Growing Your Own Garden: Emotional Resilience for Entrepreneurs
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Four strategies, including vital reading on moral philosophy, for keeping a cynical world at bay.

It has been many weeks, and I finally got the itch to write again, this time about a symbol that in just a few days has given me a profound sense of relief: growing your own garden.

I'm not speaking about an herb garden.

I mean cultivating, in your own fertile mind, a set of values and standards by which you will measure your life's worth separately from what anyone else says or thinks.

Your Own Garden: Insulation from a Cynical World

Growing your own spiritual garden, a haven for an exhausted or cynical mind, is the only way to stay on the path of doing social and environmental or creative work with real, measurable impact without caving in to despair.

Because despair is all around us, and entrepreneurs and creators are especially vulnerable: we are the types who will new widgets and ideas and art into existence, possessed by a productive naïveté that can easily get crushed by reality.

We are not the "money people" who add capital to an existing idea.

We are the creators taking huge risks at great personal cost. We are often described as naive, idealistic, passionate, or crazy.

The social entrepreneur has it even worse: we are fighting the battle of birthing a new venture while at the same time trying to show the world that we can inject a sense of justice into the business itself, rather than merely trying to rack up profit.

Growing your own garden is the only way to recover from the devastating reality that most of the world doesn't give a sh*t about your cause and often (especially in the short term) rewards politics — catchy campaigns, beautiful pitch decks, buzzy language — over real, measurable impact on people and planet who don't have a voice.

I have seen brilliant people working for the public good take blow after withering blow in their careers and organizations. Not only have they opted to pursue the high road, sacrificing financial stability to do work they feel matters, but on top of that they are left with less — less time for friends, family, and fun; less ownership of their companies and ideas; even damaged reputations because of an overly zealous scandal-seeker in the press (for whatever reason, people love to take down do-gooders.)

Life-Saving Moral Philosophy

Sometimes it feels to social entrepreneurs like the bad guys are winning. Like we should have opted to take the easier path.

Last week, I spoke to a group at the Financial Times and sat next to a thoughtful editorial writer. We spoke about a moral philosopher who advised us early in our careers, a Yale Professor named Thomas Pogge, whose book World Poverty and Human Rights made a profound impact on countless young souls (and inspired me to start Samasource).

He remarked that I still seemed very passionate after a decade, and that many people receive a reality check that causes them to quit or abandon their passion. He asked me what I've done to avoid the descent into cynicism.

I laughed and told him that I feel cynical every day. That I am constantly frustrated by a million little things — other for-profit companies copying our tagline (minus the rigorous social impact standards); management struggles; the fact that sometimes, our work and the results we've shown take a back seat to how I am personally perceived — and that not quitting is the bravest thing I've done.

And he said, "Oh! I see you've grown your own garden."

WHAM.

What a line. I've grown my own garden, says the FT editor.

And as we chatted further, I realized what he meant.

Nothing is fair. Good guys are constantly losing. Some of our most brilliant and creative leaders have been assassinated, imprisoned, or driven to suicide. (Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain's tragic deaths last week shocked the world and reminded us that fame and financial success offer no insulation from pain.)

The only way to stay afloat — maybe even alive — is to grow and nourish and spend time in your own garden, where you can cultivate what matters in the face of all the evil.

My garden is a work in progress. I am pulled too often outside of it, upset by the fact that we haven't scaled fast enough compared to others, or that we lost a certain deal, or that someone sent me a nasty email. And equally, I'm pulled out of it by opposite forces of praise and glory — a big press feature or glowing customer review.

But if this stuff isn't feeding your garden (and let's be honest — none of it ever does), TUNE IT OUT. Immediately. Go back to your own first principles: the values that guide you. Remember that there is no judgment beyond how you perform against your own personal value system — whatever happens out there in the world.

If you don't stack up to your own values, well — guess what? Everything prior to this moment is over, and everything after this moment is yet unwritten in your life's great story, and you are the sole author and arbiter of what takes place in your garden. There are no excuses; there can be no bitterness towards an unjust world, because in your garden, there is only beauty and light and good, fertilized by the decisions you choose to make.

