



How to Stand While the World Falls Down

and other essays

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How to Stand While the World Falls Down

Essays on searching, finding and letting go

Contents

- When in Doubt, Do Something Beautiful (p. 1)
- How to Stand While the World Falls Down (p. 5)
- Why God is an Anarcho-Communist (p. 11)
- The Spiritual Case for Police Abolition (p. 20)
- In Search of a Spiritual Theory-of-Everything (p. 25)
- The Problem with Fixating on “Natural” Things (p. 33)
- No Class War on a Dead Planet (p. 37)
- Why Personal Lifestyle Changes Still Matter in the Face of Climate Chaos (p. 51)
- We Can’t Eat Rights (p. 56)
- It’s Time to Put an End to Economics (p. 62)
- Why I Trust the Future (p. 65)
- On Looking for God in the Age of Extinction (p. 73)
- Goodbye to All That (p. 79)
- The Power of Recognizing I Don’t Exist (p. 82)

When in Doubt, Do Something Beautiful

I started this year half-conscious with Covid in a ghost town that was once the pearl of the Salton Riviera. There is some meaning in this I must share with you.

The Salton Sea lies deep in the desert of south-eastern California. It was created by accident in 1905, through an overflow of water engineers were diverting from the Colorado River to irrigate farmland to support a swelling population in the West. Long before that, there were villages here.

The town outside the window today is called Bombay Beach. Sixty years ago, this was a popular weekend holiday destination for families and fashionable people from Los Angeles. You can still see it, the 50s in the air, in the antique cars and pastel colors. Now, it's a lesser tourist destination for the edgier of the Instagram influencer crowd angling for what Pinterest tells me is called "decay tourism." You know the vibe: abandoned buildings, broken metal structures, bright graffiti, ironic art. Post-apocalypse chic.

The Salton, having no natural water source, is evaporating slowly over time. The shoreline has receded and is covered in the bones of dead fish. The towns are mostly deserted. The desert is striking and bleak. It's the kind of place you'd think was day-dreamed up for a particularly cynical Lana Del Rey music video. The phrase "post-Americana" comes to mind. The phrase "rotten kitsch" comes to mind. Death and plastic come to mind. It's an appropriate place to be sick.

As I start healing here, I feel I must tell you that this place is beautiful. It is a dry, cracked shell of what it once was,

haunting and uncomfortable, the visual embodiment of decay, and it is beautiful. The artists who reclaimed this area have done so with a sincerity and humor. There's a dusty drive in full of empty vintage cars you can sit in and watch a movie. Its creepiness is self-aware. It knows it's expired and it's owning it. Out of the blight has been born a special kind of life that only belongs to dead things, the way a ghost has personality.

This place is beautiful because people made it beautiful. It is beautiful now because it is dead, and people took that death and turned it into art. What I'm saying, in a roundabout kind of way, is that there's a lesson in this.

No matter how self-assured I may sound about the future, the fact of the future remains that it is anyone's game. Trends are only predictive until they are broken.

One thing that seems assured about this era is that the certainties we once built our lives upon are now in question. The only thing we can predict is that what's coming will not be predictable.

In the face of such uncertainty, we cling onto the past. All of us do it. Whether that past is a Norman Rockwell painting of 1950s American grandeur or whether it's the sense of normalcy we halfway felt in 2015, we react to the chaos of the present by longing for some sort of return. When faced with the uncomfortable, we yearn for a comfort zone.

What I'm learning, day by day, is that there is no going back. The harder we run back towards the past, the further it retreats away from us. The more we deny the reality of present, the more what's around us falls into decay. We cannot heal our present situation by pretending we can get rid of it.

If we cannot go back, and we don't know what going forward will bring, it seems our only option is to exist in a limbo state of terrified paralysis, reacting as we have to when crises arise as we spin further and further out of control. Before this, I'd have told you that the answer is to

surrender. Give up the reins. Let the uncertainty exhilarate you and trust in the current to pull you forward on its own.

It is still good advice, but living like that is easier said than done.

I know it well myself —there are moments when it's possible to float, but then the urge comes in to do something. We don't know what to do. We can't fix it, we can't control it, but still, we know we must do something.

What we can do is do something beautiful. We can take what is around us, no matter how ugly it may seem, and do something beautiful with it. We can take this little step before us and make it beautiful. We can put what's immediately in front of us into harmony. We can make this moment into art.

Some days, it seems everything in this world conspires towards our impotence. Illness and isolation, financial precarity and political disenfranchisement, the global scale of problems and bureaucratization of attempts to solve them — caught in this web, we have next to nothing.

What we always have is the power to respond to what's immediately in front of us — to this place, this room, this neighborhood, this moment, these next five minutes. We have the inalienable power to choose what we do with them. Anything can get ugly if we let it fall into disrepair by continuously focusing our attention elsewhere.

I know that it's hard to have faith when we have so little control. Sometimes you just can't muster the will to surrender. I don't know what's coming next. I don't know if we'll see economic collapse or another pandemic, a civil war or deadlier natural disasters. I don't know if we'll hold it together. I don't know if the kids will be alright.

What I know is that the future cannot be dealt with, whatever it may be, because it isn't happening now. Only this is happening now. Give what's here your undivided attention; don't split yourself by longing for what isn't. Take

what's here and turn it into art. Make it a monument to your humor and devotion.

When in doubt, do something beautiful.

How to Stand While the World Falls Down

1. A parable, or something

When you first notice the cracks, you don't see anything extraordinary. Walls crack sometimes. That's how things go.

When the first brick falls, you call it an anomaly. You say, that brick was rotten anyway. It alone is at fault for its failure.

When it hits the ground, it shatters like a mirror. It reflects like one, too.

You look away.

When the next brick falls, you say the same again, but your voice is not quite so firm this time.

By the fourth and the fifth, you panic. You look around like a dog in a cage. Who is tearing the walls down? You see them, over there, pulling bricks. It isn't the bricks at fault; it's those hooligans. Those idiots. Those wicked, guilty ones. You see them and you hate them. They are rotten anyway. They alone are at fault for this failure.

When the bricks begin to fall on them, you laugh the laugh of justice served.

When the bricks begin to fall on you, all your laughter stops.

Who is the architect of this room? They've built it wrong. It's evil. No wall is meant to crack, not when you're under it. Whose room is this? They must be stopped. They must be the ones to fall, not you.

Through the cracks in the ceiling, you see them up there, living lives of loud desperation. Oblivious. Manic. Deranged. They won't help you, though they could. It's like they couldn't help you even if they would. Do they have

walls around them up there too? You can't see it, but it's like they're bound by something just like you.

Here, now, all the worlds are crumbling. No one is coming. It's just you and the wall and the wall is falling down.

When the next brick falls across the room, suddenly it hurts you like it hit you in the head. You see yourself in others, now. The innocents and the victims, all are just like you. You could easily be them. Their collapse collapses you. Their pain is yours and it's real and it throbs.

When the next brick falls, it hits the hooligans tossing bricks around. Suddenly it hurts you like it hit you, too. You see yourself in all of them now, too. The guilty and the idiots are just you, too. Every new collapse collapses you.

When the next brick falls, you catch it.

When the next brick falls to someone who doesn't, you scream at them in anger. *Catch it!* You see how they could've. You see how they didn't, and you hate them. When the next brick falls and hits them, you try to laugh the laugh of justice served. But it isn't funny anymore.

Catch it! You say. They don't listen. *What is wrong with you? Catch it!*

But another brick is coming down now, and you turn away to catch it. Whatever brick falls to you is yours to catch. If it doesn't fall to you, there is nothing you can do. This is how it goes and it isn't yours to understand.

But from the corner of your eye, you see that there are others catching bricks, too. You trust there will be more of them. You keep catching what you can.

You realize, leadership is only ever by example.

2. Prose

I've watched the best minds of my generation destroyed by a false definition of sanity. As my youth winds to a close, I find myself believing once more in the miraculous wisdom of bumper stickers. *It is no measure of good health to be*

well-adjusted to a sick society. Bombing for peace is like fucking for virginity. Coexist and Exist responsibly.

Now more than ever, the truth rings true.

The world I live in is insane, but that doesn't mean I have to be. Through the cracks in it, I've found small moments, here and there, to learn what it means to be sane.

The first time I really hitchhiked was in 2017. We were in Western Colorado, thumbs out, trying to reach Moab before dark, and I understood in a whole new way that the world is continuous. When you drive, the world seems like a series of islands, beginning and end points that can't be reached without assistance, but hitchhiking opens up the spaces in between. It teaches you to rely on other people and proves that you can. It shows you how you can't really get stuck. If you trust the world around you long enough, you'll find your way.

We lose sight of the abundance all around us when we fixate on how we think things ought to look. It should come as no surprise to you that what we think we need is not what we need. I know this, you know this, we all know this. We know we don't need most of the things in our lives, though we have our very good reasons for being motivated by things other than need.

But the truth is, what we need is humble and not so hard to find. When we worry about the rest, we crave power we do not have, and we become convinced that we must be afraid. The world becomes a series of daunting tasks, high walls to climb over and shrinking hoops to jump through. To overcome the fear, we must come to possess a power so awesome that our control becomes absolute. If we cannot control, we plunge back into fear and so, we crave power like a fix.

I've been told that with great power comes great responsibility. I suppose it's a fine piece of advice, if you

can get anyone with great power to listen to you. The problem, though, is that I don't have great power. There's not much I can say with certainty about the future, but I can just about guarantee that I will never lead a branch of the U.S. military. I will never run a Fortune 500 company. I'll never be the president of any states, united or otherwise. I won't have great power — not like that.

Can I still have great responsibility?

What I know is that the cracks in the world reveal a mirrored glass. Whenever something falls apart, in tiny ways or big ones, we have the chance to see ourselves within it. Sometimes, that sight is too painful: too many lies we've been fed about what it means, too much needless shame to bear. And so, we turn our heads away and wail about the cracks. We pretend they aren't there, and when it becomes impossible to deny them, we cast blame like a hex.

But you and I and all of us — we're always in the center the equation. We defend against that knowledge as though it were an attack, but the pattern of the truth always holds true: nothing can be done to us that is not done through us. Our role may be small, but it's always present.

Only when we see ourselves can we change ourselves. When we see the role we play in creating each moment, we can learn how to change how we respond.

So when the world tries to break you, let it bend you. Let it kill off everything that isn't you, every concept you have, every belief you hold dear. Let them go. Find the spaces in between. Find who you are beneath them. Discover your ability to choose. If we look to achieve only certain things, the world is a series of islands separated by dangerous waters and we must engineer how to cross them. If we look for what we need, not just what we think we need, we find the world is continuous and expansive.

When we turn our responses from reactions into choices, we increase our power. We find we were not so powerless as we thought. We always have some choice. Not every choice — we never have every choice — but within the tiniest moment there are still infinite choices made. The more we practice, the more moments shift from obligations into choices.

The more we practice, the more we realize that the old adage runs backwards. With great responsibility comes great power. This power, though, is real. You lord it over no one. You master without a slave. No one can take it from you. This power is truly yours.

Then, inside this power, we can learn again to trust. We find we have no need to control it all. We have no need to cling to our concepts. We have the power we need right here. Then, the rest of it has room to be magic.

It is critically important in this life to leave room for magic. You cannot dictate for the future what it will. You can't even dictate for the present. There is no point to living if you don't give the world its chance to surprise you in ways you thought were impossible. Not all magic is good magic, but if you tell the future now what it will be, you'll only end up wrong.

Whether or not you want it to, the future will unfold, so you might as well want it to unfold. You might as well trust in its unfolding.

There is, and always will be, another brick you could go get crushed by if you look for one. Or, you could catch the ones thrown to you. The decision is only ever yours, even (and most especially) when it doesn't seem like it is. There is always more to learn. There are always cracks to that allow you to transmute obedience into autonomy, reactivity into consciousness, and automation into choice. We will never have every choice, but we always have some power to choose something.

When we claim our power from the cracks in our assumptions, we find we hold responsibility — not guilt, but ability to respond. We can make choices about what to do with what's happening. We can't choose what the others will do, but we don't need to.

Leadership is only ever by example.

Why God is an Anarcho-Communist

God — specifically God’s will for us — is one of those topics human beings seem to like to fight about a lot. What does God want? What is God’s plan? What is the right way to live on God’s green Earth, and who is this God person, anyway?

Of course, I can’t answer any of those questions definitively, but I can start to sketch an answer based on one basic premise:

Humans know how to meet their needs.

1. The collective human need for God

Once upon a time, while browsing GrubHub delivery options, I found myself thinking, “Wow, isn’t it amazing how every place in the world has its own distinct cuisine?” Then I laughed at myself, because of course they do.

Everyone has to eat.

It’s obvious then that every community of humans would take the plants, animals, and cooking methods that were available to them and, over generations, arrive at culturally-specific cuisines. These cuisines could take on other roles and significations in their cultures, but they all arose for the same reason: we all need nourishment.

We may all have cuisines and dishes we like more than others, we may have some cuisines that feel like *ours*, but behind and beneath all these different cuisines, we understand that there is one universal thing called food. Food is something eaten that meets the basic need for nourishment.

