

# **Era One**

Travels, Adventures, and Getting On-Track if You're Off-Track

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## **Backstory – The Light on Details Version**

I was as busy and expansive as anyone from 2003 to 2008. Over those five years, I did a lot of great work, accomplished a ton of things, and generally moved up in the world very quickly. There were challenges, but I always seemed to wind up better off no matter what went wrong. Pieces fell into place.

I did a great many things – I learned a lot, I did some entrepreneurship, I did some contract work, I studied business full and specialized in project management while also working running a company full time. I traveled regularly, seeing most of the major cities in the United States, and working my way through over 30 countries exploring. I met a lot of friends and made a lot of colleagues.

Naively, I assumed the good times would keep on rolling forever, and my ascent to whatever levels I wanted was near guaranteed. I had the work ethic, creativity, loyalty, and will to do great things. It seemed like my life would be a steady upward track.

Not so.

A lot went wrong at the end of 2008. I came down ill with some serious fevers, a full time employee I'd hired didn't work and I had to let him go, and things were already shaky with me before the economy crashed. Then the economy crashed, and I was just really tired. I closed up shop, and took some time off.

I had enough savings to live for a year or two, so I had a very quiet year in 2009. From '03 to '08, I'd traveled constantly. In '09, I only left Los Angeles once to go to Nevada for my birthday for a few days. I'd been hyper-social and extroverted from '03 to '08. In '09, I had a really quiet, low key year. I self-studied lots of eras of history, rationality, and some biochemistry. I went to the gym and did some martial arts. That was pretty much it. Nothing really happened in 2009.

On December 29th, 2009, I decided that it was time to hit the road again. I searched multi-stop plane tickets for countries I haven't been to, and I found a decent route through Taiwan and Thailand. I booked my flights for seven days later, and left Los Angeles to Taipei on January 5th.

I spent a great month in Taiwan, doing tons of writing, and meeting lots of people. I was back to being the ol' Sebastian I knew, the expansive Sebastian who does massive amounts of stuff.

I'd already booked my onward ticket, and flew to Bangkok one month later. Bangkok didn't really suit me, so I took an overnight train north to Chiang Mai. There, unfortunately, I was having a really do-nothing month in February again.

A month passes in the blink of an eye and I didn't have an onward flight or anywhere in particular to go. My visa was almost up. I looked at the borders of Thailand, and figured it'd be Burma or Cambodia next. Angkor Wat, the ancient Khmer Empire temple sold me – I wanted to see it. So I took a series of trains and buses and walking, and I crossed into Cambodia.

I spent two days going through the ruins of Angkor, and it was indeed inspiring and powerful. There were little stalls and shops nearby the sides of the roads, and I kept buying and eating fresh pineapple. It was hot and sweaty, but with lots of bottled water and pineapple, I covered a lot of ground through ancient Angkor. It was magnificent.

I spent a few days in Siem Riep (the major city outside of the Angkor ruins) and then headed to the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

Phnom Penh is the dustiest city I've ever been to. There's dust everywhere. It's like a Southeast Asian Old West Frontier Town. A tumbleweed blowing down the streets would've fit in.

The city was decent enough. Siem Riep had been really light on infrastructure, and in SR I'd been eating in the mornings with the taxi and motorbike drivers at a little roadside noodle shop. In Phnom Penh there were a lot more options for more modern restaurants and cafes. I particularly liked The Foreign Correspondents Club (FCC) with an amazing view over the river. Pricey for Cambodia, but really beautiful atmosphere inside.

After a couple days in Cambodia, I went to visit the Killing Fields and Security Center 21 and... well, it shook me. The actual Killing Fields were bad, but not so bad to the eye. There's not much there any more. You can see where the graves were excavated, and some of the tools the Khmer Rogue had used. There's some skulls and remains in a pagoda, but it's not that visceral. You don't feel it there.

Security Center 21, on the other hand...

It's the most horrible place I've ever been. The Khmer Rouge converted an elementary school into a prison and torture center. Anyone who spoke a foreign language, knew a valuable trade skill, was a capitalist, had foreign connections, basically anything like that – they'd be tortured and executed.

They ran out of space, so they made makeshift jails in the upper classrooms that are about the size of a pen for small animals... there's stains on the walls and floor. It might sound like a cliché, but you could literally feel the death and horror in the air.

I decided there that I'd take a stand if collectivism ever came to a place I cared about. Collectivism is so, so evil. Studying history, it's clear that it always descends into this.

I was in a strange mood after seeing the Killing Fields and S-21, very ponderous. Just thinking. I wasn't really up for doing any kind of creative work, so I ran some errands – I bought new running shoes, workout clothes, and a swimsuit.

Two days later I was walking over to Hotel Cambodiana to go swimming. There's a crosswalk right in front of it, with two lanes of traffic.

I was walking through the crosswalk when I heard a loud scream.

Then, suddenly, I was face down on the ground. It was really strange.

Am I dreaming? Did I not wake up yet? Why am I on the ground?

And what's this wet stuff?

Is that blood?

Is that my blood?

Oh, no...

Then I screamed.

I've written up the whole experience before on my blog, so I'll just give you the short version here. A teenager was driving recklessly on a motorcycle. He was going on the wrong side of the street, took a turn hard without looking, and hit me. I'm not entirely sure about the details, but I think the motorbike struck my right leg, right hip, and maybe some of my back, then I went up into the air a little bit, and fell to the ground. I went into the air, I think, and then came down on the ground. My right calf, right hip, the right side of my back, and right arm were all pretty jacked up.

I went to a Cambodian clinic which looked something like how war hospitals are portrayed in movies. The doctor set me up with some sort of anti-inflammatories and steroids, and said I was lucky I didn't hit my head, and that God must have been looking out for me. I was going to reply and ask him that if God intervened, wouldn't it have made sense for Him to intervene about 30 seconds earlier so I didn't get hit in the first place? But I thought better of it and didn't say that.

Perhaps because of the shock to my system, or perhaps because of coincidence, I then came down with food poisoning. I got in pretty bad shape and dragged myself over to find medicine. I found an untrained Cambodian pharmacist who sold me some expired medicine which cured me. He gave me a mix of anti-parasitics, anti-spasmodics, and anti-bacterials, along with rehydration salts. His general plan, I think, was to give me anything that might cure whatever I might have had. Two of the medicines were expired by a few months to a year, but you take what you can find. I was well enough to leave the country after about 10 more days, and did so.

