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MINDFIRE

BIG IDEAS FOR CURIOUS MINDS



SCOTT BERKUN

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Mindfire: Big Ideas for Curious Minds
By Scott Berkun

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GET READY

WARNING: THREE IMPORTANT THINGS

Welcome to this book. I'm glad you're here. Before the book begins, there are three things you need to know:

1. These essays have been published elsewhere before. Do not panic.
2. If you are so inclined, you can find them for free by poking around on scottberkun.com or elsewhere online. I recommend you don't do that. Here's why.

If you're new to my work, this book serves as a fantastic introduction to a decade of effort. All the essays have been edited, washed, organized, re-organized, washed again, stared at crossly, then pruned, polished and curated for your pleasure. It's the best possible edition of these works.

If you've previously enjoyed my work online, please pay a few bucks in return for the value my free work has provided. Karma is good for you and for me. You'll enjoy rereading past essays, or ones you missed, in this simple, convenient, beautiful book.

3. This book is self-published. I've had an excellent relationship with O'Reilly Media, the publisher of my first three books. But I know I want to publish books in the future that no publisher in its right mind would release. Therefore, I must learn to do it myself. What you have in your hands is a purely independent production.

There. You've been lovingly warned. Now the preface patiently awaits your attention.

PREFACE: PLEASE ACTIVATE YOUR MIND

These essays were made to challenge minds. I'll be thrilled if you like what I say, but if you don't, that's fine, provided I get you thinking.

Most days we avoid big thoughts. We stay busy with small things. Despite our wishes, we know real thinking takes us places we may not be prepared for. You may finish this book with questions you wish I'd answered instead of the ones you found. But that list might be more valuable to you than you think.

As a collection of previously published works, written independently, you should feel free to read them in the fashion you choose. They were selected for this book because they fit the theme of intelligent provocation, and ordered, after much experimentation, in a simple and straightforward way. But if you disagree, your vote trumps mine; skip sections, read the essays in reverse order, have a beer after each paragraph, any means you choose is fine with me.

If you find anything you like here, please join me online at www.scottberkun.com where the quest for wisdom continues.

Scott Berkun

9/20/2011



PART ONE
GASOLINE



THE CULT OF BUSY

When I was young I thought busy people were more important than everyone else. Otherwise, why would they be so busy? I had busy bosses and busy parents, and I assumed they must have important things to do. It seemed an easy way to decide who mattered and who didn't. The busy must matter more and the lazy mattered less. This is the cult of busy: by always doing something, we assume you must be important or successful.

The cult of busy explains the behavior of many people. By appearing busy, others bother them less, and simultaneously believe they're doing well. It's quite a trick.

I believe the opposite to be true. Or nearly the opposite. Here's why: time is the singular measure of life. It's one of the few things you cannot get more of. Knowing how to spend it well is the most important skill you can have.

The person who gets a job done in one hour seems less busy than the guy who can only do it in five. How busy a person seems is not necessarily indicative of the quality of their results. Someone who is better at something might very well seem less busy, simply because they are more effective. Results matter more than the time spent achieving them.

Being in demand can have good and bad causes. Someone with a line of people waiting to talk to them outside their office door seems busy, and therefore important. But somehow the clerk running the slowest supermarket checkout line in the universe isn't praised in the same way; it means they're ineffective. People who are at the center of everything aren't necessarily good at what they do (although they might be). The bar of being busy falls far below the bar of being good.

The compulsion to save time may lead nowhere. If you're always cutting corners to save time, when exactly are you using all that time you've saved? There is this illusion that, someday, you'll get back all that time you've squirreled away in one big chunk. Time doesn't work this way. For most Americans, our time savings goes into watching television. That's where all the time savings we think we get actually goes.

The phrase "I don't have time for" should never be said. We all get the same amount of time every day. If you can't do something, it's not about the quantity of time. It's really about how important the task is to you. I'm sure that if you were having a heart attack, you'd magically find time to go to the hospital. That time would come from something else you'd planned to do, but now seems less important. This is how time works all the time. What people really mean when they say "I don't have time" is that this particular thing is not important enough to earn their time. It's a polite way to tell people they're not *worthy*.

