Life, unlike literature, does not foreshadow its plot twists. Last December, I was cooling down after a Sunday morning jiu-jitsu class—something I had done most Sundays for the past two years. A friend was talking about the need for prostate exams starting when you are thirty-five years old. I’m thirty-five and thought, “Damn, I’m starting to get old.” The clarity with which that moment is preserved in my mind’s eye is strange. Because, almost as soon as I had that thought, I had another. I was hit by a wave of dizziness and nausea and thought, “What is this burning in my chest?”

Hindsight is 20/20. We can examine past events with a clarity that escapes us in the moment. Looking back, I knew something was seriously wrong as soon as I stood up from my chair and stumbled, grabbing my gear and heading out the door. I managed to drive myself home (I know, stupid… hindsight), where I sat in my recliner shivering, trying to shake the pain out of my arms, breathing deeply against the dull fire low in my chest, and trying to pretend like I wasn’t scared out of my mind in front of my three young children.

My wife, and Doctor Google, saved my life by not-so-subtly explaining that I needed to get to the ER ASAP. Another crystalline memory from that day is when a very kind ER nurse explained to me what “high levels of troponin” from my blood work meant. “That means,” he said with the same care you might lovingly pour a bucket of ice-water on your grandmother, “you’re having a heart attack.”

— from A.E. Housman, “Terrance, This is Stupid.”
Our physical life culminates with a lethal dose of accumulated stress. This may be sudden and catastrophic; slow and insidious, as from a disease; or attenuated and dignified. There is no way to plan against all possible outcomes, but if you consider the wear on your body as being similar to doses of stress – something we cultivate in barbell training – it highlights a benefit of training beyond the obvious practical value of strength.

The first step in any training cycle is to induce a great enough stress that it signals the body to change – this is known as the Alarm or Shock Phase of the adaptation process. Alarm produces transient responses that, if chronic, would be severely damaging to long-term health. From “The Barbell Prescription”: “Classically, this stage is associated with the release of epinephrine and increases in blood pressure, heart rate, ventilation, attention, serum glucose, and neuromuscular efficiency. In short, this is the ‘fight or flight’ stage.” [1] The stress we cultivate in training is low-dose and allowed to dissipate.

The classic responses named above, like elevated blood pressure and heart rate – harmful when they are long-term responses to chronic stress – return to their baseline through an intentional recovery process. Through this cycle your body gets better at conducting stress; its responsive processes get better both at responding and returning to baseline levels. This is why (at least in part) we observe benefits to these processes as we direct and control the stress, allowing ourselves to recover from it, and as a result improve our resistance, making us stronger and harder to kill.

The idea of intentionally administering sub-lethal doses of stress through training to, in effect, build your immunity, reminds me of a scene from “The Princess Bride.” The heroic Man in Black, having dueled and bested Inigo Montoya and overcome the rhyming giant Fezzick, presumes to match wits with Vizzini, the Sicilian mastermind, gambling his life to rescue the titular princess. After revealing a tasteless, odorless poison, the Man in Black takes two wine glasses, turns his back, and empties the packet of poison, then he turns back and places one glass in front of Vizzini and one in front of himself, saying “All right. Where is the poison? The battle of wits has begun. It ends when you decide and we both drink and find out who is right and who is dead.”

Through a dizzying display of non-sequiturs and hasty generalizations that vitiates Aristotelian logic, Vizzini chooses a goblet, and they drink. Thinking he has tricked the Man in Black, the villain dies, mid-laugh. The hero reveals that both glasses were poisoned and that he had spent the last few years building an immunity to the poison. This process is called mithridatism.

