

*The Opportunity Paradox*

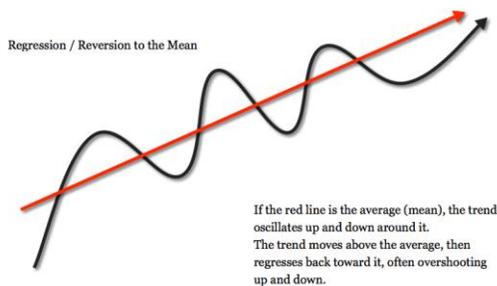
By Blas Moros

## Paradox (perə , daks)

A seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement that when investigated may prove to be well-founded or true; an opinion that conflicts with common belief.

Intro

Opportunities abound in situations, behaviors, ideas, and mindsets that are *seemingly* incorrect on the surface, but which possess an inkling of deep, fundamental truth – paradoxes.



That opportunities lie in paradoxes is only natural because otherwise the concepts would be obvious and therefore likely exploited. Like in any lucrative niche – whether in markets or natural ecosystems – competition moves in and, over time, results regress to the mean. *Outperformance, therefore, cannot result from doing the obvious.*

Another way to state this is that the most valuable truths are the ones most people neglect – truths which are “contrarian *and* correct” as Peter Thiel describes them. While being contrarian is unnatural and uncomfortable, following the herd offers no path for separation and, by definition, leads to average results. This is not always a bad option, but you must acknowledge which game you are playing and be comfortable with the probable results. Being contrarian generally also helps you avoid attacking opponents and situations head on, and although competing strength to strength is always an option, this is a grind! As Bezos so bluntly put it – “your margin is my opportunity.” Zero-sum games abound.

Non-consensus ideas have to be lonely. By definition, non-consensus ideas that are popular, widely held or intuitively obvious are an oxymoron. Thus, such ideas are uncomfortable; non-conformists don’t enjoy the warmth that comes with being at the center of the herd.

- Howard Marks, [Dare to Be Great](#)

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

This essay expands on some ideas which can help us escape these types of zero-sum games – ideas which are typically neglected because they are misunderstood, obscure, abstract, psychologically uncomfortable, counter-intuitive, too difficult to act on, or have too long of a time frame to play out. Rather than competing head on, learning to attack from orthogonal angles. These opportunities arise because of inherent human biases and fears, and those who can handle the natural discomfort of holding “two opposed ideas in

mind at the same time,” can take advantage of people’s natural tendency to want to conform, finding ways to effectively, consistently, and sustainably outperform.

These ideas obviously aren’t full proof and, paradoxically, if enough people adhered to them, their advantage would disappear. However, because human nature is what it is, that seems unlikely.

This is naturally and obviously an incomplete list but hopefully it serves as a useful launching off point in discovering your own valuable paradoxes. As [Paul Graham](#) said, “Most fairly good ideas are adjacent to even better ones.” Use these fairly good ideas to find even better ones.

## Summary of Ideas

1. Give It To Get It
2. Common Sense
3. El Flojo Trabaja El Doble
4. The Pincer Approach
5. Lowering Yourself to Raise Yourself
6. Expert Folly
7. Enlightened Self-Interest
8. The Power of the Marginal
9. Superb Conversationalists
10. Value > Price
11. Teach to Learn
12. Effortless Mastery
13. Discipline = Freedom

## 1. Give It To Get It

*The more you give – whether positive or negative – the more you will receive.*



There is a wonderful, almost mystical, law of nature that says three of the things we want most – happiness, freedom, and peace of mind – are always attained when we give them to others. *Give it away to get it back.*

– [John Wooden](#)

It is a natural human tendency to have a scarcity mentality, especially when it comes to things we most deeply crave. This results in a zero-sum view of the world – where your win is my loss – and this can't help but lead to sub-optimal outcomes, sharp elbows, and pessimism. The irony and paradox is that much of life is additive-sum – where your win can also be my win – and those who freely and voluntarily give as much as they can tend to receive much

in return. However, the scarcity approach is more common because a mindset of abundance requires trust, time, patience, persistence, a long-term gratification mindset, and not *worrying about how or even if you will be “repaid.”* *Vitaly, you have to act first – giving before you receive – in order to reap the benefits of this paradox.*

