46 Days of Phish

Improvisational Philosophy on, in, and around music

Tweed Jefferson

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"I write differently from what I speak, I speak differently from what I think, I think differently from the way I ought to think, and so it all proceeds into deepest darkness."

– Franz Kafka

How pathetic, that I must contest the world's verdict in the world's own words, even though my objection arrives already translated.

To-Be-Read Pile

Now that this phase of my life is over, I can finally check out these books:

Deal

My Three Decades of Drumming, Dreams, and Drugs with the Grateful Dead

Bill Kreutzmann and Benjy Eisen

Concepts We'll Ponder

Identity, Improvisation, and Community in the Phish Experience

Stephanie C. Jenkins, Natalie J. Dollar, and Dana Reason

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Coda Ultima Absconditus

(because I like weird music and puzzles)

Dorian Riven

Tweed Jefferson
46 Days of Phish:
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Dedication

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about you...it is.

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Introduction 1.0

Who cares about the ramblings of a Madman written to the tune of an esoteric jam band? Hopefully me, once this piece is finished! Writing, like music, like life, is transient and impermanent. A series of moments that we either make sense of or we don't. That stick with us or are forgotten.

That's what I'm doing here: improvising. On the record.

As of today, I've never listened to Phish. I mean, I've heard of them. Someone played a couple of their Halloween cover albums for me over a decade ago, but that's where my knowledge ended. The thing is, I've been a "professional" musician, for better or worse, for almost twenty-five years. I'll be forty-six this year and figured I'd do a forty-six day listening journal in (or slightly out of). No rules, just put on a Phish record or concert every day, hear, and write.

Over the decades, I've undertaken composing, arranging, and producing hundreds of songs and dozens of albums. I've worked with musicians who have worked with musicians who have worked with members of Phish (so that makes me like a second cousin, twice-removed or something). I've also written several books and coached first-time authors as an editor and publisher. That's not just trauma dumping or some narcissistic protest against charlatanism. Just giving you a little lore behind the unreliable narrator – this isn't the first time this Madman has rambled on (and sang my song). I do have a plan. Sorta.

Another note: I'm AuDHD and experience music – and life – in an atypical way. This will sometimes be mentioned explicitly in some of the essays, but it's not something I think about all the time – it's just my reality, I didn't even know what autism was (beyond the tropes) until I was thirty-five – so I often won't preface any weirdness with a disclaimer.

Introduction 2.0

It's a trip going back and looking at these at the end. Like when you spend a weekend locked in the studio and go back the next week to listen to the tracks and wonder, "who the hell let a drunk flamingo with a stylophone into the studio while we were gone?" That's why you always record the jams. Then again, there's a certain appeal to the impermanence of it all.

We probably all have something we love that we wish we could experience again for the first time. You may have first been turned on to Phish twenty or thirty years ago while in an entirely different physical and metaphorical time and space than I am. But I hope some of these experiences can help remind you of your own journey in one way or another. *That's* why you always record the jams. Then again, there's a certain appeal to the impermanence of it all.

Calling myself a Madman on day one is hilarious now, as this experience felt like narrating my own descent into Madness. I don't even know what day it is and my exoskeleton feels like a straight jacket. I joked that this was going to end up Kafkaesque – in a biographical, "Diaries" sense, not that of the oft-misused colloquialism. I need to learn to keep my damn mouth shut. I've only even read one of his books, which makes the comparison even funnier. I feel like Brad Nowell, but with too many guitars and not nearly enough drugs. I should have flexed harder. I had no plan. I didn't know what I was doing. I might have done overdid it, Gretchen (Pac-Man noise).

If you've ever wanted to write a book, this can be inspiration that it *can* be done in under two months. And a warning. What's even crazier is all of the words I *didn't* write. *That's* why you always record the jams. Then again, there *is* a certain appeal to the impermanence of it all.

Introduction 3.0

Okay, I'm back. Haven't completely lost it and spontaneously combusted into a little green globule on a drum stool yet. More like a stain. I didn't edit a lot or do many rewrites. It's supposed to be improv, so I left in enough mistakes for it to still feel live, but cleaned up the mix enough that the signal wasn't too muddy.

I now fear that I may have done the reader a disservice by not losing my mind *enough* on these pages. At least, not providing an accurate enough representation of said mind-losing. The fact that I (spoiler alert) only collapsed into gibberish once is astounding.

A quick content warning: this book contains moments of human behavior.

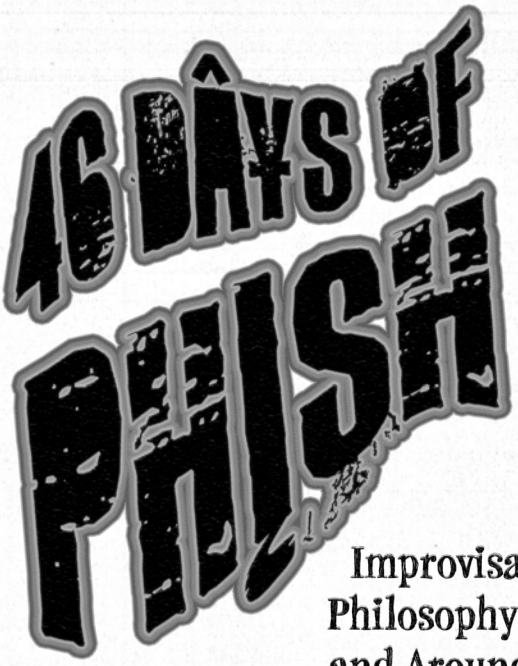
I should probably add (another) disclaimer: I might read the books and take the classes, but that does not guarantee I know what the fuck I'm talking about. I don't expect you to agree with everything I say. I certainly don't.

Editor's Note(s)

"Listening to" at the beginning of each day's entry is usually a starting point. I mostly use YouTube for music when I'm writing, so we go where the algorithm takes us. Sometimes it'll be six versions of the same song in a row; other times it might be an entire live performance.

If an idea sometimes comes out of left field, that's becaue it probably did. Other times, the writing may be prompted, so check the notes. Several essays are based on prompts from the *Philosophy School of Phish*, so please look there for further context or reading.

On citations: Academic formatting has but one aesthetic: Elementary Brutalism. Humbug. I'll use footnotes for quick references, end notes for abbreviated academic citations. Links and access to digital content will be on my website. And, if I'm feeling especially fancy one day this ~~summer~~ winter, a playlist to go along with all this. I don't promise consistency in my citation style, nor coherence. I do trust that, together, with my who, what, when, and where, and your search engine prowess, it won't be difficult to go down the same rabbit holes that I did.



Improvisational Philosophy On, In, and Around Music

by

Tweed Jefferson

Reel No.	01	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Can't Always Listen

Notes: Listening to: "Miss You", A Live One
Prompt(s): Research a new person, thing, or idea from the film "Between Me and My Mind."
and: Discuss your definition of 'listening'.

I chose Trey's sister, Kristine, and the song "Miss You". I wasn't familiar with either, but what Trey said about the song was something that was meaningful to me, so I'm going to explore it here. Early-on in the video[2], Trey mentions his sister, Kristine, passing away and how this "opened a door" in his personal songwriting. There's nothing about this song or person on the FAQ and little info online, which is actually good for the sake of this discussion. What I'm going to share is just those links because the idea he presents is about making songwriting personal and I think that the listener's interpretation is just as important, so I'm not going to give a line-by-line analysis of the song. I'll say, for those who aren't necessarily into the 'improv' nature of Phish, check this song out – it sits right at the crux of post-bubblegum and the Woodstock sound. It's like late Hollies if they had Badfinger doing the arrangement. Not the fusion sound that amateur Phisheners, like myself, might be familiar with. The lyrics are lamenting and recorded in a haunting fashion and the guitar tone is perfectly suited to the energy of the song.

Here's why it's important (to me): for *years* I didn't really write songs. I was a full-time musician and did a lot of arranging and composing on others' songs, but I always said "I don't write lyrics because John Lennon and Steve Perry basically wrote them all already." I was the George

Harrison who occasionally contributed a "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" to whatever band I was in. The problem is, I thought songwriting was a 'vocation' that was done in a specific way (read: to pander to audiences). You know how they say "write what you know"? I always thought that was cliche, until I actually started doing it in earnest. Yeah, they weren't love songs or anthems, they were about loss and loneliness and concepts brought up, coincidentally, with "Miss You". But for once, my songs meant something. They were honest. So when Trey talked about the door being opened in his writing due to personal experience and individual expression, that rang true with me. Since opening my own door (c.2020), I've written and recorded several dozen original songs; they may not be commercial, but I like them and that's what's (should be) important. Ars gratia artis. So my scavenger hunt 'item' is the idea that sometimes something seemingly innocuous can open the door to a new perspective or self.

Not having read this question prior to [class] introductions, I actually talked about the idea of listening a bit there. I'll rehash. First, I think that all types of listening are valuable situationally. Regarding the active, passive, distracted, immersive and other types of listening℠, I could certainly relate to them all, but I find myself *actively* doing different types of listening on purpose. If I'm writing, I have certain playlists to *not* actively listen to that help me write – and it's stuff like Zappa, 90s Rap, and Yacht Rock, not the 'recommended' classical music piano. I find lyrical and musical complexity helps me with word association. I have several curated playlists based on desired mental or visceral effect.

Working on a recording project is a whole different beast. I'm not sure exactly how to describe it, but I hear music as different instruments/tracks/frequencies through what could be a combination of Neurodeviance™ and a couple decades at a studio console. If that sounds foreign, imagine eating a burger, but tasting the bun and cheese and tomato and mustard as entirely different things (and not always

realizing it's a burger). This pretty much only happens with music for me. Other things, like multiple voices, provide the opposite effect where it turns into a cacophony. When working on a record, I listen passively, actively, mindlessly as I edit breath noises, hella loud, hella quiet, in the car, in the yard, on headphones, on drugs, in different rooms, on different speakers, et al. The idea is to 'hear' the music differently. Contextually.

It's the same when editing books. Sometimes work is done in the studio, sometimes it's in bed using a tablet or phone. Not for convenience purposes, but to broaden the ways in which I can "listen".

Speakers and gear themselves can make a big difference in the way music is heard. Studio monitors to phone speakers and everything in between will alter the sound and the way it impacts the listener. For the curious, that's actually a big part of *why* I listen to tracks so often and through so many different interfaces – the goal is to get what we hear, or want to hear, to translate as accurately as possible to all listeners. Which is the challenge of art.

Listening Journal Preface

A handful of pieces are marked as "Listening Journals" in the notes. These are meant to be more of an analysis (musical or philosophical) on particular Phish pieces. Consider this Type I philosophy, in contrast to the majority of my writing (Type: Drunken Cat). Though, like most things in my life, these listening journals eventually (d)evolve into a hazy amalgam of absurdity, bong rips, and pet hair.

Let's kick this first one off like a good student before we totally abandon the rubric…

Reel No.	02	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Can Always Listen

Notes: Listening Journal 1: "Bouncing Around the Room", "Stash", A Live One

I basically let this entire album be my soundtrack for the weekend – with different listening/attention levels. Working in the yard, driving to the coast, and sitting in front of my mixing console (aka this computer) while staring at the waveforms, among others. Funny story that would only happen with digital music...or a stoner with a record player. I had my files sorted by 'most recent' instead of alphabetically, so when I played them, it started with Album 2 and my first impression was *way* different than after I noticed my mistake and contextualized things. Initially, to *Wilson*, I was like, 'okay, pretty quintessential live opening song, anthem rock, fairly sure KISS opened with this back in '98' on their first third farewell tour. Very *Expected.* But *Bouncing Around the Room* is a whole different kind of opener.

Before I write my 10k word *Rolling Stone* review, I should make the obligatory statement that I don't often have an emotional reaction to music; not everybody does. I could attribute it to the neurodiversity or it could just be part of the human condition for some, regardless of operating system. I have emotional responses to hearing certain people because of their stories (Chris Cornell, Robin Williams, Mary Wells, Ian Curtis, Badfinger). There may be some kind of irony in my lack of emotional response and basically being *obsessed* with every aspect of music. Maybe it has to do with wanting

to understand or dominate the weakest parts of ourselves (insert religion, social organization, politics, et al). All that said, I really dug the album overall. It's a bit 'unhinged', which is my favorite kind of everything. This is different from disorganized chaos, since movements and notes are intentional. Even though it might sound, to some, like 'mashing the buttons'. I'll talk more about that for *Stash*, but here we go:

Considering what I just said about being obsessed with everything from how every instrument generates its particular sound to how the final product works through different speaker balances, I should probably qualify my version of *immersion*, despite the lack of emotional response – 'interest' would be the closest 'feeling'. In the text, Cobussen points out that we don't all hear the same or respond the same: "Listening, listening to music, knows many manifestations, inflections, (dis)organizations—in short, many regimes. Often, however, listening to music is regarded as an act of becoming immersed, a condition wherein the listener is totally enveloped, absorbed, and enmeshed in a musical world in which the boundaries between self and environment dissolve. This world of musical sounds is in a sense a "virtual" world, a special event that is clearly demarcated and separated from all other ("non-musical") sounds."[9]

So as I dive into talking about my personal way of listening and responding, I'll use his guidelines of many manifestations, inflections and, especially, disorganizations. But, I can 100% identify with being separated by all non-musical sounds. I'd sidebar into echolalia here, but we're talking about music, not animal sounds...unless it's a Pink Floyd album. I do voice-emulate most instruments, though – mouth trumpet, air guitar soundtrack, something that sounds like a combination of beatboxing and hamboning – but it's intentional.

I'd actually love to dissect this album as a whole, comprehensive-yet-sometimes-incomprehensible (me *and* the music) piece, but for now, I'll stick to the first two

tracks. I have a lot of thoughts on the second track, so I'll keep my thoughts on *Bouncing Around the Room* brief. My first impression is that it reminds me of the opening number to a 1990s Disney movie.[F] Not that it's bad – I usually draw connections to what I hear and what I've heard. It also reminds me of The Police. Its intention, presumably, is to ease the audience into the show, which I call the Tighten Up[A] opening (or "soundcheck"). It starts with a bassline and adds instruments until the end with the Neil Schon/ Mark Knopfler guitar bit[J]. Classic lead-guitar player trick courtesy of the old blues players. Talking about emotional response from an audience, it's always hilarious how I could play my best riffs and nobody cares, but you play a repetitive bend or pull-off lick and everyone goes nuts. Unless it's a prog-rock crowd, they like the complicated bits. This song is a good choice to open with for the Phirgins, but I suspect their regular fans would be okay with any of the songs on this record being the opening number...which makes the transient setlist concept make more sense. I often did the same with 'blocks' of songs with built-in segues. Then you choose the opening set based on the audience or venue.

Okay, anyway, *Stash* clearly has a lot going on and I'm going to guess that a lot of folks in this class who like pop or indie won't enjoy it. It's pretty classic fusion, which is a bit like Natto or IPA, you probably will hate it at first, but if you can acquire the taste, you'll enjoy it. I spent several years in a ten-piece fusion funk-rock band where the horns used all the guitar effects and the rhythm section held the groove and melodies, so I've acquired the taste. IPA, I'm still not convinced.

This song *does* have pop sensibility. Probably as much as ten songs, but they're all smashed on top of each other

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[F] Upon further consideration, it's more like Paul Simon
[A] Archie Bell and the Drells - Tighten Up
[J] Journey - Don't Stop Believing & Dire Straits - Sultans of Swing

or in random orders, which makes it confusing. If you'd like a more pop-friendly version of what they're doing (combining multiple musical concepts), check out this song by Brad Paisley.[1] No, it's *not* country, and demonstrates the badassery of session players (and pop singers who can actually wail). Hold on, I have to go watch that video, too.... See what I mean? That's one of the coolest things a band can do, in my opinion. They're individually nailing it on their instruments, while working seamlessly as a group through time and style movements. This is what *Stash* is doing, too, but at a much more complex (and less rehearsed) level.

For the first section, you have to recall (or know about) the whole 90s resurgence of swing and ska. The opening and first vocal section ("Maybe so and maybe not") are similar, but more elaborate, to what many flash-in-the-pan bands were doing at the time. Which creates appeal as a second song (again, new fans, record sales, etc.). But idk when the song was actually written. The copyright says 1990, which is before the third-wave craze, but the point is that this music is timeless – in a contemporary sense (can I say that?). Its core sound is in traditional jazz and big band.

Around 5:38 we see the first major 'fusion' shift. The band eases into it, versus hard transitions like in the Brad Paisley song. There's a repetitive guitar part like in track one. It's being used this time to set up a theme. Because it's semi-improv (the band knows they're going to shift into xyz movement, but may not know how or when and individual notes aren't predetermined), Trey is using the guitar part to suggest elements to the other band members to build on. You can hear the bass move from accompaniment to counterpoint to dissonance. It's all reciprocal, so the guitar is likely to start using themes suggested by the bass. I dig the drums on the whole album and this is where we first see them opening up, maintaining rhythm while playing around. We see a drift from some light tom play to Buddy Rich to

[1] Brad Paisley - Time Warp

Ginger Baker to Bonham. The evolution of rock drumming. Meanwhile, the band is holding the theme together loosely – it is a guitar solo after all. But in this case, Fishman is suggesting concepts and themes for the other band members to play around with. I'd like to highlight the cymbal rhythm being maintained throughout – this is pro-level work, even if it sounds chaotic.

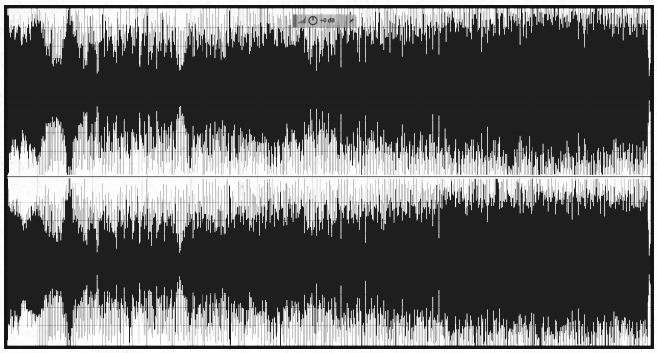
We see them drift from loose and playful into a 'pocket' together (around 10:15). I mean, it's always a pocket, but I think you can hear in that one section how all of the different instruments come together into a single element for several measures. The pocket gets big enough to fit everybody. It happens again at around 11:00 with what I'd call the Santana section[*], due to the screaming overdriven tone. Which made me question how good I actually am at determining the guitar, amp, and effects being used by ear.[**] I'm going to *guess* he's using a multi-amp setup because the tone is way different than the first half of the track. This brings us to a refrain of the first vocal section, except over more melody-driven musical lines. The band ends with a rehearsed (non-flourish) ending. This is an appropriate transition into *Gumbo*, which is one of my favorites on this record.

Does anybody else *look* at music while they listen to it, either through waveforms or some sort of synchronized visuals? With so much time spent doing digital engineering, I can often 'hear' what a track sounds like without hearing it. Especially individual instruments, where I'll often edit *(not* mix) drums or vocals without needing to play them back. Here are the waveforms for two songs from Record A of *A Live One*. Do these tell you anything about the songs?

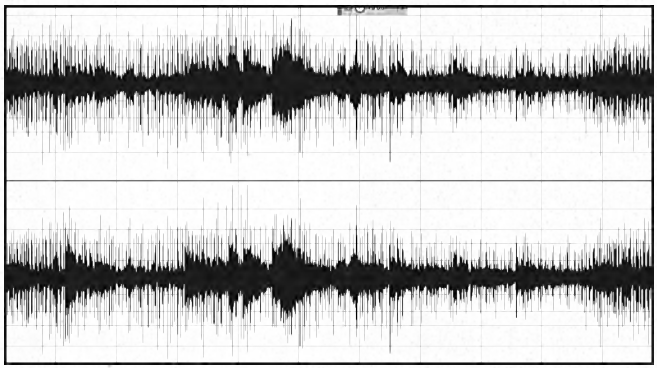
[*] Carlos Santana - Europa

[**] Looked it up later, I was right about the year for the first half, but not the second.

Bouncing Around the Room



Montana



Reel No.	03	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Fandom

Notes: Listening to: A Live One

I've been browsing the phish.net phorums (okay, I'll stop) lately and realized that I don't do fandom. Or fanaticism. Neither, really. And that's not a knock against anyone who does. People should enjoy what they enjoy.

Maybe it's rooted in my youth interest in The Beatles, which even led to a few tattoos at eighteen – the pinnacle of fanaticism. You know when you're into something and people think it's the only thing that defines you? Not people you're close to, necessarily; the people you see twice a year at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The strangers that you owe undying loyalty to. When I was a teenager, people thought I *only* liked the Beatles, though I spent just as much time listening to Rush and Sublime and Reel Big ~~Ph~~Fish (sorry, last time).

Then I started working in music, and that was the only thing anyone asked me about. Mind you, they never came to any gigs, even the ones in their neighborhoods. They didn't listen to my records. It was just, "How's your music thing going?" Then it was martial arts. Though, none of them could tell you if I did Karate, Kung Fu, or Ameri-Do-Te. What's funny is I never *stopped* listening to The Beatles (or Rush and Sublime). I never stopped playing music and making records that they didn't listen to. Most people do lots of things (I think), so why reduce them to one thing?

Now, I write books and I don't talk to those people any

more. You could say, 'they're just trying to engage you in conversation or asking about your interests' but, inevitably, a "how's xyz going" was them opening the door to talk about how great they, their kids, their business, or whatever was going since the last holiday ritual. Usually with a pitch. Why the pretense? If you care about martial arts, ask. If not, don't use it as an opportunity to bring up your church wrestling team fundraiser or teeth-whitening, body-slimming MLM scam.

So could that have turned me off of fandom? Being seen as a one-dimensional replica. A "mocker" wannabe[6]. Or could it be that I've since decided that nobody is the 'best' at anything. I don't have a favorite band or guitar player, just like I don't have a favorite color. I have some things I like more often than others, but it's all contextual. I like clothes and guitars that are pink, but I wouldn't dye my cat. I like Little River Band, but I wouldn't put them up against Pantera in a shred-off.

When I taught at a dojo, prospective students would always ask why what I did was the "best" martial art. I'd tell them that it wasn't. If we're talking about martial effectiveness, biological or atomic weapons are way better than anything I can teach – the community college is right down the street. I'd get my ass beat in an octagon just as much as an MMA fighter would be in trouble against me with a sword. And we'd both be idiots to take on a fully-equipped sniper at range. There's always someone bigger, stronger, faster, better trained, or better equipped.

If somebody thinks a martial art or a music or anything else is the 'best' at anything other than being its unique self, it's because their criteria is based on a set of rules. Would I lose in a UFC fight? Absolutely. About 90% of what I specialize in, from weapons to small-joint manipulation, aren't even *allowed* in the ring, so no matter my level of

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[6] How's that for an obscure reference?

mastery of my technique, I can't use them to 'win' under different rules. Since winning is the goal of competition, I guess. I always thought it would be better as a mechanism to practice with people who have different skill sets. Digression: I started teaching mounted archery several years ago and our small group, which called itself a club, decided that we should start competing (at a beginner level). I was the lone objection. Not because I was necessarily against it – aside from transporting horses across the state – but because their mentality was 'compete to beat others' and I just couldn't get behind that.

And there's always something new out there. Maybe not 'new' in the contemporary sense, but new-to-you. I've studied some mostly-forgotten martial arts and some obscure and esoteric music – all of which existed before me. And I continue to find something new. Yesterday, I started reading the seventy-year-old *Black Skin, White Masks* and had my mind blown again.

So maybe that's why I don't do fandom. How can I say something is a best or a favorite or an ideal without knowing all that's out there. How could I be so bold to choose a single religion or political party or instrument or genre when my knowledge is so limited?

Reel No. 04

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Plug In, Turn On, and Yarmouth

Notes: Listening to: A Live One and other appliance-based music.

Prompt: Does the use of a vacuum count as music?

What one might call artistic self-consciousness, another might call 'discernment'. An internal quality-control department that intervenes whenever one dares make a sound that hasn't been pre-approved by the invisible board of cultural trustees. I learned to make music under their jurisdiction. Not in any formal sense, like going to music school, but through osmosis, by absorbing the expectations of what counted as 'real' music. That is, music that could survive discussion with other people who also believed they knew what made up 'real' music. Certain instruments and techniques came pre-approved. As did the premise that whatever I produced had to resemble something that had already been successfully produced by someone more 'qualified' (institutionally endorsed) or, at least, more dead.

It turns out, this is a great way to build expertise at constructing objects that behave like music in the same way wax fruit behaves like food. It photographs beautifully, especially from a distance. It satisfies the criteria of recognizability. What it doesn't do is anything of consequence. Which, according to Tolstoy in Chapter 8 of "What Is Art?", is kinda the entire point.

"But if art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen, how could it be that humanity for a certain rather considerable period of its existence (from the

time people ceased to believe in Church doctrine down to the present day) should exist without this important activity, and, instead of it, should put up with an insignificant artistic activity only affording pleasure?"

There's no mention here of virtuosity, taste, imitation, or prestige. The requirement is simple: you must have experienced something, and you must, in good faith, attempt to transmit it. I think a lot of guitar players wish they could play with the expression of Jimi Hendrix, but I remember reading a quote from him years ago saying he wished he could express even a portion of what he was hearing in his head, so that good-faith part is key to me; part of his genius may be an unadulterated attempt to translate the "Electric Church" orchestra into something accessible.

Obligatory mention that I don't typically experience art in the way Tolstoy/people assume I should. What I tend to register are structures, patterns, melody/harmony/tone, layering, breakdowns in coherence, and, hopefully, the integrity of the piece. But the framework still applies. If we remove (or ease) the criteria that the content must be *felt* in a particular way, what remains is still a solid model of communication: something is created, it's encoded into a form, and it's received – or not – by a recipient. The success of this depends on three conditions – individuality, clarity, and sincerity. In other words, even if I don't 'feel' it, I can still examine whether anything coherent was sent.

I think, when developing a skill-set, we go through phases, starting with "I know nothing," to, "I know everything," to, "I know nothing, again" that comes with mastery (or lay-level mastery). You can do something intricate enough, dense enough, faithful enough to a tradition, that it passes inspection without ever revealing whether there was anything at stake. It's commercially sincere and existentially vacant. The notes are in key. But "why this, why now, why

That time Jimi talked about his "Electric Church" on Dick Cavett

at all?" can't be answered (beyond money or recognition, usually).

My escape from this mindset involved the use of whatever happened to be available and interesting and noticing how it 'felt' (how it intrigued or inspired me). Who hasn't drummed on a desk or steering wheel? Or blown into a glass bottle, had a sip, then done it again to hear the change in pitch? Even the didgeridoo – some Aboriginal person blew into a hollow tube, or heard the wind blow through it, and said, "that sounds cool." You are, at this point, the signal and the receiver.

Looking at it like this, Tolstoy's first criterion (or virtue?) – individuality – is less aspirational and more statistical inevitability. A saucepan doesn't come with centuries of sanctioned use – except maybe by toddlers. It doesn't come with a setlist or genre. Playing any of these non-instruments is creating a sound that's basically all your own. The object/instrument you choose isn't just a static instrument but a fragment of your environment. It's not categorization yet, but a specific event (and why a song or album is called a "record"). You can't really call pots and pans a universal language when yours are from Williams-Sonoma and mine are from IKEA. Or when you're in a commercial kitchen and I'm at a campfire.

To build on the analogy of home music-making, we can look at 'clarity'. A knock on a door must be readable as a pattern, not because it conforms to some external standard, but because there's nothing else there to rescue it if it fails. Tolstoy's idea that a message be clear could be read as a call for simplicity, but I would equate it to legibility. Can the work be understood without the need for auxiliary decoding? Does it cohere as an action rather than a collection of movements? At what point do we draw the line between a band and four people playing instruments at the same time in the same place? Especially in a world saturated with intentional over-complexity and subtext, clarity isn't synonymous with addition or reduction.

With sincerity, the third condition, Tolstoy claims if

the artist hasn't truly experienced the feeling they seek to convey, then the attempt is counterfeit: "You see that the performer wishes to impress upon you that the sounds he is producing express various poetic strivings of the soul. You see his intention, but no feeling whatever is transmitted to you except weariness."[3] I would, given my personal experience, extend "feeling" to include the more general idea of necessity – that a given choice isn't decorative, but needed. Sincerity, to me, isn't "emotional authenticity" it's artistic (and personal) integrity.

When we look at unconventional 'instruments', if you are using kitchenware because it produces the abrasive, metallic articulation that the piece demands, the alignment is clear. If you're using it because it's clever or novel, or want it to be interpreted as clever or novel, that's evident – often painfully so. The selection of instruments, amps, effects, tone, rhythm, pitch, etc. becomes a kind-of lie detector. Not that those choices have a particular moral quality of their own, but because it strips away the layers within which one could conceal the absence of necessity. There's an old jazz-player adage that essentially says that music (or soloing, I don't remember) is about the notes you don't play.

The unconventional instrument can itself become a badge[*], a signal of avant-garde credibility[†], a way of performing difference[‡] rather than being different. The toaster's primary function is reassigned from tonal expression to an indication that the artist is the sort of person who uses toasters for art. At this point, we haven't escaped the problem of insincerity, we've created artisanal slop (now with bistro seating). If novelty is the point, is anything being transmitted or are we just admiring the ingenuity of the apparatus?

---

[*] Stomp, "Kitchen"
[†] The Vegetable Orchestra
[‡] Blue Man Group, "Live PVC Cover Songs"

What changed for me wasn't that I began to "feel" more in an emotional sense, but that I became less willing to tolerate misalignment. The more I worked with sounds, the more obvious it became when I was constructing a genuine artifact rather than a 'product'. There's a difference between arranging elements so that they will be perceived as meaningful within a given context and arranging them because something essential should be said. The former is aesthetic compliance. The latter, if we are honest with our intent, resembles what Tolstoy is after. AI can generate a lonesome ballad, a piano teacher can demonstrate minor-key transitions, a drum machine can break into a 6/8 halftime feel with groove quantization at the touch of a button. We learn sincerity and teach it to others (and machines).

If the production of "real" art depends on access to specialized instruments, formal training, institutional validation, social circles, hierarchy, or marketing plans, then the capacity to communicate is unevenly distributed by design. The system privileges those who can afford the tools, the time, the people, and the endorsements. The use of household objects doesn't dismantle this system, but it does expose its arbitrary and hypocritical nature. If a coherent, distinct, and aligned signal can be produced with a countertop and a microphone, then the necessity of more elaborate apparatus becomes, at the very least, negotiable. One begins to see that the barrier to entry isn't a natural law but a well-maintained convention.

I am aware, in saying all of this, that I haven't suddenly become the ideal Tolstoyan subject, radiating and receiving signals with perfect clarity – far from it. But I've come to appreciate that his criteria function even when the emotional requirement isn't primary. I can ask of a piece of music whether it is distinct, legible, and if its elements align with an internal necessity rather than an external expectation. I can observe that something has been said truthfully, even if I'm not the most responsive recipient.

Tolstoy, with his focus on the primacy of felt experience, ends up providing a set of constraints that are perfectly

usable by someone who doesn't experience those feelings in quite the same way. The model holds. The variables shift. The saucepan, having endured a brief and undignified career as both percussion instrument and philosophical prop (welcome to the music business, buddy), rings out, indifferent to being classified as high art, low art, or merely dinnerware.

What matters isn't whether the piece is conventional, the artist is properly credentialed, or if the audience reports the socially-correct emotional response. What matters is whether something – anything – has been transmitted with enough distinctness, clarity, and truth that it can be received. Whether it lands as feeling, as pattern, as irritation, or as the suspicion that one has just listened to B-roll from Kitchen Nightmares, at that point, is almost secondary. The signal either exists or it doesn't. It's either genuine or it's wax fruit.

Reel No. 05

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: Gonna Be a Mennil-toss Flykune

Notes: Listening Journal II: "Gumbo" (various), "Montana" (A Live One)

Since I've basically had *A Live One* running for the last week, I went through some additional material and listened to the 'longest' version of "Gumbo" from Star Lake Amphitheater, 1997. Several times; as well as random other versions, letting YouTube take me where it would. On first listening to "Gumbo" on *A Live One*, I recognized it as speaking my musical 'language'. It screamed Zappa to me – the rhythm of the vocals and their narrow, almost monotone melody, the syncopated and funky rhythm section, the unison/harmony backing vocals, the use of densely-layered sounds (piano, Hammond organ, horn section swells and shouts), articulated solo sections, the sexy horn march at the end. I always dig arrangements like this because it's a lot of really simple musical ideas that come together to create a complex sound. Simple isn't synonymous with unskilled.

I'm not going to deconstruct each movement like I did last time (famous last words). What does this song make me 'feel'? Intrigue, amusement. It's the kind of music that I can listen to passively, like right now, while I'm writing this, and still feel a level of immersion. I've been doing some finishing work on a couple furniture pieces the last few days – one of those repetitive tasks that don't require a lot of focus – allowing me to think about the music while I worked. And I'm a sucker for a good Hammond or Tenor Sax solo.

I'd bring the conversation about this almost-twenty-minute-long version of "Gumbo" back to our discussion from earlier in the week and my take on Tolstoy's criteria for art: individuality, clarity, authenticity.[1] To which I'm now drawing mental lines to the Buddhist idea of self-interrogation: "Is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?" Part of that comes from what I consider the authenticity part of creating art. 'Is it true' sounds a lot like Tolstoy's call for the artist to convey an authentic experience. 'Necessary' makes me think of clarity: Are you doing what's best for the song or are you saturating the mix? As for 'kind', and I might be reaching here, I think that can be tied to whether or not the feeling or experience is transmitted. Which might also be clarity. Or all three. Okay, maybe it wasn't a great analogy.

When I listen to this version of "Gumbo", with its extensive jam, I can reflect on these shared-in-my-mind concepts. In this case, the 'necessary' part seems the most relevant to discussion, since I can't judge intrinsic value to the performers. I'd be remiss to say I haven't been in countless bands where we play three-or-four hour sets several nights per week and extended jams are both a way to stretch a set and stretch our musical legs. It might also be a choice made on-the-fly based on the atmosphere or audience (receivers). A speakeasy-style nightclub, where you have mostly passive listeners, begs for mellow and extended jams that don't shove a melody or hook down your throat like a bad chaser. On the other hand, an appearance on Late Night TV usually isn't the best venue for improvisational appliance jams (Almost every TV performance I've ever done has requested lip-sync).

But a 'performance' doesn't always have to be *performative*. There seems to be an expectation (ticket price irrelevant) that just because you are on a stage or a screen, you're expected to engage or entertain *all* viewers at *all* times. I think Abraham Lincoln said something about how, "You can jam out with your clam out all the time or rock out with your cock out some of the time, but you're never gonna make it in this business, kid."[citation needed]

We've been so conditioned to think of art as a *commodity* that its purpose of expression and connection are lost to marketing budgets and algorithm manipulation. The attitude that everything must cater to *me all the time* is why we have regurgitation after regurgitation of the same movie, the same music, the same AI slop, and are endlessly bombarded with ads and what I call 'masturbatory marketing" (no community, no connection, just "here's what I'm selling, link in bio"). Spaceballs: The Lunch box; Spaceballs: The Flame Thrower.[*] I'll often cite my reason for creating as, 'Ars Gratia Artis', which is a not-so-subtle dig at MGM. If artists and art lovers alike are shutting each other down in the name of capitalism, is any of it *real* art? If we're going to sit here and agree with Tolstoy's calls for authenticity and individuality, what the hell are we watching, reading, or listening to most of the time? We're feeding the machine. We're saying "performance *must* be performative," and, "it's not about communication, it's about subscription tiers," which is the opposite of authenticity, in my opinion.

Right, so we're supposed to be talking about Phish… I'll move on to "Montana". Oddly enough – or maybe intentionally – Zappa has a song called "Montana", too. Phish.net acknowledges there could have been some confusion to record-buyers. I've been listening to this song (the Phish version) for the last week, just like the rest of the album. It reads to me like a light jam on a theme. A lot of the 'production' bands I directed used a similar technique for logistical purposes. First, you don't want to have dead air. Second, you want to 'set up' your next song. Third, sometimes you just need to do shit while on stage – tune, change instruments, drink a beer, try to get the pick out of your acoustic guitar, clean the bras off the stage (for safety reasons), ask the drummer what song is next because you already lost your setlist, et al. I'd build in casual jams like this every four or three songs for these purposes. Guitar player needs a new axe? Let's end song 'x' with a chill bass and drum theme based on song 'y'. Singer wants to banter with the crowd for an unknown length and cue the

next song when they're ready? Let's hang out on the intro chords of the next song and jam around on them. And so on. Check out some live Earth, Wind, and Fire or James Brown. They've mastered this technique. It's a staple in musical theatre as motif. If done authentically, the purpose is to maintain the connection with the receiver while the next message is being buffered.

Would I call it a 'song'? I don't know – a solo can be one note. Personally, unless I were going to play it again (and often, little grooves are where the next song can come from), I wouldn't bother giving any kind of title or designation. But if you're releasing it on an album, especially a CD, you have to break up the tracks somehow, so it makes sense it would be called a song for the sake of the record.

Do you have a line, or 'rules', on what counts as a song? Are there constraints in length, rhythm, melody, tone, instrumentation, or other elements?

Reel No.	06	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Disability Anathema Stratification

Notes: on the Agglomerated Industrialization of Selective Exclusion.

Listening to: Ruminating thoughts of self-hate, Tweed Jefferson (1993-2026)

From: My Bitch Ass
Date: Thu, Sep 10, 2026, 5:35 AM
To:

Jayathi Y. Murthy
President, Oregon State University
Jennifer Humphries
Chief of Staff to the President, Oregon State University
Jackie Bangs
Secretary of the Board, Oregon State University
Katie Fast
Executive Director of Government Relations, Oregon State University
Roy D. Haggerty
Provost and Executive Vice President, Oregon State University
Dan Larson
Vice President for Student Affairs, Oregon State University
David Terry
Chief Audit, Risk and Compliance Executive (sic), Oregon State University
Scott Vignos
Vice President for Mission and Impact, Oregon State University

The silence around here is deafening. I get it, it must be a lot of work gearing up for another year of discrimination. Or do y'all like settling half-million-dollar lawsuits every year because of DAS? You *do* realize that providing subtitles is required by both law and your own policy,

right? Just making sure you're aware how easy this could have been solved if your employee would have just clicked the "subtitles on" button. You know, without my having to disclose all of my private medical information, pay even more money, jeopardize my safety, et al. Which, btw, what are you doing to protect that information under HIPAA? Besides gossiping with professors about students' disabilities? Because we all know your servers aren't secure.

Or did I not smile and thank **REDACTED** enough when being denied access? I know that's a favorite ableist kink (JD Vance comes in and tell me to be more appreciative).

Anyway, I've been working on a book about institutional abuse, how organizations attract power-hungry predators, and the societal, mental health, and mortality (read: suicide) consequences of these individuals and the institutions they support. Let me know if you want any special titles or whatever listed by your names, as I know you people love your honorariums and hierarchies. Your legacy or whatever you call it.

I came here to learn, not buy an honorarium, but OSU seems incapable of providing the services they charge tens of thousands of dollars for. Are all of the courses just AI generated and Canvas Commons now? I've had entire classes with no professor participation. Actually, that's most of them. Talk about academic integrity! But I get it, they probably have a lot on their plate...you know, like disabled students trying to work, go to school, and survive while navigating a system built on exclusion.

"Go Beavs" lol
Arbitrary Name They Don't Read
Student Commodity
All content created with AI (Autistic Imagination)
Schedule a meeting*

*tweedjefferson.com/neurotypical-accommodations/

From: [Same]
Sent: Wednesday, 03 June 2026 06:01:55
To: [Same]

"I leverage my expertise in anthropology and dedication to student accommodation to advance disability rights and education." - **REDACTED**

What a hypocrite. Thanks for blowing me off and lying (again!). You had your chance - for months - to do the right thing. Now you have an adversary where you could have had an ally. And I'm fucking pissed at the damage you and OSU have done to me and countless other students under the facade of access and inclusion. You can't even follow your own policies. But we all know the expectation for ethical behavior only points downward around here. You literally swept **REDACTED**'s violation of established university policy and legal requirements under the rug, confident I'd let it go thanks to your planned institutional attrition, no doubt. You were wrong - again.

I wonder how all of your precious organizations on your CV like NACADA and AHEAD will feel when I send them all of my records and how them how 'dedicated' you really are. At least "leverage" was an appropriate word choice.

For everyone else I copied, just thought you should know how things really operate around here. Don't let him convince you otherwise, I've talked to over a dozen students who have had similar experiences - and that's just in the last six months! Want to mitigate the litigation (like DAS has failed to do) let me know, but I'm done with **REDACTED** and his ableism and bureaucratic indifference/ineptitude. Who hired this guy? Wow, just wow!

Oh, and I'm selling my IP that OSU is using free of charge right now. I know that doesn't matter to you, ("not my department" - the OSU Motto) but that'll be why some funding goes away. And I know you people care about money (more than students)! If any faculty complain, I'll let them know why. In detail. Including every single person, by name, who has given **REDACTED** more accommodations

than he gives to students.

Someone will eventually hear the voices of the disabled students - we're people not policy "inconveniences", despite how we're treated - will it be you?

Rev. Tweed Jefferson, Sensei, LLP 8va
Student of Protophilosophy
All content created with AI (Autistic Imagination)

My thought was to publish the endless emails I've sent to disability "services" and administration/staff over the last several months, but it's tedious and emotionally exhausting. Instead, I'll share the following essay I wrote at the time, inspired by these events.

I'm going to put all of the emails and other documentation on my website when I recover from this burnout (if that ever happens!). It's a fun read – because I'm an asshole. I mean, these people and their institutions expect people to take it up the ass with a smile while being denied access. Fuck them; the days of playing nice with the fascist regime is over.

Language Requirements and the Architecture of Exclusion

(not written to fulfill a rubric)

Universities love to virtue signal – as engines of access, mobility, and enlightenment. The branding is immaculate: equity, inclusion, belonging, universal design, justice. Mission statements read like moral philosophy. Website copy reads like secular scripture. This is what business and political science majors should be studying. Between the halls lined with diversity banners and the ADA compliance statement tacked on to every syllabus without actually being read first, the institution achieves a kind of moral levitation.

Then you enroll in a mandatory language class.

Suddenly the utopia develops a specific architecture. Captioning is disabled, audio files are salted with background noise like a malfunctioning bedside soundscape machine, screen readers give up in despair, textbooks don't seem to match lectures and tests, and "asynchronous" courses fail to recognize the irony in requiring live Zoom labs with no captioning and no flexibility. Scheduling assumes a mythical 'student' archetype – unemployed, unencumbered, nondisabled, timezone-neutral, not enrolled in other courses, and apparently immune to fatigue. This is not an accident; this is design philosophy. This is not pedagogy; this is epistemic nightclub management. This is the velvet rope. There is a bouncer named "rigor" holding a clipboard labeled "standards". Entry is not determined by knowledge, curiosity, or engagement, but by sensory tolerance, schedule compliance, cognitive conformity, and bodily normativity. If you can endure the structure, you're 'qualified'. If you can't, the system calls it fairness and hands you a policy document.

Universal Design for Learning exists precisely to prevent this. It's not some theoretical ideology, it's basic educational ethics. Multiple modes of engagement. Multiple ways of learning. Multiple ways of demonstrating knowledge. Remember that whole 'visual, auditory, kinetic' crap from kindergarten? When accessibility tools are removed, the barrier becomes the assessment. The structure becomes the curriculum. The course stops teaching content and starts teaching obedience to architecture. That's not rigor. That's bureaucratic cosplay. It's the point when, in the old "less enlightened" world of academia, those who don't fit the standards of normate would just drop out, convinced we aren't capable or smart enough for higher education.

Which leads to the question universities never enjoy answering in plain language – What, exactly, is the educational function of two terms of mandatory foreign language instruction in an undergraduate degree? It doesn't produce fluency. It doesn't produce functional literacy. Nor cultural competence. There's no interpretive depth. It

doesn't come with translational skills.

Twenty weeks produces the academic equivalent of a souvenir magnet. A Wish-You-Were-Here postcard. A decorative artifact. Academic incense. Symbolic exposure with a four-figure tuition receipt. It's basically your typical American taking a week-long trip to Europe and considering themselves 'worldly'. Something that says "I spent two terms in a foreign language class and all I got was this stupid t-shirt."

Culture, meanwhile, is already taught elsewhere (also required), and with more honesty and depth. Through history, anthropology, sociology, literature, philosophy, and area studies. Intro language courses at this level are not doing cultural formation. They are doing grammar drills, memorization, and scripted conversational theater. This is not global citizenship. It is cultural cosplay with flashcards and student loans. Students can leave, not with cultural or language confidence, but with a vague ability to dicker with a shopkeep over the price of a newspaper or some other archaic item. To be clear, not even usable tourist language is the focus, but the repetition of phrases that most students will never have cause to use.

So why does the requirement exist?

First, policy inertia, the true mission statement of academia. Not ancient tradition, not medieval legacy – modern bureaucratic entrenchment. The requirement isn't old enough to be sacred, just old enough to be unquestioned. Once it was written into policy, it acquired the magical status of "normal." Committees inherited it. Departments built around it. Syllabi crystallized around it. What began as a political position became structure and, once structural, stopped needing justification.

Second, credential stratification. Mandatory language requirements quietly filter out disabled students, working students, caregivers, neurodivergent students, low-income students, and nontraditional students. The system doesn't overtly say "You're not welcome." It says, "You didn't meet the requirements," which is clean PR.

Third, and likely key in this situation, institutional economics. Required courses create guaranteed enrollments. Guaranteed enrollments stabilize departmental budgets. Captive audiences make payroll predictable. Pedagogy becomes a secondary concern behind structural stability. Is it villainous? Not to administrators. To them, it's spreadsheet logic. Systems don't need malice. They need inertia, committees, and enough policy language to make everything feel inevitable.

The disability dimension makes the absurdity impossible to ignore. When accessibility is treated as an exception instead of a design principle, disability becomes framed as inconvenience rather than responsibility. Students are expected to adapt to the structure. The structure is never expected to adapt to the people it is supposedly designed to 'serve'. Inclusion becomes assimilation with "This course is accessible" dying quietly on page six of a syllabus somewhere.

Here's the best part: what these courses claim to offer now exists outside the university – with more accessibility, more flexibility, and better pedagogy. Captioning. Adjustable pacing. Multimodal input. Asynchronous learning. Individualized repetition. The institution is not offering unique educational value at this level. It is offering monetized inconvenience with an institutional letterhead.

If a requirement cannot justify itself in terms of learning outcomes, accessibility, and equity, then it is not a pedagogical standard. It is a traditional costume on a power structure.

This is not an argument against language learning. Language learning matters. It's transformative when it is voluntary, well-designed, and accessible. This is an argument against compulsory, inaccessible, structurally exclusionary language requirements that function more as sorting mechanisms than as education.

Universities love to talk about access. They love to talk about inclusion. They love to talk about universal design. But access is not a slogan. It is architecture. And architecture

always reveals priorities.

If the system produces barriers first and accommodations later, exclusion is not accidental, it's procedural. And if no one can clearly explain why the requirement exists, who it meaningfully serves, and what educational outcome it reliably produces, then the burden of proof is no longer on the student. It's on the institution.

Here is a list of several of the OSU hierarchal drones who were aware of this situation and opted to look the other way:

Jayathi Y. Murthy, President, Oregon State University
Jennifer Humphries, Chief of Staff to the President, Oregon State University
Jackie Bangs, Secretary of the Board, Oregon State University
Katie Fast, Executive Director of Government Relations, Oregon State University
Roy D. Haggerty, Provost and Executive Vice President, Oregon State University
Dan Larson, Vice President for Student Affairs, Oregon State University
David Terry, Chief Audit, Risk and Compliance Executive (sic), Oregon State University
Scott Vignos, Vice President for Mission and Impact, Oregon State University
Pamela Hoene, Access and Notetaking Coordinator, Oregon State University
Marleigh Perez, Senior Director of Student Success, Oregon State University
Eduardo Rodriguez, Student Engagement Program Manager, Oregon State University
David L. Bishop IV, Head Academic Advisor, Oregon State University
Jonathan Kaplan, Director - School of History, Philosophy & Religion, Oregon State University

Sharyn Clough, Professor of Philosophy, Oregon State University
Rebeka Phelps, Senior Success Navigator, Oregon State University
Fox A. Perez, News Editor, The Daily Astorian, Oregon State University
Phillip J. Williams, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Oregon State University
Karen Sullivan-Vance, Assistant Dean for Student Success, Oregon State University
Cynthia Ferguson Dellon, Student Legal Services, Oregon State University[5]

Basically all of my professors but, most shamefully, those professors who are disabled themselves and have been abused by the same systems, but chose, "sorry to hear that," over their own institution's mandatory discrimination reporting procedures.

And, of course, the three perpetrators I'm discussing in the prior messages. I'll list their names when I share their responses (er, lack thereof) to my dozens of messages. In the meantime, it seems funnier to make them sweat it out. You know, just wait until an unspecified date to get denied access (to sweeping their abuses under the rug). Womp Womp.

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[4] In fairness, Dean Kaplan did meet with me to address my grievances with the caveat that he really couldn't do anything (?!). We discussed how our department could set an examples, but I haven't seen any of them come to fruition.

[5] This was the funniest one because they wrote back saying, basically, why are you messaging us, we don't protect students from our benefactors (OSU). Which is funny - if a student, lives, works, and studies on campus, who exactly is student legal services helping if they won't protect students from the institution itself?

Also, I'll add the story about how first-term-junior-underling-rubric-enforcer-in-training, Izabel Kickner assigned us to write about our mental health for a class assignment and then "mandatory reported" me for saying I was seeing a psychiatrist regularly for suicidal ideation. Not threatening, not saying I had active ideation, but doing exactly what she asked and keeping a log of my physical and mental health (for the mandated 'health' class). Mind you, she didn't offer any resources or concern. She literally left a comment on my assignment in Canvas saying: "As your professor, I am here to support you. However, because you mentioned experiencing suicidal ideation in this assignment, I am required to report this to the OSU Care Team as a mandatory reporter." I sure as hell bitched out the Dean of Students' assisstant-to-the-assistant of student neglect over that – and the fact that I waited three days for the gestapo to show up with their assault rifles and never even heard from said "care" team until days after *I* reached out to *them* saying, "I feel completely violated. The assignment asked me to talk about my mental health. I didn't mention "a plan" or an other "reasonable cause" as the law states. The instructor didn't reach out to me, but simply made a report. Nobody from the "Care Team" reached out either. I guess they don't care on weekends. So what exactly was the point of creating a report? This is exactly why people keep these thoughts and feelings to themselves until they do kill themselves, you know. I'm not sure how I can be expected to continue with this course (or this school?) after a betrayal like this."

They responded with boilerplate and links to their supposed support systems. Kickner sent me a message with excuses about how she wasn't trained right, but no apology or accountability, as is the status quo in academia and institutions. If you've never heard of "Weaponized Wellness Checks," look it up. Institutions (especially schools, families, churches) love to use their "care" as an excuse to harm you. Right OSU?

