THE 10 PILLARS OF PRODUCTIVE FLOURISHING

CHARLIE GILKEY
Before we begin, I want to start by saying that I’m excited to join you on your journey.

The ten posts included here are the pillars of Productive Flourishing. You’ll sometimes see them directly showing through other pieces, but other times, they’ll be subtly supporting what you’re reading.

These pieces are also representative of the diverse ways I show up in the world. There’s no uniform style or voice because the posts were written at different times since 2008; there’s both consistency in the core ideas and evolution in the expression and understanding of them. I also decided to let each post stand alone, rather than making transitions and tying them all together, so that the pieces stay true to their original form and expressions.

If something really resonates with you, I’d love to hear from you or for you to share the piece with someone else. Each post will have a link to the web version.

Thanks for reading. I get to do my great work only because there are people willing to join me on my journey as well.
THE TEN CORE IDEAS

Each post in this document explores one of the ten most important things for you to know about Productive Flourishing, ranging from what we believe, to how we operate, to why we’re here:

1. This is our world now.
2. These (you) are my people.
3. I want to help you thrive, in whatever ways work best for you.
4. Productivity is great, but let’s understand what it really means and why it matters.
5. Our stories drive us—and we can change them from limiting stories to expansive ones.
6. “Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking”—we’re all on a journey.
7. There will be failures; you’ve got plenty of company there; get back up and try again.
8. And while you’re at it, get up and take care of your people.
9. We can change the world by focusing on proving our yaysayers right.
10. The end of all human action is flourishing.
Not too long ago, there was a myth told about the world of work: school led to a job which led to a long-term employer which led to retirement. Somewhere between the job and retirement was a house and kids.

Some people didn’t walk the normal path, though. These brave and crazy souls went off to start their own businesses, where they would toil away for the rest of their lives, growing businesses to be handed down to family members or scaled up to become larger organizations. They were brave and crazy because once you got off the job track, there was no turning back.

As much as we may sometimes wish that we lived in Career World with its security, predictability, and straightforwardness, our reality is different. Careers are dead.

We now live in Project World, where our lives are marked by three- to five-year projects with clear endings that might not create a logical next step. A project could be a job, a business, an educational program, or caring for young, sick, or elderly family members.

Before I go on to explain the differences between Project World and Career World, I’ll briefly address why the world has changed. The Industrial Revolution brought a shift in society, away from individuals making items for customers they knew in a relatively small-scale, village-based context and toward working in large factories (by which I mean to include more modern-day factories like banks, data centers, and call centers) that create products and solutions for a mass of unknown customers. As our business practices and society shift back to more direct relationships with customers, the changes in creative work and entrepreneurship have also changed the nature of jobs, entrepreneurship, and what it takes to thrive in this new (old) world.

Let’s handle each in turn.

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**Job-Hopping Is the New Norm in Project World**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average number of years that U.S. workers have been with their current employer is 4.6. The tenure of young employees (ages 20 to 34) is only half that (2.3 years). Job-hopping is the new norm.

Job-hopping used to be considered career suicide, but with rapidly changing technology and the fact that job-hopping is trending more now than it ever has, it’s now being seen as advantageous.

The world of work has thus shifted from careers to projects. In Career World, you went to school to get a job in a company that you’d work at for the rest of your professional life. That employer would issue a pension for retirement and you’d spend your idle years in some post-work, pre-death twilight. Probably in Florida.

**Project World is different.** It’s unlikely that you’ll work for the same company for longer than five years, even when that’s a company you create. While an employer may contribute to your retirement in some way, no one under 40 that I know starts working someplace thinking that they’ll retire from there. Whether it’s the cause or the effect, the amount of time an employee is trained, mentored, and cultivated has changed dramatically, not to mention the fact that a new generation of leaders and managers is coming of age and they tend to build cultures that favor self-sufficiency and individual accountability as opposed to organizational practices.

In Project World, no matter how well you do your “job,” you’ll be on another one in three to five years because:

1. If you don’t do your job well, you’ll find yourself without it. The better the job, the better you have to do to keep it.
2. If you do your job really well, you’ll find yourself fast-tracked to do more jobs you’re not trained for, without the budgets, resources, and manpower you need to do those jobs.

3. If you hang on to your job long enough, you’ll find yourself under the direction of a new leader or of another company entirely. The people from #2 are shuffled through leadership positions so quickly and the people from #1 get shuffled out so quickly that, though your desk and chair might never leave a 10-foot circle on the floor, your work environment dramatically changes faster than you change computers.

The only thing that you have to take with you in any of the cases above is what you’ve accomplished. You don’t get credit for all the things you half-started or half-finished. In the world of work as it relates to professional creatives, what counts is what you build, sell, or manage—and likely all three in different ways. (Yes, this applies to academics and government workers as well.)

The very worst thing you can do in Project World is to have only time-in at a company or an organization to show for yourself. Great, you’ve worked at Acme Organization for thirteen years and you can’t show one significant project where your contributions were absolutely vital?

**Entrepreneurs and Small Business Owners in Project World**

This pressure is even more significant for entrepreneurs and small business owners. Innovation cycles went from hundreds of years to just years in less than a hundred years. We experience this pressure in subtle ways that add up.

Just about the time you get your website upgraded, the Next Big Thing hits.

That marketing strategy or social media platform you just got dialed in? Replaced by this year’s trend.

