

Use the Power of Contrasts to Drive Yourself Forward

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.

Richard P. Feynman, Nobel-Prize Winning Physicist

When my father was growing up, his father used to spend occasional Sunday afternoons driving him through expensive neighborhoods around Detroit and showing him the expensive houses in these neighborhoods. My grandfather was a newspaper man and never made a lot of money. When I was growing up, my father also didn't make a lot of money and did the same thing with me. It was often uncomfortable cruising three miles an hour down these streets. A major reason I was uncomfortable was because I knew a lot of the kids living in these houses. Although it didn't happen often, when I spotted someone I knew, I slumped down in my seat so I wouldn't be seen.

"Wow, look at that!" my father might exclaim while looking at a particularly large home.

I can remember being driven down these streets at slow speeds probably at least once a month for several years while I was growing up. I never really understood the purpose of this exercise because it seemed like the point was to feel envious of what others had. It was always mildly depressing returning to an apartment or wherever we might go after these drives. There was never any hint or hope that we would live like this. It was just a drive down prosperity lane to look at a bunch of nice homes that our family would never, ever be able to afford.

At the same time I was shown the homes of the rich, I was told to work hard in school because this was something that was open to all. The competition to get into Ivy League Schools, for example, was just as competitive as it was for the rich as it was for the poor. At least this is what I was taught growing up. I learned later on that for various Ivy League schools, a lot of what happens has to do with connections and wealth, as well. But in some respects, what my father had taught me about the democracy of most learning institutions was true. This emphasis on education was almost to say:

"People in our family have never known how to compete with the rich in making money, but we can be equals academically."

One of the saddest moments of my father's life, I think, was when I didn't get into Harvard College. There were a lot of schools I was interested in and people from that school had never been too nice to me anyway so I wasn't that concerned with it. In fact, my first choice of college was actually the University of Hawaii and I was talked out of that by a legion of concerned school officials in the private high school I was attending. I'd thought that applying to the honors program at Hawaii would make some sort of difference but no one seemed to care. I was really looking forward to going to Hawaii and because of my dad's work with Harvard, I actually was given the treat of learning weeks before Harvard decisions went out that I wouldn't be admitted. My father had been involved in admissions work for Harvard and had seen the sons of other rich and influential men he knew get in with lower test scores than I had. He must have realized that this idea of democracy didn't completely hold true as he had preached. My father was someone who had spent a lot of time in the [military](#). He got up at 6:00 a.m. each day and came home from work at exactly the same time. The day after I didn't get into this school, I remember coming home for lunch and finding him sleeping at 12:00 in the afternoon. He had to have been so depressed at work that he actually came home from to take a nap. The idea that there was no perfect democracy, that wealth and influence mattered more, must have really shook him to the bone.

One of the easiest things for each of us to do is to believe that things are different than they are. We all have a model of the world and want to look at things in a certain way. In many respects, this is a protection for us against the pain we will feel if we need to change and step outside of our comfort zone. One of the largest and most persistent hallucinations that we all experience is the hallucination we create about ourselves and our lives.

- We believe our careers are different than they are.
- We believe we are more important than we are.
- We believe we are contributing more than we are.
- We believe our careers are safer than they are.
- We believe we may achieve something that we never will achieve.
- We believe we've made the right decisions.

Life, for many of us, becomes an unconscious process where we exist almost as if we are on "[autopilot](#)" and end up going through the motions each day while making very few changes in our own lives. In fact, we do everything we can to insulate ourselves against any form of change and protect our own beliefs about the way things are. This allows us to perceive the world in the way we choose without any interruption of our fantasy.

What I am talking about is a "comfort zone" that many people spend their lives in that never allows them to realize what lies outside of themselves. People need to know what they can do if they allow themselves to step through this comfort zone to an area that's uncomfortable. People also need to show themselves what reality is.

One of the best ways of experiencing reality is when you are looking at homes and cars. A couple of years ago, I was looking at new cars in Pasadena, California. I initially went to the dealership to look at Audis. You can buy a nice Audi for around \$40,000. However, dealership I went to also sold Porsches, Bentleys, Jaguars, and Rolls Royces. When I looked at the Audis, I was amazed at first. I hadn't purchased a car in years and couldn't believe how advanced the cars were. There was satellite navigation and all sorts of other things that really made the cars special.

