

In Praise of Mediocrity

By Tim Wu, Sept. 29, 2018

I'm a little surprised by how many people tell me they have no hobbies. It may seem a small thing, but — at the risk of sounding grandiose — I see it as a sign of a civilization in decline. The idea of leisure, after all, is a hard-won achievement; it presupposes that we have overcome the exigencies of brute survival. Yet here in the United States, the wealthiest country in history, we seem to have forgotten the importance of doing things solely because we enjoy them.

Yes, I know: We are all so very busy. Between work and family and social obligations, where are we supposed to find the time?

But there's a deeper reason, I've come to think, that so many people don't have hobbies: We're afraid of being bad at them. Or rather, we are intimidated by the expectation — itself a hallmark of our intensely public, performative age — that we must actually be skilled at what we do in our free time. Our “hobbies,” if that's even the word for them anymore, have become too serious, too demanding, too much an occasion to become anxious about whether you are really the person you claim to be.

If you're a jogger, it is no longer enough to cruise around the block; you're training for the next marathon. If you're a painter, you are no longer passing a pleasant afternoon, just you, your watercolors and your water lilies; you are trying to land a gallery show or at least garner a respectable social media following. When your identity is linked to your hobby — you're a yogi, a surfer, a rock climber — you'd better be good at it, or else who are you?

Lost here is the gentle pursuit of a modest competence, the doing of something just because you enjoy it, not because you are good at it. Hobbies, let me remind you, are supposed to be something different from work. But alien values like “the pursuit of excellence” have crept into and corrupted what was once the realm of leisure, leaving little room for the true amateur. The population of our country now seems divided between the semipro hobbyists (some as devoted as Olympic athletes) and those who retreat into the passive, screeny leisure that is the signature of our technological moment.

I don't deny that you can derive a lot of meaning from pursuing an activity at the highest level. I would never begrudge someone a lifetime devotion to a passion or an inborn talent. There are depths of experience that come with mastery. But there is also a real and pure joy, a sweet, childlike delight, that comes from just learning and trying to get better. Looking back, you will find that the best years of, say, scuba-diving or doing carpentry were those you spent on the learning curve, when there was exaltation in the mere act of doing.

In a way that we rarely appreciate, the demands of excellence are at war with what we call freedom. For to permit yourself to do only that which you are good at is to be trapped in a cage whose bars are not steel but self-judgment. Especially when it comes to physical pursuits, but also with many other endeavors, most of us will be truly excellent only at whatever we started doing in our teens. What if you decide in your 40s, as I have, that you want to learn to surf? What

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if you decide in your 60s that you want to learn to speak Italian? The expectation of excellence can be stultifying.

Liberty and equality are supposed to make possible the pursuit of happiness. It would be unfortunate if we were to protect the means only to neglect the end. A democracy, when it is working correctly, allows men and women to develop into free people; but it falls to us as individuals to use that opportunity to find purpose, joy and contentment.

Lest this sound suspiciously like an elaborate plea for people to take more time off from work — well, yes. Though I'd like to put the suggestion more grandly: The promise of our civilization, the point of all our labor and technological progress, is to free us from the struggle for survival and to make room for higher pursuits. But demanding excellence in all that we do can undermine that; it can threaten and even destroy freedom. It steals from us one of life's greatest rewards — the simple pleasure of doing something you merely, but truly, enjoy.

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In the US, students get grades (marks) ranging from A to F. To determine a student's Grade Point Average (GPA), each grade is given a numerical value, given below. In parentheses, you will find the approximate equivalence in the French numerical system of grading.

A = 4 (16 – 20)

B = 3 (12 – 15)

C = 2 (9 – 11)

D = 1 (6 – 8)

In order to get a GPA of 4.0, a student must get only As in all classes; this is referred to as “straight As.”

What Straight-A Students Get Wrong

By Adam Grant, December 8, 2018.