Feeding Your Garden

I read the biography of a fascinating artist, Françoise Gilot, now in her nineties and still painting every day despite devastation that might crush a weaker woman — Françoise was Pablo Picasso's partner for a decade, and on the receiving end of the kind of cruelty and misogyny that would inspire a #MeToo reckoning had it happened today. She is regarded as the only former lover of the powerful artist who defined her own path, built a successful career well outside the shadow of Picasso's, and left him despite his famous threats that she'd amount to nothing on her own.

Françoise cultivated her own garden from a very young age, and it became the source of her strength in the presence of a notoriously charismatic narcissist. She said to her biographer that as a young girl, she used to sit in the splits for long stretches of time, and evolved this into a life philosophy of living at the extremes, rather than in the middle: "If you want to really live, you must risk living on the edge, otherwise life isn't worth it...When you open yourself to risk, you will also experience bad things, but mostly you will learn a lot and live and understand more and more. Most importantly, you will not be bored. The very worst thing is to be bored." (From The Woman Who Says No: Françoise Gilot on her Life With and Without Picasso)

How can you grow and fertilize this garden? How do you fill that space in your mind yearning for meaning?

Here are a few things that helped me grow mine:

Read moral philosophy. Especially these books (you can also join my book club to discuss them with like-minded folks). For me, Pogge provided a foundation for my personal ethics and a philosophy for how I should design my life. Religion can offer this, too — but be sure to go back to the source, to a consistent code that reflects your innate sense of right and wrong. I believe that most major religions have a very similar set of base principles that can be summed up in two points:

The self is an illusion of the ego, and consciousness (or God, or life force/chi, or whatever you want to call it) is universal

Love yourself and love other beings (plants, animals, people) with the same force ("do unto thy neighbor..."), and make this the guiding principle behind all your actions

Journey into wilderness. Much has been written about the tonic of nature — whether you call it "forest bathing" as they do in Japan, or being a hermit a la Thoreau and Muir, go and spend time in places where there are no signs of humans. You cannot feel the relief of your own insignificance in the face of the cosmos without forays into wilderness. Oh, and

don’t interpret this as a jog through Central Park. I’m talking about backpacking in a remote place with no electricity or running water, or swimming in an isolated lake or patch of sea. You need to go where nature is left in its wild state.

Struggle. Is your life too cushy? Are you stuck in a comfortable rut where your brain and body never truly struggle? This is the basis for all kinds of decay. New research has shown that intermittent stress to the body — ice baths, fasting, high-intensity training — is beneficial (check out my friend Scott Carney’s book What Doesn’t Kill Us, about the science behind all of this). The same is true for your brain. Grit and resilience come from struggle. So go and find a challenge that calls you — maybe an extreme sport, or a pursuit like climbing a series of mountains or learning Mandarin — and doggedly pursue it, not with the goal of excelling or completing the challenge, but of enduring a period of struggle for its own sake.

Love. It can be your mother. It can be a partner. It can be your pet lizard. It can be your God. But fixate on someone or something to shower with love just for the pure beauty of the exercise. Bonus points if the person or being doesn’t love you back. I personally find this hard to do some weeks, and it sounds like total BS, but it works the same way that gratitude, meditation and prayer alter our mental state.

These four actions will give you a set of principles that serve as a guiding force for your life. Maybe you can write them down, as Ben Franklin did, and review your progress against them each day.

These are the flower beds in your garden. Go and make them bloom. By this I mean: spend a few minutes every day thinking about whether you made any progress on your values. Did you do something that made other people’s lives better? Did you create something that you find beautiful or useful? These are all little seeds of possibility that you can grow, day by day.

Each time you plant a seed, and each time it grows even a little, reflect on it. Write about it in a journal. This is your gardener’s logbook. Visualize your garden every day. Name the ideals you cultivate there. And when you are being dragged through the muck, challenged to the point of exhaustion or cynicism, go back to that garden, stay there for a long while, and remember that this is your one true home.