



most people are not strong enough to hurt themselves. at least not at first. i don't mean that they physically lack strength to cause injury, i mean that in the gym or any environment that they can exercise control, they will quit mentally long before they encounter any real physical danger. "hard" work is a constant negotiation, your body sends you signals, information about the cost of your actions and you have to convince yourself to keep carving away at that pound of flesh despite the consequences. in that situation, most people drop the knife at the first sight of blood - but as we train, as we learn to get comfortable with the pain, to manage those costs, we creep, inch by inch, into the deep end and one day we reach our toes down only to realize we cant reach bottom, we are in over our head.

this exhibits in a few ways - cramping, vomiting, blinding headaches, symptoms like food poisoning, burst blood vessels in the eyes and face. symptoms usually last from a couple days to a week - working out during this window is usually nearly impossible and certainly ill advised, but something happens during this forced downtime, something transforms. there is a realization; that every time you "went hard" before this you held back. you left something in the tank. as hard as you may have gone before you had never felt like this. it usually happens by accident, a change in circumstance or scenery - an adjustment or challenge momentarily shifts your self image and you fall victim to L'appel du vide, you gave in to the call of the void and this time nothing stopped you, no one protected you - and now the world looks different. shifted. it is like your first true heartbreak - it can't really be "sought out" and no one wants to wish it on someone else, but there is usefulness to be found in the darkness. the bone-deep realization that the world is a little less safe, that risk and consequences are visceral things, they have a taste and a sound and a cost that must be paid. more than that, there is now an understanding that you possess the ability to do real damage. you have earned a bit more responsibility and the freedom to do with it what you will. the safety is off and the gun is loaded, now it is up to you to hit your target and avoid shooting yourself in the process.

i don't mean to romanticize this. anyone who has felt it or even witnessed the effects will tell you that it is far from flattering - but that does not mean it isn't useful. it is a shift in perception. a changing of the rules. after someone goes through that fire it is now up to them to hold the reigns - because we do not get better by doing this - it is a tool with an extremely high cost, and one that does not get cheaper with frequent use. it is physically damaging and even from the most meat headed perspective, it benches you from meaningful training for at least a couple days. but after something like this we realize that we are responsible for these costs - and we can exercise

judgement of when it is worth it. we are more capable of making that decision, of exerting our will. most of the time in the gym we chase numbers as reflections of our ability, moments like this are shifts in perception. they are lessons that once felt will never be forgotten.

this was written years ago, in what feels like a different world, and while the struggle i was speaking of might feel a little trivial at this time, it does not feel irrelevant. rites of passage have always intrigued me - a socially agreed upon line where childhood ends and adulthood begins.

often forced. often unpleasant. it is an accounting of sorts. an excising of the assumptions of childhood.

isolation is, ironically enough, a key piece in many of these rituals. to strip away the attention of the community, to make one live for a time without its constant presence - and to ask them to return only when they have something to bring back.

isolation is a beautiful teacher. our environment exerts such an overwhelming pressure on us that without it we become unmoored, we drift and spin and obsess over the past and the future and anything but where we are right now. but then it breaks. the self is all that is left. regardless of what created it, it is the only thing available to explore. so we do. we try and understand our place in all of this. more than that, in learning that we can be cut out, cut away - in learning how much we actually take from our surroundings without thought - we have to learn how to justify our expense.

purpose. purpose is what separates a rite of passage from a crisis. from a penalty.

purpose, above all, is a choice. it is an attitude. it is a way to view a set of circumstances.

so we find purpose. we create purpose.

from a young age we are given roles to fill. without understanding who we are, we are given an objective. faced with expectations and immediacy - the desire to fit into the system often overrides the slower process of understanding ourselves. we are problem solvers. immediate objectives keep us driving forward. the system is massive and redundant, it does not require us to be happy or even content - only useful.

we become so accustomed to tumbling forward, flitting from one judgement to the next that many of us have never made the effort to create an internal structure, a self-referential value system that can at least push back on the environment that surrounds us.

space. and time.

these elements are so often stressors, but in claiming them as your own they become fuel for definition. removing immediacy gives us space to learn. understanding is currency of sorts. a force multiplier. taking the time to understand your objective, your material, and your tools. it is an accounting. identifying what elements you can change, and at what cost.

in defining why we can begin to work on how. raw material is simply potential, it is only after we have an objective that we can understand the balance sheet. assets and liabilities. artistry is the ability to see - to interpret the objective, to understand that a tool is simply a lever, an extension of will. it is that will, that understanding, that striving to be that is your most vital asset. we are all works in progress. snapshots of inheritance and influence. we are often so focused on moving forward that we don't stop to ask if it is the direction that best suits us, or one that we want in the first place.

purpose. created, deliberate, purpose.

understanding and artistry.

these are things i value.

these are things i choose to refine.

to see the end result within material. to recognize potential and expose it. to nurture it with a deft hand...

a traditional bow is nothing more than a piece of wood that follows a few simple rules. making it is actually quite easy: to bastardize Michelangelo – just remove everything that isn't the bow. to build a bow is to take a material and, with our action, give it purpose. the "rules" are ones of function, and the skilled hand is the one that can interpret those rules more creatively. it has access to more material because of understanding how to balance and exploit what initially appear as liabilities.

i am obsessed with lessons. with rewards. with identifying the traits our challenges are selecting for. the skillset required to be victorious. matching material with a realistic understanding of my capabilities. understanding appropriate tool selection. the stages of reduction. how to cope with the unexpected...

understand your material. understand your objective. understand what you can change and what you cannot. most of all, understand why.

working with my hands, working with wood or steel or stone will always remind me of these lessons. will force me to look at problems differently, to turn mistakes into centerpieces, to recognize how to make an asset out of a liability, to be flexible and open to new information.