This means that people who are always busy are time poor. They have a time shortage. They have time debt. They are either trying to do too much, or they aren't doing what they're doing very well. They are failing to be effective with their time, or they don't know what they're trying to effect, so they scramble at trying to optimize for everything, which leads to optimizing nothing.

People who truly have control over time always have some in their pocket to give to someone in need. A sense of priorities drives their use of time and it can shift away from the ordinary work that's easy to justify, in favor of the more ethereal, deeper things that are harder to justify. They protect their time from trivia and idiocy; these people are time rich. They provide themselves with a surplus of time. They might seem to idle, or relax more often than the rest, but that just might be a sign of their mastery, not their incompetence.

I deliberately try not to fill my calendar. I choose not to say yes to everything. Doing so would make me too busy and less effective at achieving my goals. I always want to have some margin of time in reserve, time I'm free to spend in any way I choose, including doing almost nothing at all. I'm free to take detours. I'm open to serendipity. Some of the best thinkers throughout history had some of their best thoughts while going for walks, playing cards with friends—little things that aren't considered the hallmarks of busy people. It's the ability to pause, to reflect, and relax, to let the mind wander, that's perhaps the true sign of time mastery. When a mind returns it is sharper, more efficient, and perhaps most important, calmer than before.



WANTS VS BELIEFS

A funny thing about the human mind is it tends to believe what it wants to believe. We allow what we want to have happen distort our reasoning on how likely it is to happen, so we obsess about things that scare us, even if they are unlikely. We worry about snakes, or getting on airplanes, when the real threats to longevity are cheeseburgers, chocolate shakes and long hours lounging on the couch.

A telling example is how when we think about the future, we want it to be grand. We imagine dramatic positive changes like personal jetpacks and transporter beams, ignoring how every novel and science fiction film of the last 50 years failed to capture the essence of what changes over time and what does not. Simply wanting a cleaner, smarter world for our children doesn't have any impact on how likely it is to happen.

I believe the future, in many ways, will be boring. Much of daily life will be the same as it is now. I don't want this to be the case, but I believe it in spite of my wantings. When I tell people this, they are disappointed. Because I've written books about innovation they expect I'll have great faith in how amazing life will be in the decades to come. This is wrong. I'd love new and better things to happen, but I don't let that influence what I

think is likely.

One reason I believe this is the history of ideas. The difference between ideas that change the world, and those that remain on the drawing board, includes large quantities of chance and circumstance. There's no grand reason we have 12 months in a year instead of 15, or 60 seconds in a minute instead of 100. They're just numbers someone made up. Politics, self-interest and conflicting beliefs influence all important decisions made today, just as they did in the past and will in the future. Why the U.S. is one of a handful of countries in the world that doesn't use the metric system has more to do with circumstance than good reason.

Ideas like the golden rule, or pay it forward, may never become popular. Not because people don't want them to be adopted, but because wanting something to be popular can have little bearing on how popular it becomes. And as much as we might want the future to be different in this regard, it's insufficient for believing it will happen.

A kind of wisdom rises when we strip away what we want or don't want from our view of the world. Then we're free to see things more clearly. There are three ways to do this:

- Acknowledge something you hope doesn't happen will happen anyway (death)
- Want something even if it's improbable (developing superpowers as you age)
- Be open to data that disproves the theory you want.

Take a moment to list your beliefs. If you're careful, you'll discover wants lurking inside. It's good to want things and fight for them, but misplaced belief is not the way to wisdom.



HOW TO BE A FREE THINKER

In the same way a man can be chained to an oak tree, a mind can be chained to an assumption, a religion, or any idea. But the idea, like the tree, should not be blamed. It is inanimate and is good or bad only in how it is used. Instead it's the chain that must be questioned, and the motivations of the people using them. Each mind is unique for its infinite ideas and can be used to think about anything in a thousand ways. Any act that confines a mind to a singular way of thinking cannot be good. And yet all communities, from families, to schools, to gangs, have ideas members are expected to adopt without question. This doesn't make them evil, but it doesn't make them liberators either.

