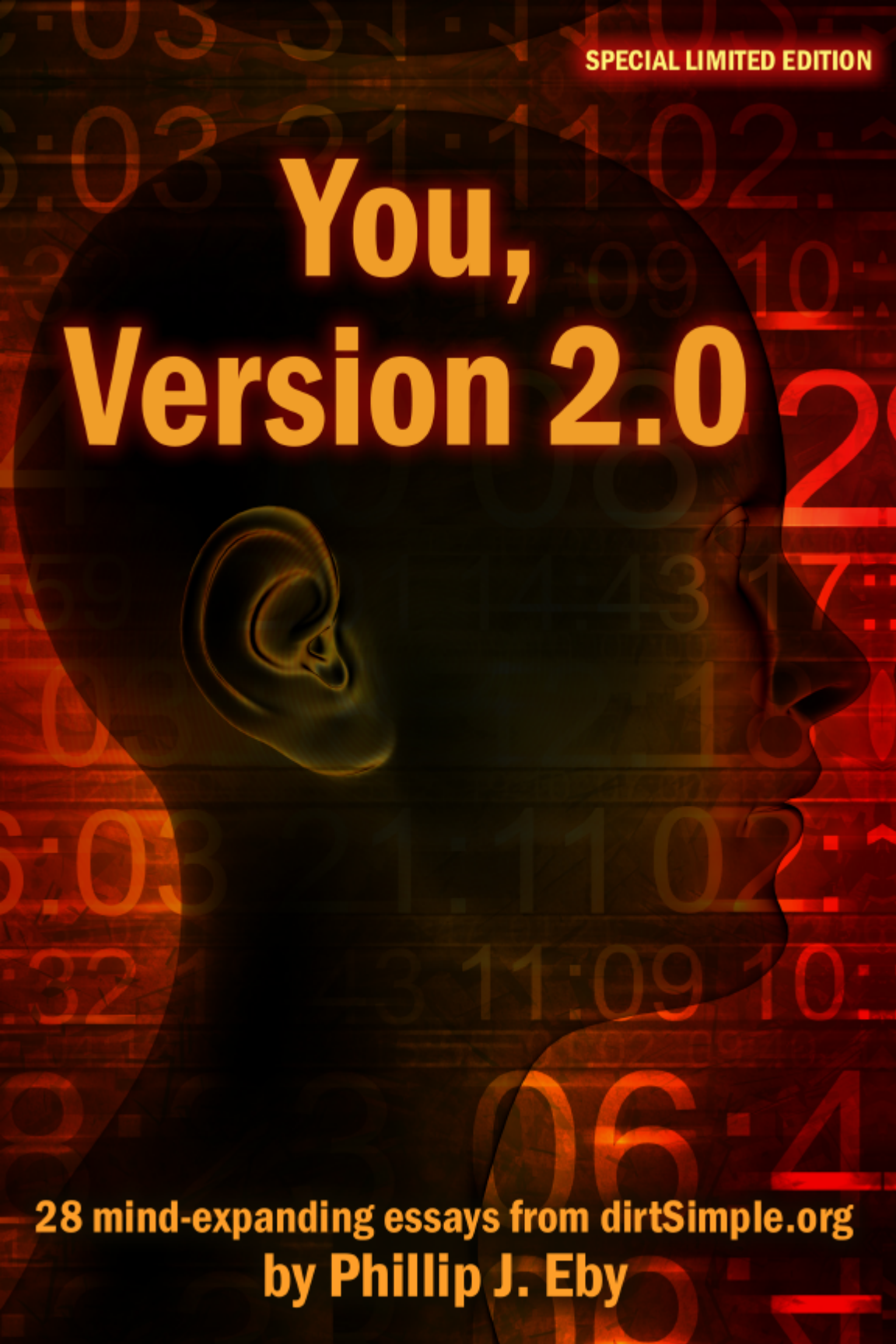
SPECIAL LIMITED EDITION

You, Version 2.0



28 mind-expanding essays from dirtSimple.org

by Phillip J. Eby

Praise for the Essays in "You, Version 2.0"

"Oh man, you are so spot on I just can't believe it. Everybody, hang that quote to the wall and live by it, it's the **mantra to a life of happiness**, really. You're not going anywhere until it sinks deeply within you. "
– Nicola Larosa

"That was **brilliant**! You just summed up my year, my life, me, and every one of us on the planet!"
– Danielle Lynn

"**My confidence is now restored, thanks!** I can think of several members of my circle of friends/family that could learn a great deal from your techniques."
– "D"

"I think this will be **really helpful** to me. I've had a lot of problems with concentration, with attention. Thinking back, the idea that I just haven't been physically present in my body to the degree I could **really rings true**."
– Chris Capel

"**Opened my eyes** considerably... The realization that there are two structures operating in my person is **very freeing**. I don't have to fight certain things anymore."
– "Marco"

"Thank you - that was brilliant; the **most inspirational short essay that I have read this year**."
– Anonymous

"**Really got me motivated** to start the new year right!"
– David Hartunian

"Your article The Multiple Self has **changed me forever**. I can't describe how great this is what you are writing about, thank you."
– "Migel"

"Your model is **remarkably coherent and useful**, and has given me **tools to take better care of my brain."**
– Anonymous

"I have printouts of your self-discovery posts salted in my tickler folder so I can **re-read them periodically each month**."
– "Mike"

"**Timely thinking** for a society on the cusp of radical technological and societal change." – Jef Allbright

"Brilliant way to express some **profound** that I normally associate with Buddhist psychology in a way that **makes sense** to us geeks."
– Marc-Antoine P.

"Thanks so much for taking the time to put your struggles into words. Reading this post, I have such a sense of recognition – since I go through so many of the same things. I just can't phrase my thoughts as well. **I'm very inspired**." – "David"

"**Fascinating**, and I can't wait for more." – Owen Phelps

"**Wow**. Most of what I read here, I've thought at one time or another [but] I've never been able to consider all this together in such a coherent matter." – Calvin Spealman

"It's quite **refreshing** to hear you express this so clearly. I find that it **resonates very strongly** with where I am now."
– Duncan McGreggor

"I am very **glad you wrote this** article. I also see the functioning of my brains as you described, but I was never able to write it down and **share it with others**." – Nevenka Kristan

"**Thought-provoking** essay, thanks for writing and sharing it."
– Matt Revelle

You, Version 2.0

How you can be happy and live life to its fullest, even if you're too intelligent for your own good!

28 mind-expanding essays from dirtSimple.org

by Phillip J. Eby

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introduction

This book is the story of how I learned to keep my head from getting in the way of my heart and my life.

When I was growing up, my older brother and I used to fight over whether brains or brawn were better, and of course I always took the side of brains, because I was smaller than he was! And so, to be consistent with my own arguments, I learned to shun the things of the body and the material world as being inferior to the things of the mind.

But the truth is that you absolutely cannot experience life to its fullest potential without stepping outside of the realm of pure mind. Pure mind is a fantasy of simplicity and perfection, while the real world is messy, imperfect, and full of complicated love and beauty and feelings.

But before I really understood that, I first had to realize that the purity of "mind" is itself an illusion: the brain is complicated, and the way it works is often quite different from how it *seems* to work.

This book, then, is the story of my discoveries. As such, it is a record not only of my answers, but also my questions, my struggles, and my dead ends. It is not always straight to the point, as no search for truth ever is.

Some of these essays are meant to be read once, and then discarded. Others are meant to be read over and over – in fact, I frequently re-read many of them myself. The mind is a surprisingly tricky thing to change, and simply knowing that something is a particular way, doesn't necessarily make it any easier.

Indeed, many times I'll find myself in a predicament that makes me wonder, "Haven't I had this problem before? What did I do about it then?" And before I began blogging these essays, there was little I could do about it, except struggle through the same problem again.

So here's hoping that you'll find these essays as useful to read, as they were for me to write.

contents

The Long Search

The Discovery

Your Life, Already in Progress

Feelings are not Optional!

To Love Life, Embrace Your Pain

Attention is The Only Technique

Part 1:

The Long Search

In which I look for the line between thought and action, and the border between ideal goals and practical actions

Imperfect == Real 1

What can't die is not alive. Food that can't go bad, isn't any good. To the extent that a thing is not perfect, it is real.

This blog is not what I'd like it to be, but in order to create anything, one must first start with something that is **not** the thing being created.

Welcome to dirtSimple.

Part 2:

The Discovery

In which I learn about the divided nature of the self, and how to reshape it.

The Multiple Self 8

If you've spent any amount of time trying to "improve yourself" in any way, you've undoubtedly experienced some frustration, in that you discover your "self" isn't as much of a part of you as it would appear. It seems bizarre - "you" want "yourself" to do something (or refrain from it), but "yourself" goes ahead and does whatever it wants. Often, "you" may rationalize your behavior in context, only to be later exasperated by your lack of "willpower".