As different as cuisines can be from one another, every human community has successfully created one, because humans know how to meet their needs.

If humans know how to meet their need for food, even as they craft distinct ways to get there, we can likewise infer that humans know how to meet their need for God.

We don't often talk about religion like a cuisine, but it is: each religion arose from a particular group of humans in a particular place, based on the stories, experiences, landscapes, values and practices those people had access to. Religions have taken on all kinds of roles and significations in different cultures, too — becoming the bases for laws, customs, rituals, morals, power structures, habits and so on. We could say that religion, then, also meets a universal human need: for a shared worldview and structure to thinking and organizing society, at the very least.

But in these ways, religion is more like a politics or a philosophy. I could make the case that all worldviews are religions (capitalism, for instance), but at the moment, I won't. I want to set religion apart, because I think there is something else to it beyond the social functions it plays.

There's a socio-political aspect to religion, but there's also a mystical one: a side that is purely spiritual, about a personal connection with something divine.

Perhaps not every person experiences the need for mysticism in the same way we all experience a need for nourishment, but across every culture in the world exist people who do experience the need for connection with divinity. The forms of how people meet that need can look wildly different from person to person and place to place, just like cuisines can look wildly different from one another. Yet, just like all cuisines are food, all mysticisms are means of connecting with the divine.

Let's assume, for a moment, that religions and mysticisms function like cuisines. If you feel strongly attached to your particular religion, then for now, I invite

you to suspend your disbelief. Let's look not for one correct religion, but see if we can identify the "food" that they all are. What do religions and spiritual philosophies share in their understanding of the divine?

2. Finding a minimum shared understanding of God

A comprehensive survey of every conceivable interpretation of God across every religion that has ever existed would be impossible in a Medium article, or even in a book. For now, we're looking for the basic principles of how major religions and spiritual philosophies conceive of God, and what qualities they all share.

In Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), God (/Allah) is the single creator. God causes and sustains all of existence. God is the creator of justice, and alone sets the rules for how to live. God transcends the bounds of material reality, but remains eternally present in material reality. While human understandings of God differ between these traditions, they can all agree on these principles about what God is. These religions also share a belief that God is supreme: the only God, and the only God to follow.

The spiritual traditions of the Indian subcontinent, commonly called Hinduism, share a notion of God as a cause behind all reality. God manifests in many different forms, in more particular gods and goddesses in many traditions, but these deities are still multiple representations of the same supreme idea of God as the creator and sustainer of existence. God is likewise both transcendent (operating beyond the bounds of material reality) and immanent (present in material reality). God is the essential self: the essence of everything that is. Again, there are many distinct manifestations and teachings in how this understanding of God gets interpreted across Hindu traditions and how those interpretations play out in society, but we're looking for universal principles here.

Buddhism doesn't speak of a God at all, but it does speak of universal laws of nature, by which everything

exists and is bound. Buddhism doesn't concern itself with any being that might have created these laws, but with how to wield the understanding these laws towards a liberation from suffering.

Taoism is similar, in the sense that it also doesn't talk about God as a being. Instead, all of existence follows a fundamental way of operating, a flow or a universal pattern, called the *Tao*. The Tao cannot be grasped conceptually by the mind, but can be embodied and experienced. Aligning one's actions with the natural flow of creation leads to peace and contentment. Fighting against that flow leads to suffering and imbalance.

Numerous traditions we might loosely call "Animism" have a similar understanding of a universal aliveness that is shared in all of nature. There is a spiritual essence to everything, which exists within everything. While there isn't one set animist philosophy or ethic per se, the defining features of animist cosmologies include an understanding of the sentience and spiritual nature of humans and non-human beings and an embodied interdependence with the natural world.

While we can plainly see that wildly different societies arose from communities that shared nominally Christian beliefs, at one end, than those that practiced forms of animism, at another, the understandings of God within and between all of these traditions aren't so very different.

Abrahamic religions share a more particular belief in God as a supernatural being not held by other traditions, so we won't count this as part of our universal definition of God (though you are very welcome to still believe this yourself).

For the purposes of this exploration, we are looking for what all of these traditions share in how they experience divinity. What we can safely draw out from all these disparate traditions, at the least, is this:

1. There is a shared understanding of some fundamental order or pattern to existence,
2. That fundamental order is both embodied in all that exists and transcends any individual being, and
3. The spiritual role for an individual to play is one of following within that order, rather than attempting to fight against it.

3. Making sense of the fundamental order

While many religions have ascribed specific laws or dogmas to this fundamental order, we are looking not for culturally-specific laws, but universal ones. What are the universal features of the fundamental order these disparate traditions seem to share? Taoism would say that we cannot understand the order directly; if we tried to, we would lose sight of it. We can actually use that logic of not defining the order itself to make sense of it.

What we know is that the fundamental order exists both within and beyond every individual. It is universal and also personal: existing across everything, and within every thing. Every being is created according to the patterns of it. Every being exists and is sustained within the patterns of it. The order is absolute and intrinsic; nothing can exist without it or outside of it.

What is the order? It is the process by which all things are. It creates everything, everything exists within it, and it exists within everything.

It is an innate quality of everything that exists, and everything operates according to its principles. Because of this, all entities in existence can be understood both as what they are individually and as components in the functioning of some broader pattern, just like cells in a body can be understood as both as individual cells and as the components that make up a larger whole.

We can also say there is a universal understanding that this order is inescapable. This understanding is not religious, either; laws of physics are an inescapable order. From ethics of the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism or Taoism to a basic understanding of physics, we can all understand that attempting to break universal laws would invariably cause suffering. Attempting to do so would also be pointless, because the order is fundamental and inescapable.

So, we can likewise draw out a universal ethic of right action within this order: don't try to break it, because you cannot succeed in doing so. This is not a moral statement, but a factual one. If the order is fundamental, you cannot break it. If you can break a law, then it is not a fundamental law. It follows, then, that to believe in any society's or religion's ethics are the fundamental order is like saying that a specific cuisine is the only food.

There exists, at the heart of this, a paradox about ethics: the fundamental order is the only real law, but individuals can believe in other codes of ethics and seek to coerce one another to do the same. As we know, individuals are able to believe in things that are not true. Individuals can be unaware of the truth. Experiences can arise that, when interpreted by the individual mind, make something that is not true seem true. For example, when you stand on the Earth, it does not look to your mind like you are standing on a sphere, but you are.

4. The socio-political function of religion

Religions, as we discussed above, serve a dual function: they exist both as means of experiencing divinity, and as ways of structuring the ethics and behaviors of a society. In this latter respect, they function more like political systems. All political systems arise from particular world-views, which may not be nominally religious, but share

religion's goal of structuring society around a particular set of ethics or beliefs.

If we've drawn out a minimum universal understanding of divinity, can we likewise draw out a universal political system, one that functionally embodies the fundamental order without seeking pointlessly to break it?

The fundamental order derives its power from being fundamental: it exists in everything, inescapably. It does not only govern some things, but all things. It exists in every thing that exists. It creates everything. It sustains everything.

The fundamental order, then, is a kind of power or ability. All things are created from a power to create. All things are sustained by a power to sustain. All things that exist have the ability to shape existence within the bounds of the fundamental order, and existence has the ability to create according to the patterns of the fundamental order.

Because the order is present in all things, the ability to create, shape and sustain is given to all things. This is an element of the fundamental law. No other set of laws can actually take that power away. If it is possible to break a law, the law is obeyed by decision, not by the fundamental design of existence.

Therefore, a political system that seeks to unevenly distribute decision-making power cannot be in line with the fundamental order. It will cause suffering and be pursued pointlessly. A political system that is in line with the fundamental order begins with an equitable distribution of decision-making power. In political language, we would call this *non-hierarchy*.

Because the fundamental order comes from everything, and exists within every thing, a political system in line with the fundamental order would arise from the aggregated decisions of every thing. Decisions come from everyone. The closest cognate we have to this in the realm of political

systems is *direct democracy*, where decisions are made by individuals, together, towards a goal of shared consensus.

Because consensus, like consent, can only be felt authentically and cannot be enforced upon anyone, the building block of consensus is *autonomy*. Individuals have the ability to choose whether or not to consent. Consensus, which is just shared consent, can be participated in on a basis of *free association*.

To seek to force association with a particular decision, to render association not-free, would be an attempt to break a fundamental law by coercing individuals to behave according to beliefs that are not actually true. Individuals are able to associate at will. If a political system seeks to deprive people of their autonomy and freedom, it seeks to make people believe in things that are not true. It seeks to coerce individual perception into being at odds with the fundamental order. This leads to suffering.

This decision-making structure must apply to the economy as well. An economy is a system of how resources are managed; that is to say, an economy is a set of practices for making decisions about resources. A political system is a set of practices for making decisions — so, an economy is really just a specific aspect of politics: politics about resources, rather than politics in general.

If someone is capable of walking on your property, using your property, taking your property or identifying with your property, then that property is not really yours. It is yours only within the confines of a set of rules ascribed by a certain political system. If these rules can be broken, they are not in line with the fundamental order.

An economic system in line with the fundamental order recognizes that property is able to be used by everyone. It likewise recognizes that not everyone is going to use every resource at every time. An economic system in line with the fundamental order conceives of resources as belonging to everyone. It also understands that what we call “resources”

are themselves part of the fundamental order, and possess the same essence as humans. Non-humans therefore must hold power and respect within the system as well.

5. God is an anarcho-communist

The political and economic system that aligns itself willingly with the fundamental order thus has the following features:

- non-hierarchy of decision-making power
- consensus-based decision-making
- personal autonomy
- free association
- shared property
- resource allocation based on need
- reciprocal care and respect for the non-human world

These are the foundations of an ecological anarcho-communism.

Every other political system, therefore, is an attempt to move human behavior out of alignment with the fundamental order, to make people see things that are not there.

The path to spiritual awakening and embodiment for a human living in alignment with God, then, is the path towards actualizing an ecological anarcho-communism as the organizing structure of human society.

The Spiritual Case for Police Abolition

I believe in abolishing the police.

Part of the reason for this is because I care about social justice and anti-racism. If at this point, you still don't understand the entrenched racist violence of the American policing apparatus, I don't know what to tell you anymore. I bet Google does.

Part of the reason for it is because I believe in sound public health policy. Specifically, I recognize that policing is a fundamentally stupid way to respond to public health crises like addiction, theft and violence. These are social health crises that are better dealt with by ensuring people have access to the resources they need: to heal, to have emotional stability and material security, and to find dignity, purpose and authentic connection.

Part of the reason is that the police, since the inception of the institution, have been fundamentally corrupt and unjust. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, we often saw slogans about how "America's first police officers were runaway slave catchers," and there is truth to this. Early American police forces cannot be disentangled from the perpetuation of slavery, but even in places where slavery had been abolished, police forces still arose for the purpose of crushing human rights movements and enforcing a social order that favored the privileged few.

Nominally, the first modern police force was the London Met, founded in 1829 by a man named Robert Peel (hence the nickname "the Bobbies"). Peel cut his teeth as a colonial overseer ("Chief Secretary") of British-occupied

Ireland during an era of revolution and expanding interest in democracy and human rights. Recognizing that the use of direct military force could backfire on the British goal of crushing Irish resistance, Peel established a permanent, professional paramilitary institution to patrol Ireland with the goal of crushing proletarian and liberal movements for independence and human rights through direct and ongoing social control and violent enforcement of the colonial order. This new proto-police force was such a success for the British Empire's goals of trampling Irish resistance that Peel imported it back to his own country in a classic example of "Foucault's boomerang."

It is no wonder, then, that our modern police engage in such altruistic, pro-social endeavors as crushing Indigenous resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, forcibly removing homeless mothers from a vacant house in Oakland or ensuring peaceful protesters aren't allowed anywhere near the Supreme Court after having their fundamental bodily autonomy stripped away.

I recognize that abolition is a process, and that the full abolition of police and prisons is not something we're likely to see in my lifetime. All the same, I understand the Overton window, so I see no need to advocate for anything less than abolition.

Police have always been, and will always be, an instrument of colonization, oppression and social injustice. When police officers engage in work that is of direct community service, they are not acting as police; they are acting as social workers, investigators, conflict mediators, disaster responders and so on. These roles are critical to society and social well-being, but police exist to enforce a social order that perpetuates the worst things humanity has ever done to itself.

If we are to have any hope of healing, we have to move past policing, not just because of the social order our police exist to uphold, but because policing (and the impulse to police) is the root cause of suffering.

From a Buddhist perspective, the cause of suffering (*dukkha*) is desire (*tanha*). To lend more precise translation to that Noble Truth, we'd say: the cause of the anguish of never being able to be satisfied is craving for something you do not have.

The act of policing — of using force or the threat of force to change someone else's behavior to be in line with your own desires — is the most extreme version of that craving. It is to be so wedded to an image of how things should be, and so afraid or dissatisfied with how things are, that you feel compelled to force another person to obey your desires, even going so far as to inflict violence on them should they disobey you.

