



Using It or Losing It

Exercise improves physical ability and mental agility,
does it also improve symbolic thinking and democratic society?

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“Money is like an arm or leg – use it or lose it.” — **Henry Ford**

“Perspective: use it or lose it.” — **Richard Bach**

Is Doing the Right Thing a Privilege or a Responsibility?

Given the ongoing collapse of representative democracy in the US, orchestrated by Donald Trump, it’s hard to think of any topic that’s more important. This is partly our failure because, as members of representational democracies, we did not do more to prevent it.

The expression “use it or lose it” applies to health and skill, but not to other things to which it could be applied, such as emotion, initiative, motivation, empathy, self-respect, and responsibility, just to name a few. Does it also apply to democracy?

Intellectual Ability and Exercise

I am declining physically but growing mentally. My memory might be dulling but it's hard to tell. If you question your memory too much you can come to almost any conclusion.

I remembered, forgot, and remembered again the name of Meryl Streep. I thought of her while watching John Turturro in the series Severance because she and John stood above me on the stage of the Yale Repertory Theatre when I was a teenager. I was bathed in a mist of John's spit as he acted out some drama I now entirely forget. It bothered me that I could not immediately remember Streep's name, but it does not bother me that I've forgotten everything about the performance.

I'm a physicist and you might think theoretical physics requires great memory. In some cases it does, but not always. A person tends to remember what's most relevant, and if you work with the important things, then you remember them. In my case, the range of important things is limited, so the more I work with them, the better I remember them.

The challenge is avoiding the confusing alternatives other people put forward. Many ideas claim to be significant but are not. This is made difficult by the preference of the physics community to generally complicate things. Physicists, who are poor writers to begin with, write for a select audience, usually an audience of one. The greatest problem in physics is not remembering what is true, but forgetting all that is not.

The progress I make in remembering technical details reminds me that exercising specific aspects of memory improves memory generally. Although there are aspects of memory that rely on certain areas of your brain, the general task of remembering is a whole-brain process. It's important to keep all of the memory areas working; that means more than just recalling facts.

Physical Ability and Exercise

I have back pain that comes and goes. It's related to a fractured vertebra from a flying accident. This has led me to give my back extra support when bending over, which I've been doing by holding on to a cabinet or table top.

This habit has had an effect that's opposite from what I intended. It's made my back weaker and my back pain worse. The support has prevented me from strengthening the muscles around the old injury.

Most of our movements involve many muscles, and the muscles of our backs are some of the most complex. Unless you have an extensive exercise regime you won't exercise all your back muscles. In particular, I don't normally exercise the muscles that I use when bending over. By not allowing and strengthening my normal movement I was losing function.

I'm stating this as a general rule but there are many exceptions. Movement becomes looser with exercise but damaged joints can be damaged further. And there are slow and fast twitch muscles that respond differently. There are some exercises you will only do intentionally, such as cardiovascular

exercise, but many of the muscles you use regularly can be exercised by doing more conscientiously what you do normally.

To retrain myself I consciously avoid using supports. Instead of holding a table I will just touch it for balance. Even that may provide too much of a crutch. I suspect people who use canes and walkers are similarly losing function. I now consciously avoid using supports, and my back has quickly improved.

Emotional Ability and Exercise

Less commonly discussed, or never discussed, is the relationship between emotion and ability. We don't equate a lack of emotional exercise with a loss of emotional ability, but we should. As people age they gain experience but their environments shrink. They are less physically and emotionally mobile.

A lack of emotional exercise is stultifying. This is why people of different generations keep to themselves. This is partly due to no longer needing to understand people of other generations, and partly a general lack of empathy. This applies to cultures, races, and genders too. If we don't exercise our understanding of other people, we lose the ability to understand them.

We are poor at judging ourselves objectively. That might seem obvious, but we could develop these skills which we use to distinguish between how we're changing and how things around us change.

We need some scale on which to measure ourselves. This scale might be subjective and imperfect, but if you can't measure the change in your attitudes, then how would you know if your sense of self is growing or shrinking?

