MIND SHIFT

COMMUNICATION LEADERSHIP
LONG-FORM COLLECTION

2023

COMMUNICATION leadership
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

ESSAYS

DESIGNED BY ARDHRA S

INTRODUCTION

Memories of being a horse girl. A complicated relationship with Seattle's Interstate-5. Everyday awe. The perfect pair of jeans. Power lifting. These topics and more are included in this collection of long-form essays produced in the Winter 2023 course *Professional Long-form Writing & Platforms*.

Their refreshing originality is the product of weeks of brainstorming, research, writing, editing, more writing, and more editing. Each student operated under the relative constraint of a quarter system that punishes procrastination, while in many cases juggling work and multiple classes. The goal was to immerse students in the writing and research process, while simultaneously reading the work of contemporary long-form luminaries and considering the modern means of publication and distribution—all with the fevered backdrop of AI and the future of writing.

These essays are as varied as our community of Comm Lead students and relate deeply considered stories that showcase curiosity, vulnerability, and care—three noteworthy leadership traits.

Enjoy!

Anita Verna Crofts
Comm Lead Artist in Residence

MEASURING THE BRIDGE

"Lots of women I've talked to about this say they just knew, just knew in their bones, that they wanted to have children, that they've known their whole lives. I've never known anything that way. My bones don't know anything."

WRITTEN BY
SARA KEATS

My mother has a dinner party bit that goes like this: Her two kids, my brother and me, are very different, she explains. You know the old saying about jumping off a bridge? 'If everyone else jumped off a bridge, would you?' Well, if someone said, 'Let's jump off the bridge,' Jack would already be soaring toward the water.

Sara would be measuring the height of the bridge, testing the temperature of the water, researching bridge-jumping, and asking 'Why this bridge?' When is the best time to jump? She'd make a pro-con list, a Google Doc, and talk to bridge experts, her friends, and her therapist. And if she decided that jumping was the best thing to do, she'd take a running start and never look back.

That's not exactly how she'd tell it. I added the therapist part.

When my mom tells this extended joke, this illustrative bit, she's talking about my brother and me as kids. She's talking about our differences: my brother's care-free pursuit of the next thrill, his fearlessness, his occasional recklessness, and his uncanny ability to stick the landing. In contrast: my type-A, information-loving, contingency-planning thoughtfulness.

I can be fearless, too. I can be all in. I can. But first, I want to know everything there is to know. I want to wrestle and ruminate. Then I'll enthusiastically jump.

When I started thinking I wanted to get married, I did my research. I made a list of reasons in favor and against. I read Fates and Furies and cried and journaled about how I felt. I read longitudinal studies about how married people live longer than unmarried people. I interviewed a married friend about her experience (the tape, poetically, inscrutable over the clinks and taps in the restaurant). I presented the evidence to my partner, in a folder, in a park. He raised his concerns, I raised mine.

That July, we each made a list, and we made pancakes. We sat on the floor and talked through them one by one. It took two pots of coffee. We took our time.

The Pancake Summit, as we came to call it, sounds silly, but it was serious. It was silly and serious. We wrestled with our hesitations and our fears. We cried and pursed our lips together in thought. We negotiated.

When we agreed, we shook hands, laughed at ourselves, and kissed. We took commemorative photos, snapshots across brunch detritus, sticky fingers holding the lists we had signed and dated—our ketubah's first rough draft. In mine, I'm holding up three fingers to celebrate our agreement: we'd be engaged within three months. He proposed, romantically,

dreamily, in the perfect place, in the perfect way, that August. We got married a year and a half later, just shy of our tenth anniversary.

In a way, we'd been measuring the bridge of getting married for a decade. We ran our final calculations, made peace with the unknowns, and confidently jumped. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't scary.

I've measured the bridges for other big decisions too, like if we should buy a house or if I should take one job or another. Bridge-measuring has helped me feel okay about medical procedures, wedding venues, friend break-ups. When the stakes are high, I research and I think, and that's where I find my North Star. Is it because I'm an anxious, Jewish, Pieces sun, gifted program, eldest daughter of divorce? Yes, and. I wouldn't have it any other way.
Bridge-measuring has empowered me. It's helped me feel secure in my choices and live a life with only a handful of real regrets. My loved ones may rib me for being methodical, but it's an intentionality that works for me. I know, of course, that you can't think your way through everything. I know gaming out every single outcome is impossible. But the attempt is a comfort. It gives me confidence, and my confidence has never let me down.