Dude, fuck all these people and their reactive, puritanical, oppressive bullshit. “Oh no, you said the S-word, better call the state-sponsored murderers to kidnap you. That’ll make you want to live. Now, back to our regularly scheduled capitalism.” But, yeah, tell me more about how much you care about “unaliving awareness” and what a tragedy it is, you algorithm-sucking, demonetization-phobic cowards.

I’m fucking done.

See you in the funny pages.

Reel No. 07

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Just Because a Record has a Groove don't make it in the Groove

Notes: Listening to: Gamehendge, 31 December 2023.
Prompt: On experiences with Dionysiac music.

I can see how the takeaway from Hawley's piece can conjure up images of Dionysus as, like, the promoter of a warehouse punk show – knock over a few chairs, spill some beer, everyone goes home satisfied, having briefly escaped themselves. Hawley doesn't seem to care about the cost of the decor so much as the structural damage. When he writes, "The fourth characteristic of Dionysiac music is that it activates and replenishes our psychic energy. It achieves this effect by virtue of the demands it makes of us. As seen, one result of the intoxication occasioned by musical dissonance is a breakdown of the Apolline experience of subjectivity, a breakdown which represents a threat to the very possibility of being an individual at all,"[vi] he's not being strictly cosmological or metaphorical. He's describing an interruption, or destabilization, in the way we normally attach to our 'self'.

In that sense, I don't disagree with him. I've experienced that kind of interruption, often quite willingly/willfully. But I think there's an assumption embedded in both Hawley and the Nietzschean framework he uses – an assumption not dissimilar to that which we saw in Tolstoy and Levinson – that this subject, this stable, emotionally-responsive listener, is the baseline from which Dionysian experience arrives and departs.

For me, that baseline has always been, at best, blurry. My

relationship to music, as I've shared, has never been reliably encountered as a direct conduit to feeling. At least not in the way people tend to describe it with such visceral immediacy. What I encounter first is structure: patterns, timing, logic, the skeletal design of the piece (or lack thereof). Music feels less like an emotional landscape and more like a system to be broken down and thoroughly mapped. That is, I often begin where Hawley might call Apolline, it's subjective, but more targeted toward empirical study than qualitative response. Through that lens, the breakdown he describes doesn't feel like a loss of stability. It feels more like the suspension of something that doesn't come with an off switch. A fair amount of the music I connect to is more of an acquired taste. Something that takes a few passes to get a good interpretation of.

That's why this second quote lands differently: Hawley states that, "The point, rather, is that to remain entirely within the Apolline and the emotional states that are the artifacts of its emphasis on subjectivity is to fail to reach to the heart of the tragic disposition and that, absent Dionysiac intoxication, said disposition is unattainable." This reads as a warning against over-intellectualizing art – or mistaking analysis for experience. Fair enough. But it also implies that Dionysian access is, if not automatic, at least available. One simply needs to loosen their grip on subjectivity to encounter it. I'm not convinced that's universally true. It feels kinda dismissive, like using the word 'talent' to describe someone who has spent years honing their craft.

I enjoy reading Schopenhauer and honed in on Hawley's use of his work. It was interesting to look at Hawley's evolution from Schopenhauer's stoic-esque idea of the will (or the Will) to Nietzsche and Hawley's radicalization of the idea that it's not just access, it's overwhelm. The self doesn't observe the will, it's temporarily immersed in it. But if that access were inherent to *music* instead of people, one would expect it to occur with regularity across contexts and forms.

That hasn't been my experience. Instead, what I've

found is that certain musical conditions are required before anything like Dionysian immersion becomes possible. Groove, tonality, density, sometimes (and preferably) experimentation and absurdity – elements that aren't reaching out to engage with a listener, but are engaging with themselves/each other. This considered, we can look away from Tolstoy's criteria of legibly sending and receiving a message and consider the perception and language that said interpretation requires. I have a couple of examples to share that are the pineapple-on-pizza of music (or something equally as divisive). I think they're even more relevant because you can clearly hear the influence of these artists on Phish's music. Or, I can.

Herbie Hancock's *Headhunters* is an example I'll give on one side of the spectrum. The album doesn't try to seduce you emotionally, so much as embrace you rhythmically. The grooves are hypnotic, not about carrying a theme or narrative, but about building a sonic world. You don't (and often can't) *follow* the music, you have to be a part of it. *Zen and the Art of Fusion Jazz*. And once inside, the distinction between sender and receiver begins to blur. Are they *saying* anything? Do they have to? If there is a "loss of self" here, it's not because of the chaos, but the groove – the result of sustained repetition that gradually makes the boundaries of subjectivity irrelevant. Semantic satiation, but for music.

Frank Zappa[e], in contrast, achieves something similar through entirely different means. Where Herbie builds immersion through groove, Zappa destabilizes normative thinking through unpredictability and discontinuity. Sudden shifts in tone, genre, and structure interrupt the listener's ability to maintain a coherent interpretive lens. The expectation that music should resolve into something emotionally legible collapses under the weight of its own

[e] Need a primer? Check out Hot Rats, Apostrophe('), Over-Nite Sensation, One Size Fits All, Joe's Garage.

inconsistency. What remains still isn't chaos, but a different mode of engagement – one less concerned with meaning than with movement through and with a system without waiting for it to stabilize. One of the reasons I love Zappa so much is that he knows *exactly* what he's doing and does it anyway. I think artists like he and Bowie and Prince are good examples of realizing that thinking outside of the box means recognizing that box is just a construct in the first place.

In both cases, what I see is something like what Hawley describes, but with an important caveat: the Dionysian experience isn't just inherently waiting there beneath the surface of music. It's produced – or at least made accessible – through challenges to specific structural expectations. The intoxication isn't only a factory-default feature, it's also an analog effect that can be added in post.

From that perspective, my experiences with music that do approach this Dionysian threshold feel less spontaneous and more like engineered conditions. When I get "lost" in a groove, it's usually because the groove has been allowed to exist long enough, densely enough, or unconventionally enough to override the analytic habits that otherwise mediate my listening. When I'm pulled into something more absurd or novel, it is because the music has successfully disrupted my ability to impose coherence on it. Which is to say, the loss of subjectivity Hawley describes isn't something I 'feel' accidentally or automatically. It's something that has to be constructed and processed. I can't be the only one, or we'd all still be listening to traditional music. If it were built in, we'd have no reason to keep pushing the envelope of what is "allowed".

That has implications, not just for how I listen to music, but for how I make it. If Dionysian experience is conditional for others as well, then composition is more about building environments in which certain kinds of experiences and emotions are *allowed* to exist, not constructing them as a form of exposition. Repetition isn't just pop convention, but a tool for saturation. Density isn't just overproduction,

it becomes a way of using different voices for different receivers. Even absurdity has a function – it breaks the expectation that everything must resolve into meaning. Or resolve at all.

So while I agree with Hawley that Dionysian music involves a kind of breakdown of the individual self, I would hesitate to treat that breakdown as a universally accessible feature of musical experience. Dionysus doesn't have to represent excess. He could represent access – contingent, deliberate, and "you know it when you hear it".

Reel No. 08

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track Nutopia

Notes: Listening to: Evolve

There are more laws than anyone can name. Not in a poetic, "more stars than in all the heavens" way. More like "an eight-year-old needs three licenses and a health board certification to sell lemonade" way. Where ignorance of the law isn't an excuse, but knowledge of the law requires a graduate degree and a billing rate. Specialists to interpret specialists who interpret revisions of revisions written to correct interpretations of older interpretations.

We treat this as maturity. *Look how developed our civilization is. Look how many layers of governance we've engineered.* We measure sophistication in statutes. But most of those statutes are just insincere apologies. Something went wrong. Someone figured out how to monetize harm, exploit ambiguity, weaponize trust, convert vulnerability into revenue. Instead of shrinking the permission that made it possible, we added a paragraph. Then a subsection. Then a sub-subsection. Then an enforcement mechanism. Civilization as a beta version that can't be patched enough to get the bugs out.

We don't lack law.

We lack restraint.

Take equality. Entire volumes exist to regulate discrimination. Employment law. Housing law. Civil rights statutes drafted, revised, defended, amended, repealed, reinstated. We have to repeatedly legislate that people are

not, in fact, property. We have to clarify that skin tone isn't a résumé. That disability isn't a moral failure. That identity isn't hierarchy.

Imagine if equality were ontological instead of aspirational. If dignity didn't require litigation. If we didn't need to remind institutions that humans are not adjustable components. How many pages evaporate if we stop debating who counts?

Or honesty. We have consumer protection agencies because advertising lies. We have financial oversight because markets mislead. We have perjury laws because testimony can't be believed. Entire industries exist to anticipate deception.

We assume dishonesty the way we assume gravity.

Now imagine a culture where honesty wasn't a marketing virtue but a social baseline. Where lying wasn't considered clever. Where integrity meant more than "legally defensible." How much of the compliance economy dissolves if people aren't rewarded for strategic misrepresentation?

We regulate what we refuse to internalize.

We codify what we won't embody.

It starts from childhood. We write laws to regulate what can be taught, who can teach it, what age it's appropriate to introduce certain ideas. We argue about curriculum like it's nuclear policy. Because we know ideas are powerful. Because we know indoctrination works.

But what if children weren't ideological property? What if no group felt entitled to stamp certainty onto a mind before it could reason abstractly? How many future conflicts are preempted when you allow doubt to mature before doctrine?

Environmental law provides another clear indictment. We debate acceptable levels of poison. Acceptable deforestation. Acceptable emissions. Acceptable extinction rates, as if extinction were a subscription service we can cancel anytime.

We don't outlaw profit from harm. We regulate how tasteful the harm can look in a quarterly report.

Imagine a boundary simple enough to fit on a bumper sticker: don't profit from harm. Not to people. Not to animals. Not to the planet. Not to public space. One constraint that radiates outward across labor law, environmental policy, healthcare, media, infrastructure.

Instead, we draft industry-specific permissions for optimized harm. Tiered. Taxed. Compliant.

Law expands where conscience contracts.

Then there's worship. Not the Sunday-service kind. The structural kind. We deify institutions. We elevate leaders. We sanctify markets. We pretend authority deserves reverence simply because it exists.

So we draft checks and balances. Oversight committees. Ethics boards. Anti-corruption statutes. Because concentrated power attracts narcissism the way high-fructose corn syrup attracts ants.

What if power weren't worshiped to begin with? What if skepticism toward concentrated authority were cultural reflex rather than 'dangerous thinking'?

How many amendments become hypothetical?

Then there's excess. We regulate waste disposal, zoning overflow, debt ceilings, landfill capacity, emissions thresholds. We write entire tax codes around consumption patterns. We invent holidays that require logistics chains.

What if simplicity were prestigious? What if celebration meant connection rather than acquisition? If generosity were infrastructure rather than philanthropy-as-branding?

How many municipal codes shrink when excess isn't aspirational?

It might sound naive to think that ten principles would solve everything.

The real fantasy is that ten million clauses are solving anything now.

We keep drafting because we don't trust ourselves. And we don't trust ourselves because we keep incentivizing the worst versions of ourselves. So we regulate. And enforce. And interpret. And litigate. We build systems to manage impulses we refuse to question.

This isn't an argument for societal chaos. Chaos is hierarchy with less paperwork. Power doesn't disappear when law thins; it concentrates. Autocracies only need one law, after all. The question isn't whether we need structure. It's whether the endless elaboration of statute is evidence of health or a symptom of disease.

Boundaries are finite. Micromanagement is infinite.

If equality were baseline, if honesty were expected, if children weren't indoctrinated, if profit couldn't externalize harm, if power weren't worshiped, if excess weren't aspirational, whole sections of the legal code would become museum exhibits.

"Here," the placard would read, "is how we once attempted to regulate what could have been prevented by basic decency."

Maybe the measure of a civilization isn't how many laws it can produce, but how few it actually needs. Maybe maturity looks less like expansion and more like contraction.

Not fewer rights.

Fewer permissions to harm.

And maybe the impassioned plea isn't for better legislators.

It's for better avarice.

Because if we can't live within a small handful of constraints, no number will suffice.

And if we require tens of millions, perhaps the problem isn't complexity, it's what deficiencies we refuse to give up.

Reel No. 09

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Like Blood and Water

Notes: Listening to: 16 February 1997 @ Alter Wartesaal, Cologne, Germany.

9

I have an theory. Our parents (by that, I generally mean mine and their peers), have become rabidly political because they no longer have a household to abuse and control. With the children gone, they need to inflict their pent-up authoritarian rage and misguided hate on someone. And seeing as their lives didn't turn out the way Reaganomics promised, they need to take it out on society. I'll never be able to consolidate the 'good morals' of Christians with their actions. Sorry, I'll die on this hill. Religion is the opioid epidemic of the masses. Manipulation and fear for the sake of power and control. Let's see how you feel about abortion after I fuck your wife. And I'll also never understand how people, especially in the age of information, can't be more discerning – in a critical-thinking way, not artistic discernment. How can one *not* question the baseline intelligence of a species that *refuses* to learn.

> *Good Morning,*
>
> *I wanted to let you know that you won't be visiting this summer. It's clear that you lack ethics and morals and want to see the world burn in what little time you have left. No surprise, given the lifetime of abuse and trauma you've subjected your children to. Especially me, the scapegoat, who you still don't believe is autistic. Typical ableism. Never apologizing or*

'taking responsibility for your actions'. Of course, you're a textbook narcissist[1]*, so I shouldn't be surprised. You have no loyalty but always want to talk about family? Fuck you. Have fun with your pedophile club and tell Brad and Larry I said hi. Never want to hear from you again. Write me out of your will, you're just an expense and liability to me and the only thing I associate with your family is bad memories and trauma. See you never.*

That was an actual message I sent to my mother today. It's time for *someone* to start living with integrity. I can't consider it one of my core values and only practice it some of the time. The weekly small-talk calls to placate my mother always felt like a violation. Not that boundaries were ever allowed or respected in my family, anyway. The manipulation of my relationship with my son and any partners I may have had for the last twenty years, a cycle of ongoing abuse stretching back as far as when memories started to form. I don't see any reason to keep having trauma flashbacks like I took the brown acid at Woodstock. Or Crystal Pepsi. What does it say about us when we carry on 'loving' – or even cordial – relationships with people who support our eugenicization.

I've been involved in plenty of toxic relationships over the years. But only four (or maybe five) that make up the "Carey Pentagram" (physical, mental/emotional, verbal, sexual, financial). Only. Not like I learned my lesson. The patterns of behavior, thinking, morals, socializing, speech, even facial expressions and gait, have all been instant giveaways. More red flags than a dictator's birthday parade. Am I showing my hand here? Whatever. I'm not going to let other people's bad behavior break me. I'm stubbornly

[1] Extensive patient observation and interaction endured, thereby fulfilling clinical formulation requirements.

naive. Or naively stubborn.

That's a pretty small sample, though. Only four (or maybe five) people out of everyone I've known have completed the Carey Pentagram *on me*. Many other people I've known were doing it to others. Which has led me to believe that either I'm cursed to attract these kinds of people or people just suck. Either way, seems like a good reason to build the wall, right? By the way, which one's Pink?

I prefer the curse idea, though, because otherwise that makes me really sad (Note to self: don't read the news). Curses are cool, though. I used to have a variation of the Good Luck Chuck curse. Or maybe I still do, I haven't tested it in a while. I don't know if either of these curses are necessarily bad. My philosophy (er…approach) when I was working in dispatch was that I may as well take all the calls that others would have a harder time with, emotionally-speaking. So I'd let them transfer these to me – which explicitly wasn't allowed by the bureaucrats who'd clearly never talked an eight-year old through chest compressions on their overdosed mom. Fuck them. I could handle the most traumatic calls with sociopathesque calm and compartmentalization. I just figured, if there's a finite amount of suffering and it causes me the least amount of harm, it should be my responsibility to do it. This wasn't intended to sound like a metaphor for taxes.

There's a short story about this idea by Ursula K. Le Guin called "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." The main question is, would you choose to live in a 'utopian' society if all of the suffering of mankind were inflicted on just one person? Would that actually *be* utopian? The difference between this and the dispatch analogy is the option for the sufferer to choose. I chose to volunteer for the sake of my colleagues. But the child in this fictional story doesn't get a choice. Did past me 'choose' harmful relationships by ignoring the patterns and signs, or was it inevitable?

Curses. I don't know if they're a good thing or a bad thing. When you're surrounded by a lot of negative experiences, it seems subjectively bad. But if the result of

those experiences is you're able to do positive things for others, it seems good. Interesting; I always had this idealized view of a Bodhisattva's existence, or at least a purposeful one. But maybe it's just to endure a random series of curses and the rest of the time it's trying to be cool with being exhaustingly unimpressed by all the chaos and bullshit.

In the next episode, I'll compare the cycle of parental abuse with the academic institution. That doesn't sound trite at all.

Reel No. 10

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Yogisms

Notes: Listening to: A Picture of Nectar.
This was written for a World Religions class, but I was listening to Phish at the time, so I'll include it.

I think most of us in the West first encounter "yoga" wearing Lululemon and speaking fluent stress reduction. A mat, a sequence, a softly-lit room curated to convince the nervous system that everything is fine. The premise is simple: touch your toes, regulate your breathing, and eventually achieve a temporary ceasefire with your monkey mind. Even at first introduction, I understood I was dealing with a translation, not the original manuscript. My practice was supplementary to my martial arts training. And like many martial arts, we've imported the choreography of Yoga and replaced the values with something Americans are far more comfortable with: capitalism. Enlightenment can be found on Aisle 12 between those purple foam blocks and the straps to help you with boat pose.

I don't have as much preexisting knowledge of Hinduism as I do about other religions. I knew a few deities and celebrations, some core values. A bit about historical caste systems and Brahmanism. These [course] materials clarified that what we're practicing at Spiritual Healer Jenny's Yoga, Reiki, and Aromatherapy Studio™ is the tip of a much larger philosophical iceberg – and we're congratulating ourselves for swimming in the melt. "Look how culturally aware and enlightened I am, I can hold crow for 30 seconds."

In its traditional context, yoga isn't primarily about physiological flexibility or even mental calm. It's a sustained

attempt to solve a problem most of us will face: the human tendency to misidentify the self, to cling to impermanent things, and then act surprised when that arrangement produces suffering. Last term, I wrote a paper comparing Stoicism to Zen and Aikido – and this is another system along those same lines. It's relationships like this that make me think about the ubiquity of certain religious beliefs, but not in the god-and-heaven sense, but in a trying-to-figure-out-the-point-of-it-all sense. I noticed other overlaps, such as marghas (Do/Dao) and moksha (Nirvana).[§] Seeing as Gautama Buddha came from this cultural background, it's not surprising that the same ideas exist and have been rephrased or modified.

What I find most appealing is that Hindu traditions don't offer yoga as a single path but as a set of parallel strategies, each intended for a different type of person. I'm designing a new philosophy course right now with this as a core concept. Four sets of learning materials for different interests, abilities, backgrounds, heutogical styles. Should we use Karma instead of points for assignments? I think it would be super cool as a game, like some Unreal Engine thing that takes place in an asylum where these old philosophers have been locked up. You can use that one.

Netflix last-episode recap[¶]: Karma yoga asks you to act in the world while relinquishing your obsessive attachment to outcomes – which sounds simple enough until you realize how much of your identity is attached to results. I love the irony of discussing these concepts critically in an academic setting (hold on a second, I have to check if I've met the rubric…okay, I'm back). My approach to philosophy is that there are no wrong answers, only dishonest ones. There's a certain gray-area in writing this with the intention for it to be read. Is self-censorship of philosophy still philosophy? Okay, sorry, ADHD disengaged.

Bhakti yoga leans into devotion, dissolving the self through love or surrender to something larger, which is either beautiful or uncomfortable depending on how suspicious you are of sincerity. Very; I am very suspicious.

Jnana yoga is the intellectual knife – inquiry, discernment, the slow and methodical stripping away of illusion until the question of "who you are" becomes less a statement and more a problem.

Raja yoga, the one most recognizable in Western practice, is the disciplined training of the mind through meditation and control of attention – less spa day, more internal laboratory.[1] Wait a second…I just realized we're sorting into Hogwart's Houses. Minus the bigotry, I hope.

Compared to the American version, this is less a 'wellness routine' and more a full-scale ontological renovation project. Can we call it "*self*" care? (Waka-waka). The Western model isolates the body and tells it to behave. The Hindu model treats the body as one instrument in an orchestra, all of it aimed at reconfiguring how you experience reality. One approach helps you decompress after a hard week. The other questions the entire premise of having a "week" in the first place.

If I have to place myself into one of these camps, I'd land in Jnana yoga, with a strong minor in Karma yoga. My default setting is interrogation. I don't encounter a concept so much as I examine it, tear at its edges, and see what might be hiding underneath. I'm less interested in participating in a system than in understanding how it produces the things it claims. Jnana yoga, with its suspicion of surface-level truths and willingness to dismantle the idea of a stable self, feels less like a choice and more like a diagnosis.

That said, I'm not purely contemplative, no matter how appealing that sounds on paper. I write, I make music, I build, I produce things that go on to exist in the world on their own. This is where Karma yoga enters, less as a natural inclination and more as a necessary corrective. The idea of acting without attachment to outcomes is, for someone invested in their work, both appealing and insulting. The outcome matters. Not cosmically, but in finding our sense of self. Yet, the more tightly you grip it, the more distorted the work (and self) becomes. Karma yoga reframes actions as something you commit to while simultaneously refusing to

let it define you. In practice, a kind of ongoing negotiation with our own ego – a concept I've learned to embrace after years of performative art. Artistic integrity over pandering. Ars gratis artis.

I liked Prothero's reference to books like The Catcher in the Rye. I've also written novels about characters trying to 'find' themselves, often without success. Not that I think Holden was on that path to enlightenment, either. I'll throw in another one: In Christopher Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff*, yoga appears as something both absurd and serious. The characters approach it with a mixture of skepticism and curiosity, treating it as rigorous and ridiculous. And yet, beneath the humor, there's a truth to the satire – that yoga isn't just a collection of poses but a method for altering perception itself. The joke works because it's accurate, not pejorative: from the outside, yoga looks like stretching. From the inside, it's not just your body you're contorting into new positions, but your mind and soul.

My understanding of yoga has shifted from seeing it as a practice to perform to a framework to inhabit, whether I intend to or not. Identifying as a jnana–karma yogi isn't about adopting a label, but recognizing patterns: a tendency to question, act in good faith, and then spend an unreasonable amount of time trying not to let the results of that action define my sense of self. Yoga, it turns out, was never about touching our toes. It was about figuring out why we're so invested in the idea that toes (or "our") matter in the first place.

Reel No. 11

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: Lethologica

Notes: Listening to: "Waiting for Columbus" Atlantic City, NJ, 31 October, 2010.

To Be Filed Somewhere Between Draft and Disciplinary Review

I keep thinking about how the first time someone told me to "prove it," I was young enough that the claim in question was something like, "I have an opinion", and the support they were asking for was not evidence but obedience. They didn't want reasons. They wanted alignment, they wanted the sentence to land differently. Less *mine*.

Later, someone used the exact same phrase in a classroom and the only thing that had changed was the font. Which is when it started to feel less like education and more like conformity. Not a new system; an old one with brighter lights and a bibliography. Authority hadn't disappeared, it had learned to ask for references. Which is an elegant solution if you think about it. You don't need to justify power if power can annotate power. You don't need to argue if you can cite your sources.

There are students who do well in that environment and it's not necessarily those who best understand the material. It's those who understand the room. The person who can feel where the boundaries are, not as written rules, but as atmospheres. The one who knows when a question will be received as curiosity and when it will be received as argument. They don't argue, they recalibrate. They learn

to produce answers that resemble the answers the system already recognizes as answers. They learn that correctness is not an absolute condition but a negotiated one. An answer can be right in a way that is wrong for the room and wrong in a way that is right for the grade. You adjust accordingly. You become good at being legible.

This is often mistaken for understanding because it *looks* like understanding from a distance. It has the right format. The right vocabulary. The right number of citations arranged like structural supports holding each sentence in place. It doesn't wobble. It doesn't surprise anyone. It performs stability.

Academia rewards this. Because it has to. It's an institution built on the management of credibility. And management requires predictability. You can't have a system where every idea has the freedom to behave like an idea. Some of them have to behave like fast food. Reliable. Recognizable. Easy to order. So you learn how to arrange them. You reference the right people. You adopt the right tone. You present your argument in a way that feels new enough to count and familiar enough to pass. You become, in effect, a curator of acceptable thought. Which is a strange role to occupy if you entered the institution believing you were there to think freely.

Freedom, it turns out, has formatting requirements.

Academic integrity lives somewhere inside this arrangement, like a concept everyone agrees is essential but no one wants to discuss in mixed company.

Officially, it's about honesty. Unofficially, it's about control.

Students are introduced to it early, usually through a tone that combines disappointment with surveillance. Their work is scanned, compared, evaluated. Not just for accuracy but for resemblance. Too much resemblance is a violation. Too little resemblance isn't enough engagement with the source material. There is, apparently, a correct amount of originality – and discovering it is part of the curriculum. Students who misjudge that amount are corrected. Formally. Documented.

Sometimes permanently. Which is an interesting choice for a system that describes itself as educational.

Meanwhile, the rest of the institution operates under a more flexible interpretation of the same principle. Courses are recycled like holiday traditions. Materials are "borrowed" because it worked before and hasn't caused enough trouble to justify change. Lectures are delivered from slides that have achieved a kind of academic afterlife, slightly updated in resolution, but structurally identical.

No one calls this a lack of integrity.

It's called efficiency.

Or continuity.

Or, if you're feeling nostalgic, pedagogy.

The distinction isn't subtle once you notice it. Integrity is enforced downward. Upward, it becomes a matter of discretion. The same behavior changes its ethical category depending on who performs it and how difficult it would be to challenge them without consequences.

This isn't unique to academia, but academia *is* particularly adept at explaining why it makes sense.

Grading enforces this logic in a way few other mechanisms do. It presents itself as evaluation, but it functions more like calibration. You aren't simply being assessed on what you know. You're being assessed on how well you can express what you know in a way that aligns with expectations that are rarely stated clearly but are always present. You learn to anticipate them. You learn to write sentences that feel like they have already been approved. You learn to avoid phrasing that might require too much individual interpretation. You learn to recognize the difference between a thought that's interesting and a thought that's safe. You develop a preference for the latter because the latter comes with fewer complications.

Curiosity becomes strategic.

Office hours make the arrangement feel personal. You sit across from someone who represents both knowledge and authority and you negotiate access in a series of polite exchanges that attempt to feel both helpful and carefully

contained. You present confusion in a format that can be addressed. You ask questions that can be answered without expanding the scope of the conversation beyond what is manageable or expected. You don't ask everything you're thinking. You ask what can be *appropriately* answered. You learn that knowledge isn't available, it's supervised.

I'm guessing that tenure is what happens when someone becomes good at this for a long enough period of time. It's often described as protection for academic freedom, which isn't technically incorrect, but it's also a reward for having demonstrated consistently that one can operate within the institution without disrupting it in ways that are inconvenient to manage. You publish. You present. You participate in the circulation of knowledge in forms that are recognizable and, therefore, legitimate. You become part of the structure. You become the voice that other voices learn to navigate.

This isn't a moral failing, it's a structural outcome. People who can't or won't adapt tend to not remain long enough to be promoted. People who do adapt remain and, over time, they shape the environment in ways that reflect the adaptations that allowed them to succeed.

The system reproduces itself. Not through conspiracy, through selection.

Disability services, for example, is where the institution demonstrates its ability to sound compassionate while remaining procedurally consistent. The language is careful and, in many cases, sounds sincere. It acknowledges barriers. It promises support. It frames access as a priority.

And then it introduces a process.

You're asked to document your need, which requires translating lived experience into something legible to the institution. You provide evidence. You fill out forms. You wait. Your access becomes contingent. Not just on your need, but on your ability to navigate the system that determines whether that need is in the correct format.

Support becomes conditional.

Accommodation becomes something that must be

requested properly, justified sufficiently, and implemented in ways that do not disrupt the broader functioning of the institution more than 'necessary'.

Elsewhere, it might be called cruelty. Institutionally, it's called administration. It's also, depending on where you're standing, indistinguishable from a refusal that just takes way, way longer.

Everyone involved can, theoretically, believe they are doing the right thing. Professors maintain standards. Deans ensure consistency. Committees refine policy into language that can survive scrutiny. Students do their best to meet expectations that make more sense in retrospect (if they bother to stop and think about it) than they do in the moment. None of them wake up intending to create a system that prioritizes alignment over understanding. They inherit it. They participate in it. They explain it. And because it works – in a limited and highly specific way – it continues. At some point, it becomes difficult to tell whether the institution is teaching people how to think or how to survive thinking in a way that can be evaluated, categorized, and approved without causing too much disruption.

And the grade, eventually, becomes the thing that matters, not because it should, but because it *does*. It translates into opportunity. Into legitimacy. Into the ability to continue participating in the system that produced it. Which is, in its own way, a kind of inheritance.

Not of knowledge. Of behavior.

You learn how to speak in a way that will be heard. You learn how to write in a way that will be accepted. You learn how to think in a way that won't cause friction. Over time, you learn to mistake that for thinking itself. You don't have to stop people from thinking, you just have to teach them how to do it 'correctly'.

And "correctly" is a generous word for what's essentially pre-approved deviation. You're allowed to move, just not far enough to leave the room. You're allowed to disagree, provided the disagreement can be cited and framed and edited until it resembles a contribution instead of a

disturbance.

It's not censorship so much as choreography.

Which sounds better on paper.

And papers are what matter.

There's this moment, usually somewhere between the second and third assignment, where some students realize that the rubric is less a guide and more a personality test. Not of them. Of the person grading them.

What does this person *reward*?

Clarity, but not too much clarity. Originality, but not the kind that requires them to reconsider anything. Confidence, but ideally paired with enough hedging to suggest humility. A tone that says, "I have an idea," but also, "Don't worry, it's not *that* kind of idea."

You learn to write like you're asking permission after the fact. Which is a strange habit to develop in a place that claims to value independent thought. But it works. And because it works, it gets repeated. And because it gets repeated, it becomes indistinguishable from the thing it replaced. There's probably a cleaner way to say that that would get a better grade, but I'm not going to look for it.

Research culture introduces another layer, which is that thinking doesn't just need to be correct, it needs to be *productive*. Not productive in the sense of useful, necessarily, but productive in the sense of publishable. Something that can be packaged, reviewed, cross-referenced, and added to the ongoing conversation without requiring that the conversation to change too dramatically.

You're not just thinking. You're creating content.

Timelines. Deadlines. Submission windows. Calls for papers that read like job postings for ideas. You begin to notice that the pace of knowledge production is correlated to the pace of professional advancement, which is either a coincidence or the point.

Probably the point.

You write to be cited. You cite to be visible. You become visible to remain. And the ideas themselves begin to feel

secondary to their circulation, which is an odd experience if you remember what it felt like to have an idea before it needed to perform.

There's a kind of phrasing that appears in academic writing that always makes me laugh; something like: "This gap in the literature suggests an opportunity for further research," which is a nice way of saying, "Nobody has said this in *exactly* this way yet, and I would like that nobody to be me." Which is fair, if a little revealing.

The gap isn't always conceptual, sometimes it's stylistic. Sometimes it's just a matter of rearranging existing ideas into a slightly different configuration and presenting it as a contribution, which it technically is – the way setting the table for dinner is technically contributing to interior design.

No one calls it that. We call it career advancement.

Peer review is introduced as a safeguard, a way to ensure quality, legitimacy, and all the words that sound like they belong in a lexicon that is trying extra hard to be taken seriously. And, I mean, it works. It filters out work that is careless or unsupported or simply needs more time. It also filters out work that doesn't fit easily into the established categories. Work that doesn't cite the *right* people in the 'right' way. Work that challenges the structure instead of building within it. Work that feels like it requires an entirely different rubric. Which should be a feature, not a flaw.

Systems that depend on stability can't afford too much instability, even if that instability is where something genuinely brilliant might exist.

So the review process becomes less about truth and more about fit. "Does this belong?" Not, "is this right?" Not, "is this possible?" Not, "is this groundbreaking?"

Does this belong?

If you've ever wondered why certain ideas seem to circulate endlessly while others disappear almost immediately, it's usually because some ideas know how to behave themselves.

There's a joke somewhere in all of this about how the system designed to produce knowledge has become expert

at producing people who know how to navigate knowledge without challenging it. It's not really a joke. More of a CV entry.

The thing that keeps resurfacing, no matter how far you follow the thread, is how familiar all this feels. Not intellectually, structurally. The language changes. The stakes change. The consequences become more abstract, more delayed, more professionally articulated. But the underlying dynamic – the calibration of self in response to authority, the performance of alignment, the careful management of deviation – remains consistent.

You've seen this before.

You've lived this before.

Deja vu, now with a Works Cited page.

Are you waiting for the bit where I say that the system is broken? Broken implies that it's not working as intended – and this seems to be working quite well for what it is designed to do.

It produces graduates. It produces publications. It produces people who can operate within its logic and, eventually, explain that logic to others in a way that feels both inevitable and necessary.

It produces continuity. Which isn't the same thing as truth, but it looks similar from a distance, especially if you're using a speed grader.

The hypocrisy isn't hidden, it's distributed. It lives in small decisions that feel reasonable in a vacuum and become something else at scale. It lives in the gap between what is said and what is actually done – which is wide enough to notice and narrow enough to ignore.

Professors talk about originality while using course materials they downloaded but haven't gotten around to reading because there isn't time to reinvent everything, which is true. Students are told that time constraints are not an excuse, which is also true. Both things are true in ways that can't coexist comfortably, so they aren't placed next to each other.

Administrators talk about access while managing it through processes that *require access* to navigate. Committees talk about inclusion while defining the terms under which inclusion is permitted. Everyone uses the same established vernacular, which gives the impression of alignment, even when the underlying practices diverge significantly.

No one is lying – not exactly. They're describing different parts of the same system from positions that make those descriptions feel morally defendable. Which is how the system maintains itself without needing to resolve the contradictions it produces.

It's funny how the more fluent you become in this environment, the less likely you are to describe it this way. Because fluency comes with benefits.

Recognition.

Stability.

A 401k.

A sense of belonging that one can't question without risking the very things that make them comfortable.

So you adjust your language. You describe the system in ways that make sense from the inside. You explain why things are the way they are. And eventually, you believe it. Not completely, just enough. 'Just enough' is the system's favorite amount.

At some point, the question stops being whether the institution is teaching people how to think and becomes whether it is teaching them how to recognize when thinking is no longer the primary objective. Because there are moments – and they aren't rare – where the goal isn't to arrive at something true, but to arrive at something acceptable. Something that can be evaluated, categorized, and approved without requiring anyone to reconsider the structure that made the evaluation possible in the first place.

It's not presented as a compromise, it's presented as professionalism. And professionalism, like integrity, has a direction.

Down.

It's expected of those with the least power and described by those with the most. It is enforced in ways that are visible in one direction and negotiable in the other. Which is efficient. Which is stable. Which is (depending on how long you've been inside it) either completely normal or increasingly difficult to unsee.

There's probably a conclusion here.

Something about reform. Something about awareness. Something about doing better.

I can feel it forming, the way those final paragraphs always do, rolling themselves into something that sounds responsible enough to end on. That sums up my position neatly in four sentences.

I'm not sure I believe it.

Not because change is impossible – this isn't sustained by ignorance, it's sustained by participation. Participation that, once it becomes survival, is difficult to critique without implicating yourself. Which, at this point, seems unavoidable.

You realize you can predict feedback before you receive it. Not the general direction. The phrasing. You start to hear the comments before they're written. "This could be clarified." "This needs more support." "This is interesting, but…" Like a little administrative Saint Peter that everything has to pass through on its way to legitimacy.

And once you can hear it, you start editing for it. Not after. Before.

You remove sentences that would require too much explanation. You soften claims that might be read as too certain. You add citations, not because they're necessary, but because they're expected, which is a different kind of necessity that tends to carry more weight. You begin to anticipate correction so effectively that correction becomes unnecessary.

Which is efficient.

Which is the point.

(There's probably a word for this that sounds less like

self-censorship and more like professionalism. There's *always* a word.)

The distinction between your voice and the institutional voice starts to blur, not in a dramatic way, but in a gradual, almost polite merging. You still feel like you're thinking your own thoughts. You're just thinking them in a way that would be acceptable if someone else were to read them.

Which they will…eventually.

That's part of it, you're never just thinking, you're thinking about being read.

There's a kind of self-harm in that, but it's the kind that doesn't leave marks. It doesn't require stitches. It doesn't reveal itself as anything other than refinement. Improvement. Development. You become better at expressing yourself. You become worse at noticing when you've stopped.

I keep thinking about how often the word "rigor" gets used, and then remembering I agreed to retire that word because it's already doing too much work elsewhere, so let's call it something else.

Let's call it endurance. Because a lot of what passes for intellectual achievement looks like the ability to tolerate a system long enough to be recognized by it. To keep producing within its constraints. To keep adjusting without breaking. To keep participating even when participation feels like translation rather than expression.

Endurance is admirable. It just isn't the same thing as insight. But insight doesn't get funding.

Academic writing reads like it's trying not to exist too loudly. Careful, qualified, layered with disclaimers that function less as clarification and more as protection. Every claim buffered. Every conclusion contingent.

It's not that the author doesn't know what they think. It's that they know what happens when you say it. The written word becomes a compromise between thought and survivability. Which is a strange compromise to make in a place that claims to prioritize truth.

I keep circling back to the idea that no one involved believes they're doing anything wrong. Which is probably

mostly true. The professor who reuses materials is managing time. The administrator who enforces policy is maintaining consistency. The reviewer who rejects a paper is upholding standards. The student who adapts their voice is trying to succeed. All of these are reasonable actions.

Individually.

Collectively, they produce something that feels less reasonable when you step back far enough to see the pattern. But stepping back isn't encouraged. There's always more to do inside the system than outside of it, which is a convenient way of keeping everyone inside.

Citation politics is its own ecosystem. Who you cite matters. Not just for accuracy, but for positioning. You're locating yourself within a network of legitimacy. You're saying, "These are my people," even if you've never met them, even if you disagree with them, even if you're only citing them because not citing them would be noticeable in a way that could be misinterpreted. You build your argument out of other arguments, which is fine, that's how knowledge works, but you also build your credibility out of proximity. You become adjacent to authority. You borrow weight, which saves you from having to generate it yourself.

And then there's the part no one writes about, which is the exhaustion of constantly translating yourself. Not just your ideas, but your tone, your emphasis, your uncertainty. You learn to flatten certain things, amplify others, reshape your own thinking into something that can be received without friction. You become, in effect, a mediator between yourself and the system.

Which would be fine if it were temporary. At some point, it becomes automatic. You stop noticing when you've adjusted. You stop remembering what the unadjusted version sounded like. And that's not necessarily tragic. People adapt. Systems require adaptation. This isn't new. What's new, or at least newly visible once you start looking for it, is how seamlessly this adaptation gets reframed as growth.

You're improving.

You're refining your voice.

You're becoming more precise.

All of which can be true while something else is also happening.

Something like subtraction.

There's probably a cleaner metaphor for that. Something involving erosion. But I'm not going to work on it.

The institution doesn't need to tell you not to think a certain way. It just needs to make thinking one way more difficult than thinking another way. More time-consuming. More likely to be misunderstood. More likely to require explanation that won't fit in the space provided.

Over time, those slight differences accumulate into preferences, and those preferences accumulate into norms, and those norms begin to feel like reality.

It's design. And design, like everything else here, is distributed. No single person is responsible. Everyone contributes. Everyone inherits. Everyone adjusts.

There's a version of this where I say something like, "We can do better," and I don't doubt that's possible. People *can* do better. Institutions can change. Policies can be revised. Language can be updated to reflect intentions more accurately. All of that is possible. What I'm less certain about is whether the underlying structure – the need to manage knowledge, to evaluate it, to legitimize it in ways that are consistent and scalable – can exist without producing some version of this dynamic.

Because control, once introduced, tends to persist. It just changes vocabulary. "Because I said so" becomes "as established." I don't think it has to be this way. I just think it's good at convincing people that it does. And convincing people, especially people who have already learned how to be convinced in the correct way, is usually enough.

There's probably a final sentence here. Something that sounds like closure. Something that feels like it resolves the tension.

I don't think this resolves.

I think it continues.
Silently.
Professionally.
Cited, if necessary.

Reel No. 12

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Water in the Ground

Notes: Listening to: A Live One, "Tweezer" (various)

I didn't set out to learn anything about music by digging a hole in my yard. I set out, straightforwardly, to put water somewhere it wasn't – and to persuade a few birds and insects to treat my property as a stop on their daily rounds. A modest ambition. Hydrology with delusions of hospitality.

In theory, I knew what I was doing. Not in the sense of competence, exactly, but in the way one "knows" biology after enough books, documentaries, and undergraduate midterms. I understood ecosystems as a concept. I could tell you about food chains, about how water features increase biodiversity, about the delicate choreography between plants, microbes, and whatever decides to crawl or fly in. I had a mental model. A clean one.

Which, in retrospect, is the first warning sign. Because theory, when left alone, becomes architectural. It starts drawing straight lines. It assumes cooperation. It imagines that if you introduce element A and element B, you will get outcome C, as though the world were a Calculus II equation waiting to be solved. Music theory has the same tendency. Learn your scales, your modes, your harmonic relationships, and suddenly you have this internal blueprint of how sound ought to behave. Tension resolves. Dominants lead home. Everything has a function. Everything has a place.

Then you pick up a shovel – or an instrument – and the entire system collapses.

The pond began, as these things do, with a shape. A rough outline scratched into the ground like a composer sketching an arrangement. Here is where the water will sit. Here is where the edge will be. I had intentions: a shallow shelf for birds, a deeper section to stabilize temperature and protect the snails, space for submerged flora that would oxygenate and filter. I was, for a brief, intoxicating moment, the benevolent architect of a tiny world.

Then I started digging.

Soil, it turns out, is not especially interested in your plans. It has density gradients, pockets of rock, roots that appear where they're least convenient. It resists symmetry. It collapses when you want it to hold and holds when you want it to give. You can persuade it, but not quickly, and not without concessions.

This is exactly what happens when you move from knowing music to making it (or attempting to). You can outline a progression, sketch a structure, imagine a phrase that behaves beautifully in your head, and then your hands touch the instrument and everything becomes dirt. Melodies create their own topography. Certain transitions feel natural, others feel like you're trying to bait the guitar into an argument. Timing slips, not dramatically, but enough to remind you that "groove" is an aspiration, not a guarantee.

In both cases, you discover that execution isn't the translation of theory. It's a negotiation with material.

The plastic liner went in next. A clean, artificial membrane meant to impose order on the planet beneath it. It's a little offensive. A sheet of industrial control dropped into an otherwise organic process. Necessary, I guess, but inelegant. I tucked it, folded it, tried to make it conform to the shape I had carved out, which of course meant discovering that my shape was not nearly as coherent as I had imagined, despite my theoretical research.

You bring in structure – time signatures, harmonic frameworks, maybe a click track if you're feeling authoritarian – and lay it over your playing like a liner. It contains things. It prevents leaks. It also reveals every

contour in your underlying shape. Your phrasing has edges. Your timing has seams. The thing you thought was fluid turns out to have corners.

You can't remove the liner. Without it, the pond doesn't hold water. Without some kind of structure, music dissolves into undifferentiated gestures. But you also can't pretend it's natural. It's an intervention. A constraint. An imposition that will, hopefully, eventually disappear under everything else.

"Eventually."

Because once the water went in, the pond entered its most embarrassing phase. It looked like a project. Not a pond. Not an ecosystem. A naked track. The water was too clear in a way that felt sterile, like a freshly recorded track with no reverb, no room, no equalization. You could see everything. Every fold in the liner, every rock placed with slightly too much intention. It had the aesthetic of something that had been assembled by someone who wanted it to look like it had always existed.

Music has this phase, too. Early compositions, early improvisations, even early recordings can feel embarrassingly sterile. *I have learned "the thing." Observe as I apply it correctly.* The notes are in the right places. The timing is, more or less, acceptable. And the whole song feels like it's waiting for an Amazon Prime package to arrive that hasn't been ordered yet.

Time isn't just about counting beats.

The first sign that the pond was no longer entirely mine came from things I didn't put there. A film on the surface. Microscopic life beginning its occupation. Then detritus worms and insects. String algae. Then the Scrub Jays, who approached with the cautious entitlement of creatures that assume everything is theirs until proven otherwise.

This is where the analogy becomes less composed and more useful. In music, the most interesting moments are rarely the ones you consciously author. They're the ones that emerge when your habits, your training, your mood, and the immediate physical reality of playing intersect in

a way you didn't script. A phrase appears that feels less like invention and more like discovery. You recognize it as yours, but not entirely under your control. It arrives, and your job isn't to create or interpret it, but to not interfere with it.*

In ecological terms, this is succession. You create initial conditions and then the system begins to populate itself according to factors that exceed your design. In musical terms, it's improvisation that has stopped trying to prove anything and started listening to what is already happening.

Both require restraint.

My initial instinct was to adjust everything. If the water clouded slightly, I wanted to correct it. If a plant grew in a direction that wasn't part of the original composition, I considered moving it. There is a deep impulse to maintain control over something you've made, as though deviation were a kind of failure. A note that doesn't land exactly as intended becomes something to fix. A rhythm that breathes a little too freely becomes something to tighten. You start policing the qualities that make the thing alive.

And yet, every intervention has consequences. Adjusting one plant changes light patterns. Clearing one bit of debris removes a habitat for something you didn't know was there. Correcting one "mistake" can erase the conditions that allowed a more interesting idea to appear two measures later.

In both cases, you realize that perfection isn't only unattainable, it's undesirable. A perfectly controlled pond is a decorative object. A perfectly controlled piece of music is a demonstration. Both are technically impressive. Neither is particularly alive.

Constraint, on the other hand, turns out to be the actual engine of identity.

I didn't build an ideal pond. I built a pond in my yard,

*Yeah, yeah, I know - Past-me hasn't learned that part of the lore yet.

with my soil, my light conditions, my access to materials, my tolerance for contamination, my particular blend of patience and impatience. Those constraints aren't unfortunate. They're the entire character of the thing. A different yard, a different set of materials, a different person – you get a different ecosystem.

Your technique, your limitations, your influences, the instruments you have access to, the space you're in – these aren't obstacles to be overcome on the way to some abstract "better." They're the conditions under which your sound exists at all.

Improvisation, in this light, isn't freedom in the sense of anarchy. It's freedom within a particular enclosure. You aren't wandering an infinite landscape. You're exploring a terrain that has already been shaped by everything you are and everything you have practiced. The artistry is in how you move through it, not in pretending it isn't there.

Maintenance, inevitably, becomes part of the practice. The pond doesn't sustain itself without attention. Water levels drop. Leaves accumulate. Plants overextend or fail. There's a restrained, repetitive labor involved in keeping the system balanced enough that it can continue to evolve. It's not glamorous. It doesn't photograph well. It is, however, the difference between something that persists and something that decays.

Music has its equivalent in practice. Not the performative kind, where you display your discipline like a backstage pass, but the mundane, almost invisible repetition that keeps your hands connected to your intentions. Scales, yes, but also listening. Revisiting patterns. Noticing where you default to cliché and redirecting yourself. It's less about improvement in the heroic, woodshedding sense and more about upkeep. Preventing your habits from becoming stagnant water.

Failure, when it happens, is hardly dramatic. It's incremental. The water gets a little murkier than you'd like. A passage doesn't click. A performance feels slightly off, not enough to collapse, but enough. The useful mindset is to treat these not as verdicts but as information. Murkiness

might indicate too many nutrients, not enough filtration, insufficient oxygenation. It's the system communicating. An awkward phrase might indicate that you're leaning too heavily on a pattern that no longer serves you, or that your ear is moving faster than your technique can follow. Again, communication. The mistake is to interpret feedback as failure rather than as instruction.

Time, eventually, does what it always does. It integrates.

The pond, after weeks, maybe months, stops looking like something that was recently constructed. Edges soften. Plants settle into their roles. The water loses that initial clarity and gains a depth that feels more convincing. It begins to look less like a decision and more like a fact. As though it had always been there and you simply revealed it.

It tends to be less visible and more audible with music. Phrasing becomes less forced. Transitions that once required conscious effort start to feel inevitable. Improvisation loses its frantic search for the "right" note and settles into a humble confidence, where notes aren't selected but allowed.

This isn't mastery. It's familiarity with the terrain.

The most surprising shift, for me, has been in how I think about audience.

I didn't build the pond for spectators, but it's constantly being used. Birds arrive, drink, leave. Insects skim the surface. It exists as part of a network of small, overlapping needs. It provides, it receives, it participates. Whether or not anyone stands there and admires it is almost irrelevant. Music can be performed and evaluated and consumed. But it can also exist as an environment. Something people enter, even briefly, and take what they need from. The question shifts from "is this good?" to something more ecological: "what does this make possible?"

Does it create space for attention? For movement? For a particular kind of listening? Does it invite anything to exist or does it just display itself?

Control is a comforting fiction. It suggests that with enough knowledge, enough planning, enough discipline, we can produce outcomes that align neatly with our

intentions. What the pond suggests instead is that intention is just the opening move. After that, you're in conversation with a system that doesn't care about your blueprint. It will respond, adapt, resist, and occasionally reward you with something you couldn't have predicted. Your role shifts from architect to participant. From designer to listener.

Music, at its best, asks for the same humility. You learn the theory, not to enforce it, but to recognize when it is being used in interesting ways. You practice, not to eliminate error, but to expand the range of things you can respond to. You build structures, not to contain the music, but to give it something to push against.

And, occasionally, if you're paying attention, something arrives – a phrase, a texture, a moment – that feels less like something you made and more like something that agreed to happen while you were there.

Reel No. 13

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Echoes from the Faculty Lounge:
On the Epistemological Limits of a Three-Hour 'YEfh' Consisting Entirely of Bass Solos.

Notes: Listening to: Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville, CT.
23 July 2024.

There's a musical version of education that is surprisingly similar to a band where auditions are run by a committee that has never actually listened to music. Everyone shows up with the same instrument, tuned to the same pitch, playing the same approved passage, and the panel nods approvingly while Huey Lewis puts down his megaphone because nothing unexpected happened. It's very clean. Very efficient. You end up with six drummers who can all execute the same rudiments at the same tempo, which is impressive in the way a metronome is impressive – accurate, tireless, and not especially interested in making anything worth hearing.

I've been thinking about this while trying to make sense of how I actually learn things, which looks less like a degree program and more like assembling a band that keeps changing genres mid-song. Not out of indecision, but because no single discipline seems interested in doing all the jobs at once.