So that was Cambodia... I had a couple more misadventures while leaving – I took a “luxury bus” out of the country. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that the only differences between a luxury bus and normal bus are that the luxury bus (1) costs more, and (2) plays loud Cambodian music videos and sitcoms on a TV. Then the luxury bus broke down going through the mountains. That was an interesting 12 hours.

Anyway, let's fast forward through some transit and misadventures, and now I'm in Southern Thailand. A friend and mentor to me, John, was playing in a golf tournament in Phuket. I met John down there, and we went scuba diving, and talked business a lot. This was good on a few levels – I do some of my best and clearest thinking underwater, so diving was fantastic. And John's one of the sharpest guys I know, and I got a ton of good insights connecting with him.

I was off to China next, but didn't have a visa, so I stopped off in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has some of the most non-working holidays in the world because it celebrates the British holidays and the Chinese holidays. So they've got Christmas and Boxing Day off work, as well as Chinese New Year's, and everything before and after. It was supposed to be five days to get a China visa, but it took something like 11 days between the holidays and weekends. After that, I crossed on foot to Shenzhen, flew to Shanghai, and took trains through Anhui and Guilin.

Guilin, in particular, was fantastic. I stayed at the Lakeside Inn, which is right on top of Lake Shan. In the mornings, I would sit and do some reading and writing at the window of the Inn. In the afternoon, I'd go out and get a coffee from Jack Coffee, two pieces of fried chicken on a stick, and I'd sit on the large flat rocks overhanging Lake Shan.

It's beautiful there – the water is crystal clear, the temperature is nice, and there's a temple in the middle of the lake. After I finished my chicken and half my coffee, I'd take a book out and read on the rocks. I've rarely been as at peace as I was in Guilin – it was a very, very good experience. I'd recommend the city and the Lakeside Inn to anyone. Go to Jack Coffee, too – it's strange to drink coffee out of a straw in that zipped-covered container, but it grew on me. Look

for the fried chicken-on-a-stick place nearby. 26 cents for a piece of de-boned fried chicken is quite the deal.

Time passes, my Chinese visa is almost up, and I'm not sure where to head next.

Again, I had nothing that required me to be anywhere in particular. I went through maps and starting checking the prices of flights. Beijing to Seoul was cheap enough and I'd never been to Korea, so I went for it.

Era One began in a traditional Korean bathhouse in Seoul.

### **The Downside**

If you were to have a competition of the best 20 days in a year every person has, I might win. Really, my top 20 days each year tend to be really good and fantastic. You read a summary of the high points of a year for me, and I'm crawling around in ancient ruins, scuba diving off the coast of an island, things like that.

Even summaries of boring times for me – like 2009 – look pretty good. I read lots of books, do some martial arts, learn to cook a little, and go to the gym. That pretty much describes the whole year.

But ah, you know, this is somewhat misleading. My top 20 days of 2009 would stack up pretty well with anyone's, but the other 345 days out of the year were not so hot.

You see, I think I'm capable of producing tremendously a lot of stuff, and I want to do a lot of things. I have pretty expansive goals that I know I'm capable of doing, but it's going to take a tremendous amount of focus and discipline to reach those, to build the things I want to build, to make the world more into the kind of world I want to live in.

And it sucks. It's neurosis inducing. That's what people don't tell you about having really big, expansive goals. The highs are very high, but the lows are... well, they're pretty low.

I don't even mean getting hit by a motorcycle, or being stubborn and walking five miles in the dark because I refuse to pay a driver who increases his price and asks for more money when I'm already a mile past a somewhat rural crossing of the Cambodian/Thai border late at night. (I walked for a really long time through this rural area until I saw lights, which turned out to be a small shipping port – I went to the harbormaster's, who was shocked to see me. They gave me some water, and one of his daughters took me on a motorcycle to a hotel another couple miles away, where I picked up a bus in the morning to Trat, and from there to Bangkok, and from there to Phuket).

No, I'm not talking about things going wrong. That's fine, things going wrong are at least sort of interesting.

What I'm talking about is the crushing weight of inertia, of things not getting done. After 2008, I was burned out. Nothing really happened in 2009. I've got very simple tastes and never spent much money, even when I was earning fairly a lot, so I had enough savings for two or more years. But now, it was mid-2010, and I hadn't earned money in almost 18 months.

I'd halfway tried to start a couple endeavors that didn't get off the ground – I spec'ed out a digital publishing company in 2009, and I was going to go see if I could get funding for it, but I wasn't able to recruit the team I'd want to build it with.

I hadn't put out any noteworthy writing, or shipped any creative projects. I wasn't building any company or industry, I wasn't trading, I wasn't working, I wasn't earning.

Nothing was really happening in '09, and the inertia still carried over to a lot of my affairs in early '10.

So you hear about me crawling through ruins and yes, it was fantastic. You hear about me sitting on the rocks of Lake Shan and eating chicken and drinking coffee, and yes, it was fantastic. You hear about me diving an hour off Phuket, and yes it was amazing.

But I kind of skip past the part where I'm just sitting there and nothing is happening.

What should I write about my first visit to Hong Kong? I was in a tiny little crummy dirty room, doing nothing particularly important. Sometimes I was reading, sometimes I was playing Risk online. There was one eventful moment – I got into a shouting match with a mob boss at McDonalds who'd been really abusing the employees. He'd been shouting, cursing, and then he spat on the floor.

I found his abuse of the staff to be out of line and I'd had enough of it, so I told him to knock it off. This didn't still well with him, of course, and I was almost in a fight with him and two of his guys. Eventually I calmed it down, he sat down with me and chatted for a moment, and he actually gave me his phone number and told me to give him a call. (I didn't.) After things had already calmed down, two police officers showered up to break it up and one was wearing riot gear with a helmet and shield.

