

PROJECT MANAGER FOR LIFE
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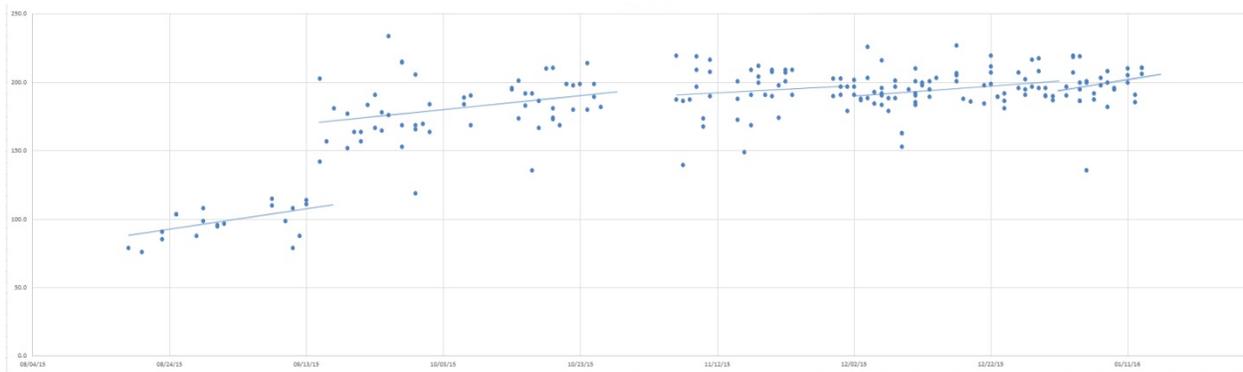
There was this guy who kept showing up for progress meetings. He didn't say much, but he was always there and he took lots of notes. Just as I was about to collar the head guy from Clark Design-Build to ask, the guy piped up. He was with Johnson Controls, a consortium partner, and this was his project; meaning: he'd retire just as the *Governor George F. Deukmejian Courthouse* would revert to the State of California—approximately thirty eight years hence—having operated the facility for the rest of his career.

A life sentence resonates with a jail designer. My stock line for decades has been that I design jails for the innocent man *and* the correctional officer serving a life sentence one shift at a time. It wasn't a tagline. I believed it. I still believe it.

So this guy was project manager for life. File that away and move on. Shortly thereafter, I applied for a PhD in Sociotechnical Systems. Basically, I needed to know why, when I designed a state of the art jail, it might be operated like the 1930s jail it replaced. Or, conversely, why a jail programmed from the start as understaffed and under-resourced would over perform to an unimaginable extent. The DOJ's Bureau of Justice Statistics declared it the lowest incident jail in the United States for sexual abuse and sexual harassment, whether because of or despite my design. Clearly, my expertise amounted to squat when it came to the complex adaptive system that a detention facility represents. I had to find out why.

Two weeks before the start of my dissertation year, I took on a parallel project: working out. At my wife's urging, while staring down my approaching fiftieth birthday, I began walking on a treadmill and lifting weights. Over time I became regular as clockwork. Three treadmill sessions one day, two treadmill sessions and a weight session the next—alternating, again and again—a rhythm set in.

All that treadmill time, and the discrete chunking built in, allowed a lot of productive time for thinking. At first it was daydreaming. Eventually, I began to game the system out of boredom and a newly-realized physicality. The results came in stages, but I had no idea what was happening as it happened.



I never considered analyzing the data until after I sent in my abstract on December 1st. The x-axis is time and the y-axis calories per session. The trend lines follow from cluster analysis. Clear phase changes are evident. The first occurred when I figured out I could enter age and weight at the start of each session. Clearly old guys who are fat burn more calories than the baseline person. The gap between the second and third clusters was ten days and three presentations in Europe. The other shifts I'm not so clear

about. I think one might be adoption of a more disciplined approach. For maximum aerobic and cardiac improvement I began approaching the treadmill sessions as follows:



I won't get into technical details, but basically, as I increased intensity (incline,) and the cycle necessarily shortened—the sawblade each session became transitioned from crosscut to rip saw to hacksaw—as I transitioned from pulp wood to Ferrocement to rebar.



After all this macho construction talk it might surprise you that things are about to get downright mystical. If you know the acronym BYOT, you might have a handle on the following:

The universe is a rotary combination lock with an infinite number of tumblers. That rare combination which allowed life is evidenced by our very existence. Life is incredibly rare and precious, but more precious still is consciousness.

Consciousness is a gift and a curse. The enhanced fitness it provides fuels our dominance over nature and all that has wrought. Yet it provides revelation of the mysteries of the universe. It simultaneously elevates us and painfully separates us from our birthright.

The return to the fold through the sacraments of disciplined thought and action is at best fleeting. As the past present and future melt away to reveal the now, as the superego, ego, and id are subsumed into the flow, we return to the state of nature, to perfect liberty.

This truth is a dying ember we must nurture and protect. With great power comes even greater responsibility. The least among us—the most flawed of all of us—is a miracle worthy of wonder and respect. Ignorance is the evil we must banish, for as it recedes, justice, equality, compassion, and peace fill that void.

My side project recast me as project manager for life. At fifty, I've botched the job so far. Maintenance hasn't been a priority. On the other hand, at fifty you start to feel the deferred maintenance. I don't care that I've been deteriorating since my thirties, or that I've been dying since adolescence faded in fits and spurts. I'm not going down easy. I'm going to fight.

Treadmill time gave me permission to contemplate. How does inkling become habit? Why'd those trend lines ratchet up? The treadmill is a black box. There are inputs and there are outputs, but how they're connected isn't so clear. Same goes if you expand the system boundaries.

What's at work when I want to slow, but I will myself to go on? At base, I'm cells—unknowing cells, unconscious tissues, insentient organs, insensible organ systems—a cataleptic baseline of submerged iceberg to exposed sentience. Maslow's edifice slowly melting.

I host one hundred trillion bacterial cells outnumbering vestigial cells ten to one. They're 99.9 percent of the unique genes in ecosystem "I." This collection of microbiota is, alongside the cells originating from cell division and cellular differentiation, a superorganism. I am a coral reef; an ant colony of sorts.

According to myth, Persephone was abducted by Hades to be his bride in the underworld. Her mother Demeter, goddess of fertility, searched in vain. In her distress nothing on earth would grow or bear life. Zeus stepped in because the human race withered, and without them, there would be no offerings. Without offerings, the gods too would wither. ...thus the spur to compromise which generated the seasons (Bulfinch, 1881).

Born of evolution, I too am a god who waxes and wanes based on the epiphenomenological offerings of cells and microbiome. The anger of the mob. The adulation of the crowd. An explanation that persists for that which works in the world.

I am reminded of domestication. Wolves become dogs because behaviors are reinforced, relationships and culture emerge, and bonds are constructed. So too, consciousness and the self. That which works endures.

My project continues. In seven years my cells will all be replaced, or not. In the meantime, a chorus of millions will cry out for sustaining fat, and the benign dictator that is the self will stifle dissent.