that the user I responded to had in fact committed suicide.

I also try to respond to people who reach out for help on reddit.com/r/depression. Hundreds of depressed people post there every day. Whenever I can, I'll respond to a few to try to help them.

I prioritize responding to posts that don't have any responses and are at risk of not getting any.

Social media can be depressing

Social media websites like Facebook can be depressing. I see pictures of people I know from school having lots of fun and being super successful. I feel jealous if I don't think I'm having enough fun or being successful enough.

Social media isn't that big of a source of depression for me, personally, but I know for some people it is.

The pictures, videos, and stories show the best of their lives. It doesn't show the difficulties they had to overcome or the luck that they had. The story you're getting is not necessarily the whole story or even the true story.

Hopefully you spend more time doing what makes you happy than looking at what other people are doing. If you don't know what you can do to be happier, invest time in finding out.

An introduction to "Loving What Is" and "The Work" by Byron Katie

"Loving What Is" is the title of a book by author Byron Katie. In it, she describes her process for finding peace and happiness, called "The Work". Her website is TheWork.com.

The title "Loving What Is" is intimidating and a little bit misleading for beginners. The goal is NOT to take something horrible and see it as a great thing. Instead, the goal is to examine your thoughts about a stressful situation so that your thinking is realistic and productive.

When confronted with something horrible, the way you think about the problem can make it even worse. The Work calms you down so that your mind is better able to take action and fix what is horrible. It allows you to love yourself and the world despite the problems you face.

The Work consists of questions that help you see how your own thinking is hurting you. It also helps you think of new thoughts that you hadn't considered before. Her book, "Loving What Is", describes the questions and why they are helpful. For example, "Who would you be without the thought that is on your mind?"

Byron Katie has helped many people overcome their fears and problems with The Work. The book gives many examples of people answering the questions with her. You can find videos online of her counseling people using The Work. She has also given lectures around the world.

Her website has a free worksheet called "Judge Your Neighbor" which you can use to try The Work. It is a little confusing at first. In fact, when I first read "Loving What Is", I didn't understand it or like it all that much. It wasn't until I saw Byron Katie speak at a lecture that I began to see how helpful it could be.

The ideas behind The Work are not unique. They are a form of "cognitive behavioral therapy" that psychologists use to help improve how patients think.

How to perform "The Work"

The first step is to identify something that you are stressed about or upset about. This could be another person or something you don't like about your life.

The second step is write down some statements you believe about the situation. You need at least one. Byron Katie's "Judge Your Neighbor" worksheet asks six questions to help you identify some of your beliefs. For example, "In order for you to be happy, what do you need?" or "How should things be different?"

The third step is to examine those belief statements one at a time. Byron Katie does this by asking questions like "*Can I absolutely know this is true?*", "*How do I react when I think this thought?*", "*Who would I be without this belief?*", "*Can I see a reason to let go of this belief?*". The answers might surprise you. You might find that what you thought was true was not completely true. Or you might find that the belief is hurting you rather than helping you.

That question, “Who would I be without this belief?”, is my favorite part of The Work. Imagining what I would do if I let go of my thoughts leads to me to helpful realizations.

The fourth is what Byron Katie calls “the turnaround”. You take the statement you are examining and transform it into new or opposite thoughts. For example, you might examine whether the opposite of what you thought is actually true. Or maybe you are doing in some way what you are accusing someone else of doing. You see if you can come up with genuine reasons in support of the “turnaround” variations. Basically, you are trying to look for counter-arguments to your beliefs.

These thinking exercises help you become calmer, more reasonable, and more focused regarding whatever is upsetting you.

There are no wrong answers, so answer honestly. That sometimes means admitting that a belief absolutely is true. The point is not to change your mind or get you to answer a certain way.

When I first started the Work, I incorrectly thought I had to disprove my stressful belief. That led me to answer questions in a way that wasn’t completely honest. It is more helpful to be completely honest with yourself, even your answers seem “wrong” or pessimistic.

My experience with The Work

When I examine my thoughts I find that I have fears and beliefs that are not really true. This can help me feel better about how things are going in my life. Over time, I think it helps decrease how much I worry.

I use the thinking exercises from The Work almost every day. I ask myself questions and write the answers in a journal. I answer the questions based on whatever is frustrating me at the time. I also come up with my own prompt questions, such as “Why am I not happy?” and then I examine my answers.

“Should thoughts”

By studying Byron Katie, I learned that some of my stress comes from “should thoughts”.

A “should thought” is when you dislike something and think it should be different. A “should thought” can be about yourself (“*I should have gotten more work done yesterday*”), about someone else (“*My co-worker should be less annoying*”), or about the world (“*Politicians should be better!*”).

There are actually two definitions of the word “should”. Most of the time we say “should” we are expressing a preference or an ideal. For example, “*My roommate should be cleaner.*” This is the first definition of “should”.

The second definition of “should” means you have an expectation about reality. Things *should* happen because the necessary prerequisites are met. For example, “*I started the washing machine*

an hour ago so it should be done by now". This second definition is more helpful because it reminds us that things only happen if reality dictates that it must.

Why should things be any different than how they are? "Should thoughts" are wrong because they want reality to be something that it is not.

In reality, everything is exactly how it should be. Everything happens because it obeyed the rules of our universe. If something didn't happen, then it should not have happened (according to the second definition). Byron Katie likes to say "When I argue with reality, I lose".

I create a lot of stress for myself when I think about things I don't like. "Should thoughts" make me less happy and less motivated. Without "should thoughts", I can be more at peace and move forward more easily. To let go of these frustrating thoughts, I can try to think about the reasons why things are exactly as they are.

As an example, I remember being mad at one of my friends. I thought that she was being overly judgemental and that *she should be kinder*. If I didn't examine that thought, I would have just stayed mad at my friend. But because I examined that thought, I thought about how that friend wasn't trying to be mean, she was trying to be helpful and frank. Based on her past experiences, she wasn't prepared to be kinder. And I also realized that I hadn't been kind to her either and that I should apologize.

Even if you don't think you have many "should thoughts", try examining your thoughts. Some "should thoughts" are hidden.

The purpose of life is to be where you are right now

The purpose of life is to be where you are right now. Byron Katie mentioned this idea in a video and I really like it.

When I'm feeling depressed, I don't know what the purpose of my life is. I might feel like life has no purpose and that nothing matters. But this is very demotivating and doesn't ring completely true. Other times I feel like the purpose of life is to become very successful and accomplish my goals. But this is also demotivating, because my goals feel impossible when I'm depressed.

Remembering that the purpose of life is to be where you are right now is very motivating. It's a form of self-kindness since it prevents me from getting mad at myself for my current shortcomings. It helps focus on the present rather than some imaginary future or failure.

The website I built to help people examine their thoughts

I made a website, www.ExamineYourThoughts.com. Anyone can go there and try writing answers to some questions. It's inspired by what I learned from studying Byron Katie.

The ping-pong metaphor for anxious thoughts

Let's say I have an anxious thought. For example, "*this book will be a failure*" or "*this weekend will be horrible*." It helps to imagine the anxious thought as a ping-pong ball or tennis ball that has been served towards you.

The goal is to hit it back quickly and as solidly as you can. You can hit back by examining your thoughts or having reassuring thoughts. For example, "*this book will have some fans and be a success even in the worst case scenario*" or "*The parts of this weekend I'm worried about probably won't be that bad*."

Keep reminding yourself: Never give up, Things won't be as bad as you think, Just get started

Never give up. For most big things (such as fighting your depression, building a happy life), you are better off not giving up. Ask yourself, what do you have to lose by giving up? What do you have to gain by not giving up? If you're depressed, you have a lot to gain by not giving up: you could potentially have many happy years ahead of you.

Things won't be as bad as you think. When was the last time that something you worried about turned out to be as bad as you worried it would be? Probably not recently. Generally the things we worry about don't turn out to be that big of a deal.

Just get started! For me, the hardest of anything is getting started. Once I get started a little bit, the task becomes so much less scary.

If it helps you to remember, write it down on a piece of paper and tape it to your wall.

Tackling issues that cause sadness, anxiety, or stress

Sometimes when a person is depressed or anxious, it is because they have issues that they are worrying about. If that is the case, examine the issue or issues. Then spend time actually working on one of the issues.

For example, as I'm writing this book, I sometimes feel anxious that this book isn't good enough yet. The best thing I can do in that situation is spend time focused on improving the book.

Tackling the issue head on is going to be more helpful than doing something to make yourself feel good without solving the underlying issue.

I might be afraid to face the issue and try to avoid it. If I notice this, I try examining my thoughts about the issue. This helps me get to a place where I'm less afraid to try working on the problem. If I'm really nervous, I set a timer so that at the very least I work on the issue for ten minutes.

Helping someone you know who has depression

If someone you know is depressed, it can be very frustrating to try to help them. They might be moody or angry. Or maybe they don't feel like sharing all their thoughts with you. It might feel like they aren't listening to you. The depression causes them to avoid doing the things that might help them.

Ask them what you can do to help them. Avoid telling them what to do. They probably know what they could do differently but just don't have the willpower to do it.

Spend time with them. Take them outside in the sun, out to eat a healthy meal, or out to get exercise. Talk to them about their fears and problems. Help them examine their thoughts. Offer to help them get chores or goals accomplished. Help them find resources and professionals who can help them more.

You might be tempted to ignore them because helping them is so stressful to you. But if you can, respond to them when they reach out for help. It will help them feel less alone.

It feels like some people have it easier

It made me jealous when I noticed that some other people had an easier time being happy than me. For example, some people are happy without struggling with depression first. Another example: some people are (seemingly) perfectly happy with lives and careers that wouldn't bring me that same happiness. I'm a little bit jealous of people who have a passion that is cooler than writing a self-help book, haha!

It's probably best to not worry about other people and just be the happiest you can be.

Happiness is something you do

Instead of trying to *be happy*, try to be *doing happy*. Happiness is something you do. Instead of worrying about whether you are happy or how to achieve happiness, think about doing things happily. This mean could mean changing what you're doing and/or changing how you do things.

This isn't an original idea. It's something that I found online in a forum comment. But it stuck with me. Anytime I'm in the middle of doing a chore I try to remind myself that I can try to do it happily.

The future of mental health

Hopefully our society will continue to get better at taking care of mental health as time goes on. There will be additional research, new discoveries, better resources, better educational materials, better training, etc. There are lots of opportunities for improvement and there are people willing to put effort towards those opportunities.

Chapter 3. Education

Education in this book

Education and learning are themes that appear throughout this book in a few different ways. First, this book contains interesting facts. Second, you might learn about my opinions and ideas. Finally, I might learn something from you if this book causes you to get into contact with me.

All of the other chapters in this book involve education in some way. Education is about learning how to learn. Happiness requires you to learn what makes you happy or not. Work is about learning how to be successful. Design is about learning how to build products that people love. Health is learning how to live a healthy life. Dating is about learning how to have a great relationship. Science teaches us about our universe.

My educational background

I was always a smart kid growing up. I think this is because my parents taught me a lot. They had both been teachers when they were young adults, so they loved teaching kids. They spent time teaching me math and reading. They also gave me plenty of educational books and games. (Of course, that's not the only way to be a smart kid, as there are plenty of smart kids without those things.)

In high school I loved reading the history textbooks so I thought I might go to college for history or political science. I was also very good at math so I thought maybe I would be a mathematician. Then I discovered computer programming and went into computer science instead.

I got a bachelor's degree in computer science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's College of Engineering. I also got a business minor and took some classes on entrepreneurship and creativity. After college I worked two jobs in Silicon Valley as a software engineer. I also did an online programming bootcamp called "Bloc.io" to learn Ruby on Rails and improve my front end web development.

The purpose of education: Why should we teach?

Why should we teach others and why should we learn from others? For one, we learn skills that help us improve our lives and increase our capabilities. We teach because we want to help others improve their own lives.

Another motivation is that we want to live in an informed society. For example, we educate others because we believe it will be valuable for democracy and justice. We teach children, both our own children and other children, so they learn how to live happy, peaceful lives around us.

We all start off knowing almost nothing. The world is full of challenges, obstacles, and frustrations. Hopefully the things we learn allow us to overcome those challenges. Hopefully we learn enough so that we are able to do the things we want to do and feel the happiness we want to feel.

Different methods of learning

There are lots of different ways to learn things. Some examples: you can learn by taking classes, talking to your friends and family, by reading books, by going to school and college, by watching videos, by reading websites, etc. Some education comes from formal education, such as grade school, high school, college, trade school, graduate school. Other education comes from informal education, such as books, private lessons, online tutorials, etc.

For formal education, there are a lot of different questions we could investigate. What should be taught? Who should pay for it? What should that money be spent on? What tests should be given to students and what material should those tests cover?

As an adult, informal education is very important to me. There is still a lot of valuable learning I could do even though I have already finished a lot of formal education.

I tend to learn best by reading really good books and written guides. That's why writing a book appealed so much to me.

Explain things in a way that is easy to understand

Explanations can be easy to understand or difficult to understand. When something is explained in a way that is easy to understand, the listener will learn much faster and more completely.

Being able to explain things well is an extremely valuable skill. We tend to overlook how much of a difference a great explanation can make for our listeners.

There are a couple keys to a great explanation. How the information is ordered matters. The most important information should be expressed as soon as possible. Otherwise your listener will be waiting for you to get to the point. New or confusing information should be given in an order that allows the listener to best understand it. A good explanation will also be concise. It won't distract the reader with unnecessary information. The descriptions will be simple and effective.

Understanding 'Why' motivates us to learn and teach better

The most important question to ask and to teach is "Why?". If you're a student, you'll be more motivated to learn about a subject if you understand *why* you should learn about that subject. Additionally, you will study hardest if you believe what you are learning is actually important.

If you're a teacher, you also will do a better job if you believe what you're teaching is important. You won't be very inspired to teach well if you think the topic is unimportant.

This reminds me of parents trying to change the behavior of their children. If you explain *why* a behavior is desirable or undesirable, they will be more likely to listen. Similarly, adults will change their behavior when they understand why.

Reflecting on difficult classes

Some of the classes I took in high school and college were really difficult for me. Usually it was because I didn't know the "big picture". I didn't understand what it was I was supposed to be learning or why. They would teach me concepts, but I didn't have enough background information to understand why these concepts were being taught. It made getting a good grade much more difficult.

Now I have a much better understanding of the big picture. Looking back, the material I was being taught does not seem very difficult at all. Now I'm able to describe the concepts and explain why they were being taught.

Meaningful projects

I was assigned a lot of projects for my classes. I worked on these projects either individually or with a team of my classmates. Sometimes I would do a really great job on the project. I would be motivated to produce really great work and be very creative. However, I didn't always give my best effort or produce a great final product. Sometimes I was not motivated at all.

I think how meaningful to me the project was determined how motivated I was to work on it. All of the projects were graded by teachers. A meaningful project was one that had value to me in addition to the grade. I wasn't inspired by getting good grades, but I was inspired by doing interesting work. It was something I was proud of for other reasons besides the grade.

For example, one time I took a class on databases and got to build a little social network. It was really fun to work on. I learned a lot. I loved showing it to others. And it was something I wanted to keep working on after the class ended.

I wish I had done more projects during my education like the ones that I am proud of. Great projects can open up really meaningful opportunities.

Difficult tests

It feels terrible to do poorly on an important test. Imagine you're taking a college class and you fail the first big test. It makes you feel angry at yourself and feel bitter towards the class. It makes you dislike the class. That's how I felt when that happened to me!

This is very demotivating. The next time you need to study for the class you'll be at a disadvantage because of your emotions. You'll feel like the material is too difficult and lack confidence in your ability to learn it. You won't like studying because you won't be enjoying the class. This only makes it harder to focus on learning and catching up to the students that did well.

If I was a college professor, I would grade the first big test but I wouldn't have it count towards your grade for the class. I would tell the students that it doesn't count but that they should take it very seriously anyway as a way to measure their understanding of the material. That way, even students who did bad on the first test would continue to be motivated to do well in the class.

Learn by teaching and explaining

One of the best ways to learn about a topic is to teach about that topic. The process of having to explain the topic will improve your understanding. You will be able to see the big picture and understand how each of the pieces fit into that picture. You will notice new connections and think of new questions.

Attempting to write this book has encouraged me to learn a lot about the topics I cover.

You don't need to literally be teaching someone else either. For example, you can create a study guide for a topic. You'll learn a lot by doing so, even if you don't show anyone else the study guide. This is a much more effective way of studying than just reviewing your notes. I remember my calculus teacher had us prepare for the final exam by creating a study guide and turning it in. I understood calculus much better after creating my own study guide for it.

When I work as a programmer, I occasionally come across a problem I don't understand. Sometimes when I am explaining the problem to someone else, whether in person or via an email, I will realize what the cause of the problem is. This is so common in programming that there is a term for it: "rubber duck debugging". The name comes from figuring out how to fix bugs in code just by explaining your code to an inanimate object, such as a yellow rubber duck.