The noteworthy points of my life have always been interesting. I took the Star Ferry back and forth across the harbor a few times – I've always loved trains and boats. I hadn't quit sugar back then, so I had an amazing slice of matcha cake at Pacific Coffee, probably the best piece of cake I ever had in my life. It was near perfect, I had it with jasmine tea.

So again, I can tell you about those highlights about Hong Kong, but what was the time in between? Just... nothing. Nothing, punctuated by a few minutes of excitement here and there.

I was developing my mind somewhat – I'd spent lots of time on Hacker News, which is one of the healthier addictive sites on the internet. In Hong Kong, I was reading Julius Cesar's

autobiographical military account “The Gallic Wars” – that’s what I was trying to read when the mob guy kept shouting and making a fuss.

I don’t know, my life sounds interesting. The interesting parts are interesting, yes. But from early ’09 to mid-2010, the vast majority of the time was non-time. I read some books, I wandered around the world a little bit, but it was all kind of hazy and hollow and empty. I’m here to *do* things. Training and learning are valuable, but should be mixed with production and service.

That’s the kicker – I wasn’t producing, and I wasn’t serving. There’s pragmatic considerations – seeing my bank balance go down each month is no fun, and not being entirely sure of how I’m going to bring it back up is also... well, also no fun. But beyond that, there’s the burden and neurosis of knowing I want to do a lot, serve a lot, build a lot. And I wasn’t. Time was just passing.

It was maddening. My life over that 18 months was a mix of quiet and passive and mostly pleasant learning, distraction and time melting away, and then moments of madness and horror and despair realizing that the sands of time are slipping through the hourglass. Occasionally, these would be broken up by a feeling of pleasant relaxation or a peak experience – Star Ferry, Lake Shan, Angkor Wat, things like that. But the high or centeredness from those moments would fade all too fast when confronting reality – I wasn’t *doing*. That’s why I’m here. To *do*.

You know, all the training in the world, all the learning in the world, all of that – it doesn’t mean a damn thing if you don’t *do* anything with it. At least for me.

And I wasn’t. It was maddening.

And y’know, the worse things get, the worse they get. The Less Wrong rationalist community came up with a term for this – “Ugh fields.” An “ugh field” is when you’re so disappointed in your conduct in an area that you don’t want to look at that area. It’s like when someone’s deep in debt and keeps spending – they don’t want to analyze their spending because it’s so depressing. When they even get near their bank balance or credit card balance, they feel this feeling of, “Oh my God, ugh, this is so terrible.” Same with people out of shape, or disorganized, or messy, or whatever.

For me, my non-production of this era was like that. My email inbox had swelled up to 800 emails, and I just let them pass by like the wind. The craziest thing, that I still couldn’t explain to you – the craziest thing is that I had a bunch of recurring expenses from the United States that I never canceled.

I couldn’t tell you why. I can’t explain it even now. For five years, I’d been like clockwork, one of the most disciplined, hardest working people I knew. Then it largely fell apart, and my huge wells of willpower dissolved to the point where I could barely handle things.

If you've never been an entrepreneur, never made or attempted to make art, never did any writing, never did anything creative with a chance of failing – then maybe you've never experienced this. If so, I probably can't explain it.

It's a common enough phenomenon, I've found. Connecting with a lot of smart and expansive and talented people, this happens to people. You run yourself hard for a while, maybe too hard, and then you break down and just treading water is all you've got.

I mean, I feel really stupid about this. I was getting billed \$200/month for my Krav Maga martial arts while I was outside of the country. I was getting billed \$70/month from AT&T for the phone I wasn't using. I had some bank accounts dip below their minimum amount to have no fees attached to them, so the bank was hitting me with either \$5/month or \$18/month fees to keep those accounts open.

Those all could've been fixed or canceled with just a few hours of phone calls, but it's like there was this strange "ugh field" around them. I wasn't producing, so I didn't want to own up to that. So I just read my books, surfed Hacker News, and played Risk or Darklands or Civilization IV or whatever to whittle the time away.

And it was fine. In Chiang Mai, I'd go out to eat eggs and noodles where the laborers eat, and I'd read Edward Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. I'd buy peanuts, fruit, bread, and water on the way back to the little hotel I was staying. When I got back, I'd fire up a game of Civ IV, usually choose the Ottoman Empire or India, and I'd play until I was tired.

This was all fine, and none of it bothered me – until I shut down my computer and was going to go to sleep. Then I'd think – what the hell was that? What the hell am I doing? And I wouldn't sleep particularly well.

Somehow, I'd stopped being one of the most expansive, driven, and productive people I knew, and I'd taken up this strange routine of distraction and non-life.

Even throughout this mess of a time, I'd say my peak experiences stacked up fairly well, and in retrospect I learned a lot. Traveling teaches you things you don't even know you're learning, and the time I put into study of history, governance, law, biochemistry, nutrition, longevity, business – this will pay some dividends.

I'll tell you, the first memories that come to my mind from my travels this year are interesting, fascinating, fun. I could regale you with stories of the night markets and hot springs in Taipei, the food and forests and beaches of Thailand, the ruins in Cambodia, the sheer powerful majesty of Hong Kong, and the diverse and varied wonders of the Chinese provinces. But that'd be only a small part of the real story. My top 20 days of the year would stack up well with anyone else's, but those pesky other 345 days of distraction and feeling a crushing mental inertia, and the frustration and angst that comes with it...

## **The Korean Bathhouse**

2010 had been up and down for me. But the two weeks I'd spent in Guilin were fantastic, I felt really revitalized. After that, Beijing was okay, and then my visa was up – where to go next?

I decided and flew to Seoul, South Korea.

Landing in Korea, I had a really great feeling. Just right there in the airport, things felt right. I don't get this feeling too much, but when I do it signals great things. I had the feeling that a bunch of amazing stuff is about to happen.

I'd been tired and mostly rested for 2009. In 2010, I was trying to shake the rust off and get back on track, and I was wandering around Asia while trying to figure things out. As I landed in Korea, I had the feeling that I was about to put things together.

I found the most crazy and enjoyable sleeping arrangements – Korea has family-style bathhouses called “jimjilbang” – they're very cool.

As I was researching where to stay in Korea, Seoul seemed very expensive for relatively poor quality sleeping arrangements. Even a cheap, bad quality hotel was quite expensive.

