

Choose Your Frames of Reference Wisely

By *Harrison Barnes*

I spent the summer following my first year of [law school](#) working at the Department of Justice (the "DOJ") in Washington, DC. The entire summer and the events leading up to it resulted in one of the strangest experiences I have ever had. After I got the job with the DOJ, I was required to undergo a security clearance with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After contacting and questioning many people I knew in the past, the FBI also required me to take a physical and a drug test.

In late spring, I went in for the physical when I was studying for my final exams. It was like something out of a Frankenstein movie. There was a skeleton hanging by a wire inside the doctor's office and the whole place was very disorganized. He started telling me strange stories about grisly things like a decapitation case he had worked on at the morgue. The doctor looked like a mad [scientist](#)—his hair was disheveled and his comments were bizarre.

I was the last patient of the day on a Friday afternoon. The doctor had to let me out of the building because everyone was gone for the day. On Saturday, I went to the library around 5:00 pm and did not return until 1:30 am. When I got home, there was a message on my answering machine. The machine said it had been received about 45 minutes previously, at 12:45 am:

"Hello, this is the doctor who did your physical on Friday. It is important that I speak with you right away...please call me immediately! Your exam was fine. This is about something far more urgent!" He left no number, and I searched frantically for the number of the clinic. I couldn't imagine why the doctor would be calling me at such a strange hour. I called the clinic and an answering machine picked up. I did not leave a message. On Sunday, I called again and the machine picked up again. I still did not leave a message.

On Monday, I came home from the library around noon or so and called the clinic again. This time someone did pick up. I asked to speak with the doctor.

"Who is this!?" the person on the other end of the line demanded.

"He left me a message early Sunday morning," I replied.

"That's impossible," the person said. "He was found dead this morning in the office. He had been dead since Friday night."

This was the start of my bizarre summer at the DOJ.

A few days into my job at the DOJ, my boss (an important government official who had been appointed by the president) came into my office and told me he had heard I was living in a skid row hotel and that I could stay at his house if I watered his lawn and fed his bird. At the time, I was paying \$100 or so a week to stay at the hotel—the cheapest place I could find at the time.

My boss wanted me to live in his home while he and his family traveled throughout Europe for the summer. I took up residence in his basement, where I was surrounded by boxes and a collection of hard liquor bottles. Despite the surroundings, the living conditions in the basement were much better than the skid row hotel.

There were lots of things I did not enjoy about working with the DOJ. In addition to the supernatural death experience with the doctor a few weeks before, and the time I spent in the skid row hotel, I was now living with a bird in a basement surrounded by liquor bottles and boxes of old albums. My job was strange as well. I was working in a huge building with hardly any windows. The pay was low and the people I was working with did not appear happy. (There are numerous different divisions within the DOJ, so my experience was perhaps not the norm; however, I found the entire experience thoroughly unpleasant.)

One of the strangest things about my experience working with the DOJ was the group of people with whom I shared an office. Every day, a very large woman would come in with a man who looked no more than 20 and they would sit in the office with me all day. They would do nothing but spend the majority of their time eating and looking at me. There were no computers on their desks and I never saw them on the phone. As far as I knew, they did nothing.

When I would type, they would seem annoyed. "Gotta hit those keys," one would say. "Yep, hit 'em up!" the other would chime in.

I was involved in research projects that made no sense to me. One of them involved a bunch of hypothetical questions about nuclear powered airplanes exploding over subdivisions in North Carolina. The job, the people, Washington, DC... none of it was very appealing.

Many of the people I was working with seemed like zombies.

I remember the phone ringing in the house late one evening, and I rushed upstairs from the basement to grab it. It was a relative of mine I had not spoken to in some time who was working overseas. There was a delay in the communication because he was in Poland at the time (I think for the CIA) and he was calling on what sounded like a satellite phone.

I told my relative I was not interested in working for the government, the pay was low and that the work was not very exciting—and was, in fact, bizarre. This was, of course, due to the division I was working in, not just the government affiliation. I will never forget what my relative said to me.

"Isn't this the most you can expect out of your life? If you do this, you will have really succeeded."

For me, this was not what I wanted in my life. This person was trying to provide me a reference, claiming this was what I should expect out of my life and was the best I could do. This was not the reference I wanted. My idea of what it meant to be a lawyer was much more than this. Had I chosen to believe this relative and accept that assessment, I may have spent my life doing something I did not enjoy.

I have provided you so much detail about my experience because I quickly created a reference for myself that the worst possible thing that could happen to me was to work for the government. I had such a strange and bad experience I came to believe I needed to expect something far different for myself. Working for the government had gone from being my dream to my nightmare.

This makes no sense, of course. Working for the government offers incredible opportunity, but our references are what control how we think about things. People, like my relative, provide us with references as to how we may choose to view our lives, and we can either accept them or deny them. Here, I reacted with rage.

"Are you kidding? This is the last freaking thing I'll ever want for myself!" I think I may have hung up on the relative and not spoken to him for weeks afterward.