My own experience with creating educational content

Last year I wrote a guide explaining how to use Git™. Git is a software tool that programmers use to help manage the code they write. It is a widely used tool, but it is also very difficult to learn how to use.

Writing the guide was a lot of fun. I shared it with some of my friends who are programmers and they were very appreciative. I also learned more about Git while writing it.

I encourage people to try creating their own educational content. It could be a written guide or a video or a series of pictures. Then you can share it with friends or publish it somewhere online.

You can read my guide to Git here: www.github.com/kevinverre/kevins-guide-to-git

Growth mindset

A "growth mindset" is when you strongly believe in your ability to learn and grow. A "fixed mindset" is when you believe that you have strengths and weaknesses that cannot be changed.

Imagine you are struggling with a particular class or subject in school, such as math. You notice that your math skills are weak right now. How do you react to your poor performance in that subject?

If you have a "fixed mindset", you accept that you are bad at math and that math is one of your weaknesses. You won't try to get good at math because you don't believe it could ever become one of your strengths.

On the other hand, if you have a growth mindset, you believe that your math skills could greatly be improved. You believe that you can grow into someone who is great at math, even though you currently struggle. You don't believe that being bad at math is permanently part of who you are.

Some people I know have a growth mindset and others have a fixed mindset. The people with a fixed mindset limit their possibilities. For example, I have a friend who was bad at math and science when he was younger. As an adult in college, he doubted his ability to learn difficult math or technical subjects. Instead he focused on writing and poetry. He didn't have very much belief in his own ability to develop new strengths.

In contrast, I also have friends that exemplify the growth mindset. They are willing to try new things and challenge themselves in order to grow. They find success and happiness doing things that they never previously imagined doing.

Video games are a great metaphor for why you should have a growth mindset. The first time you played Mario Kart, Call of Duty, or League of Legends (or whatever game you play), you were awful at it. You began as a noob! You didn't know what was going to happen next or what strategies were effective. But after playing the game a lot, you learned how to play much more effectively.

So the next time you struggle with something, you think you aren't smart enough, or you don't think you're capable of something, just remember that you just need more experience or instruction. Don't underestimate how much you can grow.

Instead of thinking "I suck at calculus", try thinking "I don't know enough about calculus right now."

But don't underestimate how difficult or valuable it is to grow either. Sometimes I neglected to put in the time and effort required to learn a valuable skill. (Example: some advanced programming concepts.) Why? My confidence in being able to learn caused me to procrastinate actually learning it. I probably missed out on some opportunities because I didn't push myself to grow.

Sometimes you should go for it even if you don't know much

There are a lot of skills you can learn just by trying. For example, say you want to make an iPhone app. That's the type of project you can just go for. It doesn't matter if you don't know what you're doing because there's no risk. Just start working. If you get stuck you can reach out for help. But don't let your lack of knowledge scare you off from getting started.

Asking questions and getting answers

A great way to learn is to ask questions. But asking good questions and getting good answers can be difficult. Sometimes someone will have an important question but not ask it. Maybe they are afraid to ask or embarrassed to ask.

Sometimes someone will ask an important question but not receive a good answer. Maybe they didn't ask the right person or people.

Why did I read so much fiction for school?

When I was in high school, I took an English literature class every semester. Sometimes we read nonfiction, but most of the time we read fictional books. We would discuss the books in class and also write essays about them. These were the classes I struggled with the most during high school. At that time, I didn't understand why I was being taught fiction. I didn't understand how to discuss the important parts of the book during class. I also didn't know how to consistently write good essays.

Fiction novels and poetry can teach us a lot about the real world. The writing can express ideas, thoughts, feelings, morals, inspiration, and lessons. The authors use their writing to teach the reader what they think and feel. We can use this to help us come to our own conclusions on what we think and feel. Fiction can help us explore new, complex ideas.

However, it wasn't clear to me at the time why I was being asked to read so much fiction. The lessons in the books were sometimes very subtle. I didn't always know how to connect those lessons from fiction to my own life. Also, reading lots of good books did *not* feel like it helped me to become a good writer!

If I took those English literature classes now, I wouldn't struggle like I did. I've learned how to be a much better writer (more on that later, in "How to be a good writer"). I've also learned how to understand the important ideas within fictional novels. These skills would allow me to now consistently write good essays and consistently participate well in class discussion. Now I understand why fiction is valuable to students. I just wish I had been taught how to be a good English student earlier.

Nonfiction reading

I love reading nonfiction! I've read many nonfiction books and I have many more that I want to read. I read nonfiction books while I was still in high school, during college, and after college. Many of these books I read on my own for fun (outside of school). Some I found on my own, others were recommended to me by other people.

I was inspired to read because I wanted to be smart about the real world. I felt like I was learning so much. These books were written by professors, journalists, psychologists, economists, scientists, engineers, biologists, marketers, bloggers, etc. I mention some of my favorite nonfiction books throughout this book.

I wish I had read more nonfiction books for school. I think teachers should start asking their students to read more nonfiction. Reading nonfiction can be very valuable.

Recently, there has been a rising interest among readers in psychology, business, and self-help books. There are more nonfiction books to choose from now than ever before. I think that there will be many amazing nonfiction books written in the future.

One of my favorite nonfiction books was *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. It describes how to be more likeable and how to convince people to agree with you. It was first published in 1936 but it still holds up amazingly well today. Reading it helped inspire my love of nonfiction reading.

Carnegie writes that we should not “criticize, condemn, or complain” because arguing rarely gets people to agree with our way of thinking. Instead, be a respectful, empathetic listener and be encouraging.

Topics that aren't taught enough in school

I learned a lot in school. But there were some topics that I wish had been taught *more*. These topics are very practical and would've helped me outside of school. Examples include: entrepreneurship, business, personal finance, economics, how to be a good writer, non-fiction reading, psychology, dating and relationships, cooking, etc. Some of these are mentioned elsewhere in this book.

Learning about careers

As a student, I learned a little bit about the various careers and jobs I could have in the future. But there was a lot more I could have learned. I now know a lot more about many different careers: what types of educational requirements they have, what skills they require, what salaries they can earn, how stressful they are, what type of people they attract.

How to be a good writer

I learned how to be a good writer when I was a senior in college. I learned by reading a book on how to be a better writer. I wish I had learned those ideas a lot sooner. It would've made the writing I did for high school English class a lot better.

The book was titled *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup. It explains how to write in a way that is easy and enjoyable to read. For each lesson, it showed how to re-write example sentences and paragraphs to be clearer.

The book discussed word-order within a sentence and sentence-order within a paragraph. Sentences and paragraphs are easiest to read if they have a logical starting point. This starting point is usually something that is familiar to the reader or easy to understand. This way the reader isn't

confused by something you wrote. The end of sentences and paragraphs should be a logical ending point. The end of a sentence or a paragraph naturally get more emphasis.

Another tip was to be concise and get to the important points quickly. Words or sentences that don't serve a valuable purpose should be removed. Many sentences can be re-constructed to use fewer words.

For this book, I try to make the writing clear and easy to read. However, there are still many improvements I could make to the writing style. It takes a lot of time and effort to write well. Good editing can require just as much time as writing.

Taking too many classes at once

One semester in college I tried to take too many classes at once. That meant I had too much studying, learning, and work that I was supposed to do. I didn't get my best grades that semester. And I definitely didn't understand the material from those classes very well.

But it did teach me a lot about my limits. I learned that I can't be like Hermione in Harry Potter, who used a time travel device to take more classes than she had time for.

Why college costs so much

Going to a university in the United States can be expensive. There are probably many reasons why college costs so much. One important reason is that the demand for a college education has increased. Universities are willing to raise tuition prices because many students will attend despite the increased cost. Scholarships and student loans allow more students to afford a college education.

The price will stay high or increase as long as enough students enroll at the current price. A university will only decrease its tuition if the university feels it cannot attract enough students to enroll at the current price.

Is college worth its high cost?

The reason college is very popular despite its high cost is that there are lots of benefits to attending college. You can have a great educational experience and learn valuable skills. You can use your degree to get a job. You can meet great people. In many cases, going to college is a great value for your money.

However, you should be realistic about the benefits of any college program. Some college degrees offer great economic benefits by leading you to a high paying job. Which school you attend and what you study will affect your opportunities.

“Bootcamp” classes as a way of learning outside of college

In the field of computer programming, there are lots of educational companies offering customers programming “bootcamps” that teach you how to write code. A bootcamp is an intense class over a short period of time. I enrolled in one such programming bootcamp a couple years after college and it was extremely helpful.

These bootcamps and intensive classes can be a great way to learn a lot in a short amount of time. You can go at your own pace, which allowed me to skip over the parts I already knew. The curriculum tends to focus on what the industry is hiring for. For me, I wanted to learn a new programming language and technology (“Ruby on Rails”). How much you learn depends on how hard you’re willing to study.

Educational software and educational games

I love educational websites and software. There are many great educational resources online. New ones are being created all the time.

“Coursera” allows you to access college courses from real universities. “Khan Academy” has a lot of great, free educational videos and resources. YouTube has some amazing instructional videos. “Duolingo” is a clever game for learning a new language. TED.com has videos of inspiring lectures called “TED Talks”. Quora.com allows users to ask and answer questions. There are many more educational resources online.

As a kid I played a lot of educational computer games and board games. I think games can be a great way to learn things. Playing games also helped me get more experienced using computers.

I used a computer game (“Type to Learn”) to learn how to type on the computer. I also practiced math and reading with various computer games, such MathBlaster and the JumpStart series. SimCity 2000 and other Maxis games taught me about the real world. The computer game “Civilization II” taught me a lot about history and politics.

Future online educational resources

YouTube is great because it makes it very easy to upload, share, and organize the educational videos you’ve created. (Recording and editing a video still takes a lot of work.) The success and popularity of YouTube as a platform for videos has inspired many more people to create videos.

YouTube is an example of “Web 2.0” because it allows users to submit content that other users can enjoy. “Web 2.0” is still growing, developing, and evolving.

In the future, there will be new ways for content creators to create and share content. There might be newer and better ways to publish educational content. The content could be lesson plans, study guides, quizzes, videos, links to helpful URLs, or collections of resources, etc. There will also be improved search engines and recommendation engines to help people find the best educational content. As our websites and platforms for educational content improve, teachers will be more inspired to create content for those platforms.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a great educational resource. It has a huge amount of articles and information. The articles are written collaboratively by anyone willing to contribute.

Each article has a discussion page where you can discuss the contents of the article with the authors. You can also see all the changes made to an article over time.

Wikipedia has many articles describing aspects of Wikipedia itself. This includes all the different rules that are in place to try to maintain the quality of the encyclopedia.

A lot of effort goes into trying to keep Wikipedia accurate. If someone attempts to vandalize an article (to be funny or to push an agenda), it can be detected either by other contributors or by automated software that flags suspicious changes. But you may still encounter inaccuracies.

Wikipedia also has weaknesses. Some articles are not very well written. The important information that you're looking for can be hidden inside of a large article. Information and details can be in a weird order.

Another one of the limitations is the encyclopedia format. Encyclopedia articles are great for many kinds of information, but not all kinds of information. For example, many articles that would potentially be useful are removed because they don't meet the guidelines.

Even small but good changes can be removed if a moderator doesn't like it. It's frustrating if you write something that you are proud of only to have someone else remove it.

A great project for college students is to create a page on Wikipedia or try making improvements to an existing page. It gives you a better understanding of how the pages are edited.

Book summaries

I love reading books and I also enjoy reading book summaries. If I'm curious about a book, I will try to find a summary or review of it.

There are some websites and apps for book summaries. However, I haven't found one yet that does an amazing job. Looking for great summaries or notes online for a specific book can be disappointing. There is "WikiSummaries.org", which is related to Wikipedia and allows anyone to edit book summaries. But it has very little content or user activity so it is not very helpful. Writing a good book summary takes a lot of effort.

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Chapter 4. Career and Work

Introduction

Work is one of the things people worry about most. In this chapter, I focus on management and motivation. I think that understanding these topics benefit people the most. Better management and teamwork skills leads to better accomplishments and happier people. I also try to give some career advice.

Good Managers

Some managers are great, some are OK, and some are bad. Great managers are extremely valuable to the success of the company and to the success of their employees. It wasn't until I got more experienced that I realized how much of a difference great managers can make.

A better manager will get the most out of the employees that he or she is leading. Unfortunately, many managers don't know how to do this. Bad managers will actually cause their employees to be less productive. I'm hoping that as time goes on people will get better at management. It will make work less stressful for their employees. It will also allow better work to get done.

I've had great managers, OK managers, and bad managers. It made a huge difference in how much I enjoyed my job and how motivated I was to do good work.

How to motivate people

There are many books on how to be a good manager. But it seems like many managers don't read them or adhere to their advice.

One book I read and enjoyed was called *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink. It's about what causes employees to be motivated to do good work. According to the author, the three keys to motivation at a job are autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Autonomy means having control over what you do. Mastery means the work allows you to grow. Purpose means working on something that you feel is a good use of your time.

It is important to delegate responsibilities rather than "micro-manage". Not only does it free up more time for you, you're giving the other person more autonomy, which is very motivating.

On the other hand, there are some things that are ineffective motivational tools. Rewards and punishments intuitively seem like a great way to motivate people. But in some cases, they are actually very demotivating to employees. It depends on the task. Doing a task just to receive a reward or avoid a punishment may make the task less enjoyable. Money is not always enough to motivate people to do great work.

Employees work best if they think their work is important

Employees and management sometimes disagree about which projects are best for the company. This can be very demotivating for the employees.

Imagine being me and being told to work on a project that I think is unimportant. I resented being assigned that project. I could think of dozens of things I could be doing that was more valuable to the company and the customers. I was frustrated because, in my mind, the company was not using my time very well. This example demonstrates why autonomy is important. I would be more motivated if I was working on what I think is best.

If an employee is not doing great work, it may be because that employee thinks the project is not important enough. Management can try to explain the importance of the project. Management can also try to explain why the project is higher priority than other possible projects. But management should also listen to their employees. Great management will understand what employees think is most important.

I've experienced this at work. Some projects I did great on because I really wanted to work on those projects. They were projects that I believed were really important. On the other hand, the projects that I thought were a waste of time were very demotivating. I did not put forth much effort on them.

Communication and empathy can improve teamwork

Good teammates empathize with each other. However, this can be very hard to do. Each person has different ideas and values. Each person might also have a different stake in the project's success. Teammates can have very different backgrounds and previous experiences.

The best way to empathize with teammates is to talk to them. Ask what they think is important and why they are passionate about those things. Don't make assumptions about why they do something a certain way. Instead, ask them *why* they do things that way. Ask them to explain their ideas. Their answers often surprise me. You might learn a lot about them. If you don't understand your teammates, you can't work with them very well.

There have been times at work when I felt like my teammates didn't empathize with me. This made it very demotivating to work with them.

Really listen to your employees and teammates

Employees don't always share their good ideas. They might not have the courage or opportunity to speak up. Great communication is difficult but very valuable. Companies can suffer if the good ideas aren't being heard by the right people. Management does best when it really listens and responds to employee suggestions. Listening to your own employees can be much more valuable than trying to imitate what other companies are doing.

It's very frustrating to the employee if their feedback is ignored. The employee will be demotivated and not do their best work. Ignoring feedback also makes people less willing to share important ideas again in the future. If you notice someone's work change dramatically, it could be because they don't feel heard.

My least favorite times at work were when I felt like I had good ideas but those ideas were being ignored.

Feedback is only useful if it is understood

If you're a manager, you should try to constantly give feedback about an employee's performance. Make the feedback clear so that the employee understands it. If you're an employee, frequently ask your manager for feedback.

Sometimes feedback and expectations are misinterpreted. One time my work was criticized by my manager but this feedback was given to me in a way I didn't understand. I think I was told to be more like [this other guy working there]. But I didn't know what that meant. And while the other person was someone I had a lot of respect for, it wasn't someone that I looked up to or knew how to use as a role model. The message wasn't conveyed to me clearly. This meant I didn't realize how my manager wanted my work to change.

Try to think of what you can do better before blaming others

It's easy to blame others when things go wrong, but it's not helpful. Imagine someone on your team is awful and makes work miserable for you. You might feel that it's a valid excuse to blame them for your team's poor performance. That's what I did once, unfortunately. But if you really want to be successful, you are going to have to overcome obstacles.

Thinking about how other people made things harder for you will only make you angry. Instead, think about how you can ensure your success in spite of all the challenges.

Maybe you have a manager that is extremely demotivating, like I've had at times. On one hand, your manager is making it harder for you to be motivated. On the other hand, you need to step it up and get motivated anyway.

You have to be responsible for your own motivation. If you blame your manager for a poor performance, no one will take pity on you.

In fact, reading about good management vs. bad management had a demotivating effect on me because I became more conscious of what management could have been doing differently. I should have focused on what I could be doing differently. (I would've been better off reading a book about how to be a good employee instead!)

Make it clear when someone is at risk of losing their job

Losing your job might be a complete surprise. I think this is even worse. If you're a manager and you've started thinking of firing someone, you should let them know.

