The New MVP

<Suggest a name 🤷🏻‍♂️>

Few years ago I was working with this team on building a credit scoring system for a fintech product. It would decide whether or not to grant loans for unbanked people. The goal was to minimize risk, since the downside would be borrowers taking loans they couldn't repay. It took us about two months to build it, and it required a super complex algorithm. The funny thing is, when we showed it to the upper management, they were like "wow, this is so complex, this is what we're looking for!" – and that pretty much summed up how things worked back then. The more complicated your system was, the better, because your competitors would have a hard time replicating it.

In July of last year, I had a cool concept for a landing page. I wanted to do it so bad I reached out to one of the best designers I know. He told me “It will take 3 weeks and will cost $2,400” – The reason I was after implementing this concept was that it had fancy animations and design, but ain’t no way I’d pay $2,400 for a landing page. So I did it myself. Sure it wasn’t near the quality of something done by a designer, but I got something working and made peace with it.

Crazy to think this was just a few months ago. I wish I could tell you that back then, most of a software's value came from its complexity. But it isn’t really ‘*back then*’, it hasn't even been that long.

Do you know how much that $2,400 landing page costs today?

Just below one dollar. Because it’s no longer *complex*.

Today you can quite literally record a short video of whatever super complex animation you like, pass it to whatever AI tool, and you can get it done in under 5 minutes. And that sophisticated algorithm from earlier which previously took months can now be implemented in just a day.

Historically, the core intellectual property of a software product was fundamentally rooted in ‘how complex it was’ because it demonstrated how much effort went into research and product development. This complexity created the barrier needed for market differentiation, such that it’s impossible for someone to wake up and decide they’d do the same exact thing without probably bleeding resources and time.

This has entirely changed. Today, we shifted from asking “is this idea feasible to implement” to “which ideas to implement” now that we know *anything* is possible. The

barrier of entry to any sophisticated feature that used to signal competence is now almost zero.

Some people would think this is frightening, but let's think about this: If we can now execute on complex ideas at a very high speed, then the real complexity lies in having *original* ideas to start with. The barrier is no longer technical – it's creative.

To understand 'what remains defensible', i.e what can't be easily copied or taken away, we first need to outline a few changes recently taking effect.

The new MVP

The way we used to implement a minimum viable product, i.e the simplest functional form of an idea, from scratch was that we have an idea about what we're trying to do, was this: We have an idea in mind, maybe a handful of features and a few designs, and we want to develop a simple prototype with a simple interface. It would typically take anything from a few weeks to a few months to implement this MVP - so this is the old model. This is how we used to think about implementing a prototype from scratch.

This has fundamentally changed. Now we can prototype at the speed of thought. With just a prompt, you can generate a complete prototype – including the entire codebase, database, deployment, into a fully functional software package. What used to take weeks or months to build as an MVP can now be done in a few days.

This changes what defines an MVP, because no one is expecting just a *working* prototype anymore. Today the general expectation from an MVP is a mature product that's working with almost zero flaws. Not only that but also the interface has to be so good because it no longer reflects what you had in mind when you started working – it actually now reflects how well you prompt and iterate with your AI. Because imagine having this tool that could program or design anything, and you *still* end up with a poor user interface – what does this tell about the product? If you think deep enough in your prompts, it would be reflected on product quality and design. This is the new standard.

English is the new programming language

Since we're shifting from programming languages and design languages to just pure English, this puts clear emphasis on the quality of your thoughts. Because now, more than

ever, if you give your AI a bad prompt (i.e., bad English), this is what you're going to get out of it. Actually, we now have a clearer indicator of 'quality of thoughts' than any time before.

In the past, I could blame poor results on miscommunication, or lack of tools, or poor processes. But now there are mostly no intermediary layers, it's just me, my AI, and pure English. Even most communication within the team has been less about how to implement stuff and more about how to communicate it to AI. This wasn't even a thing just one year ago.

Taste is now more relevant than ever

No wonder conversations about taste are recently common, because it's probably one of the last things AI can take away from you. If your thoughts could be translated in real time into a working product, then it all comes down to what you want to see out in the world, what you want to create from nothing, and how you shape it to create value. So things that were not widely discussed before like taste, originality, creativity, are now the most important again.

Now that we already know that more than 90% of your software is probably written with AI, let's not talk about the complexity of your software or about the feasibility of implementing it, because we know that's possible, let's now talk about what brings real value to your customers? What is the mixture that goes into your 'building' process? What's unique enough about it that it is not replicable by a competitor? Because if I see something cool while using a competitor's product and then I was able to get my AI to build that by writing a prompt, was it really distinctive? Was it really a killer feature? Was it something that used to drive or separate them apart from the competition?

AI is not replacing software products

I think that **right now** it's foolish to think of AI as some entity that has the ability to do everything and replace every system. I think the right model would be to think that AI is only as good as what we set it out to do. This has been true since chatgpt, but it's now even more true with models like deepseek.

- talk about LLMs

• talk about the 2 mental models to think of AI models by sama

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What to focus on

<taste, creativity, communication, wrap up>

How to build a knowledge library for creative work

How to build a knowledge library for creative work?

Today I'd just chime in to discuss a personal challenge I've been struggling with, which is how to come up with ideas for this newsletter, or any type of creative work. I found that the process is not often linear, it's not like you sit down and figure out what to write about. It's more like you read and consume lots of things, and then suddenly and unexpectedly you find you probably have some good insights about something.

Since I consume lots of content in different formats, and there's probably lots of people like me, the challenge is becoming less about what to write about but rather how to manage all these inputs. If writing output is directly related to things I read or learn, then theoretically I should have lots of content and things to share. Practically though, it's not often the case.

I always try to carry around a small notebook and a pen. Where I write down anything I'm inspired by or maybe want to remember in a few months time. I often find each one of those notebooks lasts 2-3 months before I switch to a new one. So each one ends up being a small collection of thoughts and ideas I had during this time.

Last week I wrote an issue of this newsletter, but then I didn't like it, so I didn't send it. And then I thought of writing another one. I was searching for ideas. Only 10 minutes skimming my current notebook (started December) I had more than a handful. When I picked one topic (this post) I then skimmed it again but with a sharper filter: ideas that might be related to the topic I chose. Once again, I found several relevant ideas, which helped put together this post in under an hour.

The process I described above is the typical process of how a brain works when you create something. Remember that creativity is not coming up with new ideas, but **mixing existing ones** in novel ways. It's not like you sit down and think so hard about something to create. Actually, if this were the case, no one would be able to write anything. Just the heavy lifting required to pull everything from scratch onto a blank page would be enough to prevent anyone from ever starting.

However, a physical notebook represents just one way to capture inputs – What about the 100 webpages or short videos or insights I have read or watched or consumed since December? How many ideas do you think I could've come up with if I also have a detailed log of all these things just like I have handwritten notes? If I was able to skim a library of

things that I have captured in my notebook since December, what about the things that I wasn't able to capture?

This made me think of the importance of minimizing friction into capturing things, if I want to capture as much as possible. Because if those things I capture serve as building blocks for future projects, then I might as well capture as many of them as possible. But in order for this to happen, the capture process itself has to be as quick and easy as possible.

Provided that we're able to crack this, the value of this library for 'creative work' is infinite. Moreover, your problem becomes what to pick from the existing pool of ideas you already have rather than what ideas to start having, which is generally a good problem to have, all thanks to this library. If I could sit down, check my library, and write a post in under an hour, then there probably exist lots of other ideas I could turn into posts just by doing a small mix -or more- of some previous inputs from the library; those are things that I captured sporadically.

<photo>

If you read this and think "that's only relevant because you write," it's actually safe to say that this kind of library is an essential prerequisite for *any line of creative work*. The thing about building such a library is that it doesn't really matter what your output looks like. By capturing and storing ideas you come across, you make it possible for your future self to use that in whatever way they like, which could be a blogpost, a youtube video, a tweet, an email, a podcast, a presentation – the potential is infinite.

<visual: Consume → Mix → Create>

<instead of a digital one, add visual from notebook + date>

If I were to mark each paragraph or idea in this post with its capture date, you'd be surprised to see how scattered these dates are. Although they neatly connect, '*when*' they first occurred could be very disconnected. It's surprising how we connect the dots over time.

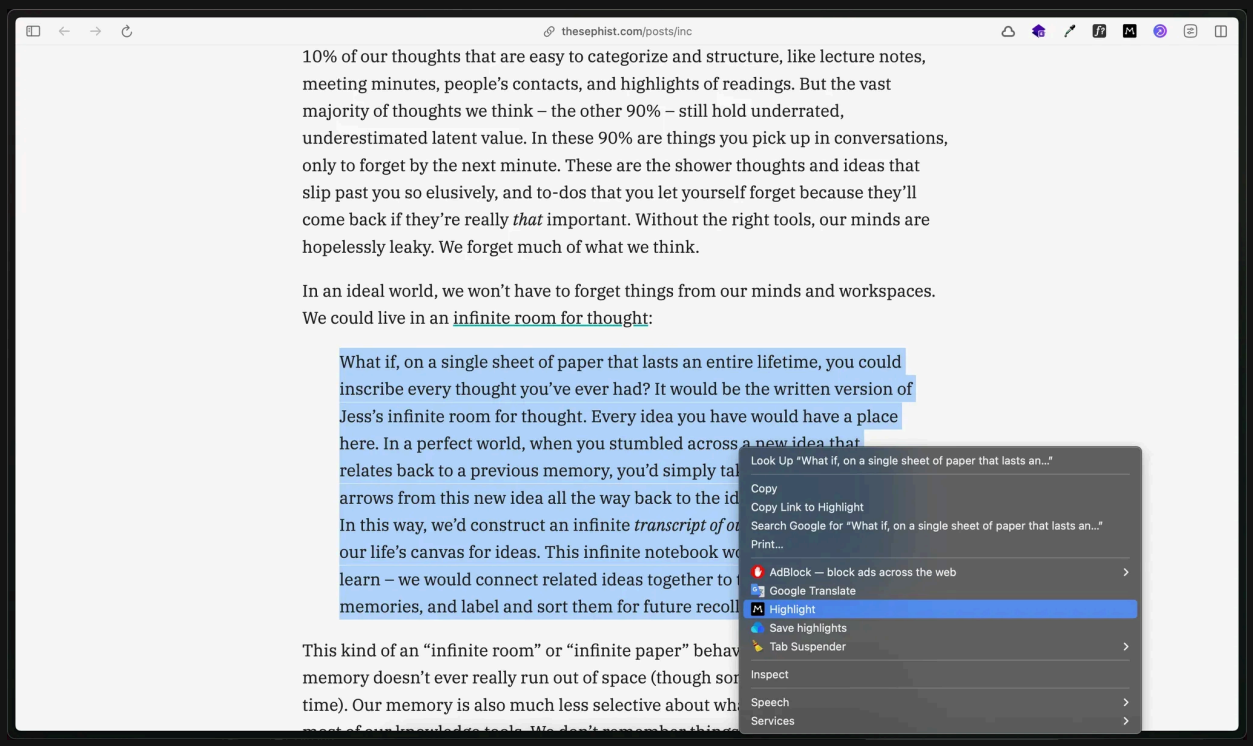
<visual: disconnected days, connected ideas>

The challenge, then, is this: How can we build a growing knowledge library from all the content we consume online, with as minimum effort as possible – even when we don't know how we'll use it yet?

