

A photograph of a rugged, snow-capped mountain peak, likely Mount Everest, under a clear sky. The mountain's ridges and valleys are covered in white snow, with some dark rock visible. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

The Promise of Thoughtful Perseverance

“It always seems impossible until it's done.”

– Nelson Mandela

Perseverance.

Possibly one of the most under-rated qualities in the achievement of success – whatever that might mean for you. Let's call it “A Life Well Lived”, that includes overcoming challenges and difficulties, contributing, and leaving the world just slightly better than you found it.

I know, this idea of “success” is a topic all its own, so let's not get caught up in it for the moment. It can (should?) be a moving target, that shifts as you go through life, so I won't even try to define it in more detail, but will leave a vague signpost so that we can move on the subject of this Blog entry.

There are as many paths to “success” and a Life Well Lived, as there are versions and definitions of it – probably more, now that I think of it. Brilliance can pave the way; extensive education and expertise can cut a path, serendipity can ease the journey, and sometimes what appears to be blind luck (is it, though?) can be at the core. Perhaps more esoterically, alignment with the forces of the universe can be a powerful enabler, as many great spiritual and philosophical traditions will argue.

Amid all this complexity, I believe the critical role of perseverance is often overlooked, or underestimated, and that our collective valuation of the discipline of perseverance fails to do it justice.



Amid all this complexity, I believe the critical role of perseverance is often overlooked, or underestimated. I'll qualify that a bit further, by saying "thoughtful" perseverance – that is, perseverance that is informed, discriminating and a little strategic. You all know the old line about chasing a sunset running East...or was it, a sunrise running West? Anyway, you get the idea.

Perseverance is not blind stubbornness, nor is it ego-driven insistence on a course of action, at the cost of whatever outcome or objective you are pursuing. It is thoughtful commitment, the discipline and the courage to work through, feel through and live through hardship, difficulty, complexity...all of which are of course relative and will differ for each of us.

What does it Mean?

Perseverance is a focused, thoughtful pursuit of a goal or commitment, with the flexibility to adjust the pathway and direction of travel; whether the goal is something “concrete” in the real world, such as a promotion, a level of earning power, or a fitness objective, or whether it relates to a state of being, a level of spiritual evolution – whatever – perseverance has its place.

A brief word to the younger generation out there? And I know one or two of you are reading this...

Yes, it is important to “pursue your passion” and to play to your skills and innate abilities. Please consider for a moment though, that there is immense long-term value in developing the discipline and the ability to persevere through a difficult experience. A course, an academic program, or a “job” that tests your patience and challenges your tolerance levels, all while offering a promising cure for occasional bouts of insomnia.

It's been easy for many years to “drop a course” or change a program because it's just easier that way. Now, this is not to say that there are not very legitimate reasons to make those choices, but only to suggest that “working through the tough stuff” may actually prove more valuable in the long run than any single course or program.

This is not for everyone, I fully recognize. And it is based on personal experience that perhaps colours my views on the topic. A university counselor once told me (yes, decades ago!) that graduate schools like to see students who have done well, and give little weight (I am paraphrasing) to those who chose a program that was tougher for them and stuck with it.

So, it's entirely possible that you are best served by ignoring the words you just read. Or, perhaps there is a balance that allows you to do well, and to push your limits and develop your “Perseverance Muscle.”

There is a parallel discussion for those in early to mid-career, and perhaps an even stronger parallel conversation for entrepreneurs.

Even in the “ideal” circumstance of running your own business involves doing things, learning about subjects and making decisions that you may not enjoy or innately grasp. It’s axiomatic in the world of entrepreneurs small or large, local or global, that crossing the line between a promising dream and its realization often comes down to just one more moment of perseverance.

But a crucial moment, where that quality pierces through what looks like an insurmountable obstacle with one more act or decision of commitment in the face of the perennial challenges that come with running a business.

You can easily do some research to validate this point.

Company founders are often domain experts – scientists, technology specialists, engineers and architects – and any number of others. Very commonly however, these owner/managers are described as financially illiterate in that they don’t “speak banker” and can run headlong into the existential threat of a cashflow problem, with no knowledge of options available to solve the problem, and with little idea how to even approach a conversation on the subject. The issue is so wide-spread that it has a name: it’s referred to as the need to present a “bankable proposal”.

I digress again, but hopefully with a relevant point: perseverance is as much about doing the tough stuff, as it is about developing the discipline to do the “stuff” that you might consider unpleasant, uninteresting or unfamiliar, but that is in fact, critical to whatever mission you have set for yourself.

Perseverance in the context of entrepreneurship is not an option or a luxury. It is a must, perhaps even the price of entry that is more critical than the brilliance of your business model, the genius of your idea or the potential of your proposal. It is critical as you set up and launch your business, and it is equally critical as you grow, seek partners, pursue investors...it is truly a discipline that will pay dividends throughout the life of your business.

If you are employed and committed to make a contribution and to grow, the same applies. Developing and honing the discipline of thoughtful perseverance will differentiate you, and will help you to chart a path through the difficult or uninspiring

moments, to the place where your unique brilliance shines and your unique contribution finds its place.

In either case, what helps is to “keep your eye on the prize” – the larger opportunity, the objective that fires you up, the potential you aspire to. Keep in mind, we’ve been chatting about “Thoughtful Perseverance” – a turn of phrase that does not imply “realistic” or somehow limited or uninspiring: you can aim for the stars, and persevere in that pursuit if that is your path.

Just persevere, and do so thoughtfully.

Let's Get Practical

- Consider a situation you are facing that is proving challenging or difficult. What can you see on the other side, once you’ve worked your way through the problem? Can you see a payoff for your time, energy and effort? How will that help you to persevere through the difficulty, cross the line to where you accomplish what you aimed for?
- Choose a small action that activates and strengthens your “Perseverance Muscle”, and make it part of your day. Whatever challenges you but brings you closer to a worthy outcome. A physical objective? An academic or intellectual exercise? A small commitment to perseverance in professional development? Stay focused on Thoughtful Perseverance. Shift or adjust as needed, but once you’ve done that, carry through
- Become actively aware of examples of Thoughtful Perseverance around you, just observe, and take note of the outcomes if you can discern them. Observe any lessons or insights that can help you; see if you can be of help – engage in the energy of Thoughtful Perseverance that is around you
- Think about Perseverance and its relationship to time. Does your version of Thoughtful Perseverance have a stopwatch running alongside it? Is that helpful in serving your objective? If you’ve set a time limit to accomplishing something or launching that business, or whatever (and sometimes that is the prudent thing to do), is the approach helping you or hindering you?

- Look back: is there a moment you can recognize, where it seems in hindsight that you might have given up on something just a little too soon? If so, what was the reason? What can you learn from that experience?
- Can you think of anyone you admire for the perseverance? Have you ever had a conversation with them specifically on this topic? If not, give it a try. Or flip this idea on its head: speak to someone around you (diplomatically!) about the price they may have paid for not developing their Perseverance Muscle. What do these conversations suggest for you?

By the Way...

Just to have a little fun, now that we've spent a few minutes together on the idea of "Thoughtful Perseverance", and the suggestion around activating and developing a "Perseverance Muscle", there is a powerful and compelling (complementary?) notion of Wu Wei, or the concept of "Non-Doing" from the Tao, that refers to being in a state of alignment with the flow of life. Thoughtful Perseverance + Non-Doing. Hmmmm...

"Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

- Thomas Edison



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