Now, I'm coming up on another bridge to measure. For the last couple years, I've been wrestling with whether or not to have a child. I'm 32. The bridge looms.

I don't want to be flippant about the privilege embedded in my to-parent-or-not-to-parent wrestling: I have the health and wealth to find my way to motherhood if I want to, and I have the bodily autonomy to remain not pregnant if that's what I choose. It's a degree of reproductive freedom I don't take for granted. I wish it for everyone.
And yet, it seems at times an impossible choice. I find myself envious of my friends who are already parents, not because I'm so confident I want what they have, but because the decision doesn't hang over them the way it hangs over me. Equally so for the people I know who know they don't want to be parents ever. I don't begrudge them their certainty, but it feels alien to me. How can they be so sure?

Lots of women I've talked to about this say they just knew, just knew in their bones, that they wanted to have children, that they've known their whole lives. I've never known anything that way. My bones don't know anything.
But what I lack in bone-deep intuition, I make up for in brain-based rumination. That's right, kids, get out your protractor. We've got ourselves a bridge to measure.

A data point:
I can picture it: homework at our nicked and loved dining room table, bundling into a big coat for icy soccer game sidelines, bedtime stories, art projects, adventures. I've always loved tree houses, school projects, and birthday parties with elaborate themes. I grew up close with my cousins, and our kid would, too. Trudging through the fog to our elementary school. What if they want to learn the violin? What if they love to swim? What if they have a knack for languages or baseball or knitting? What if they're silly, like my husband can be? What if they're patient, brave, and kind?
Earlier, earlier, like the grainy home movie in a romcom: walking the path by the lake with one of those crunchy momma baby wrap scarves knotted around me. Before that: pregnant, the dog can sense it and gets protective. Finally painting the last bathroom in a fit of nesting energy. The day we get to tell my mom.
I know my husband and I would be good parents. We're good at different things, and we'd be good at this together. I solve problems, fill gaps. My husband listens and empathizes. We're doting in different ways. Our love would be bottomless.

A different data point:
I can picture it this way, too: In the summer, the kids come to us from L.A. and El Paso and Bucks County and West Seattle. They're our nieces and nephews, our friends' kids, and in a different way, they're ours, too—the next set of branches on our chosen family tree.

The pantry is stocked with Annie's mac and cheese. I've got an itinerary; I've got passes to the aquarium. We're going to make up stories about the Calder in the sculpture park. We're going to swing in hammocks by the lake. We'll take out more books from the library than we could possibly read in a week, and we'll build extraordinary blanket forts to read them in. Every year they get so much bigger, closing in on the versions of their parents we've known for 15, 20, 30 years. We have traditions, like the summer you turn 12, you learn to shuck an oyster. We have drama: bees sting, sisters fight, ankles get twisted. With us, they eat dim sum, climb mountains, pick blackberries.

Or maybe it's not summer vacation, it's just a Wednesday. We walk to the farmers market, eat tamales for dinner, and settle in for homework. It's times tables, then a science fair poster; it's SAT prep. They're beyond us in math, but we watch YouTube videos and figure it out together. One more hour of schoolwork, then we can get ice cream. My niece loves mint chocolate chip like me. My husband finishes everyone's cones. We love them and they love us. After dessert, we scrub the hot fudge from their faces and drive them home.

And then, instead of parent-teacher conferences, we spend a month in Portugal. Instead of researching high schools, I publish a poetry collection. I can take an early work call without missing the school bus. The cozy mess of my office is mine and mine alone. When my friends say, 'I need you,' I'm there in an instant. We give generous graduation gifts, but we don't cosign college loans. I'm forty, and I still sleep in on Sundays, see theatre on Thursdays, go to the movies or get dinner without a plan. I have it both ways. I have it all.

"Having it all." The phrase makes me think of a shoulder pad feminism, proto-girlbossing. "Never bake for the board room," my mother cautioned.

"Work life balance!" my LinkedIn feed sings. I've read Lean In. I went to a Zoom baby shower at work on Friday. "I hope you come back," cooed the other mother on our team to the honoree. "But take your time, enjoy! But please come back."

Let's measure work.

My work is important to me. I'm a UX content designer at a tech company, and I'm a freelance dramaturg, working primarily on new plays. My husband works for himself as an artist and illustrator. We both derive a lot of joy and identity from our work. We both like what we do and thrive when we feel engaged in our careers. Having a child would threaten that for both of us.