There isn't one definite answer. Instead, it's best to think of the solution as *a set of practices*. It's also important to note that what works for each of us could be different, and that's why it takes some trial and error. But there are some practices that lots of people have found to largely help their creative workflows. I say 'practices' because the tools are not as important as the practices. Tools are just ways to help easily incorporate practices into your daily life.

Below are some of the practices that I've found to work well for me, listed in order of importance:

1. Highlighting the web



Highlight capture tools enable saving text excerpts from any place on the internet. A highlight could be text from an essay, a book, a tweet, an academic pdf, a blogpost, etc. Some tools for highlighting are Readwise, Matter, and Raindrop.

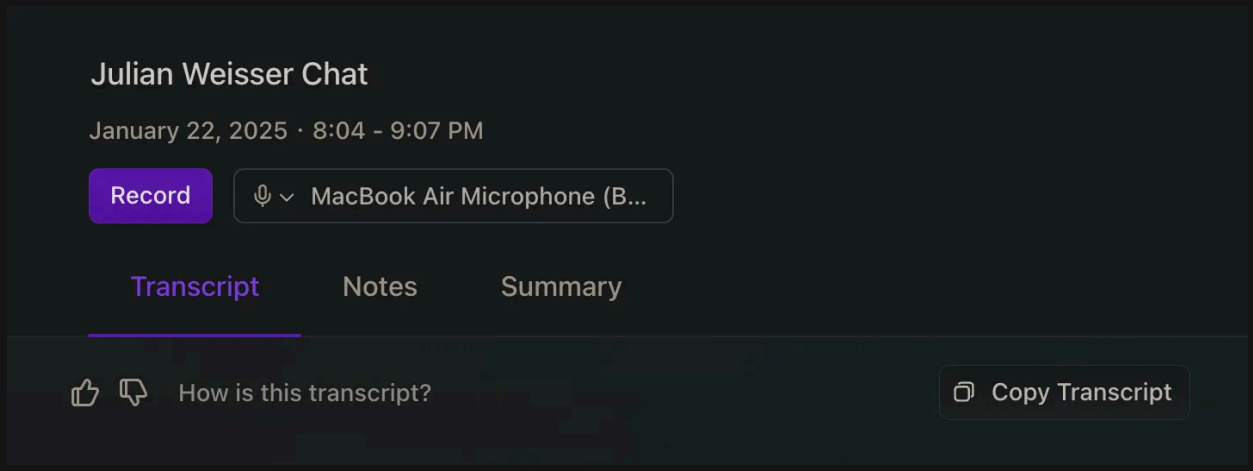
2. Handwritten notes

<image>

Carrying a physical notebook allows for quick capture of ideas and thoughts throughout the day – no batteries or wifi required. The tactile nature of writing by hand also helps

with memory retention and creative mixing. Also, searching a handwritten notebook is incredibly easy, because of ‘visual memory’.

3. Meeting notes



An online meeting is an example of an event that creates a dense medium for ideas per minute compared to other events. The collision that happens between the thoughts of everyone on the call often results in you not being able to process everything until after the call. That’s why meeting notes come in handy if you want to auto-capture and revisit those insights later.

Many software tools are now making it easier to transcribe meetings, take notes on your behalf, and turn them into summaries, insights, and even action items. One example I like is limitless.ai.

4. Write from conversation

<screenshot: iphone keyboard mic>

You’d be surprised to know how easy it is to create written content by just speaking it. Speaking requires much less effort than writing. For this reason, you can use the speech-to-text feature available in every phone keyboard today. This enables you to draft an email, a script, a social post, or a marketing copy while you’re walking or driving or at the gym.

5. Take screenshots

<screenshot: photos search, 2 portrait pics>

This could be one of the least favorable ways of capture, but the Photos app on iOS now enables searching text in images. This means that you can take screenshots of anything you'd want to capture or visit later, since you know you can search by certain keywords and they'll pop up.

6. Regular review sessions (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly)

Reviewing things you capture is a good routine to maintain the integrity of the system, i.e, maximize its utility for your future self to spin out quality stuff. Doesn't matter how often you review; pick whatever works as long as you're able to revisit from time to time.

6. Keep it simple - don't over complicate your system

In the end, the best system is the one that enables the least friction. Using too many tools or doing too many things can lead to diminishing returns. It's reported that creators and professionals spend nearly one-third of their workweek on storing and retrieving knowledge. If anything, we're trying to combat that.

2. BASB

How to capture knowledge from the internet?

Part I of the 'How to build a second brain' series

During the height of the covid pandemic lockdown, there was no way out of the screen. If you are an average computer user, your screen time jumped from 5 to 13 hours per day. This initiated a consumption frenzy, where we were consuming far more information than we knew what to do with.

Then the lockdown ended, but the consumption frenzy didn't.

Since 2021, it has actually skyrocketed. Fight over your attention had just started.

Youtube shorts hit 70B daily views, up 6x from 2021.

Instagram reels doubled year-over-year, up 8x from 2021.

Podcasts grew from 2M to 5M shows per year, up 2.5x from 2021.

We could keep going, but I'm not here to talk about implications on culture. Instead, I want to discuss how to capture and make sense of all this information. Because if we don't then there's no point of consuming any of it.

Since 2021, I have been struggling to answer the question "How to process and retain everything I learn across time." Answer to this took me through several phases; each becoming progressively simpler than the one before. From complicated, to complex, to simple.

In this post I'm willing to discuss the simplest practice I could use to:

- Gain maximal benefit of things I spend time on – That is things I create, work on, or interact with, by saving as much of them for my future self
- Spend minimal time doing it – I don't want to spend hours capturing information, as new information continues to accumulate anyway, so I'd rather capture them as they happen

This means that for effective information capture, there only has to be **two principals**:

1. Capture has to be contextual
2. Capture has to be frictionless

I'll explain what I mean by that in a second. But first, here's a quick look of some types of information I *create**, and where they normally belong:

<information formats image>

<caption> **things we create (i.e book highlights, podcast notes, web bookmarks) often exist in places different from the **medium of consumption** of things that led to them (i.e kindle, apple podcasts, youtube videos), which is almost another problem – Now the question we're trying to answer here is not how to facilitate consumption but rather how to facilitate recall – That is how to effectively store things we work on, or spend time interacting with, in any capacity*

Here, I described *22 different places* to store digital information. And that is information we use daily. So on a given day, the *standard* practice is to switch between ~22 places on our computer.

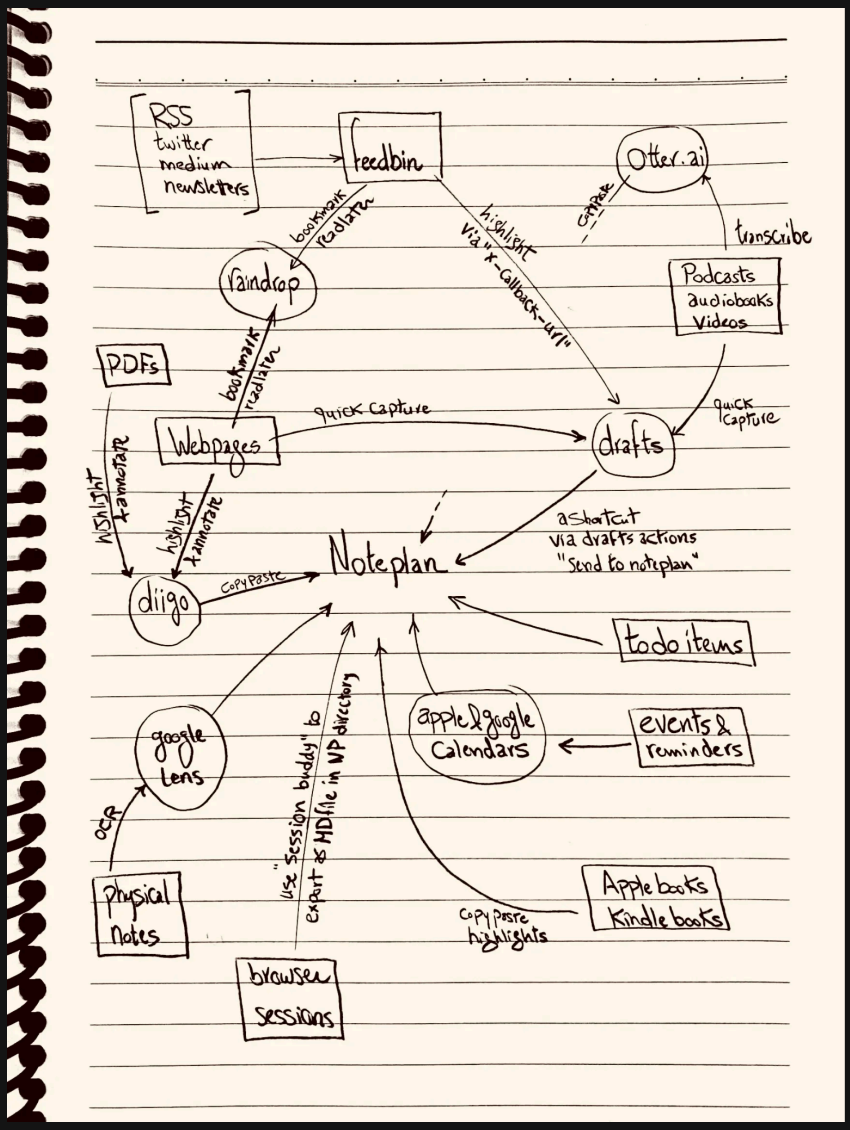
<visual of fragmented knowledge>

The human brain can only process a limited number of scopes at a time. So when you're dealing with 22 different apps, even if you're not actively using them all at once, the cognitive load of remembering what's where becomes a disaster. This wouldn't be a problem if this precious cognitive load is infinite, but it's not. This problem is even bigger for people whose main capital at work is information; knowledge workers.

It's estimated that roughly a third of the workweek is wasted on knowledge management. Knowledge workers spend up to **2.5 hours per day** searching for information across different apps and platforms. This is not *work*, that is 2.5 hours per day reconstructing the context needed to *start working*.

