

The Rule of the Edge

Learning to face adversity with curiosity

Jessica Butler

One of my favorite blogs to read each week is Leo Babauta's Zen Habits. I find that so much of what he writes about is applicable to music. In a recent post, Leo discusses the concept he calls "The Rule of the Edge." In simple terms, it is pushing yourself towards the edge of discomfort and what is difficult for you. Humans naturally dislike discomfort, so the initial response when faced with adversity is to flee or disengage in that activity. As musicians, we are faced with this choice every day when we put our horns to our lips to practice.

I cannot count the times that I have told students to practice what they are bad at. "Where's the fun in that" they must think. What's fun is when you start to improve! The thing about practicing at the edge of your discomfort and staying with what is difficult is that "what is difficult" will gradually become easier. Staying with "what is difficult" is a path that will lead to improvement and growth.

Is it possible to find joy while practicing at the edge? What if instead of running from initial discomfort and adversity, we learned to accept it? What if we found a way to love it? Perhaps we should figure out why we are predisposed to dislike discomfort and adversity: Because it doesn't feel good, and I don't know when this feeling will end. Because I'm worried about what others will think of me when they hear and see me struggle. Because if I'm not perfect, then that means I'm not good enough and may never be good enough. I have personally had all of those thoughts, yet it sounds utterly ridiculous when I type them all out. On the flip side: This struggle will not last forever. I will soon overcome it. Who cares what others think of me?! I'd like for others to see me as someone who is humble enough to work on what challenges me and to see me gradually improve.

We all have limited amounts of time that we can dedicate to our practicing. So why not attack the problem areas of your playing? Even by dedicating a small chunk of your practice time to an area of your playing that needs work will greatly help. The key is to

do it every day and to approach the task at hand with a dedicated mind and body. I have recently been using an app called Forest that helps me concentrate on the task at hand. Here's how it works: when you are ready to begin, you "plant a seed." For 25 minutes (or whatever specified time) that seed will grow into a tree. If you move your phone, then the seed will die. The goal is to grow as many trees as possible for your forest. Sometimes turning what is difficult into a game is helpful (and fun!). That uninterrupted practice time can go a long way. Sometimes I tell myself that I'm just going to work on a single task for the duration of time. For example, I will limit myself to only my routine or a single excerpt or etude. Multiple sets of 25 minutes on a specific task really do add up. Even if I want to quit (for any reason), I push myself to be productive and engaged until the timer sounds. Then rest, rinse, and repeat.

Keep in mind that practicing the rule of the edge does not mean pushing yourself until you collapse or hurt yourself; it is important to remain intentional, mindful, and healthful when practicing. Practicing the rule of the edge just means being OK with staying with what is difficult rather than quitting. I can't help but think about hiking the Colorado Trail with my husband Chris. There were so many times when we were ascending a mountain feeling exhausted, hungry and defeated. But we couldn't just stop— we were in the middle of nowhere. The only choice was to keep going. The reward of getting to the top of that mountain and taking in the view was priceless. As musicians, who even knows what the "top" is? But each challenge is a mountain to climb, and each success is a gorgeous view to savor.