From a Taoist perspective, the cause of suffering is the impulse to control that which is already perfect. Nature follows its own path, which the individual human mind cannot fully grasp, nor dictate. The role of a wise man is to flow within the current of unfolding that exists already in reality, not to attach himself to the whims and fears of his individual, limited mind and its images for how things should be. Imbalance, and as a result, suffering, emerge when we try to exert force over our surroundings, to bend them to our mind's will instead of working with their intrinsic perfection.

From a Christian perspective, God is the only judge. The role of an individual is to follow in the example of Christ, who embodied love, compassion, non-condemnation, service and liberation. Christ never taught, "Kill or imprison a man who steals from you." Of money and material things, he taught to let them go, that they

could not ever be the source of salvation. Of empires and imperial orders, he taught to leave them to their own devices and walk away to a better focus. Of love, he taught to prioritize it exclusively, to build one's own kingdom in the reality that nothing can stop you from loving but your own imagination.

From every spiritual perspective, it is always the mind that ruins our fun. We imagine things should be different than they are. We imagine terrible, fearful things. We imagine we are separate and separable from one another. We imagine we are in Hell, and so we fail to see the Paradise we already inhabit. The path to living in that Paradise is to drop the mind's illusory interpretations, stop clinging to the fears, the judgments and the imagined outcomes and experience the perfection of what is already here.

A friend read to me recently from *Endgame* by Derrick Jensen, and in his opening premises, Jensen writes:

“There are no rich people in the world, and there are no poor people. There are just people. The rich may have lots of pieces of green paper that many pretend are worth something . . . and the poor may not. These “rich” claim they own land, and the “poor” are often denied the right to make that same claim. *A primary purpose of the police is to enforce the delusions of those with lots of pieces of green paper.*” (Emphasis added.)

This is true, yet the truth runs even deeper than that. This is beyond rich and poor, beyond money and land, beyond the particularities of this economic and social system the police uphold.

The primary purpose of policing, as an action, is to enforce delusion. *The* delusion: the grand spiritual one so many teachings speak of. This illusory world of the mind's Hell where fear and separation reign supreme, where judgment is our only meager defense and the thirst for absolute power over others is unquenchable.

If we spiritual seekers want liberation from the shackles of our mind's illusions, we have to liberate ourselves from the impulse to police — to police ourselves, each other, and life. Every time the fear comes up that makes us judge that makes us want to control and coerce and force, we must peel each layer back until we return to that initial kernel of fear. Then, we behold it for what it is, and we can begin to transmute it into love.

Likewise, if we want to live in an awakened world, in a world of peace and compassion, harmony and interbeing, then we have to move towards the total abolition of police and the punishment apparatuses that govern our lives.

In Search of a Spiritual Theory-of-Everything

I've noticed three particular threads of my spiritual thinking that feel distinct from one another, my kind of ABCs of spiritual philosophy, and I've been trying to find a way to weave their wisdoms together into a more cohesive philosophy. This essay is me trying to do that. I don't know yet if I'll succeed or where it will lead.

A is for *Animism*. Animism is a spiritual perspective that sees spirit (sacredness, God) alive in all living things. The spiritual quality of everything is innate and intrinsic, and life itself is sacred. The spiritual and the material are inseparable from one another.

B is for *Buddhism*. I'm using the term "Buddhism" as a stand-in for a particular spiritual orientation that is 1) not *only* found in Buddhism, and 2) not found in *every* practice of Buddhism either. That spiritual orientation is one of seeing material reality as illusory flux, and choosing instead to focus on training the mind towards peace through non-attachment to the external world.

C is for *Conscious Evolution*. Consciousness is, in my best definition of it, the awareness of the ability to choose. Evolution is a process of learned growth and refinement towards greater ease at thriving. Conscious evolution, then, is the willful decision to participate in our own spiritual development, embodied in learning to respond instead of to react, and so to have conscious choice over how we behave.

It's not that I think these three perspectives are inherently distinct, or necessarily in opposition, but depending on which one I identify with the most at a given moment, they each give me wildly different priorities and different ways of looking at my life or life in general.

I. Animism

In the moments when I feel the most aligned with animism, I feel both the least isolation and the most suffering. The more time I spend really learning to connect with nature, and the more time I spend reading about traditional ecological knowledge, the more I begin to feel how much I was meant to have an innate and reciprocal connection with the spirits of the natural world. It's like one of my senses was blunted, like a limb has been cleaved off. I'm supposed to know the names of all the plants that grow around me, and I'm supposed to know how to relate to them and care for them.

I feel my inseparability from life, my innate connection to all of it and all of it woven into this living tapestry along with me. At the same time, I feel profoundly bitter and angry at the destruction of the natural world, and so resentful of my colonial conditioning for robbing us of our human right to live indigenously, in deep relationship with land and place.

I feel called less to meditation and more to botany, less to writing and more to land defense and water protection. I feel called to learn the arts we keep losing of how to live in reciprocal relationship with the natural world. I feel called to foraging and weaving. I also feel called to war, in a way. I feel like fighting every extraction project, railing against contemporary civilization.

And yet, by my core spiritual ethic I believe that what I resist will invariably persist.

My animism feels at odds with my other spiritual philosophies, because it absorbs me deeply in the material. There are beautiful aspects to this, but also harmful ones: the war mentality, attachment to outcome and form, identification with my Ego and its drives. It all becomes a cycle of suffering, of craving and attachment that drives me into existential angst.

And what is the way to heal that?

II. Buddhism

Again, when I say “Buddhism” here, I don’t really mean Buddhism per se, nor any particular denomination of it. I’m referring more generally to *spiritual philosophy rooted in viewing material reality as fluctuations of craving and suffering that cannot be conquered, but only released.*

It’s not that I find this perspective wholly incompatible with animism’s understanding of everything’s innate spirit, but they come at spiritual growth with very different priorities. If everything around me has spirit, then to develop spiritually is to communicate and relate more deeply with the spirit alive in the physical world. If the physical world is a hologram of my own desire and rooting my focus and care in this world will only create suffering, then spiritual development is a self-mastery of over my cycles of craving and a release of all attachment to form and outcome.

Self-mastery over the addictive mind and deep connection with the innate spirit of the world can be compatible — in fact, if we take the approach that connection is the antithesis of addiction, then they’re not only compatible but identical. To release the mind from pointless craving for anything-that-isn’t-happening-here-and-now is to experience everything’s aliveness and perfection in this moment. Communing with the innate

spirit of life here and now is the only real cure to the cycle of suffering and craving.

The ends are one, but the means can be so different. A more animist perspective doesn't really concern itself with non-attachment to form, and a more Buddhist philosophy doesn't really concern itself with decolonization. Even if both perspectives share an ideal of total dissolution of identification with the false separate self and perfect communion with all of creation, they speak to different sets of priorities that guide the path very differently.

Ultimately, all spiritual practices are doorways into the same room, or rather, doorways out to the place beyond rooms. The point of a doorway is to walk through it, not worship it. Once you've walked through it, the door is behind you. Yet, while I'm inclined to think the doorway matters less than the place it leads, the reality remains that most of us spend our material incarnations hovering in the doorway. Perhaps we occasionally walk through it, but we're often being pulled back by our attachments and identifications with the Ego's world.

So if this proverbial doorway is where I'm spending my time, then it does matter which doorway I choose to occupy.

Which brings us to the question of choice:

III. Conscious Evolution

The best way I can sum up conscious evolution is by quoting Her Majesty, Dolly Parton:

“Find out who you are, and do it on purpose.”

The most common examples of conscious evolution we see are about trauma healing. Ultimately, all of this is about trauma healing, but I mean that in a more specific and limited scope. The way I've seen most people apply the framework of conscious evolution is to pause and look at their own triggers and reactive patterns, unpack their

origins, and learn to assess the difference between what those patterns dictate and what is actually happening in the present moment.

The evolution is from living as a reaction to living as whole person — both acknowledging past pain and practicing self-mastery by not letting past pain control behavior.

This is a critically important step, and one I have to continue practicing (and often fail to), yet in my view, it isn't taking conscious evolution as far as it can go.

Consciousness is aware choice: it's making a choice while aware that you are making a choice. At it's deepest level, conscious evolution is about becoming aware of what your true self is (y'know... the Universe, God, Source consciousness, the infinite unfolding of nature, etc.) and choosing to align your perspective and behavior with that reality. It's consciously choosing to live and act as though you are your eternal self, because you are. What does the Universe do? It evolves. So what do you do if you consciously align with the Universe? You evolve, aware that that is what you are doing.

The pitfall of this approach is to substitute the Ego mind's understanding of evolution for the reality of evolution. I can't tell you what evolution looks like or what it means to consciously evolve in a given situation. My images and concepts are not a language the Universe speaks. The Universe speaks in sensation and experience, and so to consciously choose your own evolution, you have to choose the option that *feels like* you are evolving. It may not look at all like how you imagine progress to look.

Because that's just the thing of it — the Universe evolves. It doesn't necessarily "progress." Progress and evolution are not the same thing.

Evolution is an infinite process of changing, adapting, creating and responding. It's a dance, a conversation, which is why so many of our great spiritual experiences involve understanding the world as art and play. Evolution is not a linear path towards some distant goal. It's a *way* of happening, the way the Universe unfolds. It's just what the Universe does.

The Universe evolves because everything in it has both matter and spirit. Like clay to a sculptor, matter is spirit's medium for creation. When we talk about aligning with our true nature, what that means is aligning with the reality that our actual essence is spirit.

My body is a medium for spirit to create, but my identity is spirit, not this form.

Conclusion: Matter is an Instrument for Spirit to Play

I think, remembering that is the way to synthesize the three perspectives. Like I said, they're not in opposition, but they do take distinct approaches and have distinct priorities to spiritual attunement.

Matter is the medium through which spirit creates, and so, all matter has spirit. At the same time, spirit is the essence, and material reality is like the paintbrush. The artist does not mistakenly believe she is a paintbrush, and the spiritual seeker does not mistakenly believe she is a body. The artist practices using multiple colors and strokes so that he does not get locked into the way only one color can paint, just as the spiritual seeker must work on self-mastery to not be ruled by desires and past traumas. But, the artist cannot create without the paint and the paintbrush either.

Dancing and playing and creating with matter is what spirit does. Spirit wants to engage with matter. Spirit always engages with matter because it creates through matter. Matter is its medium. And so, matter is sacred, because it's where spirit lives. The material world is spirit's sacred temple.

Conscious evolution is about understanding who we really are and choosing to align our actions with it. The reality is that we are not this body, and the impulses of the body do not need to guide us. The material world does not control our creations, but we can only create through matter. We are not matter, we are spirit. Aligning with the reality that we are spirit means treating the material world as spirit's sacred temple and remembering that everything that lives in the temple is spirit, too.

That still feels like a convoluted explanation for how to synthesize the three approaches, so perhaps they are better synthesized by what they tell us not to do. They all teach the same crucial lesson:

Do not mistake your own desires for the truth of who you are.

Our body's desires for safety and security have led us to conquer and dominate, to attach to outcomes and ignore the voices and needs of other beings. This makes us more attached to the body and less aware of our true nature.

The body is an instrument for spirit to play. It is meant to be played in harmonious symphony with all the other bodies.

The body's conditioned thoughts and desires are not the same as the mind of spirit.

Animism tells us not to give into the impulse to dominate and conquer, but learn instead to commune, connect and live in harmony and reciprocity. If we conquer and destroy, we try to stamp out the art spirit creates.

Buddhism tells us not to give into the cravings that drive us deeper into desire, but learn instead to find the peace that exists when we give desire up. If we continuously pursue the next desire, we can never find acceptance and love for what's already here.

Conscious evolution tells us not to give into the patterns of the past in the present, but instead learn to perceive what is actually happening now and respond authentically and fully. If we continue reacting instead of listening to reality, we will forever be stuck inside some torturous fantasy of the body's thoughts.

Perhaps it's okay that my thoughts can't find a synthesis they find fully satisfactory. The point, Lao Tzu would say, is not to grasp it with the thoughts, for as soon as the thoughts have named it, they've made it into a thought. The real thing is not a thought. It cannot be bound in thoughts and concepts.

The thoughts and concepts, the words, are not the point. All these words can do is to point the way. These frameworks are like doorways to the experience beyond the Ego, beyond the body's thoughts, beyond the false self. The point of a doorway is to walk through it.

Once you do, the door is behind you.

The Problem with Fixating on “Natural” Things

Like many people around the world, the Covid quarantine period gave me a chance to slow down and focus in on what was happening directly around me, especially on my health. The year before the pandemic hit, I’d moved for the first time to a small town, a hippie town where herbs and tinctures and ecosystem restoration were common topics of conversation in a way they just never had been in Brooklyn. Between the rural setting, our collective emphasis on health and a dawning, visceral realization of the wisdom of slowing down, I started getting really into nature.

I don’t just mean going hiking, though the past few years have found me I rekindling a love for walking in nature I hadn’t fully felt since I was a child. It ran deeper than that. I got more interested in food and herbal medicine, in making things by hand, in eschewing quick fixes and disposable anything in favor of investing in the slow work of doing things in a more natural way.

