

What Inspires Me?
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(Note that the talk as delivered diverged from the prepared text at several points.)

This was tough talk for me to prepare. My usual strategy for preparing a talk is to make sure I understand the audience, the context for the talk, and what I'm being asked to talk about. Then, to tell you the truth, I poke around in talks I've given before and see what I've got that I can, as they say, "re-purpose."

So, I understand the audience fine—I've been part of it for the last couple of decades, after all—and I understand the context, summer services. When Sue Otto called, she asked me to talk about my sources of inspiration and that seemed like a clear enough task, so I was ready to go. As it turns out, I have to warn you, the question was clear enough, but I quickly (but not quickly enough to decline the invitation) discovered that I didn't know the answer.

When I moved on to the step where I poke around in talks I've given before, I found a big ol' chunk of bad news/good news. The bad news was that I found absolutely nothing on my computer that could be legitimately repurposed. I've got some stuff that is meant to be inspirational, but that doesn't really address the question of what inspires me. I've got plenty of old lectures, but nothing I'd inflict on this group, and I've got welcoming remarks for all kinds of events. So the bad news was I'd have to start from scratch—quite a challenge.

The good news was exactly that-- this talk presents a challenge and an opportunity for growth. And the more I thought about it, the more I concluded that that is the exact answer to the question that Sue asked me. What inspires me? A challenge. So in some kind of weird self-referential way, this talk illustrates itself.

So, that's the preview: I find my inspiration in challenges, and the opportunities for growth they provide.

As I thought about the question Sue posed, I resorted to the last refuge of an academic. I looked up "inspire" in a dictionary. Along with the familiar stuff about "breathing in," I found:

fill (someone) with the urge or ability to do or feel something, esp. to do something creative

Synonyms include:

stimulate, **motivate**, encourage, influence, rouse, move, stir, energize, galvanize, incite; animate, fire, excite, spark, inspire, incentivize, affect.

There's actually a lot of complexity in the word:

- Urge *or* ability are two really different things
- A historical implication of an external source, originally a divine one

I'm going to simplify my task and fit this into 10 minutes, though, and think about inspire mostly in terms of the sources of motivation-- what makes me do what I do.

Back when I was a real psychology professor (before I had gone over to the dark side and become an academic administrator), and more especially when I was a graduate student I knew some stuff about motivation. Now most of what I knew is hopelessly out of date, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's wrong.

One thing that I knew then that is probably still true is that if you want to know what motivates someone, a good starting place is to look at what that person does—particularly when that person's choices are relatively unconstrained. If you can understand the common characteristics of the activities a person chooses, you're at least part way to understanding what motivates, that is, inspires, that person. So, I've given some considerable thought over the past several weeks to what I do when I have a choice about what to do.

By now, by the way, you're probably seeing one of the ways that Kim and I are pretty different, in complementary ways. I think it is fair to say that Kim is very creative in a divergent and productive way. I on the other hand tend to the convergent and the analytic. It's about to get worse.

	Helps others	Grows me
Pretty sure I'll never be very good		Guitar, woodworking, poetry (inspired at least in part by the beauty of others' efforts)
Confident I can be at least pretty good	Lots of stuff I do at work (e.g., being DEO, current position)	

I've identified two kinds of things that I do when I can choose what to do. In this point in my notes there a compulsively neatly created 2 X 2 table with labels on the rows and the columns. The column headings are "Helps others" and "Grows me." The row labels are "Pretty sure I'll never be very good" and "Confident I can be at least pretty good."

Two columns and two rows makes four cells in the body of the table. Two of them are empty—in other words none of the things that came to my mind when I thought about the choices I make about where to put my effort fit into those two cells. One of the empty cells makes perfect sense, to me at least. I would hope that I wouldn't devote a lot of effort to things that I think will help other people, but that I'm pretty sure I'll never be very good at—that just seems like a bad idea. The other empty cell is the one that would include things that I'm confident that I can be pretty good at and that would contribute to my growth. That one being empty seems a bit more complicated to me, and if you don't mind I'm going to set it aside for now, at least. If I have time, I'll see if I can explain why it seems complicated to me.

The cells that contain examples are the key to my exploration of what inspires me, so let me talk about those two cells. Let me start with some examples of things that I'm pretty sure I'll never be very good at, but I think will help me grow. Over the last 10 or 15 years, I've spent some time learning a bit about furniture making, I went through a period of memorizing poetry, and I took guitar lessons for a few years. What I have to show for these efforts, and believe me when I tell you that I am not demonstrating false modesty, is a rickety walnut end table, a very few snatches of poetry, and a plodding ability to play a few melodies on the guitar.

