

The Importance of Constant Struggle



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Youth is the time in our lives we are allotted to figure out how the world around us works. During those important first decades of life, we move from a purely instinctual response-based existence to memorizing the rules of the culture around us and ingraining the physical tasks necessary for survival into our bodies. Upon reaching adulthood, we spend the rest of our lives acting on this information and making a life for ourselves.

The downside to having a firm position on how things work and the practices we grew up with is that it automatically makes the other views and practices we encounter difficult to integrate. This is part of why children are so good at learning things. They have little else to get in the way of adopting new ideas. Instead of comparing the new with the old and letting them compete for mental real estate, they simply take it all in with novelty and excitement. The sooner this process ceases in us, the sooner we start to see the symptoms of being “old.” It’s like the mind has an automatic shut-off sequence that activates whenever we convince ourselves that we already know enough to get by.

When we find new ways to challenge ourselves, we circumvent this process of debilitation. Constantly introducing new technologies (which force us to think in new ways) or living in foreign cultures (which force us to interact with others in new ways) remind the mind of how little it really knows. Aside from keeping us humble, it retains that childlike state of growth and wonder that are natural in early life. It makes a state of wonder a daily living reality.

It’s widely recommended that as people get older they take up new hobbies that challenge the mind. Crossword puzzles, golfing, or even just taking a different route home from work are said to invigorate the mind and keep it fresh. These tactics may offer little boosts of vitality to a solidifying personality, but they hardly scratch the surface of the malleability of the human mind. What if you lived your life in such a way that every birthday you celebrated brought an almost entirely new identity for you from the year prior? Not only

would your mind never solidify, but you would really start to see the cumulative capacity of learning as these new identities stacked upon each other over time.

The mark of a leader is in how well he understands this and applies it to himself. Average people spend their time and resources maintaining their possessions and finding new distractions. Exceptional people invest their lives in growing and pushing every boundary they encounter. When an obstacle arises along the path to their goal, they resolve to learn the tools necessary to bypass or defeat it. The moment you start to accept that your identity has been set for you is the moment you surrender to entropy.

The remarkable thing about learning is how new skills stick with us, even after being buried many layers in our subconscious. When you encounter something difficult for the first time, you have the choice to simply accept that you don't know how to deal with it (and avoid it entirely or hire someone else to handle it for you), or can choose to attempt it anyway. Even a child with almost no frame of reference for how the world works has the amazing ability to utilize endless trial and error to slowly adapt and embrace the mechanics of how new things work. Adults can do this too; they just generally lack the patience and curiosity that children naturally have. They see novelty as annoying, whereas a child will see it as exciting.

If you could only introduce one new principle into your mental programming, make it this:

Whenever you encounter something difficult, keep doing it until it isn't difficult anymore. Now, obviously, if this were applied on an absolute scale, you would quickly run out of time in the day. But if you are discerning and can apply it with priority to the major obstacles that continually show up in your life, you may be pleasantly surprised by how your life changes in a short time. Not only will you move more smoothly from one goal to the next (and reach bigger goals than you previously thought possible), but your mind will grow increasingly sharper. The skills you presently gain in every passing day can stack with incredible capacity atop the skills you learned in earlier days, and with little effort you'll find you can recall and put to use any number of abilities.

Generations ago, it seemed an economic necessity that most people specialize heavily in one particular area of knowledge or ability. This has made many men and women oblivious to the world outside their skill set. They even have built entire identities around what they get paid to do. While in most circumstances it may still be economically sensible to hire someone with certain specialties to handle problems outside our field of knowledge, it certainly isn't the only option available anymore.

Think of learning in terms of opportunity cost. If you find a leak under your sink, it might be easiest just to hire a plumber to come fix it for \$100. Or, through the power of search engines and the malleability of the human mind, you might acquire all the information you

need to fix the leak yourself after 5 measly hours of time investment into research and experimentation. Essentially, your time value for fixing it yourself was \$20/hour. If you are accustomed to making much more than this for the “work” you usually devote your time to, this might not seem like a worthwhile trade.

However, since knowledge is cumulative, you are actually gaining a lot more in the long run. When you call the plumber, you are paying for a one-time fix. When you invest the hours into learning it yourself, you are getting a lifetime of leak-free sinks in return. If you could learn the basics of every skill set you are likely to require throughout your life (and still make time to thoroughly specialize in at least a few) you will be well equipped to face most challenges in life, and your mind will be functioning at a level far beyond those who strictly specialize. Even the world’s most competent brain surgeon or rocket scientist may be utterly useless in most other areas. He may be the one you want to depend on if your goal is to remove a tumor or get to the moon, but what sort of man can he be if these are the only thoughts which occupy his mind?

Unfortunately, the world by and large still thinks the only merit in learning anything comes from one’s ability to get paid for it and turn it into a full-time profession. The innovation of currency, for all the blessings it has bestowed upon us, has made it far too easy to oversimplify the process of valuation for anything either concrete or abstract. Assigning an objective numerical value to anything immediately hides all the subtlety and potential it really holds. This is a terrible way to view the world, and a terrible way to treat education.

If you are economically comfortable, start looking at your actions in terms of the overall benefit they provide to your life and mind. The more you grow, the healthier your mind will remain, and the closer you get to achieving perpetual youth. Just as the body is designed for constant motion, and just as a sedentary life quickly leads to disease and disorder, an unmoving mind soon withers. Since constant challenge is a necessary part of the human experience, you might as well learn to enjoy it. Embracing a constantly shifting identity can be scary, and the world will certainly distance itself from you for it initially, but the long-term rewards are unmatched by anything else in life.