This search takes all this time because it conflicts with how the human brain naturally works. Our brains don't save information in silos – they don't store individual thoughts, documents, or ideas in isolation. Strangely enough, the brain saves connections between all of them. So when we remember (retrieve) *things* at future points of time, we actually retrieve *connections* between things.

Unfortunately, our current capture practices do not account for any of this. Also, practices discussed in most knowledge management courses are sooo complex. I remember that one time I took an entire day to lay out a full-blown capture workflow of every data format I was using at the time. The result was this terrible image below.



May 2021 – My capture toolkit which I thought was perfect
It was an effort to include everything (notes, bookmarks, highlights, journals, todos, calendar events, handwritten notes) in one place, which was Noteplan
PS: It was a waste of time. Don't do this. No one should ever

---

Capture has to be contextual

In order to come up with effective ways to save information, we first have to understand how the brain saves them. After all, software should only serve as an extension of the mind, rather than forcing the mind to adapt to it.

Let's assume you're working on a project where you have meeting notes in Notion, task boards in Linear, relevant threads on Slack, and some related files in Google Drive. Now every time you revisit the project, you'll spend significant time just trying to piece together all this information.

During this time, your brain is going from a state that looks like this:

<visual>

To a state that looks like this:

<visual>

If we want to bring this time to almost *zero*, the answer is definitely not to stop using the various tools, but rather facilitate context reconstruction across them. To do this, it's important to understand that brains don't remember information, but rather 'Events'.

An event (life experience) is the minimum piece of context a brain is able to recall. Which means not just a piece of information, but a set of pieces that come together—relevant or not.

Examples:

- Locations: Lots of our memories are bound by where we are. So just by remembering/revisiting a location, you could remember lots of other things like activities, projects, the weather, etc.
- Music: Listening to music you used to listen to when you were young doesn't just remind you of the music, but also triggers memories of events, people, and places from that time.

Now since our brains naturally store information as interconnected networks, not as isolated pieces in separate containers, it's clear that this quick *context reconstruction* has to be a main function of whatever tool we use for storing information.

Capture has to be frictionless

Now before jumping to what software to use, let's assume the above is already achieved, we'd still have one more problem.

In an ideal world, if we'd have an infinite canvas of all thoughts we ever had, with the perfect context, and the perfect log of everything, we would never lose a thing, so we'd have no problem. But since this is not practical, and since we wouldn't be able to keep track of everything, there still exists the problem of 'friction'.

Example:

If you've ever used apple journal, this is what you'd find.

<screenshot>

<good example>

It collects photos, location data, and activities from other places and presents them for you **if** you want to write about that life 'event'. But if you don't, it's still not a problem because now you have a record of it (automated), which helps future recall either way.

Thus, it's not only sufficient to have fuller context, but also this context capture has to be automated as much as possible. So if there's a way where ~~all~~ as much as possible of this information is auto-recorded, we might have a shot at having these detailed records of everything.

~Solution

Now the solution becomes not just to 'capture maximum context' but 'capture maximum context with minimal friction.'

<rephrase to layman terms>

Earlier, we discussed how knowledge management is just an effort to reduce the number of places we look at. Building on that concept and the two key principles we just covered, the most important **types of tools** that can help us achieve this are:

1. A screentime tracker
2. A highlight capturer

I believe these two are the most essential tools for capture because they complement each other: a screen time tracker automatically logs everything we interact with, while a highlight capturer records the more in-depth stuff.

< 💡visual: a page (surrounded by a screentime item red rectangle) + a highlight from the page (surrounded by a highlight red rectangle)>

Screentime tracker

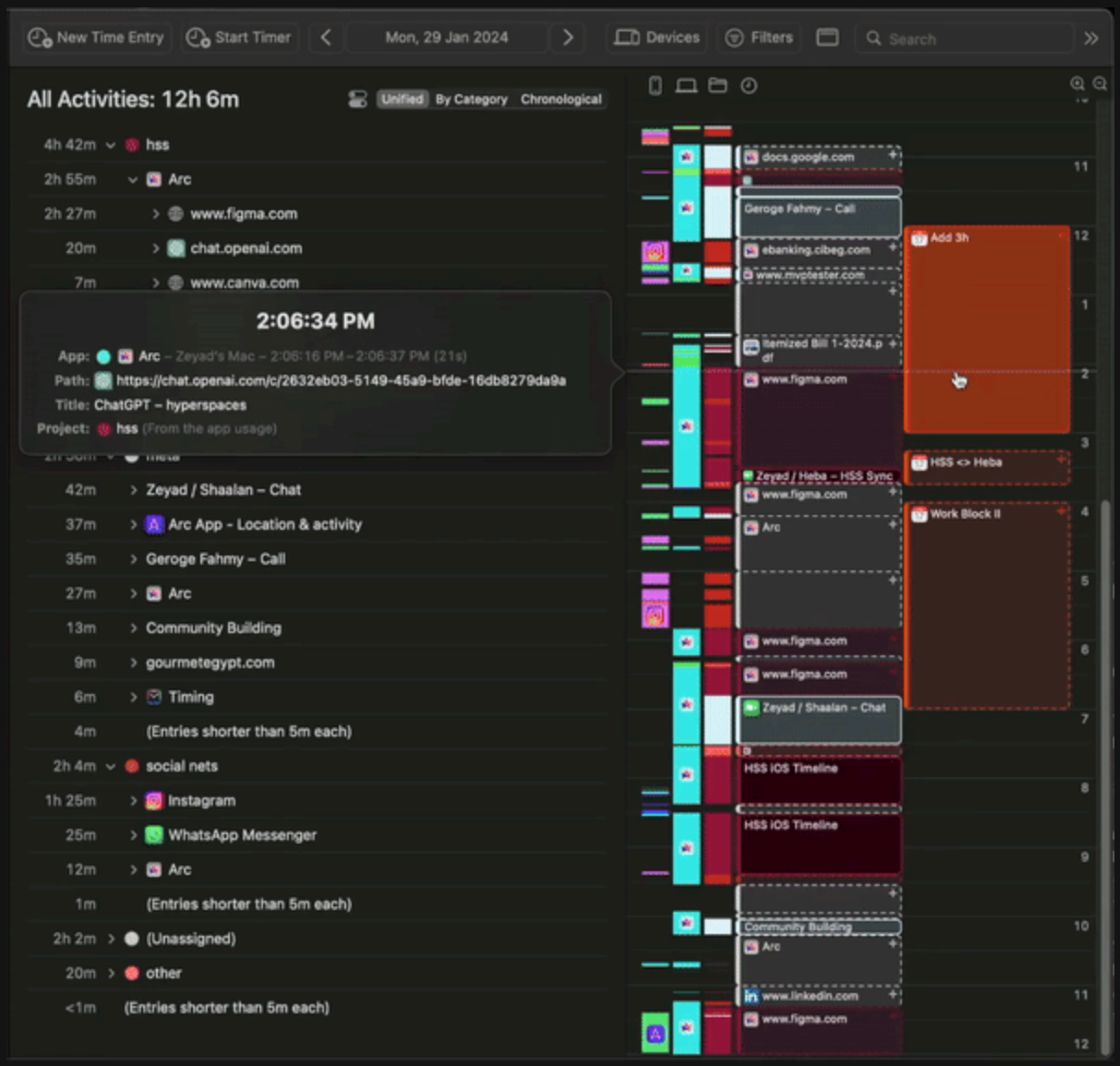
Examples: Timing, RescueTime

Screentime trackers provide the richest context of any capture tool. It does two things:

1. Shows how much time we spent doing something on screen
2. Records deep links and activity paths across different apps

This second function is what allows us to have the full history of everything without friction. I can look into details by hovering over a time chunk, which shows me actual paths and links I spent time on, along with the full context of what came before and after.

To visualize this concept, this is a sample day captured in a screentime tracker – notice how I'm able to access original links and resources I spent time on:



In the above example, every digital item I interact with already has ‘time’ associated with it. In this regard, a digital timeline enables the automatic capture of these items without having to stop and bookmark any of them.

In other words, the original format of the information doesn't matter—whether it's a Notion doc, Slack message, Python script, Linear board, or PDF book—since they're all captured and organized by a universal format: timestamps.

This is a good step towards breaking isolated silos, and building this ‘infinite canvas’.

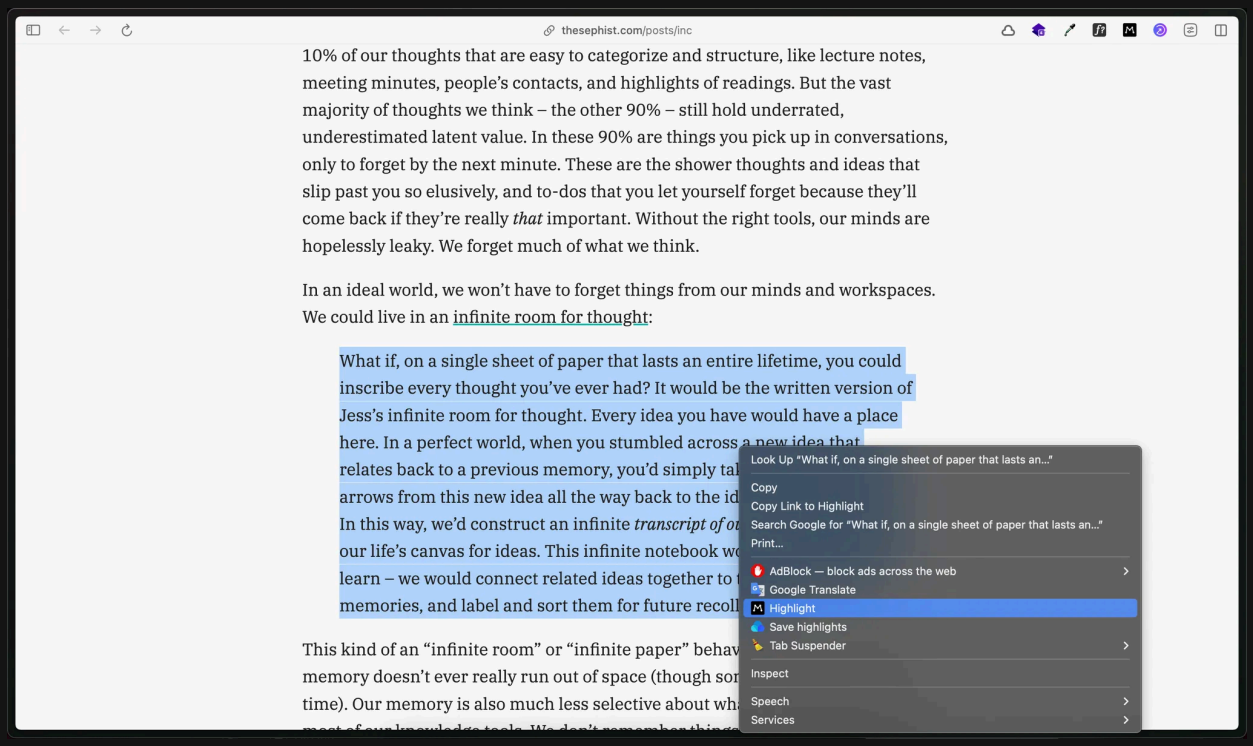
It effectively captures webpages and resources as we interact with them.