Let me focus on guitar. As with the poetry and the woodworking, I am severely lacking in the natural talents that we'd all expect a good guitar player to have. Any one of you who has been near me during a service is well aware of the problem. When singing, some people worry about being flat or sharp. My concerns are simpler. If one note is supposed to be higher than the note before it, and I go up instead of down, I'm pretty satisfied. In order for me to be able to chant the Torah portion at my bar mitzvah, I spent

many months working with a friend of my mother's who was a professional voice coach. Through sheer repetition, I managed to be able to mimic the tape recording of the portion that my rabbi had made for me, but it was touch and go.

So why take guitar lessons? I think it had less to do with wanting to get good at playing the guitar and more with wanting to struggle. Bizarrely, for me, because I'm not usually this way, it was all about the journey, not about the destination. I didn't have concrete goals, other than to get a little more skillful over time. I worked pretty hard at guitar—well, really I worked very hard—and I truly think that anyone with a bit of talent would have become a quite decent guitar player with that much work. I didn't, but I'm very happy with the experience. I found the struggle inspiring, even if, maybe especially because, the progress was so slow and small.

Before I leave this cell—the “don't think I'll ever be very good at it, but there is opportunity for growth,” one surprising observation. All of the activities I found in this cell share a characteristic that I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't prepared this talk. Each of these activities is importantly about aesthetics. There are great furniture makers, poets and guitarists out there, and their works are a source of inspiration to me. It's not so much that I want to emulate them, but that I want to have a more informed sense of what it is they do to make the works that I admire.

So, there's another cell in my 2 X 2 table that has entries in it. That's the cell that contains things that I do that I'm pretty confident I can be at least pretty good at and that I think will help other people. For the last almost dozen years, I've worked, and I'd say worked hard, at a series of administrative jobs—director of the Center for Teaching, Department Chair, Associate Provost for Faculty Development, and now Senior Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education¹. I put a lot of time and effort into this kind of work. It typically captures a great deal of my “shower time” and “dog-walking time”—the time when I have a chance to think uninterrupted. Here the inspiration is, it seems to me, straightforward. I can see a clear connection between this work and improvements in others' lives.

You know, when you become a department chair in departments such as mine where the chair rotates among the senior faculty, there's this secret ceremony where you learn the handshake and everything and you have to take an oath to never admit that you like being a chair. If asked, you have to complain about the time it takes away from your research, about the lack of support from the dean, about the banality of much of what you are asked to do, and there's a whole extended litany. Well, if you promise not to let it get out, I'm prepared to break my oath. Being a department chair was enormously rewarding. Practically every day, I got to go to work and help

¹ There's another entry that belongs in this cell (pretty good at it, helps others) which is “father,” that's both too easy and too hard to talk about to include in this talk.

someone. Some days a student had a problem I could help resolve. Others faculty members needed advice that I could provide.

Admittedly, sometimes, I had to a bit of reframing to turn what I was doing into "helping someone." One time, I called two faculty members who were locked in dispute into my office and shut the door. I told them that I would like to resolve their dispute, but that I would declare our meeting a success if they could speak to each other civilly throughout our 30 minutes meeting. Another time, after a very contentious faculty meeting, people were consoling me, and I told them that I was very satisfied with meeting. After all, we had clearly demonstrated that we could discuss the issue in front of us with out a single death or serious injury.

In my work these days, I face really challenging problems. If I can make progress on some of them, the lives of 20K undergraduate students will improve. And again, I think the key to my inspiration is the challenge. It's not just that I want to help people—though I do—it's that I want to work at the far edge of my capabilities to help people.

So, preparing this talk, whatever other merit it might have had, has been a good challenge for me and it has helped me grow. Like all good challenges, it stretched me and I didn't master it. For one thing, I've run out of time without getting back to that cell that I said was complicated—the one with things I think I would be pretty good at and that would contribute to my growth. For another, in addressing one question, I've raised others. To understand that challenge inspires me is helpful, but while I think I've got a beginning, I don't think I have a really good handle on what *kinds* of challenges inspire me.

Challenges that lead to new challenges are good things.

Thanks...

~~One of the old ideas about motivation that I still find reasonable is that all else equal, when it comes to "achievement" tasks, people choose to do things that they perceive as moderately difficult. There's a sort of Goldilocks law that says that some things~~

~~What do I spend my time doing? I spend it figuring things out. There really are lots of sources of inspiration—very personal. "That's who you are."~~

~~Unanswered question: how do I choose areas for growth?~~