

Grab a Sponge and Start Washing

Extracted from Adam Mastroianni's essay 'Use this magic bullet to shoot yourself in the foot'

Sometimes, life puts us in lose-lose situations, where it's embarrassing to try and fail, but it's also embarrassing not to try at all. It sucks to study for a math exam and still flunk it, but it's foolish not to study in the first place.

When you're stuck in a conundrum like that, how do you get out?

Well, one canny solution is to subtly manipulate the situation so that failure is *inevitable*. That way, no one can blame you for failing, *and* no one can blame you for not trying. Psychologists call this self-handicapping, and as far as impression management strategies go, you gotta admit this one is pretty exquisite.

Here's what self-handicapping looks like in the wild.

I had a friend in high school who "forgot" to apply to university in our senior year. Literally, May came around and we were like "Nate, did you get in anywhere?" and he was like "Oh shoot, that happened already?" Nate was a smart kid but a bad student, so it's possible he actually did forget, but some of us suspected that the entire application season had conveniently slipped his mind so he wouldn't have to face the shame of being rejected. We could never prove it, though, and that's exactly why self-handicapping is such a clever tactic.

Of course, Nate's self-handicapping came at a cost. No one can ding him for being stupid, but we can all ding him for being irresponsible. The ideal form of self-handicapping, then, is one that obscures the role of the self entirely. In fact, it works best when even *you* don't realize that you're doing it. Nate's months-long brain fart is more believable if he believes it himself. If you're gonna shoot yourself in the foot, best to do it while sleepwalking, so you can wake up and be like "A bullet!! In my foot!! And it got there through no fault of my own!!"

Which is to say: many of the people who are engaging in self-handicapping would earnestly deny the allegation.

You can see how self-handicapping is a handy response to a world that demands more care from us than we can give. If all the world's problems are impossible to solve well, that's sad, but it ain't on me. I don't *want* it to be that way, of course, but it is, which means my only obligation is to bravely bear witness to the end of it

all. That's why it's actually very important to maintain the idea that democracy is unsalvageable, AI is unstoppable, the Middle East is intractable, the climate apocalypse is (literally) baked in, and so on. For the aspiring self-handicapper, the best causes are *lost* causes.

But the problem with shooting yourself in the foot, is that now you have a bullet in your foot.

A self-handicap can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more we believe our situation is hopeless, the more hopeless it becomes.

Succumbing to despair might offer you a reputational reprieve in the short term, but avoiding the blame doesn't mean you can avoid the consequences. When rising sea levels, secret police, or AI-powered killer drones come for you, they won't ask whether you have a doctor's note excusing you from the greatest struggles of your generation.

We might as well go down swinging.

When folks seem hell bent on giving up, I wanna know: why are they holding on so tightly their hopelessness? What does it do for them? If the future is so uncertain, if no one can justifiably say whether or not we're gonna make it, why not pick the belief that gets you out of bed in the morning, rather than the one that keeps you there?

When I was in high school, I used to volunteer with this group that, basically, held car washes and then donated the money. The organization wasn't explicitly Christian, but Peggy, the woman who led it, was. She used to tell us: "People see bad things in the world and ask why God doesn't do something about it. But God did do something. He sent *you*."

We can argue about whether this is a theologically sound solution to the problem of evil, and we can ask why a supposedly all-knowing and all-powerful God would entrust anything to *me*, a guy who can't even do a single pull-up. But I always appreciated this attitude.

Yes, things are hard. No, it's not your fault. These are the problems we got. Would you like them to be better? Then here, grab a sponge and start washing.