I know my relative must have been perplexed by my reaction. His implication that this was the best I could expect made me furious. I did not want to be judged for being part of the government world.

When I got back to law school in the fall, I made sure I did everything I could to get a [great job](#) with a [law firm](#). I tried to get as far away from a [government career](#) as possible.

How has your career been shaped?

Have you allowed yourself and your career to be shaped by early experiences you've had?

Have your early interpretations of the world and what has happened to you made you a better or a stronger person?

In your career, have you been so turned off by certain early experiences that your version of the world and your place in it is different from what it needs to be?

Are you allowing early interpretations of the world to shape and control your destiny?

We need to take our experiences and frame them in a way that makes us stronger and makes life work *for* us.

At the age of 21, Billy Joel had been playing in bars for seven years. The life he saw in front of him was depressing. He was not always treated well in bars and, according to one account, drunks had actually spit on him when he was playing the piano. He had a series of misfortunes, was drinking too much, and simply wanted to die. He wasn't even making a very good living playing piano. In a 2002 essay in *Time magazine*, Joel wrote:

"The band thing wasn't working. I had no money. I had had a series of jobs like oystering, landscaping, pumping gas. I was homeless. I slept in laundromats or in cars. I was crashing at friends' houses. I'd sneak into my mom's house and sleep there. I didn't want to move back home; I didn't want to admit defeat.

I actually tried to commit suicide at 21. I drank furniture polish. I had no purpose in life, and I thought it was all over. I checked myself into an observation ward [in a hospital] for a while because I knew I was suicidal. I wanted to get some help, and I had an epiphany. I saw people who had profound emotional problems. These people were manic-depressives and paranoid schizophrenics. I looked around and said to myself, I don't have any problems. I realized all I was doing was being absurdly self-absorbed and giving in to self-pity, and I wanted to just get out. So I told them what they wanted to hear. I took the medicine. I walked around with the bathrobe open in the a___, like in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. People were moaning and groaning all night, and I thought, please, just let me get out of here, and I'll never be that stupid again.

This experience was one of the best things I have ever gone through. I have never given in to any kind of self-pity for longer than two minutes since then. I realized I can solve my own problems. It showed me that what I thought was my own hell was nothing compared with the hell of others. I have taken that 21-year-old with me throughout my life. He has helped me through the deaths of friends, family matters, personal-relationship issues, minefields of the music business, writer's block." (*Time*, Jan. 21, 2002)

The most important things we have in our lives are references. What determines the quality of our lives is how we evaluate situations. When I think about Joel, I also think of my early experience with the government. I formed beliefs about what the government was like and used this to propel myself away from it. Joel used his experience "going crazy" to propel his mind away from feeling sorry for himself and towards being grateful for where he was and the life he could have. The reference and association he made in his mind made him change the way he approached life and his place in it.

Years later, of course, Joel would go on to be one of the most famous musicians in the world, become fabulously wealthy, and marry one of the most beautiful women in the world, Christie Brinkley. How can a man go from drinking furniture polish at the age of 21 to the heights of stardom and greatness that few ever experience? According to Joel, having seen people who were really suffering made him realize there was no reason why he should ever feel sorry for himself again. By having seen the other side, he very quickly realized how much his life meant and how much he had to look forward to.

I have never used drugs, or even tried them. There is a reason for this. When I was growing up, I saw numerous lives practically destroyed by recreational drugs at a very young age. A drug-crazed maniac shot and killed my stepsister when I was in second grade. My school also had a program where the police came around a couple of times a year and showed people in our class pictures of drug related deaths. Speakers came to our school and talked about the dangers of drugs, how people died, or had their lives otherwise destroyed by them. From the time I was seven or eight years old until now, I have always been terrified of drugs--that is my reference to drugs.

The references you have for the way the world is will impact everything that happens to you. These references will shape your life. The people who achieve the most in the world are the people who are empowered by, and not dragged down by, references. One of the best things you can do is allow your references to empower you in a positive and not a negative way. So many people create negative references from their experiences and their lives are paralyzed and hurt forever by them.

One of the saddest things that can happen to a person is to be sexually abused when they are young. While growing up, I knew two girls who had been sexually abused by their own fathers. Each girl reacted differently to the experience. One gained a lot of weight so she would not be attractive to men and became angry, hateful, and bitter. The other girl became incredibly attractive and also promiscuous. After years of therapy, the promiscuous one told me she had used sex as a control mechanism over men to prove she owned her body and her father did not. She viewed sex as a way to have control instead of something that was about bonding. Both of these women allowed a bad experience and reference to control the course of their lives and affect how they saw themselves in the world and interacted with it. I often think about these two women because the contrast is so remarkable.

People use their experiences and what happens to them in different ways. Some people use their references for good and others for bad. People who achieve the most in the world and in their lives do so because of the references they hold in their

minds.

Your references do not need to be things that have happened in the past. They can also be references you set up for yourself and what will happen in your future. When Sony first started marketing radios in the United States in the middle of the 1950s, Bulova offered to purchase 100,000 units, but insisted they be marketed under the Bulova brand name. This was to be the largest order Sony had ever received and would give the floundering company money to grow and prosper.