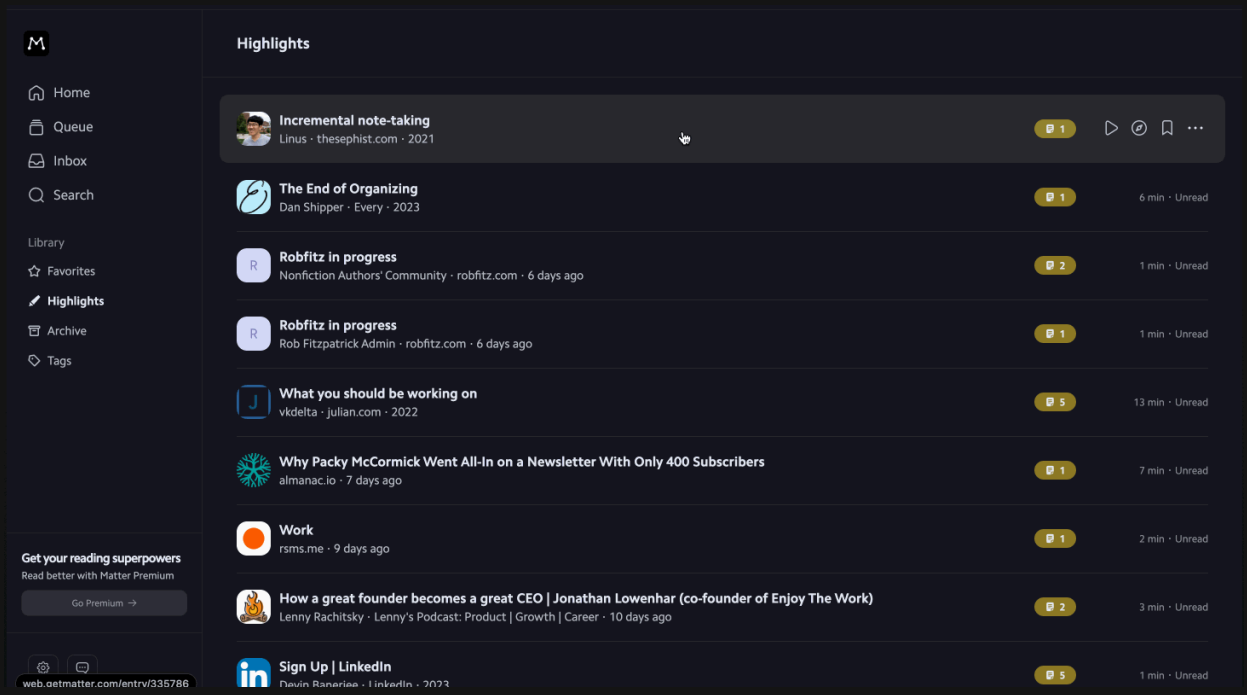
What about capturing specific text or highlights from books and essays?

Highlight capturer

Examples: Readwise, Matter

Highlight capturers enable saving text excerpts from any place on the internet into a library of your own.





'Matter' Web Clipper

While a screentime tracker captures the link of the essay I'm reading, a highlight capturer enables saving specific pieces of text from the essay. This can be done for books, tweets, academic pdfs, articles, etc.

Although there are lots of concepts and tools in this space, the above toolkit is what I believe is the only stack needed for smooth *capture*. The next step after capture would be to manage and organize things we captured, which we'll cover in detail in the next part of this series *"How to build a second brain"*.

<subscribe button>

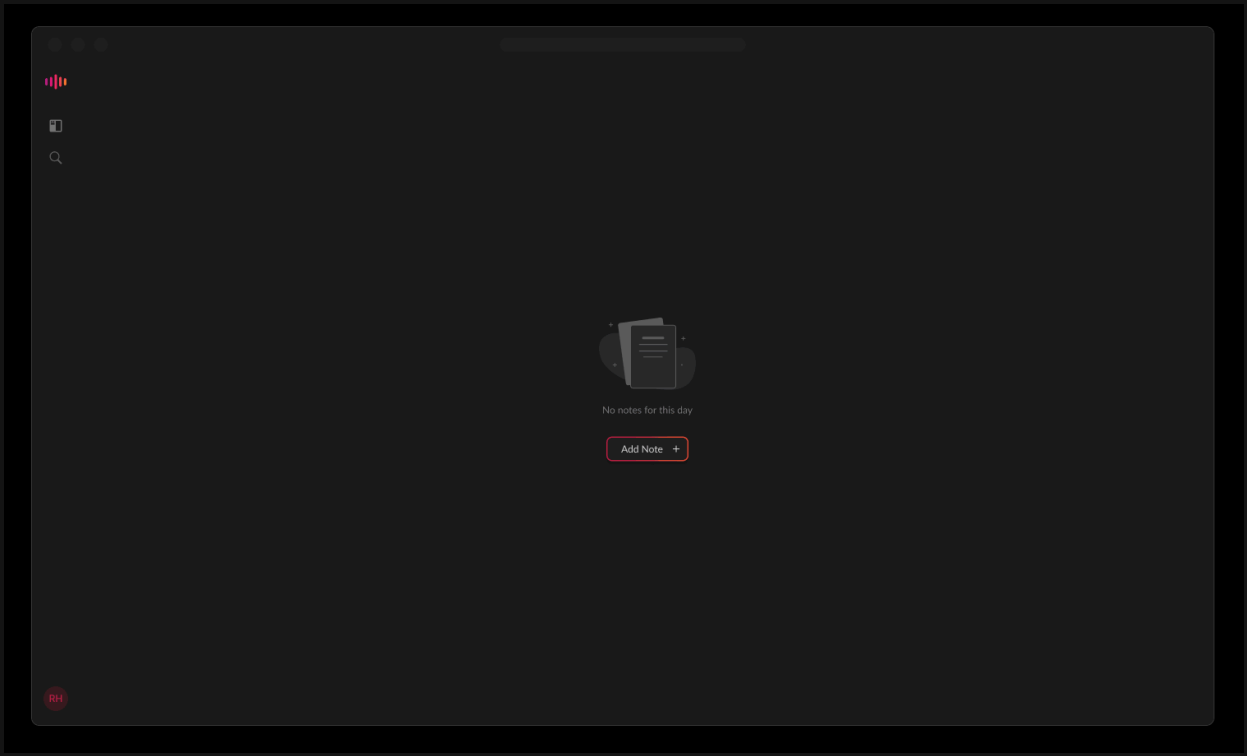
I'm currently working on a tool called Hyperspaces, whose main function is to connect and search captured items from both screen and highlight trackers.

Reason for this is, although I have been using the above toolkit for years, it still misses the following:

- Ability to add **rich notes** to captured items
- Ability to **search** captured items

- Ability to **merge** captured items

Hyperspaces is a note-taking tool for thinking and research. It enables you to search, browse, and add rich notes on top of your entire digital history in one place.



• Hyperspaces has its own screentime tracker (local plugin) and highlight capturer (browser extension)
• For a note, you can see broader context: screentime items, web highlights, datetime, even physical location
• This concept is highly extensible – I will be covering more auto-capture methods (i.e calendar events, voice transcriptions), use cases, and examples in future posts of this series

<turn to video>

Here, a note can represent an event (a set of pieces of information) rather than one isolated piece. So the unit of knowledge inside Hyperspaces is the same as that of the brain. That is the minimum piece of context the real brain is able to recall –which is not an orphan text, a photo, a tag, or a card– but an event; a chunk of 'life experience.'

We briefly opened Beta access in October but now it's back in closed Beta, where me and my small team are working with a tight group of users to polish core features and gather feedback.

If this is interesting to you and you'd want to join, feel free to fill the Beta Program form and I'll reach out to you:

<Beta Program>

Or if you are interested to discuss the tool or nerd out about knowledge management in general, I would be happy to have a friendly chat. Book my calendar directly from here:

<Calendar>

Let me know in the comments what is your current capture toolkit? What worked best for you?

<Leave Comment>

Software & Psychedelics

Why build a second brain?

on software & psychedelics

During the covid lockdown, I was constantly dragged between all sources of information, consuming tons of stuff – books, podcasts, videos, everything. With time, I wished my mind would expand to fit in everything I was learning; this seemed like the only way to make consuming all this information worthwhile.

Instead of regulating consumption, I was doing a thing that I now believe was quite far-fetched; I was searching for ways to deliberately expand the capabilities of the mind. Because I learned the brain indeed utilizes far fewer connections than it is capable of.

The human brain can create complex networks of connections that enable vast information processing and storage. However, not all potential connections are utilized at any given time. Research suggests that a significant number of potential synaptic pathways are not actively engaged in transmitting information, i.e many of these connections are usually inactive.

Similar to physical strength training where unused muscles weaken over time, the brain strengthens or weakens neural connections (synapses) based on how frequently they're being used. In other words, the less the mind is stimulated, the weaker it becomes. Theoretically, at its full capacity, the human brain is far more powerful than the most advanced supercomputer that exists today.

To me this was mind-blowing because it meant that there's probably something to do about the original problem: not being able to store and remember enough information.

If I'd choose one topic to learn about for the rest of my life, it'd be 'human consciousness' – I don't find anything as particularly interesting as practices that dig in deeper states of the mind. Isn't it fascinating how we get to understand and remember and make sense of… things? Maybe if we understand how the mind works, lots of our problems would be solved?

