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Story of the day **Portrait**

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We live in a time when privileged men are increasingly being reminded of their many check marks and privileges. But the follow-up question is: *what's next?* What can you do with the realization that you are an extremely privileged person? I know few people who have a better answer to that question than Rob Mather.

He was your average consultant - until he started the biggest movement against the biggest killer of children

Correspondent Progress

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Photography by Francesca Jones (for the Correspondent)

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In the late evening of June 9, 2003, Rob Mather, a British consultant, was sitting on the couch watching the news when a twist of fate changed his life. In fact, he had wanted to turn off the television, but as he later explained, "I'm not very handy with the remote control, and that led to a major change in my life." Source/Link: The Atlantic: 'The Greatest Good'

The channel switched to a documentary about a girl named Terri. One evening in November 1998, she, a toddler less than two years old, was tucked into bed warmly by her mother. Maybe it was the fatigue, maybe it was the stress, but Terri's mum had done something she usually never did. She had lit a cigarette in the house. A cigarette she had thoughtlessly left beside her child's bed.

When the firefighters rushed into the room not much later, they thought there was a black plastic doll in the cot. Until they heard a soft, groaning sound.

For days, Terri teetered on the edge of death. Twice she stopped breathing, twice she was resuscitated. She lost her fingers, toes, ears, nose, a foot, and only the skin under her wet diaper remained intact. Source/Link: People Magazine: 'Every day my Terri inspires me. I'm lucky to have her' But miraculously, she survived the fire. After a few weeks, she lifted her eyes and spoke her first word since the accident: "Mama."

It was too much for Terri's mother, who was consumed with guilt. Source/Link: The Sun: 'I gave my baby 90 per cent burns... years on she has forgiven me' She cut off all contact with the family, leaving Terri's father on his own. He quit his job to take care of his daughter every hour of the day. Every morning he washed and anointed her, again and again he took her to the hospital, and then he always

slept on the floor next to her. When Terri was scared, he held her; when she couldn't take it anymore, he encouraged her.

Meanwhile, there was one thing that kept him going: his daughter's joie de vivre. Terri was fun and mischievous, curious and determined. She seemed to be the only one in the whole world who could forget her disability. Source/Link: Watch the documentary here.

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“I'm not an emotional person,” Rob Mather, the consultant, would say years later of the night he saw the Terri documentary, “but my wife and I already had two small children by then, and I'm not ashamed to say tears streamed down my cheeks for the entire hour.' Source/Link: The Atlantic: 'The Greatest Good'

Now most people who see something touching on television go on with their lives the next day. But not Rob Mather. He couldn't forget Terri, he had to do something.

We live in a time when privileged men are increasingly being reminded of their many check marks and privileges - rightly so. Listen: 'An at times uncomfortable conversation with our source of inspiration: Joris Luyendijk'. But the follow-up question is: *what's next* ? What can you do with the realization that you are an extremely privileged person?

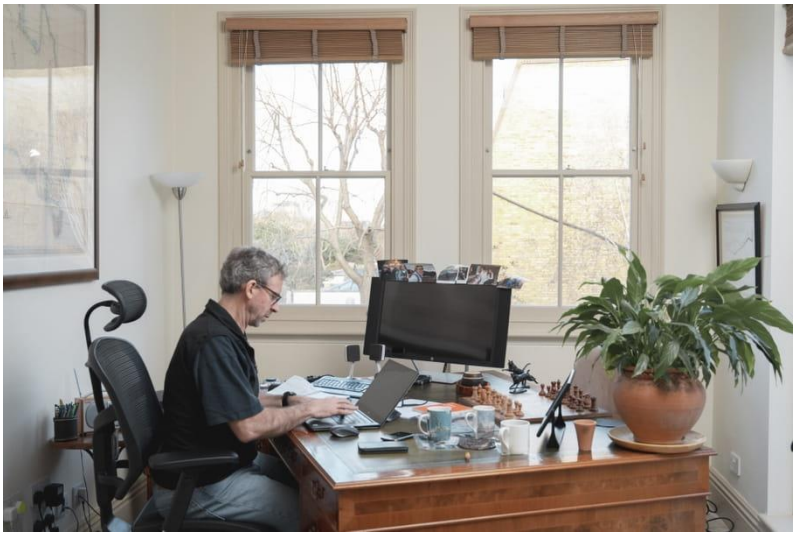
I know few people who have a better answer to that question than Rob Mather.