The benefits I’ve found of living “more naturally” are really not something I can overstate. I feel so much more in touch with my body, so much more in touch with nature. I know the names of all kinds of new plants now, and how they can be used to heal the body and calm the mind. I’ve learned so much more about my body, about how to take care of it properly, about how many thoughts lurk in my muscles and organs and how slowing down and feeling them until they transmute changes everything.

Most of all, I’ve started to come back into touch with my own humanity through building a deeper connection

with the natural world. The alienation we experience, caused by our lack of deep relationship to the world around us (from our bodies to our stuff to our natural environments) is, in my view, the cause of all kinds of suffering.

Plants and animals are our friends and neighbors.

Everything wrong in our society and our world has its roots in our great separation from nature, in our will to dominate and exploit it rather than live harmoniously with it, in the way that moves us to dominate and exploit ourselves and each other.

Nature has a wisdom all her own, and the more we try to learn from that wisdom rather than bulldoze it, the more harmonious and full our lives become.

At the same time, there's a trap inherent in our desire to return to what feels more "natural," and that is this: to fixate on anything "natural" means to imagine that there is such a thing as something "unnatural," and that isn't true.

Everything that exists, has ever existed or will exist, is natural. Every atom that has existed since the dawn of everything, from pure hydrogen to the cobalt now living in your smart phone, is natural. Everything that makes up your smart phone is natural. Every person who exploited the laborers mining that cobalt and every Instagram selfie you post on your smart phone — all these are natural. They are nature. They are inseparable from nature.

We are inseparable from nature. Everything is nature.

Contemporary colonial capitalism, the paralyzing self-doubt of the social media age, the chronic anxiety of our hyperactive news cycles, and even big pharma — these are all nature.

The problem with our contemporary civilization is not that it is unnatural; it is wholly natural. The problem is that it's hurting us and our planet. It's breeding, and was bred

by, the impulse to dominate, control and exploit rather than the impulse to learn with humility and relate authentically and harmoniously.

There's a concept in Taoism called *pu* (now made famous in the West by Benjamin Hoff's delightful book, *The Tao of Pooh*) which gets at the root of our interest in more "natural" ways of living. *Pu* is typically translated as "unhewn wood" or "the uncarved block," an idea of things in their simplest, most natural form, how they are and exist before the mind's impulse to control and alter steps in to transform them.

In Taoism, a wise mind is a mind in the state of *pu*: things simply are as they are, and within that acceptance of their natural way of being lives all our capacity for peace, freedom and wisdom. There's a perfection in things unaltered, the way a river is perfect at being a river or a butterfly is perfect at being a butterfly. This kind of perfection lives far beyond the limited scope of the mind's judgments. To experience this perfection is to understand that nothing needs to be altered to make it "better."

What makes this experience so liberating is, in my view, the way it brings us into real relationship with ourselves and the world. The less we judge ourselves, the more we accept ourselves as we are, the more we can love ourselves and build deeper, truer, more authentic relationships with others. The less we try to control the world, the less cause we have to fear it as it already is, and then we can begin to find genuine, loving relationships with it.

As many of us endeavor to return to lives that feel more natural, what we're really trying to do is cultivate lives that feel more authentically connected. We want deeper relationships with ourselves and with what lives around us.

Changing your wardrobe from disposable fast fashion to clothes you made yourself is not transformative because it is more “natural,” but because it gives you the chance to have a real relationship with your clothing. Eschewing some pharmaceuticals in favor of herbs and dietary changes, or practicing yoga and bodywork in lieu of relying on a surgery, puts you into much deeper relationship with your body and its systems. Restoring an ecosystem to its healthiest form, tending to it regularly, gardening and gathering your food, talking to plants, learning the names of birds and how to sing their songs — suddenly, a whole new dimension of relationships opens up before you.

The world becomes full of friends instead of crowded with objects.

As we slow down and root more deeply in our world, we drink in the potential for authentic relationships that remind us we are inseparable parts of a wider whole. It’s not that anything we did in our civilization was truly unnatural; it just felt unnatural because it was alienating.

What we’re longing for is not nature — this laptop is still nature — but authentic connection and reciprocal relationship. This is the antidote to alienation, where we take our rightful place as small parts of something whole.

No Class War on a Dead Planet

Part 1: From Culture War to Class War

Driving across the U.S. last summer, I found myself making a tense mental calculation in each new town I visited: would I get more dirty looks if I didn't wear a face mask, or if I did?

It's a strange thing to have to think about, strange like thinking about whether I can talk openly about politics in a bar, or if my Leftist-hippie bumper stickers will make me a target for harassment in a parking lot. It's strange spending so much time thinking about whom my minor life decisions could offend, stranger still trying to guess the odds that such an offense might devolve into physical violence.

Whatever those odds are, I am acutely aware that they're greater than zero.

These days, the collective American psyche is as dry as a California forest, and each passing news cycle seems only to ignite more sparks. Like many people, I've spent the past two years utterly bewildered by why a deadly pandemic has become the latest and most vitriolic front in a rolling national culture war.

Some days, it really does feel like a war, like absolutely any topic can be drawn into battle and ripped along an ideological fault line. Nothing is safe. Families and friends are torn apart. Every week it seems, we hear more news of altercations, more threats of violence, more tension, more rage.

It's never over anything that matters. We're angry about masks, not mass evictions. We argue about cancel culture, not the inherent violence of incarceration. We fight against vaccines and anti-vaxxers, not side by side for

decent healthcare. We the People duke it out over these arbitrary “issues” while the rich get richer and the rest get screwed.

The idealist in me wants to grab America and shake it. “These people are not your enemies!” I want to say. “The real enemies are Bezos and Buffett, the Waltons and the Sacklers. The real enemies are neoliberal capitalism and corporate domination. Arise, ye workers from your slumber! This is not a culture war, it’s a class war!”

Some days, it really does feel like a class war.

On the home front, economic inequality is at pre-Revolution France levels at least. Landlords call their tenants lazy for not paying \$2,500 a month for a 1-bedroom in the middle of a pandemic. Billionaires launch themselves out of the atmosphere and we’re the ones who can’t breathe. Globally, the dichotomy between rich and poor countries’ access to vaccines is a sickening reminder of the enduring economic violence of colonialism, and we haven’t even gotten to the inequalities in how we’re all likely to weather the climate collapse.

But despite these glaring symptoms of class war, it’s hard to see anything beyond a culture war looking at most Americans today.

In recent years, the reignited American Leftist movement has made significant headway in pushing our political conversation into terms of material class interest. Despite its many shortcomings, Occupy Wall Street did succeed in cementing the rhetoric of “the 99% vs. the 1%” into the American psyche. Bernie Sanders became a viable presidential candidate, twice. According to recent polls, over half of young Americans now view socialism favorably, and as more swathes of Generation Z enter adulthood, public allegiance to the capitalist mode of production is dwindling. More and more people are actively organizing for radical social change, with a group

like Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) seeing its membership explode from around 8,000 in 2016 to nearly 100,000 today.

The class consciousness keeps rolling in. In the world of memes and other decentralized media, anti-capitalist language has become a ubiquitous part of online culture. From guillotines to Gritty to Humans of Late-Stage Capitalism, we're all getting hungrier to #EatTheRich. While it's impossible to know the exact numbers of people who would actually participate in an attempted working-class overthrow of the government or economic establishment, it's clear that our current situation has gotten a significant portion of Americans at least to think about it.

These gains in class consciousness have been an uphill battle in the American political context. The creation of culture wars out of arbitrary identities and social issues has been a consistent fixture of American politics since its inception. Long before face masks and vaccines, long before gay marriage and abortion, long before the old or new Jim Crow, there was Bacon's Rebellion in 1675, when a cross-racial alliance of the poor engaged in open combat against colonial Virginia's ruling class. This alliance so disturbed the ruling class that they responded by passing the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, cementing the racial caste system from which we're only beginning to recover today.

It's a tale truly as old as this country's colonization: divide the lower classes along ideological and identity lines that stir emotional reactions strong enough that any effort at unification fails.

As our economic and ecological situations get increasingly more dire, and as we get more adept at wielding decentralized media on our own, this divide-and-conquer misdirection may not hold much longer. It seems

like every day now, more workers are empowered to strike against inhumane conditions and the everyday violence of our economy. The DSA emailed me recently to say, “Class consciousness is on the rise!” The working class, they said, is the only constituency large enough to unite to save us all.

Arise, ye workers from your slumber.

As we tentatively move towards a post-Covid world, I wonder if the class war narrative might finally win out in these United States. Clearly, we’re fed up. Clearly, everything needs to change, and quickly. It’d be a neat narrative, for us to unite in a class-based mass uprising against the oligarchs and thereby save America from itself.

But the more I chew on it, the more I start to realize: it just isn’t true — at least, not all the way. I’m not sure that this is a class war, but even if it is, winning it won’t save us.

Part 2: From Class War to Where?

What we call “class war” or “class struggle” refers to an entrenched political, social and economic conflict between one class and another. The two classes in the struggle have conflicting material interests, diametrically-opposed wants for society that must drive them to fight one another for the supremacy of their goals.

There are a few problems with applying the class war narrative to contemporary America. First, the American working class today is so diverse across such a variety of vectors that any talk of a unified working-class interest is dubious at best. What is that interest, exactly? What is the will of the American working class? Is it the revival of the coal mines and car factories, or is it tearing down the dams and building green energy infrastructure? Does the working class need more industrial jobs or more food

sovereignty? Lower gas prices or high-speed rail? An end to immigration or an end to the police?

I do think all working people benefit from policies like universal healthcare, a higher minimum wage and better support for the right to unionize, but movements around these issues have historically not been enough to dig the American working class out of its ideological trenches.

While our political system is certainly infested with corporate shells masquerading as public servants, curbing corruption would not erase the reality that our present political deadlock is very real. We do not have meaningful popular consensus about how to move forward as a country.

Second, contemporary capitalism has moved so far beyond meeting real human needs that I just don't think class interest is useful a framework to understand it anymore.

If a class-based movement is viable, then which classes are in the movement, and which is it moving against? Class structure in 2020s America is not what it was in 1860s Europe. If we're going to eat the rich, then who qualifies as rich? If you own a nice house in an expensive zip code, then you're rich — but you're still not six-mega-mansions-two-private-islands-and-a-bunker-in-New-Zealand rich. Is our class-based revolutionary movement going to see Richmond tenants battling San Francisco landlords in some kind of Amazon Prime-sponsored *Hunger Games*? Or are we all uniting against Lord Bezos and his ilk, a mass uprising of 300 million people against 300 billionaires?

If the latter, then we're not up against a class so much as a clique, and the rest of us definitely don't have material interests unified around anything other than decapitating the lizard people. A class denotes a meaningful population of humans with a real collective economic interest.

Even for the billionaire lizard people, this doesn't seem like it's really about class interest anymore. Given the parade of phallic rocket ships, winning at capitalism plainly hasn't met Jeff Bezos' need for masculine self-esteem. Even if we're just sticking to his material interest, the level of riches he and the rest of his clique hold is no longer relevant to their material circumstances either. Bezos could lose 90% of his fortune and nothing in his life would materially change for the worse. This isn't class interest; it's rabid antisocial derangement. Fighting this in economic terms is a misdiagnosis of the problem. Putting them all through cognitive behavioral therapy would probably do more to solve the problem than a working class uprising.

A class-based movement to overthrow the capitalists makes sense when you're rallying a hundred factory workers against a boss. When you're facing off-shore bank accounts with untold assets, abstracted corporate ownership, industries and empires that run regardless of the individuals within them and entirely speculative markets, the power dynamics of material control have practically nothing to do with people.

Third, even if we do somehow manage to overthrow the ruling class, that will not undo the global capitalist machine and it sure as hell doesn't save us from climate collapse.

Really, what would happen if we "won the class war"? What would that even mean? Seizing control of the Tesla factories does not put an end the human and ecological devastation of lithium mining. Taking Facebook away from Zuckerberg will not stop the rampant spread of misinformation online. Jailing every banker in New York won't fix our broken housing system, and there is nothing we can do to the Sacklers that will end opioid addiction.

Not only are we past the point where having a common enemy creates a meaningful unity of interest, we're beyond the point where defeating that enemy would save us in any meaningful way. We cannot punish our way out of this.

The class war narrative could unite a significant portion of America into a successful movement for workers' rights or tenants' rights — but here's the thing: rights only matter when you have a functioning, legitimate state able to protect those rights and enforce punishment for violations.

The U.S. government, its leaders and its punishment apparatus are growing less legitimate in the eyes of many Americans by the second. Biden's approval rating is in the toilet, I can't remember us ever trusting Congress, and now even the Supreme Court has lost legitimacy. While I have a very different opinion of "Abolish the Police" than I do of "Stop the Steal," both slogans are indicative of a growing belief that the state and its monopoly on the use of force are no longer legitimate.

If the government loses enough of its legitimacy, we will be in civil war, not class war.

Because last, but not least, there's that whole climate collapse thing to deal with. We're in it now, but we are still in the early days of it, and the worst we've seen so far is likely to be the best we'll see for decades. I'm reminded of a tweet I saw a few years ago that read, "I'm gonna need a climate scientist to tell me whether or not I should still be trying to pay back my student loans."