That project you’ve been working on to lower costs and overhead? Some startup company in the Philippines is using manpower to solve those same problems—and once they figure that out, another company in the Philippines will start working on solving the problem using cheaper manpower and tech to compete with them. (And before you write that off, keep in mind that it’s the guy you talked to at the last conference who’s starting one or the other of those companies.)

**Being remarkable**, if I may follow my long habit of riffing off of Seth, is the only way to thrive in business. And while shipping isn’t sufficient to be remarkable, it’s absolutely necessary. People will buy your words for only so long if they can’t buy and experience your product.

**Success in Project World Requires That You Start Finishing Every Day**

Shipping requires you to stop shuffling, lying, hedging, talking, and scheming and to start finishing. Which means, whether you’re an employed professional creative or think you’re your own boss, your success depends on whether you’re able to consistently start finishing the stuff that matters.

**But here’s the deal: we are the most fulfilled when we are making progress on meaningful goals.** As Dan Pink has pointed out in *Drive*, we don’t need carrots and sticks—autonomy, mastery, and purpose go a long way. *The Progress Principle* shows that it’s actually setbacks that make us have lousy work days, rather than the nature of our work itself. The upshot of our ever-evolving professional lives is that we have unprecedented autonomy, adventure, and chance for impact via network effects.

Our struggle is that it’s never been more important to start finishing what matters most; our salvation is that we’re happiest when we’re doing just that.

**Welcome to Project World.** Since you’re here, you might as well learn how to be successful in this world. That’s what Productive Flourishing is all about. See this post online.
Have you spent a lifetime being frustrated by people telling you that you should do just one thing rather than explore all of the different interests and talents you have?

Or perhaps you tire of people wondering why you prefer to stay home and read or work on something that matters rather than go out to clubs, bars, or the sports event du jour.

Or deep down, you have problems committing to doing something because you know you could do just about anything but are scared that you’re going to pick the wrong thing.

If so, you’re not alone. You’re probably a Creative Giant.

Creative Giants are naturally compassionate, creative people who have the vision to see how the world might be, the courage to take action, and the capability to actually change the world. These people aren’t just the black-beret-wearing artists that we might typically think of when we hear the word “creative”; they’re engineers, doctors, programmers, and scientists, as well as painters, musicians, designers, and writers. Actually, because they’re Renaissance people, they’re often both engineers AND musicians.

In fact, one of the distinguishing features is that they are AND people who get tired of trying to present themselves to a very limiting EITHER/OR world. It’s not that they’re trying to be difficult; it’s that they just don’t see the world that way or show up with an easy EITHER/OR label. They always need a few extra circles for whatever Venn diagrams people try to use to categorize them.

Being more creative is never a pain point for Creative Giants. Every breath comes with a new idea or two to figure out what to do with. Figuring out where to put the ideas and which ones to pursue is the challenge.

While not all Creative Giants are entrepreneurs—and there’s no need to buy into the pressure to be entrepreneurs—they’re almost always entrepreneurial because they’re always seeking ways to better use what’s in front of them to create more value. In organizations that employ them, they’re the intrapreneurs, linchpins, trust agents, or whatever term trends next year to describe the same thing.

Lastly, Creative Giants are usually reluctant and accidental leaders. They didn’t set out to be leaders but fell into it. Because they don’t see themselves as fitting “the leader archetype,” they discount the fact that a) they’re leading, b) there are many ways to be an effective leader, and c) most of the principles of leadership are learnable and practicable. I know, because I’ve been mentoring reluctant and accidental leaders for a little over 25 years. (I had an early start through youth leadership programs and continued in Boy Scouts and military training.)

The Creative Giant’s Challenges

In my mind, the best way to understand who Creative Giants are is to talk about their challenges and the ways that their creativity, intelligence, compassion, and personal power generate tensions and polarities. I’ll list the major challenges, which will help me explain where the “Giant” part comes from later on:

1. They can do just about anything they set their minds to. They’re scared they’re going to pick the wrong thing.

2. They chronically overcommit because people turn to them for a lot of help or to see projects through and because most things are easy for them to do. They forget the cumulative costs of small commitments, and they often forget that everything takes longer than they think it will.

3. They half-finish projects because they’ve worked out the puzzles or adventures before finishing them. The projects have thus lost their appeal, and Creative Giants have other commitments to attend to. (See #2 above.)
4. Their compassion gets in the way of their personal power. They suck at receiving, they undervalue themselves so that others can afford them or don’t feel small, they can’t “win” because that means other people lose, they can’t “move on” because they’d have to leave someone behind, etc. They spend an inordinate amount of time either hiding their power or throttling it so that they can play nicely with others.

5. They learn and grow quickly, so relationships are hard for them to maintain. Even when they have the patience for people who aren't continually expanding, they still don’t understand why people wouldn’t want to grow.

6. Because they are socially adaptable, they often struggle with keeping to their core. They adopt worldviews quickly and sometimes forget that someone else’s worldview isn’t their own.

7. Success is an ever-evolving thing for them. They accomplish things that other people could only dream of, but it’s not enough for them because they know they could do more or they know what they could’ve done better if they’d had more time. They’re great builders of never-ending ladders.

8. They crave simplicity at the same time that they reject it. Their native creativity and intelligence thrive on the tension of complexity and novelty, oftentimes obscuring their experiential knowledge (wisdom) that simplicity, structure, flow, and sufficiency form the broad, plain path that enables them to thrive.

9. They’ve created conceptual tension between strategy and compassion and often don’t see that being better in the world means that they can better serve and lead others.

