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RULES OF **ASCENDANCY**





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1 WHAT IT MEANS TO ASCEND

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. Average is good. It's not a bad thing to be average. It won't ruin you and you can have a good life. Elite is great. You can do things few do and achieve a lot, including a place in history.

Ascendancy is something else altogether. Ascendant people are better than great, whether or not the world knows it.

Average people don't try to change the world. Elite people try to be recognized for changing the world. Ascendant people work every single day to become a superior version of themselves and inevitably change the world as a result.

Average seeks safety, primarily motivated by pain avoidance. Elite seeks social esteem, primarily motivated by prestige and external validation. Ascendant seeks something no one else can give; the self-actualization and restless contentment of a life lived fully alive and in pursuit of whatever their 'it' is.

The point is not to condemn being average or elite, but to describe three different approaches to a variety of situations in hope that we can learn what it takes to ascend when and where we are willing. In reality, no one is ever fully average, elite, or ascendant. We're more or less these categories in different areas of life.

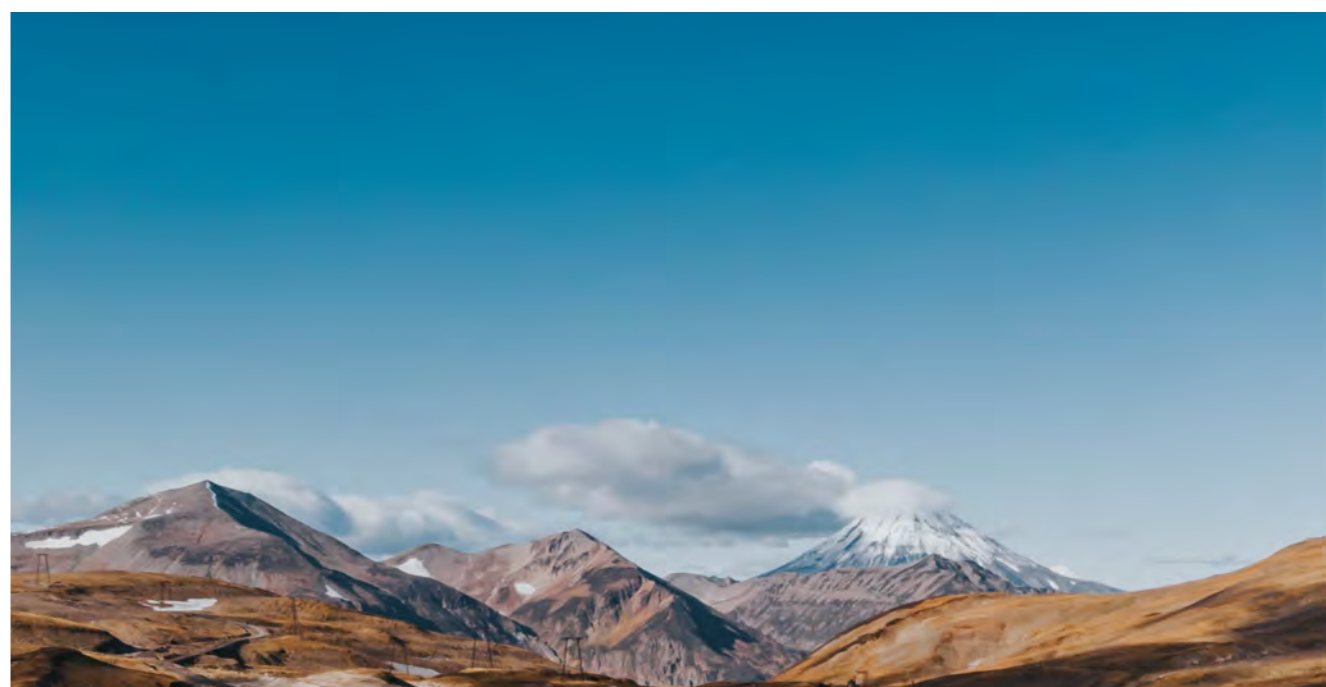
You may be ascendant in your business, hobby, fitness, or family life while being average or elite in other areas.

Striving for ascendancy in more areas of life is a ceaseless and difficult journey.

I settle for average in a number of areas. I love music, but I haven't ever mustered the will to go beyond average. I play it safe, keep music to myself, and avoid embarrassment or failure. I find myself fighting the elite plateau in many things – writing included – where a certain type of success or praise begins to draw me away from genuine growth and progress. The formula for likes and clicks and fans is a powerful draw for any creator.

Ascent is hard. Really hard.