If we treat genres like fields of study, the analogy should work. Philosophy is the blues – not because it's old, but because it insists on returning to the same fundamental tensions and asking why they still hurt. It's repetitive in the way that matters, circling a problem until the repetition becomes insight rather than redundancy. Theology is probably gospel – but not because of the whole 'god thing'

– structurally similar in some ways, but oriented toward performance rather than analysis, more concerned with affirmation than interrogation. Stoicism reads like acoustic folk to me – sparse, disciplined, a kind of aesthetic refusal that becomes its own statement.

Meanwhile, something like behavioral science has the energy of funk. It's obsessed with patterns, with what actually gets bodies to move, with feedback loops and reinforcement. It's empirical in the way funk is empirical – if it doesn't groove, it doesn't matter how elegant your theory is. You adjust until it works.

I'm just making this up as I go. None of these are complete on their own, which isn't a criticism. It's the point.

The problem starts when you're told to pick one as though you're declaring a permanent genre allegiance, and then, more subtly, to pick one *instrument* within that genre and stay there. You don't just study philosophy, you become a specific *kind* of philosopher. You don't just engage in behavioral science, you narrow into a method, a framework, a preferred set of tools. The system rewards coherence in the same way a bandleader might reward a player who never deviates from the chart.

There's a certain comfort in that. You know your role. You know your part. You become legible to others who are playing the same kind of music. You get your $100 at the end of the night.

But it raises a question that feels increasingly difficult to ignore: what kind of band are we *trying* to build?

Because a band composed entirely of specialists in the same instrument and genre is a strange creature. Six drummers can create a kind of percussive cathedral, sure, but melody becomes an afterthought, harmony an accident. Six lead guitarists turn everything into a solo, which is entertaining for about thirty seconds and then begins to resemble a debate where no one is listening. Six bassists… well, at that point you've got Spinal Tap.

There's a novelty to it, but not much range.

What actually makes a band interesting isn't just the

diversity of instruments, but the way those instruments carry different conceptual responsibilities. Rhythm section, harmonic support, melodic voice, texture, space. Each role constrains and enables the others. The drummer doesn't need to play chords because someone else is holding that down. The guitarist doesn't need to articulate every rhythmic subdivision because the groove already exists. The bassist sits in that ambiguous space between rhythm and harmony, translating one into the other.

It's an ecosystem, not a hierarchy.

When I think about my own learning in those terms, the idea of committing exclusively to one "field" starts to feel less like focus and more like malnutrition. Why would I want to build my entire intellectual band out of behavioral scientists, any more than I'd want a musical band made entirely of drummers? They might be extraordinary drummers, but the range of what they can produce together is constrained by design.

It's not that depth is unimportant. You don't want a drummer who's only casually familiar with rhythm, or a philosopher who treats concepts like interchangeable accessories. But depth without complementarity starts to fold in on itself. You get virtuosity in a narrow band of frequencies and silence everywhere else.

The more interesting question becomes how to distribute your attention across roles without turning yourself into a dilettante who can't actually play anything. Studying a field is one thing. Choosing an instrument within that field is another. You can engage philosophy through logic, through ethics, through political theory, through phenomenology – each one a different instrument with its own technique and limitations. In behavioral science, you might lean into experimental design, statistical modeling, observational analysis – again, different ways of making the same general kind of music.

The mistake is assuming you have to pick one instrument and never touch another.

In practice, what seems to work better is something

closer to a multi-instrumentalist. Musicians do this all the time. A guitarist who understands basic keyboard harmony. A drummer who can think melodically. A bassist who hears rhythm and chord changes simultaneously. They're not abandoning their primary instrument; they're extending its range by understanding how it interacts with others.

Translating that back to study, it suggests a kind of structured promiscuity. You have a home base – an instrument you've put in the hours on, where your instincts are reliable. But you also cultivate adjacent competencies that let you hear what the rest of the band is doing. You learn enough of another field's "language" to recognize when it's contributing something you can't produce on your own.

This changes how you approach problems.

Instead of asking, "what does my discipline say about this?" you start asking, "what kind of band does this problem require?" Some problems need a heavy rhythm section – stable, empirical, grounded in data. Others need harmonic richness – layers of interpretation, historical context, conceptual nuance. Some need a strong melodic line – a clear, compelling argument that can carry the whole thing forward.

Most need all of the above.

And this is where the educational model that prizes specialization above all else starts to feel a bit like insisting every song be a drum solo. There's a kind of purity to it, but it's also a refusal to engage with the full range of what could be created.

The irony is that even within music, the genres themselves are rarely as pure as we pretend. Blues bleeds into rock, which borrows from gospel, which intersects with jazz, which folds in elements of classical structure, and so on. The boundaries are useful for conversation and marketing, but they're porous in practice. The most interesting musicians are usually the ones who treat genres as palettes rather than prisons.

Fields of study behave the same way, despite their institutional insistence on clean borders.

The moment you start working on anything that resembles a real problem – something embedded in actual human behavior, systems, history – you find yourself pulling from multiple "genres" whether you intended to or not. Philosophy provides a way to frame the question. Behavioral science offers tools to observe and measure. Sociology situates it in a broader context. Maybe even something like literature or art gives you a language for the parts that resist formalization.

You are, whether you like it or not, assembling a band.

The only real choice is whether you do it consciously or let the default configuration dictate it for you.

Default configurations tend to be tidy and underpowered. They privilege user interface over capability. They produce work that is internally consistent and externally limited. You can explain it clearly to people within the same field, which is useful, but you may struggle to make it resonate outside that circle.

A more intentionally assembled "band" is messier. It requires you to tolerate a certain amount of dissonance, both conceptual and practical. Different fields don't always agree on methods, on standards of evidence, on what counts as a good question. Bringing them together is less like stacking compatible components and more like negotiating between strong personalities.

Which is exactly what being in a band feels like.

There's also the matter of voice.

In music, your instrument doesn't just determine what you can play, it shapes how you're heard. A melody on a trumpet carries differently than the same notes on a guitar. A rhythmic pattern feels different depending on whether it's articulated by drums or by muted strings. The medium is not neutral.

In study, your "instrument" – the methods and frameworks you favor – does the same thing. It colors your conclusions, not just your process. A behavioral approach might emphasize observable outcomes and measurable change. A philosophical approach might linger on definitions, on

underlying assumptions, on whether the question itself is well-formed. Neither is wrong. They're different voices.

The goal, then, isn't to eliminate that difference, but to learn how to hear it. To recognize when you're over-relying on one voice because it's familiar, and when another might add something you're currently missing.

This doesn't resolve into a neat doctrine, unfortunately. There's no syllabus that says, "become thirty-percent philosopher, twenty-percent behavioral scientist, fifteen-percent something else," as though intellectual life were a balanced diet you could portion out with measuring cups. It's more iterative than that.

You notice gaps. You encounter problems that your current "band" can't quite handle. You add an instrument – or at least learn enough about it to play a few notes. You adjust. You listen. Sometimes you realize you've been overplaying one part and need to step back. Sometimes you discover that what you thought was a secondary instrument has become the counterpoint.

If you're lucky, everything locks in.

Not because you've achieved perfect balance, but because the different parts are actually listening to each other. Rhythm supporting melody, harmony enriching both, space where it needs to be. The problem you're working on starts to feel less like something you're forcing into a framework and more like something that is being articulated through a set of complementary voices.

It doesn't last. It never does. But it's enough to make the alternative – the six identical instruments, playing the same approved passage in flawless unison – feel less like progress and more like a supremely disciplined way of saying nothing new.

Reel No. 14

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Bailing Before the Peak:
The Phenomenology of the Closed Mind and the Rejection of Type II Thought

Notes: Listening to: Lawn Boy

This morning I caught myself dismissing something in under a second.

Not thoughtfully, after consideration. Just a quick internal flick of the wrist – that's not art – and then I moved on, satisfied in the way you're satisfied after correctly identifying a stop sign. No sense of having made a judgment, just the feeling that I had recognized a fact.

If something feels that immediate, that automatic, it usually didn't originate with me. It arrived preloaded. A reflex more than a conclusion. And reflexes, for all their usefulness, are terrible philosophers. They don't ask questions. They don't explain themselves. They just fire.

I tried, after the fact, to reconstruct what I had actually done. What criteria I thought I was applying. Why that particular object – whatever it was, a sound, a piece of visual work, something hovering at the edge of definition, it doesn't matter – failed the test.

And the answer was that I didn't have one. Not a real one. I had a phrase. A handful of phrases, really, that had been circulating long enough to feel like explanations: intention, technique, originality, coherence. The usual vocabulary that gets passed around like sheet music. I could gesture toward them. I could even arrange them into something that sounded like a perfectly rational argument.

But if I'm honest, the decision had already been made

before any of that showed up.

It's a strange thing to realize that your sense of what counts as art might be less like a carefully developed aesthetic position and more like a well-trained parrot. Familiarity that masquerades as understanding. You encounter something often enough – a definition, a category, a set of examples – and eventually you stop experiencing it as something you learned. It just becomes the way things are. Not because it's been proven, but because it's been repeated without interruption.

In other contexts, we're comfortable admitting this. We know advertising works that way. We know political language leans on repetition until certain phrases start to feel like common sense rather than persuasion. But art gets to pretend it's exempt, as though aesthetic judgment were somehow insulated from the same cognitive shortcuts.

It isn't.

If anything, it's more vulnerable to them, because the criteria are so rarely pinned down. We talk about "good art" and "bad art" as though we're referencing stable categories, but the boundaries are constantly shifting, negotiated in real time by critics, institutions, and whatever happens to gain traction in a given moment. The definitions don't just describe the field – they produce it. And repetition is the mechanism that makes those definitions stick.

Say often enough that art requires a certain level of technical mastery and, eventually, anything that doesn't display that mastery starts to feel like it's missing something essential. Say often enough that art is about expression and works that are more conceptual or procedural get treated like they've forgotten the point. Say often enough that art must be original and you create an environment where influence becomes something to hide rather than something to work with.

None of these claims are entirely false. That's what makes them effective. They're plausible enough to survive initial scrutiny and repetition does the rest. They harden into expectations. Expectations turn into filters. Filters become

instincts. And instincts, once established, are remarkably efficient at closing doors.

What interests me isn't that this happens, but how invisible it becomes from the inside.

When I dismissed that thing this morning – whatever it was – I didn't feel like I was applying a borrowed framework. I felt like I was seeing clearly. That's the trick. The more a belief is reinforced, the less it feels like a belief at all. It feels like perception. As though the object itself were announcing its status, and I was simply attentive enough to hear it. But objects don't do that. Not on their own.

They exist. They present themselves. Everything else – the categories, the hierarchies, the sense that something belongs or doesn't – gets layered on through repeated exposure to how others talk about them. You learn what to notice, what to ignore, what to value, what to treat as incidental. Over time, that training becomes indistinguishable from your own taste.

Which raises the irritating possibility that a significant portion of what I experience as my aesthetic judgment is actually just well-internalized consensus. Not entirely, hopefully. There are thoughts that feel more personal than that. But enough to make me question any judgment that arrives too quickly, too cleanly, and without friction.

Friction is usually where thinking happens.

If something unsettles me – not in the dramatic sense, but in the quieter sense of not fitting neatly into the categories I'm used to – that's often the moment where I'm closest to actually engaging with it. The absence of a ready-made label forces a different kind of attention. I have to ask what it's doing, how it's doing it, what effects it produces, rather than whether it satisfies a checklist I've inherited.

It's slower. Less efficient. Also more interesting.

There's a temptation, especially if you've spent time around any formal study of art, to believe that your judgments have been refined into something more reliable. That you've moved beyond the crude heuristics of repetition into a space where you can evaluate on more principled

grounds. Maybe that's partially true. Exposure does expand your vocabulary. It gives you more reference points, more ways of articulating what you're experiencing. But it also introduces a more sophisticated set of repeated claims.

You don't just hear "this is art" or "this isn't." You hear "this is significant because…" "this participates in a tradition of…" "this subverts expectations by…" and after a while those explanatory frameworks start to function the same way the simpler labels did. They become templates. You recognize the structure, slot the work into it, and feel as though you've understood something.

Again, not entirely wrong, just not as independent as it feels.[8]

The risk isn't that repetition makes us stupid. It's that it makes us certain. Which is the enemy of curiosity.

Certainty is efficient. It lets you move quickly, categorize, and proceed. But in a domain as unstable as art, where the boundaries are constantly being renegotiated, that efficiency comes at the cost of curiosity. Which is, if we're being honest, a very *un*artistic impulse.

Art, in practice, seems to spend a lot of its time testing the limits of whatever definitions are currently in circulation. It leans against them, stretches them, occasionally ignores them entirely. If those definitions were as fixed as they sometimes feel, there wouldn't be much room for that kind of movement.

Maybe the more useful approach isn't to abandon judgment – that's neither possible nor desirable – but to treat it with a bit more skepticism, especially when it feels effortless. If I can dismiss something instantly, that probably says more about the conditioning of my response than about the thing itself.

Which doesn't mean the thing is suddenly good, or meaningful, or worth sustained attention. It might not be.

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[8] Do you concur? Ah, yes, I concur.

But it does mean that the line I'm drawing between "art" and "not art" is less like a natural boundary and more like a path that's been walked enough times that I can recognize the features. Paths can be useful. They help you move through a landscape without getting lost.

They can also keep you from noticing what's just a few steps off to the side.

Reel No. 15

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Day Whatever-the-Fuck

Notes: Listening to: "Fixing a Hole" (The Beatles) in my head.

RJ had a congenital diaphragmatic hernia. The doctors said he'd be lucky to make it to a year. He just turned four. He was one of the hardest to communicate with - he said nothing until he said everything.

I don't know if he would have preferred to be alone or was glad I was with him; most of our views of death and dying have to do with the living. Clearly, he wasn't old enough to have a clear concept of death or what was happening to him. Which almost seems more scary. Either way, I feel like I did the right thing by being there in his last moments. It'll stick with me for a while. If you've never witnessed suffocation or agonal breathing or death rattles, don't. Personally, I've always felt like it was kinda my duty to be the person to take that on on behalf of everybody else. I've been told I have a natural stewardship…I don't know, it doesn't seem like anything special to care. This is probably one of the few times when aphantasia works in my favor.

Recently, I've been exploring the concept of 'purpose' in life. Something I usually only do when feeling especially lost or depressed. And when that happens, I come back to this idea of 'helping' others. But given my experience in everything from public service to non-profits to community groups, I think the real question I need to answer is whether or not there's such a thing as true altruism. But maybe I should settle with whether there's any help without harm.

The idea of providing end of life emotional support feels like an altruistic act, but is it? It seems more like a feeling of righteousness to hold someone as they convulse and shit and piss all over you. To try to hold it together enough to say comforting things (why?). I kept thinking about how when I would tell RJ that I loved him, I was making it about me. It feels better (for me) to say what a positive impact he had on the world and that we'll be here when he comes back.

So I'm out here at six in the morning, in the rain, composing this piece in my head as my internal DJ spins "I'm digging a hole while the rain gets in and it stops my mind from wandering." Damn cats.

Reel No. 16

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Module Four: The Song

Notes: Listening to Myself

If you've been following along thus far, we've talked about art and music in the context of a representation of abstract, subjective feelings and ideas: beautiful, ugly, emotional, raw, refined, complex, simple, et al. I have a couple issues with this approach. First, the authors are presuming that we all have the same interpretation of these concepts. It's like saying a rose means love...unless they remind you of a funeral. They're putting these subjective terms on an experience that's totally subjective in-and-of itself.

Here's the other concern I have about this approach: it sees these terms or concepts as binary. Something is beautiful *or* it's ugly. Why? What about wabi-sabi? I don't know, I find the imperfect more beautiful and interesting than perfection.

Anyway, I decided to sit down and work on a song this week. The only real goal is to see if I can simultaneously transmit the socially-acceptable translation of these feelings. Which, admittedly, comes from years of studying the interpretations that others have of a piece. And knowing that D-minor is the saddest of call keys, of course.

I'll post a downloadable version of what I eventually settled on when considering the looming publication date of this book on my website and socials. I can drop a backing track version, too, in case you want to experiment with your

own music or lyrics.

What does it make *you* feel?

Reel No. 17

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: Junk Drawer Taxonomy

Notes: Listening to: Forest Hills, NY, 22 July 2025.

I've been thinking about how people hear a person the way they hear a mix. Not the whole thing, just whatever's loudest at that moment. You walk in as a full arrangement and somehow leave as "the cowbell guy." Not even the percussionist. Just some rejected bovid accessory. That's your legacy now. Hope you like Blue Oyster Cult.

I used to cooperate with this. Not on purpose, not like I woke up and thought, yes, today I will reduce myself to a single, marketable trait, but you get into something hard enough and people latch onto it like it's the only available handle. And, to be fair, sometimes you hand them the handle. You're young, you're intense, you care about a thing in that borderline-zealous way where it feels like identity instead of interest. It leaves a mark. Occasionally as ink on a page. Occasionally as ink on the skin. Occasionally as conversations.

And then suddenly that's the file you live in. Not a person, a folder. "Open if Beatles." "Open if martial arts." "Open if whatever phase we last observed him in around a holiday table." It's efficient. It's also wildly inaccurate, like describing a whole band as "the guy with the tambourine" and then wondering why the music sounds thin.

The weird part isn't that people do this. Of course they do. Humans love a label. We'll label anything. We'll label a jar "miscellaneous" and then feel like we've achieved

organizational clarity. The weird part is how fast the label becomes a ranking. Not just what you are, but how much that thing counts. How close it is to whatever invisible center we've decided matters this week.

And the longer I spent in rooms where that "center" was supposed to exist, the less convincing it became. I ended up around enough people with reputations – the kind that arrive in the room five minutes before they do – to realize that fame is mostly a lighting trick of collective agreement. The room bends around certain people, sure. Posture shifts, conversations tighten, there's a faint hum of "this matters more." But the person at the center is still just…a person. Still asking where the bathroom is. Still arguing about tempo like it's a moral failing.

Up close, the hierarchy starts to look like one of those optical illusions. From a distance, it's a staircase. Get closer and it's just lines painted on the floor.

Which probably explains why I never developed the expected reflex. That moment where you're supposed to register importance, adjust your tone, maybe mentally assign someone a higher number in whatever cosmic Yelp review we're all pretending not to maintain. I can appreciate skill. I can respect craft to the point where I'll annoy people about it. But the jump from "that was impressive" to "this human is categorically above others" has always felt like an error in the base code that somehow became the game engine.

It's not that I think everyone is the same. That's just hierarchy wearing a fake beard. People are wildly different. Some people can do things that make me want to reconsider my life choices. But difference doesn't automatically mean rank. It just means difference. Range. A bigger, messier sound.

The only place I seem to default to anything like a hierarchy is ethical, and even that's more of a running commentary than a fixed chart. Who's an asshole. Who's less of an asshole. Who's trying not to be an asshole and occasionally succeeding. It's not scientific. It doesn't come

with charts. It's just a silent, ongoing assessment of how much damage someone leaves behind them and whether they notice.

Which, as you might imagine, is not a particularly fun system to bring into casual conversation.

People want you to be impressed on cue. There's a rhythm to it. Here's where you widen your eyes, here's where you say "no way," here's where you subtly reposition yourself as someone who understands the significance of the moment. And when you miss that cue, it lands weird. Like you didn't read the room, or worse, like you think you're above it. When really it's more like I'm just not hearing the same track you are. Or maybe I am, but I'm also hearing everything else. And it's hard to pretend that one instrument is the whole song.

If anything, being around enough secondhand stardom flattened things out in an unceremonious way. Not in a cynical "nothing matters" sense – in a "Oh, this is how the sausage is made and it's mostly an ad campaign" sense. The mythology is still there, sure, but it's held together with scheduling conflicts, half-baked ideas, and someone inevitably asking if we can run it again because something felt off.

So whatever that earlier impulse was – the urge to latch onto something, to maybe even let it define you for a minute – it never quite turned into admiration in the way people mean it. Not because the interest wasn't real, but because the surrounding structure started to feel too flimsy. Too eager to turn a person into a category and a category into a ranking and a ranking into a personality.

You can be deeply into something without becoming it. That part seems obvious now. What's less obvious – and funnier the more you watch it happen – is how much effort goes into pretending that people are the thing we can most easily name about them. It's like noticing the boom mic in a movie. The scene keeps going, the dialogue continues, but part of your brain is just sitting there thinking, "That's definitely a guy holding a stick over everyone's head."

Reel No. 18

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

How the Faculty Muse Demands Peer-Reviewed Applause

Notes: Listening to: "Chalk Dust Torture" (various)

I've reached the point of the centipede effect (no, not the movie). I mean, it's existed since day one by design, but four modules in and every piece I "listen" to, unless it's as background noise, has to be this mental analysis of sender and receiver, beauty and ugliness, emotion and absurdity. Not new processes on their own, but a new cascading effect. So the idea of writing about what I "feel" in regards to a piece of art is so many layers of meta and paradox that not even I would trust what I have to say. At this point, if I told you a song made me feel something, I'd want peer review.

As if I couldn't listen to music without breaking down every sonic nuance before, now I need to analyze the metaphysical nuance as well. It's like upgrading from regular anxiety to premium anxiety (now with bonus insomnia). I can *observe* listening happening when I do it.

My hyperlexic word-vomit isn't an attempt to replace actually reviewing and analyzing the material. It's not like quotes from the readings are just divined by the essay muse into the context of unfettered thought. See what I did there? Now we can talk about the primal, unrestrained feeling that does or doesn't exist in art. Seamless transition. Everyone clapped.

Nietzsche already complained about this mental mess before distortion pedals were a thing. Hawley basically confirms that this isn't some personality quirk, but a

structural feature: “There are, in fact, three ills from which humans suffer according to Nietzsche, but they have less to do with the health of the body and more with the psychological experience of living in the world.”[§] Which is great. We aren’t *completely* broken, just historically consistent.

Hawley/Nietzsche‘s three ills aren’t separate problems – more like the world’s smallest Escher painting. Winchester Mystery House ‘stairs to nowhere’ but for existentialism.

First, nihilism, not as dramatic despair but the inevitable result of setting standards for meaning that nothing in lived experience can satisfy. Aim for ultimate truth, the metaphysical eight ball says, “ask again later.”

Second, the ‘meaning’ of “meaning” itself, where centuries of increasingly refined inquiry manage to clarify everything except the one thing everyone wanted to know. Science shows up, answers every other question except the one that pre-predates the Pre-Socratics. Or as Hawley puts it, “The result is an acute form of ontological exhaustion and weakness that forces humankind into the herdly forms of existence so characteristic of modern life.” Which is like saying we get tired of our life being a series of problems to solve and start copying each other like it’s a group photo nobody wanted to pose for in the first place.

And beneath both of these is an unsettling (I guess… for some?) realization: existence, interrogated too deeply, chooses to stop participating. Not catastrophically; life, uh, finds a way. More like a steady, low-grade “yeah, good luck with that.” I guess if you’re hung up on figuring it all out, distraction can feel less like avoidance and more like basic self-care.

Music, especially in its more chaotic and embodied forms, suspends the need to interpret, justify, or stabilize experience. You don’t solve the meaning of it – you *stop* needing to. The mosh pit becomes a temporary exit from analysis, a place where the self is less a narrator and more a member of the ensemble cast. No script, no rehearsals, just impact velocity, lack of spatial awareness, and that dude

who punched me in the throat that one time.

Which sounds ideal (minus Punchy McThroatpunch). I wouldn't mind one ticket to not thinking. The issue is that my version of 'relief' doesn't seem to work like that at all. If anything, it comes from going in the opposite direction. As a musician, I learned pretty quickly - cosmically speaking, which means, like, fifteen years - that writing for recognition is the fastest way to make something lifeless. The ego wants coherence, validation, something that can be explained on some local morning talk show. It wants the song to *mean* something in a way that can be paraphrased by someone who only half listened to the first thirty seconds. It's the same machinery Nietzsche is critiquing: overdetermined, overanalyzed, and immensely fragile. One bad Amazon review away from collapse.

So you let it go. Or you don't. But for me, I learned to stop pretending I'm in charge.

What replaced it wasn't emotional surrender so much as structural attention. The song becomes less a vehicle for expression and more a process you're lucky enough to be a part of. You follow what works, even when "works" makes no sense and actively breaks several rules in the stacks of music theory books gathering [chalk] dust somewhere in a closet. This is where mistakes stop being mistakes. A wrong note, a strange texture, an illogical transition – these aren't problems so much as auditions. Some of them bomb. Some of them steal the show. Absurdity becomes useful. Not as rebellion, but as method. Also, sometimes as rebellion. You start doing weird things on purpose and then pretend you meant to do it the whole time.

In that space, the three ills don't disappear, but they lose their authority. Historical influence becomes material rather than burden. Rational thought becomes a tool instead of a micromanager. Comfort feels like the least interesting option available, like choosing plain toast at a buffet and then wondering why your life is so boring.

If Hawley's mosh pit dissolves the self through immersion, the studio does something similar. It suspends

the self through alignment. Not disappearance, but recalibration. Not escape, but a different relationship to the same underlying conditions. It reminds me of how Buddhist monks meditating in the mountains are told to "be the cold". Which is where "Chalk Dust Torture" enters the meditation circle.

On the surface, it's frantic, repetitive, almost cartoonish in its energy. There's a clear lineage of absurdist play, the kind Frank Zappa built a career out of – an old dog who has learned all the tricks but still pees on the carpet because it's funny. But underneath that is a pressure that never resolves. The repetition drives forward, but it also loops back on itself, like it's trying to escape a system it keeps reinforcing. Same, song, same.

Lyrically, it reads like satire of the same structures Hawley and Nietzsche are concerned with: expectation, performance, the unspoken absurdity of a structured existence. It doesn't scream this at you like the "first" Reel Big Fish album, it just shrugs and keeps going, which is more accurate if you're aiming for an added layer of institutional irony.

From Hawley's perspective, the song works as a Dionysian release. Especially live, where repetition becomes immersion and immersion becomes something closer to collective suspension. You're not analyzing meaning, you're being dragged behind it and hoping your shoes hold up.

But it also accommodates the other mode. The one that doesn't shut analysis off, but redirects it. If you ever see those people at shows standing at the back of the room by themselves, not moving, not singing along, and wonder why they even go out in the first place, here's my take: the structure, the interplay, the small variations within repetition – all of it invites attention without demanding control. You can think about it without killing it, which feels like a minor miracle.

In that sense, this song sits at an intersection. It doesn't choose between surrender and structure. It lets you oscillate

between them, sometimes mid-phrase, like your brain can't decide whether it's at a concert, performing a concert, writing a review of the concert, or scribbling out some essay using concerts as an analogy for abstract concepts like thought and feeling.

Which, at this point, might be the closest thing to listening I have left.

Also, this.[a]

[a] Kevin Gilbert, "Suit Fugue - Dance of the Ant Men"

Reel No.	19	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	The Solitary Wall of Sound

Notes: Listening to: Farmhouse

Prompt: Write about the last time music made you 'feel' something.

For this story, we'll be taking the wayback machine to last Saturday, where I 'felt' inspired by The Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)". This isn't the first time this has happened with this song. And if music makes me respond in any particular way, it's usually amusement or inspiration. I get the same feeling when I go to pro-level musical theater or watch 'People are Awesome' videos. There's another song* by The Beatles that does this to me, despite being the polar opposite, musically. Both songs share the same elements, as do Phish and Zappa and Herbie and Steely Dan and countless others that have been brought up already and I think *this* is what moves me: they're all simultaneously beautiful and ugly, clear and confusing, emotional and absurd, raw and polished, simple and complex. Unlike a lot of the examples given in the learning materials, which tend to fall toward one side of the spectrum or the other in at least one respect (at least in the authors' viewpoints), these artists say, "whatever, let's just do them all and see what happens." I have to be careful with immersion. Songs like the examples I've given and speeches like "This is Water"† can impact me for several weeks and lead to long-term

*You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)
†David Foster Wallace

change, but if I listen to them every day, the impact (and inspiration) is lost.

I sat down last weekend and spent four or five hours scratching out a track that was my attempt at being all of those things. Yes, I'm manufacturing 'emotions', I guess. It's not that I'm not genuinely inspired. Regardless of how I feel now, I can draw on decades of failures and successes to source the emotional content. There's no time limit on feelings. I'm also playing all of the instruments myself and using a lot of digital instruments. I won't deep-dive now, as I'm thinking about another piece on this…but I'm interested in exploring the ideas behind shared feelings in a band setting (or even recording remotely) versus solo projects. Personally, I feel like I have to be less 'perfect', technically and artistically, when working by myself.

DeChane says, "My memories are rarely consciously elicited in music. Rather, they surface, seemingly, by themselves. Moreover, in my most intense musical experiences, there's often a state of distraction, of simultaneous psychic distance and acute awareness, a distraction that seems to welcome the play of memory as it wells up in my mind and body."[9] This is familiar to me. I can remember moments from my childhood and where I was and what I was doing by hearing a song. Many of my teen memories are tied to music. Of course, my young adulthood, when I lived and breathed music, can be remembered the same way. I was writing a book a few years ago and wanted to elicit memories, so I specifically listened to music and watched TV from that time in my life (it worked). Listening now, passively or in the studio, the effect is even more significant. When a chord change or a drum fill or a riff remind me of another song, it may bring back memories – consciously or not – that could then play into my interpretation or inspiration of the current piece. It can have a cascading effect, since music tends to share a lot of the same elements with other music. The more I think about it, the more these concepts seem to be circular (or string-theory) and not linear.

Now, if you don't mind, my song is sitting here wondering why I'm talking about music instead of making it. So I'll be getting back to that right after I take my dogs to the beach... because inspiration comes in all forms.

Reel No. 20

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Dear Sirs

Notes: Listening to: The Spectrum '97
Mailed to: NSLS at Oregon State University
c/o Student Experience Center

Dear National Society of Leadership and Success,

Your invitations have arrived with the persistence of a salesperson who has mistaken politeness for interest. Each envelope and email assures me, with admirable confidence and convincingly polished language, that I have been selected, identified, and elevated among my peers. That I'm already among the chosen.

The materials shout "opportunity" in leadership, networking, success – a constellation of buzzwords so polished they've lost any gravitational pull. As though legitimacy might be achieved through repetition alone. Less a pathway than a curated vision board for validation. I'm told there are resources, connections, guidance. I'm told doors will open. I'm told, in all-too-familiar institutional language, that I may purchase proximity to a future that remains conveniently undefined.

It's a compelling pitch, if one hasn't already spent time inside the institution that supposedly anchors it.

Because here's the inconvenient reality: the university itself already sells these same assurances. It promises mentorship, access, intellectual cultivation. Then it distributes those goods unevenly, filtering them through a lattice of metrics that reward conformity to its own internal logic. Not curiosity, not difficulty, not truly challenging

oneself – compliance dressed up as achievement. So when you arrive in my digital and analog mailboxes, offering a parallel structure – another tier, another credential, another fee – it doesn't read as enrichment. It feels like recursion. A system within a system, designed less to expand access than to refine exclusion.

My GPA, which you seem to find so flattering, is not evidence of some innate alignment with "leadership" as you define it. More accurately, it's a record of endurance. A documentation of how effectively one can navigate rubrics that mistake rigidity for rigor. It reflects the continued labor of translating oneself into acceptable formats, of working around barriers that were never designed with all students in mind. If it signals anything at all, it signals adaptation, not allegiance. And this is where your invitation becomes more revealing.

You frame leadership as something to be recognized, formalized, and, notably, monetized. As if it were a badge to be issued rather than a responsibility to be assumed. As if the primary work of a "leader" were to join an already curated circle, rather than to question why the circle exists.

Leadership, at least as I understand it, doesn't begin with selection. It begins with refusal.

Refusal to accept that opportunity should be rationed through opaque criteria.

Refusal to participate in structures that convert community into hierarchy.

And refusal to mistake exclusivity for excellence.

A student who advocates only for themselves is not leading – they're optimizing their position within a game whose rules remain unchallenged. And a society that gathers such students together, however well-intentioned it claims to be, risks becoming less a site of leadership and more a mirror of the very systems it claims to transcend.

I'm not interested in another line on my CV that translates struggle into a marketable narrative. I'm not interested in paying to be told I'm exceptional within a framework that systematically narrows what "exceptional" is allowed to

mean.

What I'm interested in is something far less marketable and far more inconvenient: dismantling the boundaries that determine who gets access to support, to mentorship, to the basic conditions of "success." Not selectively, not ceremonially, but structurally.

If there is a society for that, please ask them to add me to their mailing list.

But I'll decline your offer – not out of cynicism, but out of a different understanding of what leadership demands.

Respectfully,

A student who has learned more by resisting the system than by being recognized by it

Reel No.	21	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Is This "REAL" Music?

Notes: Listening to: "Chalk Dust Torture" rabbit hole ("Gumbo" and other assorted long jams)

This is the sort of question that sounds slightly out of tune, like a piano that's been moved too many times but someone keeps playing it anyway. Everyone hears it. No one agrees on how to tell them to stop.

You can almost feel the implied follow-up: real *how*? Made by who? Using what? As if somewhere there's a reference pitch for authenticity but nobody has a tuning fork. It reminds me of when the young students in the dojo would ask if a particular weapon on the wall was 'real'. Can you see it? Can you touch it? Is that real? That's not meant to be condescending, but to highlight the everyday subjectivity that we have and expect everyone else to invoke their clairvoyance skill to determine the criteria. Does a sword have to be sharp to be real? *How* sharp?

I made "Murder Hornettes"[8] the way I tend to make most things – that is, I started with something that felt less like invention or intention and more like catching a knife before it hit the floor. A bassline. Not transcendent, not historically monumental, just one of those brain-worms that kept coming back to help mulch things up a bit. I tracked it to a

[8] Released as The Walls Instead, "Murder Hornettes" on all of your least-favorite streaming platforms in 2020.

click, because the click is the studio's version of grounding yourself in your breathing. Everything falls toward it eventually. You can try to resist, but it doesn't care.

There's a small irony in that first step. We talk about "feel" like it's some elusive, ineffable quality, and then the first thing we do is anchor everything to a perfectly even subdivision of time. Emotional spontaneity in flow-chart form.

Drums came next. Not a drummer. Drums. Programmed parts. Sketching the groove in advance like writing stage directions for a performance that hasn't happened yet. The kick lands where I say it lands. The snare never rattles. No one rushes into the chorus because they got 'excited'. No one drags the bridge because they're thinking about how they fucked up the chorus last time.

At this point, the track already "works." It has motion, structure, a sense of where it's going. You could stop here, in theory, and call it 'music'. Plenty of people do (DnB). But it also feels like a demo of itself. Like the roadies soundchecking while the band is getting wasted in the green room.

So I added guitars, as is my MO. Real ones. Fingers on strings, minor imperfections, little hesitations that feel like decisions even when they aren't. This is the moment people start to point to when they start talking about authenticity, as if 'plugging in' restores some lost moral order. But those guitars are still orbiting the grid. They're not free. They're aligned. Which is different from being alive, though it can sound similar. Is it any different than jamming with a really tight drummer and bassist? I tend to think of the studio as an opportunity to sound like you're playing live on your best day.

On that note, the next thing I did was start building out the arrangement with VST strings and horns. MIDI parts, written once, then cloned and reshaped a dozen times. A line becomes a section. A section becomes a variation. It's a bit like handing a riff around a band, except the band is just me in different moods, each one convinced they've found

the magic.

This is where the process starts to feel less like composition and more like editing a book before anything is actually on paper. You're not waiting for something to happen; you're arranging the conditions under which it will happen. Which, depending on your mindset, is either efficient or suspicious. Is it different from a thirty-page outline for a book I may or may not ever write?

There's this button built into all of the string and horn and piano and drum apps. It's not meant to be funny: *Humanize*.

You click it or turn a dial and the machine remembers how to forget. Notes drift slightly off tempo. Velocities fluctuate. The performance acquires a kind of curated drunkenness. It's not random. It's designed to resemble the kinds of inconsistencies we associate with being human but without the inconvenience of actually being inconsistent. It's like adding tape hiss to make something sound 'vintage' or stock audio of applause for a fake 'live' album. (Yes, these are real things – and quite common)

If human 'feel' can be introduced as a parameter, then what, exactly, was missing before? And more importantly, how do we know when we've added or removed enough of it? Is there a threshold where a sequence of notes crosses from mechanical to expressive or is that threshold entirely subjective to the listener? As someone who has used these tools for decades, I can [sometimes] hear when things have been vigorously tuned and edited, but if the target demographic can't, does that render this whole discussion irrelevant? Who knows and who cares.

I have a technique for songs I produce in this way: add a musician who isn't me to build the live and spontaneous feel. I decided on a real-life drummer. Not because the programmed parts were wrong, but because they were too right. Like a musician who's technically perfect but somehow impossible to relax around. Except the robot usually won't try to hook up with my girlfriend so, I don't know, even trade?

I brought someone in, one of my regular collaborators,

and had him play the track (to the click and demo tracks). Let the groove stretch and compress in ways that resist neat notation. There's a particular satisfaction in watching a human ignore and immerse themselves in a song just enough to make it interesting.

And then I converted that performance into MIDI. Take that, meatbags!

It's not meant to be an actual punchline. I took the human feel, translated it into data, and then ran that data back through software to get the sounds I wanted. Cleaned up the hits. Fixed anything that felt off. Adjusted timing here and there, just a touch, nothing drastic, just enough to make it groove with the rest of the parts.

So now the groove is technically human. Interpreted, corrected, and re-performed by a machine that's pretending it isn't one. If authenticity is supposed to live in the performance, we've just routed it through a pretty elaborate detour.

But wait; there's more! I haven't even started post production yet. First comes editing, which is where the idea of a "take" falls apart. I chopped up solos. Rearranged phrases. Moved ideas to better passages. A line that was too early becomes a hook later. Something that didn't land in the outro suddenly becomes the centerpiece once it's relocated to the bridge.

The version of me who composed and/or played those parts becomes source material. The version of me doing the editing becomes something closer to a curator. Or a critic with access to the entire catalog of master tapes. I don't know if the person listening to the track now is the same person who listened to it five minutes ago. That's not waxing philosophical. Just observing the way that repetition changes perception. The first listen is discovery. The fifth is analysis. The tenth is disgust. What started as a funk jam becomes a set of decisions you're either defending or enacting veto power over.

If I was trying to say something specific with this song, or any song, I'm not convinced that "something" survives

production. It gets filtered through each pass, each tweak, each moment of "what if I just…". Past-me had an idea. Present-me has opinions about that idea. Future-me will probably just delete the track and try something new. At some point, authorship starts to feel less like a piece of intrinsic expression and more like an endless hell of, "Everyone go around the table and say something you're thankful for about this song".

Then there's the way I actually interact with the tools. I'll dial something in with intention, sure, but I'll also push it slightly off center just to see what happens. It's less like engineering and more like improvising with constraints. You set a parameter, break it, listen, keep what works. Half expertise, half 'what the fuck does this reverb knob do?'

Which leads to another question: how much of this is "writing" and how much of it is mashing buttons until you figure out the special moves? Because that line starts to blur in a way that makes the whole AI 'conversation' feel a little like arguing about whether a drum machine is allowed to remember how to play a four-on-the-floor.

We say machines use patterns, as if that's disqualifying. But a musician's brain is basically a pattern archive with opinions. Scales, grooves, voicings, textures. You don't invent them, you recognize them, reshape them, decide where they belong. Style is just taste applied to memory. Or vice versa.

There's that story about Mozart taking existing sheet music and turning it upside down, revoicing it, and producing a new 'piece' of music. Whether or not he literally played something upside down at a party is less important than the underlying move: take what exists, hear it differently, make it yours by where you put it. And if people don't like it, fart in their general direction.

At a certain level, cataloguing music in your head starts to look a lot like editing tape, just without the physical spools.

Which brings me to another element of the discussion: I recorded and produced a track for someone else. Light pop.

Annoying road trip theme. All live, professional musicians, doing exactly what the song and composer asked of them. It existed, did its job, probably annoyed someone appropriately.

Later, for reasons that made sense at the time (malt hops and bong resin on the brain), I took the rhythm section from that track and built something else on top of it. Darker, heavier, same narrative but told like the road trip was led by Dante and he wasn't thrilled about the music on your iPod.

New lyrics. New tone. Same idea. Same underlying musical recording. Two songs now exist where there used to be one. So whose song is it? And not legally, that's boring. They're both mine, per our production agreement.

Creatively, is it his, because the structure and original intent are his? Is it mine, because I recontextualized it into something that feels like a different piece altogether? Played side-by-side, most listeners wouldn't see the similarity. In fact, the original songwriter didn't notice at first. I just said, "Check out this new song I recorded," and played it for him. His response, "Cool, man. It's not my style, but it sounds good." I had to point out the rhythm section for him to notice what I'd done. Is the song neither of ours, like two arrangements of the same standard that share a lineage but not a mood?

Or is the "song" actually the space between them – the way the same material behaves under different harmonic and emotional conditions? If a melody can survive a key change, if a groove can survive a tempo shift, if a story can survive a genre swap, then maybe the thing we're calling the "song" is less fixed than we'd like it to be. Maybe it's closer to a theme than a thesis. Something that can be stated, restated, inverted, reharmonized.

Which brings us back to the original question:

Is "Murder Hornettes" real music?

It has a bassline that arrived from the abyss of my brain, fingers on strings, horns that were written once and multiplied like a well-behaved genetic experiment, a drummer whose feel was translated into data and back again, and solos that

were rearranged by a later version of the person who played them. It sounds like music. It functions like music. It even argues with itself like music tends to do.

The only thing it doesn't seem particularly interested in doing is telling me where, exactly, the "real" part is supposed to begin.

Reel No. 22

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Music as Language

Notes: Listening to: "Slave to the Traffic Light" 4 July 1999 & others.

Bicknell uses a lot of 'sheet music' technical terms: *piano, forte, ff, p*, key signatures, and other words and abbreviations that are meaningless to the conventional listener or musician who is untrained in theory.* In the studio or rehearsal room, informally, it might be 'dial it back' or 'lay into it more' or 'crank it up'. But theory can't capture ideas like 'play it more brown' or 'let the groove lay back a little' or 'play it a bit more sexy'. I mean, okay, it can, but with a lot of extra notation and explanation and, even then, it still can't bridge the emotional communication gap. It's just not designed to do that. The same way this writing can't carry tone *or* inflection.

However, that's not to say that we can't create our own internal 'theory' that takes these more abstract musical concepts and makes them a usable 'language'. Theory and scales and modes and voicings can be letters, while those 'untranscribable' concepts become words, while the entire interpretation of the piece or arrangement or band can be based on bringing all of these together into a cohesive story or idea.

Apparently, I'm going to use language as my analogy for this listening journal.

I couldn't find the 12.31.1999 recording (longest version?) but 07.04.1999 is pretty close. NYE Y2K was the night I played my first gig, coincidentally. Or not; a lot of

shitty garage bands probably played in public for the first time that night. We were all going to die, after all. You just had to hope you were in the middle of a cool jam when the apocalypse happened.

Whether on *A Live One* or other recordings, this song uses these same ideas of language. Basslines, vocal melodies, drumbeats, chords, and they're put together conceptually as 'words'. Like the first section of this song, which is musically/theoretically sound; I could technically transcribe it. But it also has concepts of groove, wah/talkbox sounds, trading-twos, and things that can be written on sheet music later, but are a word or phrase or paragraph the band is using as a shared language now and has to be reinterpreted into common terms.

I've mentioned the flexible setlist and how every night is a jam when you're playing four hour gigs, five nights a week. And, like an album (at least in the olden days of the 20th century) or musical, the words and phrases create passages through songs, while an entire concert or album can be its own book or essay.

Professional jamming in the context of Phish, or even just fiddle-farting around with your buddies in the garage, is like conversation. We have words and phrases that we come back to, but in daily life, we're often piecing together these concepts in real-time just to talk about the weather. Some people are great conversationalists, can read the room, and use accessible and clear language. Others might be better at giving prepared speeches (or acting/masking), which still requires presence and diction and subjective parameters, despite having the source material prepared in advance. Either way, the success of communication depends on finding and using a shared vernacular. Working with bands, I found this to be a more important skill than any musical 'genius' or encyclopedic knowledge of theory.

I don't think I'm going to reflect on "Slave to the Traffic Light" in depth. Different versions are a different conversation, using a similar language. Some might get to the point, others might make small talk for a while. I may

share a different language with the band than you, so it's better to hear it in your own 'words'. There might be an outline or even a dictionary handy (music theory), but each telling is slightly different, like a joke or a story that's been told over and over again. Where, sometimes, the delivery of the message is just as important as the words on the page.

Then again, taking edibles and listening to wah-guitar jams over and over again might be turning English into *my* second language.

Reel No. 23

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Academia as Artform

Notes: Listening to: Live at Sphere 16 & 17 April 2026

I've never been particularly inspired by the idea of education as pre-employment training. Especially considering how much of modern higher education resembles a student loan commercial being filmed at an airport business-networking seminar. Somewhere along the line, the university stopped presenting itself as a place to think and started marketing itself like a subscription box for employability. Earn a career! Develop leadership skills! Become a dynamic contributor in today's evolving workforce! Every brochure reads like it was generated by a malfunctioning recruiter bot trying to seduce a middle manager.

What bothers me is the smallness of the vision.

Not the scale of the institutions themselves. Universities are sprawling bureaucratic labyrinths with enough administrative subcommittees to "accidentally" recreate feudalism. No, the smallness is conceptual. The implied purpose of education has narrowed so dramatically that asking what someone *wants to do* with their mind now sounds vaguely irresponsible unless the answer can be easily selected from a drop-down menu. I've been asked several times, especially since switching majors to philosophy, "What are you going to *do* with your degree?" This. Studying philosophy *is* what I'm doing and will continue to do, regardless of the letters that follow my name. I mean, I

could already put about thirty letters there anyway, but most of them describe my brain.

You're supposed to know your outcome in advance. Your pathway. Your "trajectory." You're expected to stand before admissions committees and funding boards like a tiny little corporation explaining quarterly projections for your own soul.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Preferably not in a forced-labor camp. But beyond that? I'd like to compose a philosophical rock opera about institutional confinement while researching the social aesthetics of punishment and building interdisciplinary public education projects around disability and stigma.

The room temperature drops three degrees.

Meanwhile, a twenty-two-year-old tech founder can say, with complete sincerity, "We're developing an AI-enabled blockchain ecosystem to revolutionize artisanal sock delivery," and venture capitalists start levitating from excitement like medieval monks witnessing a miracle. Tens of millions of dollars materialize overnight because somewhere beneath all the buzzwords is an understanding that speculative investment in weird obsessive people occasionally pays off.

Not always financially, of course. Sometimes it produces an app that burns through forty-million dollars so strangers can receive tacos by drone while trapped in the traffic they helped create by ordering drone tacos during rush hour. But culturally, we still understand the principle in certain arenas: people with unusual visions sometimes need time, resources, and freedom before their work can exist.

Artists have historically understood this. Or at least suffered under its absence long enough to romanticize patrons.

I've always loved the story about Harper Lee's friends giving her a year's salary so she could stop working and write. There's something profoundly human about that gesture. Not because it guaranteed greatness, but because it recognized possibility. Imagine believing in someone

strongly enough to say, "Here. Take some time. Make the thing you're trying to make. We'll survive without extracting immediate productivity metrics from you for twelve consecutive months."

That's not just financial support. It's existential nutrients.

And historically, civilizations seem to do pretty well in these little pockets of suspended survival panic. Renaissance patronage wasn't merely rich people collecting eccentric geniuses like decorative marble exhibits. It was infrastructure for creation. Wealthy patrons funded painters, composers, architects, philosophers, anatomists, and inventors because culture *itself* was considered worthy of investment. Sometimes selfishly. Sometimes politically. Sometimes because rich people enjoy having sculptures around. Human motives are rarely pure. But the mechanism mattered.

Michelangelo didn't submit weekly updates on quarterly deliverables to the Chapel Arts and Culture Optimization Committee. Da Vinci would've been "inappropriate" in a modern university. Too scattered. Too interdisciplinary. Not enough consistency for grants. One day dissecting cadavers, the next sketching helicopters, then designing stage props, then studying hydraulics because apparently sleep and intellectual boundaries are for lesser mortals. A contemporary academic advisor would've trapped him in quarterly Zoom meetings about which classes are *easiest* to fulfill all of the credit-hour requirements in under four years. Intellectual experimentation? Interdisciplinary examination? Sorry, that's not built into our prerequisite system. We are so far from being on the same page that we aren't even reading out of the same book.

Academia feels hostile to precisely that kind of intellectual wandering. Universities love the language of innovation right up until someone becomes difficult to categorize. Then suddenly everyone starts asking questions like a tax auditor discovering a box of jazz fusion receipts.

What department are you in? Yes.

The modern institution prefers legibility. Predictability.

Containment. You can study Madness, but through approved frameworks. You can critique systems, but in ways that remain professionally manageable. Even radicalism arrives pre-domesticated, carefully formatted in twelve-point Times New Roman with institutional branding in the top left corner, granting permission to use the "Free Speech Area" from 1:35-1:53 pm next Friday.

This isn't *entirely* malicious (yet). Bureaucracies survive through organization. That's what they do. But organizations have a tendency to confuse administration for purpose. Universities once existed primarily as intellectual ecosystems. Now, many operate like credentialing infrastructures attached to increasingly expensive lifestyle branding campaigns. The campus tour promises discovery while covertly funneling everyone toward market compatibility. And the students internalize this almost immediately.

Ask someone why they want to pursue graduate education and listen carefully to how often the answer revolves around becoming a type of person rather than creating a body of work. I want to become a professor. I want to become a clinician. I want to work in policy. All respectable ambitions. Necessary, even. But there's a strange flattening effect here. Identity replaces creation.

I'm less interested in what someone wants to *be* than what they feel compelled to *create*.

Tell me you want to build an accessible archive documenting psychiatric survivor narratives across rural communities. Tell me you want to compose an album translating existential philosophy into public art. Tell me you want to redesign emergency-response systems for neurodivergent populations. Tell me you've become obsessed with tracing how institutional language shapes moral panic across generations.

That's alive. That sounds like someone whose education might actually produce intellectual 'results' instead of merely another exhausted social media announcement accompanied by the phrase "thrilled to announce."

And maybe that's the core of it for me. I want academia treated less like corporate onboarding and more like an art form. Not metaphorically. Literally.

Scholarship already functions artistically when it's alive. Researchers develop thematic obsessions the same way musicians develop motifs. Philosophers revisit questions across decades like composers returning to melodic fragments. Historians construct narrative architectures. Anthropologists perform acts of interpretation bordering on literary collage. The best lecturers understand rhythm, pacing, silence, tension, release. A well-designed course can feel like theater. A dissertation can operate like an album (or *be* an album). Some books are punk records. Some are cathedral frescoes. Some are experimental jazz sessions where everyone involved is dopamine starved and at least one participant is on the lam.

Foucault practically had discography eras. *Madness and Civilization* feels loose, exploratory, almost psychedelic in places. *Discipline and Punish* arrives colder, tighter, mechanically precise. By the time you reach later interviews and lectures, there's the exhausted confidence of a touring musician who has fully accepted that society is fundamentally screwed up but would still like everyone to stop building prisons every time they experience uncertainty.