Well, I am not a climate scientist, but I don't think student loans will be chief among anyone's concerns for much longer.

Part 3: From Here to System Collapse

I don't know if we will succeed in keeping global heating under 1.5 degrees Celsius over the coming decades.

Perhaps there will be some political miracle, but the clock is ticking fast and so far, the adaptation efforts made by just about every country on the planet are far too little, far too late.

I don't know if we will succeed in avoiding the worst. Neither do you. Because of this, we can't plan only as though we will, and the way most people engage with politics is only relevant if we will. Waging any kind of a class war only has meaning if our institutions remain largely intact. At this point, the continued integrity of our social order is not a certainty. I don't even think it's a likelihood.

It's not that I think class-based politics is useless in the face of climate change. I think economic democracy and rights-protection movements will remain extremely important for the next several years as capitalism attempts to cling to life by more extreme measures through worsening conditions. However, as the climate collapse deepens, the salient conversations will not be about elections, taxes, wages or even seizing the means of production. We'll be talking about securing collective access to the means of survival.

I believe, across the board, that workers deserve much higher wages, much better working conditions and complete protection for workplace organizers. At the same time, I recognize that what matters most is not what the bosses of any industry deign to give their workers, but the tangible power those workers possess to get their human needs met regardless of what the bosses do.

We need to be thinking beyond advocating for our needs within the system that exists, and towards building the structures to meet our needs regardless of what this system does.

For example, imagine if a distribution company were to close a warehouse and fire every worker in it. Imagine there were no other jobs around to have, as is the case in

many parts of the world and country already. Where would those workers go for food? Where would they go if supply chains for other necessities were strained and struggling, as they already are? Would there be free food gardens in every park and empty lot in their neighborhood where they could easily grow fresh food with their neighbors? If a hurricane wiped out power for weeks on end, would their neighborhood have access to enough generators and solar panels? Where would they get medical care if the hospital had gone bankrupt?

I support Medicare for All. I also recognize that if rural hospitals keep shuttering and urban hospitals get overwhelmed in the next pandemic, Medicare for All is moot.

As the situation gets more dire, the actions will get more direct. We may secure better renter protections, but I imagine we'll soon see mass rent strikes and more people just squatting where they can. We might seriously raise taxes on the 1%, but I wouldn't put it past the Trumpists or another movement to organize a mass tax strike long before that happens. We've already seen armed militias start stand-offs over water management, and the droughts are likely only to get worse. Conflicts and movements will be less about class interest than immediate access to necessities.

As for who we elect, that matters too, insofar as our elected officials can help stave off the worst mass suffering while our whole society transitions to a different way of organizing itself. The right elected officials can move money towards good programs, like mass workforce development for ecosystem restoration or building local food sovereignty. They could wield the Defense Production Act to stop national production of McMansions and BearCats and force national production of nutritious food, green energy infrastructure and seawater desalination plants. They could disarm and curtail the police so that we

don't see more post-disaster crises where police departments devolve into rogue violent gangs, as happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

All of that would be extremely important. Are any of those changes happening, though?

Banking on the American government is a very risky bet. From where I'm watching, it stopped doing its job a long time ago. It let 850,000 of us die in this pandemic and counting. It regularly lets whole communities get wiped out in fires and floods without meaningful action on climate resilience. It let yet another housing bubble grow so bloated that I fear for what will happen when (not if) it bursts, yet all it seems to do is play war games with Russia and China and plead pointlessly with Joe Manchin to get himself together.

Look at our government. Not at what you were raised to believe it was, not how it used to work. Look at it now, as it's currently functioning or failing to. Our government is probably not going to make the changes necessary to help most people survive climate change. It's likely military bases and major centers of capital will get some protections, sure, but for the rest of us? It's time to accept that we'll be on our own.

We may have better luck from county and municipal governments because we can exert more control over them directly. Still, no government can stop global capitalism. No government can stop global climate change.

Better elected officials, divestment from fossil fuels and greener production could buy us time to build the structures we'll need to avoid extinction, but that time is useless if we aren't building those structures. Governments can only legalize, fund and outlaw. The actual work is always up to us.

We do need mass engaged political action, but not so we can "stop the capitalists." I don't even know what that means anymore. We need as many people as possible, rich

and poor, young and old, Liberal and Conservative, across any and all vectors of identity, to cooperate towards forging this transition together. We must act to avert the worst disasters and abuses, and to build the structures that ordinary people will need to survive.

We do not have those structures yet.

For now, we can keep fighting for access to necessities against the artificial scarcities created by capitalism. More importantly, though, we need collective ownership structures and decentralized distribution networks to be prepared for when the resource scarcities become genuine.

The fires are getting bigger. The hurricanes are getting stronger. The famines have already begun. Supply chain disruptions have already caused shortages of foods and medications. Cities and farms across the country and around the world are running out of water. This is not hyperbole. This is happening.

This next decade will force our attention to turn swiftly, from all talk of culture war or class war towards a genuine shared concern for collective survival.

Part 4: From Collapse to Deep Adaptation

In order to survive, we need survival programs.

We must keep building and improving our mutual aid networks, collective ownership structures and decentralized, efficient means of communication and resource distribution. We need to learn from the communities who have been building practical means of communal survival in impossible circumstances for decades, especially Indigenous communities. The kind of transformation we need runs deeper than any policy or politician.

No matter what our politics, we need to be restoring our watersheds and planting food forests, managing our ecosystems and learning basic medical care. We need to be engaging in new forms of participatory democracy with

our neighbors. We need to be practicing psychological resilience and collective emotional care. I repeat: we need mass workforce development for land stewardship and ecosystem restoration. If the state won't do it for us, we must do it on our own.

That is what I know so far. I also know we need your help to figure out the rest.

It's time to think beyond political will and towards human need. It's time we come together not as a class, but as communities rooted in place with the resources, skills and distribution networks needed to keep each other alive.

As much as I believe that the upper echelons of the global corporate elite should be sacrificing all they own to ensure the planet can survive, the fact remains that my beliefs do not matter to them.

Every time we cast blame, we waste time. Every time we think in terms of a "should," we waste energy. The question of who "should" fix the world is irrelevant. What matters is who *is* fixing the world. What matters is each of us doing what we can to support and expand the movements that are.

Every day, the only question that matters to ask is, "What can I do to build a better world out of what is actually happening in my community?"

We need to grow and wield the power we possess to endure this transition, not waste our energy fighting those who hold power we never will. We are almost certainly not going to stop them in time, and when the time comes, even their bunkers in New Zealand won't wall them off from all of it. Let's not forget that people in New Zealand are capable of direct action, too.

Back on the home front, we need prescribed burns more than we need Bernie Sanders. We need resilience

more than we need resistance. We need to build up the good more than we need to tear down the bad. It's called a "dual power" strategy — building alternative structures to meet our needs and organize community outside capitalism and the state. We also need to keep engaging with our government wherever we can find openings and opportunities to build the structures we need. We'll have better luck with that locally than nationally. In the words of Movement Generation, "If we are not prepared to govern, we are not prepared to win."

As time goes on, we will improve and expand upon the structures we've built in ways I can't yet imagine, but what matters now to start building them. Start building community gardens and solar micro-grids. Start learning preventive medicine and natural building. Start neighborhood seed libraries, tool libraries and vehicle shares. Study land stewardship and traditional ecological knowledge. Install rainwater catchment systems. Turn your front lawn into a free vegetable garden. Create emotional support groups. Start organizing with your neighbors, going door to door, talking to people about resilience and collective survival. Start block clubs and neighborhood assemblies, resilience groups and cooperatives.

Build community. Build it now. No one is coming to save us.

We all need to prepare for what comes next. All of us are in this mess on this planet, and the ones who can blast themselves off into space are going to die out there, too. Mars is not a living planet either. Elon Musk can have it for all I care. Render unto Elon that which is Elon's. The rest of us have real work to do.

We can't keep wasting our energy trying to shuffle the sides from one war into another. This is not a war. This is a furious struggle for survival against a global illness that could easily be terminal. Our collective interests are not

party-based, culture-based or class-based, not where it really counts. All that can unite is us the interest we all share, and that interest is collective survival.

Building the systems of the future in our communities does more than cultivate resilience. It does more than help ensure our survival needs can be met. It also transforms us. We viscerally experience how different life can be, and we stop fearing the unknown as we learn that not all disruption is bad. Within it lies the change we've desperately been seeking. The disasters are here to stay, and they are here to change us. We can allow ourselves to change everything.

We are nothing but humans living together on a dying planet. Fighting each other means we all die. It's time to stop thinking in terms of war, of any kind. No culture war, no class war, just humans helping to keep each other alive — that's the future we need.

If we keep working for collective survival, we stand a chance of doing it.

Why Personal Lifestyle Changes Still Matter in the Face of Climate Chaos

71% of the world's carbon emissions come from only 100 companies, companies over which I (and likely, you) have no decision-making power at all. One of the worst polluters on the planet is, of course, the United States military, and no matter how hard I *get out there and vote*, no one in my federal government ever seems compelled to rein in their capacity for climate destruction.

Today, after a brief reprieve, that summer heat wave is back here in the Northeast. Meanwhile, the McKinney Fire blows up the Klamath National Forest in my home state, a grim harbinger of the worst of fire season yet to come. I heard this Atlantic hurricane season might bring our first Category 6 storm. Sacred wild rice is being poisoned for another tar sands pipeline while the Amazon gets a buzz cut and environmental activists are disappeared and oil clogs the arteries of the Gulf and the glaciers crack like rotting teeth and mind you: we are still in the calm before the storm.

Climate collapse is here. It is everywhere. Its impacts will come down on everyone— not evenly, not by a long shot — but no one will be untouched by it. Those with the greatest personal culpability for climate change will likely suffer the least of its negative outcomes, but all the same, before this century's out, every last one of us will feel the heat.

We all have our hands dirty in the global extraction game, but most of us, even in rich countries, are pawns in this game at best. The scale and speed at which climate

destruction is perpetrated, and the chief perpetrators of it, have practically nothing to do with you or me. I could go zero waste, compost everything I own, get a Tushy bidet, never drive or fly on an airplane, go vegan, and spend all of my time at climate justice protests and still, nothing I do would even make a dent in global heating.

My actions play a role in climate change, but my personal lifestyle changes unequivocally cannot fix it. More importantly, the narrative encouraging us to take “personal responsibility” for our role in climate change is deliberate and toxic misdirection on the part of those in power who could fix it, or at least take significant steps in that direction. When it comes to an apocalyptic planetary crisis arising from our entire global economic and political order, the reality is that being a more eco-friendly individual is the equivalent of dropping an ice cube into a volcano.

Yet, and I say this with the utmost seriousness: making those individual lifestyle changes is essential to our collective survival.

First, any scenario where human civilization survives this era will necessitate huge changes in what and how we consume. We simply cannot keep extracting from this planet at the rate we’ve grown accustomed to, and as long as it’s profitable for corporations keep devastating the planet, they will. Maybe some miraculous shift in political will can curtail them, but so far, that hasn’t happened. If we want to exert influence over corporations, we have to hit them where it hurts. We have to stop buying their products, using their services and bolstering their financial power.

Boycotts and divestments are proven effective strategies to instigate political change. While our lives are often so interwoven with dependence on ecological devastation, it’s important for us to find any ways out we can. Whether it’s divesting from a bank that funds pipelines, or not buying from Amazon, or biking and taking public

transit as much as possible, we have to seize upon every alternative to our continued reliance on the worst offenders of climate chaos.

Not everyone can divest from extraction capitalism, not yet, but those with the greatest ability to do so have the responsibility to get the ball rolling for everyone else.

Second, the more we exit from extraction capitalism, the more alternatives there will be to it. The more co-ops we buy from (or work for), the more community gardens we plant, the more childcare collectives we start, the more tool libraries we launch, the more mutual aid we engage in with our neighbors, the stronger these movements become. If we do not keep trying the doorways out of this system, there will not be doorways out of this system.

The more we create and encourage alternative ways of getting our needs met that don't destroy our planet, the more such alternatives can flourish. They become more comprehensive, more feasible and more accessible. At the same time, we grow more empowered to experiment with new ways of shaping society and taking care of each other within it.

Third, climate change is a symptom. It, itself, is not the cause of our collective problem.

Our problem is that our entire world order is out of balance and premised on what are objectively bad priorities: growth at all costs, extraction and exploitation, the "race to the bottom," domination, colonization and commodification. This current iteration of civilization not, as most humans have done throughout history, rooted in a deep knowledge of place and a complex, respectful interconnection with the surrounding environment. This civilization is built on seizing and destroying that which we don't understand.

We have no hope of a future beyond climate change if we don't change this paradigm. The real task of our time is

to instigate a profound adaptation, a fundamental shift in the blueprint of human civilization that runs much deeper than ending our dependence on fossil fuels and curbing global heating.

