Death is the default

Subtitle: Why building is our safest way forward

In the early stages of starting a company, founders stare in the face of one of the stark realities of human existence: the fact that death is the default. Their product or service did not exist in the world before they started building it, and it will quickly fizzle back out of existence if they step away from it. It's like those horrible, murderous villains in Dr. Who, the "Weeping Angels," who stand still as long as you're watching them, but rapidly close in on you the moment you so much as blink.

Or so it often feels, anyway. In fact, there are no murderous villains waiting to close in on you in the startup case; there are just the blind, indifferent forces of inertia and entropy. Most startups don't die because someone is actively trying to kill them, but simply because the founders stop trying to keep them alive.

This state of affairs is by no means unique to founders. It is a literal law of nature that every living being must grapple with. As Steven Pinker reminds us in *Enlightenment Now*, the "first keystone in understanding the human condition is the concept of entropy": the inexorable fact, captured by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that left to its own devices, a system always moves toward stillness, randomness, and disorder. "Life and happiness depend," he continues, "on an infinitesimal sliver of orderly arrangements of matter amid the astronomical number of possibilities… Far more of the arrangements of matter found on Earth are of no worldly use to us, so when things change without a human agent directing the change, they are likely to change for the worse."

How the Enlightenment has numbed us to entropy

This is a difficult truth to keep hold of in our post-Enlightenment world. Thanks to the intrepid founders, scientists, and other innovators who have fought on the frontlines of the human fight against death and entropy for the past several centuries, many of us have been born into a world where living in relative health and comfort into our old age *is* the path of least resistance.

The accumulated fruits of human agency and creative problem-solving are so ubiquitous today—in the form of agriculture and modern medicine, electricity and air conditioning, Uber and Amazon, Google and iPhones, widespread literacy and constitutional government, bank loans and credit cards, Zoom and Facebook—that we tend to assume them as the natural default, or worse, blame them for any remaining problems they haven't been able to solve.

Living with chronic or unexplained illness is enough of an anomaly today that a seemingly unremarkable Tweet reminding us "how big of a blessing it is to not have any health problems" drew 1.4 million likes overnight, with most of the replies expressing appreciation that someone

put words to such a rarely stated sentiment. As we enter year 3 of a global pandemic, we feel we are living through what a recent Atlantic article called "the dreadful days"—forgetting, perhaps, that plagues used to be the rule, not the exception, of human existence.

We build or we die

None of this is to say we shouldn't regard chronic illnesses or pandemics as the scourges that they are, nor that we shouldn't fight them with everything we've got. On the contrary, remembering that "death is the default" should mobilize us *to* fight them with everything we've got—recognizing that the one thing we've got, in the fight against entropy, inertia, and death, is our **power of agency.**

The power of agency is, in practice, the **power to build**: to direct our intelligence toward the work of understanding the world and adapting it to our needs. It's how we impose a purposeful order on nature's chaos.

This is the power exemplified by the vaccine developers and other medical innovators who, quoting Pinker again (this time from *Rationality*), "identified the cause [of the COVID-19 virus] within days, sequenced its genome within weeks, and administered vaccines within a year, keeping its death toll to a fraction of those of historic pandemics."

It's also the power that's on display in all the more local, mundane ways we apply our intelligence to the work of understanding and shaping our world every day: whenever we consciously select and prepare a meal for ourselves; whenever we arrange our living space in a thoughtful way; whenever we act upon our considered judgment, reached in consultation with experts whom we have conscientiously evaluated, about what will best serve the medical or educational or nutritional needs of our children; whenever we put in a solid day's work at a job that helps us afford the time and materials required for these former.

And it's the power we forfeit when we squander our mental and physical energy on lamenting how hopelessly broken the world is, or how hopelessly broken *we* are, because we've made wrong turns or haven't found solutions to all of our problems yet.

An optimistic outlook

Counterintuitively, internalizing the perspective that "death is the default" leads to a more fundamentally optimistic and forgiving outlook on ourselves and our fellow human beings.