It's probably easier to go from average to ascendant than it is to go from elite to ascendant. Average and elite both share characteristics with ascendancy, but the shared characteristics of average and ascendant are in some ways more fundamental. Elite and ascendant share drive, hard work, and risk-taking. Average and ascendant share unpretentiousness, inward focus, and a higher degree of self-awareness.



More importantly, elite is valuable and rare, and therefore the move to ascendancy is more costly. Prestige is very hard to give up. Good reputations can be both a propellant and a tether. This is what Jesus meant when he talked about a rich man reaching the kingdom of God being harder than a camel passing through the eye of a needle. He didn't mean riches were bad, nor did he say it was impossible. The lesson was simple: when you have more to lose, you'll have a harder time ascending.

I'll explore the average, elite, and ascendant approaches to a number of situations. Most are from personal observation of people through the Praxis program and my own life experiences. There is a truly unique approach to life that only the rarest remnant – the best of the best, better than great – have. That's what I wish to capture, describe, and constantly move towards.

It's up to you if and when you wish to pursue ascendancy for yourself. The cost is great, but the reward is greater.

**“THE COST IS
GREAT, BUT THE
REWARD IS
GREATER.”**



2 LEARN TO THE TASK, NOT THE TEST

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach learning.

Pain, prestige, or purpose?

Average people learn what they need to avoid pain. Elite people learn what they need to get the grade, ace the test, win the award, gain certification, impress people, and obtain honors. Ascendant people don't care about accolades or awards or tests or stickers or stars. They learn exactly what's needed to solve a problem that matters to them, exactly when it's needed. No more, no less. No sooner, no later.

If you want to be average, avoid pain and learn like a lab rat. If you want to be elite, bulk up on tons of just-in-case knowledge so you'll never look dumb and you can chase prestige and external validation. If you want to be ascendant – the best of the best creators, dreamers, doers, and rebels – find meaningful challenges and projects, pursue them, and learn what you need to complete them.

Task vs. tests

Mitchell Earl built a horrible website. He got an 'A' for it.

The website sucked because Mitchell didn't particularly want or need a website at the time. It also sucked for the same reasons it helped him ace the computer class in which he built it. He spent the semester on it. It met all of the specific course requirements – hyperlinks, number of pages, content, layout – and followed the recommended steps. It was meant to be a digital resume of sorts, but it was ugly and useless in the real world. In fact, Mitchell didn't use it after the class, as it would have lowered rather than raised his professional value.

Oh, and he didn't remember any of the techniques he used to build the site once the class was over.

A few years later Mitchell was in Praxis and eager to improve his writing, build an audience, signal his value, and discover meaningful work for his entrepreneurial tendencies. He wanted a good website. So he built one in a few weeks. He took some tips from the Praxis community, ignored others, picked up a few new skills via





YouTube, and put together a great site. To this day he can tell you how to integrate WordPress with opt-in forms, customize themes, improve SEO, get hosting setup, and a lot more. (He used those skills to build a new website for his business partner, where he now works.)

When he had a specific task that was meaningful to him based on his own desires, Mitchell built a vastly superior product in far less time and retained specific skills that he had to pick up to do it. He only learned exactly what the task demanded, not what the test required. This made the learning faster, more intense, more fun, and more useful.

Just-in-time vs. just-in-case

My son is really into video games, art, design, and entertainment media. He's a creator. Having learned myself the slow, hard way how important marketing and sales skills are to creators, I'm always trying to impart bits of wisdom to him. He might need it when he decides to sell his creations some day!

He ignores me.

There's nothing in his daily experience that demands the advice I supply. It's just an old guy giving him insight without any current context. That's exactly how I felt in college marketing classes. There were all these words and charts and concepts and case studies that really didn't mean anything for me. Sure, someday when I'm trying to promote a product, "Target Market" will be important. Yet when that day actually came, the classroom cramming did nothing for me anyway. I aced my classes but had to learn from scratch how to market when I needed it to survive. Any sooner and the info was worse than useless. I developed a bias against what would later be important concepts because I despised being forced to chase grades by memorizing stuff that didn't help me achieve my goals.

When it matters, once is enough

The entire modern education apparatus is built on just-in-case learning. Better know how to multiply fractions, just in case you find yourself tasked with preparing a report on some data someday. Better know when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, just in case...well I'm not really sure there even is a case for that one unless you want to be a guest on Jeopardy. Otherwise Google it.

I talked to a bright young guy (an executive at a growing startup) who sent me a financial report to proof a few months ago. I noticed a mistake. He calculated the percentage increase from month to month incorrectly. I pointed it out and sent a four-step explanation I found on Google, he laughed about forgetting, said thanks, fixed it and never had that problem again.

Yet how many hours had he been forced to sit in a classroom doing a unit on percentages? And for what? When he needed the knowledge – prior to an important board meeting – he found it fast.