Changing our relationships with consumption and production impacts more than just the stuff of our lives. Contemporary American life is so devoid of real relationship that it's no wonder we're all clinging to anti-depressants and substance addictions to escape the pain of our extreme dislocation. Some of us may have genuine, intimate relationships with our friends, family or partners, but hardly any of us have such relationships with the landscape around us, or with our bodies, or with our labor.

If we want to heal this profound imbalance, we must return to real relationships with the food we eat, with the clothes we wear, with the way we transport ourselves, with the furniture in our houses, with our neighbors, with the work we do, with the places we live. We must learn the names of the plants in our bioregions and practice caring for them. We must learn how to care for our own bodies and minds, and extend that same care to each other as well.

Simply put: there is no way out of this global climate mess without doing the messy, painful and complicated work of collective healing. That healing process can only begin with making personal changes: in our thoughts, our beliefs, our habits, our actions, our priorities and our values.

The myth that our actions don't matter is just another symptom of the glaring disconnection of our time.

Everything on this planet influences everything around it. The whole problem is that we've spent centuries pretending we're not essential pieces of an interdependent ecosystem. But we are.

You and I may be powerless to stop corporate carbon emissions, but we do have the power to help usher in an era

of deep adaptation and societal transformation. Because we have the power to do so, we have the responsibility to do so. Not because it will “fix climate change” — it won’t — but because “fixing climate change” means nothing if we don’t take the leap to live in a different way.

We Can't Eat Rights

Something's different now — or, maybe it's the old same again — I don't know which. Ever since the invasion of Ukraine, I feel like I'm watching reruns from a previous season of America. The old actors are back, or new ones are playing the old roles. We're back to when the news was filled with more global geopolitics than nationalism, when we talked about the military-industrial complex more than culture wars, when the enduring world order made itself painfully known and we knew it ran on war.

Ron DeSantis looks like a hangnail by comparison.

The twisted blessing of the Trump era was that it made our societal illness so apparent: we live in a racist world, and we founded a racist country here. The poison of our nation's history was sucked right up to the surface where it marched in the open with blazing tiki torches and demanded we recognize it for what it is. No longer could we plaster over the ugliness of colonization, slavery and our interwoven social caste systems. There was no more denying the truth of what we are.

At the same time, the Trump era obscured something too. The political game in 2016 seemed so different than it was in 2006. Rooting out racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia — these were the center of our focus. The budding new Leftist movement also turned our attention to economic inequality, workers' rights and tenants' rights. We saw awe-inspiring movements in support of Indigenous sovereignty and against extraction and environmental degradation. We mobilized around all

kinds of important issues, and yet, we forgot something at the core:

We forgot that this world is built on war, and war can take it all away.

The social progress we've made in the past decade is important, but at the same time, I think we've been blinded by it into believing that we've gained more ground than we have. More and more people are raising their voices for a better world, but it's clear the world can snap in a moment right back to its worst. The changes we've made to society have not tangibly impacted how global power is structured. Power is forged from war, and war has not gone anywhere.

If you'd told me a month ago that the capitalist age won't end without war, I'd have nodded along in agreement. Of course, we'll see resource wars and security paranoia proliferate across the globe. Of course, the state will retreat from everything we depend on it for before it retreats from its security apparatus. Of course, the military-industrial complex hasn't gone away. Of course, of course, *of course*.

I'd have said it, but I didn't really get it. I didn't really spend my time thinking about war, thinking about how preparing for climate change means preparing for the compound disasters that war invariably brings. I didn't really understand, not until Ukraine.

Since the war in Ukraine began, I've had a hard time writing. I keep finding myself back at the same thought: *I don't have anything to say*. I don't think my voice adds much of importance to the current landscape, not right now. What I have to offer is usually socio-spiritual thoughts on where I think humanity ought to go, and all that feels irrelevant. Staring down the barrel of another endless war, of so much senseless death, of complete destruction and devastation, my talk of evolution turns to ashes in my mouth.

In general, I think Utopian visions and optimistic interpretations of human evolution are crucial. We have to keep our heads up. We have to keep our eyes peeled for chances. We have to have the awareness and confidence to jump when an opportunity arises to claim the world we want to live in. Optimism is the heartbeat of continuing to try.

But watching the total devastation of war roar back onto center-stage, I feel like optimism is growing obsolete. It's not that I'm pessimistic now, but watching the landscape change, I don't know that we'll need optimism for what's required of us. Optimism is a necessary condition to sustain the fight to improve things. It isn't necessary if all you're fighting for is survival.

The invasion of Ukraine was a sobering reminder of what the geopolitics of climate collapse are likely to look like: militarism and resource wars will get worse before they get better. Concerns for survival will likely outweigh our concerns for culture, ideals or morality. After all, social justice requires an intact society.

To me, this isn't a pessimistic perspective. I don't think society will explode in a nuclear inferno as we battle for the last remaining scraps; I just think digesting the possibility of that happening changes things. It changes what we aim to accomplish, and what we'll want to practice letting go of. It changes what our focus and priorities are. It changes what our tactics and strategies are. It puts things into perspective: survival comes first. Everything else is built on top of it.

If we don't have access to our basic necessities, even and especially in the event of disasters and wars, we cannot further social progress or defend the progress we've made. If our city is being shelled and supply chains are cut off, progressive rhetoric falls flat. Our vision for the future is irrelevant; what's relevant is whether our neighborhoods have food and medicine.

What's shifted in my thinking of late isn't a transition from optimism to pessimism, but a shedding of idealism in favor of pragmatism. The world we wish we lived in has nothing to do with what's actually happening. The kind of work that matters now is cultivating tangible, material resilience in our communities, and keeping our focus on the roots of real life.

I'm not concerned so much with ideals and fighting for them. I'm not concerned so much with gaining concessions from our rulers. All policies are the result of human agreement. So is money. So are borders. So are governments. So are rights. They exist in our lives because we agree to honor the power of certain societal structures to grant them, and they only exist as long as those structures remain intact.

Food exists regardless of what we think about it, as does our need to eat it. Land exists. Rivers exist. Medicine exists. Shelter exists. Warmth exists. Grief exists. Violence exists. Death exists. How we handle and respond to these things that actually exist—that's what's going to define our future.

The salient questions now are things like: Can your neighborhood grow enough food to feed itself? What medicines does your community have available, and do you know how to grow them? What fresh water resources can you access? Do you have the ability to produce electricity beyond the power grid? Have you and your neighbors talked through who you can shelter in the event of a disaster? Are your neighbors even talking to each other? How will your community handle resource allocation, conflict resolution or self-defense, especially in the event of a war or other catastrophe?

We're at the end of denial now. We're also at the end of passing the buck. We can no longer assume that anyone is going to ensure our survival for us. If not us, then who? We

have more than enough evidence now to show that “they” will not be coming to help us, not when we need it most.

Climate collapse is collapsing the world, and ordinary people around the world are not prepared. We certainly don’t have control over the means of production; most of us don’t even have direct access to the means of survival. As we try to adapt our societies to the changing climate, we can’t start with anything but the essentials: we need real community resilience in the face of disasters. That is the first step. Ensuring we have the means to survive must be the foundation of every movement for adaptation.

Any gains we make that are dependent on our societal structures are only as strong as the status quo. As we’ve seen so many times, our rights can all be washed away in the next hurricane, burned up in the next wildfire, rolled over in the next war. Rights and policies come and go with the whims of our rulers, but disasters are here to stay.

More than that, disasters are here to change us. They are here to teach us to distinguish between what’s real and what’s a myth we buy into, and bring our attention back to what is real. The forced pragmatism of disaster can be the fiercest ally of collective transformation. As history has shown us time and time again, disasters often give rise to the greatest examples of solidarity, mutual aid and collective action, because they force us into the present. We can’t fight about an imaginary future or long for a glorious past. We have to focus on what’s around us and work with it.

We have to keep each other alive.

The work of building community resilience does more than help ensure our survival; it transforms the way we interact with everything. Cultivating material autonomy and learning to refocus on our basic needs upends our conditioning. It provides us the space to feel out entirely different means of participating in the world, to give birth to

whole new ways of being, but those possibilities cannot be born if we don't return to the basics.

What we need, no matter what, is to cultivate our tangible resilience in the face of worsening conditions. We need food, water, medicine, shelter and basic security, and we don't have them, not without complete dependence on a globalized world order that seems determined to blow itself up. It's time to get back to the roots. We can't keep denying that conditions are going to worsen, and most of our social change rhetoric seems built on the assumption that everything is going to be fine. It isn't.

We need to look the future in the face and work with it, step by step, day by day, moving towards the world we want from the position we're actually in right now. The only way to a new world is to build it from the old. If we can't survive, we can't create anything.

It's Time to Put an End to Economics

“Money is the root of all evil,” the old Biblical adage goes. Well, the full passage tells us that “*The love of money is the root of all evil.*” In this distinction lies a simple and powerful lesson about why the economy is the root of our global social and ecological mess.

When I say “the economy,” I don’t just mean *this* economy: this weird hybrid of hyper-extractive free-market capitalism with some social programs and political constraints. I mean the economy in general, as a philosophical concept.

An economy is a system by which a society manages its resources. The problem inherent in any economy is that it views the world as full of resources. The economic value of anything is defined by its usefulness to whoever has the power to use it. Economic thinking treats land as a resource, water as a resource, and people as a resource. We see countless discussions of the cost of injustices based on how they impact a society’s access to resources, including labor and productivity from people.

Economics, as a principle, does not ascribe personhood to anything. Everything and everyone are resources to be used. This kind of thinking is the root of both societal oppression and ecological degradation. By viewing life in terms of resources to be extracted and used, we remove everything’s inherent aliveness, its quality of personhood, its spirit. We dehumanize ourselves and each other by viewing the world through a lens of resource value to be extracted, rather than intrinsic value to be respected.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the practice of enslavement, where people are treated not as persons, but as commodities and resources to extract economic value from.

Social justice and liberation movements all throughout history have arisen from the will of the oppressed to be treated with full personhood in society: to have the rights, abilities and freedoms a society deems eligible to people. Likewise, ethics and movements new and old, from traditional ecological knowledge to the Rights of Nature movement, understand that personhood must also be given to the non-human world in order for us to live in harmonious, reciprocal relationship with it.

Politics is a system by which a society manages its people. If we are to have any hope of building a world free from oppression, degradation and environmental destruction (which will, in turn, destroy us), we must ascribe personhood to all living beings. To undo our mass collective imbalance and end the insurmountable suffering it has caused, we must begin with an ethic of respecting everyone's and everything's personhood.

This is not to argue that it is never ethical to kill any plant or animal; life has always fed on death. Treating plants and animals (and people) as resources and commodities to extract value from, rather than as persons worthy of respectful treatment and reciprocal care, does not mean that no lives will ever be sacrificed to feed other lives. It means that such decisions will not be taken lightly, and destruction will not exceed the bounds by which it is absolutely necessary for creating and sustaining life.

Moving ourselves towards a worldview of respecting personhood means shedding our belief in economic ways of thinking. The world is not an economy of resources; it is a polity of persons, human and non-human alike.

If we want to save ourselves from this mess, we have to shift our worldview away from resources and towards

relationships. How do we live in right relationship with ourselves, each other, and the non-human world? How can we practice relating with respect and reciprocal care? How can we grant everyone autonomy and decision-making power, within a system of equitable persons?

Anything short of a complete worldview shift from resources to persons will continue pull us out of balance, towards destruction and disregard that are unsustainable and perpetuate mass suffering. Some individuals may survive for a while longer, but human life as a whole cannot survive without returning to a balanced relationship with the non-human world, and human societies cannot maintain peace or cohesion without granting full personhood to all of their members.

An economic worldview causes us to view value in terms of resources. It compels us to love money, to value things as providers of money, not as beings worthy of care and respect in their own right. It is time to end the economy — not just the capitalist economy, but the entire worldview of economic thinking, and see only a whole planet of persons with intrinsic rights to care, respect and freedom.

Why I Trust the Future

I was not raised religious, not by a long shot. My mother was brought up Catholic in Texas and, as a result, wanted to keep my sister and I as far from the Church as she could. My father was brought up, I don't know, vaguely Christian. He's a retired physicist whose spiritual exodus was leaving small-town Missouri for CalTech. Mostly, we were brought up to be feminists.

My mother was the one who kept faith alive for us. She'd dabbled in a variety of spiritual practices and was committed that my sister and I find our own beliefs, but there was one spiritual teaching she imparted to me that's shaped my entire life. I'm not quite sure where she got it from, but I still believe it today, and it paints such a clear picture of what's happening in the world right now that I feel obliged to share it.

I'm laying it out here in both spiritual and secular sociological terms, so that those who are put off by anything too "woo woo" or New Age can find value in it as well.

My mother told me that human society evolves according to the Hindu chakra system. Right now, she said, we are in the breakdown of the majority of global society operating according to the concerns of the second chakra, and my lifetime would see our collective emergence through the third into the fourth.

Secular folks, bear with me:

In long-standing Indian spiritual and healing traditions, which the West lumped together and labeled "Hinduism," there is a system of how energy is organized in

the body. The body holds seven primary energy centers, called *chakras*, which lie vertically from the root of the spine to the crown of the head. There's some [speculation now that they are linked to the endocrine system](#), though true believers in the contemporary New Age movement would say that chakras are energetic centers, not physical organs.