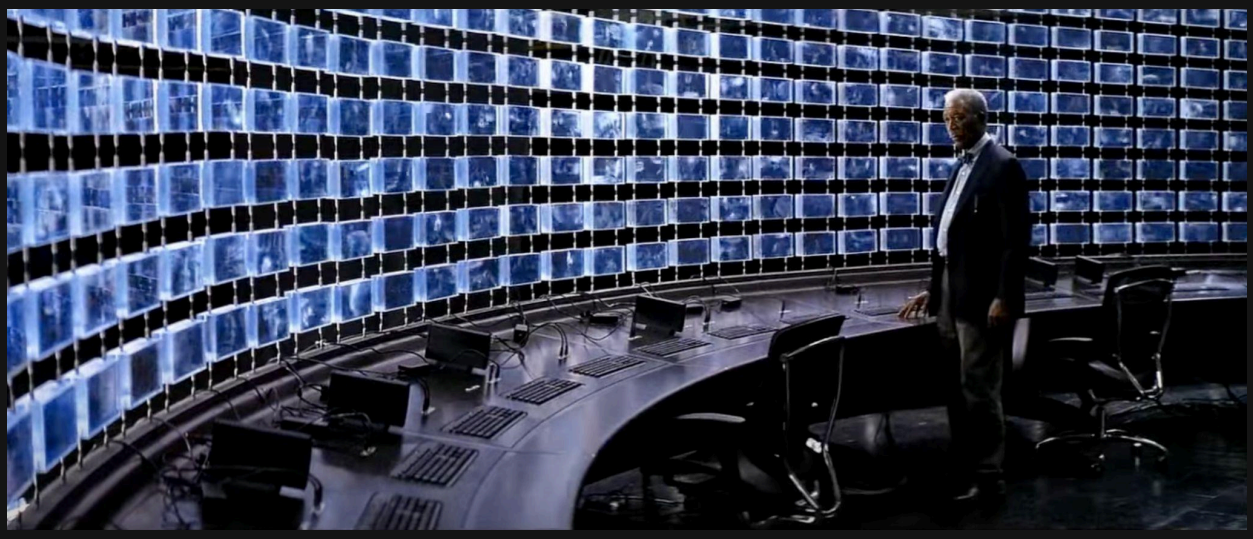
After looking into ways people used over history to practically extend capabilities of their minds, I found the most obvious way was psychedelics. I read stories of how it was life-changing for some of the most influential people. And one day I'd do it. But the problem is, I thought, and still think, I'm not ready. After reading lots of stories, I learned

that getting into psychedelics is not as easy as it seems. There has to be a setup and you have to be ready for all types of outcomes.

So now that I'm going to exclude psychedelics for the time-being, I found there's no tangible way to extend the capability of the mind. Except for one thing.

I found some people online talking about doing it with software (strange I know), and it felt kind of exciting. I later learned they were implementing practices to collect and preserve all their knowledge, and then let software help them make sense of it.

The only reason this felt compelling is that my only picture of a 'more capable' mind was as if it's able to peek anywhere and retrieve any piece of information from my entire life history. If I could remember *everything* from my past, this would be my definition of having a supermind. And this is where I learned software can help.



This category of software is known as "tools for thought" – these are tools that function as extensions of the mind. Think of it as if we can outsource the heavy lifting, normally done by the brain, to a piece of software.

Another name for these tools is "second brains" – And the way this works is: if we can offload lots of the information, thoughts, and ideas we have daily to an external *second* brain, this frees up mental space for our brain to do its functions without getting overwhelmed. I'm going to discuss how to do that during the next posts of this series.

For now it's important to note that while in the broadest sense, a second brain is just a fancy name for a note-taking app, not all note-taking apps are second brain apps.

The most important characteristic of a second brain is its ability to create **connections between thoughts**. So second brain apps are used to function exactly like the human brain (extensions of the mind). This is actually where this all starts to be interesting.

Remember how we started by discussing how neural connections in the brain determine its capabilities? Therefore, the clearest answer to "why build a second brain" is to extract as many connections as possible between things we learn daily.

And we could talk about lots of other good things that come with building a second brain, like clarity of thought, enhanced cognitive ability, an organized life, and effortless output. But fundamentally, none of this would be possible without that simple concept: ability to create automatic connections between thoughts.

As soon as you read "*I want to remember everything from every time*" it's easy to think *"But I don't want that. I don't want to remember everything. We're made to forget for a reason"* – Well, that's the beauty of it; you are the curator.

Fortunately, in software we have finer control over *bad trips* than in psychedelics.

In psychedelics, your thoughts roam into an infinite kaleidoscope, there's no map. Anything could happen; your favorite childhood memory could show up as a terrifying nightmare, and your grocery list could show up as a list of philosophical questions.

But in software, you have carefully spent time obsessing over *the ingredients*. There's no sneaky way your subconscious could surprise you on your trip. It's like this calm, controlled, cultivated space that you've been curating for so long. So when it's ready to be put to use, it's all upside. Thousands of good recipes are embedded deep in the network. Your research notes from three years ago could lead to a viral discovery, your years of journals could turn into a book, and an insight you wrote during a team meeting from last week could change the direction of the company.

Inside a second brain, you can only see ideas you put in, but you cannot imagine the infinite possibilities that could result from *connecting* them. Most of the transformative effect from our seemingly simple ideas comes from letting them collide with each other in a space that embraces this collision.

Exactly like a real mind. The best output is always one that comes as a direct result of the mixing process that happens inside the mind. AI is not going to produce good work or novel ideas on its own. And the book you read is not going to give you superpowers on its

own. But the connections that naturally emerge from all of these things simmering together is where the magic happens.

Thanks for reading,

Zeyad Mahran

0. BASB

On deciding what to work on for the next 10 years

How I pivoted from an AI problem to another in 2022

On September 20, 2022, I attended a tech conference with around 50 total attendees. During the conference, they held a breakout activity where attendees could start round-table discussions on any off-topic subject. There were 6 round tables set up, each with 6–7 seats.

I started a round-table about Building a Second Brain[1]. The whole thing lasted ~40 minutes. By the end of my session, there were over 30 people gathering around my table, with more standing than sitting, even organizers of other round-tables were joining.

I was there because my friend and I had received an invitation a few days earlier. At the time, we were working on a computer vision startup. By the end of this brief session, I knew two things. First, I hadn't received anywhere near this level of interest in my original vision-based idea while I was there. Second, it seemed everyone was silently suffering from information fatigue[2] in one way or another.

Picking a problem

Although at this point AI vision felt like a natural progression of my career, my pull towards starting a second-brain product was much higher. Heading out of this room, I knew it was over for the startup I was on at the time.

I kept working on both in parallel for a few months until I eventually decided to stop working on the vision company and pursued the second-brain one. During this time, and through 2023, this choice has enabled me to talk with lots of people in the personal knowledge management (PKM) space, and get deeper insights about consumer software.

While I believe there are lots of ways to start a startup, and although I'm nowhere near a 'startup advisor', I can probably pinpoint three of them: the fast way, the worst way, and my experience.

The fast way

Freelance for 18-24 months. Working for similar clients, solving similar problems, developing a deep understanding of their workflows and pain points. Ultimately you'd find

a step –or more– of the pipeline that could be productized, i.e turned from a service to a product, enabling you to build once and distribute twice.

The worst way

Brainstorm ideas. Which I get the reason why young folks with high energy prefer to do it: Lower barrier of entry, and the exciting thrill of jumping headfirst into building something with friends. That said, this is one of the worst ways to start working on a problem.

My experience

Solve a personal problem. This comes from noticing problems that constantly bother you for so long. My problem was 'overthinking' which was a direct cause of information fatigue. And I found that 'knowledge management' was not only a possible solution but also one of a few things that had been quietly simmering at the back of my head for **a few years**.

The thing about working on a startup around an interest of yours (solving a problem to you) is that you won't bother the long hours. If working to solve the problem feels like play to you, you'll outperform everyone who does it for work.

Also, in the early days, most success from working long hours happens in spikes. Meaning a handful of rare events scattered over a long timeline. These are events where you get 'lucky'; they don't happen often at the start. So picking a nagging personal problem makes sure you wake up as equally pumped on a day that's not special, where nothing 'magical' happens.

Luck is just 'opportunity meeting preparation'. And since opportunity doesn't have a predictable way of happening, the only way to predict luck is to simply be ready (years of prep). So by way of aligning years of work around a specific focus, luck tends to happen more naturally. This is what's often called 'serendipity' – where compounding from relationships you build and specific knowledge you get, leads to more of them.

So solving the right problem, at the right time, with the right people could be a wormhole to a world of possibilities.

But what defines a 'problem'?

I believe that, in startups, a job is just another word for ‘solving a problem’. Getting paid –by employers, investors, or markets– is the equivalent of getting rent for real estate inside your head; as you get better at what you do, you’re raising your cost for rent.

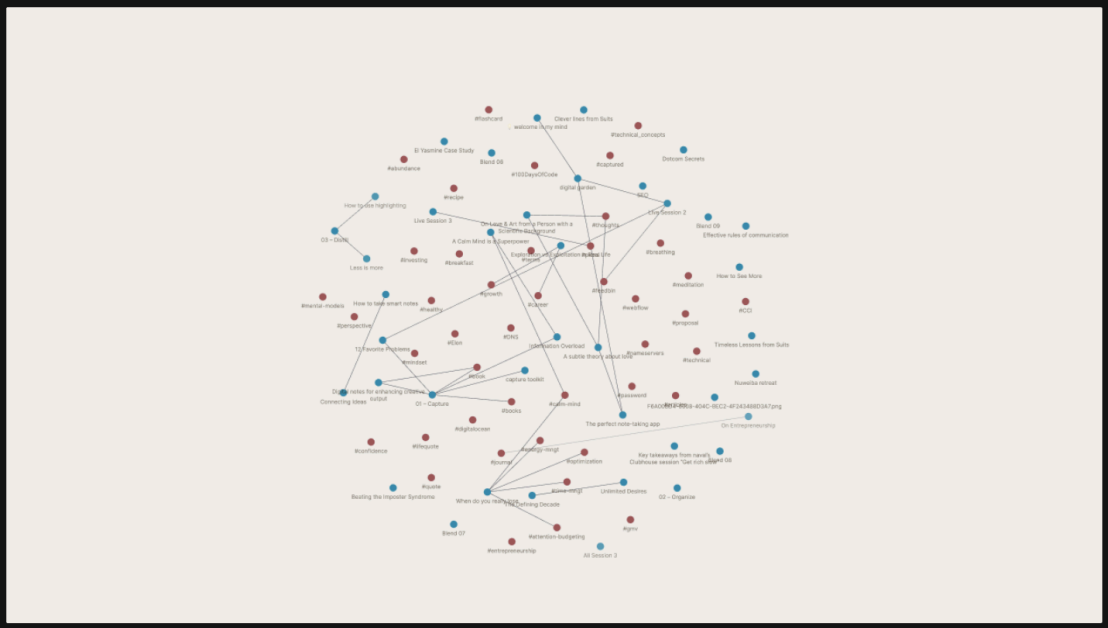
The type of the real estate is the business domain. The size of the real estate is how invested you are in the problem. The more head real estate you allocate to a problem, the better solutions you’re going to have for it, and the higher you get paid in the process.

In that sense a ‘problem’ becomes the intersection of what the world needs, what you're deeply curious about, and what you're uniquely capable of solving.

So what about the ‘information fatigue’ problem?

At some point, I realized that:

- Smart people are just normal people who know how to effectively manage their time and information
- All knowledge is connected, and the way we do our best work is by effectively managing that knowledge
- Brains have limited power connecting and organizing knowledge, so we look for external tools and systems



A data visualization of every node in a second brain over a year, animated as it is being created. You can see connections between thoughts & information, and how they emulate neural connections in a real biological brain. A tool becomes an extension of the mind.