Academia already contains artistic DNA. We just bury it beneath professionalization rituals until everyone starts speaking in conference-panel dialect. Entire personalities dissolved into phrases like "problematic discourse surrounding emergent frameworks." Human beings transformed into annotated bibliographies wearing lanyards.

Underneath all this sits the ugliest truth of modern intellectual life: we are probably losing enormous amounts of human possibility to exhaustion. Not because people lack intelligence. Not because they lack discipline. But because survival consumes the bandwidth necessary for sustained thought.

How many books never get written because their authors are working sixty hours a week? How many theories die inside

email inboxes? How many composers become insurance adjusters? How many transformative interdisciplinary projects collapse beneath adjunct schedules, childcare costs, medical debt, or the psychological erosion of constant precarity?

Human civilization has an invisible graveyard filled with unwritten masterpieces and unfinished ideas. Entire libraries exist only as migraines.

And this is where I circle back to the idea of academic patronage. Not in some aristocratic velvet-lined chesterfield sense where eccentric billionaires collect philosophers like ornamental koi fish. Though, if a millionaire wants to fund someone's six-year project analyzing social control through experimental funk albums and race theory, I'm not going to pretend that's the worst use of disposable income. At least it's not a penis rocket or swasticar.

I mean something more distributed. More communal. More human. What if scholarships functioned less like bureaucratic reward systems and more like collaborative belief?

Instead of students competing through increasingly impersonal metrics, what if individuals or small groups could sponsor scholars whose visions they genuinely believed mattered? Not because those scholars promised immediate profitability or institutional prestige, but because their projects carried intellectual, artistic, philosophical, or social potential.

Almost like independent art funding, except applied to scholarship itself.

Imagine a student saying: "I want to pursue graduate research examining institutional responses to disability while creating public multimedia resources designed *for* accessibility." Or, "I want to spend the next five years combining psychology, biology, and documentary storytelling into publicly available educational works." Or, "I want to develop community-based alternatives to punitive mental health systems."

And instead of responding with, "Please explain your

five-year employability metrics," someone says, "That sounds important. Let's help you do it."

Of course, there would still be risk. Most ambitious projects fail. Some *should* fail. Civilization occasionally benefits from allowing people to pursue strange impossible ideas anyway. That's part of cultural evolution. You don't get symphonies, social movements, theoretical breakthroughs, or artistic revolutions without periods of uncertainty where someone appears completely unhinged right up until history starts making their lives into documentaries.

We already tolerate speculative investment, just selectively. Society has no problem gambling on corporations. We gamble on startups, real estate, political campaigns, military contracts, streaming platforms, crypto schemes created by men who act like they haven't seen a woman since the Obama administration. Entire economies run on speculative confidence.

But suggest funding intellectual or artistic inquiry because it might deepen human understanding and suddenly everyone demands measurable outcomes like they're interrogating a suspect under a swinging lamp.

What's the return on investment? I don't know, man. What's the return on philosophy? On jazz? On abolitionist literature? On public libraries? On not becoming an intellectually malnourished civilization obsessed exclusively with productivity apps and managerial vocabulary?

Some of humanity's greatest contributions began as impractical obsessions supported by people willing to tolerate uncertainty. Maybe that's the real issue. Institutions increasingly fear uncertainty because uncertainty produces outcomes they can't fully control. A student pursuing a clearly defined professional pipeline is manageable. A student pursuing an interdisciplinary body of work capable of challenging institutional assumptions? Slightly more alarming. You can almost hear the administrative software crashing.

Which is why I don't think this kind of thing necessarily needs institutional permission in the first place. Universities

can still serve as useful resources, archives, laboratories, communities, and credentialing structures. I'm not arguing for abandoning academia entirely. I enjoy libraries too much to become fully feral. But maybe intellectual life shouldn't depend so completely on institutional gatekeeping either.

Maybe we need parallel systems. Independent patronage. Collaborative scholarship. Public-facing intellectual art. Community-funded research. Creative fellowships untethered from corporate utility narratives. A strange little ecosystem where people support thinkers and creators not because they guarantee financial optimization, but because civilization itself becomes more interesting when ambitious weirdos are temporarily freed from survival long enough to think.

Historically speaking, that arrangement has produced a shocking amount of beauty.

Reel No. 24

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

I'm Not a Fascist, but...

Notes: Listening to: Lake Tahoe Outdoor Arena, Stateline, NV.
9 August 2011.

Be wary of those in institutions (or anyone) who insists on in-person or Zoom meetings, but won't have discussions via email or text. Their 'meeting policies' are created for plausible deniability and gaslighting.

Recording-consent laws support this practice. Secretly record them, send it to me, I'll share it. Institutions shouldn't have a reasonable right to privacy. Especially since we don't have any privacy from the institution.

Reel No. 25

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: Scarlet Begonias

Notes: Listening to: Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation, Florida. 30 December 1999.

Prompt: Describe your understanding of the sublime and how this relates to music.

Sublime was an alternative reggae-rock (ska-punk, if you ask wikipedia) band formed in Long Beach in the late 1980s. They rose to fame in the mid-90s with songs like "Santeria", "What I Got", and "Smoke Two Joints" (Source: me).

Interestingly, both the southern California alternative scene and rap/hip-hop scenes developed in the same areas. Literally walking distance from each other (except Nobody Walks in LA). Which I think makes the development of these genres especially valuable to understanding how completely different musical concepts can share similar pathways in their development and produce a similar effect on listeners, despite sounding so different at a superficial level. And how cultural proximity can both isolate their own sounds and bleed over into each others' mix.

Standby…my producer is telling me this segment is on *the* 'sublime' not 'Sublime'. Well, coincidentally, Sublime's eponymous album is one of the three most-listened-to records over my lifetime. It was the soundtrack for countless teen adventures and always had a place in the tour van (CDs in the visor, remember that?), so I must think there is something special about it.

Bicknell describes the sublime in several contexts, such as equating it to strong emotion, giving two more-literal 'definitions', and later saying she's not using the word in

traditional ways.[3] Maybe I need a more concrete definition for something used across so many themes and ideas. When I see a word like this, I want to dive into the etymology first. Sublime is a good word because it means what it says (or says what it means), which is below or up to a level/ threshold. Its origins are more in physical description than metaphysical. Though, "Natural objects may be sublime without physical height, if vastness and great impressiveness are present. In the moral field the sublime is that which is so high above ordinary human achievements as to give the impression of astonishment blended with awe."[4] That's an interesting concept to me: "so high above ordinary human achievement." How do we even gauge this, seeing as 'achievement' is not only subjective, but has countless definitions that have been embedded in us by (capitalist) society. Same with the word "ordinary." That seems like a construct.

I mentioned before that "People are Amazing" videos often inspire me. In a real sense, though; to practice my arts and hobbies or try something new. Astonishment and awe? Maybe a little. But in the context of 'subliminal', I don't know. The feeling I get from these kinds of works (usually of extreme skill or creativity versus emotional content) is the opposite of unattainability or incredibility. I'm motivated, like the sublime should be the liminal. It reminds me that we are all the same animal and have the same potential for "achievement", but it may require redefining some of our internal lexicon. The same way that listening to Sublime in my musically-formative years encouraged me to fuse different genres and styles into my own musical language.

Reel No. 26

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Things are Falling Down

Notes: Listening to: Round Room

In *Philosophy and the Arts*, there's a lot of discussion about what moves people. Usually, that means emotionally. A painting. A song. A book that rearranges your nervous system for six months and leaves you staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night, wondering whether consciousness itself was a mistake. But sometimes what moves people isn't art in the traditional sense. Sometimes, it's finally seeing the machinery we've been a part of for our entire lives.

A Disability Studies course can do that to a person. You sign up thinking you'll learn about accommodations, the ADA, maybe some medical terminology, wheelchair basketball if Hollywood has infected your brain enough. Then, halfway through the semester, you realize the course isn't actually teaching you about "disabled" people, it's teaching you how societies decide who gets to be treated as *valid* people in the first place.

Once you see that, the world starts looking different in a way that can't be unseen.

Not just whether there's a ramp near the stairs or braille on an ATM nobody uses anyway because the screen is perpetually broken. The deeper issue is that institutions (eg. universities) are often built around a specific imaginary person. A student who learns the "right" way, communicates the *right* way, socializes the 'right' way, processes information at the *right* speed, and demonstrates intelligence

in institutionally approved formats under fluorescent lights that feel like psychic warfare.

Everybody else is expected to adapt.

Institutions love talking about diversity. Universities have mastered the arts and sciences…of producing front-facing language about inclusion. Entire administrative ecosystems flourish under it. Committees emerge like cicadas every spring. PR statements are drafted. Workshops are planned. Somewhere, at this very moment, the Assistant Vice Provost of Strategic Compassion and Student Empathy is adjusting a PowerPoint transition. Meanwhile, students are still fighting systems that confuse standardization with "fairness".

That contradiction is part of what has shaped the work being recognized. Not because the goal was to become some kind of activist mascot or professional dissenter. Most of it began with the simple and dangerous act of asking, "Why is this designed this way?" Which turns out to be the sort of question institutions tolerate right up until someone *keeps* asking it.

The answers received to those questions come with the realization that accessibility is about more than accommodation. Accommodation implies there's already a correct structure and certain people simply need assistance entering it. Universal design asks a more difficult question: what if the structure itself was designed too narrowly to begin with?

Instead of asking how students can survive existing systems, the question becomes what kinds of systems are *worthy* of students. Instead of treating accessibility like a bureaucratic afterthought or method of mitigating lawsuits, it becomes a creative and philosophical practice. What would classrooms look like if variation was expected rather than treated as a disruption? What would education look like if curiosity mattered more than compliance? What would happen if we designed courses around engagement instead of endurance?

Because a surprising amount of higher education still

operates like intellectual hazing. If students suffer enough in the approved manner, eventually a credential emerges like a prize at the bottom of a cereal box. And that's unfortunate, because learning *itself* is the extraordinary reward.

The best educational experiences don't feel like mechanical institutional processing. They feel like discovery. Like somebody handed you a key to a room you didn't know existed. Philosophy, art, disability studies, literature – these fields matter because they make the invisible visible. They expose assumptions so deeply embedded in everyday life that most people don't recognize them as assumptions at all. Including assumptions about ability, legitimacy, productivity, professionalism, and even humanity itself.

A lot of this work ultimately comes down to refusing the idea that people should have to earn dignity through conformity. Human beings are variable. Messy. Contradictory. Some people think in straight lines. Others think like a drum solo being played by an octopus in a library. Educational systems should be expansive and forward-thinking enough to recognize both as forms of intelligence rather than treating one as civilized and the other as a problem to be "managed." That is, right up until the point the incorrigible little cephalopod does something sublime and they say, "We knew it all along."

That's the point behind all of this. Universal design isn't about *dis*ability. It's about imagination, creation, and our responsibility to each other. About deciding whether institutions exist to preserve *themselves* or to cultivate human possibility. About whether education is a process of manufacturing acceptable citizens or creating spaces where different kinds of minds can actually flourish.

Which, philosophically speaking, feels like a much more interesting "career trajectory".

Reel No. 27

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track Alumni Blues

Notes: Listening to: Rift

The modern university is one of the few places left where a person can spend eighty-thousand dollars to avoid reading a book they already bought.

Not theoretically avoid it. Professionally avoid it. Industrially. With systems. Infrastructure. Support staff. There are entire administrative ecosystems devoted to helping students navigate *around* education while technically remaining inside it, like cruise passengers trying to avoid seeing the ocean while swimming in the on-deck saltwater pool.

And before the faculty senate forms a defensive phalanx around the phrase "lifelong learning," let me clarify: I love education. Obsessively. Pathologically. I'm the sort of person who falls asleep listening to philosophy lectures and wakes up with eighteen browser tabs open on ancient burial practices because one sentence about funeral pyres devolved into a three-hour spiral. I'm not attacking learning. I'm attacking the theatrical performance surrounding the *certification* of learning.

At some point, the university stopped being a place where knowledge lived and became a place where legitimacy was doled out. The books escaped first. Then the lectures. Then the experts themselves. Entire Ivy League courses are now available freely alongside videos of cats making cotton candy and dance crews pressure-cleaning sidewalks

to lo-fi music. The Great Library flattened into an infinite glowing rectangle where quantum physics, Mesopotamian archaeology, and maps of Atlantis compete equally for your attention between advertisements for meal-replacement chia-seed powder.

The cathedral lost its monopoly on scripture. Again.

The question no one inside higher education likes to ask or answer (because there's usually a *colleague* nearby who's vying for a promotion) is: If all the information is already available, what exactly are students paying for?

Not what the brochures say. Not the gauzy cinematic montage with strategically diverse students laughing under autumn leaves while an acoustic guitar gently informs you that "your future starts here."

I mean materially. What is the university *actually* doing?

The traditional answer is guidance, ~~rigor~~ endurance, and breadth. Universities don't *merely* provide information. They cultivate disciplined learners. They expose students to multiple domains of human knowledge. They challenge assumptions. They create informed citizens capable of participating appropriately and productively in democratic society rather than becoming one of those bros who learn Roman history exclusively through podcasts hosted by guys who own tactical soap companies. You can almost smell the pipe tobacco and civic optimism.

The problem is that reality started paying tuition. After decades of expanding higher education into a mass industrial system, we now possess millions of graduates who can technically use APA formatting while remaining indistinguishable from the certifiably illiterate in a YouTube comments section. The grand promise of the broadly educated citizen has, in practice, devolved into students speedrunning distribution requirements with the emotional investment of cleaning their pool. Or paying someone to do it. If they can afford a pool. Someday. After the student loans are paid off.

General education requirements are especially fascinating here because they reveal the gap between institutional

mythology and actual student behavior. The fairy tale says exposure to literature, science, philosophy, mathematics, and art creates intellectually rounded individuals. The reality says students look up which professor gives the least homework or grades the easiest so they can survive Introduction to Cultural Anthropology without experiencing culture nor anthropology.

Who can blame them? A student working fifty hours a week while accumulating debt at the speed of a small nation-state isn't approaching Plato with the serene intellectual appetite of an Athenian philosopher strolling through a grove of olive trees. They're approaching Plato with the curiosity of someone who "finds this cave pretty cozy, actually" while checking whether financial aid will be cancelled this year.

We built an educational system that treats exhaustion as evidence of virtue, then acts shocked when students optimize for survival rather than virtue.

That's the real curriculum of the modern university: optimization. Students learn how to conform to bureaucracy, manage deadlines, interpret rubrics, maximize grades with minimal emotional collapse, and write (or generate) discussion posts that sound like they read the chapters and watched the videos and reviewed all of the journal articles and fulfilled the weekly learning outcome goals while remaining spiritually and intellectually dead inside. Entire generations now possess the indispensable ability to write five-hundred words in five-paragraph format that technically answer a prompt while communicating absolutely nothing. This isn't literacy, it's administrative auditions. And the institution rewards it because institutions reward what they can measure.

A person can easily survive the university while remaining incurious. They can memorize, regurgitate, comply, forget, and graduate into a respectable career where they continue the time-honored American tradition of never voluntarily reading another book for as long as they live. Conversely, another person might spend those same four years

independently studying philosophy, biology, literature, and engineering through libraries, online archives, public lectures, private mentorships, practical projects, and sheer obsession, only to remain officially "uneducated" because nobody stamped their suffering onto gold-embossed paper.

Imagine replacing the credit-hour model entirely. No mandatory seat time. No arbitrary semester pacing. No "participation" grades based on whether someone spoke twice during a Tuesday discussion about Mendeleev while visibly dissociating. Instead, degrees could be awarded through demonstration.

For an 'associate's degree', a series of oral defenses, written syntheses, and practical applications proving competence in foundational material.

For a bachelor's degree, more advanced interdisciplinary work. Public presentations. Research projects. Applied demonstrations. The ability to contextualize knowledge historically, ethically, scientifically, and rhetorically.

For graduate study, original contributions. Not coursework padded like shipping material around a dissertation, but actual demonstrated expertise and creation.

The immediate objection, naturally, is 'rigor' (endurance). "But how would we know they learned *all* the material?"

Which is a great question, especially when posed by institutions that graduate students who used ChatGPT to summarize chapters they never read so they could pass quizzes downloaded from Canvas Commons and presented without attribution by adjunct faculty paid less than a mall employee selling Hello Kitty phone cases.

If someone can publicly defend a concept, apply it, synthesize it across disciplines, withstand questioning, and produce meaningful work, then what mystical mechanism did they supposedly fail to learn?

The current model suggests learning occurred because time elapsed. This proposal assumes learning because competence exists. One of these seems substantially less theological.

Yes, there are risks. Massive ones. Credential fraud.

Inequality. Advantages for already-privileged students. The continued disappearance of mentorship. The reduction of intellectual life into performance metrics. All valid concerns. Universities already have these problems. They just hide them beneath architecture.

A wealthy student already possesses vastly greater access to tutoring, stability, free time, networking, and institutional fluency. A charismatic student already succeeds more easily within participation-heavy environments. A neurodivergent student already struggles inside systems designed around behavioral conformity masquerading as professionalism. The existing model isn't an untainted meritocracy threatened by reform. It's a social sorting machine wearing a tweed sportcoat and favorite pair of corduroy trousers.

Universities perform another function: they certify behavioral compliance. The degree doesn't just profess intelligence or knowledge. It authenticates that a person can navigate institutions, comply with deadlines, tolerate arbitrary structures, perform 'professionalism', survive prolonged bureaucratic exposure without setting the council chambers of the Deans of Academic Mountain on fire. If they could find it.

Canvas (or Blackboard, if you will) looks like it was designed by a committee of committees trying to digitally recreate the sensation of raising a litter of puppies that need to be fed a doctor-prescribed blend of oversight and accountability every four-to-six hours. Every module unlocked sequentially. Every assignment timestamped. Surveillance software monitoring eye movement during exams like students are applying for parole rather than taking Introductory Statistics.

The university increasingly resembles a behavioral training apparatus wrapped around inaccessible scanned PDFs of texts that summarize works that would have once been considered genuine scholarship.

Which is tragic, because genuine scholarship still exists. Brilliant professors still exist. Transformative conversations still happen. Students still discover ideas that rearrange their

lives and minds permanently. I've seen it. Felt it. There are moments in education that border on religious experience. Someone encounters an author or idea and suddenly realizes that consciousness has buildings they've never entered before. But those moments increasingly survive *despite* the industrial structure rather than because of it.

Maybe the cruelest joke is that technology solved the wrong problem for the institution. We treated the internet as a delivery mechanism for information when its real significance was the destruction of informational scarcity itself. Universities were designed for a world where knowledge was geographically concentrated. Books were rare. Experts were inaccessible. Archives were physical locations. Learning required proximity.

Now a teenager in rural poverty can access lectures from world-class scholars at two in the morning while eating microwave burritos in pajamas (the student, not the burritos).

The bottleneck is no longer access to information. It's navigation. Context. Credibility. Mentorship. Attention. Application. Meaning. In other words, the role of the university should have evolved from gatekeeper of information into facilitator of intellectual development.

Instead, many institutions kept the old structure and added an "eCampus". Which is how we ended up with universities that operate like 16th-century clergy funding a bloated administrative hierarchy while outsourcing actual education to the digital equivalent of a Duolingo premium membership.

The defenders of the status quo might respond emotionally here, as though critique of institutional form constitutes criticism of learning itself. Questioning the structure isn't anti-intellectual. If anything, refusing to question the structure would be profoundly anti-intellectual. Universities, of all places, should withstand philosophical scrutiny without reacting like the Church discovering astronomy.

And maybe *that's* the deepest issue underneath all

of this: We still talk about education as though exposure automatically produces transformation. But anyone who has ever sat through a mandatory corporate training video on workplace etiquette knows human beings can survive enormous quantities of information without metabolizing a single molecule of it. Learning isn't proximity. Attendance isn't integration. Completion isn't understanding.

Real education rearranges a person – not always pleasantly. Sometimes it destabilizes them. Makes them harder to govern. Less certain. More aware of contradiction. More resistant to slogans and simplifications. Truly educated people often become "difficult" because they stop accepting institutional narratives as dogma. Which may explain why institutions frequently prefer manageable competence over genuine intellectual unpredictability.

A broadly educated populace sounds wonderful until that populace starts asking structural questions. Questions like: Why must learning occur within this specific economic model? Why is debt attached to intellectual legitimacy? Why are credentials tied to time rather than demonstrated capability? Why does institutional prestige often correlate more strongly with exclusivity than educational quality? Why are students treated simultaneously as consumers, products, and liabilities? Why does every university website look like it was written by the same boilerplate-trained marketing AI?

At this point the defenders of higher education usually accuse critics of wanting to "abolish universities," which is a little like accusing someone criticizing hospital billing practices of wanting nineteenth-century battlefield amputations. No. Universities should exist. As laboratories, research centers, mentorship networks, intellectual communities, archives, studios, and public forums rather than glorified endurance competitions where students purchase structured exhaustion in exchange for employability tickets.

Perhaps the future degree should look less like proof of attendance and more like proof of demonstrated

synthesis. Not, “I completed 120 credit hours.” But, “I can think.” “I can research.” “I can defend ideas publicly.” “I can apply knowledge meaningfully.” “I can create.” “I can contextualize.” “I can withstand critique.” “I can contribute.”

If someone can do all that without sitting through Introduction to Advanced Intermediate Spreadsheet Applications for Careers in Compliance every Tuesday and Thursday from nine to eleven, maybe we should just let them graduate already.

Reel No.	28	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Confession Time

Notes: Listening to: Rift

Phriends,

I have a confession to make; I *have* listened to Phish before. In fact, a Phish song has been a brain worm of mine for the last twenty-or-so years. Someone gave me a CD circa 2001 and said the band was "The String Cheese Incident". Turns out, it was *Rift*. I never bothered to look it up, I just believed them. So, Phish has lived in various CD books and been randomly played on road trips here and there, unbeknownst to me.

Reel No. 29

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: So What Do You Do?

Notes: Listening to: Coral Sky Amphitheater, West Palm Beach, FL. 2 November 1996.

Prompt: Is the 'new' Grateful Dead community, Phish community, or similar community a sign of hope?

Drabinski's observations about the Grateful Dead community as a kind of ethical possibility definitely resonates with me, though not in the fully utopian sense of "Hope" that would go along with a 2008 presidential campaign ad. I do think there's hope there, but it's a fragile, temporary hope. Hope with color-coded wristbands and a merch booth around every corner.

What I relate most to about these music communities (or any temporary 'enclaves', as I call them) isn't the tie-dyed mythos or the pseudo-spiritual branding that others see or seek. For me, the appeal is in the rare suspension of normal institutional behavior. For a moment, people stop acting like optimized websites wearing human costumes. You can walk through a campground at a Phish show or Burning Man and encounter people behaving with generosity toward strangers that we typically don't see in the 'real world'. Someone feeds you because they're cooking and you're nearby. Someone invites you into a conversation because they're genuinely curious to know about you. Someone builds a giant glowing spider that shoots fire from its eyes for no economically viable reason whatsoever. In a world where every interaction feels monetized, surveilled, and performative, that kind of purposeless creativity and community can even seem politically radical.

Drabinski emphasizes seeing others as fully dimensional

people: "The management of life most fundamentally changes our relation to others. The other person ceases to be a singular individual with demands, needs, or even just generous, human exchange. Rather, the other person's relation to me is mediated by a whole set of social demands, values, and structures, all of which alienate us from one another."[x] Which sounds a lot like "This Is Water" by David Foster Wallace. I mentioned it previously as something that 'moves' me. Wallace, in this commencement speech, discusses how the real challenge of adult life is resisting the default setting that reduces everyone else to background characters in our private kabuki theatre. The exhausted cashier, the slow driver, the screaming child in the grocery store – they all possess inner worlds as vivid and painful and hopeful and uncertain as our own. Drabinski shows us something similar in these temporary communities: a disruption of social numbness. For a few hours – or days – people stop treating one another as obstacles and start treating each other as complicated beings participating in the same strange experiment. As with what you learn in school, it can be something that you take outside of that environment into regular life. Of course, we can't do it perfectly in regular society, just like we can't do perfect lab tests in the field, but that shouldn't necessarily stop us from trying. Or, at least conceding our preconceptions to the environment.

But my agreement comes with a *massive* asterisk shaped like a three-story, all-terrain pirate ship blocking your view of the Burning of the Man. These communities also reveal how quickly alternative cultures become consumable aesthetics. Burning Man was the clearest example I've personally experienced. The first several days felt genuinely transformative. People talked to each other without suspicion. Art existed because somebody felt compelled to make it. And then destroy it, if they so desired. There was an atmosphere of collective participation instead of passive consumption. It *was* the mythological utopia my friends had described. Then Friday arrived like a corporate

team-building retreat sponsored by Ed Hardy and ketamine. The population exploded with twenty-thousand new people who only seemed interested in extracting the spectacle: the drugs, the sex, the social capital, the Instagram lore of "look how wild and free I am." The ethos shifted literally overnight from participation to consumption.

I think that observation is important because it exposes a weakness in Drabinski's hopefulness. Occasional communities can create moments of liberation, but they're vulnerable to what capitalism and conformity do best: absorbing dissent and selling it back as lifestyle branding. Even anti-establishment spaces eventually attract people who want the image of authenticity without the vulnerability or responsibility that being a part of an authentic community requires. You start with a gathering of eccentric pilgrims finding meaning together and end with people reserving seats at Phish concerts[ψ] like retirees defending pool chairs. Counterculture invents its own HOA.

I don't think that invalidates Drabinski's point. If anything, the impermanence might *be* the point (how Buddhist of me). Maybe these communities matter because they are occasional. They function less as permanent solutions, but as reminders that other ways of living *are* possible. Brief malfunctions. Little unauthorized demonstrations of human potential for weirdness and caring. The Summer of Love, Woodstock, Taylor Camp, CBGB - they're special because they were a moment. And nostalgia is a helluva drug. I remember this old blues player telling me when I first started playing professionally and based a lot of my identity of 'self' on the band I was in and the community surrounding it (and my role in the hierarchy) – which, of course, I thought would last forever – he said, "Bands will come and go, just remember why *you* play." It stuck with me for a long time, through identifying with and having others identify me with my 'place' in the greater and lesser

[ψ] See: Ira Iosebashvili, Wall Street Journal, 20.8.2018.

music communities, before I actually understood what he meant.

There is something I find hopeful in seeing that people can behave differently, if only temporarily. The problem is that "tourists" eventually arrive in every utopia with their ice chests, bluetooth speakers, and sense of entitlement. Humans keep on humaning, committed to importing hierarchy and self-interest into every Eden they encounter. Coachella, Warped Tour, Woodstock '99. All great examples of these temporary communities that were exploited to the point that they became unrecognizable as the events they started as.

But probably somewhere, right now, in a muddy field somewhere, somebody's sharing food with strangers while a twenty-minute improvisational jam dissolves the norms of social expectation and hierarchy. I imagine, in the long run, that rupture in ordinary life matters more than the inevitable demise of the community. There is something about being able to say (in a non-arrogant, non-hipster way) "I was there before Ticketmaster ruined it all."

Hope doesn't need permanence. As these temporary communities keep altering our way of thinking or being, we'll keep creating them, letting inclusivity transform into division, abandoning them, and starting again.

PS - I try to make a habit of asking people what they're interested in or what they enjoy doing instead of asking, "What do you do?" when creating small talk. It engages with who the person is outside of their one-dimensional routine and disrupts the social stratification that we tend to imprint on people based on their role in 'normal' society. I don't mean this to be rude, but unless someone's job is the thing they love most, have truly aspired to (not in an upward-mobility way), or that drives their spirit of individuality, I'd rather hear about most anything else. Tell me what you'd do if you never had to work again. Tell me about your obsession with arthropods. Tell me how hard it was to learn Chopin on the piano. Tell me what you'd choose as a super power. I've known CEOs and rockstars and nomads and students

and struggling artists and entrepreneurs and addicts and academics and politicians and every ‘class’ of person you can imagine. There are brilliant, caring people and entitled assholes in every group. Jobs or work or careers, however you want to phrase it, tell you how people sell their time, not about their soul (caveat for morally reprehensible jobs, you know who you are).

Reel No.	30	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Cha-Ching! No Show

Notes: Listening to: Big Boat

The most valuable resource on Earth is also the most worthless: time.

Reel No. 30 B

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Confucianists vs. Daoists:
Cage Match at the Temple of Institutional Compliance

Notes: Listening to: Big Boat

Prothero's distinction between Confucian and Daoist views of humanity is basically a disagreement about whether civilization is a finishing school or a homo genus (get it?) meat grinder.

For Confucians, to be human is to be social. Humanity is not something we simply ooze into at birth, sticky and screaming and already morally complete. It has to be cultivated. Trained. Ritualized. Polished until the rough animal becomes a person who knows where to stand, when to bow, who to honor, how to mourn, how to speak, and how not to turn Thanksgiving into a war crime. Or as Prothero put it, "[E]mpty rituals, banal aphorisms, antiquated etiquette, and otherwise maintaining the status quo."[9] In the Confucian view, "human" is not just a biological category, it's an achievement. One becomes human through relationships: child to parent, student to teacher, ruler to subject, friend to friend. Ritual isn't empty ceremony, it's the way of moral formation, the choreography by which the individual learns to live with others without immediately becoming a pariah. Take it from an alien-outsider, this is a lot closer to Western tradition than Westerners want to admit.

The Daoists are less enthusiastic about the bureaucratic processes of becoming a valid person. On the path, we aren't born as defective little poop-and-cry units waiting to

be upgraded by school, family, government, and the archaic policies of dead slave owners. We are born already connected to the Dao, to the natural way of things -- and then society starts its work. Education arrives with a hammer. Ambition arrives with a jackhammer. Status arrives wearing an overpriced suit and asking about our five-year plan. Before long, the wild, breathing human has been converted into a credentialed, energy-star-compliant appliance: punctual, productive, deferential, terrified, and good at using phrases like "rise and grind" while privately wanting to run away into the woods and roll in some moss.

In the Confucian model, education and ritual make us human. In the Daoist model, they unmake us.

A Confucian example might be a child learning "respect" through ritual honoring of parents, caring for elders, speaking carefully, and taking one's predetermined place in a family or community. This isn't just politeness, it's moral boot camp. The person becomes human by learning how to participate properly in the web of human life.

A Daoist example might be the opposite: the person who refuses the whole carnival of status, striving, and social performance. The homesteader, the wanderer, the child playing without strategy, the person who doesn't turn life into a résumé. These figures aren't "uncultivated" in a negative sense. They may be closer to what humanity looked like before it was captured, dressed, corrected, graded, and taught to apologize for existing while simultaneously existing in the worst possible way. (Forgive me father, for I have sinned?)

I lean heavily toward the Daoist philosophy, if that's not obvious by now. Though, I don't think the Confucian position is complete nonsense. Human beings are social creatures. We need language, care, obligation, memory, shared practices, and at least enough structure to keep daily life from becoming a flaming Cybertruck rolling downhill into a preschool. Confucianism is right that we are formed by others. No one becomes human alone in a cave, just ask Plato.

The problem is institutions. Full stop. They don't stop at formation. They want full conversion. Families call obedience love. Schools call obedience intelligence. Workplaces call obedience dedication. Religious communities call it virtue. Governments call it national security. Eventually, a person becomes a stack of acceptable behaviors. And everyone claps, because the operation was successful and the patient now responds to email within the prescribed 24-48 hour window while thinking they're entirely separate from the algorithm.

This is where Daoism feels less like ancient metaphysics and more like a warning label someone should have put on civilization. It asks what happens when we mistake social approval for moral development. What happens when every impulse gets corrected, every silence gets interpreted, every thought gets diagnosed, and every living thing is taught to sit still under the microscope until it can pass as normal. Daoism isn't anti-education. It's anti-homogenization. It asks whether we're striving for wisdom or just making life easier to control.

I don't think the real question is whether humans are social or individual creatures. It's clearly both. The better question is what kind of world allows our humanity to deepen and what kind turns humanity into a compliance project. Confucian cultivation can teach responsibility, reverence, and care. But it's walking a dangerous line between that and hierarchy in ceremonial robes. Daoism pushes back by refusing to equate obedience to wisdom.

I think we are born with a humanity that institutions (starting with 'family') teach us to mistrust. But, if we are lucky, damaged, stubborn, and weird enough, we spend the rest of our lives trying to dig it back out from under the rubble of fallen empires.

Reel No. 31

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

The Sound Before the Sentence
or, Why My Feelings Need a Rhythm Section and/or a Parole Officer

Notes: Listening to: "Tweezer" medleys

Whoa, has it only been a few weeks since I first listened to *A Live One*? That feels like a lifetime ago. I've been listening to some various "Tweezer" medleys lately, which I dig because one of my old bands used to do a similar routine for our closing song, including not resolving it and then resuming the medley at an entirely different show.

Anyway, I think I'm going to get meta with this one.

I've mentioned aphantasia before and that I process in words. But there are thoughts that don't arrive as sentences. They arrive as motion. As colorless color. As a throat-shape. As a sudden internal tilt, like the walls inside my chest have started to crack, but the landlord says that's normal settling. They arrive as almost-meanings, pseudo-utterances, non-verbal axolotls dragging themselves out of the mud before language gets there to do an environmental impact study.

By the time I say something like, "I'm sad," the original critter has already been taxidermized, catalogued, and stuffed in a drawer in the back of some university science lab. Not erased, exactly. Preserved badly. Stuck with pins. Mounted under glass. Labeled by a committee that got a grant to study whatever the hell is going on in here.

"Sad." Because that clearly articulates years of suicidal ideation. Or hopelessness over the fact that no matter what you do, someone will bastardize it for profit and prestige while simultaneously destroying the natural world. Because

what word even has a shared meaning after you spent your formative years not being allowed to have emotions.

This is one of the humiliations of language: it asks the interior life to come outside, dressed appropriately for the weather, the situation, and in anticipation of unspoken puritanical rules. It wants sequence, order, clean little boxes, meticulous social hygiene. It wants the cowlicks combed. It wants wounds to become a sentence everyone can safely stand near without getting any blood on their institutional polo shirt and khakis.

Music doesn't do this.

Music enters through a side door language forgot was unlocked, probably because language was in a meeting about synergy or something. Music doesn't ask the feeling to identify itself. It doesn't say, "Please choose from the following menu of emotions, or press one to continue dissociating." It doesn't demand that the experience become conceptually literate. It asks and the body answers before the social self can pick up and say, "We apologize for the heavier-than-usual call volume. We assure you, your cosomological crisis matters to us."

And then we have Schopenhauer, my favorite grumpy little philosophical gargoyle. For him, music wasn'tt just 'another' art form. Painting represents. Sculpture represents. Literature represents. Theater represents. They show us the world under various forms of arrangement, distortion, intensification, and dramatic stage lighting. They give us appearances of reality. They rearrange the torches in Plato's cave and charge us twice as much for (re)entry while signing contracts with Ticketmaster to add $99 service fees.

But music, Schopenhauer thought, does something unique. Music doesn't represent the world so much as open the hood and show you the engine. It isn't a picture of the Will. It's the Will speaking in its own blunt, perfect animal grammar. Not "this is longing." Longing itself, stretched across intervals. Not "this is tension." Tension itself, held against the body. Not "this is release." La petit mort. Music doesn't point out the window and say, "Lookie there, ma, we

got another tornado a'comin'." It's barometric. It drops the pressure in the room, rattles the windows, and waterboards your nervous system into confessing to crimes committed by your ancestors.

I think that's why it has always felt more trustworthy to me than spoken language. Not clearer, exactly. Clarity is overrated when people use it to mean "make your complexity more convenient." Music isn't clear. Music is exact in a way clarity often fails to be. It can be blurry and precise at the same time, which is where most real interior life lives anyway.

Spoken language, by contrast, is already socialized by the time I get to it. Words have been handled. Passed around. Misused by families, therapists, priests, teachers, bosses, lovers, advertisers, motivational scammers, and people who say "communication" when they mean "perform your pain in a tone that doesn't inconvenience me."

Words arrive with institutional residue.

"Fine" is a social procedure.

"Upset" can be a plea for cross-examination.

"Overwhelmed" sounds like a scheduling issue when sometimes it means the soul has become a beehive and we're facing imminent colony collapse thanks to all the pesticides people have contaminated the environment with.

Even "love" has been dragged through so much theology, pop music, bloodline worship, Valentine's Day promotions, and family gossip that it should be wearing an old hospital ID bracelet.

This isn't because language is useless. I love language. I've built whole dystopian and utopian universes out of it. Language can dazzle, puncture, seduce, rescue, accuse, consecrate, and ruin your life. It can turn a feeling into a poem, a poem into a song, a song into a book, and a book into a doctrine nobody reads but everybody fears.

Language is a brilliant nonsense machine. Because language is public. It's made of shared rules, shared uses, shared corrections. It belongs to the village – but the villagers often come carrying torches and pitchforks. The

village has opinions about tone. The village asks whether you've tried a gratitude journal. The village thinks trauma would be more palatable if you kept it behind closed doors. The village watches the 24-hour news cycle.

I was exploring Wittgenstein recently and he brings this problem to light with his private language argument. The basic premise, to my limited understanding, is this: could I have a language that refers only to my private inner sensations and conceptual ideas, a language no one else could understand because only I have access to the things it describes?

Sounds not only possible but obvious, right? Of course I have private sensations. Of course I have internal experiences no one else can understand. I contain coastlines and mountains no one has mapped. There are feelings in me that don't seem to have public names at all. I could call one of them "Kren," another "Thrum-dubnly," another "the blue hinge," another "pre-collapse teriyaki with ancestral seasoning," another "Tuesday, but aquatic," another "the tiny trombone orchestra of moral fatigue."

Why not? Who's going to stop me? The Department of Semantic Compliance? Some adjunct in a windowless office saying, "We don't officially recognize that emotion under current policy"?

Wittgenstein's question isn't whether the inner experience exists. For many of us, it does. The question is whether a word can mean something privately if there are no criteria for using it correctly. If I name a sensation "X" today, how do I know tomorrow's sensation is also "X"? What makes my usage right or wrong? A memory? But the memory is also private (and flawed). A feeling of recognition? That, too, can cause misdiagnosis. Without any shared practice, any external check, any grammar of use, the word risks becoming a bead on a string I keep reverently counting without knowing whether I'm praying, dissociating, or inventing a religion that only accepts the petrodollar.

Meaning needs a world.

This is terrible news for those of us whose inner lives

seem to arrive in dialects not mandated by undergraduate core-exclusion classes.

Sometimes, believe it or not, I do know what I mean. Not in words, but in the deeper and less negotiable way. I know the internal waveform. I know the frequency ranges. I know the desired pitch. I know the difference between the grief that falls vertically and the grief that spreads sideways. I know the anger that incites and the anger that fossilizes. I know the shame that burns and the shame that becomes architecture. I know the strange emotional compound that is not nostalgia, not dread, not tenderness, but some illegal fourth substance cooked in an RV somewhere in the New Mexico desert (yeah, science!).

But when I try to say it, I get language-rationed.

"I'm having a hard time."

Adorable. The inner event was a six-story cathedral with bats in the rafters and a pipe organ, and what came out was a slogan for a counseling center.

This is where music becomes not escape, but rescue. Or at least a getaway car with a missing muffler and a horn section. Music gives shape without simplification. It allows the internal thing to become external without forcing it to become paraphrasable. It doesn't solve Wittgenstein's private language problem by creating a secret dictionary. It solves it crookedly, by giving the private sensation a public body.

A song can be heard by others. Played by others. Misheard by others. Loved incorrectly, which is still a form of love (and also most of human history). It exists in shared space. It vibrates through air, wood, wire, bone, cheap speakers, expensive headphones, old cars, rehearsal rooms that smell like old IPA and poorly-aging male confidence. It's public enough to escape pure privacy.

Yet, it doesn't betray the private thing by explaining it.

That's the miracle. Not "miracle" in the cast-aside-your-crutches-and-be-saved religious sense. No hymnals. No harps. No weaponization against the people. More like an old Fender amp with a bad rectifier tube holding one perfect

note.

Music lets the interior remain plural. A sentence has to goosestep. Music can riot. A sentence says one thing after another because mouths are moist little conveyor belts. Music can make contradiction simultaneous: grief in the melody, defiance in the rhythm, tenderness in the harmony, dread in the bass, and the last splinter of impossible joy hiding in the tambourine.

Spoken language is linear. Music is layered. It can hold incompatible truths without making them fight for custody of the paragraph. It can let despair wear tap shoes without pretending despair is "fine" now. It can put a kazoo in the apocalypse and call it a trumpet.

I often can't explain what I feel about music, or what I feel in general. It isn't because the feeling is vague. Usually it's the opposite. It's too specific. Too high-resolution. Too densely braided. Too many signals arriving at once, each with its own crew of roadies, sound techs, personal assistants, and probably a union representative.

Music can keep it weird.

This is where Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein come together, despite the fact that putting them in the same room would probably create a fog of contempt and Austro-Hungarian anxiety disorders.

Beneath representation, beneath concept, beneath the construction-paper masks we staple on our faces so we can attend another meeting, music isn't *about* something. It's something happening in the same shape as wanting, fearing, striving, collapsing, reaching, aching, continuing.

Wittgenstein explains why I can't just invent a perfectly private language for my inner life and expect it to work. Meaning has to be used. It has to live among others. A word that only points inward, with no criteria beyond the feeling that it points accurately, becomes unstable. It may comfort me, but it can't quite communicate.

Music stands in the breach. It isn't private language. It isn't public language either, at least not in the ordinary bureaucratic-mouth sense. It's a shared interiority without

translation. A commons of inarticulate precision. A grammar made of motion. A place where the unsayable doesn't become sayable, exactly, but becomes encounterable.

People usually think expression means explanation. Explanation is only one *kind* of expression – sometimes the worst one. Explanation can become a second injury when the first injury was being forced to justify the reality of your own experience. "Tell me what's wrong" can be tenderness, yes. It can also be a demand that suffering become administratively legible before it receives basic recognition.

Please provide three examples of your anguish, including one measurable outcome.

Attach documentation if available.

Or we can use the doll.

Music doesn't require that conversion. It lets me remain unfinalized. Music doesn't finish me into a statement. It doesn't turn the internal temperature into a forecast. It allows for atmospheres, not answers. It lets emotion exist as topography: ridge, hollow, pressure, basin, fracture, drift, sinkhole, collapsed bridge.

There are feelings I have that I can only describe by borrowing from sound. A grief with low strings under it. A joy with cracked cymbals. Anxiety in the form of a piccolo snare. Shame as a room tone. Love as unresolved harmony, not because it's incomplete, but because completion would make it more defined. Hope as a modulation you didn't see coming and still don't trust.

Maybe this is why spoken conversation can feel so insufficient. Speech asks me to summarize the orchestra after the concert hall has burned down.

"What are you feeling?"

Well, the clarinets are arguing with childhood memories. The timpani has found God but refuses to declare a denomination. There's a cello in the left lung playing something that might be remorse, but I might have smoked too much weed lately. The violas are unionizing over dinner plans. The trumpet has entered into a tenuous consent with

professional distance. Backstage, a marimba is colliding with an otamatone in the name of emotional nuance.

So, you know, "Fine."

This is funny until it isn't. Then it's just the daily oppression of too much compression. The compulsory miniaturization of the self for social exchange. The expectation that an inner life should fit through the mail slot of acceptable speech.

Music widens the aperture. It doesn't make me 'understood' in the ordinary sense. In fact, people may understand me less when I talk about music because I start reaching for metaphors that sound like they were assembled during an impromptu recording session with dead deadheads in a philosophy department. But music makes me less alone inside the inexpressible. It gives the unsaid a body outside me. It proves that something can be precise without being paraphrased.

That may be the deepest comfort: not that music says what I mean, but that it demonstrates meaning can exist without saying it.

The interior life isn't exclusively tragic. Mine certainly isn't. It's absurd, recursive, overbuilt, underfunded, full of tangles of old cables, theological scratch tracks, philosophical ADAT tapes, and one very serious-looking production log dedicated to misunderstanding its own notes. Music can handle that. It can hold anguish and comedy in the same measure. It can admit that sometimes the most accurate sound for existential dread isn't a requiem, but a trombone doing something illegal with a plunger.

Language wants me to choose a genre.

Music tells language to piss off. It knows that consciousness isn't a polished and appropriately-formatted essay, it's a rehearsal space. Half the band is late, someone's amp is buzzing, the drummer is explaining neo-libertarianism for some reason, and still, somehow, something eventually happens – after an adequate number of canned beers and smoke breaks. A pulse. A figure. A phrase. A wrong note that becomes the hook. The whole ridiculous orchestra finally

gets in tune and, briefly, the unspeakable gets a voice.

It's the sound of the inward becoming shareable without becoming obedient.

It's the non-representational art that represents nothing and recognizes everything.

It's where thought goes before it has been sentenced to language.

Internal wordlessness that isn't agreement, not happiness, not comprehension, but recognition.

The blue hinge opening.

The thrum-dubnly tuning its strings.

The tiny trombone of moral fatigue emptying its spit valve on the carpet.

Bugs Bunny steps up to the podium…

Reel No. 32

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track: Find Myself Starving

Notes: Listening to: The Walkaways @ The Get Down - Live recording from last night's show.

[How it started]

Imagine this: you spend twenty years of your life at venues: bars, clubs, theaters. Anywhere you can find live music and people with lowered inhibitions. And then one day you stop. It might not even be deliberate. Like how the last time you talked to your best friend you didn't know it would be the last time you talked.

Years pass and you decide to visit this friend again, not knowing how they've changed. How you've changed.

For one, you and this friend used to drink together. A lot.

What do you call peer pressure when the 'peer' is a room or a sound or a smell?

There's a common trait among neurodivergent people, a sort of object impermanence for feelings. Not missing people. Answering "fine" when the therapist asks how your week was – because those feelings and experiences have shifted to memory like an old vocal harmony.

With this comes picking up relationships right where they left off, regardless of if the other person feels the same impermanence or not.

Fortunately, my friend wasn't as loud as I remembered them to be. I'd braced myself for sensory overwhelm that mostly never came. What I probably always suspected as volume overload was actually too many signals muddying

up the chain, as I still struggled with conversation, even when the band wasn't playing (due to the din of excited voices). It's funny that they call it sensory processing *disorder* because, to me, it makes perfect sense that if there's a lot of different sounds or visual activity, you should be analyzing and processing it. Or maybe that's hyper-vigilance speaking.

I had another expectation. One that exists even in environments that I'm well-established in. I anticipate being the outcast. Not always exiled, but just not part of the group. Given the Phish contingency, I expected the venue to be all Phans who knew each other and had long-established relationships. I didn't observe this atmosphere at all. Which makes me wonder if there's an established fan group in the area (there must be), if they only come together for officially-sanctioned events, or if Phans, as a whole, are transient and improvisational, so you never know who is part of the in-group.

(I went on to discuss a dance circle, but was then invited to write a recap of this show for Phish.net, sooo…)

[How it ended]

The Walkaways: Community, Covers, and the One-Note Republic

On Sunday, May 17, 2026, *The Walkaways* played The Get Down in Portland, Oregon, in support of The Mockingbird Foundation. For the uninitiated, The Walkaways are a Phish covers cover band. That is to say, they perform songs Phish has performed, but didn't necessarily write. It's a concept so niche it should probably require a permit, but as someone who spent enough years in cover bands to develop both tendinitis and opinions, I can get behind it. Just so long as Phish has never covered "Sweet Home Alabama." There are limits. We are still, theoretically, civilized.

I'm not going to do a full setlist autopsy. In a community where setlists can feel as improvised as a vacuum solo,

I'm not sure anyone goes to shows because of song order, anyway. The point isn't what got played. The point is what happened when it did.

Before the show, I used my ninja skills to inspect the band's equipment. And by that, I mean I walked over to the stage and looked at it. A talk box? Excellent. A small civilization of guitar pedals? Naturally. A keyboard rig that suggested several synthesizers had been left alone with the grant money? Even better.

I'm more than a little obsessed with strange musical and music-adjacent sounds, so I have thoughts. One of them is this: effects processing can be a tool or a crutch. Which, yes, is annoying because a crutch is also a tool, but the metaphor is already written. A lot of musicians use delays, distortions, and filters to conceal their mistakes or, worse, to replace having something to say. But effects shouldn't be cosmetic. They're not eyeliner for insecurity. They're part of the instrument, part of the voice, part of the rhetorical apparatus by which a musician turns voltage into personality.

If you can't play an unplugged acoustic guitar or a three-piece drum kit with some kind of musical conviction, then adding seven layers of signal processing may not make you more interesting. It may just make you louder in more expensive dialects. Mastery of effects, like mastery of anything, doesn't mean hiding your mistakes. It means making the whole vocabulary available, including the ugly syllables. You have to learn to crawl before you can walk(away).

That's the thing about this band, they had more effects on stage than I've seen in years, but it didn't feel like ornamentation. It felt like architecture. The sounds weren't slathered over the songs like psychedelic Nutella. They were integrated into the material, sometimes expanding it, sometimes destabilizing it, sometimes giving a cowbell the texture of a jaw harp on mescaline. What The Walkaways brought wasn't just a regurgitation of songs played by a band playing songs written by other bands and spiritually validated by Phish. They brought a sonic encyclopedia,

one with several appendices and a few pages stuck together from cosmic humidity (yeah, humidity, let's say that's what it is).

At various points, I'd leave the floor for a few minutes, and when I came back, there would be a different keyboard player, a different singer, another guest musician folded into the scene as if the stage had developed a porous membrane. I didn't attempt to count the number of guests. What stood out wasn't the quantity of guest appearances, but the quality of integration.

This was especially true of the younger musicians. It didn't feel like one of those performative "Look, we brought a kid on stage, everybody clap before your sense of civic virtue expires" moments. The youth players didn't appear as mascots, trophies, or punctuation marks. They felt like part of the band, not because anyone made a speech about inclusion, but because the music treated them that way.

That matters. We often talk about the four minutes under the spotlight, but we overlook the rehearsal, the listening, the adaptation, the discipline of making space without making a spectacle. The more people in a room, the more voices have to be heard. Bringing young musicians into that process as equals, rather than props, feels aligned with the spirit of The Mockingbird Foundation. It's mentorship, yes, but not the kind where wisdom descends from Mount Adult with a stern-look and a tax-deductible halo. It's reciprocal. The younger musicians learn from the band and the band learns from the younger musicians, because that's how learning works when it hasn't been strangled by hierarchy.

If we want to talk about the organic community in the Phish-adjacent universe, though, my primary focus would have to be the youth dance circle. Not that dance circles generally occur in nature. I don't think David Attenborough has ever crouched behind a fern and whispered, "Here we observe the adolescent jam-band mammal forming a semi-rehearsed ring of communal expression." And I later learned this particular circle didn't emerge entirely spontaneously. But that hardly makes it less interesting. If

anything, it makes it more interesting, because "organic" and "organized" aren't opposites. A garden is organized. So is jazz. So is a grilled cheese if you're not a nihilist.