If that is the case, I have some good news for you. It may sound a bit snake-oily at first, like I've got a product to sell or something to gain from convincing you of the idea. And I've been tempted not to try to explain this here, because why should I explain something that could give me a tremendous advantage over people who don't understand it?

On the other hand, since I've come to understand the secret, I find that virtually every form of self-help (that has any competence at all) reflects at least some portion of this secret, and many of the teachings of Zen and other mystic traditions point to it as well. So, in a sense it's not really a secret at all. Everybody's been practically shouting it from the rooftops for centuries, and yet you can't *give*

this secret away. This is mainly because whatever you say about it, people think they *already* understand it, and so never really dig down to the real truth of it, and the profound implications it has for every aspect of life and the human condition.

So, I probably could turn this idea into yet another school of self-help of my own variety, but I don't really see any reason to do that at the moment. So here it is, a freebie - the ultimate answer, not to life, the universe, and everything, but the ultimate answer, I think, to the nature of the human condition: "You" are not "yourself" today.

For that matter, you were not yourself yesterday, and you will not be tomorrow. You never have been, and never will be, because "you" and "yourself" are distinct neural subsystems which do not overlap.

What does that mean? Why should you care? And how is this a deep and mystical revelation, exactly?

Who are you, anyway?

Wave "your" hand. Do it now.

Who waved your hand? Was it you? Could you have? Do "you" know how to wave your hand? Of course not. "You" don't know how to do anything, but "yourself" does.

Now, if you are determined not to learn anything new, you will have already conveniently reclassified these ideas as being about conscious/unconscious mind, or left brain/right brain, and if you want to do that, by all means do so, but you won't actually end up with any new knowledge that way.

In fact, that's precisely how I managed to read so very much about these subjects for so many years without actually ever understanding what this *really* means about life and living. Abstract ideas like conscious and unconscious mind don't help you **do** anything differently than you already do. But if I succeed in actually conveying the real experiential truth that lies beneath concepts like "unconscious mind", then you can begin to change your life in the same way that I'm already changing mine.

To really understand, you need to first understand that you are an *animal*. Most of us humans pretend our entire lives that we are something other than animals, and as a result we think our "animal nature" is something you can just ignore or somehow transcend -- preferably while ignoring it. We enter the false dichotomy of "man or beast", when the truth is actually "man *and* beast." We are not one - we are two. And the one of us who thinks he's running things is really just a recent software upgrade that runs atop a highly sophisticated operating system that's already had millions of years of performance tuning -- *and can run just fine without you*.

That's right. "You" are just a subroutine, and a recently-added one at that. You're like a user-mode driver that gets access to certain kernel data, but you only see and control what the kernel lets you. You have no direct access to the kernel's process space, but you can make calls into it, and you get notifications from it. The bulk of your nature as a human lies entirely outside your process space, outside your ability to directly perceive or control.

(If you find yourself thinking here about the famed "10% of your brain", well, you're not wrong, but it's important to understand that the truth of this and lots of other ideas (like conscious vs. unconscious mind) is quite a bit deeper than the sound bites.)

Now, when I say you're just a subroutine and that your animal nature is the kernel, this doesn't mean that we are robots or machines or that we don't control our actions. Far from it. I mean, however, that we are deluded when we think we *directly* control our actions, and therefore ascribe intention to our actions that doesn't exist.

Why does anyone do anything?

In fact, we frequently do things for reasons that are entirely opaque to us, and then make up reasons later to explain them, because nobody wants to admit that they don't know why they did something. Nonetheless, none of us know, because it's not in our process space to know why the kernel switches in this process at this time, and that process at another time. We can reverse engineer

things, and we can use our "supervisor calls" to inject new programs into kernel space, sure, but we don't *run* in kernel space and *we never will*.

And yet, we all mostly go around pretending as if we *did* run things in our mind and body, which then leads to all sorts of screwed-up thinking - "delusion and ignorance" as the Zen Buddhists call it. We mistake kernel notifications *for our own thoughts*. We think our actions somehow reflect on *us*, when in fact they may reflect nothing more than a poorly-written script that the kernel is running. This is like trying to eat pictures of food: it might fill you up, but it's ultimately unsatisfying.

The thing you need to understand is that it's not a question of "using only 10% of your brain". The point is, you *are* only 10% of your brain. The rest of your brain is bigger, smarter, and better-educated than you, because it can learn things you don't even know you're learning, faster and better than you. It can actually *do* things, for one. You can't. "You" are really just an I/O filter, in a way. You can control everything because you are a software hook that controls what *meaning* things have. By defining the meanings of things, you can get the kernel to do whatever you want. However, if you are confused about any of this, you will feed the kernel garbage meanings, and, well, you will get garbage results.

For that matter, if you are confused about this state of affairs, you will try to "do" things yourself, and because you're only 10% of the processor, you will only screw things up by getting in the kernel's way. Don't do that, it doesn't work. The hidden meaning of "Just do it" is, "establish the kernel's operating parameters and then get the hell out of its way."

Shortly before I figured this out, I read about an interesting computer game called NERO[6]. The idea of this game is that you get a team of robots and you have to train them to fight, by designing training exercises in which you establish goals like maintaining a particular distance from the enemy, and lay out a battleground for the robots to learn in. The interesting thing about this is that the

6 http://www.nerogame.org/

robots basically evolve neural networks that seek to meet the goals you set, and they learn how to do this from experience, not by being programmed. The neural nets that evolve have no self-consciousness, no awareness of how they accomplish the task. Wiring just forms and improves. It would be a mistake to look at the robots' behavior and conclude that there is intelligence or intention there; it is just formation of neural nets in response to environmental stimuli coupled with goal-oriented feedback.

It's not "you" that learns...

And that is precisely what the other 90% of our brains are up to. Formation of neural logic networks in response to environmental stimuli and goal-based feedback. If you are not actively participating in this process, what you get is well, whatever you get.

Pretty much, you're going to have random feedback loops, because whatever you initially train the networks on (e.g. childhood) is going to get used as the basis for evaluating later input and as the basis of your goals. Your subconscious is like a random number generator whose output is fed back into its input, only there's goal seeking involved. Or perhaps it's more like it's a random number generator that's striving to repeatedly reproduce whatever numbers it generated before.

At least, it works that way without your input. Your subconscious needs you to establish meaning, and goals, and values, because without those things, all it knows how to do is maintain the status quo, or respond to what *other* people put into it. If you're not doing your I/O interception duties, it's like the captain is asleep and the entire ship's crew fights to the death to carry out the captain's last orders, whatever they were, even if he was half-asleep (or a child) when he gave them and they no longer make any sense. Conversely, if you over-manage yourself, then you're like the captain going around and trying to do everybody's job, and that just isn't workable either.

After stopping and reading over what I've written so far, I'm a little frustrated, because I still seem to be slipping away from the heart of

what I want to convey. It's too easy to come away from what I've said without realizing just how *incredibly small* "you" are, in relation to your own brain. It's like that old system administrator joke, "Go away, or I shall replace you with a very small shell script." Only it's not a joke, and you are a very small shell script *that thinks it's the data being piped through it*.

Thoughts Are Data – And The Numbers Always Lie

You see, your *thoughts* aren't you either. They're just data being piped through "you". What you "think" about things is mostly just regurgitation of patterns captured by the kernel as part of its massive imitate-and-evolve subsystem. This is not a bad thing, but a good one. Have you ever realized how little control you have over your thoughts? Can you imagine how bad life would be if those were really *your* thoughts?

Imagine a person listening to the radio. Now imagine that this person has never seen a radio before, and thinks that the radio is talking to him or her *directly*. That is, he or she thinks the announcer is talking to him, all the singers are singing to her, etc. For example, when the radio plays the song "You're So Vain", our imaginary person thinks the song really *is* about him!

This is almost as bad as the situation the rest of us are in, but not quite. At least our imaginary listener thinks someone *else* is talking to him. Most of us, on the other hand, think we *are* the announcer on the radio in our heads, and that we're announcing live, when in fact most of it is previously-recorded, and all of it is being piped to you straight from the kernel.

So, don't be frustrated by your thoughts, because they' re not "you" either. Just because the kernel sends you a heap of worry, fear, anger, or other crap on sys.stdin doesn't mean you have to send it on to sys.stdout. Until I understood that, I was under the mistaken impression that fear and worry, hurt and anxiety, disappointment and regret were all *real things*. But they're **not real**! They're just *data*. Heck, they're not even *data about real things*. They're *data about previous*

conclusions drawn about similar things! Sometimes, they're even data about *erroneous* conclusions previously drawn about similar things.

It's not enough to know; you must also rewire!

