

If you look straight up into the night sky from the yard of my childhood home, the eastern half of the sky is lit up orange with all of the light from Chicago, while the western half is black. As a young man aspiring to greatness, I fell in love with the bright skyline of the city and dreamed of becoming a part of that glittering aura. But I have since decided that greatness comes from synthesizing opportunities in dark, unexplored spaces – not from being a brick in a building that someone else has already built, no matter how beautiful the building may be.

I was once a young boy in the suburbs leading a well-defined, simplistic life. I was successful in school and in other pursuits because I had a keen ability to follow the rules handed down by my superiors. My life was a robotic exercise of scoring perfectly on various measures of aptitude, some completely objective, others cloaked in subjectivity, but all just requiring correctly calculated, carefully composed responses. I proved quite adept at navigating this mechanistic world.

At seventeen, I took a summer job with an engineering company in a downtown skyscraper and fell in love with the city. Downtown was a gigantic machine, tall, fast, and important, and being plugged into the machine brought me a joy I had never known in the suburbs. I would take the subway back from the city in the evenings, but I never really tore myself away. At night I would drive to the lakefront and stare at the skyline from afar, reliving the rush of the grand machine. Gradually, the skyline came to do more for me than merely represent the charged, intense life of which I dreamed. In my youthful inexperience, I equated living and working downtown with success and greatness, and thus my ultimate dreams came to consist entirely of finding a place for myself in the glittering skyline. I paid little attention to what kind of work I would be doing there or how I intended to become a great leader; all I knew was that I was chasing that skyline. And I believed that if I could just bide my time and continue on my straightforward track, following rules, earning perfect marks, and catching early trains to work, my downtown dream would materialize soon enough.

I was reticent to go to college in Champaign because it seemed, in many ways, a terrible detour on my path to downtown. I thought it might spell the end of my youthful skyscraping dream, and the thought of losing that trail scared me. And once I was there, a hundred miles removed from the city lights, my dream did indeed begin to change – but the change was, much to my surprise, for the better. In Champaign I realized that my longstanding reverence for rules was naïve. I was thrust into contact with computer security and artificial intelligence researchers and hundreds of other frontiersmen who did not at all mind that their work had no precedent and might never succeed. All around me, lights in the labs would burn through the night as my peers stayed up breaking rules and trying to move the world forward. Those lit-up windows in three-story labs didn't make for much of a skyline, but as I looked into them over the years I began to see the truth about success. I saw that my greatness wouldn't entail following a path into a skyscraper downtown, but would rather involve inventing my own paradigm-bending ideas and then working through the night to turn them into reality.

At the beginning of my second stint at Microsoft, my manager gave me a one-page description of a problem and told me that it was my job for the summer to find a solution. He refused to answer any of my further questions, dismissing them with an Obi-Wan wave of the hand: "You don't need me to give you that information." My experience that summer cemented my conception of how to achieve personal success: drop into a space, become fluent in that space, divine or design solutions to the problems in that space, and then drive those solutions into reality. That process of personal entrepreneurship is how leaders become great – not by following any formula or blindly flying into city lights.

So now my goal isn't necessarily to get downtown, but rather to seek out interesting problems, involve myself in them, and ultimately solve them. It may be that the problems for which I feel passion cannot be solved from a cube in a skyscraper in a glittering skyline, but this will not deter me. I have resolved to hunt down those problems whether they lie downtown or not.

From time to time I still head out to the lakefront and stare at the skyline. It's beautiful, and vistas like that shouldn't go to waste. But I am no longer religiously attached to it, deluded that life is about nothing more. Now, staring up at the orange gradient in the sky from my parents' yard, I realize that instead of chasing the lights, I must venture into the black unknown. But I shall bring my own light wherever I go.