The first thing you notice when you contact him is how quickly he replies to his emails. This is a man with a high energy level. 'I always had tons of energy,' he says when I ask him about his childhood. "I always ran from A to B."
When Rob talks about his childhood you almost get tickled by how successful he was. At the age of eleven he won a scholarship to Hampton, a prestigious boys' school in southwest London. He soon proved to be one of the best in his class. He got top grades in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, and Spanish, French and Latin - all came easily to him.

If he had scored two hat-tricks in one game for the third week in a row, he was even a little embarrassed

As if that wasn't enough, Rob also turned out to be ridiculously sporty. Running, high jumping, football – he could do it all. After Hampton he continued his studies at the University of Cambridge, because they had the best football team there. In 1987 he even played as a striker in the classic 'Cambridge versus Oxford' Varsity match, the last time this match was played at the old Wembley Stadium. The result was 2-1 in favour of, you guessed it, Cambridge.
Source/Link: Oxford University Association Football Club: 'List of Varsity Matches'

Yes, it sometimes happened that Rob did not finish in first place. For example, there was the time he applied for a scholarship, came second, and said to a friend, "*Bloody hell*, wait till I get the b*****d who came first" (that turned out to be the friend in question). But otherwise Rob was mainly used to winning. Then he ran a hundred meters, and saw - as he crossed the finish line - that the rest were ten meters behind. Those ten meters were a metaphor for his whole life.



This is not to say that Rob was an arrogant boy. If he had scored two hat-tricks in one game for the third week in a row, he even felt a little embarrassed, but hey, he couldn't help it either. He just liked to get the most out of it. Or as his grandfather used to say, “Concentrate on your knitting, the results will follow.'

When I ask Rob about the most difficult moment in his youth, he is silent for a moment. "That's an interesting..." he begins hesitantly. "I would almost like to say that I have not had any difficult moments."

A privileged cliché

What followed was an equally successful career – first four years in Italy as a consultant for a major American company (skiing every weekend!). Then two years of Harvard Business School ('*It was brilliant. Absolutely loved it*'). Subsequently, Rob had the opportunity to become a co-owner of a company that organized trade shows. After three years, he felt that the place was not growing fast enough, and he started working as a manager at one of the largest media companies in the world.

This is where Rob really learned the meaning of making money. The company had 46 divisions with 1,400 employees around the world. Some divisions had a profit margin of 5 percent, others of 20 percent. Rob's job: find out what the

5 percent had to do to become 20 percent. That went very well for him. Every quarter more profit was made, and Rob had a nice profit share in his contract.

So – what have we got so far?

A top student who was the best at everything, a top student who studied at Cambridge and Harvard, a top talent who walked in as a consultant and manager. This may sound like a lot, but let's face it: there really wasn't that much special about Rob Mather. He was "successful" by conventional standards of success. He was a privileged cliché, with his carefree youth and glittering career. There are so many people like this and most of them just live their predictable lives.

Don't get me wrong: I listened with fascination as Rob talked about the first half of his career for an hour and a half. But that was mostly because I knew what came next.

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When Rob Mather woke up on June 10, 2003, little did he know that his life would take a completely different direction. He had been looking for a new challenge for some time, but now all he could think about was little Terri. And so he sent out a call that I could still find twenty years later on the acclaimed website *mumsnet.com.* The title:

Little girl suffered 90% burns. Charity swim? Email help?'

Source/Link: Check out Mather's post on the forum.

Rob had an idea. He wanted to raise money for Terri, and had asked two friends to sponsor a 22-mile swim. They immediately agreed, and then Rob

thought, "Why not ask a lot more people?" Source/Link: Richmond and Twickenham Times: 'Swimming for Terri'

A few months later, 10,000 people from 73 countries took part in more than 150 swims. Source/Link: Swim for Terri: 'Total Raised' Funds were raised in Fiji and

Canada, Vietnam and Spain, Tonga and China and oh yes – on an island in the mid-Atlantic, with the Royal Air Force flying out eight university cadets to participate in the Swim for Terri there.