My mom had a simple yet powerful visual which helped me understand this at a young age. She called it her “overflowing cup model.” She said that those who have a “full cup” – those who have sufficient self-love, self-confidence, and self-compassion – are able to fill other’s cups. Paradoxically, due to reciprocation, those with full cups tend to get even more in return than they give, further filling their cups. This can be thought of as a virtuous cycle and, like with any virtuous cycle, an equally powerful vicious cycle exists too. Those who have “empty cups” – those who are insecure, lacking, and overly self-critical – constantly seek to hoard what they have and are stingy in their doling out of love and compliments. Unfortunately, a vicious cycle takes hold and these empty cuppers think the world is against them, that nothing can go right, further draining their cup.



The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.

– Chinese Proverb

Honor reciprocation, John Wooden’s maxim, and Karin’s Overflowing Cup – giving *first* in order to receive – and you’ll find more coming back to you (time, place, and magnitude yet to be determined) than you could ever imagine. This is a tried and true universal law, but it takes courage and vulnerability to get this process going. Don’t hesitate any longer, dive in and *first* give what you most want to get.

## 2. Common Sense

*Common sense, unfortunately, isn't all that common and conventional wisdom typically isn't wise.*

The young man knows the rules, but  
the old man knows the exceptions.  
– Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

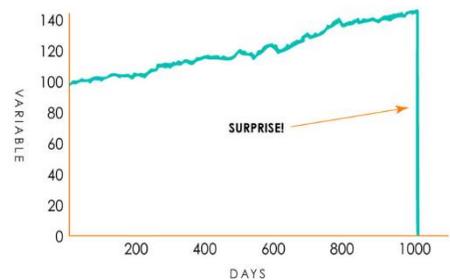
A surplus of cash leads to a shortage  
of sense.  
– Marc Faber

As Buffett so beautifully says, “what the wise do in the beginning, fools do in the end.” For example, some of the worst investments are made in the best of times, when conventional wisdom says that things can't help but go “up and to the right,” that “it's different this time.” This is when euphoria peaks and bubbles form – tulip mania, the .com boom, CDOs, ICOs, etc.... – the fools rushing in during the

final inning because they can't stand to be watching from the sidelines anymore when everyone around them keeps getting rich.

What we can learn from this is that what is conventional and “obvious” is *rarely* wise, and we must keep this top of mind before making important decisions, especially if there is social pressure, mania/depression, or any other combination which can trigger [Lollapalooza Effects](#). We must also always account for the ever-looming possibility of a [black swan](#).

FIGURE 1: ONE THOUSAND AND ONE DAYS OF HISTORY



In Howard Marks' excellent memo, [Dare to Be Great](#), he discusses this idea:

*Unconventionality is required for superior investment results, especially in asset allocation. As I mentioned above, you can't do the same things others do and expect to outperform. Unconventionality shouldn't be a goal in itself, but rather a way of thinking. In order to distinguish yourself from others, it helps to have ideas that are different and to process those ideas differently. I conceptualize the situation as a simple 2-by-2 matrix:*

	<i>Conventional Behavior</i>	<i>Unconventional Behavior</i>
<i>Favorable Outcomes</i>	<i>Average good results</i>	<i>Above-average results</i>
<i>Unfavorable Outcomes</i>	<i>Average bad results</i>	<i>Below-average results</i>

Establishing and maintaining an unconventional investment profile requires acceptance of uncomfortably idiosyncratic profiles, which frequently appear downright imprudent in the eyes of conventional wisdom.