There's ample research to suggest that a child has a significant impact on the careers of women across industries, particularly in tech. Women are more likely to leave their jobs after having a child and often face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. According to a 2020 report by McKinsey, women are 1.5 times more likely to leave the tech industry after having a child compared to men. Furthermore, a survey by the National Center for Women & Information Technology found that 56% of women in tech reported having to make significant sacrifices in their careers, such as taking a leave of absence or working reduced hours, after having a child. This can limit our ability to advance in our careers and lead to lower salaries. I've never been to a workplace baby shower for a dad.

The threat of lower compensation is a factor not to be ignored, but I'm equally concerned with my sense of myself. If I become a mother, what happens to who I am at work? What about the other work-adjacent things I want to do? Having a child would mean saying no to other yet-unknown creative and professional opportunities. In plenty of contexts, my work is the main thing I am: student, dramaturg, content designer. Motherhood, the kind of motherhood I'm most interested in, would eclipse all of that for a time. I'm worried the rest of me would shrink in the shadow.

Because of his work, my husband has more flexibility than me: fewer meetings, independent work hours, and a lot of liberty to set his schedule. At the same time, like lots of people in creative careers, he needs hours of deep focus and time to develop his craft. His calendar is easier to borrow from than mine, which is by contrast beholden to the shifting winds of a corporate Outlook. The time commitment to caring for a child would directly impact his artistic practice and his business.

I'm confident that we could work out the nuts and bolts of school pick-ups and weekend events. I know we'd put family needs above our work commitments—we do that already for each other, for our extended family, and our friends like family. But the demands of parenthood seem to leave little time for the ambitious, rigorous vocations that deeply satisfy us.

My husband and I are financially privileged. According to the Pew Research measures, we're upper class for our region. We budget and live within our means, and yet finding the financial margin to have a child feels daunting at best.
"Childcare in our state can be ruinously expensive for families, costing anywhere from $11,000 per year for a 4-year-old in a program designed to meet the state's minimum standards, to over $30,000 for an infant in a 'high quality' childcare center," writes Kevin Schofield in the South Seattle Emerald. Even with the childcare benefit I receive through work, the extra costs are daunting.

I know it can be done. I know parents—really good, loving, thoughtful, responsible parents—who are raising their children beautifully with less financial margin than we have. I know excellent adults who grew up well-adjusted, loving, and lovely without every expensive experience that crossed their path in childhood. In fact, there is evidence that my class makes me more likely to be anxious about the expense of raising a child.

"If you're a middle or upper class parent, [an economically anxious] style of child-raising (characterized by a loaded schedule of activities, 'playdates,' enrichment, and, eventually, an overarching orientation towards elite college placement) has become so normalized as to, again, become unquestioned," writes Anne Helen Peterson, in her analysis of a 2023 Pew Research survey on stress in parenting. "But it's exhausting, time-intensive and can transform the everyday labor of parenting into something more akin to management, complete with a sort of cost-benefit analysis for every activity, from a sleepover to reading at bedtime."

That's the kind of childhood I had, and the kind of parenthood I imagine: maximalist in opportunity and activity. My parents stretched to make my every extracurricular dream a reality, so without much critique, I'd expect to do the same. And so I squint into our monthly budget and our long wish list of other expenses (new kitchen counters, the honeymoon we delayed, visiting our family and friends who live far away) and I can't make the numbers work.
Economic insecurity haunts many people in my generation considering having children. In addition to the record student debt, looming elder care expenses for our parents, and precarious economy, having a kid is more expensive than ever—in part, because of this relentless pursuit of success under capitalism. "We want to invest more in each child to give them the best opportunities to compete in an increasingly unequal environment," explains Philip Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, in a New York Times report.

According to the same report, millennials are more likely than previous generations to earn less than their parents. Well-founded fears about the economy in general, the ability to afford child care, and the accessibility of homeownership are all factors in delaying parenthood or deciding to live child-free. Not to mention that corporate jobs feel increasingly precarious. Layoffs are unpredictable, unforgiving, but

not uncommon. Even if I had every confidence in my budgeting today, the floor could drop out without notice.

Another dimension to measure is simply happiness. Let's leave the practicalities aside for a moment and return to desire. Unfortunately, the evidence seems all-but unanimous: parents aren't happy and certainly not happier than their childfree peers.

A study of 900 working mothers by psychologist Daniel Kahneman found that the women remembered the time they spent with their children as less enjoyable than other activities, including watching TV and working, in their day.

Another study, a meta-analysis across 188 longitudinal studies, looked at four family events (marriage, divorce, bereavement, childbirth) and four work events (unemployment, reemployment, retirement, relocation/migration) as major events that impact happiness. They found that new parents experience a decrease in overall happiness and a decrease in marital satisfaction that doesn't bounce back until the children move out.

