My Learning Process

When I graduated from college and "retired" from tennis, I needed a new passion to fill the void. It took me some time to figure out what that was, but I eventually settled on learning, traveling, and surrounding myself with the highest quality people possible – things I knew I would never regret.

People have asked about my reading and learning process, so we'll focus on that in this essay. My system has evolved over the years into what now feels like a solid foundation that serves me well, but it's always being tinkered with. My process is by no means the "right way", a recommendation or advice, simply what has seemed to work for me so far.

Let's start big picture.

First off, I believe too many people rely on and overemphasize "life-changing transformations" and don't appreciate the importance of mundane, everyday lifestyle choices done over long periods of time. Crash-diets vs. a healthy lifestyle. Cramming for a test vs. a regular study schedule. Looking for a quick dollar vs. investing for the long-term. People often create and rely on short-term goals rather than developing long-term systems. I believe the latter is much more robust. It forces sustainable change in behavior and, importantly, there is no "finish line." The danger with goals and finish lines is that, when reached, they tend to decrease motivation or, even worse, if not reached, depress you.

In my life, I don't set goals in terms of how many books to read or anything of the sort. Instead, I aim to create systems which help me learn, grow, and meet fascinating people. One example is how I think about and try to take advantage of dead time. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snap, TikTok, etc. have proven, without a doubt, that filling this white space is immensely powerful and profitable. Rather than defaulting to these time fillers, take back control and use these moments for things you deem important. If it's spending time on one of those networks, by all means, go for it! But, if you feel like it's not serving you, change your default. I always have a book, notebook and pen, headphones, and Kindle with me. This way, when I have some unexpected time, I default to one of those rather than my phone.

Additionally, I've given a lot of thought to my schedule and routine.

I began this process by inverting the problem. Like the analogy with rocks, pebbles, and sand, figure out what the big things in your life are, scheduling those first and then fitting in the small things where you can (or not).

One key example of this is my health. Health is the fountainhead that feeds into and makes every other area of my life possible. Without it, I can't help myself or others. So, I begin by planning on 7-8 hours of sleep and work backwards from there. That means I need to be asleep by ~10pm so that I can get up between 5-6am. I then have about a half hour to myself to meditate and get ready for the day. I'm at my peak in the mornings, so I do my most creative and important work first thing, spending time with my family and then setting aside a 60-90 minute chunk to read, write, journal, and think. A couple days per week I work out and am home every night to have dinner with wifey and baby. I'm very fortunate that my situation allows for this, but I've also crafted it so that it's possible. This didn't come quickly, nor does it always happen, but you have to clearly know what you want so that you can make your way towards it. These defaults and systems, as well as the people and environment you surround yourself with, impact you more than you know.

So, with some big picture systems in place, now onto the details.

Concretely, what my reading process looks like is that while I read (typically a physical book, but Kindle and Audible are great for literature, history, biographies, and certain books I want to re-read), I highlight, brainstorm connections and any parallels I can draw, write notes in the margins, sit and think about what I just learned, think about how it can impact my life and those around me (making learnings actionable, tangible, concrete is vital), summarize the book in my own words on the cover page, type up these notes into full blown notes on Evernote, and review them. If it's a kindle, I simply highlight, export, and then reorganize the notes into core themes. With Audible, I type notes on my phone or laptop directly into Evernote while I'm listening. The inability to easily take notes is why I don't think I get as much out of Kindle and Audible as physical books.

Now, I maybe only get through 1/3 as much as if I simply read, but this process ingrains these ideas and learnings for the long-term. Ideas beget ideas and learning begets learning, so when you deeply incorporate these lessons, you can make connections across books, themes, ideas, people, and time, and that's when this concept of compound learning truly sets in and the flywheel begins to take off.

Another aspect which has been helpful to me is thinking through the balance between exploration vs. exploitation – serendipity vs. focus, breadth vs. depth. I tend to favor exploration as I enjoy following threads and not knowing where they'll lead, but I try balance it with deep dives that result in "teacher's reference guides." These are topics that are interesting enough that I'm excited to read about that one thing for extended periods of time. It doesn't happen often, but it's great when it does.