10. Busy, accomplished people always get more responsibility than everyone else, so it’s easy for them to be overwhelmed. An evergreen problem is that they have more demands on them than they have the capacity to meet, and every time they satisfy one more demand, another one or two are placed on them.

11. They have a chronic problem with over-delivering. Good enough is never good enough, especially if someone has paid them to do something.

12. Cultivating their physical health has to be an intentional practice that they remain vigilant about because they work with their minds. Because they often get pulled into travel, extended projects, or caregiver roles that disrupt their routines, they easily fall off the exercise wagon.

If you’re reading that list and thinking that everyone has those problems, I have two things to tell you: a) you’re wrong and b) you’re a Creative Giant. Welcome to the club. Coffee is in the back, the bathroom is down the hall, and we’ve been meaning to get equipment in the fitness center for a few years now.

Why “Giant”?

I recognize my limits but when I look around I realise I am not living exactly in a world of giants. —Giulio Andreotti

Now, about the “Giant” part. That really comes from items 4 and 5 above, and the term addresses a recurring pattern I’ve seen for years in conversations with my clients, colleagues, friends, co-mentors, and mentors. In private conversations and in workshops, I talk a lot about superheroes because the metaphor provides such a rich and clear lens for the stories we can tell ourselves, AND the superhero is a concept that female Creative Giants have had a harder time getting into, so I started looking for more accessible language.

What so many of my conversation partners were describing was the feeling of having to tiptoe around people lest they end up triggering, hurting, or enchanting them. It’s as if they were giants having to pretend to be normal people so that they didn’t step on others, scare them, or awe them. Additionally, Creative Giants are just as often introverts as they are extroverts, so while they might not actively smallify themselves, their gianthood is still not readily apparent. Until you get them talking. (I’m thinking of Chris Garrett here, who’s a known Creative Giant and one of those guys I can never hear enough from.)
To add further insult to a long life of injuries, Creative Giants who show up to events and conferences that put on a big show often find themselves sorely disappointed but unable to really talk about it. While everyone else is having a great time and/or having their minds blown, the Creative Giants are trying to figure out a) how not to show their internal discomfort, b) what’s wrong with them that they’re not getting it, c) whether to cut their losses and leave or hold out for that “one idea” that may be a game-changer for them, and d) how to find other Creative Giants so the trip isn’t a bust. Yes, they’re doing that all at once. (It’s for this reason that I tell Creative Giants to decide whether the conference or event is worth it if all they do is meet a handful or two of people they click with or want to finally meet; if not, pass.)

The other reason that they’re giants, though, is that they really are powerful. As I mentioned in Foundations Are to Be Built Upon, Not to Be Flown Over, this is also a perennial downfall for them: they can do so much without trying hard that they simply don’t cultivate self-mastery skills.

I’ll pause here, though, because that’s the story you want to hear. The story you don’t want to hear and be held accountable to is the one that says you’re scared of being the best version of you and that you should dial it back so you don’t have to deal with the social fallout of revealing your gianthood. Mediocrity is safe for you because your mediocre level of results and performance is at the level of very good for other people. Let’s move past those easy A minuses.

Marianne Williamson said it best:

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure about you.

Standing Tall

I used the term “Giants” behind the scenes for years before I used it publicly. I didn’t want to share it because I was afraid you’d hate the name. I got it, Team PF got it, everyone I’ve talked to about it got it, but still, there was a fear that it’d be yet another name or concept that wouldn’t stick.

I’ll also not sidestep the truth that showing you who you are also means showing you who I am. Those 12 challenges I listed above? I struggle with them, too. I’m a lot better with some than with others, but I’m here in the trenches with you.

I’ve been bolstered by the reception you’ve given the ideas I’ve been writing about for the last few months, though. More of you have been sending me personal notes about how much you’ve appreciated what I’ve been doing. I’ve also gotten a few “I’m glad you wrote that but I’m a little mad at you for pointing it out” notes. I’ll take a little bit of groaning from you if the end result is you standing a little taller and feeling truly seen. I’ll tell you the same thing I told my troops: you may not always like me, but we will succeed and I will do my best to take care of you.

It’s the tension of “doing my best to take care of you” that compelled me to share this and that continues to get me up in the morning. I know there’s a part of you that won’t like the “Giant” bit. I know why that part is there: the superficial elitism of the label, your self-criticism, your seeing that you’re not the “expert” or authority, and so on. I could dance around the idea for the next few years. I could dance around your gianthood indefinitely without ever directly holding up the mirror so that you see what I see and what the world would see.

But I don’t think that’s the best I can do to take care of you. I can’t encourage you to move past that A minus if I’m not going to do it myself. I can’t really encourage you to Stand Tall if I’m not doing it myself.

As part of that process of doing the best I can to take care of you, I’ve been focusing a lot on self-mastery foundations for the last year or so and will continue to do so. I don’t want you to get by just on your raw power and I don’t want you to excel at a game that doesn’t tap into the best of who you are and what you can truly do when you play the game that fits you.

I want you to stand taller so you can step bigger.

And as I said above, I intend on standing taller with you. My goal is to prototype and ship sooner and faster than I have in the past. Rather than spend a year figuring it out on my own, I’m showing more rough sketches,
prototypes, and outlines to the people I’m building them for and doing this three or four months earlier than I have in the past. It’s awkward to not have it all figured out, but, anymore, it’s more uncomfortable to leave the people I care about hanging. I’m leaning into the former discomfort, which means that some things might not work. I’m okay with that—I trust that you’d rather have roughs that work sooner rather than later and that the cream will rise to the top.

