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Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about how sometimes we get caught up in a race towards mastery on a topic where we are amateurs. But in our mind, there is often a misplaced sense of professionalism that can sometimes have negative consequences without us realizing. I guess these are individual choices that we make but being aware of this phenomenon and having a clear Why behind some of these pursuits is often helpful.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to a different theme Tom you talk about specifically your experience with biking, where you say you tried it for a while and at some stage you stopped having fun and it started feeling like work and you alluded to it the beginning of this conversation and you also link it to the way we think about identity, right? Somewhere, I would love for you to talk about the link between some sort of a satisficing mindset and our approach to these pursuits on the side. Can you talk a little bit about specifically maybe relating to your journey with biking?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): Sure. Yeah, when I was around 40, I started road cycling which is a very common thing for middle-aged men to do. In fact, there's an acronym the word is MAMIL which stands for Middle-Aged Man in Lycra because you often see, you know, because cycling is one of these lifetime sports that you can do without hurting your knees or things like this.

DJ: Low impact as well, yeah.

Tom: Yes, exactly. So, but I sort of got plunged into this world, I became very excited and sort of intoxicated by it and at first it was just sort of riding for pleasure, but then I met some people that were a bit competitive and I ended up joining an amateur racing team. And the way this is structured is you start out as a category 5, then you work your way down to category 1, if you are amazing you would get on to 1, but it was all very good in the beginning and I was investing large amounts of time but it was satisfying and I was gaining fitness and having new relationships and having interesting conversations and it's just getting out of the house and seeing nature and just nothing but good but because of that sort of progressive nature of competition where what happens if you do pretty well in a Cat 5 race is eventually you get sort of bumped up to Cat 4 and then you are back at the back of the pack again because you are in a harder zone of competition. So, to me this began to feel like because this wasn't, again it wasn't my job, it was starting to feel like a job and there were benchmarks I was having to meet, I was having to wake up very early in the morning to go on these training rides, it felt just a little too enforced dietary regimens and at some point, the pleasure aspect was being sacrificed for this drive to simply get better and better. And this is something that it is a very natural thing, but there is a lot of talk out there about mastery and expert level

performers and Anders Ericsson's famous 10,000 hours rule of deliberate practice to achieve expert level perfection. But I was never into the illusion that I was going to... I was a forty-year-old and yet there was no path to professional cycling for me. So, I started to wonder why am I pushing myself so hard for this thing that is meant to, you know, at the end of the day be something that is a sort of a safety valve for the other parts of my life, something that I am choosing to spend my leisure time on this thing and, you know, other people probably did not have this experience, they were happy to keep sort of pushing on, but I also saw many people sort of fall by the wayside. So, I think, we tend to forget sometimes that a lot of this mastery talk we hear it is sort of oriented at professionals or expert-level performers not for people trying to get into something particularly later on in life who might be lucky to have 100 hours to devote to improvement not 10,000. So, I sort of, you know, sort of walked away and stepped back from cycling. And, of course, a cynic might say well you were simply just weren't good enough and I mean there's that too, I mean, one does come up against the edges of one's performative quality and some of this is genetic and some of this is training but so I, you know, but I didn't feel like I needed to feel bad about that because again, it wasn't, it was just meant to be a recreational thing so. So, yeah that is the saga there and if that answers your question.

DJ: Absolutely, absolutely.