Like the rules to a new board game, we absorb these ideas with our minds at half-power, since our goal is to learn and follow. Traditional education mostly teaches us to copy, to memorize, and apply other people's theories. What does this train us for other than performing these thoughtless behaviors throughout our lives?

And the things that are considered taboo in our societies, acts

that violate traditions, are banned without parents, teachers or leaders understanding why. Why is being seen in underwear embarrassing, but in a bathing suit is not? Why are nipples and flesh forbidden to see, when everyone has them? Why are alcohol, nicotine and Prozac legal, but marijuana and Absinthe criminal? It's un-free thinking, this accepting of an idea simply because someone said so. If an idea is good, it will thrive in fair debate and discussion, and if it's weak, it will wither away.

Wisdom demands two questions: Why do we believe what we believe? How do we know what we know? They should be stamped on every schoolbook and posted in every meeting place and home to encourage independent thought. It should be tattooed on the forehead of anyone arrogant enough to dictate orders for others to follow.

When a child asks "why," to every answer, the game often ends with the parent embarrassing the child: "Stop being silly," they say. But they are hiding their own embarrassment. It's harder for them to say "I don't know" despite its truth. Why not be proud of the child's inquisitive mind and hope they ask questions their entire lives? We all know less than we think, and learning it starts by admitting ignorance, and asking more questions, not fewer.

Questions help us discover the ideas that bind us: chains forced upon us as children, before we found the will to refuse and question. Chains we used to bound ourselves, to fit in at school, at work, or with friends. Free thinkers forever seek to acknowledge, understand and disprove their assumptions. They hunger to discover better ideas, wiser opinions, and more worthy faiths. They are willing to abandon ideas they've held dearly, seeking when they learn an important belief has been held for the wrong reasons.

When I first ate Ethiopian food, I asked three times "Are you sure it's ok to eat with my hands?"

It didn't occur to me that a) they're *my* hands, b) it's *my* mouth, and c) I'm paying for the food. Shouldn't I do what I please? For all of America's freedoms, we're still under the tyranny of silverware. When I went to India, I was scolded for eating with my left hand. At a fancy French restaurant, I got dirty looks for eating with the wrong fork. Travel makes clear how arbitrary the rules we defend are. We often have trivial reasons for being offended or judging others.

The first challenge: Be wrong. It's ok.

Brace yourself: you're wrong—much of the time. I'm wrong too and some of this essay will be wrong (except for this sentence). Even if you're brilliant, successful, happy and loved, you're wrong and ignorant more than you realize. It's not your fault. None of our theories are entirely true. This is good. If we had all the answers, progress would be impossible. Look back 100, 50, or even 5 years. Consider the smartest people of those times: weren't they misguided, compared to what we know now? Governments, religions, cultures and traditions all change, despite what they say. Each evolves. Traditions do have value, but ask yourself: who decides what to keep and what to toss? Why did they make these decisions? There are stories of free-thinking and change hiding in every tradition.

What beliefs have you held and discarded? If you have kept the same beliefs and theories your entire life, then you haven't been paying attention. To be wiser, smarter, and more experienced than you were a decade ago means you've changed. It's good to think differently about life than you did before; it's a sign future progress is possible. If you pride yourself on rigid consistency, you bury intelligence under pretense. Only when you're free from allegiance to a specific idea, and put faith in your ability to learn, can progress happen.

The second challenge: other people

Children survive by conformity. By recognizing adult behavior

and adjusting to it, they survive. Babies quickly learn that crying bring food and smiles get attention. We're designed for survival not freedom. Consider Buddha's excellent advice:

“Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who has said it, even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your reason and your own common sense.”

This is the opposite of what adults teach children: teachers test and grade them on their ability to memorize answers. At what point must we teach our children to think for themselves? There are no required college courses called “undoing the damage of the last 18 years of your life” or “how to escape the evil tyranny of your dogmatic education.” We're on our own to figure out what freedom means.