Whenever we find ourselves raging against the fact that there is still pain and suffering and hunger and sickness and injustice in the world, the underlying assumption is that these problems wouldn't exist but for some human folly or malice; if only we'd stop being so greedy or so racist or so materialistic, we could all live in peace and harmony and never run out of food or shelter or high-quality healthcare again.

But if we actually take seriously the creative challenge of effecting any one of these outcomes, we quickly come to see that the failure to do so is not fundamentally a problem of malice or ill will; it's a problem of *not having the knowledge or will to effect them in the first place.*

What we often take for granted is just how much human ingenuity, iterative experimentation, and messy trial-and-error has gone into generating whatever solutions we now take as "given."

The way we've come this far toward reducing world hunger was not predominantly by curbing our voracious appetites; it was by developing the science and practice of agriculture. The way we've come this far in reducing the death toll of global pandemics was not predominantly by sheltering in place or social distancing; it was by developing the science and practice of immunology. And the way we've come this far in reducing the global impact of discrimination and violence is not predominantly by desisting from hatred; it was by devising complex social, political, and legal institutions that unleash love, allowing for peaceful cooperation among large and diverse groups of people.

As every founder and independent problem-solver knows, the work of building new solutions to heretofore-unsolved problems is messy, fallible, continuously iterative work. Sometimes we're not even clear on the nature of the problem until we've already gone a ways toward solving it. When it comes to normative fields like education or psychology, simply agreeing on the problem—that is, on the ends we are trying to effect—is itself a [Herculean challenge of philosophy and social science](#).

Meanwhile even a typically flawed education or middling mental health treatment is better, and sometimes literally more life-saving, than none; and the default, through most of human history, was none.

Entropy isn't evil; it just is

Understanding that death, disorder, and chaos are the natural default can be paradoxically liberating. Many problems become more tractable, or at least less frustrating, if we approach them less as casualties of human folly and more as challenges of creative engineering.

For instance, it spares us from feeling aggrieved by the toxic, dysfunctional relationships in our lives, once we realize that the *fundamental* problem is rarely one of malicious intent; it's that no one in the relationship has figured out how to make it work. This is why practical, skills-based communication technologies like Marshall Rosenberg's [Nonviolent Communication](#) (NVC) or the [Interpersonal Effectiveness skills](#) from Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) are so game-changing for those who implement them. It's not because people never have ill intentions (this is something on which I disagree with both Linehan and Rosenberg), but because an effective system for [building "win-win" relationships](#) makes it far less tempting to resort to ill-intentioned "win-lose" tactics. Whatever their flaws, methodologies like NVC and

DBT-IE offer ingeniously creative solutions to the complex problem of how to get everyone's needs met in a relationship. I myself was too quick to dismiss such methodologies as "obvious" or "gimmicky" until after I'd repeatedly failed to solve the same problems on my own and found myself returning to them for guidance. If you're not getting what you want from your relationships, you would do well to scour these methodologies for solutions you might not have tried yet.

The same applies in spades to dysfunctional institutions: whenever we bemoan the ineptitude of corporations or hospitals or government bureaucracies as though it were an injustice willfully inflicted upon us, we need to remember that the default is not well-functioning institutions. The default is, first, institutions at all. And, second, institutions that represent attempts to solve problems, but that fall short or even make things worse—another default failure mode, to be overcome only by recursive application of the same [builder's mindset.](#)

If you're angry about the long hold when you call your airline to rebook a flight: do you know how you'd solve the problem of staffing customer service lines if you were the airline? Or if you're [angry at the wealthy people of the world for not using their billions to "end world hunger":](#) do you know how you'd [go about solving this problem](#) if you were a multibillionaire? For that matter, do you know how you would even determine whether this was the best cause to prioritize, given that this remains a topic of [heated debate](#) even among the most thoughtful and committed humanitarians? Or have you taken cognizance of the problems that successful people *are* choosing to work on and solve, even if they aren't *your* favored cause?