Then I came upon a wonderful thing – the jimjilbang sells tickets starting at 7PM for the whole night until 10AM. You can use all the facilities, and there's a very spartan sleeping area with bunkbeds.

I arrived in Korea in the mid-afternoon, and took the slow train into Seoul. I had this lifting of my spirit on this beautiful modern train, crossing over bridges and rivers into the city. From there, I went into Seoul Station, had a bite to eat, and then asked a police officer for directions to where I was staying.

He was incredibly friendly. He didn't know the place, so he radioed in to HQ and we waited until he got directions. Then he walked 10 minutes with me to the jimjilbang, and we had a great conversation on the way.

I checked in, and they gave me Korean pajamas and keys to two lockers – one for my clothes, one for my suitcase. From there, I was in heaven. The place was inexpensive – only \$12 for the night – and there was five levels. On the bottom level was the locker room, showers, and pools of water of different temperatures, some mixed with minerals or herbs. I showered, and skipped the pools of water for now.

From there, I walked upstairs, and the whole place was full of Koreans with their families – I didn't see any foreigners.

There's different kinds of spas and bathhouses, but jimjilbangs are really catered to families. There were lots of groups of a Korean Mom, Dad, and a kid or two. Lots of young couples, and

the occasional person by themselves. But no foreigners – I'd found a pretty obscure place to spend the night.

Floor 2 had restaurants and food, and I kept climbing. Floor 3 was an entertainment floor – there was a movie room, karaoke, gym/fitness center, food and snacks stand, and computers with internet and Starcraft on them.

Floor 4 was my favorite floor – there was maybe 10 different rooms of different temperature and materials. There were two rooms full of salt – so you could lie in the salt. One was slightly hot, and one was very hot. There were likewise two rooms full of jade and two rooms full of charcoal, both with somewhat hot and very hot temperatures. Then there were a high oxygen content room, an ice/cold room, and an *extremely* hot room. All these rooms were open to both men and women, and you'd see people relaxing laying in the salt, or napping in the high oxygen room, or sitting trying not to pass out in the extreme temperature room. There were two final rooms, one men-only and another women-only, for people to take naps.

Finally, floor 5 had three gigantic barracks-style sleeping arrangements. In the men's barracks, there were maybe 100 sets of bunk beds, 200 beds total. Each one had a flat, hard, coated leather pad, a flat hard pseudo-pillow, and a simple cotton blanket. I quickly learned that it was no problem to fall asleep if you went to bed early – any time before 10PM – but lots of times guys who miss the last train drinking stay at the jimjilbang. If you're there and haven't already fallen asleep by midnight, especially on the weekend, you're going to have to deal with people drunkenly carousing, loud snoring, and things like that.

In theory, there should be no snorers in the men's barracks – there's a separate third barracks called the "snoring room" – nicknamed the "dragon room" because it often sounds like a dragon's lair. But you know, maybe not all snorers realize they snore, or maybe they don't care, because you're likely to get it in the men's barracks any time after 10PM. I set a goal to only go to bed late if I was certain to be exhausted, or otherwise to go to bed early.

Staying at the jimjilbang was exceptional. My first night, I spent time in the salt and charcoal rooms sweating, lifted weights, ate a meal at the restaurant on the ground floor, and then slept in the barracks. Every day, I had to check out by 10AM and bring my luggage with me, which was a hassle but still worth it in my opinion. The facilities were incredibly nice for the price. Some days I would sink into one of the pools of hot mineral water. Other times I would lie in the charcoal room for hours thinking. I'd lift weights regularly, and eat lots of food. Korean food is pretty good, and the quick Korean foods are surprisingly good – after I'd have a hard workout on the weights, I'd order a small ice cream, iced coffee, five flavored hard boiled eggs, corn chips, and aloe juice.

I'd gotten out of shape after Cambodia – after my injuries, I figured I should just increase the amount I eat a lot to make sure I have enough nutrients to heal. I wasn't able to work out or move around very much. So I was putting on a belly and lost any muscle tone I had over the next few months while healing.

In Korea, I started getting cut back up again. The jimjilbang was great for me – I'd do cardio while reading a book, hit the weights hard, eat food, go sweat, shower off, maybe spend some time in the high oxygen room, and then go to sleep.

I explored Seoul a little bit the first few days, and then I bought a power convertor that I needed. I found a cafe near the jimjilbang with wireless internet, and I'd set up there each day, ordering food and coffee, and getting back into the swing of things.

I'd been wanting to get back on track for a while, and now I had two things going for me – regular fitness in the gym, and I was forced to keep a schedule. I could only check in where I was staying after 7PM for the all night rate, and I had to be out by 10AM. This meant I had a 15 hour window for my gym, toiletries, and sleeping, and meant I was always out at the cafe or city from 10AM to 7PM.

I'd already done a lot of thinking and made halfway-attempts to break free from inertia throughout 2010. I'd actually hit a good stride in January in Taipei and did a lot of writing, and I think if I'd stayed in Taipei and kept that routine I would've broken out earlier. By far, one of the biggest mistakes I've made traveling is leaving a place where I've got a really good thing going, for no particular reason. In Thailand and especially Cambodia, I lost the momentum and production I'd built in Taipei, and was back into the inertia of distraction.

I did have one thing going for me – I'd started looking for materials that would help me shake the rust off, and I'd already picked up a copy of David Allen's book *Getting Things Done*. I had it since I was in Hong Kong, and in retrospect I feel silly for not reading it right away.

That's one of the most important books I've ever read. The biggest problem I'd had was that a lot of things in a lot of different areas were not how I wanted them to be. If I did break out from distraction and stimulation for a few hours, the end result was never much better than the start. My email inbox had 800+ mails in it, some of them important and some not. If I answered 10 of them, my inbox might decrease from 842 to 832. Not exactly a major win. I had a variety of big and small charges I should cancel, I had a bunch of papers I wanted to go through and either digitize, deal with, or throw away. I wanted to start to accounts, I wanted to close some accounts, and a variety of other things.

This is before even getting into the expansive projects I wanted to be working on in business or writing or creativity – most of which didn't have clear steps on next actions, either.