Let’s stand tall, together.

See this post online.
When I talk about the fact that some people can be authentically happy having a job, many people are surprised because I’m such an advocate and champion for small business and entrepreneurship. That surprise is often because they miss the subtle but important point about small business and entrepreneurship being vehicles for thriving on both a personal and social scale; vehicles, by their nature, are meant to get us somewhere—they’re not the ends in themselves.

So, let me be very clear about this: I’m pro-thriving more than I am pro-entrepreneurship or pro-business. Small business and entrepreneurship give many people the opportunity to build the environmental and personal arrangements that are conducive for their thriving—but for people who have different values and priorities, having your own business can be misery-making. The vehicles of small business and entrepreneurship also provide us with the opportunity to contribute to our society through taxes and employing others, but again, an “opportunity” for one person is a problem for someone else.

And while “being an entrepreneur” is such an aspirational identity statement at the same time that it’s the socially approved state in entrepreneurial circles, the truth of the matter is that it’s not for everyone, nor should everyone get pressured into being an entrepreneur. I get rather frustrated when non-entrepreneurs are looked down on, as if their lack of entrepreneurial spunk or business-building drive makes them somehow inferior. We should support entrepreneurs, but not push entrepreneurship.

People aren’t less-than because they choose a life arrangement that works better for their values, (true) needs, and priorities. They’ve got far more figured out than those who stick to a path that isn’t working for them just because they can’t take the lessons learned and sunk costs and use them to build a better life for themselves.

I’ve advised clients to put their business on hold and get a job, not because their business was failing, but because it seemed that their self-identified conditions for thriving were better met by being employed than by sticking with their business. I’ve advised clients to get better or different jobs for similar reasons. To automatically presume that the entrepreneurial road is right for everyone is a type of lazy thinking that doesn’t serve any of us very well.

Above anything else, I’m pro-thriving. My mission is to help people get to that end goal, regardless of the vehicle they take to get there.

It’s time for a check-in: Is your current path moving you toward thriving or maintaining the life that’s right for you? If so, focus on the things that are working for you, however they work for you. If not, what can you do to course-correct? Small steps can lead to big changes.

See this post online.
Why Productivity is Bunk

Productivity gets a bad rap these days. A few people I respect and am inspired by have gone so far as to say (pretty much) “I don’t give a rat’s ass about productivity, and neither does anyone else who’s worth talking about.”

All of a sudden, productivity is chopped liver. Why is this?

Because productivity has been associated solely with the techniques and life hacks that enable a select few people to get more done more efficiently, people spend hours and hours finding new ways to be quicker at things they don’t need to be doing in the first place. Learning to become more efficient at things you don’t need to be doing isn’t being productive—it’s wasting time and energy.

Because productivity has been so closely aligned with “work” and cranking widgets, people feel torn between being productive and enjoying quality time with family. Sure, you could slough off your family and get more work done, but you haven’t become more productive—you’ve just gotten more work done. In the meantime, you’ve neglected a critical part of what it means to be a thriving person.

Because productivity has been measured by the production of key deliverables, creatives think that the hours they spend brainstomadoing and playing with ideas means they’re not being productive. Chasing ideas, though, is what enables creatives to do what they love doing—sometimes it pans out to a deliverable product, sometimes it’s just playing with ideas. It’s the process that separates talented creatives from, well, everybody else.

Because productivity has been connected with Doing More Things, we’ve taken on more and more without considering whether we need to quit doing everything that’s not moving us towards our real (meaningful) goals. If being more productive means Doing More Things, you can let me off the bus now.

All of that is why productivity is bunk.

And all that is wrong. Productivity is about figuring out what you want to be and making it happen. It addresses both the end at hand (why you’re doing what you’re doing) and the means (the way you’ll get it done). In the final analysis, you can’t separate personal development from productivity.

I can’t think of one person worth talking about who hasn’t thought about what they want to do and how to do it. I can’t think of one person worth talking about who didn’t have goals and who didn’t have challenges to overcome to achieve those goals. I can’t think of one person worth talking about who didn’t want to help others live from the inside out.

You care about finishing the stuff that matters. I care about it. So let’s not focus so much on the conversations other people are having about “productivity” that make it bunk.

Let’s talk in ways that help us do what we’re out to do.

That means that we’ll be asking better questions about productivity and focusing on the fundamentals, because we know that it’s not rocket science. We’re going to make a few mistakes along the way, but we’ll wake up and really show up regardless of yesterday’s win, loss, or draw. We’re pros that way.

Those are things worth talking about because they help us live lives worth living.

See this post online.
I know you’ve been through a lot. I know you’re still not ready to come out and can’t see yourself the way everybody else sees you.

And I can also understand that you view yourself as damaged goods, never worth the value you’re able to provide to others, even if you’d be able to encourage somebody else to see how worthy they are in close-enough-to-equal scenarios.

But bear me a few questions, if you will.

How does your being damaged have anything to do with your ability to provide value to other people?

Have you ever considered that you’re able to deliver such value not despite your being damaged but because you’re damaged?

No one knows how to heal others better than someone who’s been truly, deeply hurt and has lived the life that others can’t imagine. No one knows how to heal as much as someone who’s been in a hopeless, dark pit of despair and managed to crawl out of it.

Your reply by now is either that others helped you out of that hole or that, in very substantial ways, you’re still in there and your ability to walk among us is a precarious facade that may blow away with the slightest uncomfortable social breeze.