– David Swensen

*Of course, it's not easy and clear-cut, but I think that's the general situation. If your behavior and that of your managers is conventional, you're likely to get conventional results – either good or bad. **Only if the behavior is unconventional is your performance going to be unconventional...and only if the judgments are superior is your performance likely to be above average.***

Unsurprisingly, Charlie Munger has some wise words on this too:

*It's not the bad ideas that do you in, it's the good ideas. And you may say, "That can't be so. That's paradoxical." What he [Graham] meant was that if a thing is a bad idea, it's hard to overdo. But where there is a good idea with a core of essential and important truth, you can't ignore it. And then it's so easy to overdo it. So, the good ideas are a wonderful way to suffer terribly if you overdo them. – [Poor Charlie's Almanack](#)*

Beware common sense and conventional wisdom – what the crowd is doing and spewing as the “no-brainer du jour.”

Being part of the herd may be warm and cozy, but every once in a while the herd gets lured into a [buffalo jump](#). **You must think for yourself, be skeptical, and beware the good ideas that are overdone.**



### 3. El Flojo Trabaja El Doble

I grew up hearing my dad say this and, in English, it means that *the lazy man works twice as hard*.

It took some time before reality pounded this into me, but I have found find it wise and correct.

Most men spend more energy coming up with excuses than if they simply found the fix to their problems.

– Leo Tolstoy

*Every single time I tried to find a shortcut, it ended up backfiring.* The cramming I did to pass a test hurt me in the long run when I had to repeat the process for the final just a little while later. The warm-up routine my tennis coach advised me to do, but avoided, eventually caused me injuries, frustration, and lost time. Rather than spending time at the front-end to outline an essay and clarify my thoughts, I used to dive right in, more often than not having to scrap everything and start over. *Any time I tried to skip ahead without doing the hard work necessary, I later paid for it – in spades.*

American mathematician [Richard Hamming](#) sarcastically said, “There is never time to do the job right, but there is always time to fix it later.” I’ve tried to heed his advice and now try to do the job right the first time around, to the best of my ability. This shift in mindset not only saves me time, but helps me learn faster and more completely, leading to better results, attracting other like-minded people, and getting me in the habit of doing *all* things well. I thought that I could cheat the system, that I was too smart, that I could do it all last minute, but I explicitly learned that there is no free lunch. *The cheat turns out to be to just do the hard work.*

It’s not supposed to be easy. Anyone who thinks it’s easy is stupid.

– [Charlie Munger](#)

Life is hard for the man who thinks he can take shortcuts.

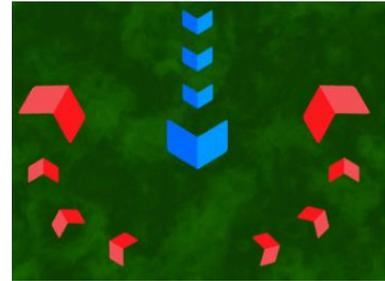
– [Les Schwab](#)

*In fact, another way of stating this paradox is: the longcut is the shortcut.* Seen from this perspective, we *may* be less inclined to try to find ways around the hard work, embracing it instead.

#### 4. The Pincer Approach

[The pincer approach](#) is a military tactic which has you attack the flanks of an enemy rather than attacking head on.

*Similarly, rather than making a “direct frontal attack” on your goals, find systems that can get you what you want indirectly via [The Path of Least Resistance](#).*



**If you're going to take on one of these massive problems, don't make a direct frontal attack on it.** If you're going to replace email, don't say so at first. Instead, say you're building to-do-list-software. People can notice you've replaced email when it's a fait accompli. **Empirically the way to do really big things seems to be to start with deceptively small things.** Maybe it's a bad idea to have really big ambitions initially, because the bigger your ambition, the longer it will take to get there and the further you project into the future, the more likely you'll get it wrong. **Start with what you know works and when you expand, expand in the right general direction. The popular image of the visionary is someone with a clear view of the future, but empirically it may be better to have a blurry one.**

– Paul Graham, [Frighteningly Ambitious Startup Ideas](#)

*I think this same idea helps us understand why tunnel vision for a singular goal often isn't effective – it is the functional equivalent of brute force, head on “[trench warfare](#).” While you may accomplish that one thing, it comes at the expense of much else.*