I followed Allen's system, and gathered everything I had to deal with. For longer things – like clearing out 800 messages – I made sub-tasks. "Email to 700, email to 600, email to 500, email to 400, email to 300, email to 200, email to 100, email to 50, email to 35, email to 20, email to 10, email to 5, email to 0" were all set as to-do items.

And then I spent a few days clearing things out. I canceled everything that needed to be canceled, cleared my email down to zero, and went through and cleaned and sorted all my

traveling gear. I threw away clutter and junk and simplified, digitized documents whenever possible, and cleared up a variety of little things that needed to be done.

Just as importantly – maybe more importantly – I wrote down all the potential projects I could work on, the goals I had, the things I needed to do, and so on.

David Allen calls this “clearing the psychic decks” and I did just that. I cleared the decks – about ten days after I started Getting Things Done, I had a blank slate that just had my goals and the projects I potentially wanted to do. Combined with the strong fitness component and regular schedule, I was getting into a position to start doing good work again.

### **The Beginning of Era One**

26 May – Success  
Stretched, situps, pushups.  
Took a vitamin.  
Did some writing on Critical Thinking.

That’s my notes for the day.

At the time, I didn’t realize what a success May 26th was. That’s the first day I started tracking what I do on a daily basis.

27 May – Fail  
Stretched.  
Took a vitamin.  
Minimal work - much distraction. Not a very successful day.  
Stayed up all night to try to normalize my sleep schedule by going to bed earlier.

That’s day two. So it’s not all rosy. But generally tracking what I do every single day has paid such huge dividends for me.

Looking at my notes now, I actually didn’t get into a great swing of things right away. Habits take a while to change. But just documenting, tracking a little bit what I’m doing each day has been worth a lot.

5 June  
Woke 2PM. Vitamins. Ate 2 eggs, bag of corn chips, can of nuts, juice. \$7.50  
Coffee.  
Kind of a wasted day screwing around, but then did gym.

That day was mostly wrong for instance, and only half-tracked. I didn’t write a lot down, and had to pay extra because I checked out late in the morning.

My first two weeks of tracking, I had one day labeled “Success,” one day labeled “Mixed,” 4 days labeled “Fail,” and 7 days not labeled at all. And the unlabeled ones were probably not successes either.

Either way, just putting the focused attention onto my day was worth a lot. At the end of a week, I could see what I had to do. I felt lighter and freer now that I’d cleared off a lot of my responsibilities and to-do’s, but really expansive creative work wasn’t happening quite yet. I left Korea to Taipei on June 8th.

The successes start coming soon after that:

11 June - Success

Woke 2PM.

Vitamin.

Kind of useless day, not sure where the time went.

Stretching, 20 situps, 10 pushups.

Almost slept, but got back up and worked heavily for three hours - new outline for Critical Thinking. Very productive just by virtue of this time alone.

12 June - Fail

Woke around 11AM. Wasted time mostly until 6PM.

Kind of a wasted day. Bed late.

13 June – Success

Woke 2PM after 4AM bedtime night before. Good day - mostly learning and planning.

Saw some insightful HN articles, followed them, got me thinking about my planning for network and counsel.

I should do some writing tonight.

Did some writing quite late - then 15 pushups, 25 situps, sleep at 6:20 AM.

14 June - Mixed

Woke 2PM, vitamin, stretching, 15 pushups, 25 situps.

Started building my Facebook, wrote lots of emails.

15 June - Success

Woke, vitamin, stretched, 15 pushups, 25 situps.

Lots of clearing out my to-do list, spent time making calls on the phone, clearing admin, a good day overall. Walked 3 hours in the evening (partially because I got lost). Ended kind of weak, screwed around the last few hours - which is fine after such a good day, but why not read instead of play games?

Slept at 5:30 AM.

Now, you’ll note that there’s no such thing as “the floodgates of success” here. It’s all incremental progress. But that’s how I’d define Era One – a few massive leaps, and then lots of incremental progress.

## **The Key Themes of Era One**

**Daily Tracking:** I began tracking my day each day, and gradually evolved what I track so that I track more and more. Doing this helps me stay on top of what I want to be working on, notice when I'm getting off course, and it's been massively helpful.

**Weekly Reviews:** I started reviewing each week, which gives me a good high level understanding of what I'm doing with my life. It's funny, in the thick of it you don't realize how much money you're spending on coffee, or that I only exercised once this week. But the numbers don't lie – with good daily tracking, a weekly review helps make things make sense.

**People:** I've known for a while that people are the way – if you want to do anything significant enough, you'll be hard pressed to do it alone. I've reconnected with people I lost touch with, and started reaching out to more people. This was slow going at first, but started to speed up rapidly.

**Blog:** I launched SebastianMarshall.com in Hong Kong on July 8th. Shortly after that, I committed to writing one blog post every single day, and I've stuck with that commitment since then. The blog has grown rapidly, and I've made a lot of connections with people from there. It's been very good so far.

**Prolific:** One commitment I made during this time was to become prolific – I explicitly committed to doing prolific amounts of work. I started doing a lot more work during this timeframe, and producing/shipping more. I still haven't reached anywhere near my ceiling on this, though.

**Borderlands:** The crash in Cambodia made me realize that life is finite. During Era One, I also read quite a bit of philosophy from the Roman Stoics and from the Japanese on bushido. One thing I started doing is meditating on the fact that life is finite and will end. This helps focus me and push to move faster.

**Filling Up Dead Time:** I started to fill dead time with either reading or listening to audio. I got lots of podcasts and audiobooks, and now I either read or listen to audio whenever I'm heading to the airport, on a bus or train, etc. I also listen to audio while exercising each day, and it's very good time for me. It means running errands is less of a hassle, because I learn while doing them. I credit this massively with helping me be successful.

**Scaling Back and Quitting:** In this timeframe, I quit video games, spectator sports, and sugar entirely. Before quitting, I would do two things – first, I tried to identify what sort of role and utility the activity was giving me. For video games, it was high immersion relaxation. For spectator sports, it was pure consumption of distraction and entertainment. For sugar, it was a bit of an energy high and good taste. Second, I worked to replace those elements. I replaced video games with high quality fiction, including good philosophical comics like Lone Wolf and Cub. I replaced spectator sports by getting an RSS Reader and filling it up with good blogs. I

replaced sugar by increasing how much I ate fruit and also healthier high calorie foods like nuts for when I wanted a boost.