Look, I understand and support your ability to really, truly feel however you feel and I’ll stand in this space with you until the end of days. At the same time, I refuse to validate the story you’ve created that says you’re not able to be happy, seen, and a fully worthy member of our community. The objective truth is that you bring a quintessential value that we cannot be fully human without.

We’re all damaged goods. We’ve all been cut—some of us deeper than others. Some of us are beautiful precisely because of the way our imperfection reminds us of our transcendence.

All of our lives are too short to be lived as damaged goods. All throughout our lives, we are damaged goods. The human condition is full of apparent paradoxes.

How you choose to write the story from here is up to you, but know that the pen is in your hands. Will your story be of damage or transcendence?

P.S. The emotional maelstrom that this may have triggered doesn’t change the fact that the pen is still in your hands.

See this post online.
A woman in her mid-50s in a local group I’m in stood up and admitted, “I still don’t know what I’m going to be when I grow up!” She was clearly frustrated that she was her age and still hadn’t figured it out. I was puzzled because I don’t understand the yearning under the worrying about what you’ll be when you grow up.

I saw looks of sympathy and understanding come from many of the other members of the group. This issue seems to be something that creatives and wanderers worry about more than other people. But who knows, perhaps when I’m older I’ll feel the same way.

What puzzles me about it is that creatives are always on a quest of one type or another. Always altering reality around them. Getting bored with “who they are” and what they do. To be a creative is to be a wellspring of change—it’s for good reason that we aren’t known for our predictability and stability.

So, the yearning to “know what you’re going to be” seems to be a wish to be something you’re not, to know where things are going, like there’s a there somewhere in the future that we’re heading toward. But as Machada said, “wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking.”

There is no who or what we’re going to be out there in the future; we become who we are and what we are by walking.

I think there’s something deeper at play: the person who yearns to know who she’ll be is looking for meaning and acceptance. She wants to know that the choices that she’s made—the adventures and the misadventures—were all headed in a direction that made sense and meant something. She wants to be able to tell her story in a coherent way that doesn’t look like it’s been aimlessly going from one thing to the next; a story that doesn’t look like a score of unfinished creative projects, half-careers, and sojourns in a yurt in a desert somewhere (real or metaphorical).

She wants a simple story of a successful life well-lived rather than the complex, wandering weirdo life that looks more like a tapestry constantly being woven or like damaged goods constantly being repackaged.

Every choice we’ve made in the past becomes a part of our story, and some stories are simply more complex than others. There’s rarely a correlation between the richness and depth of a story and its simplicity. We write our stories and make meaning daily. We are conscious beings hurled moment by moment towards a void that becomes firm on impact.

Most of us couldn’t have imagined the life we live today 5 years ago, let alone 10 years ago. If we truly show up, we have no idea what our life will look like in 5 or 10 years, either. Next year, I can see. Next quarter, I can shape. Next week, I can plan. Tomorrow, I can live in the present AND build a better tomorrow.

But I’ll pass on the helping of worrying about what I’ll be when I grow up, thank you. I’d rather have a generous portion of the adventure du jour.

See this post online.
When you’re looking at successful people, remember that you’re looking at people who have made a lot of mistakes in their time.

They’ve bought the crap. They’ve bought into the crap.

They’ve gambled. And lost.

They’ve groped in the darkness and stubbed their toes a few times.

They’ve reworked, reiterated, reframed, restarted, and revised.

They’ve fallen into a few holes and spent a good amount of time finding their way out.

**In other words, it’s not just you.** That person who perhaps has more success than you also has more failures than you’d care to know about.

Of all the things that person possesses, their financial assets are probably the least valuable.

**What’s most valuable is their ability to keep their eyes forward.**

Through the swamps. On top of the hills. In the parties. In the loneliness. Through confusion. Through absolutely clarity. Whether in fortunate winds or when they’re rowing like hell.

Eyes forward.

Life is full of choices, decisions, and incoherent data. You’ll choose A when, in retrospect, B was better. You’ll draw the wrong conclusion when someone with more experience may have come to a better conclusion with the same data. And sometimes it’ll suck.

Learn what you need to from the experiences you’re accruing. Sit with them and feel them. You can’t look backwards and forward at the same time, though.

When you’re ready to work through whatever you’re going through, plant your feet; eyes forward.

**That’s the direction you want to go, right?**

See this post online.
The blast and flash of the IED brought the convoy to a screeching halt. I sat in my Humvee for about 90 seconds before I decided to get out and see what was going on.

As I scurried up to the front of the convoy from the rear, I saw many airmen crouched underneath the hubs of the Humvees and five-ton trucks they were driving. They had dismounted properly and were trying to hold a secure position, but it was quite clear that they were terrified, confused, and lost.

Even more disconcerting than their sheer terror, though, was the fact that nothing was going on. No one was moving. No one was shouting battle commands. There was just an eerie silence.

When I reached the third vehicle in the convey, it immediately became clear why the convoy was silent and motionless. The IED had taken out the Humvee with the convoy commander in it. Despite everything we had told them to do, the convoy commander had his senior sergeant—the assistant convoy commander—in the vehicle with him.

I had seen this time and time again. An inexperienced convoy commander pulls in some additional help in his vehicle, thinking that they’ll be better able to figure out what to do. They almost never consider the contingency that their vehicle will be the one that’s hit, and more often than not, theirs are the vehicles that are targeted. Any experienced veteran can immediately tell which vehicle is the command-and-control vehicle, and you always strike at the head of the snake. *Always.*

This whole convoy was stopped because the only people who knew what was going on were dead.

