Field Notes, Volume 1

A year of essays on craft, attention, and the work of making things

— Vellumshore

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1. The Eight-Hour Day Is a Fiction

Last year I tracked my hours, honestly, for six weeks. The result was unsurprising and quietly liberating: I do about four hours of actual work in a working day. The other four hours are good hours too, not wasted ones. They are some mixture of preparation, recovery, transition, and the slow churn that lets the work happen at all.

I had suspected this for years. Most people who work with their minds suspect it. But there's a folk wisdom in the working-class roots of the eight-hour-day that we don't dignify enough: those eight hours were *physical labor*, and even there, the body needs breaks, and a foreman who watched closely knew that the third hour and the seventh hour were the productive ones and the rest was the work surrounding the work. The idea that knowledge workers should sustain eight hours of focused output is a category error imported from a context where it never really applied.

What I find more interesting than the four hours is what fills the other four. For me, it's roughly:

- An hour of *reading the system*: catching up on what colleagues did, what users reported, what the world is talking about.
- An hour of *talking*: calls, async messages, the kind of low-stakes conversation that's how teams actually coordinate.
- An hour of *waiting*: for builds, for reviews, for someone else's draft. This time is sacred. I used to fill it with phone-scrolling. Now I read.
- An hour of *the rest*: meals, walking, the time it takes to come back to the desk after lunch and actually start working.

The four "productive" hours are the time when something gets made. But they depend on the other four. The colleague conversation is what surfaced the bug. The waiting time is when the next idea arrived. The reading is what made the conversation possible.

The thing I'd ask anyone reading this to consider is whether you've internalized the eight-hour fiction so deeply that you're spending your *good* time feeling guilty about your *necessary* time. That's the trade we keep accidentally making, and it's why so many of us feel exhausted at the end of a week in which we did, by any honest measure, four good hours of work each day.

What changes when you accept the four

There's a small, practical shift that happens once you stop pretending the eight-hour day is real. You stop apologizing for the slow hours. You stop hiding the reading. You stop scheduling meetings during the windows where you actually produce. You start to treat the four good hours as the work you owe, and the other four as the conditions that make those hours possible.

I do not think this is laziness. I think it is the long-overdue recognition that knowledge work has rhythms that office work imported from factories does not. Honoring those rhythms is, in the long view, the most productive thing you can do.

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2. What Good Tools Are Quiet About

A good chef's knife has no personality. You pick it up. It cuts. It does not announce itself. It does not interrupt you with notifications about how the steel is performing. It does not require you to log in. It is sharp, and that is the only opinion it has.

I have been thinking lately about how rare this quality is in the software tools we use every day. We are surrounded by software that is in love with itself. It greets you with celebratory animations. It nudges you to share your achievements. It asks you to rate your experience. It updates itself on its own schedule and notifies you afterwards. It is, by the standards of any older craft, *loud*.

A good tool is quiet about itself because it has internalized a simple truth: it is not the point. The point is whatever the person using it is trying to make. Every gram of attention the tool draws to itself is a gram it has stolen from the work.

The cabinetmaker's chisel is quiet. The writer's pen is quiet. The architect's pencil is quiet. The tools we built before software, almost all of them, were quiet, because their makers understood that they were in the background of someone else's foreground.

The temptation of the celebrity tool

Why does software fail this so often? Partly because software companies have economic incentives that wood and steel do not have. A chisel is sold once. Software is sold continuously, and continuous selling requires continuous reminders that the thing you are using exists, has new features, has competitors, has a community, has a brand.

A chisel does not need engagement metrics. A software product, structured as a company in 2026, almost always does.

The trick, if you make software, is to keep the company's needs out of the product's surface area. The customer should be able to use the software for an hour and forget what

the company is called. They should be able to do their work with no awareness of you. They are not buying you. They are buying the silence between them and what they are trying to do.

The companies who understand this are the ones whose products people still use ten years later, quietly, without remembering when they started.

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3. The Cost of Caring About Color

I once spent four days on a color.

The product was a small consumer app. The color in question was the accent: the one tone that would carry the brand across the entire interface. I had narrowed it to two values that, on a calibrated monitor, looked almost identical. The team's product manager, reasonably, asked me to pick one and move on.

I did not pick one. I spent four days. I rendered both colors at different sizes, on different backgrounds, in different contexts. I checked them against accessibility contrast ratios at four font sizes. I built a prototype of the most-trafficked screen and lived with each color for a day. I asked three other designers I trust to look at both and report which felt warmer, which felt more confident, which felt cheaper, which felt more like the company we wanted to be.