Once I lost a job completely unexpectedly! If I had known that I was at risk of being fired or laid off, my work performance would've been a lot better.

Don't feel bad if you get fired from a job

You might get fired or laid off. This might make you feel terrible about yourself and your career. You might feel that it is an injustice. Maybe your employer is undervaluing you and making a huge mistake.

Some people can move on quickly from losing a job, even if they are angry. Other people will feel really bad about it and not be able to move on quickly. I probably let losing a job slow me down more than it should have.

Try not to feel too bad when you lose your job. Instead, keep moving and keep doing great things. You might learn and grow a lot more from being fired. People don't talk about it a lot, but losing a job is pretty common.

Don't be afraid to quit a job

Quitting a job can be really scary. It can be even more stressful than getting fired. You started the job hoping it would be amazing but it turned out to be terrible.

I had to quit a job once. It was very difficult because I didn't completely want to leave the company. But leaving allowed me to move forward.

You might feel stuck. Your job might be a big part of your identity and confidence. You might have family, friends, and co-workers telling you not to quit yet. You might feel bad about not staying long at a job.

Don't be afraid to quit your job. If you hate your job, your life will be so much better off without it. Being miserable at work means you will be constantly worried about your job outside of work. If a job is bad, it is unlikely to get better! You don't owe that company anything. You owe it to yourself be courageous enough to find a job you love. When I quit a job, my biggest regret was that I didn't leave sooner!

Don't be afraid to fire someone

Some managers don't fire a bad employee soon enough. The manager might be afraid of the awkwardness. Maybe the manager is afraid of being short-handed.

A bad employee can create as many problems as they solve. It's better to have one less employee than one really terrible employee. A bad employee makes other teammates uncomfortable,

frustrated, or very demotivated. They get in the way of other employees by making work more stressful.

Some bad employees are fixable. You just have to figure out what motivates them to do good work. But other employees are not fixable and will just continue to bring your team down.

One time I had to work with a terrible teammate as my partner. This was very stressful and demotivating. At the time, I didn't even know how to deal with it. I wish I had done more to try to improve the situation, either by talking to him or talking to management.

Meaningful Work

You'll work harder if you think your job is meaningful. Work is meaningful if there are motivations besides money. For example, you might genuinely enjoy helping your customers through your work. Your work might feel like it is fulfilling your purpose or your calling.

Different people care about different things. If you understand what your teammates care about, you can help them be much more productive.

The Invisible Hand of Meaningful Work

Generally, people want to both make money and do good for the world. In economics, the "invisible hand" is what creates wealth for a society when individuals are working to create wealth for themselves. There is a similar effect with meaningful work. Imagine that, on average, every person's work makes the world a tiny bit better. The sum of everyone's contributions will be a huge benefit to society.

Value yourself

It's important to value yourself. Some people underestimate the worth of their own time and energy. If you think your worth is very low, you can be taken advantage of.

For example, imagine you are working as an unpaid employee. You might think it is worthwhile because you'll gain valuable experience. But you are already undervaluing yourself. If the work you are doing is very helpful, it is worth a lot to your employer. Your employer may undervalue the work you do because it is not costing them much. (You might think that no one is foolish enough to work for free... but I've seen it happen!)

You are responsible for making sure you are getting a fair return on your time, energy, and resources. Try to make good investments in yourself so that you can become more valuable or become valuable for new reasons. Most people can be very valuable in the right situation.

Look for jobs everywhere

There are many ways to get a job. The first is to look through a list of job openings. There are lots of places that list job openings: job fairs, job search websites, LinkedIn, Craigslist, etc. There are many resources to help you find job openings.

The second is to “network” and ask people you know about job openings.

The third way is to take risks and find jobs in unexpected ways. For example, I once got a job as a programmer because my dad talked to a stranger in the neighborhood who happened to own a software company. It was very serendipitous but it led to a successful job interview and a job.

Another bit of luck was when I was applying to my first programming job. I didn't have much programming experience at that point in my career so my resume still included that I had successfully published comic strips. To most programming jobs that would be completely irrelevant. But it helped me stand out to someone who was looking at my resume and building a software project for artists and designers. So you never know what will lead to your next career opportunity.

Show off your passion during an interview

Obviously, job interviews are designed to test your knowledge, skills, and qualifications. When I started interviewing candidates for a programming job, I realized how important it is for candidates to also demonstrate passion. I was much more likely to score a candidate well if he or she displayed knowledge of and enthusiasm for our product.

Don't be afraid to start doing something new

The hardest part of any accomplishment is usually getting started. This is something that I've struggled with. There are many cool things that I wish I had tried sooner.

You don't need anyone's permission to do something cool. You don't need a perfect opportunity. You don't need the perfect teachers, mentors, or education. You don't need the support of your friends and family. Really all you need is to go for it. You can learn as you go.

The worst that can happen is you fail spectacularly... but is that really that bad? In that case, just move on. It's unlikely that the failure will have a negative effect on your life. Instead, you probably learned a lot from trying.

The rewards for trying something without fear can be great. You might learn a lot. You might make new friends. You might gain new skills and create new opportunities.

Stay in touch with former co-workers

Staying in touch with former co-workers is very difficult. You will be busy, the other people will be busy. You might be afraid because you don't know them that well outside of work. You might have a lot of assumptions about them.

The rewards are huge. They can help you with your career and your life. You can help them too. You might learn a lot from them. You might become closer friends with them.

Chapter 5. Technology, Product Design, and User Experience

Introduction

When I talk about technology, I'm usually talking about computers and software. My background is in computer software development. I studied and worked in software engineering and software design.

I love to think about websites, smartphone apps, computer programs, and operating systems. I love to think about how they work and how they are designed. I care a lot about making products more useful and easier to use.

The same ideas that I apply to software can be applied to all other products. Cars, machines, tools, appliances, toys (or any other product you can think of) all need to be designed. Ideally, a product's design helps it to be a great product. Bad design can make a product less effective or enjoyable.

In this chapter I talk about a variety of topics such as user experience, user interface design, empathizing with your users, and getting feedback. The purpose of this chapter is to help everyone, both product designers and the users, to become better at thinking about user experience. Product designers need to know these ideas to design better products. Product users benefit from studying these concepts by becoming smarter consumers.

What is "User Experience"?

The phrase "user experience" (abbreviated as UX) describes what it is like to be the person using a product. "User experience" is a common phrase in the software industry. Software engineers and designers want people to have a good experience while using their software.

"User experience" is a similar idea to "customer experience". The people interacting with your product aren't only limited to your customers.

I use the phrase "user experience" to describe my interaction with anything: products, services, government, non-profit organizations, education, healthcare, etc. Whenever I interact with one of those things I notice details about the experience that I like and details that I didn't like.

An experience can include many different factors. For example, a customer might notice quality, cost, convenience, helpfulness, confusion, frustration, etc.

In software, some example questions you might ask are: *How difficult to understand and use is this website? How buggy is it? Does it do what I want it to do? How convenient is it to use? How aesthetically pleasing is it? How happy am I with it?*

Good user experience vs. bad user experience

With respect to software, a *good* user experience is when you use a software program and everything goes smoothly. The software is easy to understand, it works correctly, and it is convenient to use. A *bad* user experience is when software is confusing, challenging or time consuming, or there are errors/crashes.

A good user experience leaves you feeling empowered and satisfied. A bad user experience leaves you frustrated, confused, or intimidated.

User experience across a range of users

Different users will have different experiences. Sometimes you will have a wide range of users. For example, some users will be expert computer users, whereas other users are novices. If you are selling a product, some customers might be very knowledgeable about your product. Others are less knowledgeable and don't understand the benefit of your product. Some users of your service will be reading and speaking English as their native language, whereas others might still be learning English. These are just a few examples of how users can differ.

The experts will have an easier time learning how to use your product.

“User experience” refers to your users and potential users as a whole. Just because one customer has a great user experience, doesn't mean that others will.

To grow your number of customers, you can try to improve your user experience. You might try to make it better for the novice users or the expert users or both. I tend to imagine the “overall” user experience as being the sum total of all experiences, rather than the average quality of user experience.

Great products have enthusiastic customers

Why is it so important for a product to have a great user experience? A great user experience causes customers to become enthusiastic fans. They will be more willing to use your products again in the future. Having fans is valuable to your business or organization.

Loyal fans of your product will be more likely to tell other people about your product. They might talk about your product in person (while eating lunch or hanging out). Or they might write about it in emails, Facebook posts, or blog posts.

Word of mouth is a very effective form of marketing. If I tell someone that I love a product, that person can come to me if they have questions about the product. I'll be willing to answer their questions and help them out because of my enthusiasm for that product.

There are other ways that enthusiastic fans can help grow your product. They might be more willing to write a positive review on Yelp or the app store. They might be more likely to give you helpful feedback and report bugs. In online forums and social media websites, they might respond to more posts and leave more comments.

I think of product design improvements as a form of marketing since the increase in customer satisfaction will lead to more customers providing free advertising.

In contrast, there are some products that I use a lot but I don't recommend to others. Usually this is because I don't like the user experience enough to recommend it. For example, a software program might be really helpful but also difficult to use. I don't want to recommend it to others because I dislike how difficult it is to use. If I do mention it at all, I will say something like, "I use X, but I wish there was a better alternative."

What is good design?

Product design determines how a product looks and how it is organized. An important part of product design is deciding which features are included and which are left out. You also have to think about which features should be prioritized and built first.

It's hard to say exactly what makes something well designed or not. A better design will provide for a better experience.

Good design is function, it makes the product effective. Good design is comfortable. It makes things easy to understand and makes it easy to find what you're looking for. Good design is practical, it will help you get what you want quickly. Good design is beautiful, it is pleasing to look at. The more time you spend thinking about design, the better you will get at recognizing good design.

Great design gives the user the information they need when they need it. It answers their questions quickly and clearly.

In software, the "user interface" (UI) is the part of the program that users see and interact with. Part of good design and user experience is building a user interface that is pleasant to use.

A hypothetical experience and quiz for users

How user-friendly is your website? Imagine you are a visitor to your website. You're in a hurry, so you only have thirty seconds to visit the website before you lose patience.

Not only that, but you are also the absolutely most clueless visitor. You don't know what the company does, or what the product is, or why the product is important. In fact, you don't even know a lot about computers beyond the most basic web browsing techniques.

How good is the experience for you (the difficult user)? Are you able to quickly understand the key points of the product, service, or company? Are your most important questions answered? Are you able to quickly find what's important on the site? Or was your very-limited patience tested?

Imagine giving a quiz across all your users about how to use your product after they have tried it. How well would they do? Do they understand your product enough to correctly answer questions

about it? Or would some of your users struggle because there is so much they don't understand? How much more popular would your product be if you better educated your users?

In my experience, designers and developers tend to overestimate how much their user understands about their product.

Good software is difficult to build

Creating software is difficult. Creating software with a great user experience is even harder. Writing code and making a great software product takes a lot of effort.

You might not have enough time and resources to build as great of a product as you want. Development time is limited by deadlines. Sometimes the code is written in a way that is messy and difficult to make changes to. Software development is so difficult that some projects become failures even with huge amounts of time, effort, and money invested in them.

Confused users are a result of bad design

I used to think that if someone was struggling to use a computer program, it was because that person was bad with computers. Similarly, people who are bad with computers tend to blame themselves for not knowing enough.

However, the problem is not the user. The problem is that the computer software is not easy to use. Plenty of software is poorly designed and built, which makes it a lot more difficult to use. Now whenever I see someone struggle with a computer program, I think about how I could have made it easier to understand.

Some bad design comes from bad designers

I used to think that all bad design comes from the difficulty of building software. I thought bad design was the result of not having enough time or resources.

But then I saw bad design decisions being made even when a better design decision was just as easy or easier. I saw people go out of their way to make changes that were intended to improve the design, but — in my opinion — made the design worse. At that point I realized that bad design was the result of designers not knowing better.

The person or people responsible for the user experience might not be capable of making good decisions. They might not have the knowledge or empathy required to make good design decisions. The result is that bad design decisions are made and the product's design suffers.

Good design requires that someone cares a lot about the user experience AND understands how to design a great user experience.

Empathy is key to product design

Good product design requires empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand how other people will feel when using the product. If you can empathize with your users, you can better predict what questions and problems they will have.

If the product is used by lots of people, this requires being able to empathize with lots of different types of people. For example, Facebook.com is used by many different people. Some users are experts about the Internet and social media. Other users are beginners that don't know much about the Internet or social media. To design it well, you need to be able to empathize with everyone.

Software engineers and designers tend to be experts. They know how their products work. But the user of their software knows and understands a lot less.

Many programs don't sufficiently explain things to their users.

How to get better at empathizing with users

You can increase empathy by getting to know people better. For example, if you are in the software industry, spend lots of time helping people who are "bad with computers" to use the computer. That's what I did. I was frequently around people who weren't computer experts. The more you watch beginners use a computer and talk about it, the more you will see how confusing computers can be.

It's surprising how many misconceptions they have and how much understanding they are missing. It may even be frustrating to help them. Experts tend to underestimate how much useful information the novices are missing.

I have always liked helping others. Now I realize that helping others allows me to better empathize with how they need help.

My ideal design strategy (which includes writing lots of notes)

Start by writing out your design requirements. Writing is an underappreciated skill when it comes to design. Whenever I create a new design, I start by writing down lots of notes that make it clear what I want out of my design.

Why is writing so important? It lets you argue for why your design choices are good choices. You should also try to come up with logical counter-arguments as to why your design idea might be a bad idea. Words are better than pictures for this kind of logic.

Next, come up with your own design. Ideally, this would be fueled entirely by your own understanding of the customer/user/consumer.

If you have to do research for the design, such as studying the competition or interviewing potential users, it's OK to do that. But don't let it slow you down. Your time is limited.

Build a prototype.

Get feedback on your prototype. The best way to do this is by giving people your prototype and watching them use it. Watch to see which parts they struggle with. Make note of what questions they have for you. Give it to people who are super confused beginners. Give it to people who are smart about design.

Keep making improvements to your product and design. Keep trying to get useful feedback. Keep trying to make your product easier to use.

What is a “bug”?

The typical software bug is when the software behaves incorrectly due to incorrect programming. For example, you might be browsing the internet and all of a sudden your browser crashes and exits. Or maybe the program gets stuck and is unable to continue and your program “freezes”. Those bugs are very noticeable (and annoying).

You can try to report these bugs to the software developer. Hopefully the developers will look at the code and fix the problem.

Some bugs might be so subtle that you don’t even notice them.

What is a “design bug”?

Design bugs are when a flaw in the design makes using the software frustrating or confusing. There are many different examples. Maybe a useful feature is missing. Maybe a feature that is really useful is hard to find. Maybe a feature doesn’t behave how you want it to. Maybe text is misleading. Design bugs make the software difficult to learn and less enjoyable to use.

Some people don’t consider design flaws to be bugs. I *do* consider design flaws to be a type of bug because they can be corrected. Design flaws can be just as bad for the user experience as technical bugs. So software developers should be just as concerned about them.

You should definitely report design bugs to the developers. Reporting design bugs can help make the program better in the future. The louder you are about an issue, the more likely the developer will do something about it.

A bug does not necessarily have to be unintentional. Sometimes a software developer will intentionally design something without realizing it is confusing or bad. You should report things you don’t like about a design even if it is intentional. Doing so sends a message to the developers that the user is experiencing something unpleasant about their design.

People will disagree about design decisions. There will be different opinions about whether a design is flawed or not. If someone recommends an improvement or reports a bug, be grateful for their help

even if you don't agree with it. If you rebuff their complaint rudely, they will feel like you don't care about their user experience.

The importance of giving feedback

Just like customer feedback can improve a business, user feedback can help build better software. User feedback helps the software developers understand what the user is thinking and experiencing. It makes it easier to empathize with confusion and needs. Feedback can be criticism, questions, or praise. The more user feedback, the better.

Some of the feedback developers receive is useful, some is not. It's OK to ignore feedback if you don't think what the customer is requesting makes sense for your product. For example, I've seen users request ridiculous features that are way too specific to their needs for us to ever add to our product. But I've also seen users make brilliant observations and requests.

The importance of making it easy to give feedback

I love it when a product or service makes it easy to give feedback. More users will submit feedback if it is convenient. Giving feedback can also make the customer feel more loyal to the product.

There have been many, many times when I wanted to give feedback about a product, but did not know how. Other products have a feedback section that is easy to find but frustrating to use. This makes the product as a whole less appealing because it feels like they don't care about my bad user experience.

Confused users don't give much feedback

One time I was working on a product that needed lots of design improvement. Experts loved our product. But the product's popularity wasn't exploding because, in my opinion, it was too confusing for most people. In my opinion, we could make it much more user-friendly by explaining things better.

Every day we'd get about one user thanking us for our product. But we didn't get many emails saying "I am confused about how to use or why I should use your product". Why not? I think it's because the users that loved our product were much more likely to speak up and give feedback. The people who didn't get what we were trying to do, or who tried our product but didn't like it, tended to not give us any written feedback.