I continued to move to the front of the convoy to see whether the convoy was in a defensible position. The lead gun truck was standing by, waiting for orders. At least this convoy still had some teeth to it, even though it didn’t have a brain right now.

Since by now it had been two and half minutes since we stopped, I figured that we had about three minutes before the IED strike team would start ambushing the convoy. I’d seen this before, too. They would work from the back of the convoy, where no one was looking, and slowly but surely take out every single vehicle until they reached the front of the convoy. We had about three minutes before an orchestra of death and chaos would interrupt the still sound of these huddled soldiers.

About two-thirds of the way into the convoy, I saw the highest-ranking sergeant still alive huddling under the wheel wells of his Humvee.

I walked up to him and asked, “What’s going on, Sergeant? Why aren’t people moving?”

He looked back at me and said, “I don’t know, sir. I don’t know.” He was clearly confused and scared, had no idea what to do next, and was just waiting for somebody to tell him what to do. (He was calling me “sir” because I was an officer who outranked him.)

I looked around and looked back at him and said, “Who’s the highest-ranking person around here in your convoy?”

He looked around and sheer terror came into his eyes. “I guess it’s me, sir.”

“All right. Who’s in charge here?”

“I guess it’s me, sir.” His voice and chin quivered as he said this—he was barely holding it together.

“All right, Sergeant,” I replied. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’ve got about three minutes before this convoy gets eaten alive. You are the highest-ranking person here and you need to get up and get these people out of here. What’s your next move, Sergeant?”

He replied, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”
“The captain and the first shirt didn’t brief us.” (“First shirt” is what airmen call the senior sergeants in their units.)

I had already anticipated this response. I’d seen the two leaders together, and that’s usually a sign that they were hoarding information. Now this lone sergeant had no idea what to do.

“Well, Sergeant, you’re in a bad situation. You can’t stay here. You don’t quite know where you’re going to go, but if you stay here all of your soldiers will die. If you get them moving, you might live. Get up and get them out of here.”

He looked more ready to act but not the least bit more clear about what to do.

It was time to get going, so I gave him a head start: “Get accountability of your people first. Figure out who you’ve got left.”

“Oh, right!” Finally, some wits were coming back to him. “Smith, are you okay? Silverton, get a damage report from the rear of the convoy—I’m moving up front. Travis, grab your medical kit and come with me.”

*It was awkward but beautiful to behold.* As he started galvanizing his team, they started helping him get the plan together. They were going to make it.

As I walked back to my rear vehicle, I called in to the IED strike team. “We’re going to need to cancel that third engagement. They’ve had enough and have learned what they needed to learn.”

Luckily for that sergeant and his team, this was just a training environment that I had sculpted for a large Joint Force training exercise. Despite the fact that it was a training environment, it presented the terror, the confusion, and the brutality of what happens when a convoy is ambushed. The point of the training was to get teams to experience this before they went overseas—I didn’t want them to learn the hard way like we had. My job was done.

### The Battleground of Business

A lot of the entrepreneurs and businesspeople I talk to aren’t that much different from that sergeant. They’re scared, they don’t know what’s going on, and they’re stuck under the wheels of their own business and creativity.

My heart reaches out the same way that it reached out to him. Their leaders didn’t prepare them for this and instead sold the dream of entrepreneurship and business. When things go smoothly, it’s all glory, campfires, and tall tales.

Or perhaps their leaders didn’t have the time or capability to tell them. In the midst of the busyness of business, we all have to make some tough choices about what we will and won’t share. People like the campfires and tall tales, and it’s also pretty hard to share your moments of “weakness” when people expect you to be strong.

At the same time, people weren’t told about the dark parts. They weren’t trained in what to do when their business isn’t working, or when their markets aren’t responding, or when someone they thought was a friend steals the idea for an offer they were developing.

There are plenty of good parts to this life, but sometimes it *sucks.* The truth of the matter is that at some point in their path, it’s been bad for everyone that it’s good for now. It’s not you—it’s just the life of business.

Fear, confusion, and inaction are valid responses to what’s going on, and it’s okay to feel them. In fact, it’s probably necessary that you do so.

But you can’t stay there and make any progress. The longer you stay under the hub of that wheel, the easier you make it for the strike team of time to pick you and your business apart one piece at a time. You can move on your own, or time will move things for you.

The way ahead for you is the same as it was for that sergeant on that summer day: **get up and take care of your people.** Sure, the way you do it may be awkward, but it may be beautiful as well.
It *would* be better if you were properly trained, confident, and prepared for this, but you’re not there. Welcome to the club of just about every other entrepreneur throughout history. You don’t get to pick what you start with—you only get to pick how you use what you have.

Get up and take care of your people. *Now.*

See this post online.
It's natural to lean on proving people wrong as a motivation to show up and do the work.

They always said you couldn't do it.

They always said it couldn't be done.

They always said you were naive.

You'll show them. You'll do it.

This mindset makes the world your enemy. This makes everything hard. No matter what you do, there's another thing you need to do to prove them wrong. They said you were small, after all. You'll show them.

What about all the people who said you could do it?

The people who always saw more in you than you ever saw in yourself.

The ones who caught you when you fell and steered you straight when you were lost.

The ones who reminded you, to paraphrase Marianne Williamson, that what you were really scared of was how powerful you were. The ones who looked through the illusions, masks, and struggle and saw an inner genius that'd been caged away and stifled by fear and false narratives.

How about you focus less on proving the naysayers wrong and instead prove the yaysayers right?