Other Themes – I made a commitment to give 10% of my income to charity henceforth. I started taking vitamins and refined the mix of vitamins I take. I started paying attention to skincare. I started looking to connect with people where they're at – signing up for any and all online services that other people I respect use.

### **Success and Failure by Month**

Every day I define what I'd ideally like to do that way, and mark down either "Success," "Mixed," or "Fail" to note whether I got it done or not. I also added one more category later – "BIG Success" – for days where I do massively a lot.

Here's what my results look like:

May - 6 Days. 1 Success, 1 Mixed, 3 Fail, 1 Unlabelled

June - 30 Days. 3 BIG Success, 9 Success, 6 Mixed, 3 Fail, 9 Unlabelled

July - 31 Days. 1 BIG Success, 12 Success, 10 Mixed, 6 Fail, 2 Unlabelled

August - 31 Days. 7 BIG Success, 11 Success, 8 Mixed, 0 Fail, 5 Unlabelled

September - 30 Days. 5 BIG Success, 11 Success, 11 Mixed, 3 Fail, 0 Unlabelled

October - 31 Days. 2 BIG Success, 4 Success, 12 Mixed, 6 Fail, (6 days lost to computer crash)

Simplified, counting big successes in success and unlabeled days as failures:

MAY - 1 Success, 1 Mixed, 4 Fail

JUN - 12 Success, 6 Mixed, 12 Fail

JUL - 13 Success, 10 Mixed, 8 Fail

AUG - 18 Success, 8 Mixed, 5 Fail

SEP - 16 Success, 11 Mixed, 3 Fail

OCT - 6 Success, 12 Mixed, 6 Fail (6 days of tracking lost to crash)

May and early June was Korea, June and early July was Taipei, July and early August was Hong Kong, August to October was Saigon. At the end of October I headed to Malaysia.

You'll see above that I slowly built my successes up more and cut down on failing days. The last month in Vietnam – October – was kind of so-so. This is for three reasons.

First, I was just getting kind of stale and stagnant there. This happens sometimes when traveling - it was time to move on.

Second, I was working on some kind of unclear and hazy stuff – it was hard to wrap my mind around it to get it done, since my primary objectives were mostly about selling products and services in a new market with my new company. It's not work I can just power through – it takes some creativity and there were a bunch of things I needed to learn to get it done. Honestly, some

of those mixed days should be marked as successes – I wrote them off because I was only learning and not doing, but that’s what I needed right there.

Third, and this is a positive reason – I raise my standards as soon as successes are coming regularly. My fitness, diet, blogging, and connecting with people are all improving tremendously. These would have been big wins six months ago, but are now starting to become par for the course.

### **Spending – How Much Does it Cost to Travel?**

I get this question a lot. People wonder how I can travel and hop around the world when I’m not working?

The truth is, it’s *cheaper* to spend a few months in a developing country than it is to stay in a city in the Western world. The expensive part is getting there – airfare. But after around three months, airfare+expenses becomes cheaper than staying home. Cheaper rent and much cheaper food.

I’ve got some friends here and there, so I might stay with friends for a while and get them gifts or take them out in lieu of getting my own place, but even renting a place can be done cheap. Like I said, I was paying \$12/night in Seoul to stay in a jimjilbang. Now, if you lived in Seoul, you wouldn’t want to stay in a jimjilbang all the time. But for a month, paying \$360 to stay at a place with a gym, sauna, pools of water/minerals, sleeping areas, restaurants, snack stands, and more – it’s a fantastic deal. Yes, I didn’t have my own space there. Yes, I had to check out during the day. Yes, there’s some hassle involved. Yes, it’s not always good sleeping. But \$360, man. For a month. And that includes the hot rooms, cold rooms, the various mineral and herb baths, and all the weights and cardio I want. Fantastic.

Also, it’s very possible to eat for under \$5 per day in developing countries. You can get a good meal cooked out in the world for \$1 in Northern Thailand. You can cook your own food for less. Here in Malaysia, you can get a big pack of peanuts for 60 cents USD. I’m renting a room in a luxury condo 40 minutes outside of Kuala Lumpur, and it’s 500 Malaysian Ringgit per month. That’s about \$170 USD. The internet where I’m staying is shaky, so I usually work in a cafe. The 10 minute taxi ride there is about \$2.

It takes some research and willingness to step into the unknown, but you can absolutely live and travel very cheaply through most of the world. Here’s my spending since I started tracking it in July. These are my original notes –

18 July to 26 July (8 days) - Total: room \$144 (\$18/day), food \$46, coffee \$19, groceries \$31, transit \$2 -> I also bought vitamins for \$66, but that's a long term expense over the next two months, not an expense for just this week.

27 July to 5 August (10 days) - \$340 for 10 days, total \$34 per day. Higher than last week. It would've been lower without the massages - massage is valuable for health, but

going 3 times over 10 days was unnecessary. I know my body was sore from training, but the expense wasn't worth it. I didn't realize how much it was until I calculated. [Web hosting: \$137 for next year]

6 August to 13 August (8 days) - \$25 on Visa, \$30 on AMEX, \$50 in cash since got to VN. Maybe \$35 more leaving Hong Kong... for \$140 total?

14 August to 20 August (7 days) - \$163 self [\$10 business] - free rent drastically takes down expenses. Many of the high expenses are a result of partying with friends, the rest of it is food/taxis. I should keep spending well on Chris and buy some gear while I'm here, which will keep my expenses high, but I think I can eat cheaper as well.

21 August to 27 August (7 days) - \$115 for living expenses [plus \$50 for business clothes] - this is amazingly good

28 August to 5 September (9 days) - \$170 over 9 days = \$18.90 per day

6 September to 17 September (12 days) -  $\$299/12 = \$25/\text{day}$  personal [\$385 business and business clothing]

18 September to 29 September (12 days) - \$528 over 12 days. \$44 per day. (Room: \$420 for 12 days. Food/coffee: \$82 Entertainment: \$26)

30 September to 10 October (11 days) - \$331 for 11 days. = \$30/day

11 October to 24 October (14 days) - \$215 personal (\$15.36 per day), \$16 in business expenses

25 October to 1 November (8 days) - computer crashed, not sure. Main expenses: Entertaining Chris kind of a high number, some taxis/trains, two nights in hotel in KL, new vitamins.