A decade ago, at the end of my first semester teaching at Wharton, a student stopped by for office hours. He sat down and burst into tears. My mind started cycling through a list of events that could make a college junior cry: His girlfriend had dumped him; he had been accused of plagiarism. “I just got my first A-minus,” he said, his voice shaking.

Year after year, I watch in dismay as students obsess over getting straight A's. Some sacrifice their health; a few have even tried to sue their school after falling short. All have joined the cult of perfectionism out of a conviction that top marks are a ticket to elite graduate schools and lucrative job offers.

I was one of them. I started college with the goal of graduating with a 4.0. It would be a reflection of my brainpower and willpower, revealing that I had the right stuff to succeed. But I was wrong.

The evidence is clear: Academic excellence is not a strong predictor of career excellence. Across industries, research shows that the correlation between grades and job performance is modest in the first year after college and trivial within a handful of years. For example, at Google, once employees are two or three years out of college, their grades have no bearing on their performance. (Of course, it must be said that if you got D's, you probably didn't end up at Google.)

Academic grades rarely assess qualities like creativity, leadership and teamwork skills, or social, emotional and political intelligence. Yes, straight-A students master cramming information and regurgitating it on exams. But career success is rarely about finding the right solution to a problem — it's more about finding the right problem to solve.

In a classic 1962 study, a team of psychologists tracked down America's most creative architects and compared them with their technically skilled but less original peers. One of the factors that distinguished the creative architects was a record of spiky grades. “In college our creative architects earned about a B average,” Donald MacKinnon wrote. “In work and courses which caught their interest they could turn in an A performance, but in courses that failed to strike their imagination, they were quite willing to do no work at all.” They paid attention to their curiosity and prioritized activities that they found intrinsically motivating — which ultimately served them well in their careers.

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Getting straight A's requires conformity. Having an influential career demands originality. In a study of students who graduated at the top of their class, the education researcher Karen Arnold found that although they usually had successful careers, they rarely reached the upper echelons. "Valedictorians aren't likely to be the future's visionaries," Dr. Arnold explained. "They typically settle into the system instead of shaking it up."

This might explain why Steve Jobs finished high school with a 2.65 G.P.A., J.K. Rowling graduated from the University of Exeter with roughly a C average, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. got only one A in his four years at Morehouse.

If your goal is to graduate without a blemish on your transcript, you end up taking easier classes and staying within your comfort zone. If you're willing to tolerate the occasional B, you can learn to program in Python while struggling to decipher "Finnegans Wake." You gain experience coping with failures and setbacks, which builds resilience.

Straight-A students also miss out socially. More time studying in the library means less time to start lifelong friendships, join new clubs or volunteer. I know from experience. I didn't meet my 4.0 goal; I graduated with a 3.78. (This is the first time I've shared my G.P.A. since applying to graduate school 16 years ago. Really, no one cares.) Looking back, I don't wish my grades had been higher. If I could do it over again, I'd study less. The hours I wasted memorizing the inner workings of the eye would have been better spent trying out improv comedy and having more midnight conversations about the meaning of life.

So universities: Make it easier for students to take some intellectual risks. Graduate schools can be clear that they don't care about the difference between a 3.7 and a 3.9. Colleges could just report letter grades without pluses and minuses, so that any G.P.A. above a 3.7 appears on transcripts as an A. It might also help to stop the madness of grade inflation, which creates an academic arms race that encourages too many students to strive for meaningless perfection. And why not let students wait until the end of the semester to declare a class pass-fail, instead of forcing them to decide in the first month?

Employers: Make it clear you value skills over straight A's. Some recruiters are already on board: In a 2003 study of over 500 job postings, nearly 15 percent of recruiters actively selected against students with high G.P.A.s (perhaps questioning their priorities and life skills), while more than 40 percent put no weight on grades in initial screening.

Straight-A students: Recognize that underachieving in school can prepare you to overachieve in life. So maybe it's time to apply your grit to a new goal — getting at least one B before you graduate.

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