

# The Body Does Not Care How Good Your Plan Is

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One of the reasons I exercise has almost nothing to do with exercise.

Of course, I want to be healthy. I want to be strong. I want to look as best as I can. And, at 48, I am increasingly aware that staying physically capable as I get older is something I have to participate in. It is not going to happen by itself.

But there is another reason I exercise, and lately I have been thinking about it more. Exercise reminds me that understanding something is not the same as doing it.

I need that reminder because I really like to think. I can spend a ridiculous amount of time thinking through an idea, pulling it apart, finding connections, questioning the assumptions underneath it, imagining what it could become. That is probably part of why I ended up doing a PhD in the first place. I genuinely enjoy the process of trying to understand things.

And there is obviously value in that. Thinking matters. But I have also realized that there is a trap hidden inside it: you can think about something so thoroughly that you begin to feel as though you have already done something.

You understand the problem. You have a good plan. You can see how all the pieces fit together. You can explain exactly what needs to happen next. Maybe you can even picture the finished thing in your head. And yet the finished thing does not exist.

That distance between understanding and execution is much larger than I sometimes want it to be.

The gym is useful because the gym does not let me get away with this.

My body is wonderfully unimpressed by my intelligence.

I can read about progressive overload. I can design a great training program. I can compare exercises, rep ranges, recovery periods, protein intake, supplements, mobility routines, and all the other things people like me can easily disappear into researching. My muscles do not care.

If I do not pick up the weight, nothing happens. I cannot think my way into another pull-up. I cannot make my legs stronger by creating an excellent squat program. I cannot substitute understanding progressive overload for actually progressively overloading something.

My body asks a much simpler question: Did you do it? And then, did you do it again? And again?

Eventually, if the answer is yes often enough, something changes. I find that humbling in a useful way.

Thinking about this recently reminded me of some of Carol Dweck's work on intelligence and effort. In a well-known series of studies with children, some were praised for being smart after successfully completing a task, while others were praised for their effort. What happened afterward has always interested me.

The children praised for intelligence became more concerned with continuing to look intelligent. They were less likely to choose difficult tasks that might expose them to failure, and after setbacks they tended to persist less than children who had been praised for effort. In one part of the research, some of the children praised for intelligence even exaggerated their scores when they later reported them.

There is something important in that. Once "smart" becomes part of your identity, being smart can quietly become something you have to defend. That is different from trying to accomplish something.

I think adults do versions of this too. We can become very good at explaining why something did not work. We can identify every flaw in someone else's approach. We can keep researching, refining, preparing, redesigning, reconsidering. And all of that can feel remarkably productive.

Sometimes it is productive. Sometimes more thinking really is what the problem requires. But sometimes thinking is simply a very sophisticated way of postponing the moment when reality gets to respond.

That distinction matters a lot to me right now because I am in the final year of a PhD.

There are few environments more favorable to thinking than academia. You are rewarded for reading carefully, noticing things other people have missed, questioning assumptions, making distinctions, developing arguments, identifying mechanisms, and finding better language for an idea. I love that.

But at some point the idea has to become a paper. At some point the paper has to get written. And at some point the dissertation cannot remain this enormously interesting collection of ideas, notes, conversations, models, revised models, and documents on my computer.

It has to become a dissertation.

And dissertations, unfortunately, are completed one actual page at a time. They do not care how clearly you can explain the idea to someone over coffee. The page cares whether you wrote it.

I think the same thing happens well beyond academic work. People design businesses they never launch. They plan books they never write. They build elaborate content strategies and rarely publish anything. They spend months preparing to contact customers instead of contacting customers. Organizations can spend extraordinary amounts of time producing presentations about things they are going to do.

None of this means thinking is unimportant. I would argue exactly the opposite. Good thinking can prevent enormous amounts of bad action. The right question can change what you build. A better interpretation of the situation can change the decision entirely. I certainly do not want to replace thoughtful work with a cult of constant motion. Busyness is not accomplishment either.

But thinking and doing are not substitutes for one another. They are supposed to work together.

Think, build something, and see what happens. Then think again and build again. Action gives thought something that thought cannot give itself: contact with reality.

That may be the biggest lesson exercise gives me. In the gym, I either trained or I did not. The weight moved or it did not. I did the last repetition or I stopped. I came back the following week or I did not. And over time, the accumulated evidence shows up.

The body keeps receipts.

It knows nothing about the workout I intended to do. It does not know about the program I designed Sunday night. It does not care how motivated I felt. It responds to what I repeatedly asked it to do.

There is something about that that I want to carry into the rest of my life: pages written, experiments completed, ideas turned into papers, businesses actually launched, calls made, things published, things built.

Not because everything meaningful can be reduced to output. It cannot. And not because every thought needs to become something. Some thoughts are valuable simply because they change the person having them.

But I have learned that I can give myself a little too much credit for understanding. Understanding feels good. Seeing the pattern feels good. Having the plan feels good. Sometimes it feels so good that it becomes easy to forget that none of those things guarantees that anything in the world will actually be different tomorrow.

Exercise makes that mistake difficult. So yes, I exercise for my health. I exercise because I want to be strong. I exercise because I enjoy it.

But I also exercise because several times a week I need to be reminded of something embarrassingly simple. Understanding the work is not the work. Planning the work is not the work.

Talking intelligently about the work is not the work.

Eventually, you have to pick up the weight.

And then, eventually, you have to pick it up again.