Oh, and my son learned more about marketing in one evening of playing Mario Maker than I did from all those classes.

Real learning is hard but sneaky

I played a lot of LEGO as a kid. My kids do now. It's a pastime full of pain, anguish, and maniacal, "Just one more minute I'm almost done"'s late into the night.

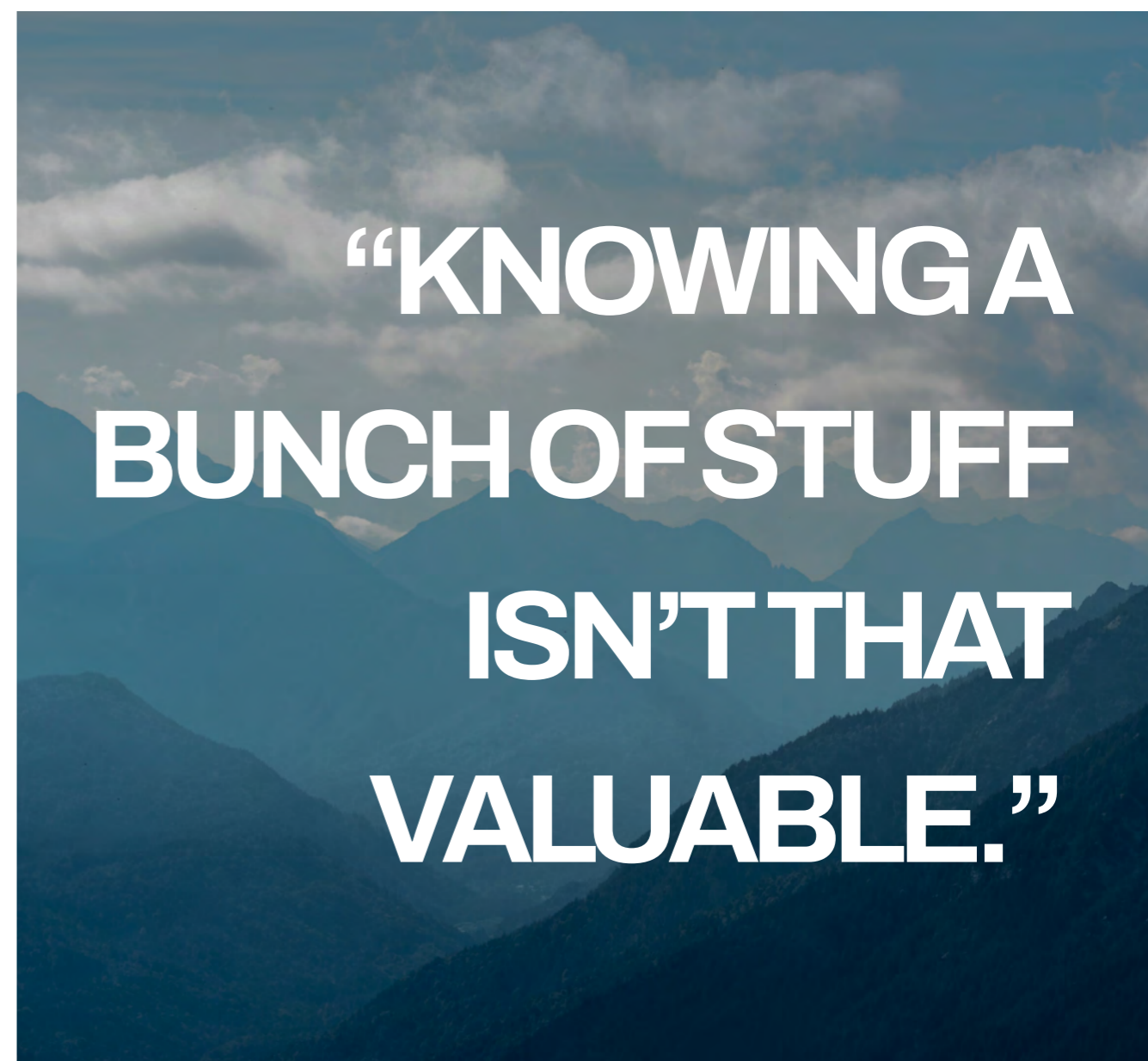
When you have a vision for a build and you must – must – find a way to solve it with imperfect pieces, your brain is stretched and your creativity awakened. It's hard work that can even take a physical toll (ever bent over digging through a bin of plastic blocks for an hour?). It's frustrating. But it's deeply meaningful and fun. You're on nobody else's timeline. If I asked my kids if they were learning anything while playing they would laugh.

Yet I'm totally convinced, just like me, they're learning more from LEGO than they would if I made them do algebra instead.