Other spending: The pre-July spending I wasn't tracking. Flights aren't much. Saigon to Kuala Lumpur one-way was \$95. I got the Taipei -> Hong Kong -> Saigon flights for free with points I'd built up on my American Express card, but it would've been around \$400 if I didn't have that. Some bank expenses – I've got to pay more attention to those wily banks. My laptop at the end of this time period and I had to get a new one. I got a Toshiba Satellite with an Intel Core i3 processor, 4 GB Ram, 500 GB hard disk, built in webcam and mic, and boring other specs for \$650 at the Low Yat Center in Malasia. I'd have been happy using my old computer until it died, but then it did die.

Anyway, these numbers could be even lower if I worked at it. If you have a valuable skill you're willing to barter and you're a cool person, I think it'd probably be possible to never pay rent ever using Couchsurfing and connecting with people. If you cook your own food, I think it'd be possible to eat for less than \$100/month. Transport is cheap if you're in the right places. It'd

probably be possible to survive on a few hundred dollars per month total for a while if you were disciplined about it and did enough planning.

### **Some General Advice if You Get Stuck In a Rut**

I now believe that fundamentals are the one and only way to get out of a rut. While it is romantic and exciting to think that bigger dreams and visions and plans can dig a man out, I believe it's instead doing little things gradually more correctly.

First, though, is to get the feeling of overwhelm under control and break through the general "ugh fields." For this, I have David Allen and his book to thank, and it was exactly what I needed. I sorted out all that needed to be done, and then I whittled it all away. By having the full list documented before starting, I was able to see it get smaller. It wasn't like shoveling sand into the ocean.

From there, I rebuilt my fitness. After leaving Korea, I didn't have regular access to weights, but I decided it was key to just get *some* motion each day. Even a 15 minute walk would be okay. It didn't even need to be "exercise time" – I might wander around a district of a foreign city, looking at the people and the architecture and the scenery. Doing this, I'd often go for three hour walks in Taipei or Hong Kong or Saigon.

I began listening to audio podcasts and audiobooks during this time, filling up my dead time. I can't stress enough how much that helped me. You know, I don't think humans are naturally motivated towards accomplishing their highest goals.

Maybe that sounds strange, but I think it's true. We're drawn to a variety of things, but some of those aren't good. And we're not necessarily emotionally drawn to our highest values.

I have just come to terms with this. I'm driven, ambitious, and like to work, much more so than most people. But even still, I'm human. I've got the same general laziness and distractibility that we all suffer from, and it's easy to not be motivated to work on big, hard problems and projects.

So I've come to terms with it – motivation is not something that can be just done once and forgotten. It must be rebuilt and rekindled when it gets low. It would be silly for a man to think he could eat one big meal and then never eat again. It would be silly to think you could drink a few gallons of water and then never be thirsty. But somehow, I think a lot of us expect to get motivated once, and then never worry about it again.

Not me. I'm human – all too human in this regard. So I listen to regular podcasts and audiobooks while I go for my walks or run errands, and it helps fill my motivation levels back up. I read biographies and histories and books to fill self up with motivation.

So those are three of the first pillars of doing massively a lot of good work – first, getting a handle on everything and getting past overwhelm. Second, some basic motion and fitness. Third, regularly pursuing media that increases motivation and inspiration. On the last note, I'd

really highly recommend audio. I can't recommend it highly enough. I like Brian Tracy – The Luck Factor is my favorite program of his, and I'd recommend that.

Tracking has been amazingly helpful – just seeing where my time and where my days go helps a lot. Even when I was off track, I would still dutifully write down every day that I was off-track. In some ways, this was hard to do. But eventually it became easy. It doesn't feel good to see three or four days in a row of being off-track, noted down coldly and unambiguously. You can't argue with that. It's easy to not realize that the sands are slipping through the hourglass all the time, but tracking makes you see the value of all those grains of sand, and to ideally harness them for a great life.

So, I would recommend tracking to you.

Finally, I know people are the way, and I've been connecting much more with people. After a very quiet year in 2009, and being the lone wandering adventurer for the first half of 2010, it's good to be regularly in touch with people.

There's no magic to this. If I see something I really admire, I might shoot an email to a writer or creator of it. If we connect some, maybe we hop on Skype and have a chat. I wish there was some magic to it, but there's not. You just start doing it.

In the beginning, actually, it was frustrating, because I waded into the pool slowly. I'd email one guy a nice email. Then, no reply. This was fairly common.

But now, I have so much going on that I just fire and forget. Ideally I would pay more attention and track this later, but for now, I might write an email to someone, and then they'll get back to me or not, but I'm on to the next thing either way. I'm in touch with a great many people, connecting with some really smart and cool people, so if I fail to connect with someone that's okay.

Starting my blog helped, too. Now a lot of people reach out to me. It's a lot easier when people reach out to you, because they tend to be much more responsive. Actually, I'm starting to have the opposite problem now – my volume of email and letters I'm receiving is more than I'm used to, and I get a little bit behind on it. I need to move faster, more decisively, and be more disciplined about this going forwards, but I think I can do that.

### **Bullet Points – If You Find Yourself in a Rut**

1. Get past overwhelm. Catalogue everything in detail before starting, and then clear everything. I highly, highly recommend David Allen's book "Getting Things Done" for this.
2. Get some regular motion in your life. Exercising is good, but you don't even need a designated exercise time. Go walk around an interesting city district and look at the buildings. Even 15 minutes would help.

3. Regularly increase your motivation and inspiration. Get an mp3 player of some sort, and fill it with good audio. I'd recommend Brian Tracy's "The Luck Factor" quite highly – it's the one I've re-listened to the most.
4. I track my day every single day. This helps me notice where my time is going, how much I'm exercising and moving around, what I'm eating, what money I'm spending... it's really incredibly valuable.
5. Connect with more people. You can start slowly, but don't get discouraged if you do. People are busy, and many people you reach out to nothing will come of it. Expect to put a lot of effort for not much gain into this area in the beginning, and later you're going to have massive gains without much effort.