Our management tended to ignore making our product more user-friendly. The users who would've benefited the most from our product being more user-friendly weren't loud enough.

Give positive feedback as well as negative feedback

Most feedback comes in the form of criticism or questions. But you can also express gratitude or praise. Product designers appreciate hearing how users love the products. Positive feedback can be used to influence future design changes by helping the designer know what people like.

One time I was using a web app called “JIRA” (made by the company Atlassian). The developers had changed the layout of the website and asked users to submit their feedback. I loved the new design because it made accessing a commonly used feature easier.

In my feedback I noted the improved convenience. I also expressed my gratitude for the change. I thanked them with a fun message. I don’t remember the whole ridiculous, over-the-top thank you I wrote, but it ended with “May you live to be 100 and may your descendants travel amongst the stars.” They thought my feedback was so funny that they sent me an enthusiastic thank you email and mailed me a free t-shirt -- shipped all the way from their office in Australia!

Educating the user about your product

Educating the user about how to use your product is very important to the user experience. Some products require that the user understands a lot. If the product is complicated without good instructions, the user will end up being confused or frustrated. Good products will make learning about how to use the product a good experience.

There are many different ways that a software product can educate its users. For example, the homepage (or “landing page”) that users first see when they visit your website should explain your product. The explanation should be concise so that users quickly understand important details about your product. Tooltips (small text that appears when you hover your mouse over something) are a great way to give users clues on how to use your product.

Perhaps the best places to educate users are with a Help Page or a Frequently Asked Questions page. The user can use the Help Page/FAQ to help discover new features. A brief guide for beginners can go a long way towards helping users understand the product.

There are teaching methods used in the software industry that I don’t like. For example, some apps and websites will have an “interactive tutorial”. These have the benefit of showing users exactly where things are in the user interface. But I dislike them because they can be very unpleasant to use. It’s hard to get the information you want and can be annoying. Most of the time I just want to skip the interactive tutorial. Tutorial videos can also be annoying too. For me, it’s usually much quicker and easier to learn from a written guide that includes images.

Design so that people can find what they are looking for quickly

Great design allows users to find the information they want quickly. The user might be looking for general information, such as a description of what your company does. It might be more specific information, such as the time of an event.

Frequently, important information on a website is hard to find. Instead, there is a bunch of stuff that I don't care about getting in the way.

A/B Testing (and how to use it correctly)

An A/B test lets customers try different versions of your product (version A, version B, etc). The goal is to find out which alternative customers like better.

This happens in the software industry. For websites, the servers can separate users into different test groups and show them different designs of the same website. The server also keeps track of statistics about user behavior. Then you can compare the competing versions of the website based on those statistics. For example, you might compare the percentage of users that signed up, how many people clicked on an ad, or what the loading times were. Looking at the results of the test can help you decide on which design of the website to show to everyone.

The problem with A/B testing is that it takes a lot of work. Imagine you have an idea for a new design. Before you get your A/B test results, you have to actually build your new design, set up the A/B test, and wait for users to test it. The results of the test might be disappointing. The last thing you want is to spend a lot of time and energy on a project only to find that your customers hate it. I've seen this happen! Software developers don't always have the design expertise to know when a proposed change is worse.

Good designers can correctly predict how changes in design will affect user behavior. They can explain *why* their changes will be better. Then they use the A/B test to confirm their hypothesis. If their hypothesis was wrong, they try to understand why. Good designers use A/B tests to grow their empathy with users. Intuitively understanding users is much better than relying on A/B tests for feedback.

I've seen A/B testing used incorrectly. For example, the testing is set up in a way that the results aren't helpful. Or a good user experience is sacrificed in order to get better quantitative results. Or bad ideas are A/B tested rather than being well thought out.

A/B testing can be very effective in certain cases such as marketing and email campaigns. Imagine you have two ideas for a banner ad that you want to use to advertise your product on Facebook. You could set up a test to see which one is more effective at getting people to click on the ad and purchase your product.

Beautiful design can be objective, not just subjective

In terms of software design and product design, I think beauty can be objective. Imagine you have two versions of a product. Is one better looking than the other? Or are they both good and the difference is just personal preference?

In my experience, some designs look more beautiful and provide a better user experience. Also, not everyone who builds a product does a good job of making their product as beautiful as they could.

When I worked on some software UI, beauty and aesthetics were not given enough attention as I thought they deserved. There are two reasons for this. The first is that making the product and features functional were more important than making the product look great. So that's where our time needed to go first. The second is that people in the software engineering industry don't always have enough understanding of aesthetics to make beautiful UIs.

I distinctly remember a moment when I tried to make a small change in the product's appearance. In our product, when you selected an object from the list, the object would be highlighted by adding a border around it. The border was grey, hard to distinguish from the white background, and not very pretty. I changed it so that border color was a beautiful light blue. I loved it and was very excited about how great it looked. But it didn't make it into the final product because the product manager didn't get it and changed it back. I was heartbroken.

If you're having trouble judging how beautiful your product is, imagine asking someone to rate the aesthetic appeal of your product. People might have different opinions, but the average would give you a good impression of the objective beauty of your product. Talk to lots of different people to learn how different people can feel.

Newer does not always mean better

Unfortunately, newer versions of products are not always better than previous versions. In some cases, the new version provides a *worse* user experience.

Why is this? New bugs and problems can be introduced unintentionally. Software developers try to fix as many bugs as they can before releasing a new version. However, it's common for bugs to still exist when the software is published.

Sometimes the new version is worse because of poor design. The designer might not realize that the change is worse. Sometimes attempting to make something look new actually makes it uglier or more confusing.

Another potential problem is called "feature creep" or "feature bloat". This when new features are added to a product but end up making the product worse. For example, adding more features might make a computer program more confusing. Or the program might have to run more code and take longer.

Be careful about copying other designs

When people are still learning how to be a good designer, they tend to copy other successful designs. This can be OK, but it can also cause problems. For one thing, you might not understand *why* a design is good. Or the design you copy might not be good for your situation/product. (I've seen that happen at least twice now.) And you might not understand why it is a *not* a good design for your needs.

Finally, make sure you judge a design on its actual design merits. Any product may have design flaws and you may be blind to them. You might be blinded by the success of the product or who made the product. Great product designers and great companies are still at risk of making a product with a bad design. Products can successful despite bad design.

Technology evolves

Technology is always going to be advancing in many different ways. New scientific breakthroughs allow us to build smaller electronics and more powerful batteries. New standards are developed to help different devices to work together. More sophisticated algorithms and more advanced features allow our software to be more useful. More visitors and users allow websites to grow into communities busy with activity, working together online. Even the attitudes and habits of users change considerably.

Why good user experience is the future

There will always be bad user experiences and poorly designed products. Unfortunately, creating a great user experience is too difficult for it to happen everywhere. However, I think improving the user experience will be a big part of the next generation of technology products. Hopefully new technology will make it easier to create great user experiences.

Increased competition can motivate improvements to the user experience. If your product has no competition, then you might be able to be successful without a great user experience. But if your product is competing against lots of other products for time attention and money, having a better user experience can make your product stand out.

Chapter 6: Politics and Religion

Why am I writing about politics and religion?

Politics are important for a few reasons. First, they have a big impact on the world. There are lots of political decisions made and some of them have huge ramifications. Some people have their lives completely changed because of politics. Secondly, people spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about politics. Politics and political news are everywhere now: newspapers, television news, news websites, social media, history books, etc. There are probably more people on Earth publishing their thoughts and questions about politics than ever before.

Politics can be very divisive. It can cause people to dislike each other. It also creates a lot of judgement. For example, you might judge someone as being better or smarter if they share your political views.

My political beliefs

You might be wondering how my political beliefs are the same or different from yours. You might even be hoping that my political views are similar to yours!

In the current spectrum of American politics, I consider myself pretty moderate. There are some issues on which I am liberal and other issues on which I'm conservative. There are some issues that I care a lot about and other issues that I don't care much about.

In this chapter, I start with sections about some political theory. Then afterwards I discuss some issues that I care about.

It's important to acknowledge that I've only lived in the United States. This has a big impact on which political issues are most important to me. If I lived somewhere else I would have different opinions and ideas.

Solving problems

We face problems and challenges all the time. People have formed governments to help deal with those challenges. The government's responsibility isn't to solve ALL of the problems we face for us, but it should help us try to fix some of the problems. The government should also try to prevent new problems. Sometimes an attempt at solving a problem will cause a new problem; this can be seen as a failure to prevent a new problem.

There will always be new concerns and new problems arising. It's like a never-ending to-do list. There are lots of small challenges and some big ones.

A government should be judged based on how well it handles challenges and problems. A bad government will do a worse job of solving problems and also create lots of new problems. Good governments will solve problems effectively and efficiently.

Solving and preventing problems allow citizens to live happy, healthy, and prosperous lives. Good problem solving requires treating people fairly and justly.

Government's Responsibilities

Every government has responsibilities. The responsibilities that governments encounter can be divided into three broad categories: keeping people safe, keeping things fair and just, or making improvements that benefit the community.

There is a a lot of disagreement and arguing over what the government should do and how it should work. The disagreement and arguing can be very intense.

The debates and opposing views are disagreements about *how* the government should handle its responsibilities. People disagree about *how* to best keep people safe, *how* to best keep things fair, and *how* to make improvements without causing future problems. We can also disagree when the responsibilities conflict with each other. There can be conflicts between safety and fairness, fairness and improvements, improvements and safety.

It's important to note that these disagreements can arise even when competing views have the same goal. Deep down, they might agree on what the end results should be. For example, everyone wants a safe, fair, happy community. Still, how to best achieve those goals can cause lots of disagreement.

Which policies are implemented depends on how people vote and politicians decide. People change their beliefs about the government based on their experiences and knowledge.

The Importance of Free Speech

The freedom of speech has always been a valued liberty in the United States. The idea is that the government should not have the power to punish, censor, or control what you say or how you express your opinions.

Free speech can be a complicated topic. There are a few things you could say that are not protected by free speech. These are cases when your speech would directly create injustice for others, such as slander, lying under oath in court, endangering others, etc. In those cases, it seems fair to put restrictions on the speech. But generally we allow people to share their beliefs without fear of punishment or censorship by the government. This means you're allowed to share any opinion about the government, a business, a person, a religion, etc.

Free speech only protects you against censorship by the government. Businesses and individuals can still censor you. For example, consider a website that allows users to express their own thoughts on the website (such as Twitter or Facebook). The people running the website can censor or remove

what you wrote. They are not obligated to display what you wrote. So if you want to express something controversial, you need a medium (such as a website, a book publisher, a meeting place, etc) that is willing to have your opinion.

There are a number of reasons why free speech (protection from government punishment) is important. It is a form of justice, since allowing the government to punish someone for their beliefs feels unjust. Free and fair democracy requires that people can share their opinion of the government without fear of being punished by the government. It also allows you to hear a variety of opinions. It helps people speak up who might otherwise be afraid to voice their opinions, feelings, and ideas.

Some people will use free speech to say things you don't like or agree with. If you listen to those people, then you can try to understand and work together with them.

The Importance of Political Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's feelings and thoughts. Political empathy is when you understand someone else's political opinions.

To me, empathy does not require that you share or agree with those feelings, only that you understand them. It's relatively easy to empathize with the people that you like and agree with. It's a lot harder to empathize with someone that you disagree with or dislike. That person may be voting or campaigning against what you want. Though difficult, developing political empathy has many benefits.

Political empathy is NOT a form of agreement, support, or sympathy. It's important to recognize that you can empathize with someone who is evil or wrong without being evil or wrong yourself. In my opinion, empathizing with someone does not lend credit to their claims. It does not validate their incorrect speech. So don't accuse me of being supportive or sympathetic to anyone just because I try to understand them. It's possible to empathize with anything, no matter how evil or terrible it is, if you listen to what they are arguing.

Political empathy for someone tries to understand what they want, how they came to disagree with you, and what your best response should be. Empathy allows for a greater understanding of the things and people you are trying to change. You will make decisions based on better facts and fewer incorrect assumptions about your opponent's beliefs. You will have a better chance of convincing someone to agree with you.

Empathy leads to better solutions. It allows you to be open to different ideas and new information. It creates an atmosphere of cooperation, optimism, and motivation. The best results occur when everyone involved in a project is motivated to work together for the best outcome.

Responding to Opposing Viewpoints and How to Convince Others

When you respond to someone that you disagree with, you want to be as convincing as possible.

There are some criticisms that I see that I don't think are very effective, and might even be counterproductive. For example, I frequently see people accused of being a "troll," which is ridiculous. A troll is someone who is being insincere or just wants attention. You are accusing them of not being serious when they might actually be sincere. You should be willing to accept that they can have different beliefs than you.

Don't call people who disagree with you stupid. Most likely, they are not stupid. They just have different beliefs and experiences than you. Similarly, don't call them crazy. Very few people are actually crazy. It's belittling. You're not giving your opposition the same respect you would like to get from them. Don't make fun of them personally or attack them personally. It's not strengthening your logical argument.

There are things you can do that I suspect are very effective at convincing other people to agree with you. Start by believing that they are just as capable of intelligent thinking as you. Recognize that the difference of opinion is a result of having different experiences and information than you. Ask questions. This helps you understand them better and respects their intelligence. Let them come to their own conclusions. The style of debating someone by asking lots of questions is called the Socratic Method.

There is a great book called *Non-Violent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg. He says that the most effective way to communicate is to make the other party feel appreciated and listened to. Try to work with them rather than against them. Rather than getting angry or judgmental, you express that you are listening to what the person is feeling and why.

The worst thing you can do is act like you are smarter than them. The best thing you can do to convince people to agree with you is to listen to and respect them. People seem to be convinced more by emotions than with reasoning and logic.

Finally, understand that there are a lot more similarities than there are differences or disagreements. Deep down, everyone pretty much wants the same things: safety, justice, fairness, wellbeing, and respect. We just have different ideas about how to best get those things.

What is America's role in the world?

The United States is a unique country in many ways. Our history is fairly long and our democracy is complicated. We have a large population with a lot of diversity. We have a large geography and a large economy. Our unique history and position in the world does give us some unique opportunities that other nations don't have.

Some of the most influential people in world history have come from the United States. This includes politicians, scientists, business leaders, engineers, activists, writers, doctors, military generals, and others. Overall, we have an unusual amount of influence on people living all around the world.

While the United States is unique, that doesn't mean it is exceptional. In some ways, it is just like any other country. We are not a "chosen" people. We strive for greatness, but so do many other nations.

Additionally, it seems like the world is becoming more connected than ever before. What happens outside of our country can have an effect inside our own country. For this reason, we can't think only about ourselves. We have to understand ourselves as well as everyone else. This allows us to make better decisions and promote our well-being in both the short-term and the long-term.

Democracy is about convincing others to agree with you

In a democracy, voting has a huge effect on policy. There are different types of votes: citizens vote to elect an official to represent their interests, elected officials vote among themselves to make a decision, and sometimes citizens vote directly on the laws.

In a fair vote, the winning option is not necessarily the best option but rather the one that got the support of enough people. Being persuasive is very important to a democracy.

What makes someone persuasive or charismatic? They have to be easy to understand. They should be enjoyable to listen to. They should also be inspirational. Effective election campaigns make the voters feel like they are voting for someone who will do great things on their behalf.

Voting Takes Effort

Only the people who vote get their vote counted and influence the result. There are a lot of people who are eligible to vote but don't vote. Sometimes people don't vote because they don't have a strong enough opinion. (Or in some cases, they live in an area where their vote doesn't matter.)

Other times, people don't vote because they haven't put in the time and effort to vote. If you want someone to vote in support of you, you have to convince them to actually vote. Unfortunately, it's not always easy or simple to vote. Even when it is easy and simple, it can still be perceived as being difficult.

The "User Experience" of Being A Citizen

Interacting with the government can sometimes be frustrating or confusing. When it is, this is a bad "user experience" for the citizen.

There is a wide range of frustrating experiences and how bad they are. For example, you might have to wait in a frustratingly long line or "stay on hold" for a long time during a phone call. You might be unsure how to correctly obey a confusing law or unsure how to correctly fill out a confusing form. An extreme example of bad government user experience would be if you were imprisoned unjustly for a crime.

A great government will have a great user experience. Improving the user experience of citizens is a way to improve the government. The “citizen user experience” can influence opinions of the government. It seems reasonable that someone with a more frustrating experience with the government would be more skeptical of government projects. Someone with a positive experience with the government would be more open to new government programs.

Political parties and the political spectrum

In the United States, it’s common to have only two major political parties at a time. Other parties exist but win less frequently than the two major parties. A candidate who can earn the nomination of one of the two major parties will have an easier time winning than a candidate that runs as a member of a 3rd party.

It’s also common to hear complaints about the two-party system. For example, if you don’t like either of the two choices. However, the current voting method discourages third parties because they could “split the vote” and cause a different party’s candidate to win. A politician or voter sometimes supports someone they don’t completely agree with just to prevent someone “worse” from winning. In this way, they are allied to one of the two major parties to avoid losing to the other major party.

