



there is always so much talk about environment - it is true, it is important. we go through considerable effort to create a space with feeling, with an ethic - but these spaces are flavored not by the paint and the equipment but by the quality of individuals we invite inside the walls. we surround ourselves with people, not based on income or music choice but by their willingness to believe that they can be better. we make a habit of expecting more out of the people who surround us - and from ourselves. it is amazing how easy it is to live down to other peoples expectations - how other peoples ideas of possible and impossible shape the way we see the world for ourselves. we give up that power, often and unconsciously - small signals seed doubt, and the internal dialogue is strong.

so we cheat. we surround ourselves with a different message. we study psychology and neuroscience - we find reason, misplaced as it is, in our doubt. we remind ourselves that what we are doing is not special, not even difficult - that we were built for this.

it is hard - still. despite what we know. minds are tricky. complicated. we are deeply pliable - we respond to stress, but our response is measured - we change when we *need* to. it seems to require some sort of sacrifice - pain or discomfort or some sort of danger... there are some terrible and fascinating examples in schwartz's book [the mind and the brain](#) - the short version is that we learn to be helpless. we accept it. we find a work around... the book chronicles a therapy where they would put a stroke victim in a straight jacket for 23 hours a day with only their damaged limb

protruding. no shortcuts - breakfast is over there, help yourself - they are signaling the brain that fixing the problem is the only viable option - and it rises to the occasion. in a similar vein - the [invisibilia podcast](#) recently did a show featuring a man with no eyes who had taught himself to see - and he was not unique. the visual cortex decodes signals from the eye and creates the images we "see" - starved for information - and fed from a different source - that same visual cortex simply learns to translate the signals from the eardrums to create the same images (there is also an earlier episode called the secret history of thoughts which features a story of a man who was conscious and totally paralyzed for over 8 years and "thought" his way out - i highly recommend it) - the part that stuck with me more than anything from the podcast and schwartz's book was the apparent cruelty required to "rewire" the brain, how quickly "kindness" can rob someone of a lesson...

imagine this - your grandfather is old, getting in and out of his chair is difficult, so we help. we run errands for him, we give him an arm, we teach his mind that basic strength is no longer necessary - sooner or later it is no longer a matter of "difficult" - it has become impossible. we have allowed our care and affection to make another person helpless. the invisibilia podcast discusses how we unconsciously do that to the blind, or (in one study) how our perceptions of an animal as "stupid" make it perform worse on tests. out of care and affection we forget to challenge the people who matter to us most - those who define our surroundings, our perceptions, and our very reality. hearing stories like these, exploring [biases and the science behind how we think](#) puts our tiny struggles into focus, they make us aware of the grandness that we are - as a species - capable of - if we only choose to engage it. if we are willing to pay the price (for most of us) of a little discomfort. if we are willing to surround ourselves with people who care enough to let us fall down - to see us struggle and support us by supporting the person that we wish to become. that is what i mean by "environment" - physically, it is harsh... austere. psychologically it is challenging and supporting in a way i can not rightly explain. it is a crucible. it is where individuals are made - where every person can absorb the strengths of the whole. it is artificial, but its results are not. the brain can be tricked - convinced to change. it is not cheap, easy, or quick - but i do believe it is worth it. to remake your perceptions, your capabilities, and through them - your world.



the “wrench” is a special shirt we give to those who have been a consistent example of behavior. someone who embodies the ideal, chooses what is hard - be in working or recovering - and through that becomes what they have chosen to be.



plotting between the swell. perhaps if we soak these walls with enough intent the space itself can move us - or at least move with us.







all the support, all the preparation - but in the end, it is the work we do alone and anonymous that often matters most.