If this isn't your cup of tea, don't worry. I'm not going to get into the weeds on this, and we'll get back to what this has to do with the world in a moment.

The first (or root) chakra, called the *muladhara chakra*, sits at the very base of the spine in the tailbone. Energetically, it deals with concerns of survival and foundation. The second (sacral) chakra, called the *swadhisthana chakra*, sits at the sacrum, behind the lower abdomen. Its energetic concerns are with security, pleasure and abundance. The third (solar plexus) chakra, called the *manipura chakra*, sits further up the spine at the solar plexus. Its energetic concerns are self-esteem, individual identity and self-worth. The fourth (heart) chakra, called the *anahata chakra*, is located in the center of the chest and concerns itself with connection, love and compassion.

If you found yourself thinking, "That sounds a lot like [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)," you'd be correct. Maslow drew inspiration directly from the chakra system. If you feel more comfortable thinking about all this in contemporary psychology terms, you can use the first four levels of the Hierarchy of Needs in lieu of the chakras.

Now, I am of the opinion that material reality is a projection of consciousness, and therefore the patterns that exist within human consciousness are also reflected in our external experience. That would mean that internal shifts in consciousness correspond with macro shifts in society and the world. If individual consciousness can ascend,

collective consciousness must invariably do the same (as within, so without).

If talks of consciousness and correspondence are not your thing, you can think of it this way:

As society has become globalized, we've become more interconnected and culturally homogeneous. Transnational human communities now have to confront issues and realities together, and in order for a globalized order to function, we've had to find some fundamental common ground on which to make decisions. A cohesive society cannot function when half its population is concerned for its daily survival and half is focused on developing its self-esteem. The extreme difference this fosters in people's priorities and decisions will continue to cause breakdowns in social cohesion until a critical mass of people within a society get more or less on the same page about what they're trying to do together.

This is, of course, an oversimplification, but the core argument of it is something we can see played out clearly in the world today. As ideas of democracy, social mobility and self-determination permeate through human societies, it gets harder and harder for any society to justify permitting extreme disparities in well-being. Not only is it hard to justify, but such disparities threaten a society's ability to function peacefully as a whole.

For the purposes of our discussion today, each of the chakras represents a particular mode of living, a set of primary personal concerns and priorities that engender a corresponding worldview and set of priorities for one's society.

If you are struggling for survival, your primary concerns are about survival. Ideas of social cohesion, pleasure or democratic ideals will not be chief among your concerns. You'd care mainly about meeting your immediate

physical needs and the physical needs of those you identify with (such as your children).

If your survival needs are met, your primary concerns are with enjoyment, well-being and above all, security. Your concerns are no longer about your ability to survive, but about preserving that ability and having the option to find pleasure beyond basic survival. This is where the energy gets more social. From this space, it becomes your desire for society to preserve your material security, protect you from threats to it, and afford opportunities for pleasure.

In a “second chakra” way of thinking, your primary goals for your society (including your government, economy, culture, social roles, etc.) are security and pleasure, and you’d be averse to disruption of either. Unknowns and outsiders are perceived as a threat to security, and disruption to the social order is perceived as a threat to both security and pleasure. This plays out in societal conditions like “us vs. them” thinking and strict social roles: think nationalism, xenophobia, racism, rigid class structure and gender roles. What matters most in a society dominated by “second chakra” concerns is to preserve the security of survival against potential disruption.

If your security needs are met, your attention turns to more emotional and psychological needs. The pleasure-seeking might begin to feel hollow. The social roles expected of you start to wear against you and cause you pain. Your main concern is for yourself, your *whole* self: your own autonomy, self-worth and individual life. Priorities arise about personal achievement, personal character, authenticity, individuality and self-determination.

A “third chakra” society sees conditions like mass questioning of norms and roles, breakdowns of traditional order in favor of individual liberty and opportunity, and at times, movements for secession or greater local

autonomy. You find new spaces for commonality and solidarity with others that cross traditional social groups, and you find new fissures and divisions that separate you from others in your traditional social groups (e.g. your family, religion, nation, etc.) Your goal is for your society to increase personal autonomy, which inspires socio-political trends like deepening democracy, embracing diversity and allowing for social mobility and self-determination.

Each mode of living builds on the one that comes below it.

I still believe my mother's worldview about the chakras mapping onto society because I see it played out so vividly in the world around me.

I was inspired to write this essay after reading Sergey Faldin's [op-ed in *The Guardian*](#) about how young Russians' only solace right now is that the invasion of Ukraine could spell the end of Putin's regime. He writes, "The big problem is that there is no coherent ideology in Russia. There is no shared way of interpreting the world. Instead, the simplistic idea that has become prevalent is a story of "us v them"." From these United States, I can only say: *same*.

All across the globe (not everywhere, but anywhere), the "us vs. them" way of interpreting the world is breaking down. We have large swathes of the world now whose needs for survival, security and pleasure are comfortably met. We've also broken down barriers to communication and travel, allowing much more mixing of people with similar desires and concerns across borders and cultures.

As a result, a large and growing portion of the world's population does not want to live in a society whose primary concerns are with security and enforcing a social order.

Not for everyone — not yet — but for a critical mass of people, structuring a society based on rigid social roles, in-groups and out-groups and security concerns is no longer acceptable. The rising desire for society to allow for autonomy, individuality and personal freedom is in conflict

with the desire for society to ensure safety and social cohesion. This conflict is playing out all over the world, from the U.S. to Russia to Hong Kong to Brazil. Are we a democratic society that embraces individuality and diversity, or do fears for our in-group's security trump autonomy? (Pun intended.)

It plays out within us individuals as well. We all have aspects of our lives where we experience greater insecurity and fear scarcity, and I'd argue that we tend to desire stricter roles and greater security in those aspects of our lives. For example, for me it's been in relationship roles. I tend to crave monogamy and security in my relationships because I view romantic love as scarce and in need of protection. Now that I'm in a stable relationship I trust, I feel more comfortable with fluidity and openness.

There's an important, but misguided perspective on this shift in priorities, that tends to imagine that base-level needs (aligned with the first and second chakras) are real needs, and higher-level needs are superfluous. Of course, if you're starving, concerns of self-determination and esteem might feel silly. Likewise, if you feel terrified of the world and losing your security within it, pushes for greater autonomy and diversity would feel extremely threatening.

But the thing is, shifting our needs according to present circumstances is normal human behavior. I'd argue that it's not only evolutionary and impossible to prevent, but desirable. We want a world where everyone's survival and security needs are met. We want a world where people can turn their attention towards higher goals of authenticity, individuality and self-worth.

We shape our societies, and our societies shape us. There's a constant give-and-take of power between the individual and the collective. New Yorkers turned out by the thousands to protest police brutality in 2020 and raise their voices for a freer, more compassionate world. Then they

elected a former police officer as their mayor when rising crime rates sent feelings of paranoia and insecurity through the city.

The IPCC released [an extremely dire report this week](#), outlining how climate collapse will force millions, if not billions, around the world into to struggles for daily survival over the coming decades. We must adapt, deeply. We must adapt now. If we don't, we will backslide from all our civilization's achievements in creating material security for the masses. Humanity will not survive if we continue as we presently behave. Have another pun: we can't keep *bidin'* our time indefinitely.

Friedrich Engels famously said, "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." I pray that we come to understand in time is that socialism is not a dirty word. It does not necessitate the authoritarian politics of the USSR, not by any stretch of the imagination. Socialism means that communities, rather than single individuals or private corporations, regulate and control their resources and means of production. That is all it means. For all I care, call it "democratic capitalism."

I think the fear of socialism arises when people imagine it as a backslide into the "second chakra" way of organizing society. They imagine rigid security states with no room for individual autonomy and self-determination. They imagine these fears so vividly, they cling to fascist strong-men who drive them right back where they fear to go.

What Engels calls bourgeois capitalism, I'll call our "third-chakra society."

The "fourth chakra" lies in the center of the chest. It deals with concerns of compassion, connection and love. As with all the levels beneath it, it is normal human behavior to shift into primary identification with these concerns when the conditions arise for it. It is, of course, easier to focus on

cooperation and compassion when your survival, security and autonomy needs are met.

All across the world, societies are debating whether to backslide into security states concerned with rigid control of their populace and territory, or to transform through increasing autonomy and democracy and into societies built on interconnection, compassion and cooperative control.

That is the choice that lies before us. It lies before our societies as it lies before us as individuals. Our base-level needs teach us that our societies shape us. Our autonomy teaches us that we shape our societies, too. We choose in every moment what our primary concerns are, what kind of society we embody, what kind of world we want to live in.

Now that we are aware of our ability, we cannot deny our responsibility.

I look around the world today and I see death throes. An old world order is struggling for survival. It's screaming and fighting and bombing and terrorizing for survival. We choose, now, whether to resurrect it from the ashes or let it die in service of something new.

I cannot make the choice for you. My autonomy teaches that I can only make it for myself: by swallowing my fears and biases, accepting my responsibility and power, learning with humility, honing my choices, and giving love wherever I can. I keep practicing so I find myself able to make that decision more often. I practice so that I can continue to make it even if conditions in my life worsen.

I practice not succumbing to despair, so that I do not succumb to fear, so that I do not succumb to barbarism. I choose to trust, to find and build more reasons to trust. I choose to go the next step.

You choose whether or not you'll do the same.

On Looking for God in the Age of Extinction

I've had a hard time meditating lately — at least, in meditation *like that*. If you count sitting on the porch in silence riding waves of emotion at my country's spiral into theocratic fascism and the looming likelihood of a civil war “meditating,” then I guess you could say I've been meditating a lot.

I read [a story](#) last summer about firefighting monks at the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center clearing brush and spraying water as the Willow Fire burned on their doorstep. They called the water “dharma rain.” The literal meaning of *nirvana* is something like “a flame that's been extinguished.” There's some lesson in here about metaphors coming to life.

My spiritual path isn't Buddhist per se, but I've taken many lessons from that tradition. I see the way Buddhism speaks of desire as the root cause of suffering as a truth about craving. In order to crave something, you must be lacking it. To come to a place of inexhaustible peace is to extinguish the craving for something else, to recognize that what you already are is enough. The ability to simply be, and be simply, deprives the burning fire of suffering the oxygen it needs to sustain itself. Even the desire to relinquish desire is another craving to let subside.

These days, though, I can't help craving a different world.

Fire, in this metaphor, sounds harmful — a thing to be fought until it's been extinguished, but the idea of a fight is the root of the problem. In the United States, [we wage wars](#)

on everything: on countries and their people, to be sure, but on all kinds of other things too. We've launched wars on poverty, on crime, on drugs, on terror, on women, on democracy, on Covid.

The outcome of these wars is a story you already know. "We would like to congratulate drugs for winning the War on Drugs," the memes go. Nearly 40 million Americans live in poverty. Violent crime is on the rise. Covid is the new normal. It seems only the wars on women and democracy are going well for America, which begs the question: for whom are these wars being fought?

As for that war on terror, well, I certainly don't feel safe.

The wisdom of Buddhism teaches that you cannot wage a war on suffering; to do so only perpetuates suffering. The urge to divide and conquer must be met with connection and unification, first with your own feelings of pain, then with the object of your pain. It's a counterintuitive process, like arriving at the battle scene in a video game and fighting pointlessly until you open your arms and allow the enemy to dissolve into you.

The wisdom of Taoism teaches that opposites arise in perception; beneath that, all is one, and the flow in and out of division and union is wave to ride effortlessly. It's that urge to conquer the other that drives us out of harmony. Yoga's wisdom teaches us to practice, to continuously reattach our minds to the experience of union until our identification with division and separation subsides. Alchemy's wisdom teaches us to question our suffering, and come to understand that only the mind can create it, so in training the mind, we can release it.

I believe in all this wisdom and so much more: in peace and in positive focus, in acceptance and allowance, and I try my best to bring it into practice. If I believe, "What you resist persists," then I cannot root my political action in fighting what I want gone, but instead focus on building

what I want here. If I believe that all is fundamentally love, I have no cause to hate. If I believe my true being is the unfolding process of the whole universe, my individual identity takes a back seat.

But I find myself at a sticking point between faith and future. Practicing faith in the face of such a world is a constant act of resistance: resisting the urge to hate and fear, questioning the action to rage and worry, remembering the truth like a single raindrop on the wildfire of this desperate craving for a way out to something radically different from all this. How can we find peace when we can't afford rent or food or gas? Where is the union between my body and those who wish to strip my autonomy away from me? I want to rip my ovaries out and leave a trail of blood across the steps of the Capitol. I want to buy a gun. I want to go to war.

Because everything is terrible and upside-down, because everything I was taught to uphold was a lie and everything real that matters gets laughed off like the most childish of fantasies. The rage we feel is righteous. If we burn, you burn with us. My attempts to flow harmoniously slammed me into a brick wall of immovable inhumanity and I want to tear everything apart until my hands are bloody and my nails are broken. I am a soul and I have a body and that body is an animal and animals defend themselves.