Anyone who's been in an intimate relationship knows the kinds of stretch and strength they require. And even if you haven't, you should anticipate the emotional skills these kinds of relationships require.

We go through childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, partnership, and family, before entering a parent-of-adult-children phase. Each phase involves emotional rearrangements with new characters and responsibilities. The grown-up children phase is the last phase, unless you consider elderhood to be a phase of its own.

There's not a lot of emotional growth after 50 in the typical Western family. We have no Tribal Councils of Elders, no Shamans or Wise Women, and our culture is less for it. As a result, most people become static and socially irrelevant when they retire. Even those who find meaningful pursuits will experience little emotional novelty, at least not in the West.

If you want to keep growing past 50, you're going to have to create opportunities for emotional exercise. You might become an entrepreneur, or get involved in politics or community. You might get divorced, start another family, or switch professions. It seems like many people do something like this, and perhaps this is the reason. You have to do something if you want to avoid becoming irrelevant.

I started writing in my 50s and returned to physics in my 60s. I'm now 70, still parenting my teenager, playing a role in the lives of my clients, and looking for close connections. With no role models and

little time, I have three choices: become irrelevant, be reckless, or expand actively. The choice is obvious.

Can We Lose Our Ability to Symbolize?

We can segregate intellect from emotion if we want to. We can become heartless bosses, drunken alcoholics, bitter singles, or all three at once. Such people are unhinged.

Thinking symbolically is different from thinking intellectually or emotionally. As a metaphor, consider intellect like a propeller, emotion like a sail, and symbolism like a rudder.

We rarely talk about symbols; they're taken for granted. All ideas held at arm's length have symbolism, but that doesn't mean we know how to use them.

Every symbol orients us according to its own context, according to its own magnetic north. If reality is a map of many dimensions, in each dimension there is a symbol that gives us direction. But how do we use these maps to navigate?

We use symbols to create new ideas, but we need to weigh symbols in relation to one another. We need a way to compare them. Like benchmarks, symbols help us get around when we know how they relate to each other.

Without symbols we have to think literally with everything spelled out, or think emotionally, impulsively, and experientially. Emotional behavior is a reality play of symbols, and so are dreams. Without symbols we behave habitually, and while symbols give meaning they don't provide conclusions.

Do you remember your dreams? Do you explore them? Do you see any point to them? In dreams we think entirely in symbols; their symbols are so overloaded that they generate conflicts. We do our most symbolic thinking in dreams.

In a dream we are fully invested in a symbolic reality that's unsuitable for waking life. You would appear insane if you behaved in waking life as you do in your dreams. It's safer to separate dream thinking from sane thinking and not to confuse the two. It may also be safer to forget your dreams, but your dreaming happens anyway and affects your mind. Yet, as you get older it appears that you dream less.

“One study found that subjects over the age of 60 had an average dream recall rate of less than one dream per week. In stark contrast, 72 percent of middle-aged participants and a remarkable 93 percent of college students reported being able to recall at least five dreams from the previous week.” — **Ashleyquiroz** (2024)

This decline in dreaming with age sounds dramatic, but the reality of it remains in dispute (Mangiaruga 2018).

I suggest we dream less as we age because we change less with age. Without change there are fewer new symbols and less need to reconsider symbols. I suspect that one becomes more adept at exercising one's symbols with practice, and with practice you can become more creative and will generate new thoughts and feelings.

“Overall, according to one 2017 study, recall of and interest in dreams seems tied to openness to experience, a personality trait characterized by a desire to try new things and explore unusual ideas.” — **Stephanie Pappas** (2023)

You have to know how to work with dreams. They are not productive in the normal sense. You will not arrive at conclusions and your thoughts will not move in predictable directions. Dreams create symbolic narratives that give you raw material to think about. (For more details, see my many books on sleep and dreams at <http://www.minstrengthbooks.com>.)

