

Start Here

There is a simple saying in Japanese that epitomizes the nature of striving for excellence, “*Ue ni wa ue ga aru.*” It translates literally as, “Above up, there is something even higher above up.” To me, it is an eloquent expression of not only an unattainable goal in life, but also the nature of human ambition—of constantly wanting to become better.

Becoming better can take many forms. It is easy to take matters into your own hands when it comes to improving skills like drawing, public speaking, or anything else where practice makes perfect. Advancing your own career, however, is something that is subject to an entirely different set of forces, fraught with politics, relationships, and chance, not all of which are as easily controlled.

In my own working life, questions of career advancement had largely been resolved. I had worked my way up to being a tenured professor at MIT, which is a job that I could have kept until I croaked. Sure, there were a few times during my career as a junior professor when I tried to rock the boat and I was warned, “Cool your jets, and wait in line for your turn.” On another occasion, I was informed that my quest for change was

pointless: “John, just wait until they all die,” I was told. I took that as advice to live into my 100s, so I began exercising more and eating better to maximize my chances of making a difference. Little did I know what was about to happen long before I was 100 ...

SIMPLICITY TO COMPLEXITY

> Staring at a missing piece in your life makes you miss the real peace that you truly have.

During my career as a professor, I had begun working outside of academia with a variety of clients, either with companies as a designer, or with galleries as an artist. In doing so it became clear that there was a missing piece to my education. People kept saying to me, “You’re the creative person, John, so don’t worry about the financial stuff.” As a professor, I had always operated my own “organization of one,” but a brief stint as an administrator exposed my sheer lack of knowledge of how an organization of more-than-one is run. So I sought to remedy this deficiency with an MBA—perhaps it was the missing piece in my life that would solve all my problems. Alas, getting it made me reflect on all the amazing changes in business, technology, and design that had led to intense complexity in our daily lives. I realized that I wasn’t just missing a degree, I was missing a sense of simplicity. And so I began a project to define the *The Laws of Simplicity*, which gave me the peace I was looking for ... for that moment.

> @johnmaeda is thinking how courage is a noble form of stupidity that aids getting impossible things done.

Shortly after completing *The Laws of Simplicity* and giving a related talk at the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, I received a phone call from a headhunter about the possibility of leading a major art and design institution. I was happy to suggest names of other people the recruiter could contact instead of me, since I didn't see myself as presidential material at the time. I hadn't been a department head, dean, or provost at MIT, so I figured I should just "wait in line" as I'd been told. But the conversations continued, and before I knew it I was suddenly the sixteenth president of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). The fact that I "suddenly" became president continues to frame my experience even today, as I believe that not having learned all of the proper administrative ropes along the way has given me a kind of freedom and courage to improvise as needed.

"THE MAN"'S LIFE IS COMPLEX

> The grass is always greener on the other side because from far away you can't see the weeds.

I've quickly come to realize that being a professor/thought leader is different than being a CEO/organizational leader. There are similarities of course—being either requires a great deal of discipline and hard work. But there's much greater latitude as a professor, when you work within the ethos of academic freedom and are free to speak your mind unreservedly against "the man." The leader of an institution, on the other hand, manages infinitely more constraints with regard to what

he can say. I'm embarrassed to admit that I never truly realized that the position at the top—something of aspirational value and numerous upsides—carried significant constraints. As an academic trained to speak his mind—and even worse as an artist and designer who lives to express himself creatively—it has been an interesting challenge to learn, through much trial and error, how to live as a creative leader of an institution.

> @johnmaeda is tickled by barber's response to my Q, "Do you believe in leadership by example?" "Sure. But not if it's a bad example."

The word *leadership* is something of an anathema to creative folks as it invokes an image of authority and order over the chaos that we thrive upon. Whether the image is of a person wearing an immaculate pinstriped suit or a distant figure in a large auditorium with a booming voice, leaders are generally respectfully disrespected by the creative class. For instance, an irate undergraduate student recently came up to me at an exhibition opening and said, "You know, a lot of us students and faculty don't like what you are doing with the strategic planning conversations." I asked him to continue. "You are trying to get us to work together, and we're artists. We aren't joiners and don't want to swim with the pack." I saw this as a valid point of view and asked the young man to present this viewpoint to the planning groups. "You don't get it," he replied astutely, "That would make me a joiner by definition."

