

Improve When Others Are Not

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the more interesting experiences of my life occurred when I was about 13-years old and I was on an airplane headed to Spain to study for the summer with a group of high school students. The airplane had literally been held up about 20 minutes because of me. I was so much younger than the other travelers that no one was too interested in spending much time with me. Consequently, I had mostly been left to my own devices up to that point in the trip. We were traveling from Detroit to New York and I was almost left in New York. I was eating some food in a food court in Kennedy Airport when I heard my name called over the loud speaker. The first time I heard my name ring out, I thought I was hearing things and simply kept eating. Then I heard it again and I remember putting my food down and looking around for a few moments before getting back to my fast food. Then, at some point I heard my name again with direct instructions that the airplane was leaving. So of course I immediately ran towards the terminal.

I was fairly excited about this trip to Spain. At the time, I was going to a [public school](#) in Grosse Pointe outside of Detroit and had become a pretty bad kid. I was so bad, in fact, I remember on one math test the teacher had subtracted three points because I hadn't spelled my name right. One day, I walked down the hall in school and saw a giant magnet the size of my hand lying on the floor next to a locker. I picked up the magnet and started playing with it. I remember throwing it to a friend of mine and we started playing catch in the hall with it between classes. My friend thought it would be funny at some point to turn his back and not catch the magnet. The magnet kept flying and ended up hitting the biggest stoner in the school in the head. The stoner overreacted and was actually excited because drew some blood.

"Dude, I'm going to be able to at least get out of the rest of the day," he told me as we sat together in the principal's office.

The strangest thing ended up happening that day. I went into the principal's office and he started telling me about how I was going to get suspended for throwing this magnet and how it was "assault" and all sorts of things. Then he asked me where I got the magnet. I took him to the front of the locker where I found it and when he opened the locker he found more magnets (stolen from the science lab) and also drugs. The police ended up coming to the school and everyone completely forgot about me. Apparently, several other students ended up getting involved and when I walked by the principal's office at the end of the day I saw the stoner with five or six other students still sitting in chairs waiting to talk to the principal and a bunch of police.

That's how I almost got suspended from middle school.

The worst thing about my experience in public school was the dress and grooming habits I picked up. This was in the day of Members Only jackets, Sassoon and Jordache Jeans, and big male hair. It was the 1980s. One day, my best friend and I went to get haircuts. He ended up getting a perm and the same place figured out a way to blow up my hair so it was three times its normal size, parted down the middle. I remember my friend's mother actually beat him up over this. She brought him over to my mother's house the night after the bad haircut holding him by the back of his shirt and telling my mother that we needed to be sent to [military](#) school. She then called up the hair salon and yelled at them. I think she may have sued them in small claims court. I also started picking up language that was intentionally grammatically incorrect, but in that environment various phrases were considered cool.

My grandparents had met while living and working in Paris and were fairly cultured people. I think it was them who made the case to my father (and they may have paid for it, if I remember) that the condition I was in culturally was horrifying. They convinced him I needed some sort intervention and that it needed to happen internationally. They were horrified by the United States and what people like me represented to them.

At the time, I was only taking Spanish in school because it was the easiest language. I didn't care at all about school. I will never forget something one of my incredibly snotty relatives said to me when I was choosing between French and Spanish:

"Why would you want to take Spanish? Look who speaks Spanish--it's all peasants. Look at who speaks French--it's the intellectual leaders of the world."

As far as I'm concerned Spanish was, and is still, my language.

Because I couldn't be sent to France for culturing up, the decision had been made to send me to Spain. I was sent on a high school field trip for Seniors from private schools in Detroit, despite the fact that I was only in 7th grade.

The airplane was about an hour into the trip when all of the students started requesting that the leader of the expedition, a [Spanish teacher](#) at Cranbrook Schools named Senor Gomez, tell the story about how he escaped from prison. Gomez was from Spain but apparently had been held in prison in Cuba for some sort of political crime involving his dislike of Fidel Castro. He was not violent and had never done anything bad. However, whatever the political crime he was held for, it was considered serious enough that they had planned on holding him for many, many years.

A huge group of [teenagers](#) gathered around Gomez and they became seemingly entranced. I was still sulking and had endured plenty of mean stares from the passengers since I'd delayed the airplane for who knows how long. Gomez sat down next to me and began telling a story that I have modeled my entire life on.