applying these lessons day in and day out have changed me as much as they have changed the objects i have created. it has made me more comfortable being a work in progress, a being undergoing refinement.

and refinement is heavy work, for if i cannot see myself – how am i supposed to see others? if i cannot control my hand then why would i lift a tool that will multiply my effect exponentially?

i wish to have an effect.

i have limited energy.

to maximize my effect i must understand my material. i must seek out and master the tools that will best allow me to craft that material to a purpose.

to my purpose.

the gym never made sense to me before it was given a purpose. to me, that purpose was initially as a laboratory, and later as a crucible. i realized that i needed to better understand my material, to understand myself. my behavior. how it changed when i was tired. when i was hungry. weak. scared. when i was cocky. when i was performing. when i was alone.

i needed first to see myself. honestly and without judgement. material is not good or bad, but degrees of usefulness in reference to an objective. the gym allowed me to explore so many scenarios, to better understand my potential, and where i was lacking. it also provided a structure to add and

subtract - to develop skills to cope with my worst failings. it became a framework to exert some control, to start to unravel 25 years of short sightedness and quick fixes. like the crafting of a bow, the gym helped me remove the dead weight. to understand the interplay of flexibility, strength, and potential. of minute changes, leverage, and their effects.

purpose. self-knowledge. what we are really building here is ownership. i am this way because i decided it is the best way for me to be. for now.

without the space to really explore who and why you, how can you ever claim that ownership? and without it taking responsibility, how do you plan to be in control?

a plan.

and control.

one of the first thing i had to do when starting jiu-jitsu was reexamining my idea of control. in the gym, if i can control myself, i can control the weight. in jiu-jitsu, if i can control myself, my greatest hope is to influence my opponent. it became shockingly clear that even in combat, control is an illusion. until that last moment, our greatest hope is to understand. to use the knowledge of our own body and our opponents to exert influence, to steer events in a direction where the last choice of the enemy is an obvious one, and one where we are comfortable with either outcome. the part that really struck me from this realization is that the only way we demonstrate absolute control is by destroying something. anything less than destruction is not control but influence. attempts to control carry an implied threat, and the cost associated with that.

knowledge of my opponent, of what they value, allows me to manipulate them more effectively - but thinking i have control over them blinds me to the directions they still have to go. to engage in this challenge requires me to try and see my actions through the eyes of my foe, to be willing to accept that the plan is not the goal, the goal is the goal. the plan is one vehicle that may or may not get there. changing the plan is respecting that the goal is the important part. exerting "control" by executing a plan in spite of the facts on the ground is not control but vanity.

don't mistake the map for the territory. we identify what we think is important and focus on it at the expense of the rest of the information. worse yet, we pick up someone else's map and do not ask when they drew it, or what they were looking for when they did. we don't question their experience or their motives in giving it to us. when we exit the simplicity of the gym we must accept that the things we can control are actually almost infinitely small. but it is all we have. the tools which we have to work. so we must learn. we must learn to be sensitive and dynamic. to listen and to understand. being honest with the limits of your toolkit will allow you to spend your energies more effectively.

this is not control, this is commerce. this is about knowing yourself, about knowing your audience, and about your ability to communicate. this is about understanding. the gym is easy, it is practice. it is where we start. as we invite other variables, other players, other agendas - the idea of control swells and recedes. the acceptance that what we possess is a degree of self control and information. and that's it. the relationship between those attributes is our leverage. the better we understand our sphere of control, the larger we can cast our sphere of influence. and the better we understand ourselves, the better chance we have to recognize which end of the lever we are holding.

too often i see people defiant in the face of information.

criticism rejected because we don't like the source. opportunities to grow turned away as being borne of jealousy or some sort of attack. friendship tossed away over misunderstanding and ego.

we live in a disposable world.

we live in such excess that it can be difficult to differentiate discerning from dismissive. be it business partners or personal relationships, we are all, on some level, replaceable. we can classify whole swaths of people as not my problem, in fact we have to - simply to stay sane. the problem arises when wielding that knife comes so easily that we risk using it without regard of the consequences. personal growth is constantly at war with personal preservation. it is simpler to cut away those with which we don't agree, or who we feel wronged us in some way. we can go to another bar, move to another block, find new employees and new friends. growth is not linear. the process of investing involves setbacks, challenges, and finding a way to incorporate new information.

aggression is too frequently mistaken for power, threats stand in for control and impotence is wielded like some sort of weapon. in an attempt to be seen as powerful we give up the only true power we have. to control ourselves. to direct our action. to exercise agency. we cannot change what happened before this moment, but we can influence what happens next, and through that - what happens **after** what happens next. training, for me, is an exercise. it is an exercise in patience. in managing small things. in managing myself throughout the process.

i wish to be an agent of change. of progress. and the first step is to understand the material. the tool with which i have to work. to ask questions and seek out information. to seek out leverage. to practice influence deftly, applying all that i have, all that i am to the situation. and with luck, making whatever it is better for me being there.

ultimately, agency is understanding and the will to act.

it is as simple and as complicated as that.

good luck.



traditionally, the first project of an aspiring blacksmith is a pair of tongs. with adequate heat and something to bang against, a serviceable pair can be made. this gives us reach. access. and with that

access we can craft a better hammer. and with that, better tongs. each iteration also brings knowledge, of how the material moves and how we like to move it. leverage and focus and impact. the difference between a crease and a cut. how to bend and when to break. understanding the material and the goal allows us to apply creativity, to forge better tools and better art, because in this endeavor we are both the means and the end, the story and the author.

agency is accepting your role as artist and architect. subject and storyteller.

so gather your tools, and sharpen your skills. our tales will be told in the doing.

- the station.

