

Challenging * Mattering = Meaningful

Son, if the mountain were smooth, you couldn't climb it. – Wintley Phipps

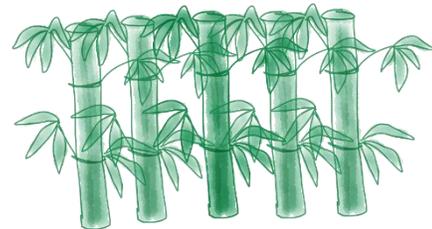
This essay helped me discover a deeper connection between challenge and meaning than I previously appreciated. This seems obvious in hindsight, but it wasn't before, and I think that's the key to an interesting essay.

The idea is that challenging * mattering = meaningful. If something isn't challenging, the amount of meaning one can derive from it is limited. Similarly, there are an infinite number of challenging endeavors that don't matter. The combination of challenging and mattering leads to Lollapalooza Effects, where $1 + 1 = 3$.

Now, how we define “challenging,” “mattering,” and “meaningful” is paramount.

To me, challenging doesn't look like the person who just grinds through a project to get it done, sacrificing sleep, family, or any semblance of balance. While brute force may be effective short-term, I'm convinced it doesn't lend itself to *sustainable* creativity, joy, or meaning (and sustainability is everything – from a biological and mathematical perspective – as we have to first survive and then endure over long periods of time to harness compounding).

To me, what comes to mind is the person who demonstrates persistent incremental progress eternally repeated (PIPER) in their craft. Someone who continuously pushes the boundaries of their comfort zone, ever expanding their skillset and circle of competence. Like a tree, day-to-day growth is unnoticeable, but come back in a couple of years and the growth can be staggering. These types of people put in more time, effort, and care into their craft than seems rational to an outside observer, and that's the point. They love the process and are playing an [infinite game](#) rather than a finite one.

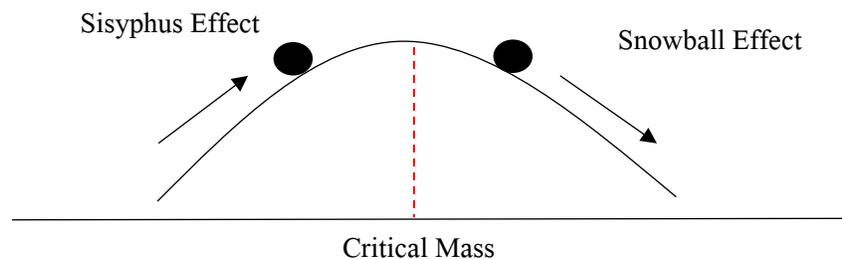


We can learn a lot from bamboo's growth pattern. It takes years for bamboo to establish a solid, underground root system. This phase is vital for its rapid future growth, but nobody ever sees or applauds this progress. However, once ready, it shoots out of the ground and grows faster than any other wooded plant. We too need a “solid, underground root system” to prepare us for our own rapid future growth.

Amazingly, like alchemy (or some very helpful bias), top performers often reframe the “sacrifices” they make into something energizing that brings them meaning – allowing for

“[effortless mastery](#)” to spring forth. Precisely the things that others run away from, they embrace and run towards! Extra windsprints? Great! On game day I’ll be in better shape. Gale-force winds? Excellent! More difficult conditions will throw off my opponent more than me. You get the idea.

This mindset provides a method and a framework for understanding, appreciating, and acting upon obstacles that life throws at you. This allows you to become “[antifragile](#)” in the sense that you actually gain strength by going through and learning from challenging times. The greater the challenge, the greater your strength becomes. I learned a great Latin saying from Ryan Holiday’s [The Obstacle is the Way](#), “vires acquirit eundo,” which translates to “we gather strength as we go.” I love this! If we can embrace and overcome our challenges, we can take advantage of this momentum in our own lives and craft, overcoming the [Sisyphus Effect](#) and harnessing the [Snowball Effect](#). Our current accomplishments enhance our confidence and skills, allowing us to take on even larger challenges moving forward – creating a virtuous life flywheel!



Framed this way, challenging situations should be sought after. Not because of some masochistic tendency, but because they can yield incredible meaning and growth if properly approached and handled. Our perception of the situation and how we handle it can therefore either be a source of awesome strength or great weakness.