Dysfunction, ineptitude, hunger, and death are not a personal affront or a divine punishment for wrongdoing; they are defaults. Operational excellence, competence, abundance, and flourishing are always and everywhere achievements, the distinctly human mode of overriding nature's defaults. Figuring out how to wrest order from chaos—whether as an individual or as a family or as an institution or as a culture—is *what we do*; it is a creative challenge afforded to us by the miracle of having escaped entropy for this long, and by the grace of all the fellow human builders who've gotten us this far.

Letting go of status quo bias: why building is the safer choice

By letting this perspective sink in, we can shift from blaming the problems of the world on human depravity to marveling at all the progress we've already made toward solving them—and taking ownership of the difficult, fallible, energy-intensive work of trying to move the needle a bit further.

Whether and how we take up this work is always a choice. It can be harder or easier depending on our circumstances, our natural endowments, and the size of our ambition, but it is never the default. Evolution furnished us with a unique capacity to regulate our own energy expenditure, including even our choice of whether and toward what ends we expend it. This means we have a

limitless potential for sustaining and bettering our lives—and an equally limitless potential for squandering or destroying them.

Choosing to build doesn't guarantee we'll build the things we actually need, or that we'll build them well enough or fast enough to stave off the forces of entropy; but **refusing to build guarantees that we will fail to do so.** In this light, the work of building is our best—nay, ultimately our *only*—defense against the entropic forces that threaten our survival and thriving.

And yet most of us act as if the opposite were true: as if the "safer" choice, all else being equal, is to maintain the status quo and to stick with what we've got, rather than bet on the possibilities of building something new.

While there's debate about *why* so many people exhibit these "status quo" and "risk aversion" biases, one readily available observation is that they are manifest in our cultural messaging. The whole notion of Maslow's hierarchy, as it's commonly understood and invoked today, suggests we can't afford the "luxury" of exercising our creative and intellectual powers when our basic needs are threatened; as if exercising these powers weren't precisely what has allowed us to face down such threats throughout human history. We think of professional endeavors as "risky" in almost direct proportion to the extent that they involve building something new (*a la* working at a startup) versus maintaining the status quo (as people often assume, rightly or wrongly, of the "corporate" world).

The partial truth in these assumptions is that building something new is *socially risky*; insofar as you need to bring other people on board in order to build what you want to build (as, in our division of labor society, you almost certainly do), you'll need to push through *their status quo and risk aversion biases* in addition to whatever other entropic forces you're up against. This often means you need to fight harder for customers or gigs or investors or public recognition than someone who's doing the more conventional thing.

But *how big a risk is this*, actually, when pitted against the risk of continued inaction and stagnation? To answer this question with any accuracy, we need to shed our complacent post-Enlightenment assumption that human health, happiness, freedom, employment, education, and flourishing are automatic, to-be-expected defaults, and recognize them instead for the **hard-won human achievements** that they are.

Even sans global pandemics, these achievements require ongoing maintenance, which, in a dynamic world subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, means ongoing innovation. The 20th century should have taught us just how easily we can sign away our own freedoms and undermine our own progress as a civilization when we don't understand or appreciate these truths.

The psychological upshot: to stagnate is natural, to build is human

Taking this historical and philosophical view of the human condition provides an invaluable lens for our own individual decision-making. For instance, it implies that embracing a bias toward action as the overall *less risky* alternative to inaction, all else being equal. Once we fully internalize the perspective that "death is the default," we see that the absolute riskiest route is often to do nothing at all: to keep languishing at a "safe" job instead of making the scary leap to something more fulfilling and financially rewarding in the long term; or to stay single and lonely or continue in a relationship we have outgrown, instead of putting yourself back out there.

Finally, by appreciating the often far deadlier risks that humanity's builders have taken on the path to securing our present-day comfort and prosperity, we can also learn to recognize the *work* that any worthwhile achievement entails—including the mistakes and rejections, the false starts, the struggle, and even the pain. In a universe where quiet, passive death is the default, the so-called "tradeoff" between security and ambition is illusory. We can do no better to secure our health and comfort and that of future generations than by seeking that sublime height of human experience: the full application of our intelligence to difficult problems that matter.