Don't just understand this intellectually. I've "understood" all these things intellectually for many years and it was useless. The question to ask is, "How do I *implement* things with this knowledge?" How do you drop input data on the floor? How do you insert new data into the output stream? How do I make supervisor calls to the kernel? How do I edit the scripts the kernel is running? Until I started asking these questions, I wasn't able to do much besides dance to the tunes on the radio in my head.

And don't get me wrong, after weeks of playing around with this stuff, I'm still no superman or Zen master. But I have managed a few very interesting hacks. For example, a few weeks ago a certain situation led to me feeling very bad. Intellectually, I totally knew there was no reason to feel bad, because what happened had nothing to do with me. Emotionally, though, I was a wreck.

Suddenly, I had a flash of insight: these are two different neural networks. The intellectual understanding and the emotional response were networks that evolved at different times in my life, under different circumstances. They were therefore not connected, except through their mutual activation in the current circumstance. Therefore, I experienced each network's output as a full and distinct input, but the "emotional" net had no way to receive data from the "intellectual" net, in order to moderate its output. This led to an experience of conflict, in which I could try to suppress the output of the emotional net, given the data from the intellectual one, but this couldn't and wouldn't stop the emotional input from coming in my input pipe.

As soon as I could see that, it was obvious what I needed to do: pipe the output from the "intellectual" net into the "emotional" net, instead of trying to integrate the data downstream in the "consciousness" process. And literally, as soon as I imagined this, the two upstream networks integrated, and the need to feel bad

went away. I still felt bad physically, in my body, so I "shook it out" and it went away. (It appears that shifts in glandular output and neurotransmitter states are used as a crude system-wide state machine to aid in sorting input and output, so even after you adjust an upstream source, you may retain some kinesthetic "pollution" downstream until you garbage collect it.)

Many Circuits, Loosely Joined

Now, before I go further, I want to explain that the "emotional" and "intellectual" networks I just mentioned were *not* my entire emotional or intellectual being. That's precisely the sort of large-scale behavioral integration that our brains do *not* have by default. I integrated two isolated "understandings", each of which was a simple script to assign meaning to a certain class of events. In programming terms, each of these nets could be considered a "business rule"; just pattern recognizers that fired off to send "me" their analysis of the situation. It's just that one of those rules fired off a "knowing" and the other fired off a "feeling".

So, the fact that I did this one particular edit of my brain's rule system does not now mean that intellectual understanding is now integrated with all my emotional impulses. During early life, we write a **lot** of scripts in our brains that are not abstracted or reused in any significant way. Later scripts may abstract or absorb chunks of previous scripts, but they often do so in a downstream way; that is, they take their input from older scripts and output commentary on them, but this commentary doesn't necessarily have any effect on our behavior or feelings, and therefore leads to the experience of inner conflict. So, we inherit a lot of "legacy" code that desperately needs refactoring.

I'm still experiencing these conflicts from time to time, and it's not always easy to integrate the processes. Sometimes, an emotional network offers some kind of input or is linked to a goal that's important, so even piping the intellectual data into that network's input doesn't modulate its output much, and I have to do more extensive refactoring. This can be a pain to try to do while the net is

still running and making you feel bad! It's even worse when the net uses bad feelings as an input indicating that you're in a bad situation; once you get a loop like that started it's pretty tough to get out of without a reboot (like going to sleep, or a surprise interruption that forces the whole process to swap out, as it were).

However, I'm starting to get a kind of catalog of "design patterns" together to make the process a little easier, like establishing state machines to evaluate rules over longer time periods, rather than needing to immediately feel a certain way at the first evidence of a circumstance that potentially matches a pattern.

Command Mode

So how do you **do** this? How do you edit rules, pipe one net to another, make a supervisor call? In the same way you waved your hand at the screen, several paragraphs ago. You *imagine* it, in *command* mode.

There are a lot of books out there about creative visualization and imagining what you want and all that, but there are very very few that even hint at the need for the command mode. You see, imagination is like a scratchpad; it's working memory. If everything you did with that working memory were a command, you'd say and do everything that came into your head. The command mode is like a modifier that says "actually do this", or "make it so". It's quite literally *metadata* that describes what to do with what you imagine.

Point your finger at this book. How did you do that? Do it again. Try something else. Make various motions with your body. Now just think about making the motions. What's the difference between thinking it, and doing it? *That's* command mode.

If you play with it for a bit, you'll discover that command mode is easiest to use with a *destination*. It's likely that when you decide to point at the screen, you're visualizing the endpoint, where your finger is pointing at the screen, rather than visualizing all the motions in-between. Similarly, when I integrated those two networks I spoke of, I just visualized them integrated, and I

happened to engage command mode even though I didn't really know what it was yet.

This is what I mean about not getting in your own way. Your operating system has enormous parallel processing power, whereas "you" are a serial processing filter. If "you" try to get involved in the "how" of things, you will just interfere, because you're a *bottleneck* on how much "yourself" can do! Really, saying that your conscious mind is 10% of your brain is probably grossly exaggerated, because we mistake a lot of the things the kernel does as being part of our consciousness. 5% might be a better estimate.

But even that doesn't truly show just how bad it is to try to shove the entire system's I/O load through the consciousness filter. Even if "you" had a whole 10% of the brain to play with, that 10% is set up for simultaneous use in *serial processing* of experience. "You" just don't have the pipes and peripheral processors to handle that load, but the operating system does.

Those pipes and processors will never be directly accessible to you, for much the same reason that intellectual understanding of your behavior that comes after those behaviors is ingrained usually has no direct effect on the behavior. The newer, more sophisticated abstractions are there to process outputs from the older, more "primitive" subsystems. **We can reason about our inputs, but our inputs are not driven by our reasoning**.

Of course, within the scope of networks wired after we were born, we have a lot more flexibility. Among those networks, we *can* rewire older nets to include input from newer ones. But at the periphery of the brain, these networks are simpler, more hardwired, with less "meta" wiring capability.

This isn't a problem as such, because the brain has plenty of "meta" wiring to go around, and you can do a lot up there that can't be done directly. However, that meta wiring is also part of an older layer than "you", so you still can't access it directly. But you can access it via *emulation mode*, which is another variation on command mode.

In fact, I've been finding that there are a lot of command mode variations. I'm rather reminded of a novel I once read, where a computer programmer traveled into a dimension where magic worked, and he ended up writing a magic compiler. Unlike other magicians who worked out their spells in somewhat random fashion, he developed abstractions, a subroutine library, and an orthogonal command system.

For example, he would say things like "backslash light enter" to cast a light spell, where other magicians might chant some kind of short poem about light. As a result, he became one of the most proficient wizards in the land, because his powers were extensible and composable in ways that other wizards' were not.

In the same way, most of us don't really know how to use our own brains in a systematic way. We give them commands like we were a cat walking across a keyboard: every now and then we end up with something syntactically valid, but semantically... questionable.

So I'm beginning to understand now why Bandler and Grinder speak so disparagingly of the conscious mind, and talk about the need to engage the unconscious mind when training people, meanwhile distracting their conscious minds so as to keep them out of the way. I suppose that beats trying to actually get across to someone all the information that I just wrote in this article, and further get them to actually believe it, just in order to teach them something *else*.

WYFIWYG: What You Feel Is What You Get

And on that note, I'm going to tell you one more secret-that's-not-secret before I go. A lot of self-help books mention this, but I'm going to try to explain how and why it's so important. They usually tell you to suspend judgment, to just "try the ideas" without getting caught up in your ideas about whether the book's approach will or won't work. This is not, as it happens, because of some sort of faith-healing type thing, so that they have an excuse in case their stuff doesn't work. (Well, maybe with some of them it is.)

The actual issue is that if you think you're the announcer on the radio in your head, you'll probably believe whatever it says as the gospel truth, and act on it, regardless of whether it has anything to do with your goals or what you're trying to accomplish. The next thing you know, you're believing stuff like "This won't work," and you're suddenly adding metadata tags like "doesn't work" and "don't believe his lies" to the audio and video streams you pipe back to the kernel. And the kernel, since it has no reason to doubt you, will then act according to the metadata you give it.

You see, the real secret about command mode is that there is *no* command mode. It's really more like a tagging system, where the kernel acts according to the tags you put on stuff. You can tag things as "just pretending", or "not important", or any number of other things, and the kernel does whatever you've set it up to do for those tags. That means you really do need to watch what you think, and learn how to "browse your own thoughts at -3". Otherwise, you can clog your kernel with an awful lot of crap.

There is **so** very much more to all this, more that I've seen and discovered and experienced and want to tell you about, but many books have been written about it already, and there's no way for a single article to compete. I'm not going to promise to elaborate further in future posts, although I'm sure I'll want to try from time to time as new insights or possibilities occur to me. But I'd certainly be interested to hear if any of you pull off any cool or interesting hacks using the information in this article. There is an entire field of knowledge waiting to be discovered out there... or should I say, in here? (he said, gently tapping his forehead.)