King Mithridates VI of Pontus was a thorn in Rome’s side during the first-century BC who had a somewhat complex relationship with poison. His father had been poisoned, dying publicly at a feast a lá King Joffrey, and his mother was not a fan of the joint rule between her and Mithridates VI that followed. Perhaps driven by paranoia Mithridates became an amateur pharmacist. He was famous for his use of poison, on his enemies, his family and harem, and, eventually, on himself. He is perhaps best known, however, for his practice of self-administered sub-lethal doses of poison to build immunity to it (tested, supposedly, when he attempted suicide by poison, failed, and required the services of a soldier instead). [1] A “mithridate” is a somewhat mythical elixir for a universal antidote, “a panacea to all toxic ills.” [2]

Most of the reasons why we pick up a barbell have to do with the functional benefit of increasing strength. We know that improvements in absolute strength affect every way that we interact with our environment. A measurable improvement in strength also represents other physiological and mental changes that allow us to display strength to a greater degree than we could before we started training. When you successfully lift (actually lift) heavier and heavier weights, you are demonstrating to the universe that something changed that allowed you to do so. It can be difficult to quantify all the changes that occur in order for you to squat more, press more, or deadlift more weight, but we know
that something has to change to take you from weaker to stronger and that those changes are good things.

The point being that we tend to focus on the practical benefits of strength training: A stronger you can better interact with your environment in all the ways you like to do so; stronger is better. But this end result is, in many ways, a sign for many other changes that occur within your body when you train for strength.

Training is as close as we can get for a mithridate for life. I now have three stents in the arteries around my heart—two of them in the LAD, which is sometimes called the “widow maker” artery. There was a phrase my wife and I heard several times from nurses and doctors who were trying to comfort us during the heart attack, during the process of getting three stents put in, and while recovering in the Cardiac Critical Care Unit. They said that I would be okay because I am strong.

Now, I realize that these are words said to scared people to make them feel better. I also realize that the medical staff had no idea I had deadlifted 600# in training just weeks before. But these words have meaning, even if they aren’t knowingly talking about my ability to produce force against an external resistance. At the critical moments and during my recovery, it didn’t matter that I had once run a marathon; it didn’t matter that I had earned my blue belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu or how long or hard I could fight; it didn’t really matter that I had deadlifted 600# pounds either. But, the process of getting to that last goal mattered, and it still does.

My own training has both a new urgency and a renewed focus. My goal now isn’t simply to put more weight on the bar. My goal is to train – to induce stress, forcing my body to react and change and get stronger. Strength is the happy by-product, but my focus has shifted from the end result to the process.

For most of us, life occurs alongside training. And life, of course, doesn’t always go as planned. Injuries, marriage, divorce, births, deaths, and the lack of herd immunity are a few things that can upset our training. Certainly, there are times you cannot train. Some illnesses should not be trained through. Some injuries or surgeries require healing before you should stress the tissues that need to get stronger. But, they do need to get stronger. And stress from life’s twists and turns is real and harmful to your health.

Obviously, strength training is not the magic elixir of health. If it were, I wouldn’t have had a heart attack at a young age. There are other aspects of health and fitness that we should not ignore. But just getting under the bar is a solid first step and perhaps the best foundation for physical and psychological health. As Dr. Sullivan is fond of saying, “Everyone who can lift weights should lift weights, with very few exceptions.” Even in sub-optimal conditions, the goal doesn’t change: apply the appropriate stress to make you stronger tomorrow than you are today.

We have made the argument many times that strength is the most useful physical adaptation we can get from training. Strength affects all other physical attributes. [4] It plays a role in every way we interact with our environment. [5] It has the greatest downstream effects on fitness for every general physical task. [6] And strength is eminently trainable. But, when I take the big-picture view (I do that a lot more now), I come back to this: It mattered that I was strong when there was nothing in my power that I could do to survive, to get back to my kids. Whether you want to call it strength, or robustness,
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or physical or mental toughness, the process that leads to improving your ability to produce force matters.

So, we can add to Vizzini’s enumerated classic blunders: “the most famous of which is ‘never get involved in a land war in Asia,’ but equally as famous is ‘never go in against a Sicilian when DEATH is on the line.’” Never underestimate the value of training for the sake of training. How you do it, and why, will change from person to person – and may depend on the season of your life. But the struggles under the bar are important; this is as close as we have to a mithridate for life.

References