In the end, the choice was clear. One was right. The other was almost right.

The almost-right color would have been fine. The product would have shipped. Nobody would have written reviews about the color. The company would have grown the same revenue in the same quarter. By the metrics that the product manager was reasonably tracking, my four days were a loss.

What the four days actually bought

Here is what I think the four days bought. They bought a color that the team stopped questioning. For the next eighteen months of building, nobody on the team had to wonder if the accent was right. We made a hundred small design decisions that flowed cleanly from the accent because the accent was settled. We did not relitigate it in every meeting. We did not get pulled into "what if we tried a brighter version" conversations. We did not have a quiet, persistent feeling that the brand was not quite us.

The price of *almost right* is that you pay it every time you encounter it. The price of *right* is paid once, up front, and never again.

I think this is what people mean when they talk about caring about details. It is not perfectionism. It is the recognition that small wrongness compounds. A color that is almost right is fine in any single moment and exhausting across a year. A color that is right is invisible.

This is, on a long view, why some products feel made and others feel assembled. The made ones had someone spend four days on a color. The assembled ones did not.

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4. On Receipts and Other Ephemera

I save receipts.

Not for accounting. For attention. I have a small wooden box on my desk, and into it goes the paper from things I bought that I cared about. The receipt from the bookshop where I bought the gift for my friend. The receipt from the diner where I had a long conversation with my sister. The receipt from the locksmith who fixed the lock on my old apartment door at 11pm one Wednesday for $40 and was kind about it.

Most of these receipts will mean nothing in ten years. Some will mean a great deal. The point is not that I sort them. The point is that the moment of saving them is a small ritual of

paying attention. I am announcing to myself, “this transaction was worth remembering.”

I am suspicious of the digital equivalent. Apps that “save your memories” are very efficient at it. They save everything by default, organize it by date, surface old photos on anniversaries. They do not require the ritual. They do not require the moment of judgment.

But the value of the wooden box on my desk is partly that it is small. It can only hold so much. Every new receipt is a decision: is this worth keeping? Most are not. Saving them all would erase the meaning of saving any of them.

Ephemera as memory architecture

The technical name for receipts and matchbooks and concert ticket stubs and the back of envelopes is *ephemera*. They were never meant to last. They are by design temporary, which is why deciding to keep one is a small assertion that this particular moment was not.

I think a good life accumulates a thoughtful amount of ephemera. Not a hoard. Not nothing. Some small, edited collection of physical objects that bear witness to where you were and what mattered. They are an external memory you can hold in your hands.

The boxes our great-grandparents left behind contain love letters and ticket stubs and a few photographs and a lock of hair. These are not because they were sentimental in a way we are not. They are because they had limited room and they used it for the things that mattered. We have unlimited room and we use it for everything, which is the same as nothing.

A wooden box, well-chosen, is a kind of editor.

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5. Why We Still Make Books

A book, as an object, is one of the most thoroughly solved problems in human design. It is sized to fit in two hands. It is portable. It needs no power source. It is readable in sunlight, on an airplane, in a tent, on a beach. It is shareable: one person can hand it to another and the protocol is universally understood. It is durable: a book published in 1850 still works.

The digital equivalent has none of these properties consistently. An e-reader is wonderful but it needs charging. A PDF is universal but it is awkward on a phone. An audio version requires headphones and a moment when you can listen. The book, the physical book, asks for nothing but light and quiet.

People who claim that books are obsolete tend to be people who are measuring the wrong thing. They are measuring information transfer rate, which a Wikipedia article wins. Books are not really about information transfer. They are about giving the reader a particular kind of extended attention, a particular kind of solitude, a particular kind of voice in their head for a number of hours. That experience is not improved by hyperlinks, push notifications, or comments sections. It is, in fact, almost always degraded by them.

The physical object and the long attention

What I notice about reading on paper, compared to reading on a screen, is that I argue with the text more on paper. I underline. I write in the margins. I dog-ear pages I want to return to. I have, over the years, accumulated a collection of books that are essentially conversations between me and the text, recorded in pencil over a decade of rereading.

I cannot do this on a Kindle. I have tried. The highlight feature is functional. The notes feature is functional. They produce a list of clippings that I can export. But the list is not the same as the marginalia. The marginalia is *spatial*. It lives in a particular place in a particular book, next to a particular sentence. When I open the book later, I find the note not because I searched for it but because my eye lands on it. The spatial memory is part of the meaning.

We will, I suspect, keep making books for the same reason we still make wooden tables in an age of cheap plastic furniture. Some things were already done well. The job now is to