Real learning happens when you're absorbed in solving a real problem, one that matters to you. It took a complete abandonment of lessons and a deep personal interest in Calvin & Hobbes for my son to learn to read. The same pattern can be spotted in all real learning.

Knowledge is overrated

Knowing a bunch of stuff isn't that valuable. Knowing what you need to know to solve a problem, reach a goal, or become a better version of yourself is hugely valuable. Often this requires first figuring out what's non-essential and ignoring it. Conscious ignorance is hugely valuable. What you don't waste time or energy worrying about — what you don't memorize just for prestige or fear of embarrassment — are what determine how much room you have left to learn what does matter. (This is also why I advocate completely ignoring the news.)

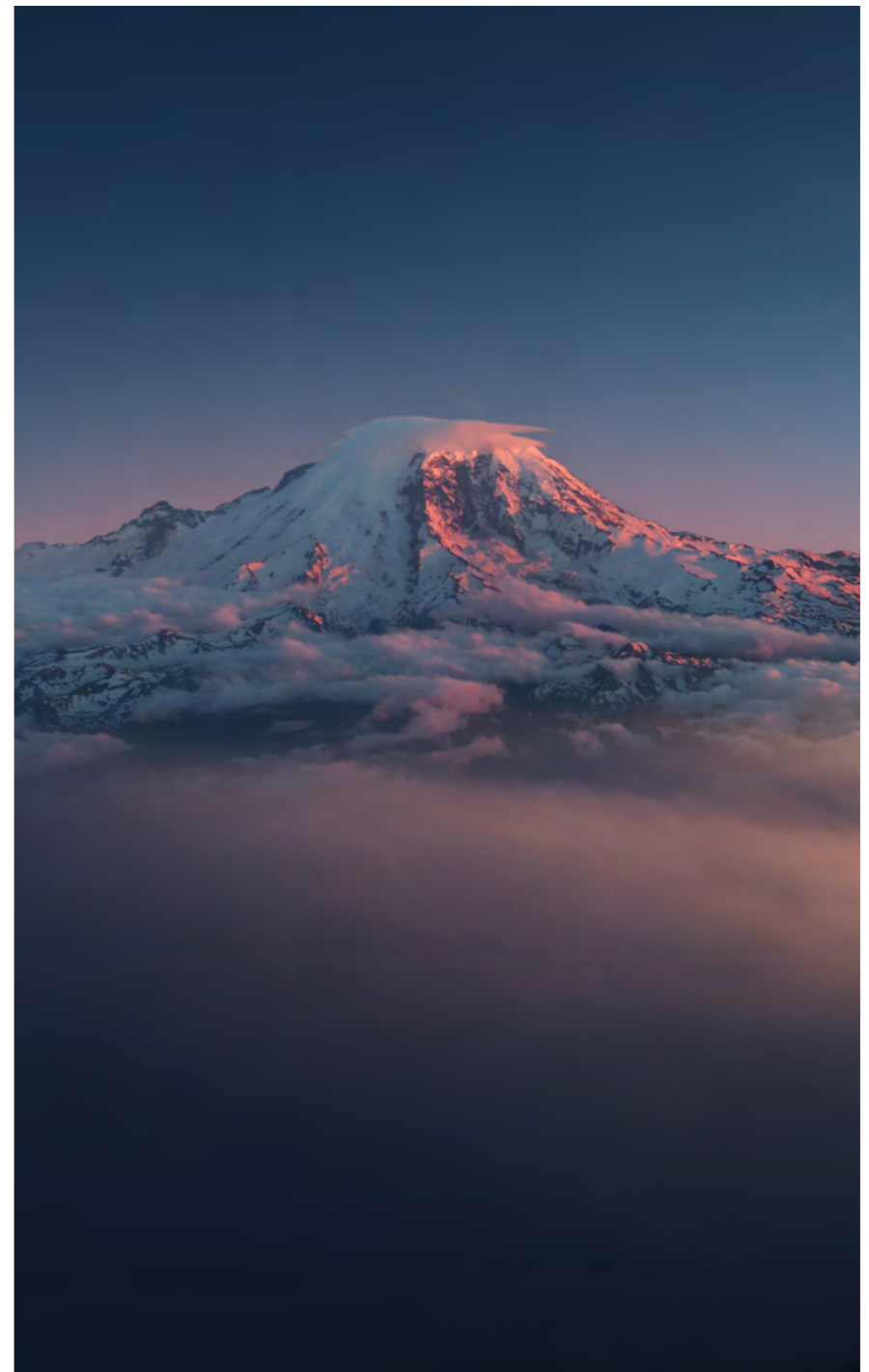


Don't be prepared, be hungry

It's not about what you know, or even who you know. It's about what will improve your life, *how to learn it, how much* of it to learn, and *when*.