A Spooky Mind Hack 9

I was originally planning to spend a little time this evening on writing a follow up to "The Multiple Self", to expand on some points and answer some questions folks posed in the comments, but an interesting thing happened on the way to the computer, that I thought I'd share with you instead. (At least for now.)

Anyway, I was thinking about including a quote from an old book I'd read. I didn't remember the title, but I knew the author had said something like "Use your faculties; don't work yourself" in it, and I wanted to get the exact quote, and see what else he said that was relevant.

So I walked over to the bookshelves, and began systematically scanning them for the book using my usual technique of holding an image of the book in mind, so that it would "pop out" at me while I scanned.

About halfway down the first stack of shelves, it occurred to me that I was doing exactly what I just wrote that people shouldn't do: attempting to cram a bunch of data through the narrow pipe of my consciousness. What I needed to do was to restate the problem in a way that would allow my subconscious to fully apply its processing

Part 3:

Your Life, Already in Progress

In which I realize that my life has already started, and "someday" is already here...

The Island Within 13

A couple of weeks ago, I heard about an interesting experiment. The researchers took some rats and divided them into two groups. Rats in both groups were individually placed in a tank of water that had been made opaque by adding milk, so the rats couldn't see what was in the water.

For one of the groups, however, there was a kind of "island" in the tank: a raised section of the bottom that was high enough that the rats could place their hind feet on it, to get some rest from swimming. The other group was in a tank with no island; they had no place to rest.

In a relatively short amount of time, the "island" rats learned to swim straight for the island. The control group, of course, just flailed wildly, trying to stay above water. Then came the experiment's payoff: both groups of rats were individually placed in a tank with no island, and the amount of time it took them to give up and sink beneath the water was measured. (They were, of course, promptly rescued by the scientists.)

The result? The "island" rats lasted almost twice as long as the control rats, swimming frantically in search of the island they **knew** must be there - an island that really only existed within them.

So, the part I find compelling is this: sometimes it's better to believe a false good thing, than to believe a true bad one. One imagines the rats thinking, "I know that island is here somewhere! Just a little bit more and I can rest... just a little bit longer now..."

Of course, there are also true good things, and false bad ones in this world. The islands within us may be places of fear or sorrow that we constantly swim away from, even when they never existed at all. Indeed, we so often live on these future islands we fear or yearn for, that we scarcely notice the water we're treading in right now.

The Content of Your Mind is the Quality of Your Life

About a year ago, my wife and I signed a contract for a roofer to replace our house's roof, damaged by last year's hurricanes. A year and several thousand dollars later, we still don't have our roof finished, as the job became unprofitable for the roofer, who therefore has no incentive to finish it. We've spent so much time worrying and stressing about this, and wondering what we can do about it.

But just a few days ago, it occurred to me for the first time that maybe we've been spending so much time trying to swim away from an island of fear, that it never occurred to us the worrying is much worse than the things we've been worrying about. We don't actually have any roof leaks right now - that we know of, anyway. Hurricane season is over. The worst that's likely to happen right now is that we might have to hire somebody else and waste several thousand dollars.

Sure, that stuff's all **bad**, but the worrying has been *much* worse, in terms of quality of life. Those things, if they happen, will only happen the once, but our worrying has been weekly and sometimes daily, for most of the year! In retrospect, I wish we'd just hired

someone else months ago; the quality of life improvement would've been more than worth it.

So, for the first time, I acquired a personal perspective on that old saw about the coward dying a thousand deaths, and the brave man only one. It doesn't matter how hard you swim away from the island, it still remains within you. But if you cross **over** the island, you'll leave it behind you when you go. As the saying goes, you can touch a thistle and it pricks you, but grasp it boldly and the spines crumble.

So, it's also literally true that while life will always have its trouble, worrying will indeed make it double!

Except that next it's triple, then quadruple, quintuple, and so on, each and every time you worry. And it's an even worse ratio if the worrying is more painful than the *actual thing* you're worrying about!

My spirits buoyed by this insight, I found myself thinking... what if you could turn it around? If your life experience can be so thoroughly overwhelmed by worry about negative things, could you equally overwhelm it with positive ones? In other words, what is the **opposite of worry**?

The Opposite of Worrying

Are you thinking about it? Wouldn't it be cool to know what it is? Don't you wish I'd tell you? Are you looking forward to finding out? Have you guessed it yet?

That's right: it's *anticipation*. I probably wouldn't have thought of it myself, if I hadn't been talking with my wife about Christmas presents the night before, just after she'd been watching a "Queer Eye" episode where they helped a guy give his fiancee a *surprise wedding*, of all things.

Now, I don't know about you, but I winced as soon as I heard this concept. "Are they nuts?" I said. "A lot of women have been looking forward to their wedding almost their entire **lives**. They're going to rob her of weeks of anticipation and obsessing over every

detail." (And yes, the fiancee definitely looked like she'd have been a lot happier with more advance notice.)

Anyway, after that we talked briefly about Christmas presents, and I was thinking about how my wife loves to obsess over what a present might be, which is why I usually try to tease her a little bit ahead of Christmas or her birthday with impossible hints and enigmatic clues that she has no chance of figuring out. From experience, I know that she loves the anticipation far more than the momentary enjoyment of the actual presents.

So the next day when I thought about the worry equation, it pretty quickly came to mind that the opposite of worry -- in content, not structure -- is anticipation. When you anticipate a thing, you follow the exact same structure as worry: you imagine something you think might happen, and then *feel* how you think you would feel if the real thing happened.

So, whether the thing you're imagining is good or bad, the result of doing it repeatedly is to magnify the effect of the experience on your life, if only because of the repetition.

But that doesn't entirely explain it, because the truth is that you're **not** actually responding the way you would if the real thing happened. When real bad things happen, we normally just get focused on fixing them. And when real good things happen, it's quite nice, to be sure, but it's nothing like the ecstasy or fervor of some good anticipation!

The secret, I think, is that when we imagine the future -- whether good or bad -- we leave out a significant amount of **context**. We see only the bad thing or the good thing itself, floating like an island in the oceans of our consciousness. We don't see ourselves *fixing* a problem, we just see the problem itself. We don't look at the drawbacks or limitations of an anticipated future either, like kids not thinking beforehand about having to clean up all the wrapping paper and boxes on Christmas day.

Not that that's a bad thing, mind you, at least where anticipation is concerned. I've spent too much of my life avoiding good things in

order not to have to clean up after them, metaphorically speaking. It's just that I'm realizing now that all those people babbling about "it's the journey, not the destination" actually have a much bigger point than I had previously been aware of.

Small Goals Have No Power To Move Men's Hearts

You see, big goals are useful because they give you something powerful to look forward to for a long time, not because their momentary result is so valuable. You can work for a lifetime and never actually achieve your goals, yet nonetheless have a wonderful life in the process. (For example, it's unlikely that any golfer will ever shoot a perfect game, nor any batter achieve a perfect 1.000 average, but that doesn't make anybody quit playing golf or baseball.)

Paul Graham advises that, in general, we should all work on the hardest problems available to us[8], in the fields we believe we can make a contribution to. I think that this is true, for no other reason than that it's the what makes the most rational sense for improving the quality of your spiritual and emotional life, regardless of whether you actually solve the problem or not.

The flip side of anticipation, you see, is that it supports *involvement* in what you're doing and how you live your life. It gives you a chance to see the island *and* to be thoroughly invested in your swim towards it. No mere amusement or pleasure is a substitute for involvement, and games are only fun when they capture enough of your attention to make you invest yourself in them this way.

Before my "2.0 upgrade", I mostly feared such involvement, because the idea of losing always seemed worse than the idea of not playing. And to the extent that I understood the nature of anticipation and the idea of "the journey, not the destination", I rejected them as a kind of cheat or self-delusion.

By now, however, it has become clear to me that appropriate self-delusion isn't just a good idea, it's pretty much a necessity for

8 http://paulgraham.com/procrastination.html

actually accomplishing anything! Sure, you can go too far with it (*cough* George Bush *cough*), but what **can't** you go too far with, really?

On the other hand, self-delusion is a relative concept. The truth is that the messages our senses receive are *always* subject to interpretation. What we think an event "means" is **inherently** delusional, in the sense that our interpretations were never reality to start with. Does a problem in the middle of your attempt to do something "mean" the effort is doomed to failure? That you should try harder? That you should think smarter? **Every** answer to the question of what an event "means" is ultimately a delusion!

So, to the extent that we assign the meanings, we control the meaning and quality of our lives, in an emotional and spiritual sense at least. I'm not talking here about trying to control the behavior of the universe through thought or creative manifestation or any of that stuff; I just mean that what you think about and how you do it will entirely determine how you *feel* about your life. That may in turn cause you to do things differently, for better or worse, but that's beside the point; your quality of life was *already* affected by your thoughts before you ever acted on them!