This is why I like Scott Adams' idea of having [systems over goals](#). By having a system, you ingrain the traits and behaviors you want as part of your long-term lifestyle and the results come as a byproduct of the process. This is more sustainable and robust than having goals because goals often are singular, binary, and have a finish line whereas proper systems can be thought of as [infinite games](#). If our system includes eating healthy and exercising regularly, the weight loss matters less, but paradoxically we're more likely to achieve it. However, if we have a goal of losing 10 pounds, once we've done that, it is easy to conclude that you're “done” and then revert back to what made you uncomfortable in the first place. This volatile process is defeating and depressing and doesn't lend itself as well to long-term change. *Instead, seek to find systems which produce the results downstream, attacking the problem orthogonally rather than relying on direct frontal attacks.*

## 5. Lowering Yourself to Raise Yourself

*We can often move higher and faster by first stepping back and going slower.*

A prime example is a “servant-leader” – leaders who lower themselves by seeking to serve others, and never ask people to do what they wouldn’t be willing to do themselves. They are truly humble and this humility, coupled with mastery, makes them formidable leaders.

A great man is always willing to be little.  
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Paradoxically, this lowering of oneself raises other’s impressions of us.* Everyone is afraid of being hurt, embarrassed, ridiculed, of saying “I don’t know” and looking stupid, and we know the courage and self-esteem it takes to be vulnerable and willing to be hurt. When people lower themselves, showing their willingness to help and do whatever it takes, we see them as someone worth following.

In any hierarchy, it’s clear that the ultimate boss holds the most power. But a wonderful thing happens when you flip the traditional organization chart upside down so that it looks like a “V” with the boss on the bottom. My job is to serve and support the next layer “above” me so that the people on that layer can then serve and support the next layer “above” them, and so on. Ultimately, our cooks, servers, reservationists, coat checkers, and dish washers are then in the best possible position to serve our guests...**I staunchly believe that standing conventional business priorities on their head ultimately leads to even greater, more enduring financial success.**

– Danny Meyer

Although typically not glorified in the media like “alpha” leaders tend to be, some of the most successful organizations have taken the servant-leadership mantra to heart and have “[inverted the hierarchy](#),” honoring the fact that the bottom, the foundation, should be served by the top.<sup>1</sup>

The real problem with arrogant leadership is that it not only leads to worse products, lower morale and a sub-optimal culture, but that it culls people from the top. The best don’t want to work for poor leaders in bad environments, and since they have the option to work pretty much anywhere, they will congregate in companies which treat them well. The best people will eventually vote with their feet.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Graham’s [Keep Your Identity Small](#) is a great corollary to this idea

Moses Maimonides said that the only virtue which can't be overdone is humility. While this might be an interesting thread to pull on, I think it is safe to say that a dose of humility rarely hurts. Become the "depression" into which wisdom flows, and you can't help but rise.

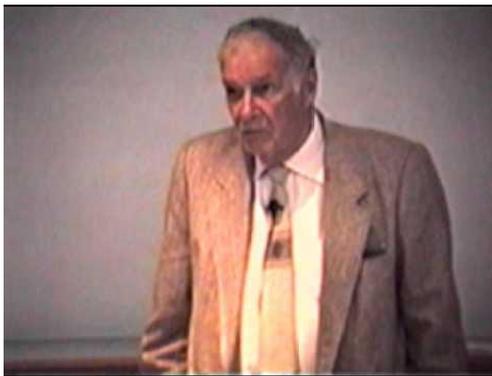
Wisdom flows into the  
humble man like water flows  
into a depression.

– Lao Tzu

## 6. Expert Folly

*While experts can be tremendously helpful, they can also be too knowledgeable for their own good. They know what can and can't be done and that is that. Sometimes you need someone who doesn't know what they don't know – someone with a fresh perspective.*

Richard Hamming's [Learning to Learn](#) is brilliant and he has a whole section dedicated to this topic:



