

Seeking the Path of Least Comfort

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One of my favorite quotations comes from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who observed, “In peaceful times, the warlike man turns upon himself.”

Comfort is a near-universal value. We seek comfortable clothes, comfortable cars, comfortable beds, and comfortable lifestyles. We want to retire in comfort, and when we see people upset, we want to comfort them. Hotels? Sofas? Headphones? All are made with comfort in mind.

In fact, comfort is almost as important to us as convenience. We shop at convenience stores, take the most convenient route to work, eat convenient frozen and fast foods, take the most convenient airline flights, and download music for convenience. Delivery people bring us pizzas, bookmarks save us navigation time on the computer, and paychecks are directly deposited to our accounts—all for the sake of convenience.

With all that comfort and convenience, you would think people would enjoy a surplus of free time, living a life of ease. But that’s not how it works.

What is missing from a life of comfort and convenience is *effort*. Over time, people conditioned to comfort/convenience lose the capacity to sustain efforts. We can see this dynamic at work in our bodies, when we cease making physical efforts. In the absence of exercise, lifting even modest weights, jogging short distances, or climbing a small hill become daunting efforts. Ceasing physical activity does not bring greater well-being. Rather, people who stop exercising become increasingly unfit for even normal activity, suffering ever-greater aches, pains, and limitations.

The results of lives devoted to comfort and convenience can be viewed during retirement. For too many people, retirement is hardly the “golden year” experience. First they lose parenting roles; then they stop working. Filling days with vacations, golf, tennis, and trips to restaurants and movie theaters, they essentially retire from challenge. Comfort, in the retirement context, is often a codeword for the abandonment of goals and efforts. Eventually, like people who cease exercising, retirees find themselves unable to muster the energy to face normal life demands.

How much of getting old is simply the result of our decisions to cease using our bodies, to abandon our will, to retreat from all that is demanding? Ayn Rand noted the contradiction nicely when she observed that, in the Biblical story, man was cast from the paradise of Eden and condemned to a life of toil. How many of us long for Eden, only to discover that it is life’s labors that bring us the greatest sense of fulfillment?

There's a certain kind of person that refuses to seek comfort: Nietzsche's warlike man who will turn on himself if there aren't external challenges at hand. If I cannot work on the market, I'll work on myself; if I can't reach a goal at work, I'll pursue a personal challenge. These are the people who exercise for the sheer joy of pushing one's body to the limits—and the pride that comes from expanding those limits. For such people, the path to follow is the one of least comfort. It is through directed efforts that we become more than we are.

Why these reflections on life and challenge? At the end of August, I will turn 50. My work at the medical school has been rewarding: I have headed a counseling program, taught in a variety of courses and programs, published a number of articles and books, and developed my interest in trading and trading psychology. My position at the school has always been secure, my finances are debt-free, and I have been blessed with a supportive group of friends and colleagues.

In other words, heading into my sixth decade of life, I am *comfortable*.

And that is the problem.

It's a problem I have faced before. During my sophomore year at Duke University, I knew I had to maintain an excellent grade point average to enter graduate school in clinical psychology. I also knew that my courses were not challenging me; that I could sustain mostly A's if I took the usual courses. In a fit of inspiration, I signed up for a graduate Comparative Literature course that required a working knowledge of two foreign languages. I had only a high school background in French. It was the most difficult, least comfortable course offering I could think of—and that's why I signed up.

After many long nights spent with assignments, bleary eyed from continual use of foreign language dictionaries, I received an A- from the instructor. From that time forward, no course ever intimidated me

So now, as at Duke, I find myself firmly in the comfort zone: a secure job, a paid-up home, a well-funded retirement. And, just as I did in college, I have decided to abandon that ease.

That is why, beginning in July, I am relocating with my family, starting roots in an entirely new community, and tackling some of the most demanding work imaginable. On July 12th, I will become a full-time psychologist working in a trading firm with some of the country's most successful traders.

That is when I start work as Director of Trader Development for Kingstree Trading, LLC in Chicago.

Out the window will go job security, the convenience of setting my own schedule, and the ease of work routines honed over two decades. Gone, too, is the security of issuing my ideas from the ivory tower. Instead, I will be forced to put those ideas to

work in the real world, with real traders, with real-time accountability for the results. I will learn more about trading and the psychology of traders than I ever imagined, and I will be pushed harder to tackle trading problems than I've ever been pushed.

You see, approaching age 50, I decided that Neil Young was right: it's better to burn out than it is to rust.

Along with athletics and the military, trading is one of the last fields of endeavor in which it is acceptable to be one of Nietzsche's warlike men (or women!). There is little room for alpha males/females in a world that values empowerment over power; teamwork over individual initiative; lifestyle over accomplishment. In athletics, the military, and trading, however, there is always room for the individual who strives for elite status. That status comes from rigorous training and discipline, neither of which are comfortable nor convenient. Perhaps those virtues are out of fashion, but they form the very fountainhead of human achievement. Show me a great creator or creation, and I will show you an individual who traveled the path of least comfort.

For those of you who cannot accept a life of rusting, I dedicate this article. Perhaps my example, at age 50, will come to you during moments when the struggle seems too arduous, the odds too great. You are never too old to begin life anew. It is never too late to find the true peace that comes from the satisfaction of waging a worthy war. May yours always be the path of least comfort!

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