Goals and dreams are better than grades and information. Meaningful tasks and challenges are better than memorized facts and textbooks. Go do some cool stuff and go be what you want to be. When you need to learn to take the next step, you will. And it will be better than any arbitrary data-cram for any class.

Average people can learn the basics when shoved. Elite people can learn that plus a bunch of other stuff that's meaningful to others, not them. Ascendant people discover who they are, who they want to be, and learn what it takes to close the gap between the two.



3 KNOW WHEN TO PLAY THE GAME

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach games.

What are games?

Games are everywhere. Every social setting and institution is made of games, mostly unwritten, that govern success and failure within. Games include things like dress codes, insider lingo, lunch break norms, name dropping, and other patterns of behavior and language.

Average games

Average people play games when opting out is painful. They comply with rules and norms to avoid shame, material loss, or physical discomfort. They view games as a necessary evil. They don't see the opportunity presented by learning and winning certain games, only the cost of failing to do so.

They learn and play the games necessary for a life they can tolerate and opt out of those that require too much

work and have little cost of ignoring (except, of course, opportunity cost, which average people are never very aware of). Average people don't take ownership of the games they play, but instead believe they don't have a choice. They think they have to play the games they play. Even when they opt-out, they often claim they aren't free to play and disqualify themselves from the start.

Average people mock and scorn the games they don't play. The best way to defend against feeling lazy or insufficient is to claim all the games you don't play are pompous or ridiculous.

Of course they are right much of the time. Many games are pompous and ridiculous. Many games aren't worth playing. But not because, as average people believe, they don't have enough downside, but because they don't have enough upside.

Elite and ascendant games

At first glance it can be hard to distinguish the way that elite and ascendant people play games. But the difference could not be more stark.

Ascendant people opt out of games when they calculate that the cost of playing is more than the gains from winning. They assess the gains and losses at stake and pick only games that get them what they want at the right price. They harbor neither bitterness nor excitement at the existence of games or the prospect of winning. There is always something beyond the game that they want, and their eyes are fixed on it.

Elite people never opt out of games. They can't. They must win every game they meet. Moths to a flame, introduce a new game to an elite individual and they will immediately re-orient their life and begin studying how to play and be recognized as a superior player. They have nothing that motivates deeper than status within games.

When ascendant people play games they do it with self-awareness. They know it's a game and they know they are choosing to play. They bring a sense of identity to the game, and playing does not involve a change in who they are, only changes in emphasis. In certain social circles, certain aspects of their identity will be more rewarded than others, and certain ways of describing the world. Ascendant individuals choose to bring to the fore and let fade to the back whatever aspects are necessary to win worthwhile games without losing themselves. The language and behavior patterns adopted in ascendant gameplay are not affectations, but regulations of the flow of information. Friends of an ascendant person hardly notice when new games are being played, because they see the same person simply navigating new situations.

Elite gameplay may look the same at a glance. Like ascendant people, they first assess and learn what is rewarded in the domain of the game. They are a quick study, often learning rules faster than average and ascendant people.

When elites play games they do so without self-awareness. They know they must do things to win, but they do not recognize the game as a game, but as the new Truth. When they discover things rewarded in gameplay, they become those things, rewriting their



entire personal history in mere moments. These are not new terms and habits, but everlasting realities. They are not adapting and behaving in new ways, they have always and everywhere been like this. This is the narrative immediately adopted, and they believe it.

Because status within games is the deepest motivating factor for elite individuals, who they are at the core changes with each new game. It is easy to spot elite gameplay when you know what to look for. Think of the people who, upon each new book they read, use new terms they've never used before and adopt new beliefs and habits quickly and to the extreme, and do so with an air of "I've always been like this." They fail to see how transparent it is to others that they have, overnight, put on a new skin. Friends of elite individuals always know when a new game is being played, because a completely new person materializes.

Elite personal narratives are not unlike the history in Orwell's *1984*. It's not enough to say "We are now at war with Eurasia". Elites must rewrite the story from the beginning; "We have always been at war with Eurasia." Saving face is key, and elites are in perpetual fear of being revealed as impostors or frauds. They worry they'll lose status if people know they are new to the game, so they play as if it is and always has been who they are. No one believes it but them.

Elites win games, and sometimes important games. They get the status they seek but miss the chance to define success for themselves.

4 DRAMA IS THE ENEMY OF PROGRESS

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach drama.

Average drama

Average people love drama. It's a distraction from the boredom of daily life. Average people enjoy drama in a self-aware way. It's a known indulgence; an escape from weightier things that take too much effort.