## **Era Two**

My last few days in Vietnam and first few days in Malaysia were bland and not much was happening. I wasn't getting much done, I was a mini-rut.

In Saigon, I was heading out to this cafe with nice ambiance and kept writing and re-writing potential projects and how I could focus more, and what I should be prioritizing. With my two or three largest projects, the next steps weren't entirely clear, and that's always bad when you're trying to get things done.

A blessing in disguise happened around November 2nd – my old Toshiba laptop that'd been around the world with me died. It wouldn't boot up properly. I tried the various built-in fixes, and I also had a Windows installation disk in my bag in the event this happened. The computer couldn't install a new copy of Windows, and the old one wouldn't work. The computer was dead.

At the time, this seemed quite aggravating. I was already having a bit of a ponderous and down week, I had just arrived in Malaysia and hadn't really sorted things out here yet in terms of logistics and infrastructure, and then my computer dies. But, it turns out to have worked out very well.

Over time, my old laptop had accumulated a mess of things "that really should get done" – but many of which were never going to. I had a variety of things on there that seemed like they could be important, but obviously weren't.

Now, working off a clean computer with almost nothing on it, I realize what the problem was. Just like before I did my clearing out in Korea, I had entered a space of uncertainty and slight overwhelm. Lots of moving around and thinking, but not so much nailing down what needed to be done and production.

I backup my computer regularly, so I didn't lose anything too crucial. A week's worth of tracking, some media that's replaceable, and unfortunately a few pictures, but not so many pictures.

I figured I'd re-start my tracking and to-do lists from scratch, and that's when I came up with the idea of Era Two. It seemed like a clear, discreet change of eras and ways of thinking. If I'm going to make changes, why not make big changes?

So I think it would be fair to say, Era One was establishing the fundamentals and digging myself out of the rut, and now it was time to take my expansiveness up much higher.

So begins Era Two.

Principles:

- \*A Tasks, B Tasks, C Tasks. Never do a C Task when a B Task is undone. Never do a B Task when an A Task is undone.
- \*Expansiveness. Rapidly iterating/pitching.
- \*Every day, one pitch or asset, or both.
- \*No halfway measures - do things or triage them, but make decisions. Auto-triage everything once a month or so.
- \*Work one asset at a time. Work on it until it's complete. Then pick the next one.

While those principles might sound simple, I believe they're going to take me to the next level, and already are helping.

The first principle I took from Brian Tracy – it says that there are tasks and projects that can have a massive impact on your life, and these should be worked on whenever progress can be made on them. These are “A Tasks.” Then there's tasks that make a difference and have to be done or there's consequences, but not so impactful. Those are “B Tasks.” Finally, there's “C Tasks” which are nice to do, but don't have significant impact if left undone.

I don't do this so rigorously, but I do have ideas in my mind about what's important and what isn't. For instance, I'd consider writing this up – Era One – an A Task. This should help me clarify my thoughts, it should help put good creative work into the world, and there's a myriad of other benefits. Also, as an advantage – it's long enough to require heavy focus over a few days, but short enough to ship quickly and complete a project right at the outset of my new systems.

I work on things like this – A Tasks – right at the start of each day, and try to keep directing my focus to them when I have free mental energy.

Answering email is a B Task – it should be done, but it should be done after I've hit the wall in terms of working on my highest priority stuff. It can be done when I'm tired and not at peak creativity.

Surfing Hacker News or getting a coffee would be a C Task. I still spend time there, but I should have cleared out the vast majority of my available A and B stuff first. I should only be on HN when everything for the day is done, or I'm exhausted to the point that I'm not able to put in good work on other areas.

Expansiveness is another theme of Era Two. Just doing more, in a variety of areas. Not just doing more, but shipping more. Completing more. I did a variety of good things in Era One, but many of them don't have deliverables. Things like regularly stretching, exercising. There's nothing to ship or complete. And a lot of my projects have uncertain completion dates, because they're not solely within my control. But, I want to start shipping more things.

Every single day – either working on building an asset or pitching/selling something. That's a new focus for me – either working explicitly on creating and bringing things into existence, or selling and presenting things. There's no wiggle room here – either building or selling, every day.

Either do things, or don't do them. I'm going to get better at this. I need to start throwing things away if it turns out I'm not going to do them. If I get some books and I'm carrying them around for six months, that's just silly. I need to look at the books and say, "Is this really important enough to read?" If so, I should decide when to read it. If not, toss it. There's an opportunity cost to having things lying around, especially when living out of a suitcase. If a nice-to-do item stays on my to-do list for more than a month, I'm going to make the decision and do it or toss it. No leaving things to-do forever.

Finally, one asset at a time. There's some wiggle room on this when I need to get deliverables to other people. But all projects – *all* projects – come under some strain and difficulty right at the home stretch. It's too tempting to switch off at that point. No, need to power through there. Finish this document, Era One, ship it. Build the next asset, ship it. And so on.

### **The Joy of Just Shipping Things**

The biggest problem with creative work is that it's almost never done. You could add, subtract, edit, refine – probably forever. And every pass you do, your work probably gets better.

The problem with that is that nothing ever gets shipped.

When I started writing this document up, it was going to have a bit different form than it does now. It was going to have less of a narrative story element, and contain more lists.

I was going to list all the books and audio I listened to during this timeframe and feature some notable blog posts. Also, I was going to look at my tracking more and put down more about fitness and eating habits.

But you know what? This is good enough. I need to ship this sucker and get on to the next thing.

That's, I suppose, a big key of Era Two. Not trying to get things perfect. Just doing a lot of solid stuff. A solid, completed, shipped project is infinitely better than a project that aspires to perfection but never ships.

That'll do it for Era One.

You can find me online at <http://www.sebastianmarshall.com> - I write there every single day, and hopefully many topics of value to you.

Up soon – a newsletter at <http://www.getsomevictory.com> – I'll launch this within the next week, you can sign up now.

Glad to have you reading along with me. Comments, questions, and feedback are welcome.

Cheers, au revoir, best wishes,  
Sebastian Marshall