Tom: But you know it's just... the point here which... skill acquisition is... the whole process it is sort of a blessing and a curse, because it can sort of go on and on and the question is how good is good enough and are you always pushing to get better, is there some level which you are happy to sort of stay where you are and at that point is it okay to switch to something else or are you then a dilettante or a quitter, and I think I probably had some residual guilt about not racing. I felt like I was abandoning something but then I decided to just go for other types of expeditions that were more about just having fun or so some other purpose besides pure competition.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I should share a bit of my personal story here. About a decade back, I tore a ligament around my knee while playing tennis. The Anterior Cruciate Ligament to be precise. I decided to go for a Arthroscopic surgery to fix it and I was on the recovery path. Thankfully, the recovery went broadly well and I wanted to test for myself if I was broadly fit. So, I signed up for the 7K walk/run at the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon. I was able to run slowly and was able to finish it at a slow pace without stopping anywhere. One of my friends said, why don't you start training for running. He introduced me to a running group near my home and I started training with them. They would train from 7-8 and this was about 15 minutes away from home. That would mean getting up at 6 am and doing this and getting back by 8:30 am. I started making decent progress with this group and just like Tom says, they had different categories like in Karate (They segmented the runners into Red, Yellow, Blue, Black and so on. So, while I started with an objective of gaining fitness, very quickly I found myself losing sleep over which group I was on and how much I was clocking during my run.

I ran my first Half Marathon in Mumbai and clocked 2 hours and 9 minutes. At that time, the rage was Sub 2:00. Completing the Half Marathon under 2 hours. So, I got consumed by it and started training towards it and the next year, I did 1:59:40 at the Mumbai Half Marathon.

That is around the time, my second child was born and my daughter started going to Play School and that had a certain bus schedule in the morning. Very soon, I realized that while, I was making decent progress on the running front, I was losing out on sleep, my productivity at work was taking a hit and I wasn't being sensitive to the evolving context in my life. That is when it occurred to me, that

whatever I try, I am not going to be an Eliud Kipchoge and I should possibly think of solving for fit for purpose rather than trying to shave minutes of the clock beyond a point.

I realized that I was trying to inculcate running as a habit and my competitive streak was being unlocked in this pursuit and it was possibly doing me more harm than good as I went down this path.

Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik (DP) spoke about this quite eloquently when he spoke about Awareness vs Habits on the podcast.

DP: "This concepts of habits is a western idea, habit is a bad word in Indian philosophy, another word for habit is conditioned I am conditioned to do it, conditioning there's a pavlovian response, a god has a habit of salivating whenever the bell rings and the west has made it a virtue action without thought is habit repetitive action without thought is habit and if you look at the many of the cultures in the west they are like domesticated animals at a particular time they will get up and run, so they are on a treadmill all the time and this is seen as virtue, driving in a car with a coffee in your hand, nobody sees in America that this is tragedy, it's a tragedy, you can't enjoy your coffee, you can't enjoy your drive you have glamourized slavery, you have glamourized slavery and nobody sees it because you have all the gurujis in white coats with their chin what is called their fist on the chin photographs, these photographs that you see are telling you therefor it must be right nobody is questioning what is the habit? And habit has been somehow projected as a good thing Indian thought is all about awareness, it's all about awareness, why are you doing what you are doing, why are you not doing what you are not doing, once you are aware then you realize what is of value to you and what is not value to you, so then breaking habits becomes difficult, there are good habits there are bad habits, habits are good or bad depending on context, so you will find people behaving, that's why I always find, when experts come to Indian they have tough time because their habits suddenly in the new context they don't know because oh my god there's no place to run, oh my god they don't have this thing because of their habit, you become like an animal and habit really goes to the lower part of your brain not the upper part of your brain and habit is about avoiding life, you do habits like it's an addiction, it's an autopilot and its addictive, like I have habit of writing, but its addiction if I don't write I get withdrawal symptoms, which means I have trained my body to be in pain when I don't do it and to get pleasure when I do it and I am not aware of it I am just doing it mechanically, so we are an awareness culture, awareness culture not habit culture, in habit culture empathy goes away"

DJ: I guess, a lot of us have come through multiple gates which required us to be on top of our competitive game. That was the only way we could get ahead. So, when we get exposed to a hobby, without realizing we get OCD about it and really start going down the rabbit hole without thinking about the related consequences. Worth reflecting on it as we think about our approach to our various pursuits. This just one perspective. Some people might argue that this hobby gives them a vent for their aggression and their competitive streak and this makes them more even keel at work.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Devdutt Pattanaik that is referenced: [Building Habits vs Enhancing Awareness](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive’s / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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