He said that he was thrown in a prison cell with around 50 other men. The cell was meant to hold no more than 20 men. He said that the men in the cell would smoke all day and sit around doing nothing. If they could get their hands on drugs they would use the drugs. They would eat all of the food they could. They would not keep themselves clean. They would get depressed and they would spend all of their time talking about how horrible their circumstances were. They would fight with each other and worry about lots of unnecessary things.

In contrast, Gomez said that he looked at his time in prison as among the most important times in his life. He said that he

looked at it as a time to get fit. For several hours a day he ran in place. He did as many push ups as he could do each day. He read and meditated, and kept his mind active. He did sit ups. He didn't smoke. He traded food for razors so he could consistently be shaven (the other men all grew beards). He cleaned himself several times a day using a small sink in the prison cell. He made sure he kept a clean pair of clothes at all times.

"You are crazy!" the prisoners said to him. The prisoners would make fun of Gomez for his exercise and taking such good care of himself and not enjoying himself like the other prisoners.

Gomez said that many of the prisoners ended up going crazy in the time he was in the prison cell. Other prisoners killed themselves or were killed. They lived their lives like they were in hell. They focused on the negativity, suffering, and evil around them. Many became addicted to hard drugs. They gave each other tattoos. Many got diseases, because they weren't healthy.

Gomez, on the other hand, continued his ritual of exercising several hours per day, looking very good, and keeping himself up.

One day, Gomez was taken to the infirmary in the prison for a check up. He put on his clean shirt and pants, which he had never worn. As he was waiting with several other prisoners to see the doctor, Gomez realized no one was guarding the prisoners. There was one other door that didn't lead into the infirmary in the waiting room. Gomez got up and walked into a room where a bunch of prison officials and others were standing around smoking. A few people looked up at him, didn't say anything, and assumed he must work in the prison in some sort of administrative role or other capacity. In contrast to the other prisoners who were run down, strung out and tired, Gomez looked like a million bucks. He didn't look like a prisoner. Gomez then walked through another door and came to a guard station and the guard smiled at him and buzzed him through a door. Within a few seconds, Gomez was standing on a busy city street in Havana. He blended right in and managed to completely escape the prison.

"I am free today because I took care of my body and mind when others did not," Gomez concluded to the students gathered around him on the airplane.

Think about your own life. You may be surrounded by people who have thrown in the towel on their lives and are allowing themselves to go to hell. They may be so depressed about the economy or their jobs that they're drinking more than they should, smoking to alleviate stress, not shaving, gaining weight, and not taking care of themselves. They may be wallowing in how bad things are and feeling as if the world has ended.

When confronted with difficult and seemingly unjust circumstances, people will often simply "give up" and feel as if there is nothing that can be done. They will "throw in the towel" on life and allow themselves to feel bad about the way things are.

How many people have you seen do this? I know I've seen an incredible number of people do this. Some people do this earlier than others. Some people have thrown in the towel on their lives by the age of 20 and others by the age of 30.

Yesterday, I saw a man speak, Ray Zahab, who had been a pack-a-day smoker until the age of 30. He had been sedentary and lived an extremely unhealthy lifestyle. Just last year he set a record for being the man who did the fastest trek (without skis) to the South Pole. He could have stayed on the track he was on with his life and his health, but instead chose a new path.

Lance Armstrong got cancer, fought the cancer, and came back to be the greatest cyclist in the world.

How many people, when confronted with incredible challenges, decide they're going to rise above this challenge and be transcendent?

You need to be transcendent, too. You need to be the light in the world when others are not. People don't realize how important it is to be a beacon of light, hope, and possibility and to keep your wits and mind about you constantly.

If you've lost a job, if you've ever been in a position where you are in a depressed economy and don't see hope, if you believe there are serious issues and problems you should confront, you need to step forward and improve yourself. Get in shape physically and mentally and step forward into the world as someone who has taken charge of the world around them and their circumstances.

If you do this, everything is going to change for you. Make the most of yourself and never stop improving. Be a beacon of light, shining for all the world to see.

THE LESSON

When faced with difficult times, you must develop the ability to transcend the trouble around you instead of giving up or assuming that nothing can be done about your situation. Keep your wits about you and take charge of the situation, and you will find yourself on track for constant improvement and career success.