I'm 70 and I dream all the time. I remember my dreams whenever I awake, which is usually three times a day. I recall more dreams, and pay more attention to them, than I ever did. I spend time thinking about the meaning of things, and writing this essay is part of that exercise.

Use or Lose Democracy?

“There is no universally accepted definition of democracy. Some argue the US is a ‘flawed’ or ‘illiberal’ democracy, or a democracy facing substantial ‘autocratization’ – a process that began long before Trump came to power a decade ago but which his presidency has rapidly accelerated... (and) the country's democratic health points are bleak.” — **Lauren Gambino**, journalist (2026)

For the sake of argument, call the US a democracy. It's really a republic, but we speak of it as if it's democratic. At the beginning of the second year of Donald Trump's second term, there are now few democratic forces at work.

If democracy can be strengthened through exercise, what kind of exercise? More voting? A more informed electorate? Better choices?

All the skills we've considered occur continuously, but democracy only demonstrates itself through voting, and voting only happens once every year or two. To apply the notion of “use it or lose it”, democracy should be something we continuously exercise.

Election cycles assume the cycles are sufficiently frequent to address the rate at which things change. It's also assumed that voting offers choices that are sufficient to address the circumstances at hand. If these things don't happen, then are we really exerting democratic guidance?

“In 2024, fewer than two-thirds of eligible voters cast ballots... What appears to be apathy may instead reflect a form of learned helplessness.”— **Bennett Kashdan**

We assume elected officials behave as representatives both after and between elections; we assume they follow the trends of collective opinion. The means to measure this have never been well defined, measured, or demonstrated. Representative democracy is somewhat of a fantasy.

In the US, the two year cycle is seen as the fastest cycle-time that could be absorbed by a voting population. Major policies would change slowly over two years to allow the electorate to develop a consensus. The legislature was to provide interim direction while the judiciary defined foundations and the boundaries of law. In short, plebiscites held more often than every two years would be impractical, so the idea that we have a democracy on a time-scale shorter than two years is simply assumed.

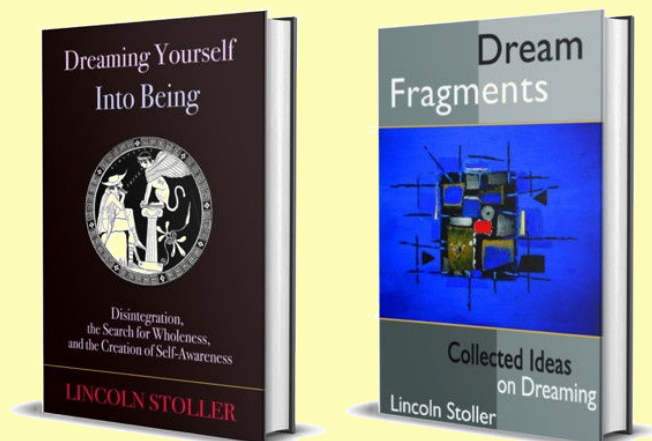
Executives can implement decisions moment by moment. Legislators take weeks if not months to propose, debate, and decide on legislation, and they still lack the power to implement their policies. Judicial actions take many months to generate precedent that remains to be interpreted and tested. Measuring the voice of the populace only happens through voting, which only happens every two to four years.

This looks more like a corporation than a democratic structure, and using it does not make it more democratic. It would be more democratic if the time scales were more equal and designed to be responsive, but no one is suggesting that.

Democracy would be made stronger If we applied it when it was needed, but we don't. The amount of democratic guidance we have is questionable.

It's disconcerting that people don't recognize this. In the US, within this 2-year loophole, things can change undemocratically, yet the average voter does not object. The reason democracy is failing in the US is because it does not exist at this scale in the first place. The problem is not whether it's being exercised, it's whether it's here to be exercised at all.

Two New Books on Dreaming. Support the books. Sponsor the campaign...



<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/mindstrengthbalance/dreaming-yourself-into-being-a-guide-to-personal-dreamwork>

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