Is Anything Really Worth Worrying About It?

It's easy to shrug this idea off; I was first exposed to it maybe 25 years ago, when I first read Maxwell Maltz' "Psycho-Cybernetics". But it was just intellectual knowledge, something that became part of my consulting repertoire, not something I really connected with or lived.

But if you can make this a part of your understanding of life *now*, then you can really *feel* how worrying saps the life out of you piece by piece, and you can become aware that the worrying is nearly always worse than whatever you're worrying about. And even if it isn't to start with, it will be as soon as you worry about it enough times! So if you can make this a part of your experience -- not just your knowledge -- then you will be in a position to make a very real improvement in your day-to-day quality of life.

As for me, I'm now thinking about how I can use anticipation to make additional improvements. The trick seems to be that you need something you really believe will or can happen, but it doesn't necessarily need a concrete time frame to happen in. And it's helpful if it's connected to the processes of your life, so that you can experience at any moment a connection to that dream and believe you're moving towards it.

Thus, the secret of successful people everywhere is that they actually **reverse** the usual way of looking at reality. Instead of considering the "real" world to be the fixed and unchanging truth, they realize that the only place where truth is fixed is *inside* us. It's only our external reality that moves from day to day, not the constant compass of the soul. Magnetic north will jitter and shift as you move about the globe, but true north is always in your heart.

So build as you will,
your castles in air;
as long as there's room
for an island beneath.

And although you'll still swim
through the thick and the thin,
your life's **really** lived
on the island within.

Part 4:

Feelings are not Optional!

In which I discover that feelings are biology's way of predicting the future, and the subconscious mind's control system.

Smelling the Fear, Feeling the Future 16

Recently I've been reading an interesting book called "Animals In Translation". The author, Temple Grandin, is an autistic woman who writes about the similarities between animal behavior and autistic traits. I've been finding it fascinating because it has been giving me a lot of insight into my own behavior and traits as well.

While I'm not a diagnosed autistic, I do score pretty high on the "Autism Quotient" test: almost double an average man's score, albeit still lower than the typical scores of people diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or autism.

Nonetheless, a lot of the differences that the author explains exist between autistic and "normal" people do apply to me, so they're fascinating to read about. For example, they explain a lot about why things that seem obvious to me are very hard for other people to grasp.

Some of these differences are two-edged swords, of course. My ability to see and hear things with precision and detail also makes it easy for me to get distracted from the big picture, and sometimes inclines me to be overly critical of other people's work (in the sense

of having unintended side effects beyond simply communicating the issues I've observed).

Some of the book's other insights will probably make for fascinating articles at a later time, but for right now I want to focus on an interesting topic that the book unfortunately only glances at in passing. In one chapter, the author writes a lot about the purpose of fear in animal motivation. She explains that, for most animals and autistics, fear is a much worse experience than pain, whereas normal people are more likely to prefer being afraid to being in pain.

She goes on to explain that this is because fear is an early-warning system. It's better for an animal's survival to respond to the fear of something, than the actual pain of it. In a sense, the function of pain is merely to provide you with something to later fear, because punishing you for something that has already happened isn't much use. This is also why animals can learn to fear things by observing others of their species behave fearfully: if monkeys had to get bitten by tigers in order to fear them, it wouldn't be very good for their odds of survival.

She then proceeds to go into a bunch of stuff about how animals are designed to fear close-up signs of predators, not far-off signs, and how this again allows animals to make decisions about the future. Smelling the strong scent of a predator means you're in its territory, thus being afraid and then avoiding the area that makes you afraid makes you safer because you're less likely to be discovered by the predator. Smelling a far-off predator may mean you need to watch out, but isn't a reason to take immediate action.

You Can't Decide What You Can't Feel

But the part of this discussion I found most interesting was when she talked about how emotions factor into human behavior, especially decision-making:

> A lot of obviously emotional decisions probably *are* dumb a lot of the time. But the problem isn't the fact that emotions was involved. Everyone uses emotion to

> make decisions. People with brain damage to their emotional systems have a hard time making any decision at all, and when they do make a decision it's usually bad.

She goes on to write about how emotions are how people and animals predict the future, and therefore how they make decisions:

> That's what Elliot couldn't do after his brain damage: he couldn't predict the future, so he couldn't decide what to do about the future. He'd get stuck in endless deliberations instead. One time when Dr. Damasio asked him what day he wanted to come to the office next week, Elliot pulled out his date book and spent a full half-hour going through all the pros and cons of each one of the two days Dr. Damasio had suggested. He went on and on and on, spelling out all the possible consequences of either choice and never reaching a conclusion.... Without visceral emotion, Elliot couldn't automatically predict which day would be better and which day would be worse; he also couldn't tell whether the two days would be equally good or equally bad. He couldn't decide about the future.

I don't know about you, but that sure sums a lot of my behaviors up in a nutshell. I'm not nearly as bad as that Elliot guy, but that's only because I'm highly skilled at getting other people to make enough framing decisions for me that I only have to make the ones that can be approached on rational grounds with limited emotional input! Even when I make decisions based on political reasons or sensitized to the emotions of others, I tend to do this in a fairly analytical way.

But, for fairly simple, stupid stuff like what order to do some tasks in, I'm often a complete mess. Generally speaking, I just wait until stuff just has to be done, or in some other way it becomes sufficiently obvious what to do. Until reading what I quoted above, though, I had no idea *why* I was so easily bogged down when trying to make even trivial decisions.

So I'm intrigued, because perhaps this insight will let me develop a fix or workaround for the problem. My previous attempts at workarounds have focused on two things:

1. Getting a bigger problem, and
2. Moving quickly, to force more decisions to occur at an unconscious level

In a way, these are both just facets of the same thing. By "getting a bigger problem" -- that is, focusing on a higher-level goal -- I tend to end up moving more quickly, and vice versa.

However, these tricks still don't work all that well in the context of my personal goals; they're much easier to apply to goals that come from my work or other external sources, or to personal goals that I've externalized by publicizing them.

In other words, it's almost as if I do have some ability to use my emotions for decision-making, but that the only emotion I'm actually using is shame or embarrassment or something of that sort.

This is a good sign, though, as it probably means that my issue has more to do with either some kind of emotional suppression taking place, or else it's a simple function of being overtrained to a very specific set of cues -- and the book's other chapters have certainly suggested that it's an animal/autistic tendency to over-fixate on very specific training cues.

Indeed, I think it's likely that overtraining is the issue for me, and that I became fixated on social cues as a result of simple fear, mostly of my mother's violent mood swings. It was much more important for me to predict my mother's future behavior than the results of my own behavior!

You could probably say I was the human equivalent of what Grandin calls a "high-fear animal": intensely curious and highly intelligent, but totally motivated by trying to predict the behavior of dangerous predators such as my mother and school bullies, as well as the strange behaviors of fickle "friends" and fawning teachers.

What Your Imagination Is Actually For

Another thing that happened was that I tended to use my mind and imagination as a way to escape from a painful reality -- **not** as a tool for planning my future. There was no connection between my childhood escape fantasies and what my life was really like, and I had been taught by my father that the way to avoid disappointment was to not expect anything. One of his favorite sayings: "Man appoints, and God disappoints."

So, I ended up having pleasant associations with the *act* of imagining -- or reading, or watching TV, or any other "escape" activity -- but not with the *content* of those things, which were never tied to reality. Indeed, I preferred my entertainment to be as unconnected with everyday reality as possible!

In retrospect, it seems obvious that I would have a hard time dealing with both autonomy *and* the ill-defined goals of other people. With enough constraints provided by well-defined goals, there can be only one "best" answer to a problem, and I've actually developed a good set of visceral reactions to a wide variety of constraint-based issues. These make me a good designer and strategic adviser, but not that great at my personal accomplishments. I envy the people who seem to "have their act together", and work diligently over a long time period to accomplish personally meaningful goals.

This has become even more important to me in the last month, since I realized that there isn't anything I need to wait for in order to start living. I've joined my life "already in progress" and have come to a sudden shock of awareness, like an actor who's just noticed it's his turn to speak but has lost track of what line he's supposed to say next. I thought that I had to achieve various things first, in order to get to where I wanted to be, and now I realize that there isn't anywhere to go; I can do whatever it is that I want, right now, and all I need to do is figure out what it is that I want, and how to go about doing it.

Which of course, I have absolutely no idea how to go about deciding.

Perhaps I missed an important development window, wherein I was supposed to connect emotions to what I imagined, rather than to the act of imagining itself. But that seems too broad a generalization, because when I think about it I can recall lots of examples of emotions I've associated with things I've imagined, both positive and negative.