A 2016 study compared parental happiness in different countries and found variability based on child-care policies, such as flexible work hours and paid parental leave, and, vitally, on the different ways different cultures engage with children and parents. The U.S. was the country with the greatest decrease in happiness after people had children.

There are many, many articles that align to these findings. "It's a mistake to rely on procreation as a guarantor of happiness, at least in the short term," writes feminist philosopher Christine Overall. "Not only is it risky to have a child to make oneself happy; it is also inconsiderate of the child."

Would these statistics align to my experience? It seems stupid to think I'd be exceptional in this regard.

Many of the things that make me happy will be different or inaccessible if we had a child: I like to spend time with my friends. I like to travel. I like to eat in restaurants. I like to sleep in and read a book in bed on a slow Saturday morning. I like hour-long adult-only prestige television. None of my friends with kids were caught up on *White Lotus*.

These are small things, of course. I could live a beautiful, full, life without HBO and cozy restaurants. Kids can travel. Moms, obviously, have friends. But if being a parent is as exhausting and stressful as the surveys say, if, indeed, the childfree people are happier all told than people with kids, why choose the unhappy path?

Jennifer Senior investigates and complicates parental happiness and unhappiness in her New York Magazine cover story "All Joy and No Fun" (also the title of her book on the same subject).

Of the study cited at the beginning of this section, Senior writes:

"When Kahneman surveyed those Texas women, he was measuring moment-to-moment happiness. It was a feeling, a mood, a state…As a matter of mood, there does seem to be little question that kids make our lives more stressful. But when studies take into consideration how rewarding parenting is, the outcomes tend to be different."

Senior discusses a study that "tried to untangle these two different ideas." They found that when participants were asked to map various activities on a quadrant of pleasurable and rewarding parenting came in third for both metrics, just behind volunteering and prayer. A 2015 Pew survey found, "About nine-in-ten parents say being a parent is rewarding for them all (53%) or most (35%) of the time."

While overall happiness may take a hit, the evidence also suggested that parenthood can offer purpose. That sounds compelling to me.

No responsible meditation on the childbearing choice can ignore the rapidly worsening environmental situation on our much-abused planetary home.

The climate crisis offers a double whammy of reasons against having a child: my kid would likely experience the danger and health impacts of a rapidly changing climate, and by their very existence, they would make it worse. In addition to the dramatic, catastrophic weather events that threaten our communities imminently, slower boiling threats like asthma and microplastics will make our planet harder and harder to inhabit. Though "carbon footprint" measures have limited utility, by some calculations, having a child in a developed country like the U.S., increases an adult's carbon footprint between 7.8 to 58.6 tons per year.

Additionally, the climate crisis is an overwhelming example of the ways greed and capitalism have continued to beat back science-based, collectivist solutions. The climate crisis offers a vast library of case studies of Ways People Are Disappointing.

To consider the climate crisis at all is to see the world both naturally and socially becoming increasingly untenable. It's not dramatic to predict that wars will be fought over potable water in my child's lifetime. I cannot imagine explaining to my child why the billionaire gets to go to the Mars colony while the mountains around our city burn. No amount of recycling and zero-waste days even it out.

"Since having even just one child in an affluent household usually produces environmental impacts comparable to what mainstream environmentalists consider to be an intuitively unacceptable level of consumption, resource depletion, and waste, they should also oppose human reproduction (in most cases)," writes philosopher Thomas Young. He argues that reproduction and overconsumption have parallel motives and, as summarized by Overall, "if we regard having children as morally permissible, let alone desirable, then we must say the same thing about 'ecogluttony.'"

There is an environmental justice angle to consider, too. Statistically, in the U.S., poor people and people of color suffer the effects of climate change disproportionately compared to upper-class white people like me. Thinking globally, poorer countries bear the brunt of wealthy countries' global emissions.

Though it is impossible to track the exact butterfly effect of the excess of a U.S. childhood directly through to the climate-fueled misfortune of a Bangladeshi childhood, the impact is hard to deny.

Our bridge measuring now takes us deeper into the abstract, interior territory. Beyond the environmental morality questions, what are the other ethics of this choice?

David Benatar is an oft-cited antinatalist philosopher. His writing, including the book, *Better Never to Have Been* (with the fun subtitle "The Harm of Coming into Existence") argues that it is always better not to exist than to exist. If you accept that premise, having a kid is an ethical nonstarter.