Freedom grows best in diversity. Absorb ideas. Compare them. Question them. Challenge them. If you share ideas with only those who agree with your philosophies, you're just sharpening your prejudices. Sharpening prejudices can be fun, but it's not thinking, free or otherwise. Finding safe places to share different ideas is hard to find, so start looking now.

The third challenge: be alone

Many of history's wisest men retreated from their routines for a time. Jesus, Buddha, Moses, and Muhammad all freed themselves from the conventions and commitments of normal life. Only then were they able to discover, to transform, learn and understand themselves in ways that changed the world. They had to break chains and bonds to think freely. Only with new perspective and priorities, did they choose to return. I doubt this choice was popular among those who knew them. Their long absences bothered their children, friends, landlords, and tennis partners.

They say the fish is the last to see the water. But what if the fish

could step out of the tank now and then? You're not a fish: you can take that step whenever you like.

When was the last time you were free from others? Can you name the last day you spent alone with your thoughts? Travel, meditation, long baths, a run in the woods—they're all ways to experience the solitude we need to think freely, and to understand ourselves for who we really are. Our heart of hearts, our truest, freest voice, is always talking, but it's timid. We can't hear it over the chatter of everyday life. Make quiet time to learn how to hear it. We're still free to ignore that voice, but only after we have tried to listen. Being free has never been easy, which explains why so few, despite what they say, truly are.



HOW TO DETECT BULLSHIT

Everyone lies: it's just a question of how, when, and why. From the relationship-saving, "you look thin in those pants," to the improbable, "your table will be ready in five minutes," truth manipulation is part of the human condition. Accept it now.

As irrational beings who find it hard to accept tough truths, our deceptions protect us from each other and ourselves. Deceptions help avoid unnecessary conflicts, hiding the confusion of our psychologies from those who don't care. White lies are the spackle of civilization, tucked into the dirty corners our necessary but inflexible idealisms create.

But lies, serious lies, destroy trust, the binding force in all relationships. Bullshit (BS) is a particularly troublesome kind of lie. Bullshit involves unnecessary deceptions, in the gray area between polite white lies and malicious fabrications. The Bullshitters, ignorant of facts, invent a story to protect themselves. They don't mean any harm, although collateral damage often happens. BS can be hard to detect, so this is a crash course in BS detection. But be warned: there are several bits of BS in this essay. You'll have to find them for yourself.

Why people bullshit: a primer

The Western canon's first lie comes from the Old Testament.¹ To recap the book of Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge, as pretty as it is, or they'll die. God wanders off to do some unexplained godlike things, as gods are prone to do. Meanwhile, the oh-so-tempting tree is out for all to see, without a pack of divine pitbulls or angelic electrified fences to guard it. Satan slinks by and convinces Eve that the fruit of the tree is good: so she and Adam have a snack. God returns instantly and scolds Adam—who blames Eve which results in everyone, snakes, people and all, getting thrown out of Eden forever.

Here, nearly everyone lied. God was deceptively ambiguous, a kind of lie, in the description of the fruit. The fruit wasn't fatal in any sense Adam could understand. If we were Adam, only a few moments old and ignorant of everything, when God mentioned "death" we'd either have no idea what God meant, or would assume the literal kind. Satan misrepresents the fruit's power, and Adam approximates a lie by pointing a wimpy finger at Eve. It's a litany of deception and a cautionary tale: in a book where everyone lies in the first pages, is it a surprise how the rest plays out?

