



Real and Unreal Victories (\$)

Are you ready to take control of the reality that affects your mental health?

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“We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread, than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.”—**W. H. Auden**

Manufacturing Consequences

I’ve never been an athlete, and I’ve never had much respect for athletics. Athletics' contrived risks and rewards put me off. It’s hard enough discerning what’s important when you’re engaged with reality; how can you straighten out your priorities in a world where priorities are invented?

Then I became a mountaineer and found a world that is, if not more real, then more consequential. It’s consequences that count, not what you think is real. This might seem like an adolescent attitude, but it’s the right attitude for growing up at any age.

Mountaineering became my touchstone for reality: life and death under natural conditions. The victories were contrived, but the dangers weren’t. Everything I did was of consequence and no time was wasted. Mountaineering was an abrupt education.

Now that I'm older, I find time to be the arbiter of truth, not danger. With every passing moment, I ask myself, "Am I best using the time that is constantly being irretrievably lost?"



Manufacturing Commitment

I approached marriage as I approached mountaineering: committed partnerships with the risk of failure and the prospect of victory. This sort of full-on commitment is common among mountaineers, but it's not how other people think. Relationships are mostly unreal. There is no consensus about what makes up success or failure.

You'd think relationships would be taken seriously, like a serious athlete takes their sport, but most people approach relationships like a card game: bluff if you're challenged, exit the game if your hand is weak. If relationships were approached as opportunities rather than recreation, then more would be made of them. There would be fewer conflicts and evasions.

Two failed marriages acquainted me with the legal system. It taught me law is not about creating justice, it's about limiting injury. Sharing a grounded reality resolves conflicts, and being grounded starts in the body. People can be entirely lost in their own worlds, especially where relationships are concerned. Emotionally lost people are out of their bodies.

Relationships, and marriages in particular, are invitations to form commitments, but this is overlooked. Neither of my former partners took our marriages seriously, and I was too immersed in commitment to notice.

Most of my counseling clients are struggling to clarify commitment in their lives. It's not preparation or aptitude that determines success, it's commitment. Before you can commit to action, you have to have priorities that you believe in. You have to know what's important.

Change is the Opposite of Structure

The object of counseling is to enhance power and opportunity. The object of the legal system is to reduce power and curtail risk. Curtailing risk removes opportunity.

It amazes me that people don't understand that counseling helps you grow while the legal system does the opposite. Counseling brings people together and the legal system holds them apart. These are opposite approaches to change. The first is positive, the second is negative.

People see the legal system as directive and the counseling system as recuperative. We think attorneys solve problems and therapists contain disabilities. That's how practitioners of law and health care are taught to see themselves: attorneys as knights and therapists as doctors.

This rule-based thinking puts a brake on innovation and change. We're manipulated to act and think as co-dependents from an early age. We spend the rest of our lives trying to create a space for ourselves.

Counseling develops consensus and commitment to both yourself and to others. As a psychotherapist, I live in a world of contrived social, personal, and financial relationships. Objective reality rarely intrudes.

People come to counseling because they're feeling boxed in. My high performance clients are at the tops of their ladders wondering why they're not satisfied. My low performance clients feel threatened with no obvious way out. Seen from the perspective of lacking a reality to believe in, both clients are in the same boat.

Between objective rewards and subjective feelings lies what's practical. Where mountaineering pits you against a real challenge of your life's value, athletics puts you in a contrived conflict that has no intrinsic meaning. The challenge that lies between these extremes is to define our own rules. Rules that guide our emotions, shape our personalities, and provide satisfaction.

We learn from testing ourselves at both the objectively true and the subjectively contrived extremes. Both involve commitment and responsibility. This is what we can learn through intimate relationships. From what I see, most people learn barely enough to sustain their relationships, and rarely enough to be good parents.

Outstanding athletes make great team players, which is something most people never learn. A real team player is not someone who follows the rules, it's someone who takes responsibility. Responsibility is not something you learn through small rewards and failures. Just being good and avoiding the worst is no endorsement.



Engaging the Process

Lately, I've been annoyed by a few prospects who equivocated and would not begin counseling. They made appointments, and then canceled or didn't show up. These people failed the first test of creating change: they didn't engage. Their choices are not clear and they need more conflict to be motivated. They will get what they need.

If you're struggling with something—a project, situation, or relationship—the first thing you must recognize is the need to do something differently. The legal system is a last resort that exists to stop things. Sometimes that's necessary, but it's never optimal.

People follow three paths in approaching problems. The most common approach is to ignore the problem. This isn't a solution, since there isn't a problem. The second is to do more of the same and continue along the path that created the problem. The third approach is to be creative and look for a new solution.

The difference between these three is your picture of reality. Is what you perceive the truth or an illusion? If it's the truth, you'll take the second path of continuing what you've done before. After all, if that's the truth, why deviate from it?

If you see your problems as false, then you can either dismiss them or see them as invitations to think differently. Dismissing problems is a coping strategy. This is a partial rejection of your world that leaves you with false hope. The hope that your problems are not real and will go away by themselves.

Grief might also be seen as a false problem, since it is something that one does not solve. Grief is a good example of a problem for which you can take any of these three approaches, and each path leads

in a different direction: ignore your grief, insist that it is real and demand that it be removed, or think differently.

Most people try to solve their problems using existing skills and opportunities. They'll try to create more rules and achieve more goals, but they don't want to change the rules or the goals.

Counseling is the path of change. I often chide my clients for not changing enough, or not taking their problems seriously. I also chide them for not taking their power seriously, underestimating their potential, even to the point of believing they are dysfunctional.

There is a Purpose to Anxiety

We are motivated by pain and trouble. If we were wiser or more cautious, we might avoid these, but it seems there is always some pain or trouble waiting for us. This is the human equation, and the desire to avoid pain and trouble that leads to even greater problems. Trouble is the currency of growth. Don't see struggle as a problem. Trouble hides opportunity.

There are two sides to the cost of counseling: what is lost and what is gained. You lose your money in exchange for your personal growth and, sometimes, your sanity. You might object that the gain is not certain, but if you commit to change and take responsibility, it is fairly certain. The question then becomes what your growth is worth.

I believe counseling is a right. If you're educated in a society of scarcity and expected to participate in the general confusion and immorality, then society owes you the opportunity to grow. It's only by our individual growth that society will improve.

Counseling should be provided to everyone. Not just crisis counseling, but growth counseling. If it were, then society would show a commitment to its own evolution. But growth counseling is not provided, subsidized, or encouraged. We're encouraged to follow the law, believe scarcity is real, and ignore our problems.

Society's lack of commitment to change and failure to take responsibility for its behavior leads to wars and fundamentalism. Wars result from believing in your version of reality at the cost of lives. Fundamentalism allows you to evade struggle and absolves you of responsibility. You are a pawn in both cases.

An enlightened society supports its own evolution. Western society is not there yet. The best we can do is provide individuals with material rewards and hope they'll invest their assets in their self-improvement.

If you're interested in your self-improvement, then schedule a free conversation with me. Select a time on my online calendar at <https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15>.

And if you'd like to read this piece, see its pictures, and print it, then go to my website at www.mindstrengthbalance.com, and you'll find it on the Articles page titled *Real and Unreal Victories*.