At the time, Sony co-founder Akio Morita barely had any money. With some of the last money he had to his name, Morita called Sony headquarters in Japan from the United States and told them about the order. They encouraged Morita to take the order. Morita was firm he did not want to accept the order and told headquarters that he was not going to take it. Headquarters thought he was crazy.

When Morita told Bulova about his decision, they stated, "Our company name is a famous brand name that has taken over fifty years to establish. Nobody has ever heard of your brand name. Why not take advantage of ours?"

Morita remained steadfast in his views and refused to accept the order.

His rejoinder to Bulova: "Fifty years ago, your brand name must have been just as unknown as our name is today. I am here with a new product, and I am taking the first step for the next fifty years of my company. Fifty years from now I promise you that our name will be just as famous as your company name is today."

The references you create for yourself about what you *will* be and what you *can* be control your destiny. The filters through which we view life and the world have a stunning effect on what ends up happening to us and shaping our futures. Your beliefs and values come from the references you give yourself. We use references to give us certainty about the way things are.

When Thomas Edison was designing the light bulb and failing again and again, he did not say "Aw, what's the use?" Instead, he told himself he was one step closer to creating the light bulb each time he failed. He used failure as a reference to show he was getting closer to his goal. How do you interpret the world around you?

You succeed in life by creating references that empower you rather than drag you down. In my job with the government, I could have taken my early experience to mean there was something "supernatural" about me working there and that people would "come to my aid," such as my boss who offered me a free place to live. I could have decided I was working on the most incredible projects of all time, projects that would shape national policy and what happened in the world. I could have told myself my experience was something that could lead to me being the President of the United States and to help millions of people both in our country and around the world. I could have easily given my experience that meaning.

You can do the same thing with your work and life experiences. Let your experiences empower you. Give them positive, not negative meaning. When you look at your past in a way that empowers you, every single day is a new opportunity for growth. When you look at your past in this way, you may realize the worst days of your life were actually your best.

Link a different meaning to your experiences so you can be stronger. Billy Joel took a horrible event and linked something incredibly positive to it. The transformation of this experience made him strong and gave him a life that would empower any one of us. He also used this experience to empower the world through his music. You can rationalize any experience you have the same way Joel did.

When I was growing up, I was exceptionally good at soccer. At one point I was so good I was not allowed to play on regular teams. Instead, I was on a special team for all of Detroit that traveled around playing different teams in other parts of the state.

After a couple years of this, however, I rapidly lost all interest in soccer and sports in general. It was too much pressure. Too much was expected of me and the game was no longer fun. It was so competitive and brutal I would feel badly about myself after virtually every game unless I got a "hat trick" (three goals). Because I had great talent, I was expected to practice all the time.

After a while, I intentionally stopped doing as well as I could at soccer and instead sabotaged myself. I did not play as hard as I could and started to fail at the game.

My life was never the same.

Although I played varsity soccer my first year of high school, I stopped playing after that and was no longer interested. I did not want the pressure. I made different kinds of friends and dropped out of the game forever. I became friends with the sorts of kids who did not play sports and got into trouble. I was escaping life as an athlete. It made no sense.

I formed the wrong references and made the game represent something other than what it was. The fact is we give things the meanings we choose. Have you ever stopped doing something at which you were talented? If so, the chances are very good you stopped doing it because you allowed yourself to form a different meaning of what it was. We view things through the lenses we choose. Everyone looks at the world based on the experiences they have had in the past and what they mean.

Different religions view the world in different ways. If you were to eat a steak in India, a Hindu would be horrified. If you tried to shake the hand of an Orthodox Jew of a different sex, they would pull their hand away in shock. If you tried to take a practicing Mormon to a bar and have a drink with them, they would be repulsed. We view the world based on the sorts of experiences we have had and what we tell ourselves about the world mean. We view the world through filters, and it is important we realize the filters we are using are not always the correct ones. We use references to create the filters we use to see the world.

I want to encourage you to stand guard at the door of your mind. Do not let your past represent something negative that can hurt you now. None of us have had perfect life experiences. There is something inside of you, however, that is holding you back from reaching for the stars in your career. You are capable of so much. How different would the memories of high school have been for me if I had allowed myself to be a star soccer player? How different would Billy Joel's life have been if he'd allowed himself to stay depressed? How different would your life be today if you allowed your past to empower you? How different would your present be if you knew you were capable of greatness and accepted nothing but the best for yourself, like Morita of Sony?

There is no limit to your life except the limits you impose on it. Your career and the world are wide open to you. Try to look at everything you've done in the past as a powerful lesson that's making you stronger and better every day. Never be limited by your own mind. Allow your mind to interpret the world for your benefit, and not your detriment.

THE LESSON

Your life is shaped by the reference points through which you experience the world, that you establish based on your past experiences. You must learn to take these experiences and frame them in a way that makes you stronger. Your experiences create the filters through which you see the world, so you must avoid letting negative past experiences hurt you in the present. Instead, focus on references that empower you and interpret the world for your benefit.

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