A Self-Directed Summer Plan

Summer is almost here, and many people are getting excited about their work or travel plans. But perhaps you don't have any yet -- that's fine. Great, actually. Although there's a lot of value to be gained from participating in structured programs, some of the most productive moments can come from time spent experimenting with self-directed learning.

This summer, perhaps you finally have the opportunity to do this, to direct your own education. If you do, here's one way to make the most of it: **spend time exploring one topic deeply, on your own -- even if it's just for two or three hours a day.** Below I'll share a simple procedure for how I've done this in the past, but first I'd like to tell you why this can be so valuable.

There are so many things we don't know. Therefore, there are so many questions we can ask. Perhaps you want to learn how to have better social skills. Or perhaps you want to understand why Elon Musk thinks going to space is important and not impossible. Maybe you want to understand whether we can actually know anything at all about economics. Or maybe all you want to do is figure out why so many other people like to dance, because whenever you do it, all you feel is fear.

People walk around with so many questions about the world, questions that never get answered. That's a shame. This is the problem with formal programs: they don't know what questions you want to ask, so they end up providing answers to questions that you're not asking. It's not relevant to you, and it's boring. But because of the structure you are confined to, or believe yourself to be confined to, you never get time to explore the real questions that are burning inside of you. (Of course, it's probably the case that you *do* have the time, and just aren't spending it as wisely as you could be...) The point is, exploring and trying to answer these questions for yourself is important and valuable.

Here's a simple way to do so, one that yields concrete results:

- **Get a composition notebook.** This will be your field notebook for the summer, where you'll keep a daily log of what you're doing, what you've done, and what you plan on doing.
- **Choose a question that you *desperately* want to answer** From the examples above, this could look like one of these: *How can I interact with people more effectively? Why is Elon Musk trying to go to space? Which of the competing economic theories should I trust? Why in the world do people like to dance?!* Once you've chosen an initial question, write it down in your composition notebook. Over the course of the summer, this question will likely change as you understand nuances in your micro-field that you hadn't before.
- **Articulate a procedure for how you're going to answer it.** Perhaps this means reading a bunch of books, or getting lost in Wikipedia. It probably will also mean finding people to talk to who could give you directions as to where to look for answers, people you can easily access by simply cold-emailing them or by reaching out to your network. Maybe this means conducting your own experiments. If you're trying to figure out what the pleasure is that people get from dancing, for example, perhaps you want to try a whole bunch of different dances and see if you ever get the feeling of pleasure yourself.
- **Follow it.** You have a bunch of ideas for how you're going to answer your initial research question. Now do them.
- **At the end of each day:** reflect, revise your procedure, and repeat. Did it work? Did it suck? At first, the stuff you try doing to answer your question might get you no where, and that's okay. Maybe you spent all day getting frustrated at Wikipedia because the math topic you wanted to

understand was incomprehensible on it, and you feel like you've wasted your time. That's okay - let it out in your journal, and make a note of the problem: that Wikipedia might not be the resource you choose next time you want to understand a mathematical topic. Or maybe you had a great conversation with someone about why Elon Musk is doing what he's doing, and you've decided that you've answered your initial question, and now you want to ask an even further question. Whatever happens, write it down, record it, and brainstorm ways you can make your method better. Then choose one or two things that you can try the next day, so you don't lose momentum. Remember: any day when you *try* to carry out your procedure is a day well spent, whether or not the steps you articulated actually work.

- **Share your learning.**

Do this for a summer -- roughly 100 days -- and at the end of it you'll find that you understand an enormous amount both about the topic you explored (perhaps even becoming an expert in the micro-field!), as well as how to explore topics and answer questions in general. Sure, you don't know whether or not you'll be successful at answering your question, but that's part of the fun. It's not predictable like a summer program, at the end of which you know what you'll get. This plan is tailored to you, it's straightforward to do (although not easy), and can be such a valuable thing to look back on, because you'll have pages and pages of documented progress.

And no matter what you do, you'll always have to be asking and answering questions. It's just a matter of what questions you get to ask. So if you have a few hours a day this summer (or whenever, really), choose a question to answer and see where you end up. Perhaps this question will lead to an even bigger project, one that you want to work on for years to come.