Given the overwhelming amount of information today, this is clearly a problem for many others. So searching for ways where software can help makes lots of sense. Now add to that how AI can help, there exists an infinite number of possibilities to move forward.

"Everyone should have the chance to gather information and ideas, turn them into valuable knowledge, and use that knowledge to improve their own lives and the lives of others. Our biological brains are fundamentally limited, and we need to harness technology to help us think faster, better, and more clearly."

– Tiago Forte in *The 10-year vision*

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10 years from now

Startups are a decade-long game. Most dividends from building good products pay dividends after 7-10 years. Less than that if you're lucky, and about 10 if you're realistic.

So it's not just long hours of work but also long years of commitment. So by definition, what you'd want to be doing 10 years from now should align with the kind of work needed to continue working on the problem, because it's unlikely that you'd stop doing it anytime soon.

As for deciding what you want to be doing 10 years from now, and although trivial, I find lots of people talking about a very simple exercise: Write it on paper.

I found the idea of writing down my values and aspirations serves as a roadmap that guides my decisions and actions. It helps stay on track for when I get distracted.

In an essay called *What to do with your life,* author Julian Shapiro, writes that just by listing values you care about, you're able to effectively filter what projects to work on.

I did this exercise. The values I wrote down were 'wisdom', 'freedom', and 'community'.

Based on these values, it felt natural to write something like: "I want to be writing full-time when I'm 50."

At least as long as it's there, I got a reminder; a compass.

Am I heading the right direction?

When was the last time we asked?

“People fail to realize that career success isn't an end state. Success is simply having the freedom to focus on an ongoing grind you enjoy.”

I’m starting a “How to build a second brain” series, where I discuss how to organize and make sense of digital information using modern tools. This post serves as an interlude. Next post is going to be about information capture from multiple sources. Hope to see you around.

Thanks for reading,

Zeyad Mahran

About 'taste'

Doing it right is not enough, doing it with taste is

Taste is tribal

In software, design, architecture, and art – most people often focus on getting things ‘right.’ And in most domains we’re able to identify and analyze what ‘right’ is. But there's a subtle quality that separates good work from great work. It’s often the invisible component that turns an ordinary craft into art – that is ‘taste’.

When Steve Jobs was asked what made Apple's products special, he didn't talk about technical specs. He said "it comes down to taste." But what exactly is ‘taste’? Is it purely subjective? Or is there something more concrete we can understand about it?

This question has become increasingly relevant with the advent of AI. As machines get better at doing things "correctly," the human element of taste –that ineffable quality that makes something not just functional but delightful– might be the most valuable skill we're not talking about enough.

The new currency isn't doing more faster—it's creating things that are delightful, original, and resonant. We frequently see designs that follow every rule but lack soul, software that functions perfectly but feels awkward, or writing that's grammatically pristine but still lifeless.

Don’t you think that this puts some emphasis on the fact that “doing it right” has become not enough? It’s a deep question actually. Because we’re uncomfortable with what we don’t know. How do we know we “did it” if what it takes to produce great work is unclear?

I like to believe that taste is in the aesthetics. If there is such a thing as beauty, we need to be able to recognize it. We need taste to make good things. Rather than viewing beauty as an abstract concept, let's treat it as a north star—how do we make -really- good stuff?

Lots of people believe taste is a personal preference because when we appreciate some creation, we don’t know why. But saying that taste is a personal preference is just a polite way to prevent disputes. It’s not true.

In fact, taste is tribal. It's essential to understand that taste varies from group to group, but is highly consistent within the same group. This means that taste only has meaning within a specific 'tribe' and it totally loses its meaning outside of that context. A group in this sense means a group of people united by age, location, interest, work domain, or anything in between.

We can see this pattern play out across many different areas and subcultures, think: vinyl records, mechanical keyboards, oversized clothes, minimalist digital design, modern architecture, lo-fi music, artisanal coffee, vintage fashion, and even programming languages. Each tribe has its own aesthetic preferences that might seem odd or unnecessary or extra to outsiders but are deeply meaningful within the group.

In this sense, 'developing taste' becomes a process of embracing innovation and staying one step ahead of the tribe. The ability to curate and shape experiences that resonate with the tribe, even before they realize it, not only develops taste but also becomes a contribution to the cult. A contribution that has a high chance to gain admiration from individuals who understand it and resonate with it – that's what we call taste.

This definition brings three main principles that are non-intuitive:

1. Taste is up to the recipient
2. There's no 'good taste', just taste
3. Taste is a slow process

Taste is up to the recipient

Appreciation is a form of taste. Creation is another. Someone could have an impeccable taste in art, without producing any themselves. In both cases, being seen as having good taste is not up to the creator. It's up to the recipient. As a creator, you can't insist you're right.

Someone with taste might create something that goes completely unnoticed by one person while being deeply appreciated by another.

Lots of people often dismiss great creations because they were under-appreciated by the wrong tribe. The keyword here is 'tribe'. If you pour your heart and soul into something, and you also happen to consume lots of work in the same domain, what you might need

isn't to change your work – but to find the right tribe that appreciates it. This principle is well-recognized across different fields: in business, it's called 'market fit'; in advertising, it's 'target audience'; in publishing, it's 'reader demographics'; and in music, it's 'genre'.

<fill in with some insight similar to below>

Thus understanding your tribe and their values is crucial for developing meaningful taste that could be appreciated.

<make it a transition?>

There's no 'good taste', just taste

This means there should be no comparison. So having good taste is the same as having taste. Because there's no better or worse.

It's not a personal preference, it's a *tribal* preference, that's why it takes guts to develop taste and contribute to the cult. To have taste is simply to say that you have a well formed opinion.

Taste then becomes a sharp critique, an aggressive filter for ideas and opinions. Through that filter you do things and make decisions, like cook a good meal, enjoy a good movie, build a usable product, or put on a shirt that fits. For all of these things and most others, correctness is enough. But taste puts you in a state that's more than just correct — it adds depth and richness to why and how you made those choices.

And this is also why it's not typical for someone to develop taste in too many things – this can be disastrous actually. Developing taste requires careful curation of what you consume and create, awareness of your environment, and an understanding of cultural trends. So you cannot do it arbitrarily, else the choices you're making will just be *bad*. Claiming you have an opinion about too many things, or having acquired taste in many domains, is the same as claiming you are not serious about any of them.

Because it has to come from a place of immersion and confidence, taste takes effort, curiosity, and time.

Taste is a slow process

Some people believe it's hard to develop taste if you're not creating anything. And they are right. The more you're indulged into a craft of any sorts, the more you get to resonate with the tribe that creates and consumes similar works of the same craft.

There are lots of books on writing, cooking, photography, and music. But they can't possibly help you do better until you see and taste and appreciate what you're trying to create.

This is the reason why the most creative individuals don't seem to have any clear boundaries between work and play. But they're conscious consumers. Like artisans, they're living in a world where everything is connected together, every input and output. Like a big web of nodes; everything leads to everything. In this world, it becomes super easy to come up with new software design concepts while taking a walk between modern architecture buildings, or come up with ideas for the fiction novel chapter while listening to jazz in a coffee shop. The creative process becomes fluid, where inspiration flows naturally between different domains. Outcome becomes a reflection of a sum of experiences.

> "Schizophrenics aren't sunk into themselves. Associatively, they're hyperactive. The world gets creamy like a library." – Chris Krause

While taste is often focused on a single thing, it is often formed through the integration of diverse, and wide-ranging inputs. When diverse inputs are integrated, new connections emerge naturally. This leads to endless possibilities for creative expression, which later contribute to 'taste'.

This is again evident in one of Steve Jobs popular speeches: "I think part of what made the Macintosh great was that the people working on it were musicians and poets and artists and zoologists and historians who also happened to be the best computer scientists in the world."

They weren't just building a computer, they were creating something that would resonate with a tribe that valued both technical excellence and artistic beauty."

"Developing taste isn't just about making better choices, it's about contributing to the evolution of your tribe's collective aesthetic. It's about understanding that while doing it right might get you

through the door, doing it with taste is what makes people want to stay. And in a world where technical perfection is becoming commoditized, that might be the most valuable skill of all.

> Everything connecting to everything else might be a symptom of psychosis, but it's also how the magic happens. – ava link

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Outro:

<ideas>

- Almost all of us can cultivate taste in any domain by consuming high-quality stuff. Exceptional work refines your taste and makes you a better creator.
- A taste-filled life to be a richer one. To pursue it is to appreciate ourselves, each other, and the stuff we're surrounded by a whole lot more.

> *"Taste honors someone's standards of quality, but also the distinctive way the world bounces off a person. It reflects what they know about how the world works, and also what they're working with in their inner worlds. When we recognize true taste, we are recognizing that alchemic combination of skill and soul. This is why it is so alluring." – Brie Wolfson in Notes on "Taste"*

> *"I sketch what comes down the runway, but I don't sketch every one of the 5000 products. But I say 'yes, no, yes, no, I hate it, I love it'…all those decisions, my saying 'yes' and 'no' for the last seven years is what has made Gucci – Gucci." – Tom Ford, the former Creative Director of Gucci and Saint Laurent, speaking about his process*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KdlJlHAAbQ&ab_channel=NickToverovskiy

Anatomy of the greats

Anatomy of the greats

While there always exist common traits between people that did great things throughout history, their paths often differ. Through this difference, each develops their own lens for defining 'what success is.'

Below are 8 perspectives on greatness that together form what I call the 'anatomy of the greats.' There's really nothing common between all these people except for the fact that they have been part of my world – whether through books, documentaries, or software.

These are 8 blueprints that go way beyond conventional wisdom about mastering a domain.

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1. **Michael Jordan**

   "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Much of MJ's mindset is captured in his documentary "The Last Dance". It highlights how he spent 7 years of his career doing the same thing everyday before achieving any tangible win, practicing when no one was looking. He made his NBA debut in 1984 but didn't win his first championship until 1991.

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1. **Seneca**

   "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. When it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short… Life is long if you know how to use it."

Aside from the fact that "Stoicism" has been a rising theme across several contexts, I believe it has a lot to offer for the modern day. A good entry point for me was a book called

“A little history of philosophy.” You could call it “Philosophy for dummies.” It introduces the hypotheses of several influential philosophers throughout history. The section that resonated with me most was Seneca.

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1. **Ada Lovelace**

   "The more I study, the more I learn that science and poetry are not distinct art forms, but rather two sides of the same universal truth. The poetic and scientific aspects of my nature cannot be separated - they strengthen and sustain each other."

The first time I knew about Ada Lovelace was through the book “The Innovators”. Ada Lovelace is the woman who wrote the first computer program in history. She recognized that machines could be used for much more than just calculations. Her notes on the first Analytical Engine provided insights on how creativity and analysis shouldn’t be two separate worlds, but complementary pursuits.