The two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, have to remain somewhat moderate in order to appeal to large number of people. Within a single party there can be a wide variety of opinions. The major parties are always evolving over time. Their positions and platforms evolve as new issues become popular. Politicians with leadership positions within a party can evolve their opinions. Influencing one or both of the major parties is probably more effective than trying to influence the public to vote for a third party.

Hypothesis: Running a positive campaign is more effective than running a negative one

My hypothesis is that running a “positive” campaign is more effective than running a “negative” campaign. A negative campaign is where you attack your opponent rather than supporting your own alternative.

People love to criticize and attack the politicians and ideas that they don’t like. This may rally people who already feel the same way, but I don’t think it is very helpful towards convincing people who don’t feel the same way.

Instead, it would be more effective to express your enthusiasm for your own alternative. I suspect that people will be motivated to vote if they are mildly excited about someone/something than if they are mildly against something.

I’m not certain if this hypothesis is correct or not. It reminds me of the saying “any publicity is good publicity”. If you mock or criticize an opponent, you might end up legitimizing them to voters.

The Media

There is more information being published than ever before. However, there is also a lot of misinformation and misleading information that gets published. In order to understand the whole story, readers need to be good critical thinkers and critical consumers of information. The media creators might leave out details or use faulty logic.

One example of misleading information is a misleading title or headline. Some websites (such as Reddit) allow the users to submit links to other websites and also give custom titles to that link. The custom title may not accurately reflect the information content at the link. People who simply read the custom titles rather than the original content will get a different story.

Additionally, it's nice to get your media from a variety of sources so that you get a variety of opinions. Otherwise you may only hear part of the story or some of the ideas. There are dozens of sides to every story.

Many websites are popular because they reinforce what the reader already believes. This can lead to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the other side. It is better to practice listening, understanding, and empathizing towards people you disagree with.

Opposing political opinions can be stressful

When I was younger, in high school and college, I used to get stressed out and frustrated by seeing so much opposition to my political beliefs. But that frustration didn't help me in any way. All it did was make me feel horrible about the world. If you try to fight an issue while frustrated, you're going to waste a lot of energy dealing with your frustration.

Now that I'm older, seeing people who oppose my politics doesn't bother me at all. I can still oppose them with the same conviction. The difference is that I don't let the opposition worry me or cause me to feel miserable.

Environmental issues

We want a healthy, safe environment for ourselves and for everyone else. We use government to decrease the risk of environmental problems and to decrease the damage caused by environmental problems.

Global warming is a very difficult environmental issue. For one thing, global warming is a non-obvious problem. You typically don't even see global warming unless you are a scientist studying the Earth's climate. The biggest effects of global warming are that some farmable land is becoming arid desert and that some useful land is becoming part of the ocean. When these things occur, many people elsewhere don't even notice. This makes it harder to convince people to take action.

There are also costs to combatting global warming. For example, decreasing the use of coal is costly to the coal industry. Using other resources for electricity may be more expensive for consumers.

There are non-financial obstacles as well. For example, people may also have a lot of misconceptions and habits that make combatting global warming difficult. So there are many challenges that environmentalists face when trying to manage climate change.

In addition to global warming, there is a lot of pollution that is harming human health. This is another great opportunity to improve the quality of life for people.

There is also a lot of willingness to make changes in order to maintain a great environment. Some people are willing to be scientists that study climate. People are willing to learn more about how their actions impact the environment. People are also willing to make some changes to their lifestyle to be more environmentally friendly. Some politicians are willing to change policy to try to protect the environment.

Gun violence

Murders are tragic. My sympathy goes out to the victims and their families. I'm interested in making the world safer. I'm curious about how we can decrease the rate at which people are killed by other people.

Honestly I don't know a lot about gun control laws. There might be many improvements to gun-related laws that the government could make. However, I'm more interested in learning *why* murders take place and what can be done to prevent them.

I want to reduce the number of people who are interested in committing murder. For example, if people are committing murder because they believe that is the best way to solve their problems, we need to better equip people to solve their problems. If people are committing murder because they have poor mental health, then we need to improve the mental health of would-be murderers. Some cases might be prevented by better training for conflict resolution.

I think we, as a society, will do the work necessary to decrease the likelihood of violence. It might take new efforts by everyone: psychologists, parents, teachers, volunteers, non-profit employees, for-profit employees, government workers, law enforcement, etc.

Some people who want to decrease the number of Americans killed by firearms focus on decreasing access to firearms. But this is a tricky area because there is so much resistance to gun control laws.

Preventing Terrorist Attacks

How we decrease terrorism? What causes people to act in ways that we consider to be terrorists? How do we reduce the appeal of committing terrorist attacks? How can we reduce the appeal of joining terrorist organizations?

Terrorism is a difficult, complex problem. Good security can help protect us against attempted attacks. A well-trained military can help us combat terrorist leaders. We also want to decrease the likelihood that any person is motivated to become a terrorist.

For example, the military has to be very careful not to harm civilians. Otherwise this could motivate or inspire new enemies. Terrorists believe that their own actions are justified. Fighting terrorism includes making people believe that the violence caused by terrorists is unjustified.

Changes in Population

Governments need to scale their services properly with the population size. Hopefully, the government is making decisions that are effective at the scale they are working on. This is difficult when a location's population rapidly increases or decreases.

The demographics of the population can also change. The population can become greater, smaller, richer, poorer, older, younger. It can also change in regards to ethnicity, race, language, religion, etc. The best governments are able to govern effectively even after changes in population. The solutions need to be flexible enough that they can be effective even when the population changes.

Alternatives to government

Government is useful for influencing people and making changes in the world. But politics is not the only way to make a difference. Businesses are also very influential to what goes on in the world. So are non-profit organizations, clubs, groups of friends, and even individuals.

The world is a result of everyone's actions. Citizens outside of the government can be hugely influential. Your ideas might be relevant outside of politics and government.

Religion

Religion and spirituality have a huge influence on the lives of many people today. In religion, just as in politics, there will always continue to be new influential leaders and thinkers.

What are my religious beliefs?

I was raised as a Methodist Christian. I participated in many church activities while growing up. I met many cool people through it.

My favorite church activity was the volunteer work that we did. As a high schooler, I went with a group of people from church to do charitable volunteer work. We even traveled to different parts of the country.

I still consider myself a Christian, even though I haven't been to many church activities lately. But when I do go, it is fun and helpful. Do I believe in God? I don't know, I am still figuring it out. But I do believe that the universe is special.

What are my feelings about religion?

Religion can have many benefits. It can help you make a lot of great friends. It can bring communities closer together. It can be a “support system” that people go to for help. Religion can also do a lot of good for the world in the form of charity and kindness. It can help educate people. Spirituality, prayer, and faith can be a source of motivation, strength, and hope.

Religion can have a lot of drawbacks that we need to be careful about. Religion can sometimes have a negative effect. It can cause people to ignore scientific evidence and reason. It can sometimes lead to bad morals (for example, if it encourages violence or hatred). It can cause distrust, such as a distrust towards people with a different religion. In that way, it can be divisional rather than unifying. Religion can sometimes lead people to act irrationally and even violently.

Religion and Government

I think it's important that people are free to practice whatever religion they want. You should be free to do whatever you want as part of your religious beliefs (as long as they aren't harmful or against the law for some other reason).

I also think the government, as an institution, should not favor one religion over another. In order to be effective, it needs to be fair.

I hope that my politicians make decisions using logic and rationality. I don't think politicians need religious influence in order to make good laws. But I also respect their right to be religious and use religion as a decision-making tool.

What are morals?

Morals are what we consider to be right or wrong. They can be taught through religion, stories, or culture.

Morals develop because they are logically based on what you believe. Morals are logical conclusions drawn from assumptions and understanding. Our morals change over time as our understanding changes. Different morals come from different logic, assumptions, and evidence.

Why gay marriage is still an important issue

Currently, gay marriage is legal everywhere in the United States. The Supreme Court ruled that gay couples have a constitutional right to marriage.

I sometimes hear the opinion that we no longer need to talk about gay marriage. Or that it gets too much attention. To me, it is still a very important issue.

There are still many people that disagree with gay marriage. There is still unfair discrimination against LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people. Discriminatory laws exist and discriminatory behavior occurs.

So while the Supreme Court's decision is great, there is still progress to make. The Supreme Court might be in favor of gay marriage, but how much discrimination occurs depends on the hearts and minds of the people.

Why I am in favor of gay marriage

I have a gay relative, but even if I didn't, I would want people to be treated with fairness and to live happy lives. That is why I support legalized gay marriage. I think we are required to do so in order to treat them justly.

The government should act in ways that promote fairness and justice. If it doesn't, it cannot be a great government. We want our legal policy to consist only of fair laws. If we find that we have laws that are unfair, then we should work to fix them. America has always been about evolving our laws to have a better set of laws over time.

Gay marriage is not an easy issue to talk about. It's awkward, strange, and scary to many people. Homosexuality raises legal questions, social/moral/religious questions, and scientific questions. By being supportive of the LGBT community, the government demonstrates that it is willing to act justly, even when it is awkward, unusual, or unpopular.

I think it also increases happiness and self-esteem in the gay population, and that helps the overall population.

Why I don't support the arguments against gay marriage

One argument is that homosexuality is a sin according to religion. But our laws should be based on reason and fairness, not religious rules. Furthermore, it's not even clear that the belief, that homosexuality is bad, is supported by Christianity. Christianity is supposed to be about treating people with fairness, kindness, and love.

Some argue that gay marriage is wrong because homosexual couples cannot naturally have children. However, this doesn't matter to me. Why should this exclude them from the institution of marriage? It's still good to give them the option to get married. Others might argue that homosexuality is unnatural, useless, or a choice. I don't agree with those conclusions. But even if I did, I think those conclusions would be irrelevant to making fair laws. In order for the government to justify treating someone differently, there needs to be a very good reason to do so. It doesn't seem like that is the case.

I've also heard a "slippery slope" argument gay marriage might lead to other things in the future, such as pedophilia, bestiality, or polygamy. But this is not a strong argument. For one thing, neither animals nor children can consent to a relationship. Accepting homosexuals as equals does nothing to change our definition of consent. Polygamy is a separate issue and should be treated as such.

How to treat opponents of gay marriage

If someone is against gay marriage, that is totally fine. They are entitled to their own opinion. I don't want to argue with them, make fun of them, attack them, discredit them, or silence them. Instead I want to listen to them and have a dialogue with them. I want to be considerate of their concerns. I want them to enjoy justice and fairness like everyone else.

Should abortion be legal?

I think it should be legal for women to have abortions and for doctors to perform them. I understand why this is a controversial statement. Losing a fetus is a tragic loss. It is unfair and unfortunate for the unborn child. I think everyone can agree that abortions are undesirable.

That said, legalizing abortions is ethical. And criminalizing it would be an unethical injustice. Women deserve the legal right to have terminate an unwanted pregnancy if they decide to. Women should have that control over their own bodies. Neither the unborn child nor the father deserve to have that control over the woman's body. Thus, doctors deserve the right to perform legal abortions.

Better ways to discourage abortion besides criminalizing it

I sincerely want to decrease the number of instances of abortion. There are ethical ways to decrease abortions, but they do not include legal restrictions.

It starts with decreasing unwanted pregnancies. This could be done with better education about sex and contraceptives. Better education about dating and relationships would help too.

I predict that as time goes on we will get better at preventing unwanted pregnancies.

Also, some people who are against abortion try to convince women who are considering one not to go through with the procedure. I think that is better than trying to convince lawmakers to criminalize the procedure.

Accepting and empathizing with the opposition to legalized abortion

I have respect for people within the Pro-Life movement. I respect their opinions and experiences. I will not try to attack their character or silence their opinion. And I recognize that I probably still have a lot to learn about this issue. I think it is great that they are willing to fight for rights of the unborn, even though I disagree with their conclusion about what rights the unborn should have.

Feminism

I want women to be treated fairly. To me, the purpose of feminism is to help ensure that women are treated fairly. I am compelled to stand up for women when I see them being treated unfairly.

Prejudice

Prejudice is when you are suspicious about someone before you get to know a person enough to know if your suspicion is true or not. There is a lot of prejudice in the world. Prejudices exist against groups of people based on religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, education, etc. Prejudices can be conscious or subconscious.

Society tries to fight prejudice in order to prevent injustice. Prejudices hurt our ability to accurately judge people. Prejudice can lead to discrimination, racism, oppression, or violence. Prejudice damages our society because it causes our society to act unfairly. Actions that are unfair or unjust cause people to be hurt without good reason. People are right to be outraged over this.

For example, it's important that everyone is free to practice whatever religion they choose. People should be judged on their actions, not on their religious beliefs. To do otherwise is unfair.

How can we fight prejudice? One good way is to develop friendships and role models across different groups of people. Another way is to think about how you would feel if the prejudice was applied to the groups of people you belong to.

Chapter 7. Physical Health

Disclaimer

I am not a doctor or medical professional. I am not an expert on how to live a healthy lifestyle. I have opinions and beliefs about how to be healthy. In this chapter, I share the ideas that interest me most.

It's possible that I have misconceptions. I hope that if I say something wrong, someone will notify me and correct me. I am happy to update the book for accuracy.

Introduction

I want to live a healthy lifestyle and I want to help others be healthy too.

This chapter is brief. What else should I include in it? If you have a great idea for a section, please contact me.

There are many misconceptions about health

There are many misconceptions about health. It's a complicated topic. There are lots of unintuitive details. For example, I went a long time imagining that lungs were hollow (like a pair of two large balloons) before I learned that lungs are actually pretty solid (like a pair of sponges made out of many tiny balloons).

There is a lot of misleading information out there, so it helps to be skeptical. Misleading information can even be intentional. For example, the labeling on a product might lead you to believe that it is healthier than it really is.

You are only as healthy as the weakest vital link in your health

You might have the healthiest heart and lungs on the planet. But if you have a life-threatening problem somewhere else in your body -- in your pancreas, liver, kidney, stomach, colon, etc -- it doesn't matter that your heart and lungs are in great condition. So if you want to live to be really old, you need all of your vital organs to be able to last a long time. Your doctor can help you keep track of the healthiness of many different parts of your body.

Why diet and exercise are important

There are many reasons why eating a healthy diet, getting enough exercise, and maintaining a healthy weight are helpful. Some of those reasons are well known, but others are "hidden benefits".

Good diet and exercise can help decrease the risk of a heart attack, Type II Diabetes, stroke, some types of cancer, and depression. It can give you more energy and strength. It can help you get enough sleep at night. It can also improve your confidence, motivation, and self-esteem.

Make exercise fun

You might find exercise to be boring or stressful at first. I'm much more motivated to work out if it is fun. Some fun physical activities I enjoy are hiking, dancing, and playing sports. I like fitness classes because I like to be around people. I haven't tried it yet myself, but spinning classes on a stationary bike are very popular now.

Your motivation to exercise might be to improve your long term health or to be more physically attractive. With both of these goals, you don't see the resulting improvements immediately. This makes it hard to stay focused.

Workout videos at home can be great

My roommate lets me use his workout video DVD at our house. I really like it because I can use it to work out at home, which is much less time consuming than going to a gym. I learned many new exercises by watching it. It's also motivates me to work out harder than if I was at home without the video.

Some people eat to live, other people live to eat

There is a whole field of dietary psychology that I'm just starting to learn about. It is very interesting. How you think about food affects which foods you eat and how much. For example, if you think of food as being desirable because of the nutrients and resources it gives your body, you might eat healthier. On the other hand, if you think of food as being desirable because it is pleasurable, you might eat less healthy.

It's fun to eat food, especially if the food has a delicious flavor. Unfortunately, it's really easy to get fat. Especially now when we have access to delicious food.

Learn to identify healthy and unhealthy foods

Everybody knows that some foods are healthier than others. My feeling is that people are bad at identifying how healthy a meal is. This makes it harder to eat a healthy diet.

Imagine you are at a restaurant or a grocery store. You have many options for food to choose from. Which do you choose and why? When I go out to eat with people who tell me they are trying to lose weight, they sometimes fail to pick a meal that is delicious and healthy. To make a good decision, you have to know a lot about the menu.

What makes a meal healthy? To me, healthiness has to do with the calories, vitamins and minerals, portion size, and understanding the ingredients. Understand how these things compare between different options.

Good cooking skills can lead to healthier eating

Unfortunately, unhealthy food can be very cheap and fast. Eating healthy is easier if you know how to cook a few different meals that are quick, cheap, and healthy.

Eating habits

Signals from your brain influence how hungry you are and what you're hungry for. So if you typically eat large amounts of junk food, your brain could cause you to crave junk food.

People tend to think of dieting as a battle between their self-control and their hunger. But if you only focus on improving your willpower and self-control, the hunger and food cravings can win. Instead, you should also think about improving what your body craves and hungers for.

To eat healthy you have to train your brain over time to want healthier food. Like anything else, the more you practice eating healthy, the easier it gets.

The Diet Coke study

Diet soda is marketed as being less fattening and better for you than regular soda (because it contains less sugar and calories). But one outcome from the San Antonio Heart Study suggests that the people who drank Diet Coke gained more weight than the people who drank regular Coke.