On the other hand, many of these emotions seem to be things I developed in later life, such as my ability to respond to sexual fantasy or to the elegance of an algorithm - both of which responses I coincidentally developed around puberty. If I try to think back any further than that into my childhood, the main emotions I come up with are (in no particular order) fear, shame, pride, curiosity, and despair.

Unfortunately, none of these emotions are particularly useful in planning one's day, unless it mainly involves sex and programming while avoiding various forms of unpleasantness. And while I must admit that a day of sex and programming certainly sounds terrific, it might get a bit boring if that was what **every** day consisted of! More to the point, real-world constraints would quickly interfere as well.

So, it seems I have a rather restricted emotional vocabulary when it comes to future planning. I often "feel like" doing a wider variety of things in the *present*, but when it comes to thinking about the future, programming and sex appear to be the areas I'm best at anticipating future feelings about, in a way that leads to action. (So to speak.)

Actually, if I think about this a bit more I find there's something rather interesting about this. It's not really that I anticipate a future feeling in either of those respects; I experience the excitement or aesthetic appreciation *now*, even though I'm thinking about something that doesn't exist except in a possible future. I may be thinking about how cool some design will be once I implement it, but I'm feeling the "ooh, that'll be cool!" feeling in the *present*.

Could the problem be that simple? Maybe all I need to do is to learn how to anticipate what I would feel later, and feel it **now**.

Feeling The Future

So how do I do that, exactly? When I try to imagine how I'll feel after say, going to a movie, or doing the dishes, I don't really seem to feel anything. I mean, what's to feel? These don't seem special enough to feel much of anything, one way or the other.

I think, however, that maybe the problem is I'm too focused on "meta" feelings - feelings *about* something. There's not a lot to feel "about" doing the dishes or going to the movies. I might feel either one is a good idea, or not worth the bother, but in neither case is it going to be a particularly strong feeling.

But if I compare this with the way I feel in response to things that do motivate me in the present, then it's easy to see that those feelings aren't "meta". I don't feel something "about" sex or software designs any more than I do about other things -- *I just feel them*. In the case of design, an elegant design just makes me feel good; I don't feel something good "about" the design. It is attractive in itself, for its own sake.

But when I try to plan things, I seem to try to feel something "about" the things, like how good it would feel to have done the dishes, which is a rather faint feeling at best. For programming, however, I simply envision the *result* and seeing it usually makes me feel good, and so I do it. Or rather, that's what I usually do when I actually make progress. I don't always envision, and so don't always end up accomplishing anything.

So anyway, the sequence that works appears to be something like:

1. Envision desirable result(s)
2. Experience feelings in direct response to the envisioned result
3. Make a decision to have the result

In principle, I've understood this already, but in practice there are some pitfalls. For example, it's easy to sidetrack #1 into thinking about steps or obstacles instead of envisioning the results, and some results are rather hard to visualize. It's very easy to focus on something that's really only a way to *get* what you actually want.

#2 is easily sidetracked too, into feelings "about" the vision, instead of simply *experiencing* the vision. I can also easily get sidetracked into mentally experiencing the steps of getting to the result.

Maybe there's a simple way to fix these distractions. We could call it the "Mmmmm" test. If you can't find a way to envision a goal such that it makes you go "Mmmmmm" (think Homer Simpson and donuts), then you're probably envisioning the wrong thing or not focusing on a direct response to what you're envisioning. When it comes to sex and programming, my thoughts can easily pass the "Mmmmm" test, so that's a good indication that the test is right, or at least isn't wrong.

But when I think about the dishes or the laundry or any number of other tasks, it's easy to see what's going wrong when I apply the "Mmmm" test. For these tasks, I envision myself *doing the task* - which results in a mild negative experience - a sort of, "maybe later, if I have to" kind of feeling.

So what happens if I shift focus and envision only the result, like clean dishes in the cupboards and fresh clothes in the closet? Hmmm. Well, there's no question it's better; it produces a faintly pleasant feeling, with no negative connotations or any desire to avoid the thought. It's not especially motivating though, and there's still no "Mmmmm, donut" factor there.

What seems to help, though, is if I aggregate the images into a higher-level image. Instead of thinking "dishes done" or "fresh laundry", I can think "clean and well-organized household", of which the dishes and laundry are a component part. That image produces at least a mild "Mmmm" factor, though obviously an extremely mild one when compared to a good software design or a hot sex fantasy!

Planning is not Motivation, Motivation is not Planning

What I find really interesting about this is that it reveals a conflict between motivation and planning. If you want to produce accurate plans and be able to act efficiently, it's essential to break everything

down into very small pieces that can be achieved independently. (A process called "chunking down", in NLP terminology.) However, it's also just become very apparent to me that for *motivation*, it's more important to be able to "chunk up".

That is, motivation requires that you tie each of the smallest tasks to some larger goal that you actually focus your (emotional) attention on. Thus, paradoxically, the more I try to organize my tasks effectively, the less motivated I may be to do them!

It's a strange thought, yet it seems true. Certainly it meshes with the things I've read about the importance of having "big hairy audacious goals" and how "small goals have no power to move the human heart" and all that sort of thing. It also lines up well with my previous findings that "finding a bigger problem" and trying to challenge myself to accomplish "impossible" tasks are more likely to produce results than micromanaging lists in a PIM or on paper. I frequently make good use of lists and other organizing tools and techniques when I'm already motivated, but the lists and other tools don't actually have any power to motivate me themselves.

Okay, so at least now I have a better idea about linking emotions to possible futures. Will this automatically lead to better decision-making? I mean, mightn't it just mean that I keep chunking trivial things up until they're compelling?

Well, if you *can* chunk something up into the big picture, it must actually be pretty important to your life. I mean, if something is really trivial, it's not going to be a big enough part of your life to show up when you envision such a large chunk. Instead, your biggest and most personally meaningful goals should actually have a significant advantage when compared to transitory things, so it should actually lead to making better choices for your life as a whole.

But what about simple decisions like "what do I do next?" How do I figure out what order to do my to-do list in?

Ah, but that's the beauty of it! The only reason I have so darn many things on my to-do list is because I chunked them down to little

pieces in the first place. If I was looking at larger, more "life-sized" chunks, there'd be fewer of them, and it would be easier to prioritize them. I'd also be more likely to accomplish a bunch of the small tasks at once, due to the "bigger picture" focus.

Of course, being as well-read as I am in the area of time management and organizational techniques, I can now see that I've just come very close to reinventing the Tony Robbins "OPA" system, whose name refers to an "Outcome-focused, Purpose-driven Action plan". (More recently, the system has been renamed to "RPM", for "Rapid Planning Method", but I think the old name describes it better.)

Unfortunately, understanding the idea of a system isn't enough to make it work. In my case, I've used OPA before and liked it, but at the time it seemed like something you needed a big, busy life for. (Like if you're, say, Tony Robbins!) I used it most successfully during the time that I was a manager at Verio with a lot of irons in the fire, but fell out of it when things became less hectic. I later took up use of LifeBalance[13] and a limited form of GTD[14] when my life next became hectic in a different way.

Until I started writing this essay, I had been thinking about resuming my use of LifeBalance, but now it's not as clear to me that it would be useful. I find myself thinking that tools like LifeBalance and GTD are maybe more suited to a *reactive* life, where a thousand things are coming at you and you need to track and respond and somehow make sure you squeeze some of the "important, but not urgent" things in somewhere.

However, if you realize (as I just did a few weeks ago), that it's actually *your* life, then it begins to become clear that reacting to "urgent, but not important" matters is and should always be a sideline. If I'm going to actually start *running* my life, then it seems to make sense that I should use a more proactively-oriented system.

And, thanks to writing this essay, I now know what such a system needs to provide me with, and some of the OPA techniques should

13 A personal management program, found at http://www.llamagraphics.com/
14 "Getting Things Done" - a book by David Allen

be quite useful. Specifically, OPA encourages taking your smaller items and grouping them into "OPA blocks", which are collections of related tasks you intend to accomplish as a unit to satisfy some larger purpose.

Sizing Your Goals For Maximum Motivation

The part of this that I always had trouble wrapping my head around before was that Robbins always seemed to just "make up" the blocks' outcome to fit the tasks. He would frequently describe a block as "Make major progress on X today", even if there was no inherent connection between the tasks selected, apart from being tasks needed to achieve X!

Now, this makes a lot more sense to me, because the point of the exercise is motivation. Doing a bunch of "stuff" obviously isn't going to be nearly as exciting as making "major progress" towards your goals! It makes a lot of sense in hindsight now, but even when I was using OPA before I never really "got" it because I didn't really see the connection between emotions and decision-making that "Animals In Translation" pointed out to me.

