How we often solve the wrong problems with industrial means

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FF-0001 · v1 · en · 2026-11-17

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Why do we often fight wars against our past failures, sometimes at the risk of everything built since? I have been reflecting on what it means to succeed in life. To be seen, admired, respected, or to collect enough power to make things happen? I suspect that some of what looks like ambition is an attempt to answer something that happened much earlier: not being taken seriously, not being noticed, being made to feel that there was nothing particularly interesting or desirable about you, etc.

People sometimes build great things to prove someone wrong. A parent who never believed in them, a teacher who dismissed their abilities, a girlfriend who never took them seriously. Or a woman whose abilities were belittled by a male professor, who turns to feminism and sets out to become a professor herself to show that a woman can succeed too. The achievement carries a message for that person: “you were wrong about me.” This applies to men too: a man buys a fancy car and drives through the neighborhood where a woman who rejected him lives. Or he posts a new relationship on social media hoping his exes will see it. Years later, that person’s judgment may still be deciding what deserves the effort of an entire life.

There is a catch though. Imagine a young nerd who felt invisible in high school. He works his ass off and becomes a successful businessman. He commands attention, but some of it comes from people who want access to his position or his money. The very things he acquired to become desirable make it harder to know whether anyone desires him. Money and power can change how people behave around him without changing how he feels when someone overlooks him. He can be successful by almost every public measure and still be preoccupied with the question that sent him running.

Jensen Huang likes telling the story of how he met his wife, Lori, at university: spending months doing homework with her before finding the courage to ask her out. In his story, what catches my attention is the exchange that happened: he offered resources to obtain her attention, and it worked. Perhaps he never learned to do otherwise, and kept collecting even bigger resources and amassing more power to secure that attention, not only from Lori but most likely from other women as well. Although it’s common knowledge that all men pay for sexual access, a player might have got a date with a few jokes, some game, the right vibe, without spending a dime. The

question here is whether Huang ever learned to command attention without something outside himself making him shine. At university, that thing was the straight As he promised Lori through their homework sessions; later, it became the money, the fame, the CEO position, and the influence and power it provides. His resources grew, but did his way of seeking affection ever change?

Perhaps becoming formidable feels more imaginable than approaching someone and risking a refusal. Or perhaps her affection has become entangled with another desire: to become someone who could never again be overlooked. One person's attention then carries the weight of a much larger vindication. Would being wanted satisfy him, or would he still need to become undeniable?

From outside, Huang's reported affairs and the loss of his CEO position look like a silly way to risk everything he had been building for 33 years. However, when you look at his case from a different perspective, the old wound may have remained his Achilles heel, and he might not have noticed he was exposing it to the entire world every time he recounted the story of how he met his wife. Any woman offering him a little affection and attention could therefore reach the young nerd beneath all that power. And before you think he made a "bad" decision or took miscalculated risks, don't forget that his subconscious may have been using the power properly, i.e., to win the wars he had never won. To him, that was not throwing everything away for so little reward; it was finally using the weapons for the purpose they had been acquired to serve. Perhaps we never wanted what we built for itself. It was a war machine against our failures of the past, expendable in the attempt to win.

Sometimes we build an army for a war that could have ended with a kitchen knife. Someone spends years building wealth because he wants to be desired, when learning how to seduce a woman might have addressed the difficulty more directly. I think of these TV series plots in which a man who cannot get a woman's attention joins an army, goes through harsh training, becomes a conqueror, or acquires the power to defeat the villain. He returns hoping she will finally look at him differently. If he could ask for a gift, why ask for the power to defeat armies or win duels? Why not ask for the gift of seducing the girl he wanted to speak to in the first place, or of no longer needing her attention at all?

I am always amazed by how people can make wonders and change the world just to avoid changing themselves. I think of feminists who are so afraid of accountability that, in the pursuit of women's safety, they would rather reeducate men on consent and respecting boundaries, and drum into boys never to hurt a woman, than teach themselves and younger girls how to recognize danger and avoid it.

To me, true empowerment is in learning to protect yourself wherever you are. It should not depend on being lucky enough to live in a country where you control the education of potential abusers. You can perfect the system, but you cannot guarantee that every boy will come out properly formatted. If even one comes out flawed, the danger is still out there.