The next step, which took me some time to appreciate, is to share these learnings. Sharing knowledge compounds it, raises your game, provides different perspectives, makes it a more fun journey, and allows for a tribe of like-minded people to join you. This is easier than ever, but the power law still seems to hold true where 1% create and 99% consume. Aim to create.

> *"By sharing our ideas, we multiply our powers of invention. I use the whole plant for ideas. If the janitor has a good idea, I'd use it." – Walt Disney*

Some other random things which seem to help me be productive include:

- Chunking my time – setting aside at least 2 blocks of 60-120 minutes per day where distractions are minimal. I use this time to read, write, think, or work on a big project – things I love doing that require flow. The benefits of chunking seems to be common knowledge, but my guess is that not too many people do it. If struggling to make this happen, maybe the rock/pebble/sand analogy might be helpful? The most dangerous distractions are those you deem important, but not most important.
- Evernote – my external brain. Tagging and the ability to search through all these notes is so powerful as it helps illuminate connections, parallels, and patterns that I'd otherwise never put together.[1]
- Wunderlist (sadly it is being retired in May and I'll (reluctantly) give Microsoft To Do a shot…) – this is a to-do list of more mundane things I want to make sure don't fall through the cracks – daily tasks, new habits and monthly challenges, reminders, appointments, notes on what I want to talk about with friends, etc. Emptying your brain of these things frees up a lot of capacity.
- Checking email 4 times a day at set times – ideally it would be two, but I want to be responsive, so I check it quickly in the morning, before lunch, mid-afternoon, and after

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[1] Yes, I've heard about Roam and yes I'm checking it out 😊 Any tips on how you use it would be great!

dinner. This seems like a good balance between not interrupting what I'm doing and also making sure I'm staying on top of what I need to. Adding "VIPs" on iPhone mail has also been really helpful – one of the few notifications I allow on my phone. [2]

- [Andreessen's note cards](#) – this is a new one for me, but something I'm sure I'll keep up. This system has you write down 3-5 things on an index card that you want to accomplish the next day. The physical aspect of crossing these things off and then throwing out the index card brings an irrationally satisfying feeling and has helped me better stay on task and focus on the things that truly matter.

With this type of "study schedule," my friends and family often ask me how I get so much done while having a full-time job and now a wife and baby. While it might look like a lot from the outside, internally it feels calm and sustainable, joyful and effortless, fun and fulfilling. [3]

This is a key idea I want to stress in this essay: you need to find a routine, system, job, partner, lifestyle that is joyful, fulfilling, and sustainable to *you*. This takes time, constant iteration and adaptation, delayed gratification, and patience, but this process is so fun and worthwhile that, even if you never attain exactly what you want, it is the right path, the optimal mindset to embody. This is one of the core messages of one of my favorite books, Kenny Werner's *[Effortless Mastery](#)*. A quote of his I reference often is:

> *"I have come to the point where I have simply decided that effortlessness would be my prime consideration, that anything not played from an effortless place is not worth playing. I don't get my technique from studying technique. I get it from letting my hands and arms find their way without my interference. In doing so, I have unwittingly connected with the wisdom of the ancients. As I now read the writings of the great sages, I realize that I am on the same path, having the experiences they describe. Effortlessness allows us to become our own teachers, paving the way to mastery. If you get nothing else from this book, hopefully you'll at least walk away with the realization that effort gets in the way of great playing. Effort and/or lack of preparation blocks true mastery."*

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[2] A fun experiment that could have a huge impact is removing all notifications. Try it out for a week, and only add back the things you miss. In a similar vein, unsubscribe from every email that you don't look forward to. The time saved is great, but the mental clutter you eliminate is even better.

[3] The process of defining my [key life domains](#) and what I want out of each one has had huge downstream effects, helping me keep the most important things the most important things.

This is worth striving for – to make your work feel like play, your "job" a calling – to be playing an [infinite game](#). An ideal situation is one which feels easy to you but that others find difficult. This is a great indicator that you're doing something you love and are meant to do.