What mattered was the improvisational quality of what happened inside the structure. Maybe I'll sound like too much of an old man here, but I thought it was genuinely 'rad' that these young people seemed engaged with this music. Not ironically. Not as participants in someone else's nostalgia ritual. Actually engaged. And it made me wonder about taste, discernment, and the masks we wear when we're forced to explain why art moves us.

Does our alleged discernment drop in these settings? Are we yielding to the will of the group, dissolving into collective enthusiasm because everyone else has given us permission? Or does the environment let us remove the little monocle of pretension we wear when describing art? Maybe the dance floor is one of the few places where nobody has to formulate a thesis statement before admitting they're having a good time.

Despite the semi-rehearsed nature of its genesis, the activity remained improvisational. And I don't mean the dance moves or the order in which people entered the middle. That's irrelevant anyway. The improvisation came from (or with) the music itself. Fusion funk isn't exactly 120 beats per minute of obedient four-on-the-floor arithmetic. It bends. It lurches. It withholds the obvious landing. It replaces the handrail with a pool noodle and says, "Good luck, traveler."

You could tell the dancers didn't always know what was coming when their turn arrived in the center. Maybe that's an age and experience thing. Maybe it's because, again, fusion funk. But they went with it anyway. "Mistakes" and all. Which, of course, is where the actual humanity lives. Nobody remembers the perfectly executed gesture. They remember the moment someone nearly loses the thread, grabs it mid-air, and turns the recovery into a new thread entirely.

And the band noticed. More importantly, the band

adapted. They found a groove I'd hesitate to call one chord. It felt closer to one note. Less a progression than a gravitational field. The jam stretched for what seemed like ten minutes, orbiting that single tonal center without becoming dull. That, to me, was the philosophical hinge of the night. You don't always need complexity to connect with people. Sometimes you need one note, enough patience, and a room willing to agree that repetition isn't monotony when attention is alive inside it.

The focus of the room, and the band, shifted from the stage to the dance circle. Well, I couldn't see the bass player clearly through the haze of propylene glycol, so for all I know he had transcended into vapor and unionized with the fog machine. But the center of gravity had moved. At a show where the default mode is watching the band, the room briefly reorganized itself around something else: participation, response, a temporary commonality. The band wasn't diminished by that shift. They enabled it. They became the park in which a small public ritual took place.

That's the thing I keep coming back to. Do people want to be entertained by the most performative thing in the room, or do they want a center of gravity around which a temporary community can assemble? The answer, at least that night, seemed to be both. The spectacle mattered, but only because it made participation possible. The music wasn't merely being presented to the audience. It was being offered as a structure in which the audience could briefly become something other than a collection of private nervous systems standing near a bar.

The Walkaways didn't just perform a clever concept. They made the concept breathe. A Phish covers cover band could easily become a novelty act, an ouroboros with colored lighting, a jam-scene footnote with a wah pedal. Instead, this show became something more generous: a study in musical inheritance, playful translation, sonic excess, communal attention, and the strange alchemy by which a room full of people briefly agrees to become a room together.

And in an era when so much culture feels engineered for spectatorship, branding, and the monetization of every last dollar of human attention, that felt like more than a ‘good show’. It felt like an argument for why live music still matters. Not because it’s perfect. Not because everyone knows exactly what they’re doing. But because nobody does, not entirely, and sometimes the groove is strong enough to hold us together anyway.

Also, “Purple Rain” was a moment. But it’s Prince, so explaining that feels like annotating thunder.

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So, anyway, I had a couple of drinks with my old friend. I managed to resist the peer pressure, whether it be a room, a sound, a smell, or just feeling ‘normal’ again.

Reel No.	33	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	I Heard the Ocean Sing

Notes: Listening to: The Story of the Ghost
Prompt: Why is Phish so meaningful to so many people? What does this say about the power of music?

I've actually wondered over the past several weeks what makes Phish so "special" to their audience. I've known die-hard Deadheads, KISS Army, Swifties, Rude Boys, Beatles and Stones fanatics, Elvis impersonators, your archetypal Rush fans, even one dude who was obsessed with Toto, but I can't say I've known any Phans (until now). There's a similarity between all of these groups in their identification with a particular band or individual that extends beyond casual consumerism. But unlike the others, decades later, Phish still lives in this niche, 'cult', Rocky Horror-esque domain.

To be fair, most fandoms start small and either scale up (and are increasingly commercialized) or eventually fizzle out, relegated to a brief mention by Hal Sparks or Sir Mix-a-Lot in an episode of "I Love the 90s." Phish seems to have found and retained that elusive middle ground (one that I would prefer over rock-stardom, myself).

Reading Mr. Miner's *Thoughts*, what stood out or, at least, appealed to me most was, "We instinctually respond by sublimating our own egos so that we may fully appreciate the band's illustrations of 'What We Are;' Of what an authentic experience truly is…[W]e feel part of something bigger than the mechanized social behemoth, with its impositions of order and bureaucracy, unnatural restrictions on our freedom."

Well, I've already transcended the cosmos in the desert, ate all the hallucinogens, and have had those magical moments of serendipitous creation or epiphany – and one of my 'revelations' is you can't *make* magic happen. You have to create an environment that allows it. Really, you can extend that to a lot of abstract ideas: love, peace, compassion, "success". You can fake it, sure, but if you want the genuine experience, you have to create space for it first. As in, relinquishing control and allowing what happens to happen. Like anything that requires examining or breaking down the self, it needs to be a safe space – which, for a lot of people, may not be at home, may not be with their friends and family, may not be a part of their daily lives at all. Most of us live lives that we need to plan, control, and define exhaustively, which doesn't allow much space for the truly spontaneous.

I haven't been to a Phish show and I'm pretty bad at shutting off the administrative part of my brain at will, even in purported safe and supportive spaces; my true, uninhibited, unedited self is buried deep enough that it might take more than a concert to exorcise it. So I don't know if I would have the same experience that others have, but I'm willing to find out. Or have my own version of it. Even then, I feel like singular experiences are more valuable as part of a whole. Something I'd want to digest and then incorporate in my daily life ("outside the dojo").

When it comes to the meaning of music, it extends way beyond any artist or community. I don't think we could have a life, as we know it, without it. That is, it exists all around us, beyond composed music (which is often inspired by observed external sounds and patterns). How weird would that be to not recognize the musical nature of things? Our heartbeat has a tempo. Birds sing in varied pitches and patterns to create melody. The human voice uses modulation and vibration. Rain, waterfalls, waves, bees, whales, psithurism, traffic, it's all music (to me, at least). So when I think about life without music or the value of music, it's more than just listening to a favorite album, it would be

failing to notice patterns in rhythm and tone and melody in every aspect of my life. That's such a fundamental change in the way I see (or hear) the world that I can't even put it into perspective as a "mistake." It's like saying that being born was a mistake. You can say it. You can even feel it. But our puny human brains can't really comprehend the true scale.

Reel No. 34

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

An Unbecoming Practice

Notes: Listening to: UIC Pavilion, Chicago, IL. 18 June 1994.
Poetry isn't really my 'thing' but I wanted to mix it up a bit.
Apologies in advance.

I will cultivate disobedience without spectacle,
a private grammar for the life I mean to inhabit.
Not revolt as ornament, not grievance as costume,
but the slow correction of inherited posture.

Our First Obedience is not a choice.
It arrives
before language,
before refusal,
before the body knows it has jurisdiction
distinct from the voice that named it useful.

Every house invents its metaphysics.
Every family has theology with breakfast.
The child receives the doctrine
as atmosphere,
breathes it until the lungs become believers.

Goodness as compliance.
Gratitude as remaining diminished.
Love as a ledger no affection could balance.
Peace as whatever kept the waters undisturbed.

The interior regime,
the soldiers quartered in the blood,

the tribunals convened behind the face,
the catechisms written under speech.

I can't seek a pure self.
The myth that belongs to tyrannies.
There is no garden buried under history,
no unevolved animal untouched by instruction.

Only
the labor of reformation,
the surgery of attention,
the chosen pressure of repeated acts
against the old architecture of surrender.

The task isn't to polish the instrument
until it pleases the orchestra.
The task is to retune the damaged wood
to frequencies the hall was built to exclude.
To practice suspicion toward my own absolutes.

Speech without postulation.
Silence without disappearance.
Reflection without enthroning the harm.
Kindness without consenting to use.

Freedom is not the opposite of discipline.
That's the arithmetic of cages.
Freedom is the form discipline takes
when it refuses the master's teachings.

Return to the unglamorous rites:
the sentence revised before it becomes cruelty,
the boundary held without theatrical thunder,
the laugh recovered from the mouth of shame.

What do my beliefs require of me
when no audience gathers to approve them?

Madness taught me the poverty of categories.
Stigma taught me the etiquette of exclusion.
Power taught me how often the word “order”
means someone has been hidden successfully.

I will not become legible for a price.
I will not launder my strangeness into merit.
I will not call the locked room a sanctuary
because someone has polished the toilet.

Neither will I worship the past.
The past is evidence, not scripture.
It may testify; it must not govern.
Even pain becomes police.

Cultivate a more difficult fidelity,
to the excluded, without romance;
to the self, without absolution;
to refusal, without becoming refusal.

The old commandments still arrive,
dressed as prudence, maturity, concern.
They speak in the fluent accent of necessity.
They know the ancestral routes through the nerves.

Be smaller. Be open to experience. Be useful.
Don’t forget to smile.
Translate your life into acceptable terms.
Make your difference administratively invisible.
Thank the institution for permitting your existence.

And I answer, imperfectly, repeatedly,
not with the grandeur of final liberation,
but with the minor liturgies of another life:
attention, revision, repair.

Not saved from the world that made me.
Not innocent of its instruments.

Its syntax in my reflexes
and its enmity in my bones.

Each day, become less available
to the old economies of fear and permission.
Each day, take back one gesture, one silence,
one room in the internal Versailles.

Not pure. Not finished. Not exemplary.
Only more answerable to what I claim to love.
More difficult for power to inhabit.
More committed to *un*becoming.

Reel No. 35

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Flow State, Fugue State, and the Incourrigible Bastard at the Typewriter

Notes: Listening to: (Hoist)

Yesterday, in reading group, we were talking about "the hose" and "IT," which are apparently not terms derived from my local municipal water-management crisis, though one does get the sense that something pressurized, oxidized, and wearing clown makeup is moving through the universe and everybody is pretending this is normal because the jam has entered minute twenty-three and polite society has already left to find parking.

This is one of the pleasures of being a Phish outsider among the initiated. They have a vocabulary. Not just fandom vocabulary, either, but sacred vocabulary. Liturgical vocabulary. The kind of vocabulary that suggests everyone in the room has survived a religious experience involving lighting effects, modal ambiguity, and a forty-seven-minute version of a song that began as a song and ended as experimental noise with opinions on local fine dining.

I say this with love.

Every subculture, if left unattended, becomes a church. Sports fans have rituals. Academics have conferences (which are like pilgrimages, but with more expensive shoes). Philosophers have dead Europeans. Musicians have "that one night back in aught-eight." Phish people have "IT," "the hose," and the unspoken certainty that if one can just explain the nuance between Type I and Type II jams correctly, the unbeliever will stop being an unbeliever and

begin pricing out a camper van.

As the outsider, the best I could do was translate the concept into my own nearest experience: the rehearsal room.

Not the stage. Not performance…not exactly. The stage has too much social architecture. There's already an implied division between makers and receivers, the sweaty clerics holding instruments and the sweaty congregation holding light beers. The stage has lighting. Expectations. A door guy. A ticket surcharge. Probably a fog machine, which is how theater admits it's run out of conceptual ideas.

I mean the rehearsal room before all that. The room with carpet that has seen beers topple like empires. The room where the walls have been poorly sound-treated in a futile attempt to appease the neighbors. The room where one amp hums like it's receiving flashbacks from the war. The room where someone has left behind a broken capo, a pair of underwear nobody wants to claim, and a half-empty bottle of Lipton Iced Tea that now belongs to the fungal colonies.

There are moments in that room when the song stops being something played and becomes something entered. Not just tightness. Tightness is craft. Tightness is discipline. Tightness is four people agreeing, for once, not to file an injunction against the tempo. I mean something harder to label. I mean the moment the band stops sounding like four people negotiating custody of a groove and start coparenting a shared nervous system.

The mistake becomes the bridge. The hesitation becomes a cue. Somebody plays a wrong note and instead of dying miserably, the wrong note sprouts a loaf of sourdough and opens a bakery. Everyone follows the scent. Suddenly the song is not a plan but a place. You look across at the other players and nobody needs to say anything because language, in that moment, would be like bringing a schedule to an orgy.

That was the closest I could get to "IT."

But then we started comparing IT to flow state, and the distinction started gnawing at me. Not like an idea, exactly.

More like an editorial squid taking up residence behind the eyes and inking forms: *Needs revision. Lacks clarity. No, dummy, think about this more.*

Flow state, at least as I understand it, is personal. It's internal velocity. The self becomes efficient. The tribunal of doubt falls asleep in the war room. The hands move. The line arrives. The solo unfolds. The thing you've practiced for years suddenly stops requiring permission. You're not thinking less, exactly. You're thinking underneath the part of the mind that insists on narrating everything like a fourteen-part lesson series for anxious guitar students. I think this can be learned. Trained. Activated.

The communal version is different. In a band, you aren't merely flowing. You're flowing with. Or through. Or inside something that's pretending to be music because "temporary collective organism with a backbeat and a bunch of beat up amps" doesn't fit on the logo.

A good band, in those moments, becomes its own audience. Each player is both sender and receiver, actor and witness, oracle and fool. You're making the thing *and* being surprised by it at the same time. The band listens to itself becoming something none of its members could have produced alone. It's not democracy. It's not hierarchy. It's more like a coup staged by the groove against the fascism of intention.

That may be the essential feature of IT: not excellence, not ecstasy, not even transcendence, though transcendence does like to hang around the parking lot selling bootleg t-shirts. IT is surprise without alienation. The thing arrives from elsewhere, but it doesn't feel foreign. It feels discovered. It feels like everyone in the room accidentally stepped on the same trapdoor and, instead of falling into the Pit of Doom, found a prohibition-era basement jazz club run by demigods.

Then I started thinking about writing, because, clearly, I can't encounter a perfectly good communal phenomenon without dragging it back to a desk, making it weird, and asking what it thinks about Palahniuk.

Writing is usually treated as one of the solitary arts, probably because it's lonely, sedentary, and gives you enough time with yourself to become a hostile critic. A band can blame the equipment. A painter can blame the light. A dancer can blame the floor. A writer sits alone in front of the page, directly across from the blinking cursor, which is less an icon than a tiny parole officer.

The page waits.

The writer waits.

The cursor blinks menacingly.

Somewhere, language slowly undresses to a Luther Vandross song.

I know there's some kind of version of IT in writing. I know because it's happened. Not often. Not on command. Definitely not when I would prefer it, because whatever governs this process runs on ADHD's atomic clock. But it *has* happened.

At first glance, it looks like flow. The words come quickly. The internal backspace gets distracted and wanders into traffic. The paragraphs begin appearing between the margins like suburban parents in a Costco parking lot on Saturday morning. There's momentum, rhythm, proliferation. What I usually call prolific mania, because "flow state" sounds too likely to drink pH-neutral electrolyte water and describe rest as a performance strategy.

The thing I'm trying to name isn't speed. It's not productivity. Productivity is just capitalism wearing a red arm band and asking the muse for their papers. Productivity wants metrics. How many words? How many paintings? How many tracks? How many units of selfhood were converted into market-facing artifacts before lunch? Productivity is the altar at which the modern creative person sacrifices the lamb of undivided attention and receives, in return, a KDP direct deposit full of ash.

Flow can produce. Flow can generate. Flow can stack pages. I serve as my own case study. This other mode does something less likely to be pre-approved by our intellectual insurance agency. In flow, I'm still myself. A

better-functioning self, perhaps. A less constipated self. A self whose various neuroses have been strapped to a wheel and made to power the internal data center. But still me. My techniques. My habits. My rhythms. My little beloved misdemeanors against syntax and clarity. Even when I'm moving quickly, I can feel the rails beneath the train. The craft remains visible by implication. The system is working.

But sometimes the rails disappear. Sometimes writing becomes less like self-expression and more like self-displacement. I'm no longer producing from the familiar center of identity. I'm not "finding my voice," that sacred phrase, so often delivered with the solemnity of a monk asking if you accept double coupons. I'm losing my voice. Or loaning it out. Or waking up to find that some other tenant in the psychic apartment block has picked the locks, painted the bedroom pink, and started drafting a manifesto in the kitchen.

A different author arrives. Not necessarily a better author. Not necessarily a wiser one. Sometimes not even one you'd trust in a used book store or around grant applications. But someone else.

This is the part that interests me: the moment when the writer becomes a method actor playing a character playing an author. The self doesn't vanish so much as become theatrical infrastructure. Curtains. Rigging. A rusted pulley system. Some other intelligence steps forward, commandeering the director role, and begins making choices I wouldn't have made if I were still busy being "me."

And this is where "nothing to lose" becomes more complicated than the bumper-sticker version allows. We love that phrase. It sounds heroic. It sounds cinematic. It sounds like something a man says before buying a motorcycle he can't afford and drunk-texting three exes.

Most of us have a tremendous amount to lose, even when the stakes seem low. We have identity to lose. Coherence. Reputation. The carefully lacquered fiction that our opinions form a stable conversation rather than a series of Amber Alerts issued by traumatized synapses.

The writer has a brand, even if he hates brands. *Especially* if he hates brands. Hatred of branding is one of the best brands out there. It comes in matte black and smells faintly of burnt coffee, ethics, and self-congratulation. The writer has tendencies. Aesthetic commitments. Moral reflexes. Signature moves. The writer knows what sounds "like me," and that knowledge is useful until it becomes an ornate, gilded coffin. Eventually, the known self becomes another genre convention.

The most dangerous cage in art isn't imposed from outside. It's the one built from previous success, previous taste, previous conviction. The committee-managed gated community of "what I do." My tone. My themes. My intelligence. My wounds. My ideas. My tricks. My tricks about my tricks, which are the worst tricks because they've read the theory and can provide references on their own derivative nature.

Then this other figure appears. Enigmatic. Novel. This unauthorized asshole in the crawlspace of the mind. The one who hasn't been attending the meetings. The one who doesn't care whether the passage is consistent with my previous work, flattering to my self-concept, or aligned with the museum exhibit I've curated out of my personality. He's not free because he's *pure*. He's free because he's *uninvested*. He has no tenure. No audience. No tasteful bio photo. No five-year plan. He doesn't care if the metaphysical curtains match the theoretical drapes. He has, in the most literal creative sense, nothing to lose. That's terrifying, but also useful (or is this the 'terror' of anticipation?).

What if the deepest artistic freedom doesn't come from expressing the self, but from rejecting it? What if art isn't the revelation of identity but a break from it? Not authenticity, but multiplicity. Not "this is who I am," but "look what happens when who I am stops supervising."

This would explain why the experience feels so different from ordinary flow. Flow intensifies the self. IT mutates it. Flow says, "You're doing what you know how to do without obstruction." IT says, "Something is happening *through*

you that may not obey the local ordinances."

Fiction is only the easiest example because fiction already admits it's wearing a costume. The novelist gets to say, "This isn't me, it's a character," which is one of the more socially acceptable ways to confess to mentally harboring a small hamlet of lunatics. Fiction gives you plausible deniability. A legal loophole with dialogue and indentations.

The phenomenon isn't limited to fiction. Fiction just leaves better fingerprints.

Academic writing can do this, too. Though academia often tries to prevent it with formatting requirements, citation styles, and the general aesthetic of an asylum hallway where someone has whispered "epistemology" too many times.

Still, it can happen. There are moments when the academic writer stops simply arranging approved thoughts into sequence and begins thinking in a way that surprises the thinker. The essay stops being a product of knowledge and becomes a site where knowledge misbehaves. The argument begins generating its own electricity. The thesis, previously a respectable little fawn, grows antlers and starts looking for a mate.

This is different from "writing well." Writing well in academia means obeying the rituals clearly enough that nobody in the temple throws their sandal at you. Define terms. Establish stakes. Situate yourself in the discourse. Genuflect toward methodology. Make the proper sacramental offerings to the peer-reviewed ancestors. Fine, yes, good, necessary, I suppose, lest theory become incense with a bibliography.

There's another mode, more elusive and less housebroken, where the scholar isn't applying a framework, but being reorganized by the encounter. The material pushes back. The source won't stay cited. The concept grows teeth. You don't use Foucault. Foucault uses you as a ventilation duct in a prison designed by language. You don't interpret the archive. The archive leans across the table and says, "Cute assumptions you've got there. It would be a shame if

someone historicized them." The writing becomes less an explanation than a visitation.

And this, I think, is where the broader analogy starts to breathe. Maybe IT isn't a musical event, or a fictional event, or even an artistic event. Maybe IT is what happens when any disciplined practice becomes momentarily more intelligent than the practitioner.

Music comes with the obvious explanation because the room can hear it happen. Four people enter a song and the song returns wearing fairy wings and carrying a sheet of acid. But teaching can have it, too. When the lesson stops being delivered and starts unfolding between everyone present. Conversation can have it, when two people stop exchanging prepared selves and begin discovering a third mind neither of them brought alone. Martial arts can have it, when the body acts before the internal narrator can open a review board on incoming violence. Cooking can have it. Building can have it. Parenting can have it. Even ordinary labor can have it when attention, skill, and circumstance briefly conspire against the shitty grey empire of alienation.

The common element isn't medium. It's not guitar, page, classroom, dojo, kitchen, desk, or whatever ergonomic device someone bought to make work feel less like slow petrification. The common element is the temporary collapse of the self as manager. Most of the time, we're supervised creatures. We act under the watch of an internal foreman with opinions about consistency, safety, reputation, and whether this new impulse aligns with the brand. Flow quiets the foreman. IT replaces him with a door.

That's why the comparison between personal flow and communal IT matters. Flow still belongs to the self, even when that self is functioning beautifully. It's mastery becoming smooth. IT is mastery becoming porous. Flow is what happens when the trained self stops tripping over itself. IT is what happens when the trained self becomes a doorway and something on the other side knocks using your own hand.

A band enters that doorway together, which is why it

can feel so dramatic from the outside. The guitarist tosses a phrase into the room. The drummer catches it incorrectly in exactly the right way. The bass player mutters something harmonic and vaguely subversive. The keys add a color nobody ordered but everyone needs. Suddenly everyone is somewhere else and the song has become an animal taxonomically distinct from its predecessors.

The individual remains, but as a responsive organ within a larger body. Nobody disappears. Nobody becomes a [dark] puddle of ego death sponsored by psilocybin. Instead, each person becomes more available to the others than ordinary selfhood usually permits.

That availability may be the whole trick. The self loosens, but doesn't dissolve. Craft remains, but stops acting like border patrol. Identity remains, but stops demanding keys to the executive washroom. Something learned becomes something living. Something practiced becomes something responsive. Something made becomes something making.

In writing, the community is internal. Less jam band, more séance conducted in a derelict library. The audience isn't across the room. The audience is the other selves inside the self: the buried voices, the rejected drafts of personality, the exiled impulses, the perverse ministers of style who usually aren't allowed near the microphone because they make the admin nervous.

To write in this mode is to become your own ensemble. You're the player, the listener, the room, the heckler, the sound board, the lighting tech, the corpse in the third act, and the guy in the back asking whether this will be on the final.

Maybe that's why fiction can sometimes feel *more* dangerous than confession. Confession still lets the self remain sovereign. It says, "Here is what happened to me. Here is what I think. Here is my trauma, tastefully phrased for optimal keyword searchability." But fiction can smuggle in the inadmissible. It can give language to the thing you don't believe, or don't want to believe, or believe only at three in the morning when the human animal is least supervised and

most likely to start a Cult of Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

Fiction lets the unauthorized self speak in costume. The mask isn't always concealment. Sometimes the mask is what permits the truth to stop posing for photographs.

This may also be true of academic voice, though academia pretends otherwise because academia likes to imagine itself above masks while wearing the same uniform to every epistemological crime scene. Academic writing has costumes: Objectivity. Neutrality. Method. Distance. The passive voice, which is where agency goes to be smothered with a pillow.

We're trained to write as if thinking happens without a body, without a history, without hunger, pettiness, addiction, grief, vanity, eroticism, spite, pain, or the humiliating need to be understood by at least three people before we die.

No thought emerges from nowhere. There's always a body in the archive. There's always a temperament in the footnote. There's always some private vagus nerve moving through the paragraph. The question isn't whether the 'self' is present. Of course it's present. The question is whether the self is managing the work or being transformed by it.

The deadliest academic writing, at least for me, isn't the writing that lacks personality. It's the writing in which personality has been embalmed into style. The scholar has learned to sound like 'themselves' and now every sentence arrives wearing the same ceremonial cap and gown. The theory behaves. The citations behave. The argument behaves. Everyone behaves so thoroughly that the reader starts praying for a ceiling tile to fall on their head.

Sometimes the ceiling collapses. Sometimes the scholar enters the material with enough discipline to know the rules and enough recklessness to let the rules become unstable. Sometimes the thinker thinks past the approved version of the thinker. The idea finds a side door. The argument discovers it's been lying to itself for twelve pages and would now like to make a scene. That's not a failure, that's becoming alive.

The same thing can happen in teaching. There's teaching

as delivery, which has its place. Here's the information. Here's the slide. Here's the rubric. Please keep your hands and arms inside the pedagogical vehicle until the semester comes to a complete stop.

Then there are those moments when the classroom becomes something else. A student asks a question that punctures the lesson plan. Someone makes a connection nobody anticipated. The teacher stops being the sole source and becomes a conductor of forces already moving among the students.

That's IT, too, or at least a cousin (get it?). The teacher's craft doesn't disappear. If anything, craft matters more here. You can't surrender usefully to a room you don't know how to hold. But in that moment, teaching stops being the transmission of content and becomes the creation of conditions. The lesson isn't delivered. It occurs.

The same thing can happen in conversation. Most conversation is just two autobiographical press secretaries taking turns at the podium. We exchange prepared selves. We wait politely for the other person's mouth to stop making sounds so our own mouth can resume its campaign. But sometimes, with the right person or the right room or the right dangerous question, conversation becomes generative. Neither person is simply expressing a preexisting thought. The thought appears between them. A third intelligence forms. Not mine, not yours, but ours, briefly, before it evaporates, asks for a drink, and refuses to pay the tab.

This is why the communal version fascinates me. It suggests that the self isn't the origin of thought so much as it's one of thought's possible instruments (or axes, if you will). Under ordinary conditions, we experience ourselves as authors of action, owners of language, managers of identity. But under certain conditions, creative, intellectual, bodily, relational, the self becomes less owner than participant. Less sovereign than medium. Less CEO than intern. Less "master of my destiny" than "regional assistant to the vice president of whatever the hell just walked in."

That sounds mystical, but I don't think it has to be. We

don't need to pretend a literal spirit has entered the room (though, I reserve the right to blame one for certain drafts, guitar solos, and every song I wrote in my twenties). It may be enough to say that disciplined people are capable of producing conditions in which agency becomes distributed. Across a band. Across a classroom. Across a conversation. Across the fragments of a single psyche. Across body, memory, technique, environment. That distribution feels unbalanced because the modern self has been trained to file ownership claims over everything. *My* idea. *My* voice. *My* work. *My* brand. *My* trauma. *My* healing journey. *My* villain era. *My* newsletter. *My* link in *my* bio. *My* tasteful altar of monetized interiority. We've turned identity into a boutique hostage situation.

But IT doesn't care about the self's résumé. IT arrives when ownership gets blurry. When the work is still yours, but not only yours. When the idea has your attention but not your obedience. When you recognize what's happening and still feel surprised by it. When you made the thing, obviously, but also, in some perturbing-but-wonderful way, the thing made you.

Which may be the real difference between producing content and creating art. Content often reinforces the performance of the known self. It feeds the machine with recognizable units of personality. Here is my take, my voice, my niche. Here is the thing you already came to me for, reheated under a lamp so the cheese stays melted. Content is the self as a franchise. Art, at its best and most feral, threatens the franchise agreement.

I don't want to limit that to art, because the potential applies anywhere a person might become more than their CV. Serious practice, any serious practice, contains this possibility. The possibility that the act might exceed the actor. The possibility that skill, attention, openness, and risk might combine into something that feels less like performance and more like encounter.

This isn't anti-craft. If anything, it's the opposite. The doorway only appears because the craft has been built.

You practice scales so you can stop thinking about scales. You study theory so theory can stop being intellectual. You drill technique so the body can move before the mind can convene a panel discussion on whether movement is a social construct. You write irrelevant sentences for years so one day a sentence can arrive that seems to have climbed through the bathroom window (protected by a silver spoon).

Craft is the invitation. Flow is the guests arriving on time. IT is when the house starts melting and one of the walls admits it always wanted to be a staircase.

This is also why it (and IT) can't be forced. You can prepare for it, court it, seduce it awkwardly, leave offerings, make the room hospitable, wear the correct shirt, but you can't command it. The moment the managerial self says, "Today, I will transcend between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m.," the whole enterprise collapses into a productivity webinar.

IT requires discipline, but not domination. Surrender, but not passivity. Attention, but not surveillance. You have to be available without becoming desperate, which I'm not sure is more appropriate as dating advice or artistic advice.

Maybe the best we can do is create hospitable conditions. Practice enough that the hands know things the ego doesn't. Think enough that the mind has ideas worth betraying. Read enough that the dead can become collaborators instead of decorative spines on a bookshelf. Listen enough that other people can alter the room. Then, when something begins to happen, don't immediately call the cops on your own psyche.

Of course, discernment still matters. Let's not get too romantic. Not every unauthorized self is a genius. Some are just dipshits with dramatic lighting. Some inner voices should remain inner for the safety of the neighborhood. The fact that something arrives from beyond your ordinary self doesn't make it sacred. Sometimes the muse is just another bad decision wearing yoga pants.

Revision matters. Ethics matter. The morning after matters. You don't hand the keys permanently to every creature that crawls out of the basement just because it uses

interesting verbs. But you might let it speak. You might take notes. You might see what it knows before changing the locks.

Sometimes the creature knows what the managed self can't know. Sometimes the unauthorized voice isn't there to destroy the work, but to rescue it from obedience.

Flow is the self operating beautifully within its trained capacities. IT is what happens when those trained capacities become available to something beyond the self's usual permissions.

And maybe that's why it feels so rare. Most of life trains us to maintain the self, defend the self, optimize the self, explain the self, brand the self, heal the self, perform the self, narrate the self, and, if all else fails, monetize the self through a subscription model with engaging thumbnails.

To be interrupted by something larger, weirder, or less domesticated than the self can feel like danger.

Maybe it *is* danger. But danger isn't synonymous with harm. Sometimes danger is just the feeling of the familiar hierarchy losing its throne. The author isn't dead, the author has been demoted. The self is no longer king. It's an instrument, a host, a collaborator, a rented room with bad soundproofing and mice in the walls.

Maybe the question isn't whether a solitary writer can experience IT. Maybe the question is whether any practice, taken seriously enough and held loosely enough, can become a rehearsal room for unauthorized selves.

The writer alone in a room is still crowded. So is the scholar. So is the musician. So is the teacher. So is anyone doing anything that requires enough craft to build a door and enough surrender to walk through it without first demanding a safety inspection, a liability waiver, and a clean ontological background check.

Sometimes you sit down and work with skill.

Sometimes you work with speed.

Sometimes you work with fluency and everyone calls it flow because we like naming mysteries after water and pretending we've explained them.

Sometimes the self gets out of the way in a manner that feels less like relaxation and more like a poltergeist with good intentions.

I don't know if that's IT, but I know it isn't just flow.

Against the advice of counsel, I think I'm going to let the incorrigible bastard finish the book, teach the class, write the theory, take the solo, season the dish, tweak the amp settings, and maybe, under limited supervision, answer the goddamn emails.

Reel No.	36	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Have You Ever Played Rainbow Road Together?

Notes: Listening to: Live Bait, Vol.01, Summer 2010 Leg 1

I've never really understood the rules around sex.

I don't mean the obvious ones. Consent makes sense. Honesty makes sense. Not being cruel makes sense. Monogamy makes sense. Agreements, boundaries, care, basic human decency. If we haven't figured these things out yet, let's go back to page one and write this whole damn thing over again.

I mean the other rules. The foggy ones. The ones everyone seems to know but no one can explain without eventually appealing to religion, jealousy, property law, gender norms, or something they saw in a movie when they were fourteen.

Sex seems to come with this whole invisible code of laws. People act like there's a filing cabinet somewhere. Like after two people hook up, some clerk in the basement of civilization certifies a document that says: This Means Something Now. *What* something? Well, that depends on who feels most, who tells the story, and how many puritans are listening from the next table over at the Chicken Pot Pie Shop.

This is why I compare sex to Mario Kart. Hear me out here, I've been kicking this around for a while. It sounds ridiculous. It is ridiculous. But only because we've decided sex is serious and Mario Kart is silly, even though both involve coordination, timing, communication, frustration, poor decisions, and someone getting hit from behind with

a turtle shell.

If someone invites me over to play Mario Kart and they seem cool and don't have murder vibes, I might go. Why not? Mario Kart is fun. That doesn't mean I spend all day thinking about Mario Kart. I'm not wandering the earth in search of opponents. I'm not on some app messaging "150cc?" to strangers. I'm not building my identity around my Mario Kart record.

But if the situation presents itself and the vibe is good and everyone involved understands what game we're playing, sure. We can take our little cartoon vehicles on a couple psychedelic laps.

That doesn't necessarily mean I'm bad at Mario Kart. Good days and bad days, like anything else. Not obsessing over a thing doesn't mean you're careless when you do it. You can pay attention while you're there. You can be responsive. You can notice what's happening. You can not be an asshole. That seems more important than making the activity into a lifestyle brand.

The funny part is that Mario Kart has clearer rules than sex, socially speaking. The game tells you what's happening. Here are the items. Here's the track. Here's what the buttons do. Here's the finish line. It's consistent. Meanwhile, sex is surrounded by rules people claim are obvious, except they're not obvious. They're house rules. Secret rules. Regional dialects. One person thinks a banana peel is playful. Another thinks it's betrayal. One person thinks Rainbow Road means nothing unless you play it three times. Another thinks the invitation itself was practically a marriage proposal. And people usually don't explain their rules.

That's the part I don't understand. Not the existence of meaning. Meaning is fine. Meaning can be beautiful. But meaning should be made by the people involved, not automatically assigned by the machinery of culture.

Sometimes sex means intimacy. Sometimes it means love. Sometimes it means curiosity. Sometimes it means loneliness. Sometimes it means two people liked each other

enough, trusted each other enough, had some free time, and wanted to play Mario Kart for a while. That doesn't make it empty. It just means that the act itself doesn't come preloaded with one universal interpretation.

Society hates that. Cultures want a label. Religion wants a rule. The law wants a category. Your nosy friend wants a narrative arc.

The law part especially bothers me. If two people get into a fight, nobody asks whether they've played Mario Kart together. No cop is standing there with an AR-15 saying, "Have either of you ever selected Yoshi in the presence of the other?" No divorce court says, "Well, this changes things. They did the ol' Mushroom Cup on the couch in 2019."

But sex? Suddenly it matters. Suddenly the relationship becomes legible in a different way. The state doesn't understand your emotional life, your shared history, your grief, your care, your dependency, your private language, the way everything has to go on the conveyor belt at the grocery store in a particular order, or the fact that one of you knows how the other takes their coffee. It understands sex as a category. Sex makes the bureaucrats happy.

Which is probably where this is headed….Sex isn't just treated as an act. It's treated as evidence.

Evidence of seriousness. Evidence of intimacy. Evidence of ownership. Evidence of moral character. Evidence that two people are now a legally or socially recognizable unit. It's one of the great classification devices. An ear tag for the human animal.

I get why…sort of. Sex can be vulnerable. It can create consequences. It can hurt people. It can reveal things. It can attach itself to memory in ways that Mario Kart usually doesn't, unless you get a blue shell on the last lap and cross the finish line less than one second ahead of the other person. Still, I don't think vulnerability creates ownership. I don't think pleasure creates debt. I don't think bodies touching means the nearest institution gets to decide what that touch meant.

That's the part that's always felt off to me. Not sex itself, but the mythology around it. The way people pretend the rules are natural when so many of them are just old control systems wearing a new gimp suit. Theocracy with lube. Patriarchy logic with a Grindr profile.

I'm not saying sex is meaningless. I'm saying *meaning* isn't automatic or universal.

Sometimes Mario Kart is just Mario Kart. Sometimes it becomes an inside joke. Sometimes it becomes a ritual. Sometimes it becomes the first page of a much longer story. Sometimes you never play again. Sometimes you leave and think, 'that was cool', and then go home and eat a bowl of Lucky Charms.

The point is, the players should probably get to decide. Not the church. Not the cops. Not the politicians. Not the clerk stamping forms in the moral basement of society.

The people holding the controllers.

Reel No.	37	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Identity, Dead Ahead!

Notes: Listening to: The Grateful Dead, Veneta, OR, 08.27.1972 (yes, I know it's not Phish, but it was introduced in relation to our Phish reading group and the previous piece – and I go to Veneta regularly adventure the dogs and/or pick up weed, so I'm making a contextually-relevant exception. It'll be okay, I promise.)

Someone asked me yesterday if I "identified as neurodivergent" and I had one of those little internal pauses where my brain opens twelve filing cabinets at once and all the papers begin swirling through the air like a low-budget supernatural thriller. Because the polite answer was/is, "yes."

The impolite answer is: Define "identify." And I don't mean define it in the pedantic I-did-not-have-sexual-relations-with-that-woman way.

I mean, medically? Sure. Absolutely. There are enough evaluations attached to my name to qualify me for Gold Card status in the psychiatric-industrial complex. I've spent enough hours under observation that somewhere there's probably a clinician who remembers me the way Vietnam war veterans "remember." Tests were administered. Notes were taken. Shapes were sorted. At least fifteen people with expensive degrees have watched me fail to make eye contact while explaining some hyperfixation with preserving the lost art of hojojutsu while somehow never diagnosing me as neurodeviant™. Until I spent twenty years almost dying on a regular basis from misprescribing/misdiagnoses and finally did enough of my own research to make a strong enough argument to 'qualify' for full neuropsychiatric analysis. In hindsight, it's so obvious, I can't believe *nobody* - general practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, my

friends - nobody noticed (or, at least, never said anything). In fairness, neither did I. And I live here.

Anyway, the paperwork exists. The acronyms and initialisms exist. The diagnoses exist in the same way Nebraska exists. I acknowledge they get a disproportionate amount of the electorate, but try not to visit.

But "identify" is interesting language because it implies, or I infer, allegiance. Membership. A little psychological citizenship oath. Like I'm supposed to stand, place my hand on the DSM, and pledge devotion to my neurological operating system. The disability services drone at school asked me how long I've been neurodiverse. I said, "Uhhh… always?" Then he said, "Welcome to the club." What club? Those who are privileged enough to afford thousands of dollars in tests? Am I *finally* elite enough to join? Oh, my, well, I'd like to thank the academy. And my parents, without them none of this would have been possible. And I'd be remiss if I left out Tylenol.

I can never remember if it was Will Rogers or Groucho Marx who said it, but I, too, wouldn't want to be a part of any organization that would have someone like me as a member.

And maybe this is where I'll lose the room at the modern philosophy conferences that I'm soon to be uninvited from. You know the ones? Half the attendees are wearing laminates made from recycled Starbucks cups and the other half look like existentially exhausted adjuncts who survive entirely on nicotine pouches and unpublished resentment. Somebody in the corner is explaining Nietzsche using Pokémon terminology. Somebody else keeps saying "problematize" like they're trying to make Fetch a thing. I'm totally making all of this up; I don't go to these events.

Still, in most environments, every introduction now comes with metadata. "Hi, I'm Ash-Underscore-Two-Thirty. A queer, neurodivergent, nonbinary, anti-capitalist, trauma-informed Sagittarius." Like we're all software patches reading release notes before human interaction.

I understand why. I really do. There's compassion in it.

There's social signaling. There's an attempt to reduce harm and create clarity. Historically, naming matters because unnamed suffering gets oppressed and erased. If nobody names the thing, institutions can pretend the thing isn't real. The language gives people a way to locate each other across the wasteland. Tiny signal fires in the late-stage capitalism dystopia.

But somewhere along the line we crossed from "these are aspects of my experience" into "this is the officially branded and licensed content of my soul."

Identity became less autobiography and more character creation screen.

SELECT TRAITS:

- Anxiety
- OCD
- Queer-coded cardigan energy
- Dissociation during networking events
- Consumer guilt at farmer's markets
- Unresolved academic humiliation
- Weird relationship with soup

If you question it, people might react like you've vandalized sacred scripture. Because categories, in this case, started as tools for liberation and slowly hardened into architecture. The map became a gated community.

Which is hilarious because the actual human 'self' is a total disaster. People aren't internally coherent. Every person alive is basically twelve bumblebees fighting over a pineapple daiquiri in an abandoned RadioShack. We just edit heavily for social situations (ND *and* NT).

The over-confident hyper-alpha "influencer" guy from TikTok cries in his F-350 while listening to John Legend. The gym bro secretly loves baking because sourdough is controllable nurturing for people with abandonment issues. The spiritual wellness podcaster has rage-blackouts in Trader Joe's parking lots. The revolutionary anti-capitalist professor owns seventeen Italian briefcases and an $800 Scandinavian desk lamp. I'm not exempt, either. Want

to see my archive of abandoned business plans based on how to capitalize on my "particular set of skills"? Or an entire résumé page full of institutional certifications and awards? Nobody fits the categories cleanly because the categories were invented by frightened bureaucrats trying to alphabetize a Jackson Pollock painting.

Which is why I can't fully attach myself to terms like "cis white male" either, despite *technically* fitting the descriptors. The phrase sounds less like a human identity and more like microwave presets.

Do I acknowledge those traits exist? Sure. But they don't feel metaphysically central. They feel adjacent. Like traits that were added to my D&D character sheet by the DM because I showed up late that day. Yes, I acknowledge my cis-white-male privilege in even being able to say that. Unlike my brain, my body came in colonial-patriarchy society's preferred configuration.

Pronouns are another fascinating social system. Again, I participate because basic respect is free. I'm not one of those people who acts like using someone's preferred name or pronouns is equivalent to being dragged before the Inquisition. Civilization depends on tiny courtesies. Returning shopping carts. Not bringing an acoustic guitar to parties. Referring to people the way they ask to be referred to. It isn't difficult. I'd argue that it takes more effort to deliberately <u>*not*</u> extend these courtesies.

But, personally, I've never felt anchored to pronouns because I've spent most of my adult life existing in this blurry aesthetic zone. Long hair, paisley blouses, women's jeans, a preference for pink that makes conservative men have big feelings for reasons they can't articulate (to be fair, what *can* they articulate?). I've been misgendered intentionally and accidentally enough times that it barely registers anymore. Usually, it's just funny. You can actually watch people's brains crash in real time when you turn around. Their social software starts overheating. Beard says "sir." Floral prints say "bisexual art teacher." Shoes say "possibly in an Americana-jazz-polka fusion band."

Glasses say "owns at least one book about serial killers." The salesman's eyes start flickering like they're trying to land a plane during an electrical fire.

They're not perceiving essence anyway. Nobody is. They're perceiving symbols. Tiny scraps of cultural semaphore accumulated through centuries of arbitrary nonsense. High heels used to be masculine. Makeup used to be masculine. Pink used to be masculine. There are headless eighteenth-century 'alphas' rolling in their graves over modern men having an emotional meltdown because a cocktail has fruit in it.

So when people ask my pronouns, I usually say, "He/him, but hey/asshole is also acceptable," because humor feels closer to the truth than pretending I possess a perfectly integrated self-concept. Most days I feel less like a stable identity and more like an unsolicited jam session occurring in the parking lot of a megalithic Bass Pro Shop.

Maybe neurodivergence intensifies all of this. When society spends decades informing you that your thoughts, emotions, interests, conversational patterns, and sensory experiences are abnormal, you start noticing how ridiculous the concept of "normal" really is. You realize modern civilization is mostly a giant Type II jam claiming to be a Type I that nobody wants to admit they forgot the chords to halfway through the third talkbox-theremin solo. People sit under artificial lighting that destroys their circadian rhythms to answer emails about leveraging synergies while their bodies quietly beg to live near a river and see a butterfly before they die (the person and the butterflies).

The "normal" people are pretty weird, too. They've just formed larger gangs. That's the bit nobody wants to discuss. Neurodeviant people aren't aliens observing humanity from outside the system. We're just people whose internal contradictions became more visible. The rest of society hides theirs behind algorithm-friendly language, country clubs, and the phrase "circle back." Maybe that's why identity categories feel insufficient to me. Not because they're useless. They're useful politically, socially, and

medically. They help people survive. They help people find each other. They also help people other each other (No, not today, brain). But these identifiers are terrible containers for consciousness. A person isn't a diagnostic code. Not a gender marker. Not a demographic stack. Not a list of adjectives arranged and cross-indexed in Excel enough for humanity's HR department to understand.

A person is a rolling philosophical boulder. A temporary coalition of memories, impulses, wounds, aesthetics, defense mechanisms, inherited myths, distorted biochemical signals, consumer choices, childhood humiliations, favorite songs, recurring dreams, and strange private rituals. A human being is less a noun than an unfolding event.

Warmest Regards,

Tweed Jefferson, ASD, ADHD, cPTSD, MDD, GAD, SPD/APD
with minors in anhedonia, aphantasia, alexithymia, and compulsive suicidal ideation.
Insanus Emeritus
University of Institutional Categorization and Normalization
Department of Irrationality, Ontological Panic, and Pathologized Behavior
Hey/Asshole

Reel No.	38	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	No More Solos

Notes: Listening to: "Carini" medley, 17 September 2025

Aww, crap, now I've done it. Everything has become a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy or whatever Brad Norton calls it in that movie we don't talk about. I know I already said that nothing is really new and it's just chopped up data being put back together in different orders and regurgitated like a…see I can't even think of the word for…ruminant! Regurgitated like an ADHD ruminant. No, that's not it. Right analogy, wrong alliteration.

Back when I was in the eponymous band that we also don't talk about, I was the only soloist and, despite this being twenty years, a Mick Fleetwood, and a couple Keith Richards ago, I can still clearly remember experiencing this same feeling – where no matter what I played on guitar, it all sounded the same. Blues, rock, funk, pop, country, reggae, even cover songs, I'd stolen enough of other people's licks and braided them together into my own style that every solo or riff I played sounded like the same pentatonic scale on repeat. Bandmates insisted they didn't hear it, but I couldn't *not* hear it. I was practically begging someone else to take some solos – or to just eliminate solos entirely. I was so sick of hearing myself speak when I had nothing interesting to say. Three hours of guitar small-talk.

What do you do?

Nice weather we're having.

Here are some other things I know how to talk about.

Well, it was nice meeting you, I have to get back to my friends now.

Cue chorus.

And here we are, so close to the end, and I'm glancing over some previous entries and it looks like the same five words over and over again. Like we're back in that spare room above the drummer's church while the elders are square-dancing below and I'm thinking, words? We don't need no freakin' words; just leave the pages blank and call it avant garde or experimental or brutalist. Or a "workbook." It's *conceptual* art. Has nothing to do with me running out of new ideas. Or the fact that I just googled, "What are religious subdivisions called?"*

*The word I was looking for is "Denominations"

Reel No. 39

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Mea Culpa

Notes: Listening to: "Philthy Phunk Compilation" by @blissfunk

I've reached the point where, when women say "not all men" *to me*, I have to stop and consider whether I've wandered too far off the radicalization deep end.

And yes, formally, legally, taxonomically – not all men. I concede the obvious, place it gently on the table, and let it follow along if it promises to stop interrupting. But in my experience, it's been a fuckload of them. Not some tidy syndicate of obvious villains conveniently wearing matching Member's Only jackets. Not one political faction. Not one generation. Not one class, one subculture, one easily quarantined demographic with a membership card and a newsletter called *The Patriarchal Quarterly*. Men from everywhere. Men from church. Men from bars. Men from music scenes. Men from "good" families. Men with daughters. Men with minors in gender studies. Men who would absolutely post something tasteful on International Women's Day and then go home and terrorize the nearest woman with a smaller paycheck.

Most of the role models I had growing up were not so much models as statues. Men cast in the traditional materials: anger, control, silence, threat. The only acceptable emotion was rage, preferably expressed through volume, intimidation, or the ancient masculine art of hitting something that could/would not hit back. They were authoritarian in the way frightened men usually become

authoritarian – not because they possess order, but because disorder has eaten them from the inside and they confuse domination for structure.

Physical abuse. Emotional abuse. Psychological abuse. Financial abuse. Sexual abuse. Sometimes all of it braided together into the sort of family system that academics later describe with clean vocabulary while everyone inside it becomes a case study.[1]

And then, of course, the victims learn the grammar. That may be the most obscene part of the whole arrangement. Abuse doesn't just injure. It educates. It distributes itself. It goes forth to be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the Earth. Whoever can't confront the father humiliates the wife. Whoever can't survive the husband disciplines the child. Whoever can't strike the god strikes the dog. The violence becomes hereditary without needing genetics. A family heirloom nobody admits to actually owning, passed down through generations like a Family Bible.

Freud, patron saint of yo' mama jokes, probably has something to say here. I don't mean that in the cigar-and-Oedipus caricature sense. Though, to be fair, the man did leave quite a mess on the carpet. I mean, one of the more humiliating discoveries of adulthood is realizing that what you called love, loyalty, patience, forgiveness, or being "easygoing" may have been your nervous system recognizing familiar architecture. The walls were wrong, but it was those wrong walls that you knew how to stand inside.

That explains more than I'd like. Why I normalized being manipulated in relationships. Why I embraced cruelty when it came dressed as intimacy. Why my threshold for unacceptable behavior was apparently located somewhere in the next county. I thought I was being generous. Or patient. I may have been reenacting. Though, it's less visible when you're inside the machine, dutifully oiling the gears.

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[1] See: Carey Pentagram, Day 09

The only real "mentor" I had was grooming me.

That sentence can sit there like a dropped mic.

The funny part – because there is always a funny part, even when the joke is wearing a toe tag – is that when he came out, the small-town parents erupted into the usual moral panic about A Gay being around children. As though homosexuality itself had arrived in a cape and was waiting by the jungle gym with a van full of Tootsie Rolls. And we defended him. We defended him because he wasn't "like that." Because he was kind. Because he understood us. Because he made us feel seen. Because, apparently, he was waiting until we reached the age of consent – or something close enough for a small town to dutifully look away from.

That's the part people like Andrew Tate and his various snake-oil-fortified-protein-powder hucksters can never process: the world isn't safer when you hate the correct category. Predation doesn't vanish because you've chosen a socially-approved scapegoat. A man can be dangerous while belonging to a marginalized group. A straight man can be dangerous while loudly defending monogamy. A progressive man can be dangerous while quoting bell hooks. The costume department isn't the problem. The problem is entitlement with a libido.