That finding is counter-intuitive. Diet Coke was supposed to help people lose weight, not cause them to gain more. How can this be? We don't know enough to be certain. One hypothesis proposed was that the diet soda caused people to eat more food, as if the artificial sweeteners tricked the brain and body into wanting more calories.

Does this study prove that diet soda is more fattening or less healthy than regular soda? Not really. We can't be sure yet. We need more studies and research before we can be conclusive. I like this story because it shows that results can be counter-intuitive and that we still have a lot to study.

Your social network affects how healthy you are

New studies suggest your health might be influenced by your social network. This intuitively makes sense. The people around you influence your diet, exercise, and lifestyle decisions.

Imagine that your friends, family, and co-workers all eat very healthy and get lots of exercise. You'd probably eat healthier and get more exercise too. But now imagine that everyone around you eats a lot of unhealthy food and live a very sedentary lifestyle. It would be harder to eat well and get exercise in that scenario.

Too much stress can hurt your muscles

Being under a lot of stress or being angry can cause you to involuntarily tense some of your muscles. This puts additional strain on those muscles. In bad cases, this can lead to muscle soreness or pain.

Admittedly, I'm not very knowledgeable about this topic but I thought it was interesting. I've noticed that some of my muscles are sore if I am experiencing a period of intense stress.

Using a “vertical” computer mouse seemed to hurt my wrist

A vertical computer mouse is a type of computer mouse that you can buy now. A traditional computer mouse you hold with your palm towards the desk surface. A vertical mouse is designed so that you hold it with your palm vertical, facing the center. Imagine you are shaking hands.

This type of mouse is advertised as being better for your health and reducing the risk of carpal tunnel. But in my experience, after using it for a long time, it was very stressful to the muscles in my wrist. Eventually it was painful to use.

Why did something designed to be better for wrist health end up hurting me? The vertical mouse is only beneficial if you also completely change which muscles you use to control the mouse. If you continue to use your wrist, like I did, it seems to be worse than a regular mouse. Supposedly you can use your shoulder and arm muscles instead of your wrist muscles. But this is very difficult to learn how to do.

This is just my experience. I'd be curious to hear if other people have had this problem when using a vertical mouse for an extended amount of time.

Going to the doctor can be scary, confusing

Some people put off or avoid going to the doctor. Why would someone *not* go to the doctor when they should? Maybe they are worried about what the treatment will cost. Maybe they think the problem will go away on its own.

Health insurance is very confusing

Obtaining and using health insurance can be very confusing. For example, you might feel like you are paying too much for your health insurance. Or you might not know the cost of treatment while using health insurance to help you pay for it. I know I have trouble learning and remembering all the important facts and terminology related to my health insurance.

Vaccines do not cause autism

As far as I know, there is currently no scientific evidence to suggest that vaccinating a child can cause autism. Instead, autism risk is thought to be increased by certain genes and certain conditions during the child's development in the womb.

Some number of parents are trying to prevent autism by choosing not to vaccinate against diseases such as measles and rubella. This is bad because it can cause the child to get sick and die from those diseases. It can also put everyone at risk, including those that have been vaccinated. When one unvaccinated person is infected with the virus, the virus has a chance to mutate into a new form. This new form might be able to cause problems for people who have been vaccinated against the original virus.

Safe driving

In the year 2014, over 32,000 people were killed in motor-vehicle accidents in the United States (according to the Department of Transportation). Also, one of my family members was hospitalized because of a car accident. To try to help make the roads safer, I've written some safe driving tips.

- Cell phones cause you take your eyes off the road, which is dangerous if the car in front of you stops unexpectedly
- Thinking too much can be a distraction! I got a speeding ticket because I was thinking about something rather than paying attention to my speed
- Obviously, don't drive while your brain is impaired by recent alcohol consumption
- Also, don't drive if your brain is impaired by being too tired
- Give other drivers enough time and distance to react to your turns, stops, and lane changes
- Always use your turn signal, even if you don't think you need it, so that cars around you can react to you
- Use your turn signal ahead of time to signal your desire to change lanes, not just when you are actually changing lanes
- Be aware of your blind-spots and the blind-spots of others
- Truck drivers have a blind spot along their right side, so don't pass them on the right because they might not see you. (A friend of mine didn't know this... almost got hit by a truck)
- Be very careful if you are riding a motorcycle. They can be very dangerous.

The Future of Health

We will continue to learn about our bodies and our health. We will research new strategies for treating and preventing illnesses. We will also continue to increase awareness so that people are better informed.

We will also always be encountering new risks and dangers to our health: new viruses, new ways to get hurt, new unhealthy activities, etc. But I expect our overall health will improve as time goes on. It'll be really cool to see what advancements are made next.

Chapter 8. Dating, Love, and Relationships

Introduction

Dating is an important topic because it can be so stressful, confusing, and heartbreaking. Many people struggle with their relationship goals.

This chapter contains some of the things I've learned and thought about dating. Dating is a huge topic. You might have great ideas based on your own experiences that are not discussed here.

My dating experience

In my life, I've had times when I felt very attractive and confident. During these times, it seemed easy to find an amazing girl to date.

At other times, I felt very unattractive and it seemed like there weren't any great girls that would date me. During those times, I started looking for dating advice that could help me.

One of the differences that determined whether I felt attractive or not was my attitude and confidence. When I was feeling good about myself, it showed and I was attractive. When I was feeling bad about myself and feeling needy, I was unattractive.

When I was in a relationship, sometimes I would be a good boyfriend. Other times I probably could have been more fun, supportive, or happy. Past relationships helped me to learn and grow as a person.

The best book I've read about dating: *Mate*

I've read a few of books on dating. Currently, my favorite one is called *Mate: Become the Man Women Want* by Tucker Max and Dr. Geoffrey Miller. It's aimed at men but women will find it helpful too. The book helps guys understand what it is like to be a woman in the modern dating scene.

It emphasizes how to create win-win scenarios so that both you and your date are happy. It gives tips on things that some guys are terrible at: being fun, empathizing with women, looking stylish, having a clean living space, developing confidence, displaying your best traits, expressing interest in someone, etc.

Mate has lots of jokes and humor. It's funny, but the humor might make it more difficult to read if you don't get their jokes.

Be attractive *during* dates by being attractive *outside* of dates

When I started dating, I would worry a lot about what happened during the date itself. I worried about what I said, what questions I asked, what I wore. I didn't understand what she was judging me on or

what she felt about me. I knew I had to make a good impression on the girl, but I didn't know how. I knew I was supposed to be confident, but I didn't know how to come off as confident.

As I got older, I learned what it meant to be confident and how to build genuine confidence. Confidence in life comes from being really happy and excited about your life. Confidence in dating comes from being able to demonstrate to others that you are a good person to be in a relationship with.

I also realized that there is a trick to being attractive during a date: the trick is to do attractive things *outside of the date*.

To understand what I mean, imagine I have a first date on a Saturday. How attractive and confident I am during the date is influenced by what I did during the previous week and how I felt about myself.

If I felt really good about the things I did recently then I will feel better about myself and my date will probably appreciate someone who is happy. So now, instead of worrying about what happens during a date, I focus on getting better at everything in my life outside of the date.

Why does this work? Your date is going to notice you are living a life that is fun, responsible, happy, and meaningful. These are clues to your date that you would make a great partner. I naturally gave more interesting answers to her questions because my life really was more interesting. I became naturally more confident when I had fewer frustrations, worries, and insecurities.

Looking back on my dating experience, the times I was able to be in a happy relationship were the times when I was happiest with my life in general. I was also more confident while dating when I was spending time having fun with friends.

Neediness, non-neediness, and boundaries

Blogger and author Mark Manson is the author of *Models: How to Attract Women Through Honesty*. He likes to use the phrases "neediness" and "non-neediness" when writing about how to be more attractive.

A needy person needs (or wants) stuff from others in order to be happy: love, affection, attention, obedience, arguments, approval, praise, etc. Needy people sometimes try too hard to impress other people or care too much about what other people think.

A non-needy person is someone who doesn't need anything from other people to be happy. When you're non-needy, you're attractive and confident. You have self-esteem rather than self-doubt. You're naturally someone who is great to be around.

I wrote about how I could be more attractive during dates by being attractive outside of dates. I think another way of framing this is that having a great life outside of dates made me less needy during the dates.

A person who is needy will have trouble setting boundaries. A person with no boundaries will seem desperate and will not be very respectful to himself. A person with boundaries that are too strong will be too selfish and not respectful enough to others.

A non-needy person can set healthy boundaries that respects others while at the same time showing proper respect to himself.

Fix your negative traits first

You can increase your attractiveness by either improving your positive traits (adding to your strengths) and by fixing your negative traits (reducing your weaknesses). However, fixing your negative traits is more important to your overall attractiveness and should be focused on first.

Examples of negative traits that can be fixed include: having an unpleasant personality, having an unpleasant attitude, being out of shape, having poor hygiene, having a messy place to live, having bad habits, being a bad listener, being boring, being stubborn, being unhappy, having an unflattering clothing style or hair style, etc.

People can still be attracted to you even if you have some deeply negative traits. However, these negative traits might make you unattractive to the type of person you're looking for.

When I was younger I struggled with dating because I was focusing too much on trying to add positive traits. The positive traits I wanted were to be good looking, to be popular, etc. Instead, it would've been much more effective to focus on fixing the thing that were unappealing about me.

Life skills are attractive

After you've fixed all your negative traits and bad habits you can work on developing more positive traits. "Life skills" are very attractive: cooking, cleaning, fixing things, learning, teaching, medical care, child care, conflict resolution, empathy, self-defense, etc. All of these are skills that can help you take care of yourself and your family.

Other people judge you differently than you judge yourself

Dating requires making judgements about the other person. These judgements allow each person to decide how they feel and what they think about the other person. Try to understand the judgements that the other person is making about you and why. Being able to empathize with their assessment of you can help you fix your negative traits.

There is an old saying that goes, "We judge other people based on their actions and judge ourselves based on our intentions". For example, you might think highly of yourself because you believe yourself to have lots of potential. However, the person meeting you on a date might not be able to see that potential and will not think very highly of you.

You have to demonstrate that you can be a great partner through your words, actions, and other clues that your date can notice. Simply saying you are “nice, caring, and fun” doesn’t prove that you are any of those things. You also only have limited time to demonstrate what makes you worthy of another date. If you don’t prove you’re worth another date, you won’t get one!

Be yourself, but be the best version of yourself

“Be yourself” is an expression commonly used as dating advice. It means to stay true to your values, your desires, and your judgements. However, being yourself does NOT mean that you are currently the best version of yourself. Better dating advice is to “be the best version of yourself”. To become your best self, you have to examine your life for ways in which you could improve. Once you are the best version of yourself you’ll be much more confident.

For example, I’ve always thought of myself to be a caring, considerate person. But during my dating “career” I had to improve my ability to empathize with others.

Keep an open mind. Being your best self does NOT mean clinging to beliefs without examining them. You might examine your beliefs and find that you don’t believe in them anymore. You may also find new beliefs that help you become a better version of yourself.

Dating probably won’t make you happy if you are unhappy while single

Some people think, “I am not happy right now, but I would be happy if I had a girlfriend (or boyfriend).” However, this belief might not be true. You might have other challenges, worries, or beliefs that are the real causes of your unhappiness. If the real causes of your unhappiness go unaddressed, you will still be unhappy even when you are in a relationship.

If you’re an unhappy person, it might interfere with your ability to be a fun and caring partner. The person you date may not have the patience to help you address your problems and worries.

People treat you differently if you are confident rather than nervous

It’s amazing how differently people treat you when you are confident compared to when you are nervous.

I first starting thinking about this because I started going dancing. I go to dance events for partner dances such as swing, blues, and salsa. Between each song you have the opportunity to ask someone to dance.

I’ve noticed that when I’m confident and feeling good, everyone there is very nice and friendly to me. Additionally, most people are willing to dance with me.

But every once in awhile I’ll ask a girl to dance despite being super nervous about asking her. In this case, she will treat me very differently than if I had asked her confidently. When I’m nervous, the girl I’m talking to tends to be much less friendly and much more likely to turn down my offer to dance.

So if you want people to treat you nicely and make it easier to make friends, it helps if you can develop your confidence, or at least pretend to be confident.

Don't be mean

Being nice on a date is really attractive. It shows that you would be a good person to date again.

I wish I had been super nice to every girl I dated. I remember one time during college there was a girl that I liked that I was mean to on purpose. I did so because I had hoped that being mean to her would make her like me more.

Not only is this manipulative, it is also didn't work. It backfired completely and she never wanted to talk to me again. In retrospect, I realize that she already liked me a lot and was just hoping I would be nice to her.

Why did I think that being mean to a girl would make her like me more? I had some misconceptions about dating and how to be attractive. It comes from an idea that I read about online but I misinterpreted. The idea (called "negging") claims that the most attractive women will be unimpressed by all but the most confident men, and that acting too nice meant you weren't confident enough.

I don't know if this is ever true or not. But it certainly didn't make sense in my situation. Somehow I misinterpreted this idea to suggest that I had to be rude to demonstrate confidence.

Now I realize that confident guys don't have to be mean. Now I believe that the nicer I am, the more attractive I am to the girls I meet.

Make your date feel safe, avoid being awkward

Dating has the potential to be dangerous. You and your date will both want to feel safe. Keep this in mind so you can better empathize with the people you date. Your date will be judging you on how dangerous, creepy, or awkward you seem. Some people, especially men, underestimate the importance of making your date feel safe. You might even be creepy without realizing it.

You are not the only threat to your date's safety, either. You also want them to feel safe overall. Your date might be looking for someone that can provide safety and security in a variety of situations.

Rejection

Rejection is the scariest part of dating (for many people). I remember one time I experienced a horrible rejection from a girl I tried to ask out.

Not only did she not want to go out with me, she didn't want me to talk to her anymore. I felt horrible! I wanted her to like me or be friends me, not think I'm some kind of threat!

Luckily, one of my friends was there to console me. She reminded me that I was a wonderful and kind person, no matter what that other girl thought about me.

The other girl's negative reaction was based on a very small information about me. The other girl didn't know how wonderful I could be. My information about her was similarly incomplete. I don't know anything about what she was going through or what her side of the story was.

That rejection was humiliating and painful at first. But my friend's advice allowed me to realize that I shouldn't beat myself up. The girl who rejected me just wasn't the one for me. So I moved on.

Not only did I move on from wanting to go out with her, I also had to move on from trying to make amends with her. She didn't want to talk to me again. That was frustrating at first because I really wanted to say something to her. I wanted to apologize, "Sorry for creeping you out. I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable. I want to make it right some how so you think I'm a respectful guy."

I'm not sure if it is possible to make amends to her. Maybe the best way to make amends is to "pay it forward" by being extra respectful to other women.

It's great if you can get to a point where rejection doesn't hurt you. That's where I am now. This way I can focus my energy and emotions on being happy, making friendships, and being the best version of myself that I can be.

Teaching people to be less awkward

Wouldn't it be great if people were taught how to be less awkward or creepy? Wouldn't it be great if people were taught how to be more confident and attractive instead?

These are difficult traits to improve because if you're being awkward, you frequently are not given clear feedback about it. The typical response is for people to say nothing about it. In some cases, one person doesn't realize that they are frustrating the other person.

Awkwardness can come from not empathizing enough with the person you are interacting with. The opposite also happens: you may think you are bothering someone when really they are happy to be there for you.

I've also met people who talk too much without listening enough.

You can ask a trusted friend to help you work on your own issues.

Dating apps

The biggest difference in dating during my lifetime has been the rise of extremely popular dating websites and smartphone apps. Examples include Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, OkCupid (and many more). These apps give single people a new way to discover and meet other single people.

They don't completely replace meeting potential dates in traditional ways -- I still meet a lot of single people through parties, friends of friends, local events, etc. But there are some things about it that make it convenient. For example, you can adjust the settings so that it only shows people within a specific age range or a within a certain distance.

Dating apps make it easier to meet a large variety of people to date. This reminds me of how people who live in urban areas have more options for dating than people in rural areas. Generally, people in urban areas tend to get married later than people in rural areas. I wonder if dating apps will have a similar effect and increase the age at which people get married. That would be a counterintuitive effect, since some people are hoping dating apps will help them find someone to marry sooner.

An anecdote about race and dating

I was talking with a woman from Vietnam and she told me this story that stuck with me. She dated a Chinese man for multiple years and was very much in love with him. But the Chinese man's parents did not want their son to date a Vietnamese girl. They looked down on the Vietnamese for having darker skin and not being as wealthy. The couple broke up.

Many years later she was raising her daughters in the United States. At first she suggested to her daughters that it would be bad to date hispanic or black guys. So she encouraged the same kind of racial discrimination that she herself had been a victim of. Later, when she recognized this, she changed her opinion and told her daughters they should date whatever race they want.

Some people are feeling hopeless about dating, and venting those frustrations online

I've encountered people online who feel hopeless about dating. The majority of these people are men who feel unwanted and believe they will never be good enough to have a girlfriend or be happily married. They form online communities to discuss and vent with one another.