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1. **Paul Graham**

   “There's one case, though, where it's easy to say whether you should work on what interests you the most: if you want to do great work. This is not a sufficient condition for doing great work, but it is a necessary one.”

Paul graham writes, in what I believe is my most favorite essay of his. He then continues: “That doesn't mean it's the right advice for everyone. Not everyone can do great work, or wants to. But if you do want to, the complicated question of whether or not to work on what interests you the most becomes simple. The answer is yes. The root of great work is a sort of ambitious curiosity, and you can't manufacture that.”

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1. **Ben Horowitz**

   The struggle has no mercy. The Struggle is when you wonder why you started in the first place. The Struggle is the land of broken promises and crushed dreams. The Struggle is a cold sweat. The Struggle is where your guts boil so much that you feel

> *like you are going to spit blood. The Struggle is not failure, but it causes failure. Especially if you are weak. Always if you are weak.*
>
> *Most people are not strong enough. Every great entrepreneur went through The Struggle and struggle they did, so you are not alone. But that does not mean that you will make it. You may not make it. That is why it is The Struggle.*
>
> *The Struggle is where greatness comes from.*

In his book "*The Hard Thing About Hard Things*", Ben Horowitz of a16z discusses what it *feels* like when you're going through it. It reminds me of a thing I read recently: "It's impossible to look good when you're getting better". Every real win in life is downstream of misery.

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1. **Travis Kalanick**

> *"Break things fast. The way to build great things is to try and have as many failures as you can as quickly as you can, but have them be affordable failures."*

This defined Travis Kalanick's approach at Uber, to the point that their explosive growth repelled many employees and investors in dismissal of his actions. He's one of the most debatable CEOs of all time, but the "move fast and break things" approach remains influential in startup culture.

Since the biggest learnings come from repetitions, the way to accelerate learning becomes not only to try as much as possible, but also as fast as possible. Which means more mistakes, which means more growth. Thus "Break things fast".

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1. **David Goggins**

> *"When you think you're done, you're only at 40% of your total potential. Going through life without calluses on your mind is being soft and living a life of lies. Until you experience discomfort in training, you will never unlock your true potential. The pain you are experiencing and running from is your ticket to actually being somebody."*

Crazy how this simple concept reveals itself across different domains. The same thing expressed as “The Struggle” by Ben Horowitz, is expressed here by David Goggins as “Intensity”. I believe that Goggins is one of the most intense people on the internet. Yet indeed the kind of “intense” that you’d look up to.

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1. **Derek Sivers**

   "If you're not saying 'HELL YEAH!' about something, say 'no'. When deciding whether to do something, if you feel anything less than 'Wow! That would be amazing! Absolutely! Hell yeah!' - then say 'no.' Most people are living their life avoiding any kind of discomfort, but the best things in life require going through periods of sustained discomfort."

From a short essay dated back to 2018 by Derek Sivers. Cleverly reflects on the fact that every yes is a no, and no is a yes. Time you spend doing one thing is also time you’re also spending not doing something. After ruling out your least important desires, and developing an anti-vision towards everything that you don’t want in your life, the fog seems to be clearing.

1 f*ckup draft III

1 f*ckup in august, 2 days in jail, $3k in fines, 4 lessons in life

This was my view on August 9th at 7:27 PM, hours before I totaled my car.

I was somewhere on Egypt's north coast and was on my way to go meet with some friends. I had just finished cycling, so I fit the bike I just rented in the back of my car, then I got going.

It has been quite some time since I felt that good.

At that point, I had been away from my desk for quite some time—a break I felt I deserved, because the few months prior had been filled with significant changes, in life and work. I've been living like a mad scientist in his own lab for some time. So on that weekend I decided to go to the north coast to steam off, and it had been long since I went there; it's quite the destination for that time of the year.

Around 9:30pm, I'm on the road, and I can vividly remember I had this new afro track on. I was driving at normal speed, then got a bit distracted for 1.x seconds, and it was enough to tail an entire bus full of people, on an open road, in the middle of nowhere.

So in under two seconds, lots of things I never knew could happen, did actually happen. For example I didn't know that the time an airbag would take to inflate is in the order of a few milliseconds, and that modern systems could have alerting engines on board that actually do work. In just one second, iOS knew that I did a car crash, contacted emergency caller IDs, called 911, and continued to make the loudest alarm sound I had ever heard come out of an iPhone.

I was thankfully unharmed. But it's quite the irony when things like these happen at times when you *think* you are on the verge of depression. Serves like an instant reminder. Because the few months prior to this incident had me feeling low; very low. And then after the incident I was suddenly forced to revisit my definition of 'low'.

Over the next 48 hours, I would:

- Get handcuffed
- Sleep on the floor till the next morning
- Spend 5 hours in this transport vehicle, on a 35°C day

- Lose my driving license and never sit behind a driving wheel for the next 3 months
- Drown in legal paperwork (the most painful)

It was almost surreal because for a moment it felt like a movie. I knew what was going on was not something that I'd see everyday. So I decided to just be silent and absorb all of it.

I was lucky, in multiple ways. For one, I got out of the crash standing on both legs. Second, I underestimated the number of people that would show up to help me. Although it was clearly my mistake, and undeniably so, I received unwavering support from lots of people, far beyond what I would have expected. On top of them was my father.

Thankfully, it didn't turn into an open case, which would've been more drastic; it's normal for these situations to take up to weeks, sometimes months, to resolve, and that is if resolution is even on the table. So for it to resolve in 48 hours, and for me to get out in full health, is beyond what I could've hoped for.

Ironic how sometimes the bad days make you feel good, and the good ones make you feel bad.

I rarely forget the dates of my 'bad days'. These memories form a crucial timeline in my mind—a continuum that helps me maintain perspective. Keeping this continuum in my short-term memory helps me navigate the good and the bad. They remind me that life is interspersed with moments of every kind. And that I shouldn't be aiming for a life of comfort but a life of wisdom.

You're not entitled to anything

Here's the 'good' takeaway you might be looking for:

For long, I have been contemplating why some things –in work or life– go wrong, then suddenly, I had to think about the number of things that *could* go wrong, but *didn't*.

This is huge. Because now I don't think about the possibility of "things not working" only during the hard times, but also during the good times. It becomes way easier to appreciate every good time and every win when you remember that **you're not entitled to any of it**.

What this means is, suddenly, my programming was reset, and my brain rewired. I know quite well that normally, these kinds of shifts take long, sometimes years, before you're hit with the 'revelation'. So in hindsight, it feels as if I underwent an extreme experience and paid the price, only to accelerate the shift. Which I cannot be 'ungrateful' for, see how it works?

Soft men create hard times, hard men create soft times

From an outsider's perspective, it might seem unfortunate to hear about bad things happening to other people. From an insider's perspective, you go through a lot and you take it all in, and ultimately these times shape who you become. I am nowhere near what I want to be, but I'm trying my best to take everything in; the good and the bad.

The stories I read about people going through near-extreme experiences and about who they became in the process, in a sense, make me jealous. So the more I grow the less I regret fuckups, and this is not to say that you should just go do whatever you feel like doing; it's just to say that regret shouldn't have a place in your mindset.

I came to learn that everything happens for a reason, and that whatever you go through is just meant to be part of your story.

You can be fast, or you can be distracted, but you cannot be both

For long, the open road for me was just a proxy for life. This might seem crazy but I always thought that those who are extremely cautious while driving are also slow in life. *'And I don't want to be slow'* – or so I was thinking.

I was generally on the reckless side when it comes to driving. I was always feeling the urge to be faster than the average speed of the road, just because I saw a reflection of everyone's approach to risk based on their driving.

But I also believe that time has a way of telling. So it wasn't until this day that time taught me you can either be fast or distracted, but not both. Both could be deadly; on an open road, and in life.

The world is as you see it

It's always about the story you tell yourself about the memory. Your world is literally a bunch of "what you think"s. Over and over life would remind me of this hard pill.

One of the best comments I received from one of my friends when I expressed my sadness following the incident and all the money I spent was: "Just think as if you spent it on a trip to Europe." Strange but relieving.

Ever since August, everyday I wake up, then try to potter for some time; make a good breakfast, take a walk with the dogs, take a soak in the sun, or just breathe for a little while. So far I'd say this has been one of the biggest changes into my day, and also one of the best. It sets the tone for a day of work and reminds me that however it goes, it probably is better than many days out there.

Thanks for reading!

1 f*ckup draft II

1 f*ckup in august, 2 days in jail, $3k in fines, 4 lessons in life

I was somewhere on Egypt's north coast and on my way to meet some friends. I had just finished cycling, so I had to fit the bike in the back of my car, which took more than it should, then I got going. This was on Friday, August 9th, around 9:30pm; it had been quite some time since I felt that good.

The past few months had lots of shifts, in life and work. I had been drowning in work, living like a mad scientist in his own lab for some time; a state which I generally do not resent, because it allows for a continuous stream of ideas, which is good for my writing and my work.

On that weekend I decided to go to the north coast to steam off. It had been a while since I went there; I used to spend entire seasons there back in the day, it's quite the destination at that time of the year.

So around 9:30pm, I hit the road, and I can vividly remember I had this new afro track on, which had just been released a few days earlier. I was driving at normal speed, then got a bit distracted for 1.x second, and it was enough to tail an entire bus full of people, on an open road, in the middle of nowhere.

So in under one second, lots of things I never knew could happen, did actually happen. For example, I didn't know that the time an airbag would take to inflate is in the order of a few milliseconds and that modern systems could have alerting sensors on board that actually do work. In just one second, iOS knew that I had a car crash, contacted emergency caller IDs, called 911, and continued to make the loudest alarm sound I had ever heard come out of an iPhone.

I will go through what happened next, but first I want to talk about my mental state for the few months leading up to the day of the crash.

It's quite the irony when things like these happen at times when you *think* you are on the verge of depression. Puts things into perspective. Because the past few months prior to this incident had me feeling low; very low. And after the incident, I was suddenly forced to revisit my definition of 'low'.

Resentment! Towards normal things. Ok great. Back to August 9th.

Over the next 48 hours, I would:

- Get handcuffed
- Spend 5 hours in that car
- Sleep on the floor in a room that looks exactly like one of these
- Experience what it's like to be in crammed rooms & pathways with tens of people on a 35°C day
- Experience what it's like for random officers to constantly look down on you no matter what your background is
- Lose my driving license and never sit behind a driving wheel for 3 months
- Have my crashed car impounded
- Drown in legal paperwork (the most painful)

I was thankfully unharmed.

To put my mental state **prior** to August 9th into context: I was highly & easily irritated. If someone were to so much as hint that I needed to drive for 30 minutes to issue a legal doc for whatever reason, I'd drop it. I will do anything I can to avoid legal paperwork, because I know what it takes to do it.