Average drama takes the form of Judge Judy, or People Magazine, sports and celebrity gossip, and a voyeuristic pleasure in the domestic disputes of those around them. Average people like to trump up tough situations and turn them into drama as a way to make life seem more epic and interesting.

Elite drama

Elite people have an equal, if not greater appetite for drama than average people. But it's masked by pomp and circumstance. Elite drama is a method of constant movement and benchmarking along the social hierarchy they so long to climb. Elite drama is not an escape, it has a purpose. It's an integral part of elite life. Its purpose is to undermine or posture so that other's dramatic failings make you look better by comparison.

Elite drama takes the form of complex office politics,

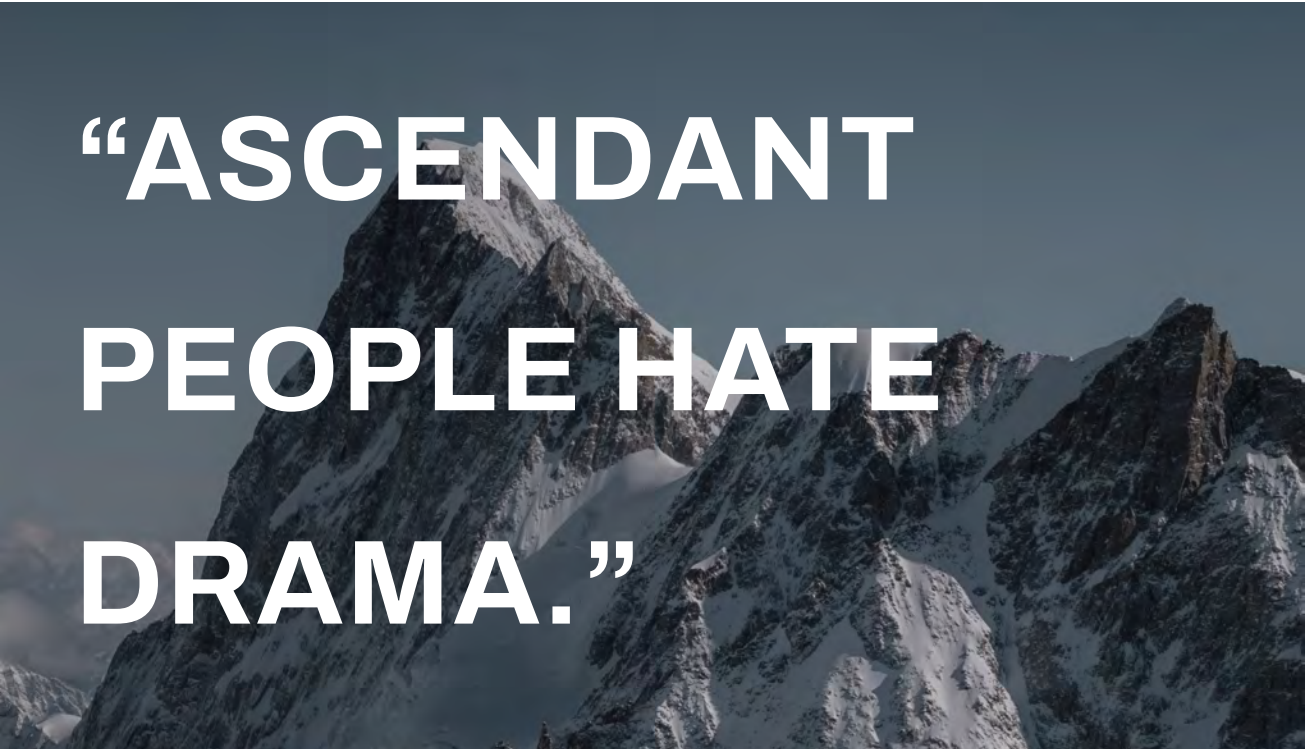
infighting and gossip in churches or civic organizations, and of course governments and committees. It is mostly unspoken. It's not acknowledged or recognized as drama, but painted as valuable information. "I think Sheila is angling for John's job", or, "I'm concerned that James is treating Hannah differently because they're having an affair".

Elite drama is imagined, created, provoked, and discussed not to materially change facts and arrive at solutions, but to create feelings, schisms, and unspoken alliances. It seeks perpetuation, not resolution. It's used as a way to ask for things an elite would be too polite/dishonest/insecure to ask for directly. Rather than, "I want you to stop liking this person so much and start liking me more", it's, "Sure, they're good at their job, but I wonder if other people on the team really trust them..." Elite drama-talk is pregnant with implication but almost devoid of provable, actionable fact.