People lie for three reasons. The first is to protect themselves. They wish to protect something they need, such as a concept they cherish, or to prevent something they fear, like confrontation. There is a clear psychological need motivating every lie. A well known fib, "the dog ate my homework," fits this model. Desperate not to be caught, children's imaginations conceive amazing improbabilities: fires, plagues, revolutions, curses and illnesses. They reinvent the laws of physics and

¹ One popular interpretation of Genesis 2:17 is that God meant "you will be mortal" when God said "you will surely die," so it's not a lie. My view is how could Adam know what he meant at the time? Even if that's what he meant, I find it hard to believe anyone would interpret it that way.

the space-time continuum on fateful mornings when children find themselves at school, sans-homework. It's an emotional experience, this need to BS: logically speaking, the stress of inventing and maintaining a lie is harder than just telling the truth. Yet we don't.

The second reason people lie? Sometimes it works. It's a gamble, but when we sneak one by, wow. Did you lie to your parents about girls, boys, drugs, grades, or where you were until two a.m.? I sure did and still do. My parents still think I'm a famous painter / doctor in London. (Shhhhh.) My best friend still believes his high school girlfriend and I didn't get it on every time I borrowed his car.² Even my ever faithful dog Butch used to lie, in his way. He'd liberate trash from all our garbage cans, then hide in his bed, hoping his distance from the Jackson Pollock-esque refuse mess in my kitchen signified innocence.

The third reason we lie? We want others to see us as better than we see ourselves. Sadly, comically, we believe we're alone in this temptation, and the shame it brings. Everyone has weak moments when fear and greed melt our brains tempting us to say the lies we wish were true. The deepest honesty is from those willing to admit to their lies and own the consequences. Not the pretense of the saints, who pretend, incomprehensibly, inhumanly, to never even have those urges at all. But enough philosophy: let's get to detection.

Bullshit detection: how do you know what you know?

The first rule? Expect BS. Fire detectors expect a fire at any moment: they're not optimists. To detect bullshit, you have to question everything you hear. Socrates, the father of Western wisdom, expected ignorance. Like Socrates, assume people,

² This is, of course, complete bullshit. I have never lied to anyone. Ever.

yourself included, are unaware of their ignorance. You must probe intelligently, and compassionately, to sort out the difference.

When someone force feeds you an idea, an argument or an obscure reference, ask the question: “How do you know what you know?” Challenging claims illuminates ignorance. It instantly diminishes the force of an opinion based in bullshit. Here are some examples:

- “The project will take five weeks.” How do you know this? What might go wrong that you haven’t accounted for? Would you bet \$10,000 on your claim? \$100,000?
- “Our design is groundbreaking.” Really? Where is that ground? And who, besides the designers/investors, has this opinion?
- “Studies show that liars’ pants are flame resistant.” What studies? Who ran them and why? Did you actually read the study or a two sentence summary? Are there any studies that make the opposite claim?

Notice your subject often can’t answer quickly when you ask: “How do you know what you know?” Even credible thinkers need time to establish their logic and separate assumptions from facts.

Answers such as: “this is purely my opinion” or “it’s a guess—we have no data,” are fine, but those claims are weak—far weaker than most people make, especially if they’re making stuff up. Identifying opinion and speculation counts as progress in the war against deception.

Bullshit detection: what is the counter argument?

A well-considered argument must involve alternate positions,

so ask for them. Bullshitters don't do research, they make things up. A counterargument forces them to defend their position or end the discussion to conduct due diligence. Similar questions include: Who else shares this opinion? What are your concerns and how will they be addressed? What would have to happen for you to have a different (opposite) opinion?

Time and pressure

Good thoughts hold together. A solid concept maintains its shape no matter how much you poke, probe, test, and examine it. But bullshit is all surface. Much like a magician's bouquet, it's pretty as it flashes before your eyes, but you know it's fake when it lands in your hands. Bullshitters know this and crave urgency: they resist reviews, breaks, consultations, or sleeping on a decision before it's made.

Use time as an ally. Never make big decisions under duress. Ask to withhold judgment for a day, and watch the response. Invite experts to help make decisions to add intellectual pressure. Hire them if necessary: the \$500 lawyer/accountant/consultant fee is bullshit insurance. These habits create inhospitable environments for bullshit.

Confidence in reduction

Jargon and obfuscation hide huge quantities of bullshit. Inflated language intimidates others and is always a tactic to make people feel stupid. If you don't understand something, it's their fault, not yours. Cling to your doubts longer than the bullshitter can maintain their charade.

