



crafted with purpose, tools and traits will pave the way for our experiences. as that road extends along our lives - that which we built has, in turn, built us. the journey made us who we are, and our success will trap us unless we can honor that process, apply the lessons bought and paid for, and repurpose. deliberately.

i am not good with people.

perhaps that is overstating things, lets just say that i am good with myself. perhaps not always kind or productive, but we have a relationship. alone is my natural state. safe. and therefore: desired.

people stress me out. as a default i distrust the ability or willingness of others to control themselves and be aware of their surroundings. i cannot rightly say if it is the result of genetics or upbringing, what i do know is that it has been with me as long as i can remember, and having run relatively unchecked through most of my childhood - it had some effects.

i was an indoor kid. computers, books, dungeons and dragons. my values and my pursuits were self-referential, and regardless of which of those came first - these facts fed on each other and served to shape my relationship with the world. action feeds action, and what we have done paves the way for what we will do next. i moved, i grew - in a way. i focused on my self to the point of ignoring others. ignorance bred misunderstanding, and i began to define myself as much by what i was not as by what i embodied. counter-culture, straight-edge, vegan, anarchist. definition by deletion. i stood against as a matter course, but still found myself almost constantly disappointed.

so i cut deeper. maintained many of my morals but cut out the communities that i believed were failing me. i had become comfortable alone. i did not feel unaided, but unencumbered. Took pride in not accepting help. i wanted to be alone, or perhaps i feared i would be alone and so i decided to choose it for myself before someone else chose it for me. i worked to fortify this position, eventually i sought to strengthen my body, to expand my abilities and not need anybody else. to not risk being seen as a burden.

training in all forms started, for me, as an exercise is self. self-discipline. self-control. self-improvement. self-reflection. i was so sick of being let down by other people, so disgusted with letting myself down and so afraid of failing others that i became obsessed with capability. depression had made me cruel to the face in the mirror, not malicious - just unsympathetic. explanations would not change the fact that something needed to change, and i chose not to change how i looked at myself, but instead to change what it was that i was looking at. to turn myself into an individual that i was proud of.

in respect to that goal, athletics was not an end in its self, but a vehicle. i worked to peel parts of myself away, to break cycles of thought and behavior and my training reflected that fact. pain and discomfort weren't just part of the process, but in many ways the primary objective. i was drawn to it. "because it hurts more" was a good enough reason to do a thing, there was an immediacy to the work, and being "different" felt more important than whatever final shape different would ultimately be. there was a sort of wisdom to this, to burn the field before you plant anew - but it is so easy to get enamored with the fires and and forget that if we don't plant something new, the same weeds will grow.

the thing about incremental change is that it is so easy to carry our baggage with us, finding a new way to break stuff is not the same as making something new. i was warned of this, explicitly so, and i probably would have wallowed in it for god knows how long if it wasn't for an unlikely savior. an accidental community. a couple guys working on my property saw me training and asked if they could join. so i used them. the first thing i think i learned while trying to change was how to lie to myself, and while that knowledge was apparently not enough to keep me from doing it, it helped me recognize a way out. the beautiful part about witnesses is they can force you to be accountable. this kind of shallow martyrdom only works with an audience, so i created one. i couldn't muster the energy to change for myself, so i found a way to perform change. i am good at fulfilling expectations, so i created some. people were a tool, a lever that i could pull. i arranged the schedule, created dependents of a sort. i fed and starved my ego as i saw fit, i created the circumstances for imposter syndrome knowing that the way i would deal with would to become obsessed with living up to the trust that i was given.

as years got on i became more adept at manipulation - i had gotten good at breaking things, at identifying weakness and biting down on it until it split. and while it still held some morbid enjoyment, i found that it was longer enough, i wanted to make something. damage for damage sake had taught me a lot, i knew how to strip away - but there is always something left. something fascinating. i realized that all the work i had been doing was to this end, to experience and interact with what was left. i would use physical work to focus the attention of those who trusted me, drive them physically to have certain experiences, to be confronted with emotional questions and lay the groundwork for the conversations i wanted to have. i wanted to grow and realized that i could not get there alone. these experiences and conversations were proxy to my own struggles, if i could change others, then i could change myself, right?

this finer manipulation took work. breaking people is easy, it is like cutting down a tree - force plus time will end us all - but i wanted to carve down to a specific ring, and graft something on there, something new. i needed to learn about people, to be sensitive to their motivations, to read the difference between anger and fear and despair, and to be able to direct those feelings. i had to gain trust, and maintain it even while i was lying, and most importantly i needed to know how to pick up those pieces. in my quest to not need anybody i ended up forming some of the closest and most impactful relationships in my life. in fact, the majority of my work nowadays is focused on the emotional health of those who i work with. everyday i have discussions about stress and sensitivity and self image. on expectations and consequences. on how to manage the way we deal with a myriad of problems we face each day, and even more importantly: the steps we can take to do better next

time.

to be clear, this is a hindsight analysis, an after action report. i can only wish to have that kind of prescience - to be as cunning and manipulative as that. there is a clarity in looking back, only in hindsight did i see how performative my change was, how much other people functioned as a catalyst for that change. from the beginning my quest for self was shaped by others, first as something to push against, then as a tool - a lever, and finally as a destination. it is my growth edge, to practice trusting and being trusted, to practice stumbling and recovery, failing usefully. perhaps some day i will be able to carry this weight on my own, perhaps not. at present i do not care. i still do better when i am beholden to someone. to some thing. i am aware of it and use it tactically.

a friend introduced me to the term "belay knife" - it has always made me laugh, a tool - honed, maintained, and carried specifically to cut away dead weight. he taught me a lot about how to use that particular tool, how to keep it sharp and use it with conviction. the funny thing about tools is that they are extensions of the user, and that which was used for years to keep people away can be used to bring them in. the sharpness and familiarity can be repurposed. that same knife can live on, can carve space for people instead of cutting them away. after all, a Sunday roast is easier to carve than 9mm of nylon, it just requires a different sort of risk.

yes. hell is other people. but i think that some part of me sees salvation there too.

please do not misunderstand - if asked i will still say that i fucking hate people. i am cynical and a grouch. still smug and curmudgeonly. but i am working. i am practicing trusting people. believing in people. and in letting people believe in me. in risking letting others down in the hopes that, maybe, i wont. training has taught me to recognize my growth edge, to see "ease" and "comfort" as variables, as information instead of goals. it has taught me how to practice. to review. to fail, and fail, and fail again. to realize that i assign value to things in my life. that meaning is made, every day. that my practice is my Practice, i can create an environment that pushes me to be the person that i want to be, that my actions now build my future options. i am still my only option, my only point of action and my only source of judgement. but if that is true, then it is uncomplicated. act only in a way you will be proud of, everything else is simply a mechanism towards that end.