Elites end up spending considerable energy and resource on drama, which limits their ability to become better versions of themselves. Hard work and focus are the most direct route to accomplishing anything, but in effort to shortcut the system, elite people pursue endless dramatic narratives and angling in effort to move up by jockeying, rather than through direct hard work. The paradox is that navigating endless drama is more work in the end.

Beyond drama

Ascendant people hate drama. They avoid it at all costs. They don't care about Sheila or John or social hierarchies or elicit affairs or rumors. They hate celebrity gossip, political gossip, and workplace angling. All are a distraction from meaningful, productive progress.



**“ASCENDANT
PEOPLE HATE
DRAMA.”**

The easiest way to separate the elite from the ascendant in a group of high performers is to introduce a juicy tidbit of gossip or some unspoken animosity. Elites will be unable to resist the lure of scandal that could possibly impact their social status or present an opportunity to climb the ranks of perception. Ascendant people will ignore it as soon as possible, find those willing to get to work, and move ahead.

When it comes to drama average people may be closer to ascendancy than elites. A known indulgence can be given up if the goal is meaningful enough. A way of life that permeates the complex lattice of social status isn't so easily abandoned.

Drama is the enemy of progress. Rise above it in all its forms.

5 NEVER BE SURPRISED BY A BLIND REVIEW

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach performance reviews.

The dreaded performance review

A lot of companies and organizations have annual performance reviews where employees submit feedback on their coworkers and then it's delivered anonymously through a manager. They tend to foster passive

aggression and act as a too-late justification for bad managers to do what they knew they should but lacked the guts to do sooner and without more support. Whatever I think of them, they're common and they provide a great opportunity to ascend pettiness and posturing.

Average people fear performance reviews. Their pain-avoidance drive makes them see only danger in the review. They work to ensure they are inoffensive and reduce risk of negative feedback with increased fervency

leading up to review season. They are somewhat cautious in reviewing their peers. Eager to vent pent-up frustration, but also leery of dishing too hard something that might come back to them next go round.

Elite people relish review season. It's an opportunity to maneuver and preen and undermine people in polite sounding language. They see reviews as a building block for a better title, pay raise, more prominent office, or a chance to weed out threats. The gossip and gamesmanship that come along with review season add to the juicy enjoyment.

Ascendant people are neutral on reviews. Reviews seem redundant, but if getting them done will help other things move forward, they'll do it honestly and without a lot of fanfare. They see no reason to fear or relish the review, because they are not surprised by the results.

Blinded by nothing

I worked at a place where the entire year revolved around the performance review. Pay raises, organizational changes, hiring, firing, and promotions were all hinged on the process. The five or six people with whom you worked most frequently were supposed to login to a portal and score you and leave anonymous feedback on your performance. A manager would gather and aggregate the scores and feedback and then deliver it to you in a meeting as a unified body of general info.

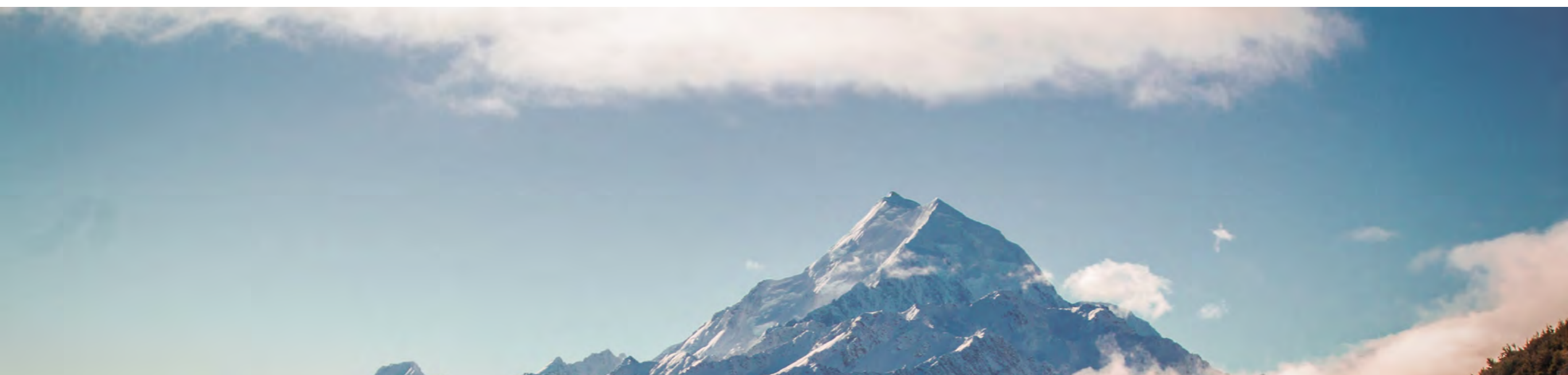
"The feedback you got was..." as if it came from a disembodied collective.