For example:

“Our dynamic flow capacity matrix has unprecedented downtime resistance protocols.”

If you don't understand, err on your own side. Don't assume you're missing something: assume they haven't communicated

clearly. They might be hiding something, or maybe they don't know what they're talking about. Wise responses include:

- I refuse to accept this proposal until I, or someone I trust, fully understands it.
- Explain this in simpler terms I can understand (repeat if necessary).
- Break this into pieces you can verify, prove, compare, or demonstrate for me.

Are you trying to say, “our network server has a backup power supply?”, If so, can you speak plainly next time?

Assignment of trust

The fourth bullshit-detection tool is to assign trust carefully. Never agree to more than what your trust allows. Who cares how confident they are? The question is: how confident are you? Divide requests, projects or commitments into pieces so people can earn your trust one step at a time. And trust can be delegated. I don't need to trust you if you've earned the trust of people I trust. Nothing defuses BS faster than communities that help each other eliminate BS. Great teams and families help each other find truth, both in others and themselves, as sometimes the real deceptions we need to fear are our own.



SHOULD YOU BE POPULAR OR GOOD?

One of the grand confusions of life is between what is popular and what is good. Often people confuse popularity with goodness, and it's a problem. When we consider the top ten books or movies of the year, we often consider which ones were most popular, but popularity doesn't mean they were necessarily the best. Being popular means appealing to everyone, which demands safe, predictable choices. A good idea scares some people, and makes others uncomfortable, which works against its popularity.

For example, I knew a guy in high school who was very popular, but I don't think anyone would say he was good at anything. He was nice, but bland. I knew another guy in high school who was good at lots of things, but for some reason, he wasn't popular. He spoke his mind and didn't always try to please everyone. I suspect if these two guys ever met, the universe would have exploded. Good thing that didn't happen.

Many creative people are tempted to strive for popularity. They make, do, and say things others like, in the hopes of pleasing them. This motivation is nice. And sometimes the end result is

good. But mediocrity is often the result of trying hard to please others. The internal goodness detector of those creative people is disappointed with what they make. Popularity often comes at a price: bland, predictable, and meaningless, instead of interesting, surprising, and meaningful.

And then there are the *artistes*, the people who develop their own sense of what they think is good and insist on striving for it, no matter what anyone says. Provided they don't expect anyone else to care, these people are quite interesting. Although, there is little worse in the world than an *artiste* who insists on telling you how stupid you are for not seeing their brilliance.

In history, it's interesting how characters like van Gogh, Michelangelo, and Bukowski balanced the popular vs. good challenge. Most famous artists accepted commissions, and in some cases those commissions resulted in their most famous work. For example, da Vinci and Michelangelo had many clients and lived on commission income. If you wonder why much of what you see in museums are portraits of old wealthy people, it's because they're the only ones who could afford to pay for paintings. In other cases, like Bukowski, Henry Miller, and Van Gogh, they rarely compromised, sometimes to their own detriment.

What most creative people want is to be good *and* popular. They want to achieve their own sense of goodness, while at the same time pleasing others.. It's a tightrope. Especially once they've earned some popularity, people tend to want more of the same. And that rarely aligns with a creative person's progressive sense of goodness. So from the creator's standpoint, a few big popular victories early on can put handcuffs on how good they can ever be while still being popular. My first book was on project management, and I suspect for some people, no matter how many books I write on other things, I'll always be the project management guy. And that's ok. It's better than not being

popular for anything good at all. I know I want to be popular enough to succeed, but I also expect to fail occasionally if I'm following my own compass for what is good.

How do you balance your sense of good vs. your sense of popular? Do you find clear places where they are in conflict (for example, your client's sense of good vs. your own)? How do you balance this with staying sane? Do you divide your creative energy into "work creative" and "personal creative," giving yourself a safe place to be an artist? Or do you still think popular and good are always the same?

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the free preview.

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