But even within these communities, there are a wide variety of opinions and ideas.

Some are trying to change themselves to get better. (That's what I would encourage them to try to do.) Others feel they are incurably cursed with dating failure due to genetics. A few men even have extreme, dangerous, and misogynistic ideas. For example, men who express that all women are horrible or evil people.

I care a lot about helping people work through their problems. So I try to listen to and respond to people online when they are frustrated. I think it's very noble to help someone else with their dating life.

What would I tell those men and women that are frustrated or angry? First, I would say to keep an open mind and beware of misconceptions. For example, you might feel like no one could ever love you but then later you end up in a relationship after making some changes to yourself. This happens

when you don't understand why your romantic interests reject you. Or you don't understand how to improve yourself.

Secondly, I would say to try to find good mentors, coaches, or teachers. These people can show you what areas of your life you can work on and how to work on them effectively.

Communication and trust are incredibly important for a good relationship

The most common advice for someone with a relationship problem is, have you talked to your significant other about it?

Many times, the person HAS already tried talking to their significant other about it. And if that doesn't work, what then?

I think that's why couples therapy is very effective. The counselor can help make sure the discussion is fair and addresses the issues.

Trust is also very important to a relationship. If you aren't trustworthy, or if you can't trust your partner, your relationship is going to be very rocky.

When to End a Relationship

Relationships are a complicated topic. One common problem I see (from my own relationships, from talking to friends, reading online) is that sometimes you are not sure if you should continue a relationship or end it.

Deciding to end a relationship is a difficult choice. You wonder if the relationship is salvageable or not. You're not sure if ending the relationship will make you happier. You also might be afraid of being single again. Some people even want to end the relationship because they think it will make their partner happier.

You have to really think about what you absolutely need from the relationship and separate it from what you want but don't absolutely need. Trust and respect for your partner are things you need. Enjoying the exact same set of hobbies is probably a want but not a need.

Being open and honest is better in the long run. Let your partner know when you think you might not be able to satisfy one of their needs. Being dishonest might be able to keep a relationship going for a while longer, but I don't know if it will save it.

Chapter 9. Science

Introduction to Science

Science attempts to give us a better understanding of the world and of the universe. The universe is a very complicated place. It's made up of so many different parts and systems. It's not easy for us as human beings to understand our universe, but as a species we have gotten better at it over time. Our scientific beliefs and understandings have always been changing. In order to better understand science we've had to invent new tools, design new tests, witness new observations, imagine new hypotheses, make new discoveries, and report new findings.

In the first half of this chapter, I discuss science itself. In the second half, I explain some scientific concepts.

Why science is important

Science is important because having a better understanding of our world and our universe allows us to do more things. It also allows us to make more educated decisions. Science allows us to have more sophisticated interactions with our world and our universe. It helps us achieve things we wouldn't have otherwise been able to achieve.

The Scientific Method

The scientific method is a list of steps that can be used to study science effectively. The steps include: 1. Wondering about a question, 2. Discussing a hypothesis, 3. Making a prediction based on that hypothesis, 4. Running an experiment designed to test that prediction, 5. Analyzing the results of the experiment to make logical conclusions about the hypothesis, and 6. Logically answer the initial question.

A hypothesis is a possible explanation or idea for how something works, but it still requires further testing before you can be sure.

The steps of the Scientific Method don't have to happen in that order. Some steps can happen without you consciously taking those steps. For example, you might accidentally make a discovery. In that case, you didn't intentionally make a prediction. But you did have an expectation and noticed when reality was different from your expectation.

The scientific method can be used to make new scientific discoveries, teach existing science, or test proposed scientific knowledge.

Why science is difficult

Science is difficult because many things that can go wrong can lead you to incorrect conclusions. The results you get from science are only as good as the methods and logics used to come to those results.

Good logic requires that you don't have incorrect beliefs or assumptions. It also requires that you avoid drawing illogical conclusions from your information.

It's possible to unknowingly be biased in a way that leads to incorrect assumptions. Wikipedia has a great list of cognitive biases and fallacies. Each describes a way in which our behavior or our logic can be irrational. You might even overlook an important fact. The phrase "bad science" is used to describe an experiment or study that we think is logically flawed or biased.

Scientists can publish their results and methods. If they do, other people can review and judge the logic, experiment design, and results. This can help identify flaws with the research. It may also lead to new ideas or explanations.

Science education

Our knowledge of science influences us. Some science education is practical, allowing you to apply what you learned to help improve your own life or your career. Science education can be fascinating and entertaining as well as informational. Science can be inspiring. It shows us things we never imagined before and it inspires us to ask new questions.

There are lots of different kinds of science education. Educational materials can be aimed at children, students, or adults. The better our educational material, the better our understanding of science will be.

Scientific writing can be difficult to read

I like to read scientific papers. But sometimes scientific papers and writing can be difficult to read. One of my pet peeves is when I have to work really hard to understand what I'm reading. I'll find an article that I know has great information, only to get frustrated at how it is written.

Scientific papers tend to include an "abstract", which is a concise summary of all the important points of the paper. But even these are sometimes difficult to understand!

Simplification and accuracy warning

In the next few sections I will try to explain some scientific topics. These are meant to be brief introductions to these topics, not a detailed and complete explanation. Some details are left out to make the explanations more concise.

The speed of light, radio waves, electricity, and sound

Light travels extremely fast. The speed of light in a vacuum is approximately 300,000,000 meters per second, which is about 186,000 miles per second or 670,000,000 miles per hour. To put that into perspective, the distance from one side of the United States to the other is about 2,600 miles, so light would only take light 0.014 seconds to travel that far. That's 1.4 hundredths of a second.

Radio waves, electricity, and sound all travel very fast too. Radio waves are a form of electromagnetic radiation so they can travel at lightspeed. Electricity also comes from electromagnetic radiation so it could travel at the speed of light, but in practice it is conducted through wires so it is much slower than light in a vacuum. The speed of sound is about 768 miles per hour.

I'm often amazed at how quickly computers can perform instructions and send information across far distances. These high speeds in physics help explain how our technology is able to do so much in a short amount of time.

Definition of "Theory"

One of the most frustrating misconceptions is the definition of the word "theory". The word "theory" has a VERY different meaning to scientists than how it is commonly used.

In casual conversation, *to have a theory about something* means to guess or suspect something that you haven't yet proved or disproved. When talking about science, *to have a theory about something* means that all of the logic and evidence supports the idea, and that you HAVE already done lots of research to prove or disprove it.

So calling something a scientific theory generally means that there is strong evidence for something, not weak evidence. I bring this up because so many people say, "Evolution is just a theory that means it isn't proven" when really there is a lot of evidence that supports evolution.

DNA

There are about 37 TRILLION (37,000,000,000,000) cells in your body. Each of those cells contains a nucleus. Each nucleus contains its own copy of your entire DNA sequence. Your DNA is organized as 46 chromosomes in 23 pairs. Each of these chromosomes has a double-helix shape like a twisted ladder. The rungs of the ladder are made up of two molecules which together are called base pairs. There are about 30 billion base pairs in total among those 46 chromosomes. That means the total number of base pairs across all the cells in the human body is about thirty-seven trillion times thirty billion, which comes out to be 111,000,000,000,000,000,000 base pairs.

We typically think of our DNA as being very tiny because it is so small compared to us. But our DNA is enormously large if compared to things that are much smaller than it, such as electrons. DNA might be easier to understand if you stop thinking of it as something really small and instead start thinking of it as something really big.

The nucleus in your cell is like a giant factory for manufacturing proteins. A gene is a sequence of base pairs that acts as a blueprint or mold to build different proteins. The proteins can be used to build other materials. The cells in your body are so good at construction that a single cell can manufacture a complete copy of itself if it has the proper conditions. These giant factories and construction sites are all run by physics and chemistry.

There are four possible bases that we label A, C, G, or T. These pair up to become base pairs and build the rungs of our DNA ladder. An A is always paired with a T and a C is always paired with a G. However, the order of the pair matters since it determines which base is on which side — an AT base pair will have a different effect on forming the protein than a TA pair. So in a DNA sequence there are four possible base pairs at each step of the way: AT, TA, CG, and GC. To simplify how we write out a sequence of base pairs, we only write the first letter (A, C, G, or T) since we can infer what its partner is.

Genetics

Your DNA, the thirty-billion base pairs, determines your genetics. Your DNA sequence is influenced by your family tree. It is a combination of your father's DNA and your mother's DNA. Your DNA is extremely similar to your family members. Your DNA is mostly the same between you and all other humans. In fact, your DNA sequence is about 98% the same as that of a chimpanzee. Your genetics determine which traits you exhibit.

Your DNA also contains genetic mutations. A mutation occurs when a gene is copied but there is differences between the original and the resulting copy. This creates genes that are slightly different from either parent.

I see some similarities between a computer running a computer program and a cell making proteins from its DNA sequence. They both rely on details encoded in a sequence (the 1s and 0s of the computer program vs. the base pairs of the DNA). But they also rely a lot on the environment that is being used to execute the code (the operating system and hardware of the computer vs. the cell and its mechanisms).

Epigenetics

The genes in your DNA are used to build proteins. The gene acts a template or blueprint for the design of a protein. A single template can be used many times to make many copies of the same protein. When a gene is used to build a protein, this is called gene expression. By determining what proteins can be made, your genetics influences who (and what) you are. Proteins are used to build and operate the living organism.

What causes gene expression to occur and a new copy of a protein to be constructed? It's actually really complicated. And really important because changes in which genes are expressed and how much each is expressed can have a big effect on the organism. So the characteristics of a living thing can change due to changes in gene expression despite the underlying DNA remaining the same. The genes in your DNA can influence who you are, but so does the expression of those

genes. The study of how gene expression is controlled, and other influences on an organism besides a strict reading of the genetic code, is called “epigenetics”.

Nature vs. Nurture?

“Nature vs. Nurture?” is a very well known question. This question asks whether a trait is the result of the genetics we began with at conception or a result of an influential event.

Your genetics come from your parents. But your parents also influence you by how they raise you. So your parents can have a big effect on both your nature and how you were nurtured.

Your traits can be influenced both by genetics and your experiences.

Evolution

Evolution is the idea that a new species can develop from an existing species over many generations. The new traits for the new species come from genetic mutations and new combinations of DNA. Charles Darwin first discovered evolution when he was studying populations of animals in the Galapagos Islands. He understood that new generations of animals were inheriting traits from their parents as well as developing their own traits. Later scientists, after studying DNA, discovered that DNA was responsible for genetic traits and evolution.

New genes can spread very quickly if the genetic trait helps the living thing reproduce in large numbers. In this case, we say that the trait is well-adapted for its environment. On the other hand, a species goes extinct if it dies off rather than continues as new generations. In that case, we might say it is poorly adapted to its environment. There are lots of reasons why a species might go extinct (changes to the habitat, food sources, predators, etc).

By developing new species from pre-existing species, evolution creates a family tree of different species. Species that are more closely related to each other on the family tree will have similar traits. For example, all mammals have a lot in common.

"Survival of the Fittest"

Darwinian evolution is sometimes described evolution as “the survival of the fittest”. But this phrase is confusing and can be misunderstood. A more precise way of saying it would be “the least fit don’t survive”.

To understand the difference, imagine a creature or plant species that only lives on a single island, but shows no sign of going extinct. In that case, Darwinian evolution *would* consider it to be one of the fittest species because it is more fit than the species that went extinct. Some people might incorrectly think that because the habitat is limited that the species is not very fit. Or maybe they incorrectly think the species is not fit if it is not very impressive or powerful. But a species is fit as long as it isn’t threatened to go extinct.

(Herbert Spencer is credited with coining the phrase “survival of the fittest” to describe Charles Darwin’s ideas.)

The origins of the human species

It’s estimated that modern humans (homo sapiens) began at least 200,000 years ago. Other related species came earlier than that. If you go back enough generations before humans, you’d arrive at a species that was an ancestor to both humans and chimpanzees. If you go really far back, you’d arrive at a species that was an ancestor to all mammals.

It is incorrect to say that humans evolved from monkeys. The monkeys that we have around today were not our ancestors. Instead we should say that monkeys share a common ancestor with us. Chimpanzees are our distant, distant cousins but we did not descend from chimpanzees.

Chimpanzees (and bonobos) are more closely related to us "homo sapiens" than any other species currently living on Earth. But they are not the species most closely related to us out of all species ever. During Earth’s history there have been many other species that are more closely related to us than chimpanzees, but none of those species are still alive today. They died off for various reasons, including competing with homo sapiens for food and territory. We have found fossilized skeletons of these other species and they have similarities to humans but also some similarities to monkeys.

Beginnings of life on Earth

The term “evolution” describes how one species can lead to a different species or multiple different species over time. Evolution explains how we arrived at the diversity of species we have today. However, evolution has nothing to do with how life began. The term “Abiogenesis” is used to describe how life can form from non-living material.

Scientists estimate that this happened on Earth about 4 billion years ago. The earliest living things were very simple and very different than the living things alive today. The Earth was also very different back then. When life began, there would have been a lot of time for many chemical reactions and events to occur uninterrupted. Today it would be much more difficult for abiogenesis to take place. The material would get eaten or absorbed or destroyed long before it had time to develop into life.

Different fields of science

The topics in this chapter focused on biology, chemistry, and genetics. However, there are many interesting fields of science that aren’t mentioned here: mathematics, computer science, etc. Each gives us greater understanding about how things work.

The future of science

The universe is such a complicated place that humanity still has so much to learn about it. New scientific ideas are being discovered and investigated every day. I think that we will learn so much

about science over the next one hundred years. We may be nearing a time in human history when we make unprecedented scientific progress.

Chapter 10. Productivity and Self-Development

Introduction

This chapter discusses a few miscellaneous topics that didn't fit into the other chapters of the book. The central themes are productivity and self-development.

Building habits and being more productive with the "Grid System"

A lot of people wish that they could be more productive with their time. I developed a strategy for managing my time that I found to be extremely helpful to me. I refer to it to as my "Grid System".

The Grid System is a To Do List designed to help develop a daily routine. The list of items are in the order that I want to do them. But the clever part is that the list repeats every day. That way I build a routine.

I use a piece of graphing paper as my Grid table. Each row is a day and each column is a task that I would like to get done every day.

Example list of Grid Activities: Make bed, Eat breakfast, Tidy up, Brush teeth, Workout, Shower, Work/Writing, Lunch, Journal writing, Respond to emails, Chore #1, Chore #2, Chore #3, Cleaning, Reading/Learning, Programming, Dinner, Activity for fun, Brush teeth, go to bed.

Included in the routine are spaces for miscellaneous chores. What I do for a chore changes each day and is determined by what needs to be done that day.

Remove any columns if you think that task isn't really helping get your life where you want it to be. Otherwise you will use them to procrastinate against what's more important.

Why the Grid System is effective

One advantage of the Grid System is that you always have exactly one thing to do: whatever is the next unchecked column. This is important for when you feel overwhelmed with too many things to do. You no longer waste time or energy thinking about what to do next.

You won't feel as bad about having so many things to do because you'll have made a little progress towards completing all of them. You can make a lot of progress in several different areas of your life if you do a little bit each day in all of them.

The Grid System is really great at building habits. Good habits allow you to be more productive. At first it will take a lot of time, energy, and willpower in order to do all of your Grid Activities. But after practicing for a couple weeks you will find you are able to do them all quickly and easily. Also, if you have a productive morning it will help you be more productive in the afternoon and evening.

No Zero Days

"No Zero Days" is a concept I first heard on Reddit ([/r/NonZeroDay](#)). It's a concept that is useful for attempting to complete a goal or improve yourself in some way.

A "zero day" is a day in which you did absolutely zero work towards your goal. "No Zero Days" simply means that every single day you will at least do something that helps you get closer to your goal.

Some days you might even get a lot done. Even if what you do is a little bit, it's much better than doing nothing. After enough days in a row of making progress you will have accumulated a lot of progress.

You can keep track of how many days in a row you make progress on your goal by marking each day with an X on a calendar. This motivates you on days when you could go to sleep rather than spending a few minutes making progress.

It's similar to the Grid System, except that it focuses on one goal or aspect of your life you want to improve instead of several goals.

For example, when I'm writing this book I try to have No Zero Days of progress on the book. If I'm trying to get into better shape I try to have No Zero Days when it comes to exercise. When I'm trying to read a book, I try to make sure I read at least a little bit every day.

Wanting to do something is better motivation than thinking you have to do something

Imagine there is an important chore that you dread doing. You spend a lot of time thinking about. You feel like it is important, that you ought to do it, or that your life would be better if you did it.

Those are all really good reasons WHY you should do the chore. However, having to do something can actually be very demotivating. You might still dread the chore and procrastinate.

Instead, it would be more motivating if you thought of it as something you WANT to do. If you can successfully convince yourself that you want to do a chore, it stops being a chore and instead becomes enjoyable. It is more motivating to have the opportunity to do something enjoyable than important.