Similarly, I tended to skimp on one of the OPA process steps, which was listing out the purposes (the "P" in "OPA") or reasons why doing a particular block is important to you. It's obvious now in hindsight that the reason to write these out in detail is to focus your thinking on the benefits, and to "juice" your emotions up, as Robbins might say. OPA calls for doing this every day, but I tended to write them only once, if ever, and be fairly sketchy even then.

I think that part of the reason I did that was that I tended to think of attempts at self-motivation as somehow being "cheating". I think I felt that if stuff should be done, I should just do it without having to be "motivated" to do it.

But ever since the discoveries that led to me writing "The Multiple Self", (and even more since "The Island Within" and subsequent articles), it's been clear to me that the care and feeding of the brain's "animal" aspect is critical and entirely non-optional. Emotions rule

our actions, and control what we do and don't learn or even perceive to begin with. Thus, to truly live, we must be able to feel the future, not just think about it.

So tonight, I'm going to dig out my old OPA literature, and tomorrow I'm going to take it for a spin. Wish me luck.

Part 5:

To Love Life, Embrace Your Pain

In which I learn that fear, pain, mistakes, and failure are unavoidable... because you can't really live without them.

Death in a Pile of Unfinished Projects 21

I've known for a very long time that I have a problem with "finishing" things. Often it's because my vision keeps moving forward as I approach it -- I'm always seeing how much better the thing could be than what I've done on it so far.

But there are other reasons, too. Reading a bit of "The DaVinci Method" with Leslie last night, I read for the second time a bit about how the DaVinci type tends to fear completion as a form of death.

Yeah, right. At least, that's what I thought the first time I'd read that bit. The book's author, Garret LoPorto, had said that he was deriving a lot of his book from the work of Otto Rank on "the artist" or "total human". (Rank apparently also used the term "productive type", but LoPorto didn't mention this.) Anyway, Rank was a pupil of Freud's, so I initially dismissed the whole death-fear idea as being typical of the Freudian fetish for symbolism and Great Meanings in the most minor of things.

But something that caught my eye on the second reading of that passage made me rethink that position. If you get past the death-symbolism of the idea and focus on the strict mechanics, it makes a

lot more sense. What struck me last night was that I hadn't made the connection between clutter and completion. You see, I tend not to put things away when I'm done with them... because I never really *feel* "done with them".

One of the traits commonly attributed to persons with ADD/ADHD is that they "put things down and don't remember where they put them", and I do this all the freakin' time. But the **reason** that I do that, is because I expect to come back to that thing in just a moment. But I never do. I keep piling new interruptions on my mental stack, and never backtracking. Thus, my life tends to resemble a giant "stack overflow" periodically resulting in "garbage collection" to free up some physical or mental space.

So, as soon as I realized this, another idea smacked me upside the head: if the "productive type" is thrill-seeking by nature, then it should be possible to obtain great **pleasure** from facing this fear directly! And, I realized that in fact I do get that pleasure whenever I actually clean up. Yes, it's nice to have a clean and uncluttered work space, but that's never really been all that motivating. What really happens is that the process of making decisions about all this "stuff" frees up mental energy that was tied up in the unfinished thought processes -- a common theme in David Allen's book "Getting Things Done", where he calls them "open loops".

But back to the fear of death. I don't think that it's death per se that I've been afraid of; I think that's just an excess of Freudian symbolism. It's **finality** that I've feared: mistakes that can't be undone, words that can't be unsaid, decisions that can't be unmade. In the words attributed to an Egyptian proverb about the three worst things in life, "to try to please, and to please not."

Death is merely an example of that broader concept - and not a particularly relevant one. In fact, I'm pretty sure I fear death *less* than I do finishing my projects. I can only die once, but I have a **lot** of unfinished projects! (Heck, right now I've got *115* tabs open in *9* FireFox windows right now, not counting all the ones I just closed while I was counting!)

All kidding aside, I don't really fear a conscious death in a good cause. Laying down my life for someone I love or something I believe in, now that would be a good use of total commitment - a true completion. (Which is probably why I often cry when somebody does that well in a movie, like Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in that "I'll drown so you can have enough oxygen to drag my body back to the habitat" scene in the move, "The Abyss".)

So what I actually fear in the smaller things is that my commitment *won't* be total; that what I produce will be less than whatever it is ultimately possible to create. I fear to make now, what will be promptly rendered inadequate and obsolete by my "better idea" tomorrow -- a theme that LoPorto also writes about in The DaVinci Method.

And what I realized last night is, I've been taking that fear completely the wrong way. If I'm the type of person that was meant to be a thrill-seeker, I should embrace that fear and meet it head-on, and should find it deeply enjoyable and fulfilling to do so. As a child, I learned to suppress and reject my sense of adventure in order to please my fearful, obsessively protective mother. Eventually, I began to adopt her attitude that whatever can go wrong, will, *no matter what precautions you take*. And furthermore, that no risky activity could possibly ever be worth it.

Thankfully, LoPorto's book has given me a kind of permission to remember and acknowledge this side of myself more fully, and to realize that many of the things I've been treating as annoying chores are in fact an opportunity to confront my fears, face challenges, and conquer them. While there will probably never be an "X-Games of Clutter and Unfinished Projects", I can still get a small adrenalin rush from each book or other item I put away or throw away.

I've learned, in other words, that it **really is okay to be dramatic** about what I do. That's simply who I am. I don't mean that I need to create interpersonal drama, I just mean it's okay to make bold moves, dream big dreams, and set my sights back on my personal mantra of "TWD": Total World Domination. Not to mention all the "big ideals" stuff that I stopped thinking about so I could

survive the last few years at my corporate job. Stuff like Truth, Beauty, and Love. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Live Free or Die. All that good stuff. "These are the old days, the bad days, the all-or-nothing days. They're back!"[20] Yeah, baby!

So I'll see you at the top. In fact, I'll race you. Are you ready?

20 A quote from the movie "Sin City" by Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez

Part 6:

Attention is The Only Technique

In which the true nature of the self is revealed...

Moving Mind Hacks into "Production" 25

Software developers talk about the difference between "hacks" -- things they're playing around with -- and "production", which is the stuff that people actually use and depend on.

Software hacks aren't often very easy to move into production, and the same is true of mind hacks. For example, one of the first hacks I wrote about here, the trick of finding a lost item, I've used very rarely in the months since then. It's just not a habit.

One of the reasons, of course, is that it's extremely easy for the conscious mind to interfere, to want to go, "Oh I know where it is" and not actually wait for the subconscious to kick in and do its thing.

But another, and I think more important reason, is that I rarely *remember to use it*.

In "Stretching Your Self" I mentioned another mind hack, for reducing the perceived effort of strenuous exercise, a hack I discovered years before I even started this blog. But do you know how many times I've used it? Maybe four or five times. Again, I don't seem to *remember* to use it.

During the last three or four months, I've posted numerous hacks and tricks for increased productivity and greater enjoyment of life. How many times have I used them?

Well, some I've used almost daily, but others I only seem to remember when I get stuck hard for a day or two.

Intellectually, of course, I know the techniques exist and that they consistently produce great results. I know I should be visualizing my day before I go to bed the night before. I know I should be using my mind as a time machine to plan and get things done automatically. I know I should be looking into what I'm avoiding.

And on a more mundane level of course, I know I should be exercising more, picking up things and putting them away, eating better, etc., etc., etc.

But this blog isn't about just adding new things to our lists of what we "should" be doing, increasing our guilt and self-abuse. It's about finding ways to make things **easier**.

And that's what I was thinking about this afternoon, as I was being annoyed by a bunch of clutter on my desk. This morning I had to run out to Circuit City to get a power supply for my computer, because the power supply had died overnight, leaving my PC a dark and silent husk of its former self. So this afternoon there were boxes, receipts, bags, packing material, and manuals on my desk, the old supply was on the floor, tools all over creation, the works.

The Magic of "What if?"

And I said to myself, "Geez, what ever happened to that thing about putting things away as a form of thrill-seeking? I figure these things out and then never use them. Hm. You know, that reverse-time visualization thing made me do certain things automatically. What if I could just run a background task for my subconscious to automatically pick things up and put them away whenever I'm not doing anything else?"

Well, I didn't say that *exactly*, it was really just sort of a nonverbal wondering and what-iffing. And as I followed that thought up with

a big "Hmmmm...", I found that my hands were already moving, without me giving any conscious direction. Fascinated, I watched quietly as I cleaned up the place and proceeded to hang some pictures up that I'd been meaning to put up for some time, and also put up the new corkboard and whiteboard I'd gotten last week to put beside my desk. Whenever I went from one part of the house to another to fetch a tool or material, I'd usually be putting other things away at the same time.

The process was fascinating, because there was actually a kind of back-and-forth between my subconscious and me. It would sort of give me requests for executive input when it wasn't obvious where something should go or how it should work. And sometimes my conscious mind would get involved in something and start to get frustrated, and then my subconscious would point my head or move my hand toward something that provided a more creative way to approach the issue.