"What shall we do next year?" one of the participants asked Rob.

"Let's get a million people to swim," he blurted out.

Source/Link: Against Malaria Foundation: 'History'

But for what purpose? Terri now had enough savings to last her life, so Rob started brainstorming about the next step. That went something like this. Cardiovascular diseases? Nope, that's largely in developing countries and is well-funded. Cancer? Same, already relatively well-funded. Landmines? Too political. Clean drinking water? A huge problem, requires vast sums. Diarrhoea? Interesting, but very complicated. Tuberculosis? Also very complicated.

> The World Bank estimates the global cost of clean drinking water at $150 billion per year.
>
> Source/Link: Reuters: 'The cost of clean water: $150 billion a year, says World Bank'

Malaria then? Let's see: the biggest killer of pregnant women. The biggest killer of children under five. At least 500 million cases of illness every year, and three thousand children die every day. That's the equivalent of seven full jumbo jets of under 5s. Is there a solution if you fall sick? Yes, pills. But then you're raising money for the pharmaceutical industry. That's treatment. Prevention? The most effective thing is a mosquito net. Impregnate it with insecticide and you're done. The cost of a net? A few dollars. This sounds simple. I like simple. Does it work? Yes. *Bloody hell* , why isn't a lot more money going here?!

Rob made a few phone calls to malaria experts and quickly understood that this was an absolute no-brainer. The world did far too little about mosquito control. In 2004, only 5 million mosquito nets with perishable insecticide were distributed. Source/Link: WHO: 'World malaria report 2008', p. 40. And that while thorough scientific research showed that you could save a child's life with a few hundred mosquito nets.

> And by the way: economic research showed that for every dollar you invest in malaria control, you get back six to forty dollars in extra economic growth.
>
> Source/Links: (1) Rima Shretta et al., 'Malaria elimination transmission and costing in the Asia-Pacific: Developing an investment case' (2020); (2) Roll Back Malaria: 'Investing for a malaria-free world' (2015), p. 4

This is how the idea for the World Swim Against Malaria was born. Rob now only had to convince a million people to participate, and he decided to apply his self-invented 'twenty-minute rule'. "I often challenge myself by thinking, If I want to achieve this, how would I do it in twenty minutes?" Source/Link: Denver Frederick: 'The Against Malaria Foundation: Lessons from a Perennial Top-Rated Charity' In this case, the answer seemed simple. He started with 20 phone calls to 20 strangers, asking each to provide 5,000 swimmers. If he succeeded, he would already have 100,000, which would be a decent springboard to try and reach a million. Source/Link: Effective Altruism Forum: 'AMA: Rob Mather, founder and CEO of the Against Malaria Foundation'

"It's simple," said Rob. “When we swim, we save lives. If we don't swim, we don't save lives, so let's swim.'

> Mather's full quote was: 'It's simple: if we swim, we save lives. If we don't swim, we don't save lives, so let's swim. Malaria is born in water – let's kill it in water.'

When Rob and his team hit 100,000, they visited a multi-billion-dollar fund in Geneva. Source/Link: This was The Global Fund, a fund that focuses on fighting HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The Global Fund website "Do you realize that you are the largest anti-malaria movement in the world?" they said there. Source/Link: Effective Altruism: 'Against Malaria Foundation: What we do, How we do it, and the Challenges' Rob responded in surprise, "Are you saying that a few calls from the back room of my house in London has created the world's largest movement against the world's biggest disease killer of children?"
The answer was yes. In 2005, more than 250,000 people from 130 countries participated in the World Swim Against Malaria. *The Times* spoke of 'the biggest charity splash in history'. Source/Link: The Times: 'Bold stroke in malaria battle'

But this was just the beginning. Initially, Rob had planned to return to management - he received another lucrative offer to become the director of a large chicken company. But the thought of spending the next few years selling dead chickens suddenly sounded very sad. Moreover, he had just set up the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF) to distribute the sponsorship money. Couldn't he continue with that?

In business, Rob had learned that all too often change is a matter of falling dominoes. You just have to figure out how the lines run, and then push the first domino. Rob was a star in finding those first dominos, which kept his anti-malarial army growing. Time and time again he applied his twenty-

minute rule, which usually meant making as many calls as possible in as little time as possible.