After looking at Audi's, I went over to the Bentley and Rolls Royce dealership. I started looking at the Bentleys and was very impressed with them. I noticed, however, that they seemed to be very similar to the Audi's. I test drove a Bentley and

couldn't believe how well it drove.

"It is actually an Audi all dressed up," the [salesman](#) explained to me about the Bentley. Since Bentley and Volkswagen were the same company, all that Bentley had done was take an Audi and redo the engine and interior to create a different car (and charge 5x as much). This was fascinating to me. Then I looked at the Rolls Royces. Compared to the Audi and Bentley, the Rolls Royce was much nicer. In fact, after test driving the Rolls Royce, the Audi and Bentley seemed like junk. Suddenly, I noticed how much plastic was used in the Audi and Bentley. I noticed where wood was and wasn't used on the two cars. I admired how quiet the Rolls Royce was compared to the Bentley and so on.

The point I'm trying to make is that the contrasts between the cars made me realize what I wanted to perceive (a \$40,000 Audi as "the ultimate car") was, in fact, not at all true. Instead, the \$40,000 Audi was actually a piece of crap because there was something far, far better out there. When you see the contrasts between what you want to perceive (the Audi as the ultimate car) and what the reality is (the Rolls Royce is much better), you start to realize you're fooling yourself.

The crazy thing about living in Los Angeles is there are so many "open houses" every Sunday. When you drive down the street in virtually every neighborhood, there are open houses. You can just as easily go to an open house for a \$500,000 house as you can to an open house for a \$20,000,000 house on a Sunday afternoon. They will open up a \$20,000,000 house to the public no matter where it might be, and you can just walk right in and look around. This is an incredible exercise in contrasts, as well. Seeing what could be is an exercise that can show us what's possible.

In order for you to really be the person you're capable of being, you need to give yourself contrasts between what you are and what you can become. Just as there are contrasts that exist between various materialistic things (cars, houses, watches, etc.), so too exist vast differences between people and their careers. The only way you can understand these differences is to allow yourself to become aware of contrasts out in the world and start seeking them out. If you're interested in really reaching your full potential and understanding what you're capable of, you need to seek out people who work in the careers and living the lives you want to live.

Several years ago, I was making the transition from running a fairly [traditional recruiting](#) company to running a recruiting company that also existed on the Internet. Instead of simply saying something like "I need Google!" and [advertising](#) online, I started going to all sorts of technology conferences. I will never forget going to the first technology conference and being absolutely amazed and blown away by what was possible and what other people were doing on the Internet. I was introduced to an entirely new world in terms of the way things worked. This contrast helped drive me forward and motivated me to incredible action.

How do you do the same thing with your career?

One of the most useful things you possibly can do is seek out and research other people who do something similar to you at different companies. Don't simply seek out people who are average. Seek out people who are the best in the world at whatever you do and read about them or try to spend time with them. When you investigate the histories of most great business people, current and former American presidents, and others, you will usually find they have studied the biographies of countless other successful people in their field in depth. In the case of American presidents, they often studied these biographies while they were in college, in their first jobs as politicians, and all along the way as they rose way up the chain to finally become President.

Great people, in any field, have generally studied their predecessors at great length to learn what made them successful. They never allowed themselves to feel content with who they were or what they'd achieved and continued to fill their minds with images and stories of people who'd achieved great things.

Where do you want to go? What do you want in your career? The most wonderful thing to understand is that the road map to get you where you want to go already exists. It's in the biographies of other successful people who've risen to the heights you want to reach. The biography may not be written, and it may be something you can learn about simply by asking, but it's something you need to know about and need to learn about. You should consistently fill your mind with the images and stories of people who have managed to do incredible things with their careers and lives because this is going to motivate you to make the impact of which you're capable. If you don't use the power of contrasts, you will never become the person you're capable of being and have the career you could otherwise have.

THE LESSON

To reach the goals to which you aspire, you must compare yourself with people superior to you for motivation. Most people prefer to look at life the way they wish it to be, rather than as it truly is. Move out of your comfort zones and face reality. Don't seek out or compare yourself with the average people around you, as doing so will only mire you in mediocrity rather than push you forward.