*The record of the experts saying something is impossible just before it is done is amazing... All impossibility proofs must rest on a number of assumptions which may or may not apply in the particular situation. Experts in looking at something new always bring their expertise with them as well as their particular way of looking at things. Whatever does not fit into their frame of reference is dismissed, not seen, or forced to fit into their beliefs. Thus, really new ideas seldom arise from the experts in the field. You cannot blame them too much since it is more economical to try the old, successful ways before trying to find new ways of looking and thinking. All things which are proved to be impossible must obviously rest on some assumptions, and when one or more of these assumptions are not true then the impossibility proof fails – but the expert seldom remembers to carefully inspect the assumptions before making their “impossible” statements. There is an old statement which covers this aspect of the expert. It goes as follows: **“If an expert says something can be done, he is probably correct, but if he says it is impossible then consider getting another opinion.”** In discussing the expert let me introduce another aspect which has barely been mentioned so far. It appears most of the great innovations come from outside the field, and not from the insiders. I cited above continental drift. Consider archaeology. A central problem is the dating of the remains found. In the past this was done by elaborate, unreliable stratigraphy, by estimating the time needed to bury the material where it was found. Now carbon dating is used as the main tool. Where did it come from? Physics! None of the archaeology experts would have ever thought of it.*

If you are or are attempting to specialize and become a domain expert, the tension you must balance lies in coming to gain deep fluency in an area, yet being humble enough to have a beginner's mind, to be willing to change your opinion if the facts change. Likewise, if you are leading a group of people, you must know when you need experts and when you need people who have a fresh perspective, who are able to make intuitive leaps because they don't know what they don't know. As Hamming said, "most great innovations come from outside the field, and not from insiders," so beware the expert folly, sometimes the best solution comes from outside a given field.

None of our men are "experts." We have most unfortunately found it necessary to get rid of a man as soon as he thinks himself an expert – because **no one ever considers himself expert if he really knows his job.** A man who knows a job sees so much more to be done than he has done, that he is always pressing forward and never gives up an instant of thought to how good and how efficient he is. Thinking always ahead, thinking always of trying more, brings a state of mind in which nothing is impossible. **The moment one gets into the "expert" state of mind a great number of things become impossible.**

– Henry Ford

## 7. Enlightened Self-Interest

*Enlightened self-interest encourages you to find a way to create an environment and set incentives so that what is selfish individually is also beneficial to the group at large.*

You may have trouble believing it, but every time we've tested the old saying, it has paid off for us in spades: the more you give, the more you get. The habit of acting shortsightedly is a hard one to break. What can be done? Nothing. No rules or laws will affect the changes. But enlightened self-interest will. It takes a little while for enlightenment to spread. But spread it must, for the concern in which both employer and employees work to the same end of service is bound to forge ahead in business.

– Henry Ford

When you find a way to align both personal and group interests, a torrent of potential energy is released. People no longer feel guilty or try to hide their selfish behavior, and all this energy can now go towards actually doing their job! What a concept!

[Maslow's Synergy](#) is a similar concept – one described as when selfishness and unselfishness merge. When this dichotomy is resolved, and a higher unity is reached, because what is altruistic also rewards and gratifies oneself.

Similarly, [Les Schwab](#) understood that the more he shared his profits with his employees – whether in salaries, incentives, bonuses, or stock options – the more profits there would be for all. Again, perhaps counterintuitive, but much of life is additive-sum, where there is an expanding rather than shrinking pie. Schwab got everyone aligned to the company's best interest because it directly benefitted them too!



I encourage you to share profits with your employees. I encourage you in every way possible to build people. If you do share, do it openly and honestly, and don't get jealous if they start to make some money...that's the whole idea. If you make people under you successful, what happens to you? Aren't you also then successful? But if you think of yourself first, it just won't work, and there's no use attempting it. What nicer thing can you do with your life than to help young people build their lives into successful people, not just in money, but in all ways. The older I get the more proud I am of the profit-sharing programs and other programs that I have created or have helped to create. **The best way to make it succeed is to share with people, to help people be successful people.**

– Les Schwab

Since *structure always affects function*, it is worth spending an inordinate amount of time getting the structure – environment, culture, and incentives – right the first time around. When everyone is aligned, you can reach a “superfluid” state, removing all friction and creating “infinite mobility.”



