



Blog >>The Worst

Nov 27, 2012

I don't really know who Dustin Curtis is, but he blogs a lot, and those blog entries often end up on Hacker News. Not too long ago, he wrote a blog post titled "The Best," in which he explains that he has *nice stuff*. That in fact, everything he owns is actually the very best of its kind.

Dustin's blog post culminates in the triumph of his quest for the perfect set of flatware. Apparently, this is what the perfect collection of forks, knives, and spoons looks like, which we can assume Dustin Curtis has in his kitchen drawer at this very moment:



The Best

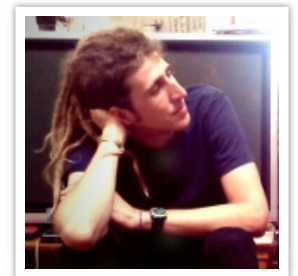
Those five "instruments" are \$50. Fifty dollars for a single fork, knife, and spoon (the smaller items are a salad fork and tea spoon — and I'm sure it would be strictly bush league to use them for any other purpose). Is the kitchen drawer that Dustin keeps these vessels in also the very best of its kind? We're left to wonder, but presumably so.

Boasting expensive material possessions isn't really anything new, but Dustin Curtis does it while framing his pursuit of these things as some admirable combination of special skill and uncompromising hardship. Stranger still, his thesis is that this is somehow the path to a *liberated life*. That being able to trust in the "goodness" of your material possessions will free you. Heaven forbid having to suffer the uncertainty that a dinner fork could... *malfunction*, when going for a bite?

But what absolutely blew me away was that the Hacker News readership seemed to agree. Or at least agree enough to not find it laughable, because it was the number one story on Hacker News for a fair amount of time.

The Worst

Moxie
Marlinspike



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So I'd like to respond with an alternate philosophy that I will call "the worst." *The worst* stands in direct contrast to Dustin Curtis, and suggests that one is actually more likely to engender a liberated life by getting the very worst of everything whenever possible.

The basic premise of *the worst* is that both ideas and material possessions should be tools that serve us, rather than things we live in service to. When that relationship with material possessions is inverted, such that we end up living in service to them, the result is consumerism. When that relationship with ideas is inverted, the result is ideology or religion.

Any reasonable person wouldn't feel liberated by a \$50 fork, but constrained by it. One wouldn't be able to help but worry: is it being cared for correctly, is my friend going to mess it up when absentmindedly tapping the table with it, is it going to get dropped or stepped on if a dance party erupts in the kitchen? After all, it is *the perfect* fork, what if something happened to it to make it... *not perfect*? The point shouldn't be the cutlery, but the meal — and more importantly the relationships involved with preparing and sharing it.

Partisans of *the worst* will get 15 sets of cutlery (out of a bucket that's an overflowing fucking sea of cutlery) for fifty *cents* at the neighborhood thrift shop, and as a result, won't have the slightest reservation if five of their housemates simultaneously decide to start a band that uses nothing but spoons for instruments. Partisans of *the worst* won't give a shit if someone drops a dish while people are hanging out in the kitchen. They can push their crappy bicycle to the limit without worrying if it gets scratched — without even being too concerned about it getting stolen. They can play a spontaneous game of tag in the park without worrying about their clothes getting messed up, or go for an impromptu hike without worrying about their shoes getting scuffed or dirty. Partisans of *the worst* will have more fun occasionally sneaking into the hot tub on the roof of a random apartment building than owning a hot tub of one's own which is available for daily use.

The logic of *the best* is so pernicious because it's poised to monopolize — an emphasis on the consumption of material goods can easily translate into a life of generalized consumption. A whole language can start to develop around not just the consumption of goods, but the consumption of *experience*: "We *did* Prague." "We *did* Barcelona."

"The best moments of my life, I never want to live again."

Dustin Curtis also suggests that as a partisan of *the best*, he is taking on the hardship of truly understanding a domain in order to identify the best consumer good within that domain. Presumably, this means he now knows more about forks than any partisan of *the worst* ever will.

But internet research isn't necessarily the same as understanding. No matter how much research they do, a partisan of *the best* might not ever know as much about motorcycles as the partisan of *the worst* who takes a series of hare-brained cross-country motorcycle trips on a bike that barely runs, and ends up learning a ton about how to fix their constantly breaking bike along the way. The partisan of *the best* will likely never know as much about sailing as the partisan of *the worst*

who gets the shitty boat without a working engine that they can immediately afford, and has no choice but to learn how to enter tight spaces and maneuver under sail.

The best means waiting, planning, researching, and saving until one can acquire the perfect equipment for a given task. Partisans of *the best* will probably never end up accidentally riding a freight train 1000 miles in the wrong direction, or making a new life-long friend while panhandling after losing everything in Transnistria, or surreptitiously living under a desk in an office long after their internship has run out — simply because optimizing for the best probably does not leave enough room for those mistakes. Even if the most stalwart advocates of *the worst* would never actually recommend *choosing* to put oneself in those situations intentionally, they probably wouldn't give them up either.

Green & Responsibility

Some amongst *the best* will resort to a resources perspective and say that in this increasingly disposable world, it's refreshingly responsible for those of *the best* to be making quality long-term buying decisions. But we're a long way away from a shortage of second-hand forks in the global north — let's take care of those first.

Simplify

Hacker News could possibly be drawn to Dustin Curtis' cutlery because it's reminiscent of "simplify." The makers of the cutlery took the concept to its core essentials, and nominally perfected them. But to me, "simplify" is about removing clutter — about de-emphasizing the things that are unimportant so that it's easy to focus on the things that are. We shouldn't be putting any emphasis on the things in our life, we should be trying to make them as insignificant as possible, so that we can focus on what's important.

In a sense, *the best* gives a nod to this by suggesting that getting the very best of everything will somehow make those things invisible to us. That if we can blindly trust them, we won't have to think about them. But *the worst* counters that if we'd like to de-emphasize things that we don't want to be the focus of our life, we probably shouldn't start by obsessing over them. That we don't simplify by getting the very best of everything, we simplify by arranging our lives so that those things don't matter one way or the other.

Perhaps P.O.S. said it best in their recent video: "Fuck Your Stuff"



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