Inversely, be cautious of the easy way out. The first law of thermodynamics says that there is no free lunch and if something seems too good to be true, you may just be right. In fact, if you’re struggling between options, choose the more challenging. You probably know this is the right answer already, or else you’d have quickly chosen the easier option!

Hard choices, easy life. Easy choices, hard life.

– Jerzy Gregorek

Take the high road, it’s far less crowded.

– Warren Buffett



As a powerful second-order benefit, this mindset also helps develop a superpower in the sense that you get comfortable putting it all on the line without a fear of failure. Many people can't do this and end up hedging their bets, but there is always a cost associated with hedging. Sometimes the cost is insidious and hard to notice, but it is inescapable. However, if you can reframe things so that failure = learning, pain = growth, you might come to actually look forward to pushing yourself to your limits and not worrying about the outcome. Once you experience the freedom and playfulness that comes with this mindset, it's hard to go back.¹

That which hurts, also instructs.

– Benjamin Franklin

Counter to popular opinion, excelling and doing great things doesn't need to burn you out, but it does often take far longer than expected, and that's ok.² If you've found something you're truly interested in, you're playing an [infinite game](#) – you're honing your craft for its own sake and not to “win.” Curiosity is pulling you rather than being pushed by external validation or other more fragile and ephemeral motivators.

An obsessive interest in a topic is both a proxy for ability and a substitute for determination... And when you're obsessively interested in something, you don't need as much determination: you don't need to push yourself as hard when curiosity is pulling you.

– Paul Graham,

[The Bus Ticket Theory of Genius](#)

Now, the second part of this equation, mattering, is a bit more elusive. Sometimes what matters is obvious, but in a new or unproven endeavor, it likely isn't. In Paul Graham's excellent essay, [The Bus Ticket Theory of Genius](#), he defines some helpful criteria to better determine whether an obsession matters (and there are obsessions that don't matter!): are you creating rather than consuming; are you doing something challenging, that others find even more challenging?

Creating something that matters, or going from [zero to one](#), can be extraordinarily challenging. However, if successful, it can have an outsized impact.

Likewise, finding and doing something which is challenging for you, but even more challenging for others is a great indicator of what you're meant to do. Even more powerful is the contrast found in doing something which comes easily to you and that you enjoy, that others find

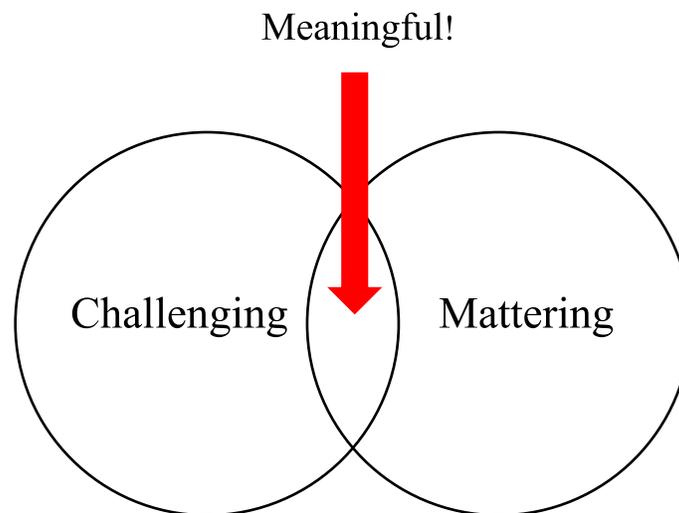
¹ Part of the reason why systems > goals

² From what I've seen, those who do great things are incredibly consistent in their work ethic and “mechanics.” They set aside hours each day to do deep work and hone their skills. As Joe Girardi says, "Everything is being able to repeat your mechanics. The consistency of repeating your mechanics determines how good you are, in all sports."

difficult. If you find this in your life, even if other’s ridicule you, think your project is *just* a “toy,” or simply don’t understand, double down on it.³

Distilled, the “meaningful” results from the combination of something challenging (PIPER in something that interests you) with something that matters (creating; doing something difficult that others find even more difficult than).

When these circumstances come together and form something meaningful, it’s like blending tin and copper. The result is bronze, an alloy so much harder than would be expected that it appears a different metal.⁴



³ PG’s [How to Get Startup Ideas](#) discusses in depth why things originally seen as “toys” can be great startup ideas.

⁴ h/t PG for this awesome way to think about the power of blending metals, traits, etc. that aren’t typically combined – [Why Smart People Have Bad Ideas](#)