**Superfluidity is the phenomenon wherein a substance undergoes a phase transition that completely removes viscosity and the matter flows infinitely and without friction.** The lack of friction is directly related to the infinite mobility of a superfluid – friction creates heat, and even slight heat can cause a superfluid to return to a normal fluid state. The lack of friction allows the perpetual motion of the superfluid to exist and serves as a “loophole” in thermodynamics. – [Wikipedia](#)

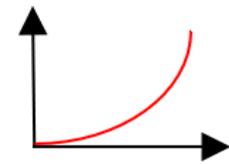
## 8. The Power of the Marginal

*Paul Graham's beautiful [essay](#) inspired this idea. I agree with his point that innovative new things come from the margin, but mine is a slightly different take. Mine is that the accumulation of small things and habits which individually seem inconsequential collectively make all the difference.*

The difficult and insidious part about these marginal habits, thoughts, and actions is that the negative effects of ignoring them typically aren't immediately felt – the feedback loops are slow and blurry. People tend to struggle in these types of situations because we naturally are linear thinkers, having trouble with exponential results and delayed feedback. That is why it is so easy to fall into bad habits and start down a slippery slope. That one cheat day of course isn't life-threatening, but when it leads to falling off the wagon, we get in trouble. However, as we've discussed, on the flipside of every vicious cycle there is a virtuous cycle, and by adding seemingly small and inconsequential habits together consistently, collectively they can make all the difference in the world.

[The Broken Windows Theory](#) takes advantage of this and helps foster a clean, safe, and healthy environment by preventing small crimes such as vandalism, public drinking, and toll-jumping. This helps to create an atmosphere of order and lawfulness, thereby preventing more serious crimes from happening.

This idea that the details matter – that the small things are, in fact, the big things – has of course been stated in much more eloquent ways for millennia, but we still have trouble adhering to it. Harness the power of compounding by doing the little things well over a lifetime which, when combined and accumulated, can't help but lead to exponential results.



- Hard choices, easy life. Easy choices, hard life. – Jerzy Gregorek
- Life is a sum of all your choices. – Albert Camus
- We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit. – Aristotle
- How you do anything is how you do everything. – T. Harv Eker
- Everything we do imputes who we are and what we stand for. – Steve Jobs
- Character may be manifested in great moments, but it is made in the small ones. – Phillips Brooks

## 9. Superb Conversationalists

*The best conversationalists often say very little.*

They instead are “active listeners” – not only listening to what people are telling them but *hearing* them too. They aren’t thinking of the next thing they can say to seem smart or engaged, they are simply present and aware – noticing subtle cues such as [body language](#), tone of voice, and other emotions which help the other side truly feel heard and cared for. Don’t only listen to what people say, but also how they say it – *the vast majority of the message lies in what is not being said.*



[Jordan Peterson](#) says, “Truly listening to someone is one of the rarest skills and gifts there are. People organize their thoughts through conversation and if they have no one to share them with, they lose their minds.” If you can truly listen, being on “receive” rather than “broadcast” (as a mentor of mine often reminds me to be), you will learn more than you could ever imagine.

## 10. Value > Price

*One of life's great paradoxes is how Oscar Wilde described a cynical man: “a man who knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing.”*



Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.

— Albert Einstein

We concern ourselves with our material possessions and “keeping up with the Joneses” because this is an easy scorecard to keep track of – there is always a price tag we can refer to.<sup>2</sup>

However, we unfortunately tend to neglect the things which truly matter because they are typically harder to “count”: relationships, our health, giving back to others, a beautiful day, and so much more. There is no price tag, and with few exceptions, this true wealth cannot be bought. Let’s aim to change our external scorecard to an internal one, one in which we focus on value over price. This, to me, sounds like the beginning of wisdom.

The big question about how people behave is whether they’ve got an inner scorecard or an outer scorecard. It helps if you can be satisfied with an inner scorecard.

— Warren Buffett

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<sup>2</sup> See Paul Graham’s [Stuff](#) for more on this. Notice I pull a lot from PG? It’s for [good reason](#)...