This was perhaps the most important ingredient of his success: Rob has never been afraid to ask others for help. Even if they are complete strangers. As a result, AMF has never spent a penny on bookkeeping, the website or legal assistance, because all of that is provided pro bono.

> The foundation is now registered in fourteen countries, but still has no head office. To this day, Rob works from his own home in London. Less than 1 percent goes to overheads (the salary of eight employees plus some travel expenses), so the rest can be used to buy mosquito nets that are distributed by local partners.
> Source/Link: Against Malaria Foundation: 'Registered Charity Status'

When Rob sought out four translators to make the website available in German, he sent 48 emails, and received 44 positive responses within 24 hours. 'I could have had the website translated eleven times for free,' he laughs. Source/Link: That's what Mather said in this lecture (starting at 9:53)."You want to jump up and kiss people when that happens."

At the same time, Rob is downright cynical about the charity sector. About the lack of transparency, the lack of accountability, and the lack of rigorous evaluation. That is precisely why he wants to show every donor exactly what happens with the money, and to constantly monitor and prove with data that the mosquito nets reach their destination. Every donation is registered on the foundation's website and you can follow every mosquito net. Source/Link: Here you can view all donations and mosquito nets distributed. Because trust is good, but data is better.

All this time, Rob has never sought a podium for himself; this is the first time that he – at my request – tells extensively about his life. As director of AMF, he has never spent anything on marketing anyway, and has put all his focus on building an operation that is as efficient as possible.

The result: The Against Malaria Foundation is one of the best charities in the world. It is the FC Barcelona of philanthropy. Thorough economic analysis shows that the foundation is one of the most cost-effective in saving human lives. At the time of writing, it has raised almost half a *billion* dollars, and

distributed more than 200 million mosquito nets to protect more than 400 million people. Source/Link: Against Malaria Foundation: 'Donation statistics' In doing so, it has made a colossal contribution to the global fight against malaria.

What began as a *fundraiser* for little Terri ended in an operation that — by conservative estimates — has saved more than 100,000 lives. *And counting*.

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What would have happened if Rob had pressed a different button on his remote that night in 2003? He suspects that he would simply have remained the manager of a medium-sized company. Then he probably would have just continued climbing the conventional career ladder.

Frankly, I think that's an inspiring thought. You don't have to play the Good Samaritan from an early age to make a difference. You can be an average consultant one day, and the next day be at the forefront of the fight against the world's biggest killer of children. In 2005, the equivalent of seven jumbo jets full of children died per day, now there are less than three. Source/Link: UNICEF: 'Long-lasting Insecticidal Nets – Market and Supply Update' (2022), p. 2

It is difficult to really comprehend these kinds of figures. The human brain is simply not suited to *feeling abstract statistics.* Source/Link: I thought this was a nice piece about it. Effective Altruism Forum: 'On Caring' But when I ask Rob about the most emotional moment of his time at AMF, he tells me about the time they distributed 50,000 nets in Uganda's western Nile region. One day Rob called a local Red Cross office in Uganda and spoke to an employee who said, "We have one of the village chiefs in the office here, he would like to speak with you."

Rob knew the figures for this region. In the previous months, 357 cases of malaria had been registered in a village with 700 inhabitants. Two boys had died. Rob spoke briefly with the village chief, Mohammed, who thanked him for his support. From his home office in London, Rob replied that they at AMF were happy to help, even though they were thousands of miles away.

Six months later, the new figures came in. The number of malaria cases in the village had been reduced to seven. That was a decrease of 98 percent, and the next month there were no more cases of illness at all. Around that time, Rob received an email from Mohammed. The village chief had walked six miles to reach the Red Cross office, where he dictated a short message:

Mr. Rob,
Malaria no longer exists in our village.
Mohammed

When Rob tells me about this e-mail, the same thing happens as twenty years earlier, when he saw the documentary about little Terri. Tears spring to his eyes. I am reminded of a quote by the philosopher Bertrand Russell. 'The mark of a civilized man', he is said to have once said, 'is the ability to look at a table of numbers and cry.'