Some people would store up grudges and grievances, rubbing their hands at the thought of finally unleashing it in a blind review.

It didn't seem worth it to fight against the process as a whole, so I tried to turn it into a more useful test of my own communication skills and work habits. It was a personal game. I set a standard for myself: if anything in my review came as a surprise to me, or if anything I said in my reviews of others came as a surprise to them, I'd failed.

I put my name on the reviews I left for people. I didn't want them to be anonymous. I wanted to openly share what I thought about their performance and what it was like to work with them. I told everyone ahead of time I'd be putting my name on all my reviews and if anything I said came as a surprise to come tell me and we could figure out where communication had broken down. I worked with these people every day. If there was a problem or something praiseworthy, they should know it in real time, not be surprised by a review once a year.

I told people to be brutally honest in their reviews of me. Be anonymous if it helps. But if anything in anyone's reviews of me came as a surprise, it reflected my failure to establish an open productive line of communication.





I was never surprised by reviews. I always knew exactly what I'd hear. I could usually identify who gave what feedback too, because they had already given it to me many times before. "You bowl over people in meetings", "You rush to finish things and overlook important details", "You are too dismissive of processes and norms". I heard all of these things and none of them were a surprise. I knew that about myself and everyone who worked with me knew it about me and we both knew that we both knew. It was out in the open.

The test

Ever since, I have used the blind review test to check myself. I walk through a mental exercise with two questions:

"If you were to honestly and anonymously review people you work and interact with, would they be surprised by anything you said?"

"If those who work and interact with you honestly and anonymous reviewed you, would you be surprised by what they said?"

If the answer to either question is yes, I force myself to get to the source of the problem and find a way to communicate it, or stop working with that person. There is no gain in an ongoing relationship with festering, unspoken problems. If the thought of anonymously reviewing someone fills me with vindictive triumph, I've got work to do on myself.

Ascend the fear and angling approaches to performance reviews – real or imagined – and use them as a test of your transparency, honesty, and communication. Everyone who matters should know where you stand with them and vice versa.

6 DON'T HAVE AN END GOAL

I'm going to describe three types of people. I call them average, elite, and ascendant. One of the differences between the three is how they approach goals and getting what they want.

The goal of goals

Average people don't like concrete goals because there is a risk of failure. Average people tend to get what they want because what they want is, almost by definition, things they already believe themselves capable of getting. They prefer excuses and limitations as convenient reasons they can't set big goals and go after big dreams.

Elite people love goals. Goals are visible and attract attention. They are driven by concrete goals that can be achieved with lots of work but which often mask deeper, underlying desires that are unobtainable. Elite people never really get what they want because whenever they achieve a new goal, they realize it wasn't what they wanted and an empty frustration creeps right back.

The things elite people want are subjective – unequivocal recognition from others for being better than all rivals, being “great”, “wise”, and generally held in higher esteem than their peers. They use constant concrete goal setting

as a way to notch items off their belt, hoping to level up to a place where these illusive perceptions become cemented for all time. They often achieve their material goals, but these never stack up high enough to take them where they think they want to go.

Beyond goals

Ascendant people don't really care much for goals one way or another. They play with them and experiment with them as tools to achieve various projects or develop habits, but they aren't obsessed with concrete, material goals. Nor are they motivated by anyone else's subjective assessment of their worth.

Ascendant people both get and don't get what they want. They get it because what they want is progress, growth, meaning, challenge, and evolution. They want a journey that leads to another journey. They don't get what they want because, well, they don't want to. They want to chase the rabbit, not catch it. The chase isn't something you can get, it's something you can do. Ascendant people are directional, not locational. Life is a centered set, not a closed set. Everything either moves you toward or away from “up”; there is no “in” or “out”, there is only “toward”.





“ASCENDANT PEOPLE FOCUS
MORE ON WHO THEY WANT TO
BE THAN WHAT THEY WANT TO
DO OR BE TITLED.”

Ascendant people focus more on who they want to *be* than what they want to *do* or be titled. They create processes and habits and systems to move them closer, an inch at a time, to the kind of person they want to be, rather than focusing on specific end goals. They identify obstacles to progress and take action to overcome them. They test and refine processes, allowing the results to be a surprise. An example might be writing every day because the process moves you closer to the kind of person you want to be, vs. setting a goal to publish and sell X number of books. The daily practice tends to result in more powerful and unpredictable outcomes than predefined goals.

Ascendant people are not afraid of goals. Nor do they require them. They’re motivated by growth, and if goals can help, they’ll adopt some. They want to pursue more than obtain.