But I wanted to know exactly what I was irritated about; so I visited a journal entry from June 15th; it was going along the lines of "repetitive patterns", or, things that we do at the same time of every year. I didn't wrap it, and I remember while writing it, I had to stop because it was going nowhere. But if I were to expand on that feeling now, it'd be that I felt a general lack of novelty. I was starting to feel some resentment for the places I go to everyday, and the things that I do everyday. These things could include the cafe I go to, the meetings I attend, and the activities I generally do.

To put my mental state **post** August 9th into context: I have never felt more peaceful, humble, and accepting. It reminds me of this snippet from breaking bad:

https://youtube.com/shorts/xH_n1-Kvk1c?si=Yd4v7s7lD52N32N6

Ironic how sometimes the bad days make you feel good, and how the good ones could make you feel bad.

For the most part, I don't forget the dates of my 'bad days' – For me, remembering them creates the continuum I need to live with gratitude. I briefly touched upon that in this post Bad events remind me that I should be aiming for a life of wisdom not a life of comfort.

For someone to tell a story like the above, it's easy to imagine these times were so hard they couldn't think of anything but desperately waiting to get out of it, which wasn't exactly my case. I had a fair share of knowledge about stories of car accidents, and police investigations of this type, so I mostly knew how every next step would like along the way. So it was more like me trying to take everything in. I can remember times when I was less composed during less complex situations. Which, in the grand scheme, made me a little bit satisfied.

So let's talk about getting out.

First of all it required an awful lot of money and phone calls. Second, one of the things that I probably underestimated was how many friends showed up, how my father stepped up, and how much personal credit is a real thing (more on that later). Hard to imagine how dire things could've been if it weren't for all of these things combined. Thankfully, it didn't turn into an open investigation, which would've been more drastic; it's normal for these situations to take up to weeks, sometimes months, to resolve, and that is if resolution is even on the table. So to resolve in 48 hours, and for me to get out in full health, is beyond what I could've hoped for.

Over the next few days I'd understandably contemplate more than I should. Mostly contemplate on the contrast between where I was and where I should be, psychologically speaking. Considering I just experienced first-hand what it's like to literally look up for a 'normal day'.

The present is complete

There is a term Jeff Bezos frequently uses, called "pottering". He said in an interview "I wake up then I normally keep pottering before my first meeting of the day". Pottering means living slowly, doing things that are less important, with intention.

It's actually weird that it's easier to explain how to hustle than to explain how to 'potter'. Many of the goals you or me thought of first thing in the morning today, are

not imposed by anyone other than ourselves. So it's not like we **must** do or have or be anything; it's an expectation we created. And this generally wouldn't be a bad thing if it weren't for all the missing out we actively experience because of it. It's okay to want things.

But if the price of thinking about the future is forgetting about the present, then it really doesn't matter whether we do good in the future or not. Because this way when the future is here, we'll already be thinking of a new future, and so on.

I kept being a prisoner of the future for so long, then it took 48 hours to remind me I had to break free.

There's this instagram account of a Russian influencer that I happily follow. She moved to Egypt, and is sharing what it is like to live here. While it could seem like she's taking normal photos of normal things, the way she's hyped up about the simple things –things that have been around us since birth– makes me jealous. How come I haven't thought of this place that's only 20 minutes from home until a girl that came all the way from Russia talked about it? What was I waiting for?

The world is as you see it

It's always about the story you tell yourself about the memory. Your world is literally a bunch of "what you think"s. Over and over life would remind me of this hard pill.

One of the best comments I received from one of my friends when I expressed my sadness following the incident and all the money I spent was: "Just think as if you spent it on a trip to Europe." Strange but relieving.

Now I'm 100% convinced I paid that money in exchange for a mindset shift, some peace of mind. Now that I'm thankfully no longer trapped in the future.

Ever since August, everyday I wake up then try to 'potter' for some time; make a good breakfast, take a walk with the dogs, take a soak in the sun, or just breathe for a little while. So far I'd say this has been one of the biggest changes into my day, and also one of the best. It sets the tone for a day of work and reminds me that however it goes, it probably is better than many days out there.

Soft men create hard times, hard men create soft times

When I was 18, it was easy to avoid near-extreme experiences and feel the pity for those who do. From a 3rd-person view, it might seem unfortunate when you hear about bad things

happening to other people. From a 1st-person view, you go through a lot and you take it all in, and ultimately you see no way of becoming what you have become if it weren't for those times.

I am no where near what I want to be, but I'm trying my best to take everything in; the good and the bad.

The more stories I read about people going through near-extreme experiences and about who they became in the process, in a sense, made me jealous; made me want to do like them, be like them. So the more I grow the less I regret fuckups, and this is not to say that you should just go do whatever you feel like doing; it's just to say that regret shouldn't have a place in your mindset.

I came to learn that everything happens for a reason, and that whatever you go through is just meant to be part of your story.

You can go fast, or you can be distracted, but you cannot do both

For long, the open road for me was just a proxy for life. This might seem crazy but I always thought that those who are extremely cautious while driving are also slow in life. *'And I don't want to be slow in life'* – I was thinking.

I normally am on the reckless side when it comes to driving. I was always feeling the urge to be faster than the average speed of the road, just because I saw a reflection of everyone's approach to risk based on their driving.

In the real world, when you know what you want, and get after it, relentlessly, there's just no way for the outside world to not respond. When you poke reality, create change, move things, everyone and everything in your way seems to slowly move out your way. Same with the open road.

But I also believe that time has a way of telling. So it wasn't until this day that time taught me you can either be fast or distracted, but not both. Both could be deadly; on an open road, and in life.

1 f*ckup draft I

1 f*ckup in august, 2 days in jail, $3k in fines, 4 lessons in life

I was somewhere on Egypt's north coast with some friends, and was on my way to go meet with some more friends. I had just finished cycling, so I had to fit the bike in the back of my car, which took more than it should, then I got going. This was on Friday, August 9th, around 9:30pm; it has been quite some time since I felt that good.

At that point, I had been away from my desk for quite some time, which I thought I deserved, because past few months had lots of shifts, in life and work. I've been drowning in work, living like a mad scientist in his own lab for some time; a state which I generally do not resent, because it allowed for a continuous stream of ideas, which is still a good thing, for my writing and for my work.

On that weekend I decided to go to the north coast to steam off, and it has been long since I went there; back then I used to spend entire seasons there, it's quite the destination for that time of the year.

So around 9:30pm, I'm on the road, and I can vividly remember I had this new afro track on, which has just been released a few days ago. I was driving at normal speed, then got a bit distracted for 1.x seconds, and it was enough to tail an entire bus full of people, on an open road, in the middle of nowhere.

So in under one second, lots of things I never knew could happen, did actually happen. For example I didn't know that the time an airbag would take to inflate is in the order of a few milliseconds, and that modern systems could have alerting engines on board that actually do work. In just one second, iOS knew that I did a car crash, contacted emergency caller IDs, called 911, and continued to generate one of the highest alert sounds I have seen come out of an iPhone.

I was thankfully unharmed. But it's quite the irony when things like these happen at times when you *think* you were on the verge of depression. Serves like an instant reminder. Because, in reality, past few months prior to this incident had me feeling low;

very low. And then I was suddenly forced to go over the definition of 'low'. What exactly is low?

So I visited a reflection from June 15th; it was going along the lines of "repetitive patterns", or, things that we do at the same time of every year. I didn't wrap it, and I remember while writing it, I had to stop because it was going nowhere. But if I'd want to expand on that feeling now, it'd be that I felt a general lack of novelty. I was starting to feel some resentment for places I go to everyday, and things that I do everyday. These things could include the cafe I go to, the meetings I attend, and activities I generally do.

Resentment! Towards New Cairo. Ok great. Back to August 9th.

It's now 11pm, and over the next 48 hours, I would:

- Get handcuffed
- Spend 5 hours in that car
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- Lose my driving license and never sit behind a driving wheel for 3 months
- Have my crashed car impounded
- Drown in legal paperwork (the most painful)

To put my mental state prior to August 9th into context: I was highly & easily irritated. If someone were to so much as hint that I needed to drive for 30 minutes to issue a legal doc for whatever reason, I'd drop it. I will do anything I can to avoid legal paperwork, because I know what it takes to do it, especially around here in Egypt. First

because it's so much time wasted, and second, because it's almost always highly inconvenient. I was generally fully ready to abandon stuff that I NEED to get done, sometimes even for work, just because I wouldn't suffer going through a gov building.

To put my mental state post August 12th into context: I have never felt more peaceful, humble, and accepting. It reminds me of this snippet from breaking bad:

https://youtube.com/shorts/xH_n1-Kvk1c?si=Yd4v7s7lD52N32N6

Ironic how sometimes the bad days make you feel good, and how the good ones could make you feel bad.

For the most part, I don't forget the dates of my 'bad days' – For me, remembering them creates the continuum I need to always have in my short-term memory. I briefly touched upon that in this post They remind me that I shouldn't be aiming for a life of comfort but a life of wisdom.

If I applied a lens of "Thick Skin" to the way I look at things, then lots of those things will change. For someone to tell a story like the above, it's easy to imagine the times were so hard they couldn't think of anything but desperately waiting to get out of it, which was far from my case. I had a fair share of knowledge about stories of car accidents, and police investigations of this type, so I mostly knew how every next step would like along the way. So it was more like me trying to take everything in. I can remember times when I was less composed during less complex situations. Which, in the grand scheme, made me a little bit satisfied.

So let's talk about getting out.

First of all it required an awful lot of money and phone calls. Second, one of the things that I probably underestimated is how many friends showed up, how my father acted up, and how much personal credit is a real thing. Hard to imagine how dire things could've been if it weren't for all of these combined. Thankfully, it didn't turn into an open case, which would've been more drastic; it's normal for these situations to take up to weeks, sometimes months, to resolve, and that is if resolution is even on the table. So to resolve in 48 hours, and for me to leave the incident in full health, is beyond what I could've hoped for.

(still incomplete)

Draft

4 lessons:

- The present is complete (include + reform)

  The aftermath got me thinking about all the times we have been waiting for, and all the things we have been waiting for. Being so close to dying, leaving life behind, brings into perspective that the daily chase is probably a facade.

  Problem is we want to be everywhere, we want to experience everything, spare nothing, get all of it; then as time goes, this feeling becomes the sole barrier between us and experiencing any of it.

  Also, seems ironic that as I started thinking about this, experiencing everyday as if it's all what I have got, suddenly I see it everywhere. Suddenly there seem to be clues wherever I look at, online and offline. Now I'm sure these signals have been there all along, but it's just me who wasn't receiving. I only fully got it when I was ready, through my new lens, and my own experience.

- I'm not –and probably will not be– ready to be a father

- You can choose to forget, but life will always remind you to stay humble

- Good times create weak men, weak men create hard times

Tab 11