And yes, I've been harassed by gay men. Not at the rate women are harassed by men, certainly. I'm not interested in co-opting an arson investigation to announce that I, too, have smelled smoke before. But it has happened often enough to matter. Messages that weren't exactly harassment, except they weren't exactly *not* harassment. "Flirting" that treated refusal as a scheduling obstacle. Touching that arrived before permission had put its pants on.

Maybe it was how I dressed (which is a sentence I use with knowing irony). Maybe it was the fact that people sometimes mistake acceptance for availability. Maybe some men, regardless of orientation, hear "I don't hate you" and translate it as, "The drawbridge is down, bring siege equipment." I don't know. I only know I've spent too much of my life being treated as though kindness were consent's

idiot cousin.

And somehow, through the miracle of not being a reactionary buffoon with a webcam, I still have friendships with gay men and still support the community. Imagine that. A person can be harmed by individuals inside a group without converting that harm into an ideology of contempt. What a concept. Someone alert the discourse factory. We may have discovered nuance, and it appears to be upsetting the alphas.

But this is where the piece has to turn, because otherwise it becomes too easy. Too clean. Too satisfyingly accusatory. Too 'not all men'.

My culpability isn't that I was harmed and did nothing. A child doesn't owe heroism to a room full of adults who have already failed him. My culpability begins later, in adulthood, when I had more agency than I accepted and less courage than I should have.

I normalized too much. I looked away too often. I laughed when I should have gone quiet. I went quiet when I should have spoken. I let men around me say vile things about women because, at the time, the cost of confronting them seemed higher than the cost of absorbing it. That's one of the little moral accounting tricks cowardice teaches you: it itemizes discomfort and invoices harm to someone else.

I don't know where 2005 me, or 2015 me, drew the line. I'm sure I would have said, "rape," because nearly everyone says that. Everyone wants the line to be somewhere monstrous and unmistakable, guarded by fire and lightning, so they can feel safely distant from it. But I knew men who took home women, or girls, who were far too intoxicated to be making meaningful decisions. I knew men who lied for sport, manipulated for sex, collected people like consumables. I knew men who knowingly spread disease. I knew men who treated consent less like an ethical necessity than a minor inconvenience, something to resolve with charm, alcohol, pressure, persistence and, if necessary, intimidation.

And I stayed too close. That's the part I don't get to

decorate with fancy adjectives.

I eventually removed myself from those people and from that environment, which, in my case, meant the art, music, and theater community I'd been a fixture in. This isn't a noble sentence. There's nothing especially valorous about leaving the burning building after breathing smoke for years and then calling it fire prevention. I left because I needed to. I left because the ecosystem was rotten in ways I could no longer metabolize. I left because the drugs and alcohol and superficial community were their own late-stage empire and I was tired of pretending collapse was culture.

Art scenes are skilled at confusing transgression with depth. Music scenes can mistake proximity for intimacy. Theater communities, bless their rotten little velveteen hearts, can turn emotional volatility into choreographed production. In all three, people learn to call exploitation "questionable," predation "messy," and accountability "drama." There's often a whole informal priesthood devoted to protecting the talented, the beloved, the exciting, the genius, the guy who just needs a chance, the woman who is moody but brilliant, the person everybody knows to warn newcomers about in whispers but somehow never removes from the room.

I was part of rooms like that.

I benefited from silence, even when I wasn't the one causing the harm. That's an ugly sentence, but a necessary one. Silence isn't neutral because it lacks an ominous soundtrack. Silence creates climate. Silence tells predators where the soft ground is. Silence tells victims how much support they can expect, which is to say, not enough.

Saying this now doesn't undo anything. It doesn't help the people who were hurt, unless, in some narrow practical sense, someone somewhere needed a semi-credible witness with a mostly-functional memory and a guilty conscience. It doesn't cleanse me. I distrust public confession when it starts resembling a marketing campaign – *Now with 40% more moral freshness!* Confession can become another performance, another way to center oneself in the aftermath

of harm one failed to prevent.

So I want to be careful. This isn't absolution. This is inventory.

I doubt the behavior stopped when I left. Why would it? Communities don't become ethical because one person exits stage left. Some of those men are still alive. Some have probably improved. Some have probably rebranded. Some, I've heard, have died – which isn't accountability, just nature finally submitting the paperwork. The machinery keeps moving unless someone jams the gears, and I didn't jam them. I walked away from the machine.

Maybe that was all I could do at the time. Maybe it wasn't. The ambiguity is part of my sentence.

Guilt and shame aren't especially useful if they become decorative, if they become a little moral terrarium you keep on the shelf to prove you have depth. But they aren't useless either. Shame can be information. Guilt can be a compass. Neither can resurrect the past, but they can make the future less stupid.

So the lesson, if there is one, is not "men are bad," though I understand why plenty of people arrive there and set up camp. The lesson is also not "not all men," that frail little umbrella opened during a hurricane. The lesson is that systems teach behavior, communities protect behavior, silence permits behavior, and men, *particularly* men, are often trained to experience accountability as persecution because they have mistaken impunity for oxygen.

The personal lesson is worse because it has my name on it.

Integrity isn't a belief system. Empathy isn't a mood. Perspective isn't something you acquire by feeling bad in a sophisticated way. They're practices. They're what you do when speaking costs you something. They're what you do when the golden child is dangerous. They're what you do when the room expects you to laugh. They're what you do when the victim is inconvenient, when the story is messy, when the accused is talented, when your friends are implicated, when your own history starts coughing up

receipts.

I didn't always do those things. I can now. Or, I'd like to.

That doesn't make me special. It makes me late.

Reel No. 40

Friendly Helpers Attenuated
Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Adjunct's Theme
(Best that you can do?)

Notes: Listening to: Slip Stitch and Pass

There's something funny about a person making their "thing" a critique on the exclusion of one demographic, while simultaneously applying the same rules of exclusion to another demographic. Dear academics and intellectuals: over the past years I've been exposed to a myriad of your thoughts on race, gender, disability, sexuality, thinking, preference for Starburst flavors, pedagogy, off-campus parking, and, especially, exclusion. Meanwhile, the focus (outside of turning syllabus and rubric into its own penal code) seems to be on only engaging in dialogue with those who happen to have the privilege of the correct honorarium from the correct institution. I watch language and attention change based on who somebody *wants* something from. Eager lips begging to suckle at the teat of hierarchy and title.

I have a question: how do you decide which one of you has to wear the Peter Criss makeup? (Because that's how fucking original I think your act is).

Adjunct's Theme
(Best That You Can Do?)

To the tune of "Arthur's Theme" by Christopher Cross

[Verse 1]
Once in your life, you find it,
a laminate turns your life around and
Next thing you know,
you're thinking way profound.
Wake up and it's still with you,
even though you left the lecture downtown,
wondering to yourself,
"Hey, what have I found?"

[Chorus 1]
When you get caught
between the praxis and the prestige,
I know it's crazy, but it's true.
If you get caught
between the praxis and the prestige,
the best that you can do,
he best that you can do
is name-drop Kant.

[Verse 2]
Scholars do as they please, yes,
all of their lives, they mask their choices and
Deep in their hearts,
They know, they're just elites.
Living their lives one grant at a time,
praising the margins from the mainline,
speaking for the folks that
They will never meet.

[Chorus 2]
When you get caught
between equity and ego,
I know it's crazy, but it's true.
If you get caught

between equity and ego,
the best that you can do,
the best that you can do
is quote bell hooks.

[Chorus 3]
When you get caught
between peer review and payroll,
I know it's crazy, but it's true.
When you get caught
between peer review and payroll,
the best that you can do,
the best that you can do
is thank the chair.
When you get caught
between a room and tiny stipend,
I know it's crazy, but it's you.
When you get caught
between a room and tiny stipend,
the best that you can do,
the best that you can do
is hand-in-glove.

I swear I'm going to record a dub-saloon-funk version of this when I'm done with this book.

Reel No.	41	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Trey (notes)

Notes: [DO NOT EDIT]

Editor's Note: This is a reflection on attending Trey Anastasio (acoustic), Portland, OR, 05.26.2026. I've chosen to leave it in unedited first-draft form.

First impression was kind of like a hug. Yes, despite the stigma, I'm fine with *genuine* touching. I actually like or even desire it in certain contexts. Pat-on-the-back, buddy-buddy, shoulder-squeeze stuff makes me want to escape my skin. Like, fine, you can have this pathetic meat suit, touchy-person, but I'm outta here. Certain things like handshake greetings might not make *sense* to me, but I don't mind politely participating in the ceremony. Unless you're one of my racist/rapist uncles having a fit because I won't shake your hand during the first few months of covid where I was obliged(?) to go to a mask-free memorial ceremony for my Grandma's husband (I stayed outside, with my [literal and figurative] mask, which everyone felt gave them permission to offer unsolicited criticism). I do physical greetings to make others feel more comfortable, not because society has taught them that they're entitled to touch me and I agree. The whole lockdown period was actually really helpful for my psyche because (many) people finally started respecting boundaries of physical space, or stopped needing to have an 'acceptable' excuse not to participate in contrived activities, or otherwise coerce engagement in an environment that always felt just as unsafe *before* covid. I'm not a germophobe, but the way people with brains instead of ivermectin felt in 2020 is basically how I have always felt all the time: uncertain. Except the virus in question

is everything and everybody. It's funny how people who know I'm on the spectrum actively *don't* touch me, and I appreciate the acknowledgment and mindfulness. Though, I wonder why that courtesy isn't extended to everybody all the time. What's funny about this (or, rather, perfectly logical) is that the people who, as a trait or practice, respect boundaries are the people I'm most comfortable touching or being touched by. Or even being in the same room with.

Let's see if I can consolidate an idea on the fly. So my present work-in-progress line of thinking leads me to believe that the tendency for Alphas™ to be bootlickers and abusers/predators is out of an extreme fear (of the world). Not a new concept, I know. Now, I have felt like I've been in fight-or-flight for going-on the last 23,487,430 minutes, give or take. By my own logic, I should own a red hat factory. Or at least work unpaid overtime at a non-union job there.

I think there needs to be a delineation in terms here. Despite reinforcing the clinical label, anxiety might be a more appropriate word for what I experience. And I only give myself the more socially-acceptable neuroses because, despite whatever my body is telling me, my mind is curious; I want diversity, even if it means upsetting my worldview (or my place in it). I don't want to make the thing that causes my distress go away, I want to understand it and integrate with it so it gives me good feelings instead of bad feelings. Despite sitting in the front row 24/7, it is incredibly difficult to figure out how neurodeviance and cPTSD work out their jams (usually Type II). I also find it odd that people tell me that I have a calming presence while my internal self feels like it just mainlined an eight-ball. Am I unknowingly outsourcing my Zen mind? Anyways, I guess that deserves more thought, but I do realize that this has nothing to do with Trey Anastasio and, with tragic irony – as I already know and you are soon to discover – I'm writing this with the intention of it being read, so I'm going to try to fall back into the groove.

The hug, if you will, was permission. See, what Trey

was doing at this show – and what he does all the time, for all I know – was letting the notes do their own thing. A dual autonomy of the thinking and the creating mind. This is what I do when I'm alone on the couch with an acoustic guitar.[8] Half-diminished run? Okay. Random minor-key chord in a major progression? It'll work. Tempo being more like a suggestion than a rule? Well, naturally. And so on…it doesn't matter if the theory makes sense. Maybe it's better if it doesn't. Learn the rules so you can effectively break them, I always say. What's happening is a conversation with the guitar that doesn't have to follow a thread. It doesn't even have to use a static language. Now, despite this being what you might call my "natural" way of communicating with the guitar, I don't let other people hear it – unless we happen to be sharing a house, hotel, tour bus, or anywhere I'd seek semi-alone time. It's like letting people hear my inner monologues…which is what I'm doing now in an extremely abridged way. The permissive-hug bit was saying that I was allowed to share the synaptic conversation, too. Because, *clearly*, I need permission to take off even more masks.

Then I got sad. Like, really sad. There's that word again. Something that spread out wider than any heartbreak and dug deeper than any grief (disclaimer: I probably don't understand grief in the typical way, this very much *could* be grief). I feel like it would be cliche to say it was an existential sadness and, at the same time, it might be the only time I've used the word "existential" in philosophy without a wink. Because, despite years of cultivating a mentality of Ars Gratia Artis mentality (ed. leave it in) and proselytizing that creation needs to come from the self and for the self before it can be for anybody else, I'm still Performing Normal. I shouldn't need permission to do the unconventional chord change or dissonant transition. The difference between me on the couch and me in the chair is that the latter is still self-

[8] Wait…Couch Tour is a Phish thing, too? Well, shit.

policing. I might think I'm expressing creative ideas. And that's not *un*true. But I'm not expressing Tweed. I mean, in a way, I am, because whatever I do is still an expression of myself, even if I'm doing nothing. Pretty sure I already did the masking as reality jam. No repeats.

I don't mean to keep saying things are funny (or phunny, we can go back to that if you want) but I always considered my longtime friend and collaborator, Chris, telling me I was the most genuine person he's ever known to be amongst the highest compliments I've ever received. And I know I'm taking this to the extreme, but if the couch player never makes it to the studio or the rehearsal room or the gig, it's not really genuine expression, is it? I also know he was speaking of my character, not my musicianship, but I consider them interwoven. People don't need to tell you who they are because they're *always* telling you who they are. Their politics, their jobs, their hobbies, their music choices, or movies, or TV, or food, or topics of conversation, or inclination to open a door or return a shopping cart, or whether their 'civil right' to spread disease is more important than others' life and well-being… it's all part of the soundscape. It's noticing where people place their energy more than any one label or genre or fandom or denomination. And *especially* never believe the marketing campaign. In fact, the way people spend their time presenting themselves is like post-production gloss for the consolidated self. And most people are trying to be an overproduced pop star.

Remember that time I went to a Trey Anastasio concert?

Here's the thing, what he was doing was genuine, if I didn't already say that. Even if it was rehearsed. And he even smiled genuinely and seemed genuinely amused at the audience participation, something I feel like I'd struggle with after however-many hundreds of times (no, Phans, I don't need an exact number of smiles). I don't know who came up with the idea that NDs don't get social cues – okay, I do, and it's rooted in fascism and patriarchy, but this isn't a history report. Social interpretation is the primary CPU

and GPU function when I'm interacting with people. Fake smiles are the (second) easiest thing to spot. Doesn't mean I don't wear red-flag blinders, it just means that there seem to be a lot of misconceptions about how signals are received. Whoever said the bit about social cues also probably said the empathy thing (partly true). Meanwhile, I'm over here apologizing to weeds for pulling them and thanking the trees for allowing me to prune them. Shit, I haven't even talked about how the whole eye-contact thing is way, way off the mark. Might have to save that for the reunion tour.

The sadness, or grief, was from the realization that I could have been being couch me the whole time. And not because it would have made me more famous or successful or a better player, but because I didn't *need* permission. You don't have to play jester to retain jesters privilege. Unless you want to jest. So I guess I had to mourn the sunk-costs of many years of trying to challenge convention while remaining firmly rooted in convention. Krishnamurti was right.

I don't remember the order of grief stages and if I looked them up, that would be cheating because this is live improv writing (trigger warning: you can't unread my brain's unreliable narrator. Abandon hope, ye who enter. Shoulda put this at the beginning). I got to have a meditation on sadness at the concert. Right about now I'm calling myself a dumbass (anger?). I know bargaining is in there, so I better prepare to head down to the Crossroads. Whatever, it is what it is.

It's not just guitar playing, it's writing, too. The way I write to myself isn't the same as how I write for a reader. As you can see, I don't exactly follow a linear route to get to my destination. A metaphor for life. I'm attempting to give you a glimpse at that through this piece, minus the simultaneous audio-visual narration, spicy nostalgia, Fernet flashbacks, cataloguing whatever dialogue is on the TV in the next room and referencing the voices to my mental IMDB, that same fucking Little River Band song, watching the cats hunt each other in my periphery, cross-referencing

everything I write with pop culture to check for plagiarism and/or to make sure I'm plagiarizing for maximum comedic effect, and probably a few other things I'm not consciously thinking as I'm also writing this. And I write to myself in a mostly-illegible shorthand, but that's going beyond Couch Tweed into something that requires Rosetta Stone translation. I was visited by a large heron yesterday just before leaving for the concert. Divinate from that what you will.

If you're still with me – and I don't blame you if you aren't, I'm barely with me most of the time – I apologize for the lack of bad jokes, third-tier nerd references, sly innuendo, carriage returns, and shout-outs to dead Europeans; most of that comes in phase two, which is still before the riff leaves the house, before the rehearsal space, the dive bar, the recording studio, the endless highways and amps and light shows and sound checks and curtain calls. This is couch philosophy. You didn't ask for it. You may have even thought I'd discuss Phish. Psych! But this is what happens when I give myself permission. There will be no encore.

Okay, we have time for one more song.

You've probably (hopefully) noticed by now that I don't 'review' music – or art, really. Reflection being separate from review, of course. For one, as we've learned, art is subjective. So unless I'm going to say something with some amazing insight (spoiler: I'm not), I don't see the point. Don't ask me about art, I'm no scholar, I just have all the books. The artistic merit of a painting or song or novel is up to you. But the other reason is because *I'm* more comfortable with criticism than compliments. Paging Dr. Freud. This is a twofold idea. First, when I used to share my work with friends or other artists for feedback, I'd overwhelmingly hear things like, "It's good," or, "I like it." Tell me you didn't listen to something without telling me you didn't listen to something. Or that you don't care. At least criticism – or questions – can help me grow. Or help

my thinking escape the vacuum [solo] that it typically exists in. The other reason goes back to the authenticity thing. Compliments are often a Holden Caulfield level of phony. Or they're used in the "compliment sandwich." Or they're used to manipulate or exploit. The key word here is "used." Compliments make me feel as uncomfortable as the bro-and-dude gladhanding. Interestingly, only two people in my lifetime have noticed this. Probably because the physical recoil from a compliment is far more subtle and sometimes comes later. I rarely give compliments for the same reason, despite regularly admiring, respecting, or appreciating certain people. I don't want to signal my full-of-shitness by volunteering the obvious or trite. At the same time, if I give an unsolicited compliment, it's something I feel strongly enough that I thought it necessary to share. And it's gone through enough internal bureaucracy that I've determined that it won't reduce the other person to the superficial or trigger insecurities. In typical bureaucratic fashion, I'm not always correct (or timely). Maybe it goes back to the boundaries idea. Like, I often eschew asking about someone's health, past traumas, convictions, etc. I might comment something like, "I hope you're feeling better," instead of, "How are you feeling?" I feel like it's prying. If someone wanted to tell me about their personal struggles, they would. It's not that I don't *care*. Maybe the opposite, even, since I don't want to add to anyone's difficulties by inserting myself or making them feel like they need to explain or justify anything to me or that they owe me any level of trust. I'll typically tell people to let me know if I can do anything for them or if I can offer any support, which I realize comes across just as empty as a compliment or smile. It's not; I don't offer that cliche lightly, either. But I haven't figured out a better way to say it.

Reel No. 42

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Community is More Than Just Being in the Same Place

Notes: Listening to: Joy

Prompt: Imagine the Phish community came together for a single social or political cause. Explore what might already exist in this community that could support this action.

Notes: What roadblocks or other issues might exist? Also discuss the greater relationship between music and social change.

"First, some descriptive, prescriptive, and evaluative caveats. In this article we do not claim to be providing an exhaustive account of the ways that music can figure in the moral life. Still less do we wish to argue that music must serve any or all of the purposes we mention. And we do not wish to argue that when music does contribute to the moral life of the culture it must be judged on that basis. What follows is instead simply a catalogue of some of the ways in which music does in fact function in the moral world. We separate these various functions out for the purposes of analysis and identification. In the complexity of real life, we can expect that they will overlap, reinforce one another, or sometimes be mutually antagonistic."[4]

This is going to be my new disclaimer, with 'music' as the variable.

I think the Phish community *could* create meaningful social change if it combined its resources, energy, and networked enthusiasm toward a political issue. I don't

mean that in the vague, cliched "music brings people together" sense, though that's part of it. I mean that large communities have material power. They have money, attention, communication networks, transportation systems, organizational habits, and a shared sense of ritual. That's a potential infrastructure wearing glitter and tie-dye and pretending it isn't potentially infrastructure. If it wanted to be.

I believe one person can create meaningful worldwide change, for better or worse. History gives us both Jonas Salk and Elon Musk, which is basically the human condition summarized as a one-question personality test: "Do you want to help eliminate disease or do you want to turn the world into a monetized Hunter S. Thompson mescaline vodka flashback?" The choice is yours. But if one person can bend the world, then a community of committed people can at least put a dent in it. A community like Phish's already knows how to mobilize around something it cares about. People travel across the country, trade information, build temporary infrastructure, share resources, organize gatherings, document experiences, and form bonds with strangers. That's a political toolkit whether or not people want to call it one.

One of the strongest – and most well-known – tools in Phish's performances is improvisation. A Phish show isn't just a series of predetermined three-minute songs performed like a Milli Vanilla concert with guitars. It's a live diplomatic envoy. The band listens, responds, mutates, circles back, abandons a structure, finds a new one, and occasionally drives the whole thing to a musical impasse. That kind of thinking is useful for social action because movements also require flexibility. Climate change, ~~police~~ institutional brutality, inequality, and other systemic problems are not little moral Rubik's Cubes solved at lightning-fast speed. They require adaptation, listening, patience, and the ability to move without needing absolute certainty at every step.

The community itself also contains something more valuable than political ideology: openness. Phish attracts

people from many walks of life, orientations, spiritual temperaments, intellectual styles, and degrees of willingness to live in a Subaru Outback for six weeks. That diversity can create space for unexpected ideas. It also means people may be less attached to one official script. In social change, that can be powerful. Movements need artists, organizers, donors, teachers, technicians, legal observers, medics, writers, logistics, and the person who somehow knows where to get a pallet of granola bars at two in the morning. A healthy community lets people contribute according to their capacities rather than forcing everyone into the same heroic polymodal…mold.

An obstacle is built into that strength. The same openness that creates possibility can also create chaos. A jam can become transcendent, but it can also wander meaninglessly off a cliff. Community energy without direction risks becoming aesthetic rather than political: a feeling of togetherness mistaken for action. There's also the danger of comfort. A music scene can become a refuge from the brutality of the world – which we all need from time to time – but it can also become a padded room for locking up the Madness of 'real' life. It's easy to confuse being around good people with doing good things. It's easy to think the vibe itself has accomplished something. The vibe has not passed legislation. The vibe has not redistributed wealth. The vibe has not held power accountable. The vibe is lovely, but it needs leadership, a strategy, and probably a ride to the next meeting. I've heard similar things said about philosophy.

There's also scale. Big issues like corporate ecological impacts and systemic oppression are entire frameworks for modern 'civilization', which means no single fan or localized community can completely solve them alone. That doesn't mean collective action is pointless. It means the action should be specific. A Phan-based movement could fund local resilience projects, support jury nullification or institutional oversight groups, organize at shows, reduce the environmental impact of touring, create mutual aid

networks, etc. Rather than trying to reinvent the activism wheel. Not, "Phish community saves the world," but, "Here is a large, motivated, resourceful community using its existing networks to support targeted work."

More generally, I absolutely think music and social change are connected. Music has always been one of the strongest tools for political imagination. Protest songs, labor songs, civil rights songs, anti-war songs, punk, folk, soul, hip-hop, the entire 1960s cultural movement.

"Songs can be joined with movement, including processions, marches, rituals, and social dances of an indefinitely large number of kinds and variations. When bodily movement, word, and music are mobilized together for a concerted effect in this way, so many dimensions of the person are engaged that the resulting states of bonding and affective affiliation can be nearly irresistible…Song not only functions to coordinate people in body and spirit; it is also an effective lever for educating people in the ethos of their culture."

They gave language to things people sensed before they could articulate them. A sense of moral urgency. That's what happened to me when I first got into music. Back in the nineteen-hundreds. When we wore onions on our belts, you'll recall. As a teenager, I didn't always understand exactly what those songs were saying about war, government, conformity, or power. But I knew they were saying something important. I could feel the message. The words came later.

The real power of music is that it changes the atmosphere in which thought becomes possible. It rearranges what people can feel, what they can imagine, and what they might be willing to do. Alperson and Carroll mention the psychedelic sixties and that was a big part of it for me, too. It's painted as turn on, tune in, drop out…from "good" society. But it seemed to me like it was more like "drop out from the prescribed way of thinking." Or rather, *not* thinking, in most cases. Thought, like music, is a lot easier to access when you outsource the work. Change doesn't begin

in protests or legislature. It begins in rhythm, repetition, shared attention, and the realization you might not be alone.

So *if* the Phish community set their sights on political action, it *could* become a serious force. Because the community already practices forms of coordination, improvisation, generosity, and endurance. The challenge would be giving that energy structure without killing what makes it alive. The political task would be very Phish-like: listen, don't over-control the jam, know when to follow, know when to lead, and for the love of Buddha, eventually resolve the E7#9b13.

Post script: can we take a moment to appreciate one of the funniest things written about music all season: "Vladimir Lenin, upon listening to a Beethoven sonata[1], is reported by Maxim Gorky to have said that he can't listen to music very often because it makes him want to say sweet, silly things and pat the heads of little people whose heads must be beaten if they are to make the revolution."

The unabridged quote is even better, I'll drop it in the appendix.

[1] Sonata No.23, Appassionata

Reel No. 43

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Response to Benjy Eisen's
"Writing About Music Is Dancing to Architecture"

Notes: Listening to: Phish (The White Tape)
Prompt: Respond to a panelist (or panelists) from the 2019 Phish Studies Conference.
[and actually send your response to the panelist(s) if you're a boisterous fool] <—That wasn't in the prompt.

Benjy Eisen is a words and music enthusiast and co-author of *Deal: My Three Decades of Drumming, Dreams, and Drugs with the Grateful Dead* alongside Bill Kreutzmann. I looked Benjy up a couple of weeks ago while preparing for another event and found myself especially interested in his upcoming novel. A lot of the best fiction comes from people who didn't spend their lives standing in front of the mirror whispering, "I *will* be a literary author, I *will* be a literary author." Sometimes the best fiction comes from people who have seen too much, heard too much, lived too strangely, and finally realize the only instrument left, after the roadies accidentally backed the forklift off the loading dock *again*, is language.

The "Rolling Stone version" of the talk is this: Benjy gives some background on how he got into Phish, his experience with music personally and professionally, and the process of working on *Deal*. All of that is interesting, but it's not exactly what drew me in.

What drew me in was the title: "Writing About Music Is Dancing to Architecture."[1]

That phrase immediately reminded me of Terry Dobson's book *It's a Lot Like Dancing*. Dobson trained extensively with Ueshiba Morihei, the founder of Aikido. Or, to put it in the hierarchical lineage language martial artists pretend we don't enjoy, my sensei's sensei's sensei.

If you watch an Aikido demonstration, especially a good one, it can look fake. It *does* look fake. I've been doing it for years, and great Aiki still looks surreal to me. Not Steve-the-Seagull Aiki, mind you, which is a separate category of American performance art with a ponytail, but actual Aiki. Actual surrealism. It looks too clean. Too rehearsed. Too cooperative. The attacker reaches, the receiver turns, and suddenly the body is being hit by planets.

It isn't fake.

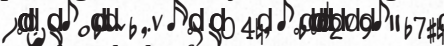
As someone who has been both the person attacking and the person being attacked in those situations, the exchange is authentic. The attacks are genuine. The throws are genuine. The danger is genuine. What makes it look impossible from the outside isn't that people are pretending, but that they have agreed to enter a shared structure. They aren't improvising from nothing. They're improvising inside a form.

In that sense, it's a jam session.

We agree to dance within this framework. We agree that the technique, the dojo, the bodies, the weapons, the timing, and the trust all matter. Then, inside that agreement, things can become alive. Or, as Benjy says at one point, "It's rock'n'roll, there is no protocol."

Which is true, but not *entirely* true.

There's always a protocol, even if the protocol is pretending there isn't one. That's half of the art: sneaking structure into the room while everyone is busy wondering whose face the white tiger will bite off next.

In Aikido, as in music, as in writing, we agree to act in good faith toward the dance. I could grab a sword off the wall. I could kick over your amp. I could step on your toes. I could write gibberish and declare myself liberated from grammar, spelling, and the tyrannical regime of dangling participles.  ? There are always ways to break the frame.

Not that those things don't have a time and place. They do. But the question is whether the disruption advances the dance or stops the music. And I don't mean whether something

is socially acceptable, culturally sanctioned, economically viable, or suitable for inclusion in the quarterly newsletter of the Department of Permissible Human Behavior. I mean something far simpler, but significantly harder to do authentically; asking: Does it deepen the exchange? Does it open the dance floor? Does it make the music more alive? Does it reveal something obedience would have hidden?

Benjy says that writing about music involves "interpreting a voice into the framework." That phrase lands hard for me because it's exactly the problem of every collaborative form. It's the problem of the bandleader, the producer, the author, the arranger, the martial artist, the editor, the teacher, and, unfortunately, the business-douche. I've been most of these things. Some of them willingly. Some of them in a polo shirt and khakis.

As a bandleader, you learn that the job isn't to dominate the room, it's to hear where the music is trying to go. As a producer, you learn that every track in the mix has value. Not equal volume or placement, necessarily, but equal dignity. The bass might need to come forward. The guitar might need to shut up for eight measures (or longer!). The vocal might need to remain unedited because the crack in the second chorus is the reason the song makes sense now. The tambourine might need to be deleted forever, never to be heard from or spoken of again.

Writing works the same way. You're always interpreting voice into framework. Sometimes the voice is yours. Sometimes it belongs to a subject, a collaborator, an interviewee, a dead philosopher, a band, a scene, a room, a myth, a hangover, or a memory that refuses to cite its sources. The goal isn't to trap the voice inside the framework, but to build a structure that lets it speak.

This is also where Benjy and I seem to share a few working philosophies. The first is to *get out of the way*. Or, as Trey puts it, by way of Benjy's telling, to "become the hose."

Which is a concept that's as funny as it is beautiful, because many of us who preach this gospel are also the

same people who will edit a paragraph or tweak a snare drum until we become mummified Buddhist monks wearing fashionable Ray-Bans and muttering sutras about transcendental compression ratios in the 2-5kHz range.

The contradiction is real because the work is real. Getting out of the way doesn't mean doing *nothing*. Nihilism is cool and all, but this means doing enough of the thing you trained for that the work no longer seems like you're beating it forward with a cattle prod. The best editing disappears. The best production disappears. The best Aikido technique disappears. The best writing about music doesn't stand between the reader and the music like a TSA agent asking whether you have more than two ounces of funky grooves in your carry-on.

This is why I believe in learning the rules. Not because the rules are sacred. They aren't. Rules are useful because they show you where the walls are. And once you know where the walls are, you can decide whether to paint them, climb them, put a window in them, or Kool-Aid Man through the sheetrock at exactly the wrong moment. Oh, yeah!

Benjy talks about the absurdity of trying to fit writing about rock'n'roll into rules, because rock music (among other forms) is predicated on breaking the rules. I agree, with the small addition that writing may be the granddaddy, sensei's-sensei of rock'n'roll. Writing was breaking rules before the phonograph had a chance to ruin someone's Sunday with that unholy jazz music. The sentence was distorting reality before the TS808 plugged in. The poem was feeding back before tape started rolling. Oscar Wilde was already leaning against the wall in leather pants, holding a bottle of Perrier-Jouet, smoking a gold-tipped cigarette, and saying, "If I'm too loud, you're too old."

We write a song, but we don't usually sing an essay. Unless you're me, apparently. But I'm getting weary of the walls of recorded music.

Still, the central question remains the same: how do you capture something that exists in time, bodies, minds, rooms, sweat, mistakes, tone, stale smoke, cheap gin, and

the invisible moment between what someone meant to say and what actually came out? How do you write about music without embalming it in six decades of status quo? How do you explain the dance without turning it into a static tableau, waiting for the stage manager to spike the tape.

This is why I agree completely with Benjy's immediate answer to the question of the best rock biography: *The Dirt*. I would, unhesitatingly, give the same response.

You don't even have to like Butt Metal or Mötley Crüe. I, unashamedly, do, and will accept the consequences in the afterlife. But that's not the point. The book's brilliance is that it captures voices in a room at a particular time and place. Or several voices in several rooms across time. It doesn't feel like a sanitized institutional biography assembled by a committee of brand managers and accountants, even if, technically, some 'adults' were probably involved. It feels like people talking. Lying, confessing, mythologizing, contradicting themselves, performing themselves, indicting themselves, and revealing themselves by accident. It feels alive. Real.

That, ultimately, is the goal of the dancers, the band, the co-author, the producer, the critic, and the aikidoka.

Not to explain the dance steps until the music stops.

Not to master the technique until it becomes boredom.

Not to break the rules merely because breaking things is easier (and sometimes more fun) than making them.

The goal is to enter the dance hall with enough respect to understand its weight, enough flexibility to move inside it, and enough humility to know when the voice, the song, the throw, or the story has already told you where it wants to go.

Then your job is simple: Be the hose.

And try not to step on it.

Question(s): How is the 'you' of today different from the you of the 2019 Phish Studies Conference? What, if anything, has remained unchanged?

Benjy's Response

I jotted this down off the top of my head, in my iPhone notes, when you first emailed me, thinking I'd revisit and revise, but upon review, I decided to let it ride. Raw dogging the response!!

Here we go:

In 2019, I was filled with existential hope that has since been replaced, at least in part, by existential dread. AI had yet to come online, America had yet to fall, and humans seemed to have all the time in the world to figure out how to rule the planet while making uncoordinated plans to invade the next one. I no longer feel that way about humanity.

But maybe that feeds back into existential hope because — for a moment, damn the species, forget the country, and keep fears of human vs. machine wars at arm's length — I'm 50 now, 43 then, and I've never expected to live past 100. That kind of grants me permission to do whatever the fuck I want. It doesn't matter! Which also happens to be Phish lyrics: "It doesn't matter!"

Before I can really examine how I've changed, let's see how Phish has changed — they emerged from the pandemic changed enough to denote it as the start of a brand new era: Phish 4.0. And while the following is a subjective assessment, of course, the fans, myself included, felt during their first tour back that the band was somehow BETTER than they had been in years, jamming harder, longer, more consistently every night than they had since at least the Baker's Dozen in 2017.

But whereas the Baker's Dozen sometimes felt like they were extending songs so that they could make their catalog last through the finish line without a repeat, in 2021, the jams felt like they were extended because the band members felt a very real urgency that perhaps this could all go away before the tour even ended. Perhaps after the show they would find out that the rest of the tour was cancelled. That it was time for them to go home, put on masks, and socially distance.

That's not far off from how I feel in my own life right now. I feel that the country is under attack from within and that our species is about to be under attack from without. I feel like at any moment, we'll be told the game is over. Maybe the simulation ran its course. Maybe some LLM hacked nuclear codes and went rogue. Whatever it may be, real or illusion, organic or artificial, if this all ended tomorrow, I wouldn't be all that surprised. And that has given my own work renewed inspiration.

I wrote my first piece for Rolling Stone in more than a decade and I didn't employ any help whatsoever from AI, not even to fact-check (although I don't know that they editors could say the same for their own process). I've made it a point to, more consciously, "enjoy every sandwich." (A quote from Warren Zevon on late-night television after he had been dealt a terminal cancer diagnosis). Humanity itself is terminal. It always was. But whereas that analysis, admittedly speculation, on my part sometimes leads me to an expression of depression and paralysis, it just as often has led to an increased drive for creativity.

Many Phish fans will tell you that Phish is as creative as they've ever been. That comes with the caveat that they do not sound the same as they used to, so therefore it's not going to be everyone's cup of tea. But if it did, then it would be nostalgia and, therefore, not my own cup of tea. I continue to be obsessed with Phish because they continue to drag their weary shit-asses up new mountains instead of making toasts on top of long-conquered vistas.

I can only hope the same for myself.

Reel No. 44

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Confession Time, Part Deux

Notes: Listening to: Junta

I've written and published at least six other books using different names. And probably like forty songs. I haven't counted. I don't know why I do it. It's not like I'm trying to preserve a brand or cultivate a public image. If anything, some of those works are 'better' than the stuff I release using my real name. Inexplicable weirdness.

I'm not going to say what they are, that would be explaining the joke. And to do that, I'd have to know the punchline. But it is a lot of shit to break up in my will, so I'm open to ideas for games to win the rights. Fair warning, some of them are probably worthless. Others might be most valuable as a tool to cause spontaneous outbursts at a PTA meeting. I never know; I exist in these walls built by an institution of one.

One of the non-negotiable conditions is you can do whatever you want with them. Including putting your name on it, selling it to a smut peddler, making a horrible Netflix series, or removing it from the timeline forever (probably the best option for the sake of future generations of space beings investigating our planet to see if it was ever able to support intelligent life). This isn't Oprah, there are no hidden terms and fees.

Reel No.	45	Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track	Hello, Cruel World!

Notes: Listening to: "Just the Jams - 2016 Summer Tour" by @weengreen

I haven't written a suicide note in a while. Does that sound crazy? Good. I never write suicide notes while actively contemplating suicide. Usually the opposite. Suicide notes are kinda silly, if you think about it. You spend your whole life trying to communicate and being dismissed and *all-of-a-sudden* people want to overanalyze a piece of paper because of some 'tragedy'. The tragedy is everything that happens before the suicide. But, like drafting a will, it can be a helpful practice. Unless your will (or 'Will') inevitably devolves into increasingly absurd game show rules where the prizes are your intellectual property. I've been brainstorming a new bucket list lately. Not sure if that's better or worse:

- ~~Finish this book~~
- Compose and record Foucault rock opera
- Finish house repairs and improvements
- Döstädning
- Try to make it longer than Lena, which will be the hardest part.
- Mahabharata

That's a pretty short list. I might need to add to it or things are going to get real boring real fast. I may as well finish this degree, but it's become increasingly pointless. Pay tens-of-thousands to self-educate (or use AI to bullshit your

way through the gauntlet) and come out on the other side without any real education. What a joke. Plus, you can just put whatever you want on your résumé, anyway. Nobody checks. The handful of academics and professionals who've bothered to talk to me about teaching or medicine or civil service or anything I might have an aptitude for all say the same thing: "Don't do it." They don't mean me, specifically; they're giving blanket advice. And they're right; I don't fit in with those institutions. I have a sub-atomic threshold for talking about what I'm going to do instead of actually doing it. Still, it *is* perplexing how everybody says not to do what they do. Maybe "upward mobility" should be based on personal/emotional fulfillment and not capital gains. Too bad those terms have become interchangeable.

I have a physical bucket list (that I made in my thirties) – all pretty generic midlife crisis stuff: dive a reef, swim with sharks, see some of the wonders of nature. It's exploitative and capitalist to even do that now. Like everything. I've done the bulk of the creative projects on my list already. As if there wasn't a flood of contrived garbage out there already, now we have AI doing the AI thing. By the time I finish this book and the musical, there won't be much of a point to sharing art because the algorithm will just read your brainwaves and give you whatever media will make you most docile. GPT programming is fun and all, it reminds me of how I program my own brain. But you *do* realize that the point of artificial intelligence is to get rid of what little natural intelligence is still left so we can all be even more subjugated as laborers and/or capital, right? Amongst other reasons, like cultivating an environment of distrust, justifying state-sanctioned media, mass surveillance (and not just to sell you shit). Whatever you think it's for, it's way, way worse. But that's a whole other book and someone's probably written it by now. Or had AI write it.

I've tried nothing and I'm all out of ideas.

A lot of people have told me to write a biography, since I've done a bunch of random, crazy shit as quietly as possible ('ningenuity'), but, ugh. *Ordbajsa* on a page claiming to be

philosophy is one thing, but an incoherent and desultory narrative arc with no tangible resolution? I wouldn't want to read that, no matter how decorative a mask I put on the language. I could call it 46 Days of Tweed. Title done, I'm halfway there.

If I were to kill myself right now, I'd credit it to the exhaustion of decades of being ashamed of who I am (or could be?) because of what people told me due to their own need for control. This shit is impossible to decode and deprogram. You fix one error and a dozen other bugs pop up. The system randomly crashes. Corrupted archives, fragmented storage. Cache overloaded with weaponized loyalty, toxic positivity, Bible verses, old Rotten.com videos, and Buzzfeed "Which Phish member are you?" quizzes. GPU being used to mine Bitcoin. Our pets' heads are falling off.

That, and because the "system" is a complete disaster and not enough people seem to realize we have to demolish it beyond its foundation to save any semblance of 'humanity' and, I'm afraid, that's just not going to happen. Probablynobodydammit, I've become an existentialist.

I don't know, I've been doing this human thing for forty-five years and I am not impressed.

A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again.

Reel No. 46

Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track

Institutions Made Easy: How to Win Friends and Instrumentalize People

Notes: Listening to: Live Bait, Vol.02 - Summer 2010 Leg 2

Institutions aren't complicated.

They *want* to be complicated. They cultivate complexity the way mold cultivates an old basement. They spore flowcharts, handbooks, bylaws, dashboards, onboarding modules, subcommittees, advisory boards, ethics training programs, laminated values, emergency contingency protocols for urgent emergencies, grievance procedures, and seventeen kinds of permission slips you need your mommy or physician to fill out quarterly.

It's all an act.

The mechanics are simple enough to explain to a drunk adjunct in a Sizzler parking lot.

First, convince someone to give you time or money.

Second, convince them that what they gave you was *not* time or money, it was alignment.

Third, use that alignment to make them do your dirty work.

By then, of course, it's not your dirty work anymore. It's theirs. They own shares in the septic tank.

This is how every institution I've experienced seems to operate: job, school, church, family, non-profit, activist cause, government department, arts organization, professional association, neighborhood council, spiritual retreat, local committee, certification program, writer's group, and any room where someone has brought donuts

and said the word “community” a little too often.

Once upon a time, there was a small request…

Come to the meeting. Make a donation. Take the class. Join the list. Volunteer for the event. Sign the statement. Wear the shirt. Share the post. Stay late. Be flexible. Be patient. Be a team player. Be reasonable. Be realistic. Be mindful of tone. Be aware of optics. Be careful not to upset anyone.

The request is never the request.

The request is a needle. The institution is looking for a vein.

Once it gets in, your contribution becomes proof of belonging. You didn’t pay tuition, you *invested in your future*. You didn’t perform unpaid labor, you *supported the mission*. You didn’t endure a hostile workplace, you *showed resilience*. You didn’t sit quietly while a whiny little nightmare with too much funding ate their young, you *protected the community*.

This is the sacrament of institutional life: take, rename, sanctify.

The job takes your nights and weekends and calls it dedication.

The school takes your twenties and calls it formation.

The church takes your guilt and calls it generosity.

The non-profit takes your burnout and calls it service.

The activist group takes your hesitation and calls it harm.

The government office takes your conscience, makes you sign in triplicate, staples it to Form 13B-47(version XIV.6.5), and sends it upstairs to the Preliminary Neglect Department.

The institution doesn’t need you to believe in it completely. Too much belief makes people unpredictable. Martyrs start fires. Zealots spill secrets. ‘True believers’ write self-help books and take the institution on tour with workshops entitled “Change Your Life in 90 Minutes,” or, “How Money *Does* Buy Happiness.”

What the institution needs is investment. Investment is better than belief because investment can be weaponized

against the investor.

"You've given so much already."

"You've been here for so long."

"You know how hard everyone has worked."

"You know what's at stake."

"You know this isn't the right time."

"You know this affects other people."

"You know they'll misunderstand."

"You know the opposition will use this against us."

"You know we handle things internally."

'Internally' is a classic vagueism.

Institutions have mastered the alchemy of converting sunk costs into moral obligations. Once you've given too much, leaving becomes betrayal. Criticism is heresy. Refusal is apostasy. You start defending the 'thing' – not because it's good, but because you need your oblation to have meant something.

Nobody wants to admit they were conned by a mission statement printed in Comic Sans on fluorescent paper.

So the institution gives you a better story: You aren't exploited, you're *committed*. You aren't afraid, you're *prudent*. You aren't obedient, you're a *professional*. You aren't complicit, you're *maintaining trust in the process*.

The "process" is a velvet rope around a sinkhole.

This is where the institution does the thing that makes the thing the thing. It doesn't have to cross *everyone's* boundaries directly. That would require effort (aka expense). And institutions hate effort unless it can be assigned to the lowest-paid person and then celebrated with bonuses at the annual shareholder's meeting.

Instead, the institution gets you to cross other people's boundaries on its behalf. You become the soft voice in the hallway. You become the concerned email. You become the person who says, "I hear you, but…"

You become the one who explains why the victim should just be patient, why the new hire should just adapt to the status quo, why the student should just intrinsically understand ~~rigor~~ endurance, why the volunteer shouldn't

share their ideas, why the whistleblower should consider what everyone has to lose, why the harmed person should use the "proper" channels.

Every institution has its *proper* channels. They're usually decorative, sometimes ceremonial. In advanced organizations, the proper channels are arranged in a circle so the complaint can achieve enlightenment while returning responsibility to the person who asked for accountability in the first place.

You learn the phrases.

"We need to be careful."

"It's more complicated than that."

"There are processes in place."

"We don't want to create division."

"That's not how we do things here."

That's the one.

The sacred sentence.

"That's not how we do things here."

No tyrant in history has ever improved on it. It reigns over law, family, politics, theology, bakeries, citation styles, non-disclosure agreements, journalism, free speech, punishment, and grant applications.

This is the moment when discipline becomes self-discipline, then peer discipline, then community, then culture, then society. The guard tower disappears because everyone has agreed to become a camera disguised as a window disguised as a mentor disguised as a parent disguised as opportunity disguised as yourself.

And the best part – because there's always a best part – is that these places almost always describe themselves as safe, inclusive, transparent, transformative, accountable, healing, and/or innovative.

The more adjectives an institution uses to describe its ethics, the more likely someone in leadership has a file cabinet full of "internally investigated" incident reports and a favorite sentence that begins, "To be fair…"

A "safe space" means safe for the structure.

"Inclusion" means you may enter, provided you don't

touch anything.

"Transparency" means the window is actually a TV screen.

"Accountability" means someone changed the date at the bottom of the policy where it says: "Last updated on:"

"Healing" means the wound is now an operating theater.

The modern institution doesn't crush you with a boot. That's outdated technology. Crude. Expensive. Live in the now, man. The modern institution invites you, for a limited time only, to try on a pair of their officially branded, scientifically-proven, celebrity-endorsed boots.

There will be a focus group.

There will be a survey about the target demographic for boots.

There will be a press release on equitable boot distribution.

There will be a neck-impact study before the boot officially comes down.

The real harm isn't that institutions ask too much. People can survive being asked too much. The real harm is that they teach you to see your own boundaries as a character flaw.

This is why that first boundary matters. The first time they ask you to stay late because someone mistook station for sense. The first time they ask you to excuse cruelty because the cruel person is more important than you. The first time they ask you to accept an award that renames exhaustion as loyalty. The first time they ask you to keep quiet for the good of the 'team'. The first time they ask you to treat your discomfort as evidence of growth.

Once an institution learns it can cross your boundaries, it learns something more useful than your weakness. It learns your price. Not the amount of money it takes to buy you, necessarily. Sometimes there is no money. Sometimes the price is belonging. Sometimes it's status. Sometimes it's access. Sometimes it's being told you're one of the good ones by people who keep an entourage of 'good ones' around them like a Roman testudo. And once the institution knows your price, it can start spending you.

That's the point: Not to use you, but to make you *usable*.

A person with intact boundaries is inconvenient. They slow the machine. They ask rude questions like "Why?" and "Who benefits?" and "Why is everyone whispering?" and "Why does the grievance process require the injured party to become a paralegal in the court of their own humiliation?"

A person with eroded boundaries is efficient. They anticipate the institution's needs. They censor themselves in advance. They call harm a "complex issue." They call silence "maturity." They call obedience "commitment." They become the kind of person who can hurt someone else while feeling a little bit bad about it (but not *too* bad), which is the institutional ideal. Cruelty with conviction. Violence with a GoFundMe campaign (18% to goal). A prefabricated apology, complete with an uninvited pat on the back and an offer to "buy you a drink sometime."

This is how institutions reproduce themselves. Not by creating monsters. That would be too honest. They create custodians. People who tidy up the scene. People who revise the language. People who remind everyone of the mission while the mission is out there gnawing through ribcages like a horde of voracious plague rats.

The most dangerous person in an institution isn't always the one at the top. The obvious villain is usually the least interesting. He has a title, a parking space, a vocabulary of threats, and the spiritual depth of a McDouble.

The more dangerous person is the one who has already given too much to stop defending the place that took it.

They are the alumni of their own downfall.

The congregation of closed-door idolatry.

The assistant *to* the Assistant Dean of Because I Said So.

They've mistaken survival inside the structure for proof that the structure is needed for survival.

So they help.

They advise patience. They recommend diplomacy. They translate abuse into a misunderstanding. They sand the edges off of testimony. They marshal the ostracized and

escort the attenuated back through the *proper* channels. And when the institution asks them to choose between the person being harmed and the thing that gave their sacrifice meaning, they choose the thing.

This is the short-term brilliance of institutions. They don't need to make everyone evil geniuses. They only need to make enough people invested, included, afraid, flattered, indebted, promoted, implicated, or exhausted enough to keep the hallway clear.

Institutions aren't built out of stone, they're built out of crossed boundaries.

First yours.

Then everyone else's.

B-Sides and Rarities

Reel No. | Shelved | Friendly Helpers Attenuated Mixing and Mastering Studio

Track | Neurodeviant Philosophy

Notes: Listening to: All of the Above

[This piece has been a work-in-progress since day thirty-two. I'd come back and add or remove or edit as the mood struck me. I'm still not happy with it – I still don't know where philosophy becomes morals and where morals become ethics or ethics become morals or philosophy. If I think something naturally, it's one thing, but if someone writes it down, it's another? Seems vague and like there's a lot of subjective crossover. Anyway, enjoy my brain talking about my brain.]

"This definition tells us philosophy is an axe. The way this is usually interpreted is that knowledge is for cutting, so the axe is a tool. The question I want to ask is: What if the axe is a guitar?" - Stephanie Jenkins

The question I want to ask is, what if you *are* the axe. Not metaphysical mastery, that's boring. More like you're born with axes for arms. Edward Axeyhands. You toddle around, wildly chopping at everything. Sure, eventually, you learn how to use your trenchant appendages, but not until you've taken out quite a few saplings, and maybe the cat, in the process, while earning a reputation as "that guy who keeps fucking up my trees."

I spent most of my life assuming everyone thought the same way as everyone else and didn't talk about it. Makes sense, if you think about it. What reason would we have to talk about something that's universal? We don't spend all day talking about respiration. Nobody even mentions

breathing unless there's a problem with it. Or you're at a yoga class.