Early on in my career I had the good fortune of knowing an unusual creative leader, the great Mr. Naomi Enami, who broke down many of these stereotypes for me. Mr. Enami was

one of the world's first multimedia producers, predating the rise of the Web; he had a sense of showmanship that rivaled Lady Gaga's in pomp and style. But I witnessed on countless occasions how Mr. Enami could effortlessly switch his manner from Lady Gaga to Donald Trump as needed. He always had a few suits tucked away in his closet to switch into "the Donald," for when he needed a socially acceptable uniform for meticulously crafting deals with business executives.

Mr. Enami would walk into the studio at 3 am boldly announcing, "If I am here, everything is okay!" and we'd all suddenly wake up and be reenergized. A few minutes after he'd say this, he'd lie on the floor in the middle of the studio and instantly fall asleep. Mr. Enami is the one who first made me aware that there are all kinds of leaders out there—wacky, brilliant, and above all, impactful. He fell ill a few years ago, and I know that his example inspires me in the work I do today as president.

> Being prepared isn't a matter of how much you practice.

It's about knowing that even if you fail, you won't give up.

In spite of the many recent financial challenges at my institution and in our world, my excitement in serving as president of RISD has remained extremely high. Sure, some days haven't been as pleasant as others, and I when I see veteran presidents of other institutions manage difficult situations with an elegance that only past experience can bring, I am certainly envious. But having had the experience of distinct careers as an academic, scientist, engineer, designer, and artist, I've been fortunate to know

the awkwardness that comes with initially not fitting perfectly into a foreign role.

In the early 1990s, after I had completed a PhD in design studies, I was at a party in Tokyo where I heard a veteran designer tell his colleagues in Japanese (which he perhaps thought I didn't understand), "John's an engineer from MIT and he thinks he can be a designer now." I now count this person as a solid friend, and I know I've earned his respect by persevering and ultimately prospering in the field, with my designs now miraculously residing in many major museum collections. I guess I'm a believer that you can always learn when you're not willing to give up seeking out something new.

> Work is easier when its just work; it's much harder when you actually care.

There's this wonderful thing called "work" that takes an enormous amount of time in your life when you are lucky enough to have it. Sometimes the work is all work and no play. For instance, growing up working closely beside my parents before and after school in their tofu-making business every day from 3 am to 6 pm—that was the hardest work I've experienced in my life. Given the mechanical nature of the labor, I expected my father to sometimes want to take a break or cut himself some slack, but he exacted the highest quality in his work every day. He wasn't driven by making money—he could have sold the product for more, but he thought "the price is just"—so it wasn't clear to me why he worked so hard. The reason became evident when a customer came by and wanted to thank my father for making tofu with a craftsmanship that could no longer be found

in Japan. Dad was always a fairly unemotional man, but I caught a glimpse of him smiling as he walked away. I asked him what “craftsmanship” was. He replied, “It’s working like you care.”

It is this passion for one’s work that I’ve taken into all my endeavors: making images, books, computer chips, skateboards, jackets, circuit boards, Web sites, computer programs, lighting, tables, sculptures, paintings, and a variety of other “things” as an artist, designer, and technologist. I’ve just begun to take this curiosity into the space of leading an institution. It has been a journey of realizing not only the limits of creative thinking, but its possibilities as well.

In my first years as “suddenly” president of RISD, I have tried to pour as much play, passion, and creativity into the act of leading as is humanly possible. Along the way I’ve already learned countless lessons about communication, teamwork, and the importance of holding on to my own sense of perspective—lessons that I have tried to crystallize in the moment through the act of microblogging, or “tweeting.” I’ve collected these microlessons here to try to see what macrolessons will be revealed through their aggregation. Please come along on this journey of micro and macro with me.