I don't want to extinguish this fire. I want to burn everything down.

So where does that leave God, then? Not *that* God — I don't believe in that God — I mean the real God: the wholeness and creative force of life itself. Love, the act of taking something as a part of yourself, the action that brings us all to union with everything that is. The peace that comes from loving everything. Where did that go? It felt real as daylight not so very long ago. How could I possibly wage patience in such extreme urgency?

Taoism teaches us to flow with what is, to arise simply and naturally, without the effort of attaching our minds to false perceptions and the urge to control what is. And yet, we have an irrevocable capacity to shape what is. I hate the feeling I feel these days — the pain and the rage and the powerlessness. Most of all I hate the disgust. I hate looking at other humans the way I see so many of them now. I hate the feeling of having enemies.

I've been thinking again about fire, about how it's on our doorstep once again. Every year we know it's coming, and every year, we fail to prepare. We cannot seem to put this fire out — the metaphor, the literal — I don't even know anymore. It's here and it's hot and it's raging and it's coming for every last one of us because this is what a reckoning looks like. Buddhist monks set themselves on fire as an act of protest. They douse themselves in gasoline, light a match, and sit in meditation while they burn to death. Until the flame goes out.

Is this the answer then? To turn the fire back in on ourselves and say: Look. Look at what you've done to us. Look at the devastation you have wrought. Is learning to sit still while I burn the only path to salvation?

You know, there is another use for fire.

Fire is a part of nature. Out west, it shaped the landscape long before we started fighting it. [The rightful people of this land have always known the truth about fire](#): that it lives with the forest and the forest depends on it, in a harmonious cycle of reciprocal care where destruction breeds creation. If burning is an essential part of a forest's life and health, then is it destructive at all?

After colonization, European settlers banned Indigenous peoples from burning. Burning, like harvesting, was a part of care and culture, an essential component of living in right relationship with the land and ensuring it

could sustain itself and those who live upon it, for people are part of the land too. Instead, America banned burns and logged forests and diverted rivers and slaughtered people and abused workers and gentrified cities and built a world order on division and conquest and now, here we are.

The wildfires we have now are a response, like addicted craving is a response to the pain of dislocation. This is nature reacting to us, to what we've done. The Earth is burning herself in meditation before us. Look. Look at what we've wrought. Look at how you have neglected your role, thrown everything out of balance with make-believe economies and a politics of conquering. This is the world that war built, and that world is burning down.

All around us, metaphors are coming to life.

So what do we do with this anger and pain, with this desperate craving for something better and truer and freer than this? I do not think we put it out. I do not think it's meant to be put out, not by our hand. The rage and desperation we feel is a part of nature's response, but like a fire, a blind rage left undirected can be just another disaster.

I think we must relearn the art of lighting sacred fires: of wielding our feelings wisely, in harmonious connection with what is all around us.

We are in an urgent age, and the urgency is here to shake us all awake. The call is not to detach or transcend or escape, but to embody. We are here to bring these sacred metaphors to life.

The path is to be inexhaustibly loving, here, where we already are, in however that manifests. It often manifests in ways we've been trained to think are not loving, so let me be clear: Love is nothing like politeness. It can look polite at times, but love and politeness were born from different worlds. Care does not always look civil. Gentleness does not always speak quietly.

But love, likewise, never feels like hate. Care never feels like coercion. Gentleness does not leave our bodies

feeling burned inside by the bile of powerless rage. There is an art to wielding our fire, a practice that must be honed in humility and in genuine reciprocal respect for the world. I can't tell you what that looks like. What it looks like isn't the point.

Our path is not to obey a fearful mind's directives about how to live, but to experience for ourselves what genuinely connecting to the world feels like in our bodies. We work together towards that goal and help one another along in the process.

We take this world of alienated bodies chasing our cravings towards any reprieve from suffering, and we find every way to turn into a home: a place where we live, in everyday experience, the reality that we are whole and we belong. We do the humble work of finding our authentic places here. We let it arise from authentic connection.

The path out of perpetual craving is not a path at all, but an embodied awareness that we've already arrived. Heaven is right here. To bring her metaphor to life, we must tend to her, respect her personhood, live in honorable relationship to her. This is the kingdom, the only kingdom. There is nowhere else to look. Where we are, here, now, is our only chance at paradise.

So where does that leave God? Right here, in our bodies, beneath our feet, around our heads. Everywhere and anywhere that's already here — we nurture the God in all of it: in people and plants, in animals and oceans, in systems and the sky. We start from the lived experience of interbeing and build what comes from there.

We find God by bringing God to life, or else it will remain only a metaphor, another pointless craving of the mind to be lost with our passing and forgotten in the dirt.

Goodbye to All That

I haven't been writing much lately. There hasn't really been much to say. There's a feeling I get like rain on a window, some sound in it to capture and translate into words, but these days, it's gone. I listen, and there's silence.

At the end of the day, there is always silence. It sits beneath the sounds that drown it out, patiently, never asking us to hear it. It's only when we stop that we realize it's always been there.

I'm trying to get comfortable with silence, with the spaces in between. I'm trying to learn from nature about winter — that thing I always run from — the recurring reminder that all things end and begin, but between the ending and beginning, there's silence. There's a time after the old things die before the new things are born. There's something there, in that time, something silent.

I think, if we knew how to sit with silence, we'd know better how to let go.

What is it about emptiness that frightens us? What is it we think is out there? Silence can't slander you. It can't ridicule you. It can't bully. It is, and that's it. It's there.

Like winter, I've spent my life running from silence. I paper over it with noises that sound something like home: songs I've heard a thousand times, news I can do nothing about, parasocial friendships with people I'll never meet and whatever I can think of to say to the people I have.

These days, though, I don't have much to say.

I write here to share what I've learned with whoever might learn from it too, in the hopes that by writing it down and passing it on I might put some meaning to all this. I might make it go somewhere, towards something. I might be able to measure what it's worth. It — you know — what's here.

But the truth is, at the end of the day, all that's here is silence. When the sirens stop and the voices hush, there's silence. What rises falls and what falls will rise again, but in between, there's silence. We can choose not to listen to it and it will acquiesce, graciously letting itself be forgotten until we choose to remember.

I wonder why it is that silence doesn't feel to me like home. Silence is where I came from. Silence is where I'll return. It's the most intimate part of me, the most essential element of living: that it all happens on top of empty space. Confronted with the emptiness, I panic. The space feels like a cage. The quiet is deafening and I cover my ears to drown out all awareness of it, but once it's been heard, you can't pretend it isn't there. It's here, right now.

Silence cannot be recorded. Emptiness cannot be measured. It's eternal in its nothingness, the space from which all things begin and will always begin. That is what to remind ourselves: that things will always begin, but before they do, there's this. This nothing, this empty, this blank.

What I mean is, is a blank page really something to run away from?

And yet, here I am running. We never seem to stop, do we? If we do, I fear, we'll fall into a blank page, so you must never stop. Never stop and hear it. Never notice the page's blankness. Spaces are here to be filled in, aren't they? Isn't that what this is all about?

Or is it about silence? Is it about learning to sit with silence? Honoring where you came from, remembering how

it held you, held the potential of you, held all the things you could ever become.

This silence, it loves us. It made us. It asks nothing from us but offers us everything, the greatest gift we could ever receive: a blank page. The chance to create. The incomparable opportunity to choose how we fill this space.

And I think, if we can let the silence in, let it be at home within us, then maybe there is nothing left to fear.

All things come and all things go, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but in between — there's us. There's you and me, breathing life into the silence, saying all the thousand things there are to say simply because we can. Because silence lets us.

Ashes to soil, dust to rain, we find a home inside this. We learn to welcome saying goodbye, like welcoming it back home. So, my friend, you've come again. You're always welcome here.

There is so much to let go of, in every moment, an infinite number of things that will never happen again. Ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of living in the world. There are people and animals, plants and buildings, memories and dreams and identities and ideas — all the things we ever thought of. All will come and go.

In between, there's silence.

The Power of Recognizing I Don't Exist

The thing about writing down a spiritual experience is that you're unlikely to convince anyone of anything. If you've had a similar experience, you'll already understand. If you haven't, you probably won't, and reading this won't help you to. If you haven't, I humbly ask that, for a moment, you suspend your disbelief.

I ask you not to believe, but to merely entertain the possibility that there is some dimension of experience you haven't encountered that others have, and that it is exactly as life-changing and awe-inspiring as everyone says it is.

I use the word "dimension" because it looks, to me, like a graph that was once two-dimensional added a third. When we watch movies, we imagine the two-dimensional screen is a real world and we allow ourselves to be drawn into it. If we get up to go to the bathroom, we shift out of identifying with what's happening on the screen. In the moment of transition, we become aware that we are there, watching a movie. Like a camera, we pull focus from the reality on screen to our reality and back again.

You are looking at a screen right now. Take a breath with me. Inhale. There's you, there's the screen, and there's you looking at it. Now, exhale.

What spiritual awakening is about is noticing that added dimension. We notice ourselves experiencing what's around us, and we notice that "our experience" is not the same as "what's around us." We notice how our own minds shape that experience, how thoughts can change the texture of the day like the sun breaking through the clouds and

changing the light. We notice how our judgments stand in the way of the truth. We glimpse, sometimes, what life feels like without them.

If only we could just get rid of ourselves, the world would be free and perfect and whole.

In my younger years, and sometimes still, I was fascinated with self-destruction. I liked doing things that were bad for me. I liked the gripping drama of emotional pain. I liked it whenever my life fell apart. I flirted with suicide, again and again, never really meaning to do the deed, but teasing myself with it. Why not? What was all of this for, anyway? A survival impulse bred into my bones, a series of assumptions, and what? Why bother with it?

For the Buddha, suicide wasn't a way out of the self. He was raised in a culture that believed strongly in reincarnation. Kill yourself? You'll come back as a mouse and experience mouse problems. Self-destruction can't release you from yourself if you'll just come back. I don't know what happens after we die, and I don't believe in linear reincarnation, but what I know now is that self-destruction is not the only path out of the self. The Buddha was right.

You can stay right here, and get rid of yourself.

That kind of "self-destruction" I used to flirt with really means the destruction of my lived experience, but my real goal has never been destruction. Underneath that urge has always been a desperate longing for liberation, liberation from my thoughts, from the shackles of my judgments and the corresponding experience they instill in me.

The world just is. It is as it is. What I have to say about it changes me, not it.

That kind of consciousness isn't really spiritual; it's just basic fact, though many spiritual paths teach the way to living in that consciousness and learning how to train the

mind to stop leading you back into misery. This mind-training is a noble goal, but it isn't the kind of ecstatic release from suffering the Buddha taught about, not on its own.

That ecstatic release comes in total liberation from the shackles of your own identity. It's found in no longer being a self. Here's how that works:

The mind shapes our experience, but of course, our experience shapes our minds.

Past experiences set expectations and shape meanings about current and future experiences. We're conditioned to believe certain judgments, to value certain actions or traits, to desire certain outcomes and to fear and avoid others. Then, how we experience the world is shaped by our judgments of it. Our happiness emerges from positive experiences that get their positivity from our positive judgments of them.

But whose judgments are those, really?

Our minds are conditioned. We did not invent our judgments. Every single one of them was taught, wittingly or unwittingly. The kind of mind-training discussed above is simply becoming conscious about how you judge and teaching your mind to choose differently so that your judgments make your experience of living better. The path to having no self comes from recognizing that these judgments aren't even your own.

None of these thoughts really came from you. None of these thoughts came from me. What our parents taught us didn't even come from our parents; it just came through them. These thoughts just happen. The judgments arise out of everything and flow through us back into everything. We have no more say in it than a strait does in the flow of the ocean.

If you really chew on it, you're not even there. I'm not even there. None of these concepts are even real. It just is, and any boundaries placed between it are made up.

These aren't even my thoughts. These aren't even my words. They come from everywhere, arise in the mind of this "self," this conditioned, fluid, ever-changing entity which I had no power to shape or determine. They flow back into the world from here. Where is here? I don't know. It just is.

And in that recognition lies the release from everything that could ever hurt. In that selflessness lives all freedom to simply be, without having to be anything. In that lack of identity, that lack of existence as selves, lies the truth of who we really are.

But the thing about writing down spiritual experiences is that you're unlikely to convince anyone of anything. If you've had a similar experience, you'll already understand. If you haven't, then you won't, and reading this won't help you to. Or maybe, like me, you've felt it and forgotten. Then, maybe this can help you to remember. Maybe now it clicks for a moment, you feel a stir of that sensation coming back. Maybe you even get there, to that point where nothing is anything and everything really lives.

Maybe you get there, then maybe you have to go to work. Then you have to do the dishes. Then you're in an argument, in a bad mood, in a panic attack about the future and then a million angry things exist and everything can hurt you. And the mind, like a projector, starts the movie reel up again and all the pain and fear come crashing into your living room like an uninvited stampede of bison.

You strive, you desire, you judge, you fear, you shame, you try, you fail, you write about it some more. Each time, it gets easier to remember what it was like when none of this was here at all, and you just were, and you were free.