We all have more yaysayers than we do naysayers, but we spend an inordinate amount of time struggling with the one naysayer in the crowd of thousands of supporters. You'll never prove the real naysayers wrong—naysaying is their livelihood and identity.

Focus on the people in your corner and the ones who send love back your way. Prove them right.

At a certain point, you'll find that you don't need to prove anything at all. And that those people you've been proving wrong are demons you've conjured and foisted upon the world. When you recognize that you're the root of your own resistance, it's much easier to spend less energy on demon-conjuring and more on flourishing.

Are you proving the right people right?

See this post online.
What does it mean to be happy and to live a good life? How do we focus on what matters and live up to our own potential? Why do some people succeed while others merely get by?

These simple and essential questions have been with us for millennia and most of us find ourselves wondering about them as we mature. If you’ve wondered about them, you’re in good company with a long line of philosophers, spiritual teachers, and religious leaders.

One of the most thorough and compelling discussions of those questions was posed by Aristotle over 2300 years ago. Given that these questions focus on our conduct, they are ethical questions. I’m going to do my best to share the brilliance of his thinking in something that can be read in 10 minutes.

Aristotelian Ethics … in 10 Minutes

To get the basics of Aristotelian ethics, you have to understand three basic things: what Eudaimonia is, what Virtue is, and That We Become Better Persons Through Practice.

1. Everyone Seeks Eudaimonia (Flourishing)

Eudaimonia is Greek and translates literally to “having good demons.” Many authors translate it as “happiness,” but I don’t think that’s the best translation or way to understand it. “Well-being” and “flourishing” are closer to what Aristotle means, and I think that of the two, “flourishing” captures the full range of the way he uses the word. And someone who is flourishing is living The Good Life.

According to Aristotle, all humans seek to flourish. It’s the proper and desired end of all of our actions. Flourishing, however, is a functional definition. And to understand something’s function, you have to understand its nature. Keep in mind that Aristotle, unlike Plato, was an empiricist—that is, he was trying to describe what he was seeing, rather than stating what he thought it should be.

In Aristotle’s schema, there are four aspects of human nature, and he is often quoted as saying “Man is a political creature.” Aristotle’s meaning is much richer than the way it’s translated, though, because he means that “man is a rational creature who lives in poleis (societies).” (“Poleis” is the plural of “polis,” from which we get the root “poli” that’s used in so many words like polite, political, police, etc. that have to do with how we interact in groups.)

How do we get four different aspects out of “rational creature who lives in societies?” Two are determined by the type of thing we are—that is, we are animals. So it looks like this:

1. We are physical beings (because we are animals). As physical beings, we require nourishment, exercise, rest, and all the other things that it takes to keep our bodies functioning properly.

2. We are emotional beings (because we are animals). What separates animals from plants, according to Aristotle, is that animals have wants, desires, urges, and reactions. We perceive something in the world that we want and we have the power of volition to get it; likewise, we have the power to avoid the things we don’t want. For humans, these wants can get pretty complex, but at rock bottom we all have (emotional) needs and wants that spring from rather basic sources.

3. We are social beings (because humans live in groups). We must live and function in particular societies. “No man is an island,” and we are the type of being that does well only in social settings. Our social nature stacks on top of our emotional nature, such that we have wants and needs that we would not have were we not social creatures. For example, if we were the type of creature that flourished as hermits, the need for trust and friendly cooperation would not be nearly so pressing.
4. **We are rational beings.** To the Greeks—and, let’s be honest, most cultures, including our own contemporary one—what made humans human was our rationality. We are creative, expressive, knowledge-seeking, and able to obey reason. We might not always obey reason and we may sometimes not want to exercise our minds, but a large part of our existence relates to our being rational animals.

You can see Aristotle’s taxonomical approach in play. He’s not working backwards from some ideal version of humanity, but rather looking at the specific things that make us the specific kind of being we are. It’s this same approach that is the bedrock of Western science, and it’s so ingrained in the way we think about the world that it would be easy to miss how brilliant and innovative his approach was, even if his answers to scientific queries are more wrong than right. The irony here is that he founded a way of thinking that ultimately gave us tools to show that many of his final conclusions were wrong.

**Flourishing Is a Holistic Concept**

You can’t truly flourish if you’re not flourishing in one of the four aspects of human nature. This principle plays out in our everyday lives when we see people who are so emotionally stunted that they can’t function well in society… or who are so obese that they can’t enjoy life… or who are so socially inept that they can’t fit into the type of society that would develop their intelligence. The list goes on and on.

The different aspects of our natures are tiered in the way that they are presented above, so that the physical is below the social, which is below the rational. This may sound familiar to those of you who are familiar with [Maslow’s Hierarchy] because it’s in effect the same thing. But 2500 years elapsed before Maslow verified what Aristotle had said all along.

With an understanding of flourishing in hand, discussing virtue becomes easy.

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2. **On Virtue**

**What Is a Virtue?**

A virtue is a trait of character that enables a person to flourish.

**The Doctrine of the Mean**

This is a key phrase to understand Aristotle. Consider the virtue of bravery, for example. An excess of bravery leads people to do really stupid things; the example I normally use is the frat-brat who’ll jump off the fraternity house roof just to prove how brave he is. It’s not brave; it’s rash. On the other hand, people who have a deficiency of bravery are cowards; they won’t put their ass on the line for anything. The virtue of bravery lies somewhere in between the deficiency of bravery (cowardliness) and the excess of bravery (rashness).