A simpler and more pragmatic solution would be acquiring a deep understanding of human nature that travels with you. It lets you recognize danger and avoid it without needing a big government to reformat an entire generation of men.

Not to digress, but why should your safety be the ultimate good around which the whole of society must reorganize itself? What gives you the right to mold everybody else for your own comfort? Isn't it pretentious, dictatorial, and egocentric to decide how others should live so you don't have to make any effort yourself? I see a princess or goddess mentality in that, a kind of solipsism: everything revolves around me; everyone should serve me and my needs.

I see the same pattern in single mothers who blame men for being irresponsible and leaving them with babies. Some could have chosen a more reliable partner, or kept their legs closed until marriage. To me, this mirrors the man who conquers the world expecting a woman's attention instead of learning how to seduce her: basically industriously solving the wrong problem.

Men often go for pragmatic solutions. To avoid false accusations, they avoid scenarios such as talking to a female colleague in an office with the door closed, staying late at the office with a female coworker, or taking an elevator alone with a woman. They do not need to reformat an entire generation of women so that no woman ever falsely accuses an innocent man of something he never did. They adjust their own conduct. On this matter, men are more pragmatic. But when it comes to seduction, they forget that pragmatism. Why?

Perhaps because seduction has become entangled with vindication. He wants her attention to settle something about himself: that he is desirable, that those who overlooked him were wrong, that he will never again be insignificant. He can accept a constraint and adjust his conduct when protecting himself. Her indifference may be harder to accept because it feels like a judgment about his worth. Learning to flirt still leaves him exposed to a personal refusal. Accumulating money, status, or power offers the fantasy of eventually becoming impossible to refuse.

There may also be something familiar about building resources. He knows how to work, compete, and accumulate. Approaching someone without those protections requires a different capacity, perhaps one he has spent his life avoiding. His reasoning may remain highly effective while serving an emotional objective he has never examined. Extraordinary competence can be devoted to solving the wrong problem.

This brings me back to the commoner seeking magic power: why ask never to be rejected again instead of asking to become immune to rejection? The first wish puts the load on the other person, whose response he cannot control. His security depends on her continuing to want him, on someone else behaving in a way that protects his sense of worth. However powerful he becomes, she can still prefer another person or simply change her mind. The protection he is trying to acquire can never quite be secured.

Becoming able to bear rejection seems a more useful strength to acquire. By immunity, I am thinking of something that leaves room to care. A rejection can still hurt, especially when the

person matters. But disappointment need not become a verdict that has to be overturned through years of achievement. If a refusal does not threaten everything you believe about yourself, there is less reason to hesitate before asking for what you want. You can approach someone, express interest, make a proposal. That confidence may open certain doors. A door that remains closed need not diminish your self-esteem or make the rest of your life feel inadequate. The commoner seeking magic power could approach her before becoming extraordinary. He would have a life to return to afterward.

Three mindsets seem useful: "This too shall pass" can soothe the pain of being rejected, giving the feeling time to change. "Rejection is redirection" can revive the motivation to keep knocking on other doors, giving attention somewhere else to go. Detachment keeps you in a state of acceptance: whatever the outcome, you will continue to live. You have been living without this until now. If it doesn't come through, you can continue living without it. You can still want it and make an effort to obtain it. The possibility of living without it gives you room to receive the answer, including the answer you hoped not to hear. Healing, in this sense, would include being able to encounter the old feeling without having to organize another campaign against it.

Certain wars are not meant to be fought in the material, three-dimensional world, but within. I think of Jesus saying, "My kingdom is not of this world, but of the world above." And of the familiar paraphrase of Jung: "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

Most of our impulses are not rational decisions. They are emotional reactions. Someone rejects you, insults you, or gives you a little attention, and suddenly you are ready to organize your life around that feeling. The effort, in the spirit of Frankl, is to put some distance between the stimulus and your response so you can decide what response is appropriate. Before building an army, perhaps you need to ask whether the feeling calls for a war at all.

Citation

Eliakim M. Kambale. (2026-11-17). How we often solve the wrong problems with industrial means. Freeforms, FF-0001, Version 1 (en). https://contributions-ledger.org/freeforms/ff-0001/v1/en/