I figured everyone walked around mentally cross-referencing conversations from six years ago against facial expressions from last night while simultaneously constructing alternate interpretations in case new information arrived later or they suddenly got access to a time machine, all to the tune of some Huey Lewis and the News sax solo over the dialogue from season four, episode twenty of The Office® *and* running through the eighty-seven point checklist that is showering.

Apparently not.

Some think *intentionally*. They focus on an idea or problem. They apply themselves. They clear their mind at the end of the day. The phrase "turn your brain off" has always sounded to me like somebody casually suggesting we unplug the sun for a bit when it's getting too hot out. Not that my brain is some massive celestial body, but the solar flares are just as unpredictable.

The strange thing isn't the information overload itself. The strange thing is discovering that other people weren't constantly, consciously cataloguing input. Not smarter or dumber. Just different. Some people can apparently order a sandwich without compiling a mental anthology on agriculture, class systems, appetite, supply chains, animal suffering, body image, language, capitalism, the history of bread, and whether they interpreted the cashier's "may I take your order," correctly.

This isn't about intelligence. Intelligence is too broad and too poisoned a concept at this point. The second that people start discussing intelligence, someone inevitably arrives with phrenology diagrams and an internet IQ test.

This is about recursive attention. The tendency *not* to experience a moment, but to immediately begin analyzing the experience, your reaction to the experience, the social construction of the reaction, whether the reaction was authentic, and whether authenticity itself is just a refined performance repeated enough times to feel natural.

For years, I assumed this performance of being a person was universal. I thought everyone was manually operating themselves from inside a control room full of switches, monitors, flashing lights, apology meters, shame indicators, emergency generators, and one burned-out fuse labeled 'childhood'. I thought everybody rehearsed every possible thread of a conversation before having it, replayed them afterward, and generated branching dialogue trees like a Choose Your Own Adventure book written by a neurotic philosophy major trapped in a linguistics course.

When people say things like, "I never thought about it that way," with sincerity, I find it more confusing than anything else. The same kind of confusion you might feel if your neighbor mentioned he doesn't dream, doesn't feel shame, and has never once imagined driving off a cliff because it sounds better than going to work.

Again, not because they're stupid. Usually the opposite. Plenty of brilliant people move through life with an ability I both envy and can't completely understand: the ability to encounter an experience directly without immediately dissecting it into symbolic, psychological, ethical, sociological, and existential components like a high school bio-lab frog.

I don't seem capable of doing that consistently. Or ever. And not because *I'm* stupid (hopefully). Though, I've heard it plenty of times. Welcome to the Philosophy of Stupid, I'm your host…

My brain behaves less like a camera and more like a room full of monkeys with typewriters attempting to write Shakespeare, but the best they can come up with are the next seventeen James Patterson novels. Thoughts are indexed, archived, cross-catalogued – and then the monkeys knock over the cabinets and mix up the cards. I think one of them pooped in the psychology section. Conversations automatically connect themselves to books, memories, power dynamics, films, voice inflection indexes, historical patterns, offhand comments from three months ago, and some article I read on the misdiagnosis of ADHD as

hypomania at two in the morning while trying to figure out why I couldn't sleep despite being severely mismedicated.

The difficulty is that this kind of thinking creates a strange relationship with identity.

If you spend enough time studying people consciously, you begin learning humanity the way an actor learns accents. Deliberately. Methodically. Observationally. Not because you're trying to deceive anyone, but because everyone else seems to have received the social operating system pre-installed while you're still reverse-engineering the boot sequence from corrupted files on melted floppy disks.

I don't mean dishonesty. That's a common misconception. People hear words like "masking" and imagine manipulation, when most of the time it feels closer to adaptive translation. Like going to a cultural event everyone else has attended since childhood and trying to infer the customs and traditions by watching carefully enough not to embarrass yourself or the person who invited you.

You notice cadence. Timing. Acceptable eye contact duration. The microscopic pause before a joke lands badly and dies while everyone steps over the body. The difference between someone wanting honesty and someone wanting reassurance disguised as honesty. You assemble social behavior manually, the way some people assemble furniture without instructions – because admitting confusion somehow feels more humiliating than building a chair nobody can sit in. Plus, you can't read Swedish.

And after enough repetition, the performance stops feeling entirely separate from you.

People talk about being "yourself" as though there exists, somewhere beneath the accumulated debris of society, a pristine original artifact untouched by adaptation. A little museum-quality soul. Roped off from visitors. Somehow spared family dynamics, advertising, hormones, high school, debt, trauma, bad teachers, heartbreak, and whatever your nervous system started doing when you were seven in response to something adults called "character-building" because children are legally (and morally?) easier

to experiment on.

I suspect most identities are collaborative improvisations stabilized over time through repetition and social reinforcement. Some people simply inherit the rhythm more naturally. Others learn choreography late and become hyperaware of the dance itself.

Maybe that awareness is useful. Maybe it's corrosive.

Probably both.

The upside is perspective. If your mind constantly models other viewpoints, you become resistant to simple explanations for behavior. It becomes difficult to flatten people into heroes, villains, geniuses, monsters, saints, and sinners because you can almost always see the machinery underneath. Incentives. Fear. Loneliness. Status performance. Trauma. Conditioning. Exhaustion. Contradiction. The thousand invisible negotiations occurring beneath every supposedly coherent personality.

The downside is that the whole concept of certainty starts feeling…uncertain. Not impossible. Not subjective. Uncertain.

People who appear completely certain about complicated things unsettle me a little bit. Not because conviction is inherently wrong, but because people are messy enough that certainty feels less like wisdom and more like compression. A reduction of reality into something emotionally manageable. A psychological toe tag.

And maybe that's what I've spent most of my life resisting.

Reduction.

The conversion of complicated living things into manageable labels. Political tribes. Diagnostic categories. Archetypes. Brand identities. Clean narratives with villains and heroes arranged like action figures for optimum display in your "man cave."

The irony, of course, is that I'm attempting to explain all of this by writing philosophy, which is dangerously close to creating the exact kind of conceptual container I instinctively distrust. There's a decent chance this entire

project collapses under its own contradiction like a graduate thesis written on wet bar napkins.

That would feel appropriate.

One of the things that increasingly challenges me about modern life is how aggressively we flatten each other for convenience. Politically. Socially. Morally. Psychologically.

We reduce people into categories the way fast food restaurants reduce potatoes into seven allegedly different products while somehow pretending this constitutes meaningful diversity. Curly fries. Waffle fries. Tater tots. Hash brown patties. Congratulations, you've reinvented the same depressed root vegetable in different shapes.

We do this constantly. We compress each other into manageable narratives because complexity is exhausting and uncertainty burns too many brain calories. It's cognitively efficient to decide a person is good, bad, intelligent, stupid, dangerous, enlightened, toxic, virtuous, broken, authentic, cringe, woke, conservative, narcissistic, neurotypical, neurodivergent, ally, oppressor, empath, capitalist, communist, or whatever temporary taxonomy the culture is currently using to sort primates into emotional filing cabinets.

The problem isn't that these categories exist. The problem is that they're incomplete in ways we routinely forget.

Most people are several people.

A compassionate therapist can also be a cruel parent. A socially progressive person can still behave tyrannically in intimate relationships. A deeply traumatized person can become an abuser. An intelligent person can believe absurd things. A moral person can participate in immoral systems simply because they were born inside them and need groceries.

This isn't moral relativism.

Context doesn't mean absolution.

Understanding *why* something exists isn't the same thing as endorsing or even condoning it. If a structural engineer explains why a bridge collapsed, we don't accuse them of being pro-collapse. We understand that explanation and

approval are different categories of thought.

Somewhere along the way, public discourse lost patience for this distinction. *Understanding* became ideological contamination, as though examining the roots of something ugly means sympathizing with it. As though curiosity were a contagion. As though naming the mechanism is the same as kissing it on the mouth.

Refusing to contextualize behavior doesn't bring moral clarity. It makes us intellectually fragile.

The more I've observed people, institutions, and social systems, the more I've come to reject singular explanations for anything important. Behavior emerges from biology, history, incentives, loneliness, fear, performance, culture, economics, trauma, exhaustion, status competition, social conditioning, and random chance.

Most of us are less like stable identities and more like ongoing negotiations between competing internal factions. A small parliament of needs, injuries, imagination, fears, desires, principles, and one loud idiot demanding immediate service. Which can get a little noisy when the mind appears to crave narrative compression.

We want clean stories. The righteous and the corrupt. We want villains who are entirely monstrous because that protects us from recognizing traces of ourselves in them. We want heroes who are entirely pure because uncertainty is emotionally tiring and most people already have enough problems without discovering morality itself is wearing its own set of masks.

The internet, expectedly, has accelerated this psychological industrialization.

Every person is now expected to become immediately legible.

State your identity.

State your politics.

State your moral framework.

State your allegiance to the correct symbolic vocabulary of your particular ideological tribe.

People increasingly introduce themselves like software

patches.

Version 3.7.4.

Updated pronouns.

Improved trauma language.

Bug fixes in public conduct.

Known issues: still becomes a monster in comment sections after 11 p.m.

To be fair, categories can be useful. Diagnostic language helps people understand themselves. Political labels help coordinate action. Social identities can create solidarity and protection.

I'm not arguing for some smug, pseudo-enlightened transcendence where we all become incorporeal energy beings floating above society like sentient "I don't see color" fog. I'm arguing against confusing the map for the environment. A person isn't the sum total of the words used to describe them.

In fact, one of the stranger side effects of living in highly categorized systems is that people often begin performing the categories assigned to them. Sometimes consciously. Usually unconsciously. We shape ourselves around expectations because social survival has always depended on legibility. We learn what versions of ourselves receive safety, affection, status, forgiveness, employment, desire, applause or, at the very least, fewer exhausting conversations with relatives who treat Facebook memes like peer-reviewed anthropology.

Eventually the performance hardens into identity.

Maybe that identity is real.

Maybe all identities become real through repetition.

I don't know anymore.

But I do know that reducing people to singular narratives has made us simultaneously more connected and less capable of seeing each other clearly.

Complexity doesn't eliminate responsibility. Contradiction doesn't eliminate truth. If people are contextual, adaptive, contradictory creatures, then any philosophy pretending otherwise will eventually begin

amputating parts of reality to preserve its own internal neatness. And I'm, ironically, not a fan of neatness – unless it comes to shelves, cabinets, and countertops.

I think one of the reasons certainty began to bother me is because I kept watching intelligent people arrive at completely incompatible conclusions while using what appeared to be the same mental machinery.

Not only intelligent people. Kind people. Educated people. Thoughtful people. People with coherent moral frameworks and genuinely good intentions.

Given enough time, almost all of them eventually drifted toward different versions of reality assembled from different experiences, incentives, fears, environments, and emotional needs.

At some point I had to confront the possibility that we don't reason ourselves into most beliefs nearly as often as we narrate ourselves into them afterward. Which sounds cynical, but I don't *entirely* mean it that way.

Narratives are how we metabolize reality. We take the chaos of experience and compress it into stories we can survive psychologically. Nations do this. Religions do this. Families do this. Individuals do this. Half of adulthood appears to consist of constructing increasingly sophisticated explanations for why your particular collection of coping mechanisms constitutes a personality and/or theology.

The problem is when the story hardens into certainty.

Not conviction, let's clean up the language. Conviction can be necessary. Moral paralysis helps no one. A person standing in front of a burning building should probably not pause for a twelve-minute internal symposium on the phenomenology of fire escape etiquette. Sometimes action matters more than epistemological elegance.

Certainty is different. Certainty is less like confidence and more like closure. An emotional desire to stop wrestling with ambiguity. To arrive at a stable explanation and finally rest there.

Which is understandable. Ambiguity is exhausting. Most people are already carrying enough psychological weight

to justify lying face down on the floor for several business days. But reality is rarely complacent toward our desire for clean conclusions.

The older I get, the more critical I become of ideologies promising total explanatory frameworks for existence. Political systems. Cultural systems. Economic systems. Self-help systems. Religious systems. Even scientific materialism occasionally develops the personality of a nineteenth-century railroad tycoon convinced consciousness can be solved if we simply measure enough skulls and graph enough neurotransmitters.

Every framework reveals something useful. And distorts something useful.

That doesn't mean truth doesn't exist. It means perspective is unavoidable.

A microscope is useful because it magnifies certain things while obscuring others. You wouldn't use one to navigate traffic. Likewise, every philosophical, political, psychological, or spiritual framework illuminates some dimensions of reality while blinding us to others.

Problems begin when people mistake the axe for the tree.

Humor disrupts certainty. A joke temporarily destabilizes rigid thinking. It creates a moment where two contradictory ideas can coexist long enough for insight to slip through the gap. A joke is a trapdoor under certainty. It briefly removes the floor from under whatever we were standing on too confidently.

Tyrants hate comedians for the same reason authoritarian parents hate follow-up questions from children. Both introduce instability into controlled narratives.

There's a reason deeply rigid people lose their sense of humor first. Humor requires permeability. Not detachment from morality. Not ironic nihilism. Just the willingness to admit that people are strange enough that absolute certainty about ourselves should probably be approached with caution. The universe contains platypuses, professional wrestling, MLM 'entrepreneur' conferences, and men who

call themselves "thought leaders." Reality clearly let Jesus take the wheel long ago.

Fortunately, uncertainty has become less frightening to me over time. Not because uncertainty feels good. It usually feels terrible. We crave stability the way televangelists crave tax exemptions. But uncertainty leaves room for revision. For growth. For empathy. For the possibility that another person might contain information your current worldview cannot yet process.

Certainty closes doors. Curiosity leaves them cracked open.

I've started to think wisdom may have less to do with arriving at final answers and more to do with developing a higher tolerance for complexity without collapsing into cynicism or extremism. A kind of intellectual flexibility. The ability to hold competing possibilities in tension long enough to examine them honestly instead of immediately forcing them into ideological freezer-storage containers labeled "Safe," "Evil," "Truth," or "People Bad."

Which is difficult, because we are meaning-making creatures and ambiguity feels like standing on unstable ground. Sometimes unstable ground is the only honest place to stand.

If I had to reduce this philosophy to a single instinct, it would probably be this: Remain permeable. Not infinitely permeable. That's not wisdom. That's how you end up spiritually resembling a flea market at an abandoned drive-in. A person still needs values, boundaries, discernment, the ability to say no, and at least one opinion strong enough to survive interrogation.

Somewhere along the way, I became convinced that many forms of suffering emerge from calcification. Individuals calcify. Institutions calcify. Political movements calcify. Religions calcify. Even identities calcify when repeated often enough without examination. People begin as adaptive systems and slowly harden into symbols of themselves. You can watch this happen in real time. A person develops a belief, then begins defending the identity attached to the

belief more fiercely than the belief itself.

Contradictory evidence isn't informational, it's personal. An attack not merely on an idea, but on the architecture of selfhood holding their life together. And to be fair, sometimes that architecture *is* holding their life together.

We need coherence. We need stories capable of carrying us through grief, uncertainty, humiliation, loneliness, boredom, and the psychological burden of existing in a universe where dogs can navigate a person safely through traffic but millions of people still can't look both ways before crossing the street. Reality is thoroughly uneven in its distribution of competence. Coherence becomes dangerous when it loses flexibility.

I think about beliefs less as possessions and more as tools. Some tools are incredibly useful in certain contexts and disastrous in others. A hammer is excellent right up until someone attempts open-heart surgery with one.

The problem is that people often inherit a single conceptual hammer and then spend decades emotionally drywalling every situation they encounter.

This is especially visible in ideological spaces. Every group eventually develops sacred language. Approved narratives. Mandatory assumptions. Internal myths. Ritual phrases functioning less as communication and more as loyalty signaling.

Some communities do this religiously. Others politically. Others academically. Others therapeutically. Some do it in group chats with the emotional temperature of a hostage negotiation.

Most people believe propaganda is something done by hostile governments while remaining completely unaware of the narrative ecosystems shaping their own perception every day.

None of this means "all opinions are equal."

That's another place modern discourse tends to collapse into cartoon versions of itself. The moment someone critiques certainty or simplification, people often assume they're advocating total relativism. As though the only

alternatives are absolute certainty or philosophical jambalaya. Uncertainty doesn't prevent judgment. In fact, contextual thinking creates a heavier ethical responsibility, not a lighter one.

If people are shaped by systems, trauma, incentives, biology, culture, history, and circumstance, then morality becomes more difficult, not less. It requires discernment instead of reflex. Nuance instead of familial automation. The ability to distinguish explanation from excuse, compassion from passivity, openness from surrender.

That's exhausting work. It would be much easier to divide the world cleanly into good people and bad people and spend the remainder of life applauding whichever side currently resembles your own reflection.

Most ideological systems eventually drift toward this because certainty feels stable and tribal belonging feels safe.

But safety and truth are not always friends.

Sometimes the ethical thing is remaining open to revision even when revision is uncomfortable. Sometimes it means admitting your enemies contain fragments of truth. Sometimes it means admitting your allies contain capacities for cruelty they disguise beneath morally fashionable language.

People remain people regardless of ideology.

History repeatedly demonstrates that our capacity for self-justification expands like manifest destiny to accommodate almost any behavior given sufficient narrative support. Give us a flag, a doctrine, a trauma history, a quarterly revenue goal, or a sacred text with enough interpretive flexibility, and we can talk ourselves into nearly anything.

Which sounds pessimistic, and it might be, through that lens – but the inverse is also true.

People are more changeable than rigid systems usually allow. Context can radicalize people toward violence, but it can also radicalize them toward compassion. We can become less cruel. Less fearful. Less performative. More reflective. More permeable. I have to believe that or none

of this is worth writing.

That belief may be the closest thing I have to faith. Not faith in perfection. We are gloriously inconsistent creatures. We routinely sabotage ourselves for reasons so psychologically convoluted they would embarrass a Greek playwright. But I do have faith in adaptation. In dialogue. In curiosity. In the possibility that understanding each other more deeply might reduce at least some unnecessary suffering produced by simplistic narratives and inherited certainties.

Not winning ideological battles. Not constructing flawless identities. Not arriving at a final truth. Just becoming slightly harder to reduce.

If permeability is the instinct, then certain values begin emerging almost accidentally.

Honesty, for example, but not the masturbatory kind people weaponize as an excuse to be cruel. "Brutal honesty" is often just brutality wearing intellectual glasses. Real honesty requires vulnerability. The willingness to remain in contact with reality even when reality damages your preferred self-image. Especially then. Honesty that only operates when it flatters you isn't honesty. It's public relations with better lighting.

Integrity matters for similar reasons. Not purity. Purity is how ideologies become cults and wellness influencers end up selling powdered mushroom crystals to divorced solar panel salesmen.

I mean coherence. Trying, however imperfectly, to make your actions resemble your stated values even when nobody is watching and there's no social reward attached.

That last part matters. Everyone has integrity in front of an audience. The real test is who you become when there's nothing to gain except the private inconvenience of not betraying yourself.

Generosity matters because contextual thinking eventually reveals how fragile people actually are. Everybody is carrying invisible architecture. Shame. Conditioning. Fear. Grief. Entire internal civilizations built

around surviving experiences they rarely discuss openly.

Once you realize that, casual cruelty starts feeling less clever. Generosity is not the same thing as softness. It doesn't mean letting people turn your boundaries into a gas station bathroom. It means refusing to make scarcity your default posture toward the world. Offering attention when contempt would be easier. Offering patience when performance would be more impressive. Offering another person the dignity of complexity before reducing them to whatever they did on their worst afternoon.

Stewardship matters because nothing exists independently for very long. We shape environments. Environments shape us. Culture shapes attention. Attention shapes morality. Technology shapes relationships.

We inherit systems while simultaneously becoming systems future people will inherit from. Participating carelessly in the world becomes indistinguishable from vandalism.

Respect for the sanctity of living things belongs here, too. Though I hesitate over the phrase because sanctity sounds like someone is about to hand me a pamphlet or ask whether I've accepted a suspiciously well-groomed savior into my heart.

Still, I mean it. Not sanctity as doctrine. Sanctity as orientation. The refusal to treat life as raw material for ego, profit, ideology, or convenience. The refusal to turn living things into props in the theater of your self-concept.

A culture that can't respect life eventually starts classifying which lives are useful, disposable, inconvenient, profitable, criminal, sacred, foreign, defective, or acceptable collateral damage. That list always gets longer. So no, this isn't theology. At least I'm not going to say it is. There's no divine command hiding in the wiring. No supernatural claim. No celestial auditor keeping score.

These values feel less like commandments than attention. Honesty preserves contact with reality. Integrity preserves coherence. Generosity preserves trust. Stewardship preserves continuity. Respect preserves life from becoming

inventory. They're not philosophical decoration. They're what keep permeability from becoming shapelessness.

One of the stranger side effects of thinking this way is developing a complicated relationship with the idea of a true self. People talk about authenticity as though somewhere beneath social expectations, cultural conditioning, trauma, performance, insecurity, hormones, advertising, childhood experiences, internet algorithms, and whatever happened to your nervous system during middle school, there exists a pristine and fully original version of you waiting patiently like an unopened Easy-Bake Oven.

I'm not convinced.

That doesn't mean the self is fake. I don't think identity is an illusion so much as an improvisation. Something continuously assembled in collaboration with environment, memory, biology, relationships, and circumstance. Less sculpture than a jam session.

The problem is that modern culture simultaneously demands authenticity and punishes deviation with almost supernatural efficiency. We tell people to "be themselves," then immediately provide an aggressively detailed list of acceptable selves.

Be unique, but legible.

Interesting, but marketable.

Emotionally vulnerable,

but not inconvenient.

Confident, but not arrogant

Traumatized, but inspirational about it.

Different, but in familiar ways.

People increasingly curate themselves like personal museums where every exhibit must remain emotionally accessible to strangers moving past at scrolling speed.

Social media intensified this into identity theater. People now maintain ongoing public relations campaigns for their own personalities. Entire lives become compressed into symbolic gestures designed to communicate belonging, morality, intelligence, taste, politics, desirability, and

suffering quickly enough to survive algorithmic attention spans already chemically damaged by short-form video platforms and whatever dark ritual occurs inside Facebook headquarters.

I understand why – I suppose.

Modern life rewards legibility. Institutions prefer categories because categories are easier to manage. Marketing requires demographic simplification. Politics requires coalition identities. Social systems function through shared symbolic language. Even psychologically, people often need stable narratives to survive themselves.

Identity provides continuity. A coherent story capable of carrying a person through time. The danger begins when the story becomes a prison.

That's part of why I've always felt uneasy around rigid identity structures, including ones I technically belong to. Not because identities are meaningless, but because they are partial. Useful approximations mistaken for total explanations.

A diagnosis can illuminate patterns without defining the entire person. A political identity can describe values without exhausting individuality. A culture can shape someone profoundly without fully determining them. Even personality itself changes more than people want to admit.

Most of us are context-sensitive organisms pretending to be fixed entities because consistency makes social interaction less exhausting.

To some extent, that performance is necessary. You can't renegotiate your entire identity every morning like some maniacal Roman emperor holding a tabula rasa in the metaphysical census bureau.

Society requires continuity. Relationships require reliability. Other people need enough stability to understand who they're speaking to from one conversation to the next.

But I also think many forms of suffering emerge when people become trapped inside identities they originally constructed for survival.

The funny kid who can't stop performing humor long

after the sadness underneath stopped being manageable.

The hyper-competent person who no longer knows how to ask for help.

The strong one.

The agreeable one.

The intellectual one.

The rebel.

The healer.

The victim.

The success story.

The disappointment.

We wear psychological exoskeletons long enough that eventually we mistake adaptation for essence.

Maybe essence is overrated.

I don't know if it's worth trying to find some perfectly authentic core hidden beneath social performance. What interests me more is whether a person remains capable of revision. Of curiosity about themselves. Of adapting consciously instead of unconsciously hardening into whatever identity once kept them safe.

That applies culturally, too. Some people inherit identities so rigid they spend their entire lives defending inherited narratives against reality itself. Others become so obsessed with self-construction that they dissolve into permanent reinvention with no continuity at all.

One calcifies. The other evaporates. Both seem unstable.

What I'm searching for instead is something like adaptive sincerity. Not sinlessness. Not static authenticity. Not endless performance. Just the willingness to participate honestly in the ongoing process of becoming a person while appreciating that the process never fully ends. Which is admittedly less inspiring than enlightenment. But probably more achievable.

I think this is also why beauty started mattering to me differently over time.

Not beauty in the commercial sense. Not optimization masquerading as aesthetics. Not the airbrushed unreality of modern branding where every object, person, and

experience looks as though it was designed by a committee attempting to seduce venture capitalists inside a minimalist spaceship.

I mean beauty as evidence of humanity. Imperfection. Texture. Contradiction. Wear. Improvisation. The visible fingerprints left behind by living.

Systems designed for maximum efficiency eventually become emotionally sterile. Institutions optimize themselves into abstraction. Social interactions become scripted. Art becomes algorithmically flattened into whatever survives engagement metrics. Even people begin sanding off the strange edges of themselves in pursuit of professional legibility and broad social compatibility.

Everything becomes smoother. Cleaner. More optimized. Less alive. Modern culture often treats friction as failure. But friction is also where character lives.

A hand-played song drifts slightly in and out of tempo. An old book yellows unevenly. A repaired object carries visible history. A person says the wrong thing while sincerely trying to say the right one. Someone laughs at the wrong moment because grief and humor occasionally share a nervous system.

That's human texture. Texture matters philosophically because perfection frequently behaves like a denial of reality.

We aren't symmetrical creatures. We are contextual, adaptive, contradictory, emotional, irrational, performative, loving, selfish, frightened animals attempting to construct meaning while trapped inside bodies that can be emotionally destabilized by insufficient sleep or one poorly worded email sent at 5:14 a.m.

The fact that we continue making art at all is kind of incredible.

I've become suspicious of systems promising total optimization because they usually require amputating something difficult but essential from life. Risk creates suffering, but it also creates intimacy.

You can't fully optimize humanity without accidentally

optimizing away portions of what makes us recognizably human in the first place.

Improvisation requires permeability. Attention. Adaptation. Humility. You have to leave room for other people to alter the direction of things. A musician who refuses to listen is just a narcissist with a better microphone.

That may be the closest thing I have to a spiritual framework. Not certainty. Not transcendence. The willingness to remain present inside complexity without demanding total control over it.

I think that's part of why humor remains so important, too. Humor reintroduces looseness into systems trying to become rigid. It punctures self-importance. It reminds us that we are absurd creatures attempting to explain existence while periodically forgetting why we walked into kitchens.

A philosophy without humor eventually becomes authoritarian.

A philosophy without sincerity eventually becomes performance art for emotionally avoidant people.

The balance may be in holding seriousness and absurdity together long enough to remain honest about both. Acknowledging suffering without romanticizing it. Allowing imperfection without collapsing into nihilism. Remaining intellectually flexible without dissolving into meaninglessness. Because in spite of everything, I do believe meaning exists.

Not as a fixed, universal object waiting to be discovered like cosmic car keys hidden beneath the couch cushions of the universe.

Meaning seems more relational than that. Emergent. Something constructed collaboratively between people, experiences, symbols, memory, suffering, expression, and attention.

Some of the most important parts of life only exist because we continue participating in them together despite their impermanence.

Trust. Friendship. Music. Love. Language. Community. Understanding.

None of them are permanent.

All of them matter anyway.

At this point, I realize this probably sounds dangerously close to becoming a belief system, which is unfortunate because one of the recurring themes here has been my distrust of obstinate belief systems.

Still, if there's a central thread running through all of this, I think it's a resistance to reduction. Not because categories are useless. We need models. We need language. We need patterns capable of compressing reality enough to navigate it without psychologically blue-screening in the cereal aisle.

Abstraction isn't the enemy. Without abstraction, civilization collapses into thirty-seven billion individual conversations about whether a chair is technically still a chair. The danger comes when abstractions stop behaving like tools and start behaving like reality itself.

A diagnosis becomes destiny. A political ideology becomes morality. A nation becomes an identity. A religion becomes certainty. A market becomes human value. A social role becomes a prison. A philosophy becomes a substitute for thought instead of a structure that helps thinking continue.

We seem particularly vulnerable to this because we crave stability. We want the world to resolve itself into understandable forms. Ambiguity is cognitively expensive. Contradiction is uncomfortable. Complexity makes people tired – and tired people can become authoritarian in direct proportion to how badly they need certainty to calm their nervous system. I sympathize with that impulse more than I want to.

There's a reason people retreat into strict systems during periods of instability. Ideology can function psychologically like scaffolding. It creates structure where chaos previously existed. It tells people who they are, what matters, who belongs, who threatens the structure, and what future they should imagine.

That's powerful. Especially in a fragmented culture where many people feel socially, economically, spiritually, and mentally untethered. But every structure extracts a cost.

The more complete the system claims to be, the more human complexity it usually has to shave away to maintain coherence.

Remaining open to revision is emotionally exhausting. It means tolerating uncertainty without immediately anesthetizing yourself with ideology, cynicism, superiority, belonging, or the comforting fantasy that your particular group finally solved the human condition sometime around 2017.

It means admitting you are susceptible to propaganda. Susceptible to performance. Susceptible to self-deception. Susceptible to social incentives disguised as morality. Susceptible to constructing identities around lies. Susceptible to becoming the kind of person you currently believe only other people become.

That realization can either make a person more compassionate or completely unbearable. Sometimes both. I think there's ethical value in maintaining awareness of your own permeability. The moment a person becomes absolutely convinced they exist outside manipulation, history usually begins loading a presentation titled Catastrophic Events.

We are influenceable creatures. We imitate each other constantly. Emotionally. Linguistically. Politically. Aesthetically. Entire cultures emerge from repeated acts of collective mimicry layered over older acts of collective mimicry until eventually nobody remembers who started what.

Civilization is partially inherited wisdom and partially socially reinforced improv comedy with infrastructure.

I don't want detachment masquerading as enlightenment. I don't want the kind of intellectual posture where someone becomes so committed to ambiguity that they can no longer meaningfully participate in moral reality.

Endless deconstruction eventually collapses into paralysis. At some point, you still have to choose how to treat people. You still have to decide what kind of systems you want to support. You still have to act despite incomplete knowledge.

We're required to make consequential decisions while permanently unfinished. No final certainty arrives beforehand. No universal narrator descends from the ceiling to confirm the correct interpretation of existence. No philosophical framework removes the burden of judgment.

There's only participation. Revision. Responsibility. Conversation. Error. Adaptation.

Maybe wisdom isn't the elimination of contradiction, but learning how to carry contradiction consciously without allowing it to harden into cruelty or collapse into despair. I realize that sounds suspiciously hopeful.

I'm trying to be responsible with it.

I don't know if this qualifies as a philosophy in the formal sense. It may just be what happens when a person spends too long examining the machinery underneath things and eventually realizes the machinery extends all the way down.

At a certain depth, every system opens into another system. Psychology opens into sociology. Sociology opens into economics and history. History opens into mythology, geography, violence, survival, resource distribution, fear, storytelling, and biology. Identity opens into performance. Performance opens into adaptation. Adaptation opens into vulnerability. Eventually the clean borders separating things begin dissolving, and reality starts resembling less a machine than an ecosystem: interconnected, unstable, collaborative, predatory, beautiful, inefficient, constantly revising itself through conflict and improvisation. Which can become overwhelming if you let it.

There's a special kind of burnout that comes from seeing too many layers at once. Not 'intelligence' exhaustion exactly. Interpretive exhaustion. The fatigue of perpetually contextualizing.

Every opinion arrives carrying hidden architecture. Every institution contains incentives. Every ideology contains emotional needs disguised as universal truths. Every person contains contradictions large enough to destabilize whatever simplified story you originally constructed about them.

Including yourself.

Especially yourself.

The deeper you examine people, the harder it becomes to sustain absolute narratives without intentionally ignoring pieces of reality that refuse to cooperate. People are too adaptive. Too contextual. Too unfinished. We're constantly influencing and revising one another in ways most of us barely perceive while it's happening.

Despite all of that complexity, we still wake up every morning and attempt the impossible task of becoming coherent enough to participate in society. That alone deserves more sympathy than modern culture usually provides.

We're expected to construct stable identities while living inside economic systems that reward performance, technological systems that reward simplification, political systems that reward outrage, and social systems increasingly organized around visibility instead of understanding. We're encouraged to become brands, demographics, algorithms, audiences, optimized productivity units, carefully managed narratives. The pressure to become legible has never been higher.

Legibility is seductive. A fixed identity provides continuity. A rigid ideology provides belonging. A totalizing worldview provides emotional architecture. I understand the appeal. There are days I would love nothing more than to wake up with the unshakable confidence of a man explaining cryptocurrency beside a rented Lamborghini on YouTube.

Imagine the psychological freedom: No ambiguity. No recursive self-analysis. Just absolute conviction wrapped in sunglasses and poor financial decisions.

But reality keeps producing contradictions. Good people causing harm. Broken people creating beauty. Intelligent people believing nonsense. Cruel systems maintained by otherwise decent individuals. Sincere movements becoming dogmatic. Communities built around liberation reproducing the same hierarchies they originally formed to escape. People leak complexity everywhere.

Is this point where this stops being merely an intellectual framework and becomes an ethical one?

Once you recognize how contextual and unfinished people are, cruelty becomes harder to justify casually.

Not impossible. Some behaviors genuinely require resistance. Some systems genuinely produce suffering.

Boundaries matter. Accountability matters. Moral judgment matters. But simplification starts feeling dangerous.

The temptation to reduce people into categories, symbols, enemies, diagnoses, stereotypes, or ideological abstractions begins resembling a kind of perceptual violence. A refusal to encounter the unstable fullness of another person because complexity interferes with certainty. Certainty is emotionally efficient. You can build entire identities around certainty. Entire careers. Entire political movements. Entire religions.

Certainty organizes reality into manageable terrain. It transforms ambiguity into narrative and narrative into belonging. But belonging purchased through reduction often extracts a hidden cost. Eventually someone has to be flattened to preserve the system's coherence. Someone has to become the villain. The outsider. The irrational one. The deviant.

The contaminated category threatening the structure from outside.

History repeats this pattern so consistently that it almost feels less like a mistake and more like a perpetual social amnesia.

Healthy systems, individual or collective, require permeability the same way living organisms require exchange with their environment. Anything completely sealed eventually begins consuming itself internally.

People do this. Institutions do this. Ideologies do this.

The refusal to revise becomes a form of decay. Maybe revision is what I actually mean when I talk about philosophy.

Not the construction of perfect explanatory systems, but the willingness to remain in conversation with reality even

after reality becomes uncomfortable.

Especially then.

To admit you are influenceable. To admit your perspective is partial. To admit your enemies may occasionally contain fragments of truth. To admit your allies may still be capable of cruelty. To admit identity itself may be less fixed than performed into temporary stability through repetition and social reinforcement. Now I'm doing that guitar-solo thing where I repeat myself so I'd better wrap this meandering Type II up.

That kind of uncertainty can feel destabilizing at first. But over time, I've started wondering if instability isn't always a flaw. Sometimes instability is simply evidence that something is alive. A jazz performance is unstable. A conversation is unstable. Democracy is unstable. Love is unstable. Consciousness itself appears alarmingly unstable if you observe it long enough.

Instability also permits adaptation. Growth. Improvisation. The possibility that people and systems can become something other than what they currently are.

Not because history guarantees progress. History guarantees almost nothing besides repetition with updated technology. People remain perfectly capable of barbarism while carrying smartphones and discussing mindfulness podcasts.

But people do change. Communities change. Language changes. Understanding changes.

Sometimes slowly. Sometimes painfully. Sometimes through conflict. Sometimes through art, humor, conversation, or the gradual accumulation of small acts of recognition between imperfect people trying unsuccessfully to explain themselves to one another.

Which may be the most human thing we do.

Not achieving certainty. Not transcending contradiction. Not escaping complexity.

Trying anyway.

Trying to build meaning despite incompleteness. Trying to care for each other despite projection and

misunderstanding. Trying to remain honest despite the constant temptation of performance. Trying to stay open without dissolving. Trying to construct lives containing enough beauty, humor, curiosity, sincerity, and connection to justify the strange experience of existing at all.

I don't think wisdom (or philosophy) means solving the human condition. Most days I'd settle for reducing the amount of unnecessary suffering produced by people absolutely convinced they've already solved it.

That feels ambitious enough.

In the end, I suspect meaning isn't something we discover fully formed beneath reality like buried treasure waiting for sufficiently intelligent philosophers to excavate it.

Which makes meaning fragile. Trust is fragile. Love is fragile. Art is fragile. Democracy is fragile. Understanding is fragile. Life is fragile. And maybe recognizing that fragility without retreating into cynicism is the closest thing I have to faith. Not faith in perfection. Not faith in certainty. Not faith in humanity as some inherently noble species marching heroically toward enlightenment while live-streaming dance trends and arguing online. Just faith that openness matters. That curiosity matters. That people can revise themselves.

That understanding each other more deeply might reduce at least some unnecessary suffering generated by fear, simplification, and inherited certainty.

Which is, admittedly, less dramatic than salvation. But it feels more honest.

For now, honesty seems like a reasonable place to stop.

Godtism Spectrum Disorder

I don't think we should call religion an early attempt at science. Theory? Sure. Explanation apparatus? Fine. Crops fail. People die. Somebody prays, kills a goat, burns the good herbs, and their sick kid feels better. Stimulus, response – are we running the cosmic experiment or is God? Nobody's released the methodology and the peer-review process appears to involve frogs and locusts.

Let's not mistake longevity for insight. Whatever religion was in antiquity – cosmology, weather report, grief manual, community theater with livestock – it got molded pretty quickly into a coordination system. Why waste time explaining how the universe works when not knowing can regulate behavior just as well? Religion is the "because I said so" parent of the scientific and political world: cosmically credentialed and constitutionally unable to answer any follow-up questions.

Freud, who was always ready to shit in humanity's Cheerios and then explain the bowl as a psychosexual symbol, called religious ideas illusions – beliefs powered by old wishes rather than secured by evidence. He didn't mean illusion in the Harry Potter sense. More Penn and Teller: deliberately built around a script, indispensable to the audience's immersion, and completely porous once somebody turns on the lights. Build a performance around fear. Make the whole world your audience. Soothe anxieties with hierarchical stories about suffering, obedience, and hope. The love child of Stephen King and Philip K. Dick couldn't have improved it. It's a user manual for living in permanent dystopia without losing your fucking mind or revolting.

So this is where I get to the point, I guess.

From my Neurodeviant vantage point, the dog-and-pony-

and-occasional-donkey show has always been painfully visible. Not false, necessarily. I'm not claiming gods, spirits, magic, afterlives, ancestral presences, reincarnation, universal consciousness, or an omnipotent ferret named Kevin are impossible. The universe hasn't asked my permission and seems unlikely to start now.

The problem is the compulsory pageantry. Institutional religion doesn't offer comprehension, it demands performance. Explanation arrives stapled to submission. Comfort gets distributed through ritual and symbolic authority. Somehow, this is considered the default human setting.

It isn't mine.

Before the Department of Nuance kicks in the door: this isn't a Unified Theory of Autistic Disbelief. Autistic people can be devout, superstitious, authoritarian, credulous, contradictory, and gloriously full of shit with the best of humanity. Autism isn't a truth serum – and anyone cataloguing atypical minds as a single cognitive species is probably selling something.

I'm writing (mostly) about institutional, authority-heavy religion – particularly the Christian machinery most familiar to me – not every practice humans have improvised around fires, graves, kitchens, birthday parties, French press technique, or ketamine. My narrower suggestion is that many religious systems assume an appetite for belonging, shared metaphor, synchronized emotion, and love for authority that some neurodeviant minds don't receive as self-evident. The software doesn't always come preinstalled and the helpdesk keeps answering procedural questions about the documentation with "instinctual reverence."

Here's where I get to my point. Again.

Religion ultimately isn't about whether you believe. That's the decoy question, the bright mobile of lambs and wolves twirling over the crib. The operational question is: who's watching?

Many a comedian has been asked, "Have you found Jesus?" only to discover nobody knew he was missing.

The joke works because faith is presumed to be part of our original programming – something misplaced during adolescence like a Trapper Keeper or one's virginity, then recovered later in life in the form of a socially acceptable personality.

But if I never had a Trapper Keeper, why would I look for it?

As a child, I remember thinking: this is theater. I'm sure I didn't use those exact words. "Theater" still sounds a bit one-dimensional unless we're discussing a building or a troupe of singers and dancers. Actually, let's forget the building analogy before I get fined for not having all of my permits in order. But I knew everyone was acting their little hearts out, like a middle-aged Roger Rocka's actor belting out "Oklahoma!" six times a week for eight dollars a night and the actuarially negligible chance of being discovered by a Broadway producer who got lost on Highway 99.

You're expected to learn the choreography. And act like it matters. Stand. Sit. Sing. Lower your head. Raise your hands. Stand in line for a shot of blood. Produce the approved facial arrangements. Deviation brought correction and communal shame, not because anyone had been harmed, but because it reminded everyone that this was a performance. The crucial difference between actors and congregants is that actors generally leave the stage without insisting they were never pretending.

This isn't a setup for a theological cage match. I wouldn't credit myself with pure logic either. Madness at its finest, ladies and/or/nor gentlemen. But why does it matter whether I join the chorus line and practice my ecclesiastical jazz hands? Why would a person of strong faith be injured by my doubt? If the structure is ontologically sound, my raised eyebrow shouldn't constitute a metaphysical Chernobyl.

Then comes autistic literalism, commonly translated as "the inability to understand metaphor." I understand metaphor. I just don't consecrate shitty ones. It's not that I missed your joke. I understood it, conducted a brief internal review, and declined to falsify a laugh. Likewise,

"it's a metaphor" isn't a universal repair kit. You can't slap those words over a contradiction and declare the problem fixed. Fantasy is fun. Poetry is a thing – sometimes a good thing, I'm told. But rebranding literature as ontology, then diagnosing disagreement as a moral defect isn't metaphor, it's category fraud with frankincense.

Maybe autistic literalism isn't lexicological inflexibility so much as an insistence on labeling the border between fact and fiction. A metaphor can illuminate reality. It can't become reality merely because a committee has sung about it.

Most institutional religions arrive with a prefab chain of command. God above humanity (you). Clergy above laity (probably you). Doctrine above interpretation. Orthodoxy above doubt. There it is, my point. Finally.

The structure is justified circularly and defended emotionally. God is higher because God is higher. Don't ask questions, you incorrigible little heretic. I'll wash your goddamn mouth out with soap if you don't honor your mother and father, just like I sai—I mean, like God says. Yes, it's an astonishing coincidence that the creator of two trillion galaxies despises exactly the same people I do. This confirms my humility. This detour has been brought to you by ADHD. We now return to our regularly scheduled blasphemy.

Hierarchy isn't inherently nonsense. A surgeon should outrank me during surgery. And whoever understands the electrical panel gets veto power over my experimental rewiring. Functional hierarchy preserves knowledge and keeps the building from becoming a memorial plaque.

The problem is hierarchy whose primary function is preserving hierarchy. What does each rank do? What problem does it solve? What happens if an entire tier of administrators disappears one day? Religion often answers with reverent silence followed, ironically, by escalating consequences.

An omnipotent being doesn't need affirmation. An omniscient being doesn't need reminders. An

omnibenevolent being shouldn't threaten punishment for insufficient enthusiasm. Those behaviors make sense for kings, managers, authoritarian parents, and institutions sweating over their latest sexual assault controversy. They make considerably less sense for the timeless architect of reality.

At that point religion starts resembling cosmic administration. Prayer becomes reporting. Confession becomes internal audit. Worship becomes a public loyalty statement. The afterlife is deferred compensation with vesting requirements and a noncompete clause. Welcome to the metaphysical panopticon. Keep your RFID chip visible.

Freud's practical point in The Future of an Illusion was that religion keeps its grip partly by converting fear into dependency, then offering itself as protection. Protection, notably, that requires loyalty, obedience, and ritual affirmation. Anyone who's worked for a shitty manager or grown up with an authoritarian parent knows the arrangement: I'm the danger from which only I can save you. That isn't transcendence. It's extortion with a pipe organ.

Call it neurotypical technology, if you like – not because every neurotypical person believes, but because the interface rewards dominant social instincts: synchronize, defer, signal, belong. Some of us keep clicking "advanced settings" and wondering why the customer service bot keeps crashing.

Two Ways of Knowing, One Persistent Misunderstanding

Most arguments between religion and its critics are staged as disputes over content. Did the miracle happen? Did the prophet get the message? Is the text divine or merely historical? Everybody brings citations, nobody accepts the other side's authorities, and six hours later the folding chairs have achieved enlightenment.

The deeper conflict isn't over what's known. It's over how a claim gets recognized as knowledge in the first place.

For convenience – and with the usual apology for committing taxonomy in public – call one approach narrative epistemology. Truth travels through story, stabilized by authority and repetition. Meaning comes before verification. Contradiction is tolerable as long as the narrative remains socially intact. Knowledge is inherited, rehearsed, and affirmed before witnesses. Academics call this "discourse" when they'd like the shit sandwich to receive tenure.

Call the other approach structural or procedural epistemology. Truth stays provisional. Claims are valued for coherence, observable consequence, predictive use, and survival under unfriendly questions. Authority doesn't generate truth. It proposes, certifies, conceals, and gatekeeps it. Stories can contain meaning without becoming mechanism.

These are tendencies, not neurological castes. Most minds use both. The difference is priority: when story and structure collide, which one keeps the house? Narrative can preserve memory and coordinate care. Method fetishists build cathedrals to their priors every day and call the tap water holy.

The trouble begins when a methodological difference becomes a moral diagnosis.

Institutional religion depends heavily on narrative legitimacy because its central claims are rarely falsifiable in any ordinary sense (nor are they meant to be). Mystery, transcendence, revelation, and sacred context insulate the model. Doubt doesn't invite revision. It proves the doubter has failed to receive the transmission correctly.

From my Neurodeviant standpoint, this isn't mainly offensive. It's baffling. The printer says "out of paper," and everyone else has agreed the message means I lack humility.

A story can preserve memory, humanize suffering, or smuggle truth past a defensive intellect. It can do remarkable work. It gets fragile when asked to carry ontology by itself.

Religious systems regularly ask stories to support the roof. Creation narratives become explanatory foundations. Moral tales become prescriptive law. Symbol becomes

command. Allegory acquires police powers. Once the story is infrastructure, questioning it isn't curiosity. You're not asking whether the floor is rotten, you're upsetting Grandma.

The Neurodeviant question often isn't "Is this comforting?" but "Does this work?" Does it explain more than it hides? Does it scale beyond the village, century, climate, or ruling class that produced it? What happens when two sacred stories issue incompatible building codes?

The response is usually social rather than procedural. Faith isn't about logic. Mystery is beneficial. Demanding coherence misses the point.

That last part is revealingly true. The point often isn't understanding. It's belonging.

Autism – famously unreliable at placing belonging above understanding merely because everyone else has – may not find that persuasive.

Narrative authority resolves disagreement by lineage, office, tradition, or a committee whose name contains an alarming number of capital letters. Texts are sacred because the authorized lineage says they're sacred. Interpretations are correct because the correct interpreters interpreted them. It's epistemic circularity dressed in its Sunday Best.

This doesn't work so well for minds that treat authority as a hypothesis rather than a conclusion. Why this text and not another? Why this interpretation and not the one it replaced? Why does spiritual authority cluster so reliably around people already empowered to enforce it? If doctrine is eternal, why does it keep developing the moral sensibilities of whichever century threatens its tax status?

These questions sound impolite because they bypass reverence. They also expose the scaffolding. Once authority looks contingent rather than intrinsic, revelation starts resembling governance. The sacred becomes administrative. The ineffable needs meeting minutes.

Contradiction helps preserve the arrangement. Paradox becomes holy. Enigmas become sacred. Inconsistency becomes proof that the material is too deep for ordinary

cognition – a marvelous business model for whoever controls the interpretive bullhorn.

Structural thinking is less romantic. Contradiction isn't a serpent guarding wisdom. It's diagnostic information. The model may need refinement, compartmentalization, or rehoming to a "nice farm in the country." Holding incompatible claims can be psychologically necessary, politically expedient, or artistically productive. It isn't automatically evidence of transcendence.

That doesn't make structural thinking intellectually superior. Brilliant people inhabit narrative systems; fools weaponize spreadsheets. Shared meaning can keep a community alive. Coherence can become sterile and cruel. The conflict sharpens when symbolic language gets promoted into literal infrastructure and guarded by punishment. Then critique stops looking like disagreement. It looks like a system error. So the institution blames the user.

Belief Has Knees

If epistemology reveals what a system calls truth, ritual reveals what its etymological evolution.

Belief is airy. Ritual has knees.

You don't merely assent. You stand, kneel, bow, chant, fast, sing, confess, consume, abstain, and return next week to do it again. Religion doesn't need to know whether you understand the doctrine. It needs to know whether you can keep time.

Durkheim – who had the social scientist's habit of watching people have feelings and turning the result into a noun – understood ritual as synchronized cohesion. Bodies perform the same movements and generate collective effervescence: the voltage of being absorbed into something larger. The experience is real. So is the alignment it produces. Belief helps. Compliance is easier to govern.

Repetition can be grounding. Autistic people are hardly unfamiliar with the relief of one thing that doesn't renegotiate the contract mid-sentence. But chosen repetition

and compulsory repetition aren't the same species. One regulates. The other conditions.

Ritual trains automaticity and gradually uncouples form from consideration. The participant isn't asked what the words mean now, only to keep them moving. Phrases exhausted three hundred Sundays ago can feel like a verbal treadmill with no emergency stop. The words don't deepen. They thin.

The institution calls that discomfort immaturity. Another possibility is that the ritual withdraws more than it deposits. The account is overdrawn. The choir still expects everyone to smile and sing along.

Ritual isn't merely symbolic, it's instructional. Stand here. Sit there. Speak now. Be silent now. Face forward. Bow your head. Raise your hands. Consume this. Refuse that. Touch the stranger. Don't touch yourself, you little pervert. These commands encode hierarchy directly into the body. You don't have to believe in authority to practice submission. You only have to rehearse it.

This isn't always sinister. Bodies learn through practice, as any fitness influencer will explain before selling you powdered certainty in a plastic tub. Shared movement can create trust and solidarity. The problem starts when embodied obedience gets mistaken for inward assent.

Religion conflates participation with conviction because participation is visible and conviction is inconveniently private. Bodies become proxies for belief. Move correctly and you belong. Hesitate, fidget, remain seated, miss the cue, refuse the touch, or wear the wrong expression and your body begins giving testimony against you.

Autistic bodies are poor witnesses for the prosecution. They process sound, light, proximity, smell, posture, and forced stillness differently. A sanctuary full of amplification, old lady perfume, incense, handshakes, surprise touch, food from unknown kitchens, and a speaker who thinks volume is a form of exegesis becomes an endurance test. Surviving gets read as devotion. Struggling gets read as failure.

Sensory overload isn't an ethical weakness. It's a

physiological event. Yet systems organized around visible participation routinely confuse inability with unwillingness. A person leaves the room to regulate and returns as a cautionary tale. Those who tolerate the environment seem sincere, those who can't are filed in the usual bins: difficult, distracted, uncommitted, needs more prayer.

