

The gift of pain

Jensen Huang — founder and CEO of Nvidia, the AI chip company that's on a rocket ride — last week offered a sadistic wish while [speaking to Stanford students](#): "I hope suffering happens to you." Without pain and suffering, there's no resilience, he argued. And without resilience, there's no greatness.

"Greatness is not intelligence," Huang said. "Greatness comes from character. And character isn't formed out of smart people. It's formed out of people who suffered."

The best stuff, at work and in life, is often unearthed in dark, sad, scary, painful moments. It's a great paradox of life and business. Most of what we've learned about starting and running companies (Politico, Axios and Axios HQ) has flowed from weathering our own mistakes — and suffering.

A recent personal example: My wife, Autumn, was back in the hospital for the sixth time in a year, battling a persistent medical issue. (She's now home, and continues to recover.) Few things provide me more solitary joy than fly-fishing for bonefish on the Bahamas' skinny flats. I had a trip on the books, but of course bagged it instantly. A joyous weekend was suddenly sad. But in the suffering, something magical happened: One by one, all three of our college kids — unprompted — left school to be with their mom.

My daughter skipped final-semester festivities to read to her mom — and keep me busy. Our two sons showed a tenderness you rarely see in 19-year-old men. The weekend ended with deep, indelible conversations about life, death, meaning and grit. You never wish for pain or fear for your kids. But mine would be less clear-eyed, less empathetic, less connected, less loving without it.

Huang is right: We *do* need pain to lower our expectations, or at least calibrate realistic ones. A few ways to think about this at work and home:

1. **Fully embrace it.** We naturally want to run from pain. Don't. Throw yourself into the fullness of it. Don't deny what's happening — explore it. Understand what's happening, why, and how you and others are handling it.
2. **Learn from it.** Almost everything good I know about relationships, business and leadership was born of painful mistakes or situations. I'm sure that's why Huang argued you need suffering before you get character — and character before you get any semblance of greatness. That's why at Axios, we talk a lot about "[when shit happens, shine](#)" — to encourage people to find good in bad jams.
3. **Prepare for it.** We want to protect our kids, and ourselves, from brutal realities of life — tragedy, sadness, failure. We're better off fortifying ourselves for this reality by being more honest, talking more deeply about

the layers of life, and strengthening our minds, bodies and souls for inevitable hardships.

4. **Share Huang's view.** His speech grabbed my attention because so few people admit it. More leaders, parents and teachers need to talk about tough stuff.

A little grit goes a long way. A lot of grit creates Nvidia — and deeper meaning.