For example, I was going to try and use a ruler to measure the spacing of the picture hangers for one picture, and my hand just grabbed the hammer and spaced the hangers using the length of the hammer in each direction from the center point, surprising me with how obvious an idea that was.

But for most of the time, it was just me watching, fascinated, while my conscious mind kept itself busy with speculation about other applications of this technique, and thinking about what I might say in this article.

The funny thing about it is that getting into that mode was so **easy**. I barely thought to myself how cool it would be, and there it was. It's pretty much the exact thing I did with all the other mind hacks: I wondered, "what if?", and "wouldn't it be cool if?" And lo, there they were.

And so my next thought was, "So why do I always forget about these things? Why does it always take so long to turn them into habits, if in fact I ever do?"

(On a similar note, Leslie and I used to have fights about the same things and reach the same insights about ourselves and our relationship -- and then promptly forget about them until it came up again. Sometimes it would take *years* before we could get an insight to "stick" and consistently put it into action. And some, we're still working on!)

So, I don't want to wait for years, I want this stuff to stick **now**. And it occurred to me that maybe I could use the same hack, as a kind of "meta hack". For example, what if I visualized myself visualizing? Since I was able to get my subconscious mind to make me walk around and do stuff, surely I could get it to remind me when and what to visualize!

See Yourself Seeing Yourself!

And at that point, my conscious memory popped in to point out that this was in fact an existing NLP technique called "future pacing". Future pacing in a therapy situation basically means that the therapist gets the patient to see themselves in a variety of future situations, using a technique or new behavior that they've just been taught. Because *without this step, a lot of changes don't stick*. D'oh!

Before this point, I was putting all of my changes into an old mind frame -- new wine in old wineskins, so to speak. Because every time I came up with something new, it was just adding to the list of things that I felt I ought to be doing to make my life better. A new thing to be stressed about, a new thing to feel guilty about!

But now I see it doesn't have to be that way. All I need to do is get my subconscious to let me know when a technique is applicable. In principle, this means I should be able to turn anything into a "habit" --- instantly! -- as long as I properly define the cues and responses in my "code". That is, in my meta-visualizations.

The funny thing about all this -- and I mean funny-sad, not funny-haha -- is that this whole time I could've been getting my subconscious to do all the hard work. Everything I've put off, everything I've thought I should be doing and wasn't, I could've

been riding my subconscious "horse" for, with a corresponding decrease in effort, both physical and mental. Anything that I already know how to do, my subconscious can already do, leaving me free to "supervise".

And by an interesting coincidence, the book I was looking for when I did my first "find the missing book" mind hack, was "How To Get Things Done" by David Seabury, written in 1938. And in it, there is a saying: "Don't work yourself, let your mind do it." And another: "Use your abilities; don't work yourself!"

And in the process of looking up those phrases just now to make sure I got them right in this article, I saw a whole bunch of other stuff that relates. This Seabury cat really sounds like he knew how to do exactly the things I'm experimenting with now.

Of course, before I knew that this was such a literal phenomenon, I never really understood what it was he was getting at! Now that I do, it should be quite interesting to re-read. I'll let you know what comes of that.

In the meantime, I'm going to experiment with future-pacing the various hacks I've discovered, and practicing getting my subconscious mind to start tasks for me. For that matter, I'm really curious to find out what I can accomplish with "background tasks", like my new "put things away whenever I'm not too busy" thread. It'll be especially interesting to find out whether it is really possible to create and "install" new habits this simply, using the principles of in-body visualization (i.e., "command mode").

(P.S. Notice again the difference between knowing and doing: I've read a zillion NLP books and articles that ***mention*** *future pacing - but I don't think I've ever actually* ***done*** *it on purpose before!)*

Time and Awareness: The Refactored Self, Part 2

28

So, it's been about five months now since I wrote part 1 of "The Refactored Self", and I kept putting off writing part 2. I wanted to make sure I was writing about something that I myself had done, and done recently enough to be able to describe it well. I wanted to be sure that what I wrote about was repeatable, and not just a fluke.

But the funny thing was, as soon as I started looking for stuff about myself that I needed to "fix", the more it seemed like everything was just great. In fact, I even posted asking other people for their problems, just in case it reminded me of something!

It's not really that I had **no** problems, mind you. It's just that they weren't the kind that lend themselves to the techniques I wanted to write about as "refactoring" the self. My problems now tend to be more that there are things I'm not doing because I haven't developed the habit, rather than areas where I'm actively working against myself. The refactoring stuff is more about cleaning up cruft in your brain, than it is about doing anything new.

So I kept looking for a situation where I had some kind of issue from my past, getting in the way of my present, so that I could step in and "refactor" it, just to be sure the techniques would work. But every issue like that in the last five months has just seemed to go away on its own. Even last weekend's run-in with the nature of life was no exception.

It was almost as if I had developed an unconscious habit of doing the refactoring without really noticing. And as I thought back over the experiences more closely, I realized that it was indeed the case. Since I wasn't consciously applying the techniques any more, I wasn't in a position to "test" them, because by the time I knew I was doing them, they were already done!

So today, I'll just write what I know and remember, as best I can, and give up on trying to get it perfect.

A Review of Topics from Part 1

But first, since it's been five months for most of you, I'll recap the key points from part 1:

- Your brain doesn't so much write code as evolve it. Think of it as a genetic algorithm, trying different responses on for size, and adjusting them according to external feedback.
- "You" are usually not a direct participant in this learning process.
- You are a different person - literally a "multiple self"- in different circumstances, because one set of neural networks is enabled and others are disabled in each situation, based on each network's activation rules.
- Your brain is a parallel processor, not a serial one. Your brain simulates serial behavior by chaining entry and exit conditions. One thing stops and another one starts, so it looks like they happen in sequence.
- If you get a complex enough set of conditioned responses, you end up with what I think of as a subnet. Some subnets are simple stuff, like perhaps a subnet for being lively at parties. Others are more "meta", in that they are about

things like maintaining a certain relative social status, or perhaps governing your relationships with the opposite sex. Subnets are a kind of intelligence or entity with some degree of autonomy to pursue their evolved goals.

- Don't be distracted by the contents of your subnets, and above all, do not personalize. If you have a subnet that encodes behavior or attitudes or feelings that you don't like, do not think about it as being part of "you". It's just a self-organizing neural network that formed in response to various stimuli.
- Attempts to use willpower to overcome an established subnet are futile, and require constant vigilance. It is easier to refactor an existing subnet, than to try to build a competing one -- which would only result in inner conflicts anyway.
- To refactor a subnet, you must change its *inputs* in such a way that your brain reshapes it to produce different outputs. You don't need to try to change all the outputs directly, especially since you probably aren't even aware of all the behaviors that a given subnet influences!

So now let's move on to the "how". How do you change the inputs? There are two keys: time, and awareness. Let's talk about time first.

Time Out of Mind

Real-life neural networks (as opposed to computer-simulated ones) are rooted in time. By that I mean that time and sequence are critical to learning and behavior. A neural net learns that event "A" precedes event "B" by a small amount of time, and thus "concludes" that event A leads to or causes event B. If there is too long a time in between, there is no learning. (Richard Bandler likes to point out that this means that brains can't learn things slowly, only quickly!)

In addition to this learning/causation aspect of time, neural networks also have **rhythm**. A neuron fires when its excitation

And I would tell you to choose wisely, but it actually only matters that you choose at all. You can always choose again, if you need to. It is far less wearing on the soul to feel the pain of an honest mistake, than to shut yourself up in a dark box called "things I don't want to feel".

So I will stay instead, "live well"! Or more to the point, just live. "Well" will take care of itself, because your brain automatically learns from your mistakes, as long as you don't insist that they're not mistakes, or try too hard not to make any.

Phillip J. Eby
April, 2006

Recommended Reading

On Living Your Life

- *Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life* – by Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D. with Spencer Smith
- *How to Get What You Want in Life with the Money You Already Have* – by Carol Keeffe
- *The DaVinci Method* – Garret LoPorto

Achieving Your Goals

- *The Ultimate Secret to Getting Absolutely Everything You Want* – by Michael Hernacki
- *The Path Of Least Resistance* – by Robert Fritz
- *How To Get Things Done* – by David Seabury
- *Wishcraft: How To Get What You REALLY Want* – by Barbara Sher
- *Getting Things Done* – by David Allen

Expanding Your Mind

- *The Happiness Purpose* – by Edward DeBono
- *Test-Driven Development: By Example* – by Kent Beck
- *Animals In Translation* – by Temple Grandin

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BECAUSE THE MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING...

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- **Why achieving your goals will never make you really happy**
- **How to use your mental "time machine" to change the person you were, before trying to change the person you are**
- **How to overcome your resistance and procrastination, not by being harder on yourself, but by being gentler**
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