So it is with all of the different virtues: the virtuous trait is that which is between the deficiency of that trait and the excess of that trait.

**What Are the Specific Virtues?**

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<tr>
<th>The Virtues</th>
<th>Vice (Deficiency)</th>
<th>Virtue (Mean)</th>
<th>Vice (Excess)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cowardly</td>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>Rash</td>
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<td>Addictive</td>
<td>Temperate</td>
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<td>Stingy</td>
<td>Generous</td>
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<td>Self-deprecating</td>
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<td>Melancholy</td>
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<td>Envious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Benevolent</td>
<td>Self-sacrificing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Industrious</td>
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I’ll not discuss all of the virtues, but some are worth a quick discussion:

- **Temperance** — This one has to do with calming one’s bodily passions and desires. Always acting on your physical passions and desires will not
lead to flourishing. However, always denying your physical passions and desires is also denying a component of your nature and will also not lead to flourishing.

- **Wittiness** — Many people don’t think this should be on the list, but when you think about it, it makes perfect sense. People naturally want to be around people who are funny and who lighten the mood. We tend to avoid grumps, and buffoons, though initially fun, grow tiresome after a while. So, having the virtue of wittiness enables us to flourish in the social aspect of our lives. The analysis of friendliness is much the same.

- **Spiritedness** — The insight here is that you should be passionate about things in the right circumstances. There are situations where anger is the appropriate, virtuous response, and if you’re never able to become angry, you’re deficient in spirit, and if you’re always angry, you’ve got an excess of anger. This trait is the emotional analogue of temperance.

- **Indignity** — Aristotle discusses indignity as a virtue in the sense that he thinks we should be upset if people do well undeservedly. For example, if someone wins because she cheated, the proper, virtuous response is to be upset or angry. On the other hand, some people are so envious that they are angry when anyone does well, and some people are so spiteful that they delight in other people’s misfortunes. The proper, virtuous trait is to be delighted when other people do well because they deserve it.

- **Benevolence** — How can one have benevolence in excess? Isn’t it always a good thing? Nope. If we get an excess of benevolence, we can’t see that sometimes to do the right thing, you can’t help someone. Do you know drama queens who always call to talk to you when they’re going through their crises? The proper response is to, at a certain point, recognize that you can’t help them (in reality they don’t want it) and walk away. However, never helping anyone is a defect and should be avoided as well. (Some people confuse benevolence with generosity. That one has to do with how you handle your resources.)

**How Are All of the Virtues Related?**
What links all of the virtues is phronesis, a Greek word best translated as “practical wisdom.” It’s not quite intelligence, although it is a rational trait; it’s more like knowing what the mean is in the particular circumstance you’re in. How does one know what to do in a particular circumstance?

**3. We Become More Virtuous Through Education and Habit**
If we’re lucky, we’re brought up in an environment where the adults around us teach us how to be virtuous. There are two ways that they can do this.

The first way is just by training us to have habits that enable us to flourish. For example, they may instill in us the tendency to exercise or to play sports. They may also instill in us the habit of sharing, being friendly, being brave, and all the other virtues. In other words, they make it part of our innate character; they are training us how to be.

The second way normally follows the first. After we reach a certain age of maturity, they can start to teach us why it’s good to have the habits that they’ve been inculcating. Children don’t understand flourishing, but adolescents and adults can. Adults are honing our practical wisdom at this stage, since they are teaching us in what circumstances we ought to do certain actions. They are in effect teaching us why we ought to be the type of person we are.

Of course, the best way for them to teach us to be virtuous is to exhibit virtue in their characters. If we ever wonder what we should do in a certain situation, then finding the answer is as easy as finding a virtuous person and asking her what she would do. And how do we know who a virtuous person is? We just look for someone who’s flourishing.

At a certain point, though, we become responsible for our own characters. It is at that point that we begin to actively, intentionally hone our characters. We continue to improve our physical body, our emotional state, our ability to live with others, and our minds. We continue to reinforce good habits, acquire more knowledge, help those around us, and find peace within ourselves.

We have the knowledge, we have the habits, and we have the understanding that the good life is up to us. *The end state: we flourish.*

*See this post online.*
You no doubt noticed that the 10 Pillars are focused on mindsets and heartsets rather than skillsets. This is intentional, as the most important treasures we have are not our skillsets and toolsets, but rather our ability to change the way we see and feel about the world.

It’s rarely a lack of skillsets and toolsets that keeps us from doing what matters. I thus wanted to start our conversation with a strong foundation in adaptive, resilient, and purpose-focused mindsets.

Now I’d like to share some of the tools and how-tos we’ve created to help you shape your future. Check out:

- **The Free Planners and Worksheets page** — This page presents *most* of our planners and worksheets. I say “most” because there are some that live in the Subscriber Library.

- **The Top Posts page** — This page is (unsurprisingly) a collection of our top posts throughout the years. We update this one semi-regularly—it’s hard to beat your own best stuff—so you might want to bookmark it or check it out every once in a while to see what’s new.

- **The Creative Giant Campfire** (our free Facebook group) – Join us at the Campfire for prompts, check-ins, micro-posts, and conversations to help you do your best work and be the best version of yourself. Come meet some people who are friends you just haven’t met yet.

If you haven’t done so already and what you’ve seen so far resonates with you, subscribe to get the Pulse (our weekly newsletter that comes out every Tuesday) and access to the Subscriber Library. We’re continually creating new resources and sharing them in the Pulse—don’t miss out! [Click here to subscribe.](#)

Until next time, Stand Tall!