

Being who you are, while becoming better

by Jason Cohen on August 22, 2011

We're told "be yourself" to seek happiness and success. But what if "being yourself" also means striving to become better? What is "yourself?"



Whatever your position on meat dresses, no one today is more vocal about being true to yourself than Lady Gaga:

God makes no mistakes.
I'm on the right track.
I was born this way.

As she's said in interviews, she's not speaking only to the LGBT community; she's encouraging everyone who is seeking their identity and still looking for permission to be that person in public.

It's so simple and trite: Be yourself.

The benefits are obvious: Fulfillment, happiness, even success. Surely you're more likely to be successful at any venture so long as your natural excitement leads to mercurial obsession, which leads to hard work and long hours,

applied to a field aligned with your innate talents¹. Even in the worst case—complete failure—it was fun and worthwhile. Years from now you'll look back and say, "I lived a good life, and it was *my* life."

¹ While this is an essential ingredient—or at least ought to be treated as such—there are many other things which also have to be true for a venture to succeed.

So why is it so **hard**?

Not just hard to live true to yourself, but surprisingly difficult to even know what "yourself" is?

And further, **what about self-improvement**? It's sensible to embrace your faults and work around them, but what about tackling them headlong? If you're afraid of public speaking, is it smart to pick a career that ensures you'll never grace a stage, or is it wiser to throw yourself into a stand-up comedy night-class that could exorcise your demon?

I used to think that in all things I had to be the best. I was upset if I didn't get the blue ribbon in the piano recital, the gold medal on the music theory test, and the 1st-place trophy in the Karate tournament.

In high school, however, I started internalizing that there will always be people smarter and better than me at anything, so the new challenge was to (1) be the best at *one thing* (telling a computer what to do), and (2) be constantly improving in other things. So I didn't need to beat Alex Saltman on the Math Team, but I worked to beat my own scores in national competitions year over year. I didn't have to outpace the endless stream of Korean piano prodigies but I did play progressively more difficult pieces, and played them as well as I could.

But time erodes your sharpest edges, and responsibilities accumulate, and you realize that even just "improving" can be too much work. Today I no longer need to im-

prove my 5k time, I just make sure to run a few 5k's a week, never timed. I don't need to play harder piano pieces, I just learn something new now and again, optimizing for enjoyment rather than progression.

That's fine for hobbies, but **what about your career or your startup?** You can't just say "Yeah I suck at selling stuff, and I don't care!"

In my case, I don't suck at selling, but I constantly struggle with procrastination. Everyone does it to some degree—there's something you don't want to do, so you invent reasons to fulfill that desire. The reasons are all seemingly-logical but actually-bullshit:

- I don't have time for X right now.
(Time always exists, you're deciding to do something else with that time.)
- It will be more efficient to do X when I'm also doing Y and Z.
(But someone's waiting for X, and you've also been delaying Y and Z.)
- I'm not in the mood for X, and it will go twice as fast when I'm in the mood.
(But it's something you don't like which means you'll never be in the mood—or—you haven't been in the mood for weeks.)
- I forgot because I don't have a good system.
(But there are 100 organization systems and tools, and blogs and books and videos for training.)
- I have better things to do with my time.
(But then it should be delegated or deleted instead of sitting in your to-do list.)

Still, knowing all this, I persist. It is on the to-do list and it is a "Next Action," but I deftly roll the deadline over to "tomorrow" and it vanishes for another 24 hours. Congratulations, me, you just out-witted your obedient to-do software.

Besides, procrastination has its advantages. Really! I wrote a whole post about why procrastination is useful for running a startup. See? *SEE?!?*

I've done everything to cope with procrastination: I've used GTD for years (and yes, it works). I've been inbox-zero for years (and yes, it changed my life). I've had temporary surges of success and guilt-ridden lapses of ineptitude. I've even tried to decide procrastination was a net-positive, hence that article.

So where does that leave me with regard to Lady Gaga's admonition that I should "be myself?" Should I accept procrastination as a given? Keep writing more articles about how I'm actually wise to embrace it? Or should I continue to fight it, because fighting means I'll get more done in less time with less stress, and it means I'm optimizing for the long-run rather than what's easiest in the moment?

I've decided to continue to the fight, because I know something else about "who I am"—I'm a person who strives.

I'm a person for whom "good enough," isn't. I can tell myself it's not important to run a 5k any faster than 26:06, but I'm going to anyway. I can lecture you about how blogging success is about content and time rather than looks and plugins, but I still wrote my own plugin to manage exactly how the "retweet" link behaves in the RSS feed.

That attitude is something I see in most successful entrepreneurs. Adam Carolla says the same thing; he calls it a "motor"—an internal, unstoppable force causing you to just go, all the time, wake to sleep, for decades.

It's why I couldn't just make software facilitating peer code review, I had to make it a so-called "real company," I had to create the modern theory around it, I had to write a book about it, and I had to push that book into 70,000 people's hands.

It's why I couldn't just read blog posts by Joel Spolsky and Jason Fried, I had to write my own, and I had to get better and better at writing, and promote myself, for no reason or reward other than pure ego. It's why I couldn't

just be interviewed twice on Andrew Warner's Mixergy—already an honor. I had to push for a third appearance so I could interview Andrew on his own show.

It's why I couldn't just be retired after the sale of Smart Bear, writing blog posts and talking to entrepreneurs. New ideas foisted themselves on me, and I had to run through bad ones until I found a good one, and I had to go start that company. It's why so many entrepreneurs are serial entrepreneurs—I like to say “You do the third one for the same reason you did the first one—because you are *compelled* to.”

But the motor also **creates problems common to most entrepreneurs**, no matter how old or successful:

“Spread too thin” syndrome.

You're interested in everything, you're good at many things, so you get involved in too much stuff. Now you don't have enough time for any of them; most suffer as a result, probably even worse off than if you weren't involved, because then other people could plan accordingly instead of believing they can rely on you.

“Shiny new thing” syndrome.

You're bored as soon as a project leaves the childhood of “mostly creative” and enters the adolescence of “mostly execution.” So you don't give projects the lasting attention they need to succeed.

“Work all the time” syndrome.

This works better when you're young, but even then you'll burn out. I did, and *many many* other famous workaholics did, repeatedly, though they rarely admit it. Andrew Warner is honest enough to admit publicly that he sold his company for less than he should have just because of burn-out. I am too. Pulling 70-hour weeks catches up to you. Period.

“Not good enough” syndrome.

Whether you're actually a perfectionist or just a control-freak, you feel like nothing is ever finished, ever done, ever enough. And when you implicitly believe others will discover your ineptitude, or that others are able to be perfect where you're not, you (like me) have real problems.

At the end of the day, these things are all manageable by acknowledging them and acting accordingly. Learn to say “no” to new projects (allowing you to continue a healthy obsession over a few). Go on a trip without the laptop so you have no choice but to be “unproductive.” (Do that once for a week and you'll be so amazed at your increased productivity, energy, and happiness when you return that you'll never doubt this tool again. Take it from this workaholic.)

So “be yourself,” yes. Don't vomit out some stupid marketing prose on your website; decide what you believe, then run your company accordingly and publicly and you *will* be more proud, more fulfilled, and likely more successful. You can't fight every foible, nor should you. You certainly shouldn't compromise your ethics and your sense of taste and awesomeness, because those are some of the few things that differentiate you and your company in the world.

But neither should you stop striving, improving, learning, and developing “who you are.”

Feed your motor.

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