## 11. Teach to Learn

*The clearest understanding comes not from learning or doing something, but through teaching others. Ironically, the teacher gains more than the student!*

The power and beauty of ideas is that they are infinite. I can give away ideas freely and it doesn't diminish or take away at all from the idea. In fact, if anything, it adds to the pie, allowing some ideas to reach critical mass and truly change people or, potentially, the world.

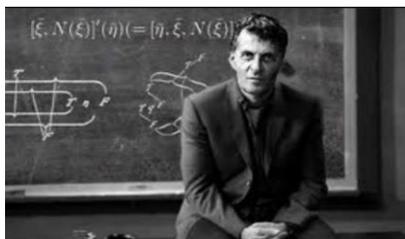
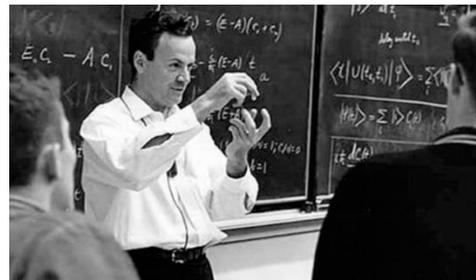
If you have an apple and I have an apple, and we exchange apples, we both still have one apple. But if you have an idea, and I have an idea, and we exchange ideas, we each now have two ideas.

– George Bernard Shaw

If our goal is to help, one of the best ways to spend our time lies in teaching others. This is truly a win/win because not only do we come to better understand what we're teaching, but the student learns too.

Richard Feynman, [one of the best teachers I've come across](#), espoused a simple 4-step process:

1. Choose a concept
2. Teach it to a toddler
3. Identify your knowledge gaps and go back to the source material
4. Review and simplify



To understand is to know what to do.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Importantly, you must be able to teach the idea without using the word itself and be able to rephrase what you've just learned into your own, personal language. Only then are the concepts truly yours.

Teaching others not only reinforces what we know but makes it blatantly obvious what you firmly grasp and what you don't. The choice is then up to you whether you embrace these gaps or put your head in the sand and ignore them...

## 12. [Effortless Mastery](#)

*The paradox here is that by slowing down, by taking your time to truly master something, no matter how small, you actually speed the process up.*

This is against our nature when learning something new because we feel like we have to “try,” and we end up forcing it, doing more than we are currently capable of. We think this will speed up the mastery process, but it actually slows us down.

So, why do most of us move on before we’ve mastered something? We are afraid that we won’t reach the level we want, that there isn’t enough time, and this actually ends up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. We cannot let the joy inherently found in this process turn into a “need” because *nothing is more debilitating than the need to perform brilliantly*. You always want to do well but the recurring paradox is that you have a much better chance of doing well if you let go of the pressure and stay within yourself. No doubt this is a hard lesson to learn, at least it was for me, but it made all the difference.

**Paradoxically, it is when we try to sound brilliant we stumble, whereas when we stay within ourselves we sound better.** There is always a schism between what the ego wants to play and what wants to come out. Although the master player may have great technical ability, you will not sense his attempt to show it; the technique manifests unconsciously. In sports, it often happens that the team with less “stars” wins it all. The players or coach will always talk about “staying within themselves,” or “just doing what they can do.” **In improvised music, the one who stays within himself may be perceived as a master.**

- Kenny Werner

An elusive state which is necessary in order to stay within yourself is one of egoless detachment – *detachment to the outcome, but not to the process*. This is a prerequisite of mastery because you cannot perform at your highest level unless you can let go and stop thinking in the big moments. Turning off the ego and rationalizing part of the brain takes diligence, deliberate practice, patience, and persistence, but it is vital. Once this state is reached, you will learn faster than you thought possible and perform at a higher level without even feeling like you’re trying. This is the state of flow.