Making a to-do list can be very demotivating because it feels like a list of things you have to do, even though you have other things you'd rather be doing that aren't on the list. So instead make a "Want-to-do list". Write down reasons why you want to do the things on your To Do List or Grid.

The importance of good organization and good note-taking

Being organized can help you to be successful. So can great note-taking. To keep notes, I currently use both a notebook and a software program.

To help keep papers organized, I have two boxes in my room. One is a box of my most important papers and things so I'll know where to find them. The other is a box of my less important papers that I might want later.

I didn't always have good organization or good note-taking. It's a skill that I wish I had developed earlier. It's also something I hope to improve on.

Project management systems

A project management system is how you organize your notes, plans, and details for a project. It's very helpful for large projects. The project could be anything -- something you're doing at work or at home or at school. The management system can include software, notecards, or a notebook.

Write down the steps involved for the project. Then, for each step, write down what needs to be done, what you've done up to that point, and any other relevant notes.

Good note taking and planning will help you figure out exactly what needs to be done, how to do it, and how to prioritize it. Good organization will help you look up important information quickly.

The conveyor belt metaphor for the present moment

Imagine you are working on the assembly line at a factory. The factory is manufacturing widgets and your job is to put together two parts for each of the widgets. The conveyor belt brings you endless amounts of factory-produced parts. Your job is to pick up two parts at a time and put them together. After putting them together you can put the combined parts back on the conveyor belt.

When you're focused on the present moment you are focused on picking up two parts, putting them together, and placing them back down on the conveyor belt. This is generally when you are happiest and doing the best work.

If you're not focused on what you're currently working on, you're not focused on the present moment. You might be worrying about the future or worrying about how much work you still have to do. In the metaphor, this is like worrying about the widget parts on the conveyor belt that have not yet reached you. You can also worry about the past, the widget parts on the conveyor belt that have already passed you.

Writing

Looking back on my life so far, I wish I had been encouraged to write more. In particular, I wish I had spent more time writing non-fiction. It's extremely fun.

It can also be helpful. I learn a lot whenever I write. The process of writing causes me, the author, to think of lots of questions that I hadn't considered before. Sometimes I won't be able to answer those questions by myself and I'll have to spend time researching online.

I also learn from others when they give me feedback and comments about my writing.

Reading, learning, asking questions

There are so many things I haven't learned yet and I hope to continue learning. There are lots of ways I could do it: through experience, through conversation, through reading, through watching videos, etc. I hope people continue to create great educational materials for adults.

I'm always finding new questions to ask. Sometimes it can be answered with a Google search or a conversation with a friend. But other times the answer is elusive.

Why do people not listen to advice?

If you give someone advice, they might not follow your advice.

This can be extremely frustrating for you (the person giving advice). You might feel rejected or disrespected. You might be so frustrated that you don't give that person any more advice. You might feel like the person is making a big mistake if they don't follow your advice.

Try not to get too frustrated. Instead, you should offer to help in some other way.

There are a couple of different reasons why someone might not follow your advice. They might disagree with you on the details of the situation. For example, they might disagree about what the goals are, what the obstacles are, what is possible, or what is the best option. The other person is probably acting rationally based on their understanding of the situation. Or maybe they are too emotionally attached to change.

Honor your calling

Your calling is what you dream of doing and achieving. Your calling could be a singular goal or be made up of many goals. For me, I feel like my calling contains many separate goals. When you are making steps towards achieving those goals you are honoring your calling.

Unfortunately, sometimes I felt like I was very far away from achieving my goals. If I was feeling really bad, it might seem like my goals were impossible.

Some people, like myself at times, are afraid to honor their calling. Accomplishing dreams and achieving goals can be scary and intimidating. It sometimes seems like following your heart is something that only a very few, very lucky people can do.

But I think I overestimated the difficulty of honoring my calling. Achieving your dreams isn't as scary, risky, or lonely as it seems.

I sat down and tried to write out what my calling was. I was hoping to come up with a single item that was my calling. Instead, I realized my calling is a list of about a dozen different goals covering all the important aspects of my life.

For example, I wanted to have a career I loved, I wanted to have a girlfriend I loved, I wanted to have great relationships with my friends and family, I wanted to be happy with myself, etc. At that point, it still felt like I was impossibly far away achieving happiness.

The next step was to write how I could honor my calling. As it turns out, I was already doing a lot of things to honor my calling. The things I needed to do to further honor my calling didn't even seem that hard.

Try doing what I did. Write out what your calling is. Then write out how you can honor it. It might make feel more hopeful about your future and more satisfied with your past.

Thank people for the things they do for you

Any time someone does something nice for you, thank them! This is a great habit that my friend encouraged me to try.

I always assumed I was a polite and gracious person. But when I started actively trying to thank people I found many new opportunities to say "Thank you" when I previously wouldn't have said anything.

Motivation for when you're not sure what to do: change the universe

If you're not sure what you should do next in life, and you're looking for something to do, start by noting what you're most passionate about. If you're not sure what you care most about, imagine, if you could do anything, what would you do? If you could talk about anything, what would you talk about? That's the thing you care most about.

Next, come up with an idea for something you could achieve related to that passion. It might be writing an article, videotaping a lecture, hosting an annual event, starting a business or a charity.

Then bring your idea to life. Don't procrastinate. If you want to do something, you might as well do it as soon as you can.

Whatever it is, do it well. Do it so well that people have to take notice. So good that it becomes important. So good that people want to talk about it and share it. So good that it gets covered by the news. So good that it becomes a top story in the news. So good that you get invited to talk about it on talk shows.

If you do something really great, people will want to make a movie about it. If your work is really important, the authors of history textbooks won't be able to ignore what you did.

I've heard this called "making the universe move instead of waiting for the universe to move you." Steve Jobs memorably said people should "put a dent in the universe."

The universe might not make life easy for you. You might not have the job you want or know what you should do next. However, the universe always has positions available for more amazing people willing to do amazing work.

The reason I share this is because some people have never tried thinking this way before.

This advice works best when what you're passionate about is something that can financially support the lifestyle you want. If following your passion doesn't make enough money to keep you afloat -- even when you're doing amazing work -- then you will need to find additional sources of income. Maybe bringing your dream to life won't make you money, but you will feel good about it.

Self-doubt

I've had many self-doubts. A self-doubt is when you think you are incapable of doing something that you think is important or you really want.

For example, I really wanted to be a happy person with a wonderful career, but I doubted that it was possible. Or maybe I really wanted to learn a skill but thought it was too difficult.

You can probably identify many self-doubts about yourself. Self-doubts are saddening when you think about them.

When someone else criticizes me about something that I myself have a self-doubt about, it stings painfully. They are poking an emotional wound and I might notice that I'm angry at them.

Once you've identified out all your self-doubts, start proving them wrong to yourself. You can't reason away self-doubts, you need undeniable proof. It might be challenging, but when you prove a self-doubt wrong you free yourself of it and feel much better.

Regrets and things I'm ashamed of

I don't have many major regrets. I try not to beat myself up for anything that happened in the past. Instead I tell myself that I didn't know any better back then.

All the things I regret or am ashamed of generally fall into one of these three categories: 1) Being mean or rude to someone when I didn't have to be, 2) Not being kind to someone when I had a great opportunity to be, 3) Not daring to live greatly.

What you do makes a difference

Be aware of the effect you have on the people and world around you. What you do makes a difference.

Some nihilist people might think that nothing really matters -- that the universe will come to an end and that humans are insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

But what you do has an effect on the people around you and your community. No two people quite have the same effect and sometimes you can make decisions that matter. If you can get yourself to care about the effect you have, you can give life a lot of meaning.

Life is short.

Life is short. Wave 'hello' to every baby and every puppy you see. Wave 'hello' to as many people as you can without seeming crazy.

Chapter 11. Future Work and Conclusion

About this chapter

In this chapter, I describe some ideas I've had. These ideas are for small projects that I could try to work on in the future. I won't attempt to do all of them, but I might attempt to do some of them.

I got the phrase "Future Work" from research papers in scientific journals. Authors of scientific papers will sometimes include a section where they describe further research that they think would have interesting results.

Why are my ideas for my own future included in this book? And why should you care about these ideas? It gives you more insight into my imagination. The question "What would I like to work on or achieve in the future?" is a great question. It gives you a better understanding of how I am thinking and feeling at this moment. My dreams are just as much a part of my thoughts as the knowledge and opinions I shared elsewhere in this book.

I also hope that writing out these ideas will be enjoyable to read. It might inspire a few readers to help me with these ideas or try the ideas themselves.

Publishing this book

After I'm done writing a good draft of this book, I will publish it. I'll look into different ways to go about publishing it. There are a lot of different possible options. I'll start by sharing the book with friends and family in order to get early feedback.

This book started out as a crazy idea. By writing this book, I learned that I should not be afraid to take on crazy projects that I think are cool.

If possible, I would like to publish the book in such a way that makes it easy for readers to share their favorite sections with people they know. I can imagine an official website for this book that lets readers copy a URL that links to a particular chapter or section.

Continue to improve this book

I am very proud of this book as it is now. But that doesn't mean I think it's perfect. If I get enough reader feedback, I might write a new draft (version) of this book. I could make improvements to both the content and the writing style.

I may find ideas for new sections to add to this book. So it's possible that the best section of this book hasn't even been written yet.

A blog

I could imagine myself writing a blog. It would be fun to write some blog articles. I already have some ideas for things that would be fun to write about that would make more sense in a blog than in this book.

One advantage of writing a blog is that people can easily share the articles they care about.

I still have many things I want to read, learn, and study

I love to read non-fiction and there are many books I still want to read. There are also some topics I'd be interested in taking classes on or learning more about.

If I learn something really great, I could write a blog article to promote it.

A blog about the user experience of the software I use

I use software a lot. I care a lot about the user experience of the software I use (websites, apps, programs, operating systems). I sometimes encounter aspects of the software that could be better designed. I could publish a blog (or Twitter feed) of design problems I encounter.

My commentary might help software designers learn to be better at software design. It also could help other people become more comfortable using software.

Articles for computer users

I could write articles about using computers. This way I could help people learn about how to better use their computers and smartphones. Many people could benefit by learning more about how to use their devices.

There already exist many books, articles, and videos that explain things about using the computer. However, I think it would be enjoyable and helpful to create my own.

Articles for computer programmers

I'd be interested in writing, or helping to write, some educational articles for computer programmers. Programming is a huge field, so there is a lot I could write about that would be helpful to people who are trying to learn more about programming. I could write topics for beginners on novice subjects that I am very familiar with. Or I could write about more advanced topics, which might encourage me to learn more myself.

Last year I wrote a guide explaining how to use Git™. Git is a computer program that software developers use to help manage the code they write. It is extremely popular in the software industry, but it is also very confusing for beginners.

I shared my guide with some of my friends and they were grateful for my writing. It helped them to quickly learn more about Git and made them more productive at work. You can read my guide to Git here: www.github.com/kevinverre/kevins-guide-to-git

A series of interviews with experts

Another idea for an exciting educational project is to publish a series of interviews with experts. I could imagine publishing the interviews as blog posts, podcast episodes, or a book.

While writing this book, I realized that there is a lot I don't know and I still have many questions. Talking to experts would be a great way for me, as well as my readers, to learn more.

Editing a book or a collection of articles from other authors

Since I enjoy writing non-fiction, maybe I would also enjoy helping other people write and publish nonfiction. It would be fun to collaborate with other people.

One idea is to put together and publish a collection of nonfiction articles from multiple authors. I could contribute either by writing an article or helping to edit articles.

Host my own meetup group or event

I've been using Meetup.com to find interesting local events and groups. For example, twice a week I attend a meetup for writers that write together at a coffeeshop. I think it would be fulfilling to try to start my own meetup group of some kind that meets regularly. Or even a one time event.

Starting my own non-profit project or group

It could be really meaningful to start my own non-profit organization. This could be a great way to help out the community. I would probably learn a lot from the experience.

I could also look into working with existing non-profits, either as an employee or a volunteer. However, I strongly encourage everyone to try starting their own organization. There is no harm in trying something on your own. It doesn't even have to be unique or original for it to be beneficial! So don't be afraid to try something even if someone else is already doing it.

An Educational Website, "KevSchool"

I think it would be really exciting to work on an educational website. There are already many great websites that exist that you can learn from. But I think they will continue to be improved upon in the future. The technology could continue to get better so that it is easier to learn important concepts.

The basic idea for any educational website is straightforward: give people a way to learn new things by spending time on your website. But beyond that, there are so many different possibilities. Some websites only allow their employees and partners to publish content on the site. Other websites

allow anyone to publish content on their site. It could be a non-profit organization (like Wikipedia) or a for-profit organization (like Quora).

I sometimes imagine building “KevSchool”. It would start out as a blog with articles that help people learn about other educational resources they can find online. But later it would also start publishing its own educational content. The emphasis would be on practical information that helps improve the lives of readers. KhanAcademy.org, a website that offers some great educational materials for free, would be an influence.

The Wiki of Practical Knowledge

This is a specific idea for an educational website. A Wiki is an informational website with content that can be edited or added to by users. Wikipedia.org is the most famous wiki and it is designed to be like an encyclopedia. It has a lot of good articles, but it is also missing a lot of great information. Only certain types of articles are permitted on Wikipedia, so many good ideas for articles are not allowed.

I think it would be interesting to try to start a new public wiki that encourages a wider variety of information content. For example, you could write tips and guides to anything. It could be a guide to your favorite class at your college or your favorite book. Or it could be a collection of tips for working out. The wiki would allow any practical knowledge.

Maybe adding a new page would require that an editor approves your article before it is published to the website. This could help ensure quality and protect the brand.

I think there are a lot of smart people out there who want to share their knowledge with others, but don't know how to publish it. This could be an additional option for them to publish their knowledge.

Help people with depression and try to prevent suicides

I'm passionate about helping people with depression feel better and preventing suicide. I want to help people be happier about their lives. I sometimes wonder what I could do to help.

One idea I had is to start a blog or a website with the purpose of being an additional resource people could find online. It might start off very simple but I would add more content over time. I could get help from experts.

Depression and suicide are very sensitive and difficult subjects, so I would treat it with dignity, respect, and seriousness.

Help people become more attractive

One of my goals, is to try to help people live healthy, happy, and peaceful lives. In my dating chapter, I mentioned that there are lots of people frustrated about dating. Some of these people feel hopeless, like no one would ever want to date them.

But we could create resources to try to help those people. For example, imagine you are a guy who has never had a date and feels like you will never find love. Perhaps you could be helped so that you are more attractive. We could create resources for you that help you work on your personality and appearance and lifestyle.

A volunteering organization to help people in different ways

Many organizations are started with a specific purpose in mind. I am curious about volunteer organizations that exist to help others but WITHOUT a specific purpose. Instead, their goals, projects, and events would change based on the needs of the community.

Imagine an organization with a small network of local volunteers. The organization would be willing to listen to any requests for projects. The requests could be for anything and could come from anyone. After considering their options, the organization decides which requests it will try to assist. That way the community gets to impact what the organization does by submitting requests.

The organization will only take action on requests where they feel they have the expertise and skills and resources to be helpful. Some requests for help might be declined with a polite response about how the organization is not able to fulfill all requests. Some people might be disappointed when their request is not accepted as a project. But the organization would be doing a lot of good for the people whose requests are accepted.

Host hackathons

A hackathon is an event that attendees go to so they can work on something that they want to work on. A “hack” is anything that is cleverly built. Hackathons are popular in the software industry.

It would be fun to host events like these because it would encourage people to try working on new things and create cool projects. People use hackathons to write software but also to create art, music, and writing.

Work as a software engineer

Previously I have worked at a few different companies as a software developer. My favorite software projects to work on are the ones where I feel like the software is extremely helpful to the people who use it. Computer programming can be challenging but it can also be a lot of fun.

Work doing something else

Besides working as a software engineer, I could work doing something else. I’m not exactly sure what, but I’m sure I am capable of doing many different things.

Start my own company

I had the incredible opportunity to work as a software engineer at a small Silicon Valley startup. I learned a lot. It made me think that it would be really satisfying to work at a company that I founded (either by myself or as part of a founding team). I would learn a lot from the experience. And I would be very proud of my work.

Music project

In the past I've written and recorded some music using keyboards, synthesizers, and computer software. I'd like to record a new album of songs that consists of me playing songs I've written on a piano.

A sequel book?

I love writing. It's possible that I will write a sequel to this book some day. It would contain all the best stuff I've learned since then. Also, the process of writing a book would encourage me to do more research and learn more.

Fear and uncertainty

The future is scary because I'm not sure what to expect. I don't have a path ahead of me that will very clearly lead me to happiness. I'm still dealing with a lot of uncertainty. I don't always know what I want. Some days I lack confidence in my own abilities.

But I will do the best I can to have a nice present and a nice future. I'm excited about the future even though I don't know what it will bring. I believe I can handle whatever challenges come my way.

Conclusion

It feels good to have expressed my thoughts. I hope it was helpful to you to read them.

Bibliography

Other books mentioned and referenced in this book:

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