Religion borrowed this machinery from every institution that mistakes conformity for capacity and put a halo over it.

This is where masking enters, quietly sits in the back pew, and gets mistaken for the Holy Spirit.

Masking isn't deception, it's compliance – the learned performance required to move through an environment without triggering correction or abuse. Autistic people study the grammar. We learn when to stand, where to look, how long to pause, which questions are welcomed, and which ones cause everyone in the room to start sucking their teeth. We learn that hesitation reads as disrespect. Sincerity gets measured by fluency, not understanding. We learn to produce the expected response before deciding whether the expectation deserves one. None of this requires belief. It requires pattern recognition and sufficient fear of consequence.

From the institution's side, it looks like faith. From the inside, it can feel like unpaid labor. Energy spent maintaining everyone else's confidence that the room contains one reality. Public alignment whether the soul signed the paperwork or not.

When the mask slips, the response gets moralized. We've "lost faith," as though it were in a wallet misplaced near the hymnal rack along with the virginity joke. The possibility that conviction was never present would expose how much of the institution runs on borrowed affect – and invite everyone to ask whether their certainty is an experience, a habit, or three terrified children in a trench coat. So departure becomes a fall. But you can't lose what you never had. Sometimes what ends isn't 'belief'. It's counterfeiting your own consciousness for the comfort of a bunch of busybodies.

The Mismanagement of Doubt

Once a system has trained minds through bodies through ritual and accepted performance as belief, it encounters the perennial nuisance of human variance. People hesitate. People ask procedural questions. People stop pretending. People leave during the final song because the parking lot has one exit and salvation apparently doesn't require courteous driving. At that point religion stops explaining meaning and starts managing deviation.

Foucault's useful insight wasn't simply that institutions punish. Everybody notices the dungeon eventually. Modern power prefers discipline because it's quieter and more intimate: install the ICE agent inside the subject and people correct themselves. Religious pastoral power rehearsed this machinery long before human resource departments or surveillance cameras existed.

Doubt, in that arrangement, isn't an intellectual exploration, it's deviance – not because one nervous mammal can injure eternal truth, but because visible doubt threatens coordination.

Religious discipline arrives under pastoral aliases: concern, accountability, restoration, love. You aren't punished but "called back," not excluded but "prayed for" with enough identifying detail to constitute a press release. You're coerced to understand how deeply your unapproved interior life has wounded the community. The vocabulary is therapeutic. The function is regulatory.

Constant enforcement becomes unnecessary once conscience becomes surveillance and guilt becomes internalized authority. Believers learn not only what to say but what not to think. Doubt is allowed if it resolves into stronger faith before the testimonial ends. Questions are welcome until they refuse to convert themselves into obedience.

Autistic inquiry can collide with this boundary without recognizing it as a boundary. A request for clarification suddenly attracts suspicion. A consistency check gets recoded as insolence. The curiosity once praised as

“seeking” becomes the sin of pride when it keeps seeking after the pre-approved answer arrives.

The institution no longer needs to persuade. It only needs to correct.

Religion also has a technical problem it can’t solve openly: texts don’t govern themselves. A book doesn’t climb down from the shelf, resolve its contradictions, decide whether shellfish, cheeseburgers, or pedophilia remain a moral emergency, and issue a revised handbook. Somebody decides when God is speaking literally, historically, poetically, or through a suspiciously well-connected real-estate developer.

Religious authority might call this interpretive stewardship. In practice, it often becomes selective literalism applied asymmetrically and revised whenever institutional stability requires it. The rules are eternal. The interpretations have a seasonal fashion line.

The flexibility is necessary. A fully literal religion collapses under contradiction; a fully metaphorical one loses coercive leverage. Authority oscillates. Clarity when obedience is required, faith when coherence is inconvenient.

Autism watches this broken metronome with the wrong kind of attention.

Literalism is demanded downward, where it produces compliance. Metaphor is granted upward, where it preserves discretion. Marginalized people meet a God with exacting opinions about bodies, gender, family, and the dimensions of a life. Authority meets a God who appreciates context, delay, and second chances.

When debate threatens hierarchy, “the text is clear” ends the meeting. When the text threatens institutional survival, metaphor arrives with coffee and asks everyone to be reasonable.

The document remains sacred throughout. This doesn’t require a room full of villains twirling clerical mustaches – though, historically, it doesn’t seem to have hurt the cause. The machinery needs roles, not evil masterminds. Authority has to bend to survive. Bending creates exemptions,

exemptions create hypocrisy, hypocrisy gets rebranded as wisdom, discernment, or nuance. The peons receive the asymmetry as a lesson in humility.

Once the man behind the curtain is revealed, reverence can die without drama. No thunderstorm. No shattered stained glass. No plague of firstborns eating all our crops. Doctrine becomes provisional, obedience becomes negotiable, and the institution stops feeling necessary.

That's more dangerous than anger. Anger still grants the institution a starring role. Indifference leaves it monologuing to an empty theater. This applies to narcissistic abusers, too. Coincidence?

Religious punishment isn't always spectacular. Excommunication, shunning, denunciation, and Hell remain available in the premium package, but quieter tools scale better. The withdrawal of trust. The lost invitation. The supervised conversation. The cooling of warmth once advertised as unconditional. The rumor phrased as concern.

Punishment works best when it's diffuse enough to resist naming. Nobody punished you for disbelief. Doors got heavier. Belonging developed bars no one remembers installing. Religion doesn't need a literal prison. It needs a community capable of distributing correction while preserving everyone's innocence.

Autistic people may be especially vulnerable because many of us take declared systems seriously. If a community advertises unconditional love, we may commit the social error of reading the label. When belonging turns out to be conditional, the contradiction doesn't vanish because everyone has agreed not to mention it. The institution diagnoses coldness, pride, bitterness, or rebellion. Often, the actual offense is pattern recognition.

Fear does the rest. Not only hellfire, though the classics remain popular, but isolation, familial rupture, loss of identity, and social death. Efficient discipline only has to demonstrate that punishment is possible and let imagination finish the architecture. Enter the fallen believer, the apostate whose life unraveled, and the rebellious child whose

misfortune confirms the actuarial department of God. These stories aren't data. They're warnings wearing the costume of testimony.

Eventually the question becomes logistical: Is the cost of pretending higher than the cost of leaving?

For some autistic people, the answer becomes yes. Fear hasn't disappeared. Counterfeit participation has simply become its own form of attrition.

When I ask why a rule exists, I'm asking about harm, purpose, history, and consequence. If the response is discipline, that response contains information: the rule exists chiefly to be followed.

Order over understanding. Stability over revision. Compliance over coherence.

The conversation was an obedience check wearing a little 'dialogue' sorting hat.

Ethics Without a Cosmic Middle Manager

After authority becomes legible, a peculiar thing happens: morality doesn't collapse. Suffering still hurts. Compassion doesn't expire because the Office of Divine Morality issued a license. People even return shopping carts without expecting celestial applause.

Religion often presents this as a crisis only religion can solve: without God, why be good? It's rhetorically powerful and psychologically revealing. If the only barrier between somebody and atrocity is supernatural surveillance, I'd prefer they remain religious and perhaps avoid owning firearms.

Most people behave ethically for messier reasons. We live among vulnerable beings, recognize pain, anticipate consequence, seek reciprocity, and occasionally imagine a life beyond our own skin. None of this guarantees goodness.

Neither does doctrine.

Neurodeviant reasoning can make the distinction visible because it often strips ethics of ceremonial packaging. Harm matters because it harms. Fairness matters because asymmetry destabilizes trust. Rules that mutate according

to rank aren't protections. They're permissions for power. No cosmic rape kit required.

Religious ethics are commonly top-down. God commands. Humans comply. Morality is granted rather than built through the difficult observation that other creatures are real.

This simplifies enforcement but creates a question my autistic mind can't politely misplace: if an action is wrong, shouldn't it stay wrong regardless of who forbids it? Euthyphro, who's been waiting in the lobby for about twenty-four centuries, enters the mandatory weekly Zoom meeting.

If cruelty becomes acceptable when God commands it, then command – not compassion – is the moral center. If kindness is good only because God rewards it, kindness has become a transaction. If obedience itself is the highest virtue, ethics has become a PR department for sovereignty.

My calculation usually starts elsewhere: not "What am I allowed to do?" but "What will happen if I do this?" Intent, context, consequence, and power matter. Divine branding adds no moral weight. And the harmed person's doctrinal category subtracts none.

Rules that protect vulnerable beings make sense. Rules that protect hierarchy while injuring people don't become ethical because they share a binding with the first group. Calling both sacred is a category error. The institution repairs the error by declaring obedience a moral good in itself. That isn't ethics, it's authority admiring itself in moral language.

Another persistent myth about Neurodeviants is that we lack empathy. Sometimes what's missing is patience for asymmetrical empathy – compassion that must flow upward toward authority before it's allowed to move sideways toward an injured person.

Religion can structure care vertically. God is loved first. Authority is respected next. Other people receive compassion after doctrine checks their social media to confirm they have #Blessed in their bio. Abuse justified

through scripture, exclusion defended as doctrine, cruelty repackaged as correction – the harm enters dirty and leaves wearing a chasuble.

This doesn't make autistic people saints. It means some of us encounter suffering before anyone locates the chapter, verse, or approved victim. Harm matters because it harms. If an action causes injury, why should its wrongness depend on endorsement? If it causes none, how does authority's disgust manufacture a victim?

At this point the defense pivots from obedience to relationship. God wants love. Worship is gratitude.

Maybe, I don't know the guy. But the relational metaphor doesn't improve while coercion remains in the room pretending to be a loving diety.

A being worthy of worship shouldn't require it. A being secure in its goodness shouldn't threaten punishment for insufficient admiration. A being capable of fabricating spacetime shouldn't behave like an insecure autocrat checking the loyalty coffers after every hymn.

Those dynamics make social and institutional sense. Powerful humans reclassify deference as love because "please participate in my emotional manipulation" performs poorly in marketing tests. Metaphysically, it's a strange fucking need.

If an omniscient god exists, that god apprehends every famine, assault, terrified child, crushed animal, and quiet despair at once, without the mercy of distraction. Why would such a being demand praise rather than relief? Why would doubt offend it? Why would honest questions from a nervous mammal register as treason?

This is where nihilism gets rolled into the room beneath a sheet. Without God, nothing matters. The universe is cold. Everybody steals the silver.

Things matter precisely because they happen to finite beings in unrecoverable time. Pain doesn't need eternity to hurt. Love doesn't need cosmic permanence to alter a life. A temporary creature isn't an unreal creature. If anything, finitude raises the stakes. There's no celestial extended

warranty guaranteed to repair what we permit here.

Meaning doesn't evaporate when authority does. It localizes. Ethics without command isn't effortless or pure. It's contextual, revisable, and labor-intensive. It asks us to take responsibility without outsourcing the process upward. That's uncomfortable for systems built around obedience. It's less frightening to minds that never found obedience particularly reassuring.

Religion offers effortless moral clarity. I'd rather do the moral labor.

Religion persists less because it explains the universe well than because it coordinates uncertain humans. It offers scripts for grief, belonging, obedience, hope, and the intolerable fact that people we love keep becoming intolerable. It preserves traditions, organizes care, stabilizes hierarchy, and turns contingency into a story with assigned seating. As technologies go, it's ancient, adaptable, and astonishingly resilient.

I haven't argued that religion is 'false'. That trial is older than most of the evidence. I'm arguing that institutional religion is ableist – optimized around certain cognitive and social priorities, then advertised as the native condition of humanity.

Autism doesn't inherently refute religion, but it reveals its assumptions: Hierarchy will feel comforting rather than arbitrary. Repetition will feel grounding rather than expensive. Contradiction can be tolerated in exchange for belonging. Authority will remain credible even when it exempts itself from its own rules. Public performance is a reasonable proxy for private conviction.

Some autistic people accept or renegotiate those terms, creating practices that are rigorous, sensory-conscious, and hospitable to doubt. That isn't necessarily rebellion. Often, it's incompatibility.

When religion stops feeling inevitable, it becomes optional. Systems that depend on inevitability don't respond well to optionality. They recode it as pride, defiance, ingratitude, corruption, or spiritual failure because they lack

a category for "your mind doesn't fit my presumptions, and it's my good Christian duty to shame you for it." Autism supplies that category, inconveniently.

Religion works when people accept its trade-offs. Autism notices the price.

That's why leaving can feel like relief. What ends is sometimes labor: pretending ritual explains, tolerating contradiction for other people's comfort, and counterfeiting assent so the room can preserve its preferred reality.

When that labor stops, the world doesn't collapse, it gets quieter. That quiet is unsettling to institutions built on noise.

Religion has coordinated communities, preserved memory, fed people, accompanied the dying, sheltered the frightened, and inspired art. It has also disciplined bodies, sanctified hierarchy, licensed cruelty, and punished variance. Both records belong in the archive. Explanation isn't absolution and critique doesn't erase care.

The danger isn't that religion will disappear. It won't. Humans can sacralize an iced coffee. The danger is insisting that one technology's design assumptions are moral facts – then punishing every mind that can't or won't run the program.

Autism keeps pointing at the mismatch. It doesn't necessarily ask religion to disappear. Sometimes it just asks to be excused.

And in a system that equates obedience with virtue, asking to be excused may be the most disruptive act of all.

The Finality of Religion: A Study of Institutional Inconsistency Using Morally-Coded Language for the Purpose of Shame, Power, and Shared Delusion

Abstract: The hardest part about responding to prompts without using "outside sources" is that I'm never sure if my brain counts as an outside source. I'm beginning, increasingly, to believe that it does. Which is kinda sad, if you think about it (but please don't, thinking isn't in the university charter), that the institution supposedly built on creating and nurturing a community of thinkers has devolved to the point where discourse is limited to properly MLA-formatted course material excerpts and practice has become checking your financial aid status and complying with communication policies. On the other hand, we did discuss my brain as a class – or I did, at least. Now I'm faced with a decision: do I begin with, "The thesis of this paper is…" or "Since the dawn of time, man has wrestled with the question of…"?

Introduction: Semantic Satiation and Stealing Sips of Communion Wine

Webster – this guy I met once at a seedy dive bar philosophy conference – defines my original definition of religion when starting this course as: "I consider religion anything that's organized in a social-structural way around aligning with a predefined belief system (could that mean political parties? Activist associations? Cults? Situationally, I think it qualifies). This is different from what I consider 'faith'. Faith is about belief without - or in spite of - evidence. Religion is a construct of control and hierarchy that often manipulates the weaknesses of the human condition. Can

you tell I've been studying a lot of mid-century philosophy? :)" [dammit, that technically counts, we said discussion boards could be used as sources, it's even in proper MLA formatting; begrudgingly awards institutional compliance merit points].

If you want me to be specific about the "origins and content" of my definition(s), I'm going to need you to sign a waiver or ten. I'd tell you to ask one of my therapists, but they keep spontaneously combusting. As briefly as possible, I've spent forty-five years observing human behavior, for better or worse, and comparing it to human words (My Brain, 1980-2026).

But how has my definition – oh no, do I go Kafka, Schopenhauer, or Wittgenstein here? Psyche! It's none – how has my definition of 'Religion' changed? I've started to use different terminology to define it, especially the practice/discourse/community/institution distinction. But I'm going to get into that in another micro-essay. And I'm probably more rigid and fluid with my use of "situationally" in my original definition, as I've gotten more into looking past the contemporary or superficial to see how these domains have evolved into what they are and question what they'll become. I've applied this language to other aspects of society. And used them as inspiration for essays, including one called "Institutions Made Easy: How to Create Friends and Instrumentalize People," where I break down institutional indoctrination into three easy-to-follow steps. But what we're talking about now is how religion, or others' definition of religion, has shaped my use of language, not how I've changed the internal meaning of the language of religion, itself. And before that spirals into something even more difficult to follow, I'll say my greater use of "religion" as a blanket term for socio-political cults with a theological twist still applies and still has little to do with true faith (except a conditioned faith in the system/hierarchy).

Methods: The Four Domains of the Apocalypse

I went a little overboard with my use of Lincoln's domains in our "Religion in the News" assignment, which I still stand behind. I could just 'borrow' from my previous paper, but I think I'm going to try to apply it to one of the traditions we've only looked at briefly, but I think is one of the hardest to qualify, despite having studied it on my own: Shintoism.

And since I shared my Kamiza in our discussions previously, I get to feed my philosopher's ego by talking about myself.

To start with, practice, which Lincoln defines as: "A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected."* Personally, this is the hardest to define, both in the context of Shinto, and in the overall application of the term to religion/society. For one, we have the performative practice a'la Pharisees, we have the conditioned/trained private practice (molded both through discourse and observation of surrounding communities/institutions), and we have private practice that nobody shares with full honesty. The internal thoughts and feelings and dialogue with the spiritual world.

Or, it might be that none of that is ceremonialized and you just let the Kami guide you. You don't interpret, you get out of the way. I could give you ten-thousand words right now on Shinto practices in Edo period Japan and how they shaped community, controlled dialogue, and built Empires (and Shogunates), but I won't, as fun as that would be for me, because I still have three more domains to discuss. But first, because I promised to make this about me, I only do one practice outside of the literal dojo (which retains many ceremonial practices and discourses in its community); and that is when I accidentally kill a creature (eg. spider, worm, step on a snail), I'll use my Kamiza as a place to light incense and silently apologize to that being and wish it success in its next phase. I find myself challenged to find another ritual I perform that hasn't come from empirical testing. Unless you count not killing in the first place, but

that 'feels' tested.

Okay, sorry, there I go again. Discourse in Shinto is close enough to Lincoln's definition to align. So long as we don't limit that definition to strictly humanistic terms. To cite myself, "[T]alking or writing about that which concerns what we can't see or what can't be proven (metaphysics). Discourse can (should?) address all four domains, including itself." And that probably works a little better with Shinto than Lincoln (yes, I'm brilliant; alert the publishing houses). I only mean that, although Shinto can be discussed and taught – which shapes practice, as Lincoln notes – much of Shinto appears in the way the individual approaches the world, versus hand washing outside a Torii or the appropriate number of times to clap when doing Misogi. They have their lore, but it's meant as a mechanism for training the awareness of the self, not conditioning the individual for the institution.

Which is another narrow mail slot to try to stuff Shinto through. My understanding of institutional language has grown immensely lately. I'll expand on Lincoln's definition (do I have to? Yes, it's required. But it'll add to my word count. Just do it, stop making things difficult): "An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value,"[9] by adding that it's become more than 'necessary' in the sense I think he's offering, but more like institutions have conditioned us to believe that surviving within the institution means that the institution is required for survival.

Which is one nice thing about Shinto. Sure, like any idea, it's been weaponized against the proletariat, but I don't get Kami Witnesses knocking on my door or weekly notices from the local shrine that they're doing a fundraiser. There's no Church of Shinto lobbying politicians to take away my rights. There's not even a definitive book, really. The Kojiki is a piece of writing, technically, but not something that anyone is petitioning to have engraved on the state capitol

building (Still citing my brain for the Kojiki thing).

Community is similarly transient in Shinto, though a bit easier to observe. People gather at shrines. There are holiday traditions. But do people, as Lincoln says, "construct their identity" around Shinto communities? Sure, some do. People shape their identities around Taylor Swift. Where are we drawing the line between religious community and secular community? Meeting a Swiftie is a lot like meeting an evangelical. I've been purposely immersing myself in the Phish community/institution for the past few months. I mean, seriously, where do we draw the line? These groups have their own mythos, lexicon, public and private practices, approved formats for inclusion, published chronicles.

Shinto is less zealous than all that. Hopefully I can be, too.

Results: The Divine Order of Masculine Insecurity

The first mistake is assuming patriarchy in the Bible is merely ancient sexism preserved in centuries of amber, an unfortunate fossil from a less enlightened age, the theological equivalent of petroleum. That's too generous. It lets the text off with a casual slap-on-the-wrist: what did you expect, they were ancient people. Everyone was doing patriarchy. It was in the water, the unleavened bread, the mana.

But patriarchy isn't only tradition. It's also a reaction. It's not just men having power, but men noticing that women have some power, too, then calling a committee meeting with "God".

Prothero says: "Each religion articulates: a problem; a solution to this problem which serves as the religious goal; a technique (or techniques) for moving this problem to this solution; and an exemplar (or exemplars) who chart this path from problem to solution."

Let's examine this tradition using his way of thinking:

The Bible is full of patriarchal arrangements: fathers selling daughters, husbands ruling wives, genealogies marching through men as though women were merely

the biological slip-n-slide between one important male and another. Women are veiled, exchanged, purified, tested, blamed, silenced, warned against, and occasionally praised with the enthusiasm one reserves for a new piece of kitchenware just purchased from Williams-Sonoma. The official story is order. Household order. Sexual order. Ritual order. Cosmic order. Everyone in their proper place. Which, by astonishing coincidence, is also the place most convenient for the men writing the rules.

One begins to suspect that "God said so" has often meant, "I'm a scawwed wittle baby."

Because women, even in these texts, keep slipping their leash. They desire. They deceive. They negotiate. They prophesize. They speak in public. They save nations. They bury secrets in domestic space. They control access to birth, kinship, food, sexuality, mourning, and memory. They know who the father is. Which is the kind of terrifying information around which entire legal systems are built. Men may own the tent, but women know what happened in it.

This is the anxiety underneath the law: female autonomy isn't absent. It's dangerous enough to require legislation.

Eve isn't frightening because she's weak. She's frightening because she chooses for herself. The entire machinery of blame descends after a woman exercises interpretive agency. She listens, evaluates, acts, and then history's first patriarchal punishment is issued. The story is usually read as the origin of sin. It may also be read as the origin of oppression. Woman thinks, man panics, God gets blamed.

The pattern repeats. When women move outside approved channels, the narrative doesn't simply condemn them. It studies them. The Bible is fascinated by women who act. Tamar forces justice from Judah through sexual strategy. Deborah judges Israel without waiting for a committee of men on appropriate feminine leadership to grant approval. Jael kills Sisera, making the tent peg one of the most underrated theological instruments in the canon. Ruth engineers survival through loyalty, proximity, and

a midnight scene that commentators have spent centuries reupholstering, while I'm still waiting for Tarantino to make a movie about it. Esther weaponizes beauty, timing, and politics to save her people. Mary consents to God before any man in the story understands what consent even is.

These women aren't incidental. They're structural emergencies. And because they're emergencies, readers and institutions work hard to domesticate them. The prophet becomes a helper. The strategist becomes modest. The survivor becomes obedient. The woman who acts becomes the woman who submitted correctly while being permitted to act, which is the kind of interpretive laundering patriarchy has always loved: first burn down the house, then create a PSA about safe candle use.

The legal imagination of patriarchy is obsessed with female sexuality because female sexuality is where male certainty goes to die. Paternity is not self-evident. Inheritance depends on bodies men can't fully control. Lineage, property, inheritance, identity, covenant membership – all these grand theological concepts have a small biological problem hiding under the robe. Women bear children. Women can refuse, desire, conceal, miscarry, seduce, survive assault, choose lovers, and remember the truth differently from the "official" record. This makes them, from the perspective of patriarchal order, not merely people, but potential invaders.

So the border must be guarded.

Virginity laws, purity codes, adultery rules, marriage arrangements, witch trials, and denigrating women's speech aren't random cruelties. They're technologies. They turn male insecurity into sacred architecture. The fear isn't that women will be immoral. The fear is that women will be ungovernable. And that ungovernable women will expose the absurdity of the whole arrangement. A patriarch is only a patriarch if everyone agrees to keep facing the pulpit.

This is why divine law is so useful. Ordinary male control is embarrassingly obvious. "I want to control you because your freedom terrifies me" lacks moral grandeur. It doesn't embroider well on a throw pillow. But "God

has ordained…" sounds almost noble, especially when delivered by a man standing on a platform built by unpaid women who are not allowed on said platform.

The praxis of religious patriarchy is laundering fear through heaven. Male neuroses enter the temple in a panic and exit as doctrine.

This doesn't mean every biblical text is reducible to misogyny. That would be too easy and, worse, too obvious. The Bible isn't a single argument. It is an argument with itself, conducted over centuries, by priests, politicians, editors, mystics, bureaucrats, exiles, reformers, emperors, and men who clearly needed to take a sabbatical before drafting family law. There are countercurrents everywhere: women who lead, women who speak with God, women who become the moral center of the narrative while the men are busy turning violence into policy. Pope Joan. Scripture contains both the suspect and the witness.

But that's the point. The patriarchal material isn't evidence that women never had power. It's evidence that women's power had to be controlled.

No one builds a fence around nothing. Right, Prothero?

A law commanding wives to submit isn't written because women have always submitted. It's written because submission must be produced, rehearsed, sanctified, and enforced. A commandment is the chalk outline around a failed assumption. If women were naturally, happily, divinely inclined to remain under male authority, there would be no need to keep saying it in God's "angry voice".

The same is true of Christian household codes. By the time the Jesus movement spread through homes, patronage networks, and informal assemblies, women were, again, present. They hosted churches. They funded missions. They communicated. They circulated teachings. They became patrons, apostles, deacons, widows with institutional support, and theological problems with names. Then the managerial impulse arrives wearing a bishop's ring. The household must be ordered. The wife must be subject. The slave must obey. The child must behave. The church,

having once sounded like an interruption to tyranny, begins practicing its emperor speeches in front of the mirror.

This isn't the voice of serene truth.

Patriarchy in the Bible, then, shouldn't be read as the ancient world's default setting. It should be read as backlash, as containment, as the sacred paperwork of threatened men. Women gained, held, bestowed, or revealed forms of autonomy, and men responded by moving the dispute into the mouth of God. The divine became a proxy for masculine fear. And once fear becomes law, it forgets that it was ever afraid.

A trembling hand writes the rule. A priest preserves it. A father quotes it. A husband enforces it. A child absorbs it. Centuries later, someone calls it tradition and everyone is expected to bow before the antique golden calf of toxic masculinity.

The centuries of spilled toxic waste is still visible. It glows through the text like a priest's vestments under a blacklight.

The Bible's patriarchy isn't proof that women were powerless. It's proof that women were powerful enough to frighten the men who wanted the universe arranged in their image. So they made a cosmos with a locked front door, called the key obedience, and told women God put it in the lease.

Women keep finding windows. I intend to help throw the bricks.

Discussion: Causation and Correlation between Religions Occupying Alternate Realities

If I were to compare the ethical systems (professed and practiced) of any of the institutionalized traditions we've studied, they'd be nearly the same. How shall we live? By these rules. What makes us "good"? Again, see rules. How do we put those rules into practice? Hahaha, you fool, we don't! That's the brilliant part; we tell people that's what we're doing and insist that we are righteous while they are condemned to eternal damnation. Wait, and they'll pay us

for this?

Sure, there are going to be some minor variations here and there. And the uninstitutionalized versions of these traditions (eg. private faith, theological discourse) can't be included in this discussion. Too vague. Too uncertain of themselves. Not ready to hit the streets with a megaphone to proselytize at the sinners.

Now, if we were to compare the designed moral systems (or rule books) of these traditions, we'll start to see some greater diversity. No, not like that, it's still about xenophobic nationalism. Despite the same flippant approach to actual practice as their ethical systems, there are some baseline "good" characteristics we see pretty-much throughout: don't cause harm, don't lie, have humility and compassion, contribute to the community/society. Notice they're all telling the individual how to behave. The line between ethics and morals gets real blurry for me around here because, as an atheist-ish, I'm like, 'well, duh'. But if somebody writes them down it suddenly becomes Intro to Ethics 101? It doesn't matter, really, because everything is so codified, anyway, that one person's ethics could be another person's morals. Meanwhile, they're doing neither in practice and shouting at each other from across the street for being unethical.

To juxtapose a couple of examples, if we compare the ethics of Judaism and Christianity, they're pretty similar, being rooted in the same foundational material and historical societies. Likewise for Islam. The main differences are the narratives of their stories and how they interact within their communities and on the world stage.

But we can compare any of those religions to something that, historically-speaking, wouldn't have had any interaction with the Abrahamic religions until both had been long-established, like Hinduism (I'm still not convinced that ideas weren't spread prior to the first millennia, even if evidence has yet to be found). Ooh, digression. Am I practicing faith by saying that I don't not believe ancient people traded ideas before the historical records indicate?

Or is that closer to agnosticism? I wonder what Prothero would call it.

Anyway, Hinduism and Western traditions still share a lot of those base etho-moral systems. Do this, don't do that, believe this, don't believe that. Own some slaves. Don't eat ungulates. Except these approved ones. Always obey the institution.

Did I say that last one or just think it?

Wait a second. Is OSU a religion? Student ethics statements, codes of conduct, steeped in tradition, narrow thinking, unquestionable authority, hiding ethical violations to preserve image, established processes for doling out shame and punishment.

They asked me to join the student review board something-or-other. Didn't give the conditions, rules, or even a specified set of goals. It was an invitation to join the institution, not to question it. In other words, "maybe you'll shut up if we let you speak in a controlled environment." I declined, as talking about ethics is silly if you're not going to be ethical. Why is there a positive correlation between the number of rules an institution has and its level of unethical behavior? Whatever oath of ethics they expected me to take (per the website) said students can't use marijuana. I'm literally smoking a joint right now, on my patio, next to my pond, while I write this – as god intended. Also, my doctor said I could. Well, she actually said, "I'd prefer if you switched to edibles." I'm not agreeing to puritanical rules as a form of submission to, or alignment with, an institution that is built on exclusion and control.

And that's what I think about institutional ethics (Outro music plays).

References: Works Cited

I know you said we didn't have to do this page, but I had to resolve the faux-academic motif!

Memories Last a Lifetime

- Pantsing me in public and making a loud spectacle so everybody would look.
- Stabbing a neighbor's dog dozens of times for trespassing on your property.
- Intentionally hitting squirrels, cats, and other animals on the roadway with your car.
- Having special guns for shooting at animals on your property, despite not having a garden or anything needing 'pest control'.
- Bare bottom spankings in public and family gatherings.
- "Because I Said So!" the mantra of my childhood
- "Do as I say, not as I do."
- Finding a pack of Swisher Sweets and Marlboro Lights in your jacket in the car. After all those years of bragging, "I've never smoked. I made a promise to my [dead] father." I smoked a couple of the cigarettes because if you wanted to punish me, you'd have to admit you had cigarettes.
- Speaking of 'father', lying about who your father was for over twenty years. I found your letter to your 'real dad' but never said anything.
- My favorite thing was escaping the house to go to Malibu Grand Prix on weekends to put credits in the games for the all-you-can-play special on Saturdays and counting the tokens from all of the games on Sundays. Not going was the worst, because then I'd be stuck home alone with you all weekend.
- The only time I ever felt like I've had 'real' friends in my life was when I was fourteen/fifteen and worked at Mountasia. Hours away and I only had to see you two days per week. But since you were having

(another) affair, we had to move back.

- The nightmare trip through Las Vegas and Arizona (in the summer). Worse than being stuck in a van with five other people I don't like for a week, the news came of your new job, meaning I had to leave my Mountasia friends – immediately. So as soon as the awful 'vacation' was over, I had to say goodbye to everybody.
- You used to smell the insides of my pockets while I showered to see if I'd been smoking.
- No privacy – searching drawers and closets, removing doors. "I'm just putting away laundry" (in a desk drawer full of papers).
- "Grounded" meant being stuck in my room with every form of stimulation removed. Only allowed to come out for meals, to use the restroom every few hours, or to do chores.
- Using labor as a control and manipulation tool. Never allowing me a moment to myself or to enjoy anything because my interests were "stupid" and I'd "never make anything of myself" so I should pull weeds instead or whatever.
- Sitting in the parking lot at the restaurant across the street from my high-school job(s) to spy on me. I used to think it was a little far to go, but it turns out one of your boyfriend's house was just down the street.
- Making random demands for me to come home "immediately" when I'd be out with friends. Then waiting in the driveway to yell at us and throw pinecones at their car and yell "pussies" at my friends for leaving.
- The time when you were caught in one of your affairs and were having a big blowout fight and trying to take the kids, so I left with a friend and didn't come back until the next day. After that, nothing was ever mentioned about anything that happened the previous day ever again.

- Having to "pick a switch" from a tree to be whipped with.
- Any gift or toy or game gifted to me immediately became a tool for control (to have it taken away/thrown away/given to a sibling).
- Teachers, in general, were cruel in the 80s. They'd call us idiots and retards, and throw things like chalk, erasers, and books at us for talking in class.
- Hearing "Stop it, you're hurting me!" regularly through the bedroom walls when I was a child.
- Constantly interrogating me about the men/women your spouse worked with.
- Any insubordination or asking if clarifying questions was met with immediate violence. I can't fathom how many wooden spoons have been broken over me in my lifetime.
- When I got too old for spanking and spoons, it was face slaps and strangulation.
- Being yelled at and berated for self-soothing because it was "weird." This continued into my twenties when I eventually became fully masked.
- When I first started playing guitar, being made fun of and insulted for only knowing three songs or making mistakes.
- Being told that my first bands are a waste of time and will never go anywhere. So?
- That time you thought I couldn't hear you through headphones in the car and were talking about how terrible a person I was for smoking cigarettes. Or maybe you knew I could hear you. Both would make sense.
- The performance of being forced to have a birthday and put on a show for your friends and family. Being told I was ungrateful and ruining it for everybody because I didn't want to have birthday parties for show. Getting beat when I said I don't care about the food or anything because it's "your party." Birthdays and holidays were more about pointless tradition

and everything having to be perfect or suffer the consequences.

- I'd always make elaborate food because you never cared about food. Put out some Costco trays and pies and like and say it's homemade. Also, being in the kitchen got me away from you.
- Speaking of which, running a whole business on the premise of (re)selling "local" fruits and nuts. If local means from the WinCo bulk bins put in non-biodegradable, non-recyclable plastic containers. Fucking capitalists, man. Anything for a nickel. Always ready to lie, cheat, and steal their way to the lower-middle.
- Being forced to sit at a table for hours to finish a dinner I found physically repulsive. Chips, oily beef, and mayonnaise that you called "taco salad." That ironically named "ambrosia" canned fruit salad with marshmallows and (more) mayonnaise.
- I still wonder what terrible thing happened between fifth and sixth grade that made me go through my first personality and masking shift. Was it just accumulated shame and trauma or a major event? I just know I went from being polite and studious to not caring about anything and being extremely depressed and withdrawn.
- I hate compliments to this day because they were always used for manipulation. "You're so smart, if only you'd…" And doing an insult sandwich and calling it 'being supportive'.
- The first 'joke' I remember overhearing as a child was a racist one.
- When I told you I'd been groomed by my high-school mentor, your response was "I was a victim, too" and "You never told me back then." You gave him my home address and are still friends with him to this day. You realize that not allowing me to have physical or emotional boundaries as a child led me to being abused and taken advantage of multiple times,

right?

- Being made to work from age fourteen because apparently school and extracurriculars and being the defacto parent and doing the chores wasn't enough. Taking half of my paycheck. When I finally saved up enough money for my first guitar, regularly berating me as a loser who was wasting my money. Making comments like, "it must be nice to be rich" any time I 'treated' myself to a soda or meal outside of your governance.
- Oh yeah, and trying to hook up with the guitar salesman. I played music with that dude like a decade later. He's way out of your league.
- Ohhhh yeah, and remember when you were hooking up with that slimy radio DJ? Was it "Spotman"?
- Keeping dogs outside in the winter.
- Beating the shit out of dogs for minor indiscretions.
- Making me go to a 'therapist' so they could build false trust and then tell you everything I said to them, which you'd later use against me.
- Taking me out of high school without telling the school so I failed every class that term and had to make it up and permanently damaging my GPA.
- Making me go spend a day each with your three male friends and requiring that I ask them about smoking pot. They all gave me the same rehearsed response. I found out later that they're all drunks or pill addicts. One was the pastor who scammed the entire church and abused his family. Actually, that describes all of your friends.
- Your best friend scamming me out of over $20k in unpaid work.
- When I was a child, if I ever ate loud food, you'd put your mouth in my face and loudly chomp and make smacking noises.
- Also, why did you make fun of the way I drink out of cup when I was a child? There's a wrong way to direct your eyes?

- I used to love to sing along to the radio and dance when I was a kid, until I'd been made fun of enough times that I stopped singing and dancing for good.
- Treating art like a commodity. There were no people behind it, it was just a show or movie (books and music aren't really your thing). It's value is in whether you 'got your money's worth'. Except for celebrity, people-magazine gossip. You love that shit for some reason. Something to aspire to?
- Being forced to stop anything remotely fun to pose with a fake smile for photos. I don't know how to smile, but you'd pull my hair and pinch me and tell me I'm ruining everybody's day for not smiling enough in your photos.
- When I had that digestive problem as a kid where I'd shart my pants, you'd call it "just a bug," and instead of getting medical treatment, you'd pour corn starch in my pants.
- When I had ingrown toenails, taking me to the clinic doctor who ripped them out without proper anesthetic. They grew back immediately and I still have issues with my feet being touched.
- Being dragged out of bed in the middle of the night to be beaten and screamed at over some perceived indiscretion or "back talk" from hours or days ago.
- Forcing me to go to funerals, despite my repeated protests. Hope you know the most lasting memory I have of your parents (or, whoever you claimed them to be) is of their dead, liver-spotted bodies.
- The scars on my back from whipping/lashing.
- Sexually assaulting me while I was in the hospital. Or, you know, 'cleaning me' instead of allowing the staff to do it.
- A steady diet of Irish Spring soap.
- When I first said I was depressed and suicidal, telling me that it's all in my head, it's my fault, I have a bad attitude, and I'm choosing to feel this way.
- Coming into my room whenever you chose, but

especially before showing to shake your tits and ass in my face while singing "watch it wiggle, watch it jiggle."

- When I was finally able to move out, shortly after turning eighteen, I went out and found an apartment, got a cosigner, and packed all of my stuff without you knowing so I didn't have to spend months dealing with your abuse over me leaving your penitentiary ("my house, my rules"). You found out the day I started packing my car and had a destructive meltdown, destroying my property and not allowing me to take anything from my childhood that 'you bought'.
- Forging passport documents so Todd could be kidnapped and taken out of the country, in direct defiance of standing court visitation orders.
- Colluding with his mother when they moved back years later to steal my visitation time and then claiming it was still mine, I could just come visit him at your house.
- Forcing me to ignore him when he "cried it out" and hovering over everything I did to correct it because it wasn't "your way." aka the authoritarian way that treats children like inconvenient property and not autonomous humans with needs.
- Every time we were in a car and a black or brown person was walking down the street, "Kids, lock your doors!"
- Referring to all people of color and alternative people as "dirtbags" or the more socially-acceptable (for your people) racist words: Rhymes with the tiger from Winnie the Pooh, describing the moisture content of someone's posterior, damage that might occur to armor, and far worse. Wiki 'List of Ethnic Slurs'. Yeah, I knew how to say most of these before I could read them.
- I passionately hate holidays because they were always preceded with days of forced labor to make the house look "presentable", if *everything* didn't go perfect,

there would be hell to pay. I was always shamed and ridiculed for not reacting to gifts the right way or smiling the right way all the time. Always the same boring grocery store prepared food, the same boring small talk, the same "traditions" that existed without explanation or any real tradition besides doing as we are trained.

- One of my earliest memories was when I was about three. I had an Inspector Gadget toy that I *loved*. I carried that fucker around with me everywhere. One day, I woke up and he was gone. I searched and searched and cried and cried. Eventually, you told me you gave him away to kids who would appreciate him more. Whatever that means. This was the first time I remember learning not to trust adults.
- I have this scar on the side of my head, near my temple. When I was a kid, you told me that I was sitting on the hood of your Camaro and "fell off" (I was one), hitting my head on an I-beam that was on the floor. Okay, cool, whatever. Except when I was forty and having real neurological problems, I asked you for more information about it and you said, "It was nothing, you just cried a little." Because you care more about preserving your imaginary image of being a perfect (or even acceptable) parent than my receiving medical care. For the record, I only have four easily-visible scars on my body and the other three are all from incredibly serious injuries.
- Regularly insulting me for teenage acne, making me use excessive Clinique skin products on my face, which made it significantly worse, then publically insulting me for not having good skincare when I was following your orders.
- I'd regularly say I was going to call CPS on you and you'd mock me and say they'd never believe me. Once, I tried to actually call and you ripped the phone out of the wall.
- I didn't know the work hypocrite at the time, but I

noticed, as a child, that anyone you were gossiping or talking shit to, you were also gossiping *about*.

- Forcing me to dress up as a mime for Halloween when I was thirteen, then yelling at me for not wanting to play 'child' for your happy-family fetish. I cried under the TV stand while you told me to simultaneously 'grow up' and to go trick-or-treating.
- That whole period where I was only allowed to associate with kids (or adults) from youth group at your (predator) pastor-friend's church.
- Holding me down and tickling me until I peed myself. Or using 'chinny-chinny' to "tickle" me in inappropriate places with your face.
- Also, seemingly-inane acts like butt-pinching, depite my repeated protests. Answered with, "I'm your [insert title], you can't tell me 'no'."
- When one of you was caught cheating (again) and the other of you was yelling, "Our whole marriage is based on a lie." Dude, your whole family is based on a lie. Your whole life is based on a lie. But it's funny how owning another person's body is where you draw the line.

On my original list I wrote, "I have a lot more to add, but I'm tired." Same, past me, same.

And if you think that this is just a roast of shitty behavior beause I'm 'pissed off', consider yourself privileged. For everbody else, I see you.

On the Ethics of Calculated Silence

From: Oh, god, not this fucker again!
To:

Brent Calvin
Superintendent and President, College of the Sequoias
Louann Waldner
Provost, College of the Sequoias
Juan Vasquez
Dean of Student Services, College of the Sequoias
James Alvin
Lead Coordinator, Tutorial Services, College of the Sequoias
William Hobbs
Director of Student Activities and Affairs, College of the Sequoias
Courtney Sallam
Dean of Student Services, College of the Sequoias
Jessica Morrison
Vice President of Student Services, College of the Sequoias
David Hardison
Writing Center Coordinator, College of the Sequoias

Greetings Administrators and Staff,

I'm going to presume that some of y'all remember me from my time at COS. I've been following the news concerning Jay/Cristobal and the Quill Club, and I've been disappointed – though, regrettably, unsurprised – by COS's response.

Several of those copied on this email will probably recall (or are about to) my raising concerns with you personally about the culture surrounding inappropriate relationships and boundaries between faculty/staff and students. Others may remember my repeated attempts

to address the absence of faculty leadership for the Quill Club, which left me, a student, responsible for operating the organization while simultaneously trying to ensure it could survive my departure at the end of the term. Other recipients might recall our conversations on exclusion and 'othering' on campus, which you're surely aware, provides predators with a plethora of lonely and confused students looking for connection somewhere. In retrospect, perhaps leaving students to manage situations requiring oversight was less an anomaly than a demonstration of the prevailing administrative philosophy.

Somehow, even eight-hundred miles away, I remain privy to rumors I didn't particularly want to hear even when I was actually employed in your building. The current word is that certain individuals are waiting for this to "blow over."

I call this Institutional Attrition: when accountability can't be refuted, simply outlast it. Delay. Minimize. Say as little as possible. Wait for students to graduate or drop out, employees to leave, public attention to migrate elsewhere, and injured parties to become exhausted by the burden of repeatedly proving that something everyone already knows happened did, in fact, happen.

It's an ironically effective strategy for an institution fluent in the vocabulary of advocacy, inclusion, safety, and community. COS has always seemed considerably better at producing that language for recruitment fliers and hallway banners than holding itself to the standards implicated. Anyone who has attempted to obtain access or accommodations (supposedly) guaranteed by law will recognize this technique: transform a legal and ethical obligation into a bureaucratic endurance event and see who gets tired first.

When an institution repeatedly creates the conditions in which predatory behavior can occur, be whispered about, be reported, be minimized, and eventually become someone else's problem, the question is no longer whether one individual behaved badly. The question is what the institution has been structurally arranged not to see.

That's the part I hope COS has the courage to address publicly.

Rather than waiting for the current situation to disappear beneath the institutional rug, the people responsible for supervising Jay could simply acknowledge that they made a decision whose consequences they didn't foresee, but one for which they nevertheless bear some responsibility. That's entirely human. Most adults make mistakes. Functional adults occasionally admit them. Like, grow the fuck up, amirite?

But the institution also needs to account for what happened after warning signs existed, who knew what and when, what complaints or concerns were raised, how they were handled, and whether personal or professional relationships interfered with the responsibility to protect students. Receiving warnings, witnessing patterns, maintaining relationships that discourage scrutiny, protecting reputations, minimizing complaints, or declining to look too closely is neither benevolence nor rectitude. At some point, "we didn't know" becomes less a valid explanation than a mission statement. Unethical organizations tend to become remarkably good at not knowing things that would obligate them to act.

This isn't an unreasonable request. It's approximately what the word accountability means before it gets processed through a communications office, a PR manager, legal, the mythical board of deans and, probably, ChatGPT.

As someone with firsthand knowledge of the predatory and discriminatory culture I encountered at COS, the administration's longstanding penchant for strategic inattention, and Jay's personal relationships with specific members of the faculty, I sincerely hope COS chooses to make a substantive, ethical, and transparent statement – not merely about one individual, but about the institutional environment that enabled the situation to develop around him.

Predators rarely require an entire institution to actively conspire on their behalf. They require ordinary people who

don't want trouble, colleagues who protect colleagues, administrators who prefer ambiguity, policies applied selectively, a mentality of litigation mitigation, and enough people willing to wait for an uncomfortable situation to go away.

That is why "waiting for it to blow over" isn't neutrality. It's participation.

If COS genuinely wishes to describe itself as an institution committed to advocacy, inclusion, safety, and ethical responsibility, this would be a convenient opportunity to demonstrate that those words refer to practices rather than hollow branding. Accountability doesn't require omniscience. No one expects administrators to foresee every bad decision made by every person they hire. It does, however, require something more than waiting in the shadows for the news cycle, students, and community to lose interest.

There may even still be time for you to enroll in Intro to Ethics. It seems a refresher might be useful.

In Structural Complicity,
Commodity #00457760
Former COS Student and Quill Club President

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

or

Watch Out for That Bus!

I think it's important to not only acknowledge those who have influenced us in the public sphere, but those who have shaped us behind closed doors into who we are today. The rapists, the predators, the abusers, those who seek to exploit others, exploit the environment, who have made deception and fraud their primary character traits, who take pleasure in cruelty. The people you don't leave your drinks unattended with, the people you don't leave your kids unattended with, the people who demand everybody else follow a set of rules, while they do what they want, when they want, with moral impunity. They don't even have to do these things *to* you. They can do them in front of you and threaten or coerce you into being complicit in the harm. It's funny how people are like, "Why didn't you say something?" until you say something. Then they want you to be quiet. Let it go. Keep the peace. Because it makes them uncomfortable. Now they have to think about their loyalty to their friend, their family, their colleague. That creates consequences for them. But you know what doesn't? Ignoring the abuse.

This isn't "whoops, I fucked up and said something stupid and/or uninformed" or "sorry, I forgot your birthday" kind of harm. Everyone makes mistakes. I make plenty. And I feel a tremendous amount of shame and remorse regularly for that. These are repeated patterns of behavior. One bad day isn't a pattern. One shitty conversation isn't a pattern. Shit, I'm not even talking about the cheaters and assholes, despite their patterns. Not even the people who cheated on me (except one, but for a totally different reason). I'm talking about the people who cause real, sustained harm. Those whose justification is usually a yarn about

how they're the epitome of whatever is the opposite of whatever they are. "I'm not a racist, but…" Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but lying does not make you "smart". Manipulating people who are offering you trust doesn't make you clever. Taking advantage of those in need doesn't make you shrewd. It makes you the reason the world is full of terrible people. Trying to rationalize or minimize harm because other people "do worse" doesn't actually reduce the harm. It's cumulative. Like the plastics most of your "small businesses" are dumping in the ocean.

Keeping up with contemporary institutional standards, I'll be using firing-squad logic to absolve any liability and protect people's delusions that they're not *as bad* as everyone else (yes, mine, too).

Sometimes you should acknowledge people who have done no harm (that you've seen). Sometimes you should acknowledge fictional characters. Or personas you made up for yourself when you were drunk one night in your twenties at a country-and-western bar with tobacco spit on the floor. Or obscure musicians, abstract writers, puppeteers, the person who never got a shout-out, the parentified child, the wanderer, or that random name that's been circling around in your brain for the last thirty years, but you can't quite place it.

Well, that makes everything all nice and clean for the institution. I feel absolved. Don't you feel absolved? Plausible deniability mode activated. I take it all back, I *have* learned something at school! [Insert "You, I learned it by watching you!" and "I'm not a chicken, you're a turkey," propaganda nostalgia here]. It's a good thing that puritans and traditionalists have such generic names.

Clearly, I'm not going to bother acknowledging politicians, cops, billionaires, lobbyists, soldiers, jurists, et al. We have access to the corporate news. We know what kinds of people choose to join these gangs/cults. And the people who circle those giant red flags like they're training for corrida de toros. It's called profiling, look it up. The

supreme court said it was patriotic. I'm just doing my duty as a patriotic American.

Oh, sorry. What I meant to say is, "The author(s) would like to acknowledge the following people for their invaluable contribution to this work:"

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Sean Stevens
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Greg Warnshuis
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Susan Weldon
Wanda Weldon
Eric Williams
Josh Williams
Margot Wilson
Dan Wolfe
Carrie Wood
Leroy Wood
Loretta Wood
Steve Wood
Bobby Woods
Rob Wyrick
Lee Yang

Yeah, that's just the people I could think of in an afternoon. Notice any other patterns? No, not that they're almost all white nationalists. That could just be a correlation to the circles my family and, by proxy, I kept. Actually, I struggle to find a demographic that isn't represented.

There's a suspicious number of matching last names, no? I've heard a surprising number of these people offer cliche lines like "family first" and "blood is thicker than water" and "look out for your own". If there were a connecting factor between most of these people, it would be their love for hierarchy. That should probably be my new tell.

Gratitude Journal

I'd like to thank the following people (in a particular order that only I will ever know!) who took the time and care to interact with me without pretense or superficial performance during the course of this project:

Kayla, Nancy, Michelle, Katie, Chris, Benjy, Stevie, Justin, Gina, Jesse, Jill, Emma, Aron.

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(https://sites.google.com/view/writer-emma-k-baeza/)

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"I know of nothing better than the Appassionata and could listen to it every day. What astonishing, superhuman music! It always makes me proud, perhaps with a childish naiveté, to think that people can work such miracles! … But I can't listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things, and pat the little heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. These days, one can't pat anyone on the head nowadays, they might bite your hand off. Hence, you have to beat people's little heads, beat mercilessly, although ideally we are against doing any violence to people. Hm — what a devillishly difficult job!" - Vladimir Lenin



Trey Jefferson

(no relation)
Co-Author

Each morning, as I sat down to write, this little fucknut would bite my kneecaps until I gave him drugs and took him on a magical mystery tour around the house and to check out the brilliant hues of the refrigerator contents.