Legendary jazz musician Kenny Werner, from whom I copied the title of this section, touches on these ideas beautifully in his book, [Effortless Mastery](#)



*Out of the fullness of this presence of mind, disturbed by no ulterior motive, the artist who is released from all attachment must practice his art. From this space, there is great compassion, and great love, as well as great detachment. **A person becomes the supreme enjoyer, observer, and doer. His involvement in life is total. He fully participates in the world yet is not ensnared by it. There is no fear, because he is not attached to the results of his actions. Practice takes no patience, since there is no burning need to reach a goal. There is simply the celebration of the doing, the learning, the achieving and enjoying. To be sure, he experiences the entire range of emotions, but he is not attached. Therefore, he can live his life and make his moves in harmony with his inner self and the outer universe. He frequently receives intuition about what to do next, and he follows it fearlessly. Paradoxically, detachment causes his actions to have great purpose and result in great success. The abundance of the universe tends to rain on such a person; however, if it does not, that too is all right.***

...

*Stream of consciousness is stopped in its tracks because you have to ask, “Where is the next note?” **Nothing puts a crimp in spontaneity more than a momentary lapse in knowledge. Most of us never get past the stage of struggling with technique. But we can never experience our deeper feelings in music if we still have to think about rhythm, phrasing, form, or the chord changes. The struggle is often attributed to a lack of talent, but it is usually due to a gap – something not learned properly.***

This “effortless” approach to mastery still takes time, energy, and focus but your energy will be directed on the right things, done in the right way. Anyone can try hard, but those who excel tend to work smarter, not harder. That, above all, is what I hope these ideas get across...

### 13. Discipline = Freedom

Jocko Willink verbalized this idea for me in his book [Extreme Ownership](#) and in his [podcast](#) with Tim Ferriss. *His point is that unless you are disciplined, you can't live your ideal life. You are at the whims of your emotions, impulses, and base desires, never letting you get to the things which truly matter to you in the long-term.*

The first condition of freedom is its limitation.

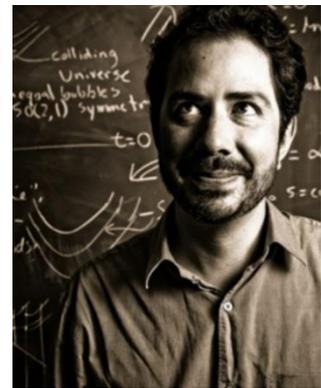
– [Will Durant](#)

Another way of saying this might be: *constraints give your life shape*. If we remove them, we become a puddle rather than a vase, splashing and spilling all over the place. This is clearly seen in those who inherit a lot of money or get things too easily – they don't know the value of hard work and often squander their gifts away. Those who truly know its value though, never take it for granted, and tend to be able to handle money, power, and responsibility. Thinking that we can simply and unequivocally give people freedom without knowing what to do with it has proven a flawed idea.

The balance lies in structuring your life enough to allow you time and energy to pursue what truly matters to you. Now, this structure may look unstructured – Buffett leaves huge swaths of time open to simply think and read – but nonetheless it is part of your daily routine and this discipline gives you the freedom to pursue your passions.

These paradoxes are all rather simple, but not easy. This goes without saying or else they wouldn't be rare and therefore valuable! In your quest to find and take advantage of paradoxes, pay attention to what seems like disorder. The history of science, particularly in [Complexity Theory](#), has shown that *disorder is simply order misunderstood*. The parallel here is that these paradoxes may seem “disorderly” on the surface but take on order if you can see why they exist and how we can use them to our advantage.

Paradoxes arise when one or more convincing truths contradict each other, clash with other convincing truths, or violate unshakeable intuitions. They are frustrating, yet beguiling. Many see virtue in avoiding, glossing over, or dismissing them. Instead we should seek them out. If we find one, sharpen it, push it into the extreme, and hope that the resolution will reveal itself, for with that resolution will invariably come a dose of Truth...Nature appears to contradict itself with the utmost rarity, and so a paradox can be an opportunity for us to lay bare our cherished assumptions and discover which of them we must let go. But a good paradox can take us further, to reveal that not just the assumptions but the very modes of thinking we used in creating the paradox must be replaced. Particles and waves? Not truth, just convenient models. The same number of integers as perfect squares of integers? Not crazy, though you might be, if you invent cardinality. The list goes on.



– [Anthony Aguirre](#)