This "effortless" mindset is partly why I don't like the "work/life" balance concept. Ideally, it should all be interwoven and interconnected, each area of your life feeding on and adding to the other areas of your life, creating a virtuous "life flywheel." In addition, it is in stark contrast to what so many around us are doing! Today, everyone tries to do more. To work harder. To be more responsive. To multi-task. However, I believe this to be a fool's errand – a race to the bottom. By doing the opposite, you can find contrast – effectively setting yourself apart. Focus on working smarter, not harder, spending time on what is deep and meaningful rather than what is expedient.

This process lets you see first-hand that growth only comes over long periods of time, brought about by your daily routines, habits, and work ethic. These are the small, unsexy, easily ignored, details which help you compound your learnings and skill over time. This formula of perpetual incremental progress eternally repeated (PIPER), is the formula for success in any endeavor. This takes a lot of time and effort, probably more than most realize or care to admit but, as Darwin so beautifully honored in his own life, it seems to be the best path towards true learning.

Charles Darwin's 8 Steps to Steady-State Learning
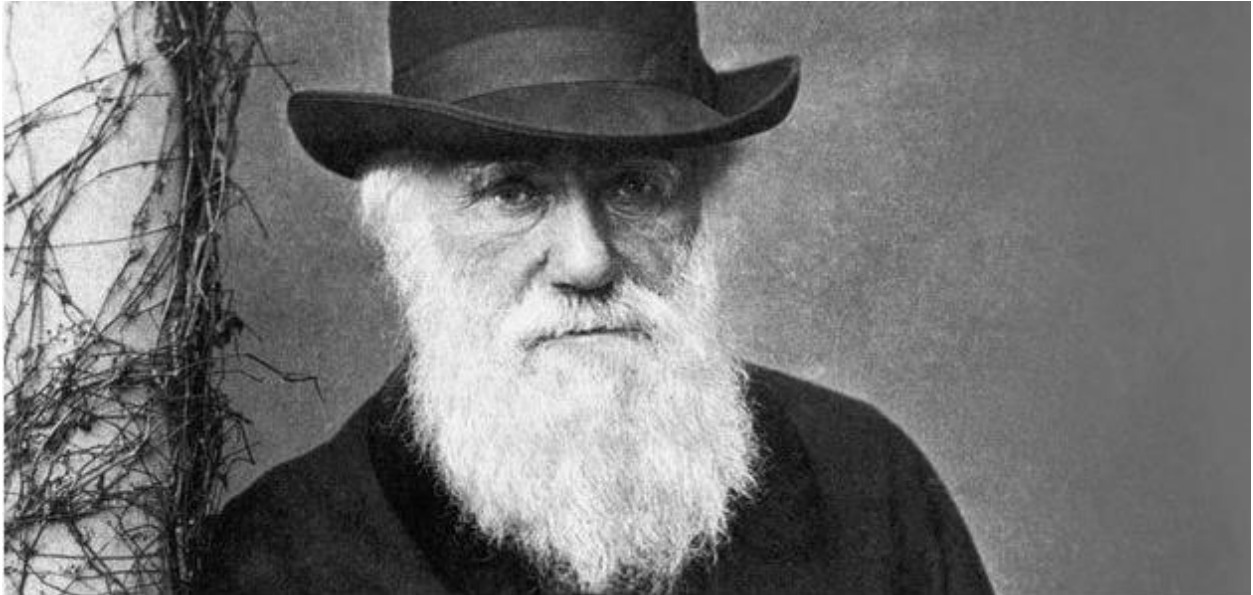
1. A life-long program of self-study
2. Keeping a diary/journal
3. Scribbling notes immediately
4. Keeping "indexed portfolios" (notes/summaries of what you've read or heard)
5. Testing beloved concepts – make a note, immediately, if you come across a thought or idea that is contrary to something you currently believe. Absorb it, study it and don't let it go until you conclude that you need to change your mind or if the thought or ideas is wrong
6. Learning lessons by heart
7. Seeking to earn the approval of great men (dead or alive)
8. The humility to seek not fame (as in, wisdom flows into the humble man like water flows into a depression)