Benatar asserts that coming into existence is harmful because it brings individuals into a world filled with suffering and the suffering outweighs any joy or benefits that existence might bring. He argues that the *avoidance of suffering* is preferable to the *pursuit of pleasure*, ergo, non-existence is preferable to existence. As a part of this inquiry, Benatar challenges the belief that life has intrinsic value. In short, he argues that having children is unethical because it perpetuates the cycle of suffering that comes with existence.

I follow the logic, but the pessimism foundational to Benatar's argument doesn't resonate with me. I'd discard it entirely from my bridge-measuring quest, if only it didn't ring true, at times, for my partner.

I don't think it's a fruitful inquiry to stack up the circumstantial suffering of one age versus another. I don't want to be casual about the fact that we live in a society with horrific injustices and incomprehensible tragedy. My fears about parenthood include modern problems like mass shootings and international biological warfare, social media's disquieting effects on mental health, and a domestic government that frequently seems to be teetering toward collapse. But each of these decidedly contemporary fears meets its match in terrors of the past. I think being a parent—and being a child—has different threats and challenges in every era, and trying to compare them doesn't get you far.
What I don't deny is that children suffer. Despite our loving parents' efforts, my husband and I suffered, just like they suffered before us. To live is to suffer, sometimes, in ways large and small.
Sure. So where does that net us out ethically?

Christine Overall engages with this question from every angle in her book *Why Have Children*. I'll admit, her philosophical grappling eluded my understanding at times. Reading Overall felt like watching a heist movie: she was always five fantastic steps ahead of me, a thrilling ride. She dedicates a chapter to dismantling Benatar's central thesis. It reads like a philosophers' fight scene.

"Mere existence is not a benefit-conferring or harm-conferring property," she argues. "Even if Benatar were right that the absence of pain is good and the absence of pleasure is not bad, it would not follow that it is better not to exist. Whether it is better not to exist would then depend on how we add up the goods and bads—that is, whether the good constituted by the absence of pain in the case of nonexistence is greater than the good that might be created if the individual were to live her life. It is not self-evident that in every case nonexistence is better."

Overall's approach to bridge measuring makes mine look clumsy and wandering. She's a professional.

Her ethical inquiry rests on an essential point-of-view: that the "so-called burden of proof — or what I would call the burden of justification — should rest primarily on those who choose to have children." Perhaps it's unsurprising that this resonates with me. Overall thinks that, "the choice to have children calls for more careful justification and reasoning than the choice not to have children simply because in the former case a new and vulnerable human being is brought into existence whose future may be at risk."

Throughout the book, Overall details the many various reasons she finds it morally insufficient to have a child. Just name a few: people shouldn't reproduce in the hopes their specific child will save the world in some heroic way (not fair), to carry on a name (patriarchal, selfish), to inherit property (capitalist, antiquated), to please God (unknowable).

Overall also illustrates how the decision to be childfree can be a political one. She quotes Sue Donaldson, who writes, "My decision to forgo children is an act of rebellion—a rebellion against the social pressures to procreate and the stereotypes that say giving birth, and caring for dependents, [are] a defining feature of womanhood; against the current societal environment in which we are expected to raise children; against the view that forgoing an experience somehow diminishes one's life; and finally, against the view that we should happily embrace our biological destiny."

This argument resonated with me: I feel so powerless to disrupt the patriarchy. A joyful, full, childfree life sounds like a delicious rebellion.

Overall herself has two children, though. A passage in her conclusion speaks directly to the anxious reader turning to her scholarship as self-help:

"People sometimes ask me whether I would advise them to have children. I often say, 'Don't miss it!' My response sounds excessively pronatalist, but I would argue that it is not. I certainly do not say it to people who have told me or of whom I know that they have already decided not to have children; nor do I say it to someone who has not raised the procreation question with me. I do not actively go around promoting procreation. But in response to people who have thought about it, who are weighing their choices, who are imagining life as a parent and life as a nonparent, I usually encourage them to take the plunge."

Overall goes on to illustrate why she recommends the leap. She calls our attention not to the individuals in the parent-child dyad, but the link between them. “Parenting is a relationship, not a set of actions directed at an object,” she writes. “Although the outcome of procreation and child rearing cannot be foreseen—much can go wrong, children can disappoint, and offspring sometimes delight in becoming what their parents do not want—what matters is the process of procreation and parenting, that is, the relationship between parent and offspring.”

She argues that the parent-child relationship—“conditional” in a good way and “crucially asymmetrical”—is what makes the experience of parenthood so transformative.

“In choosing to have a child, one is deciding both to fulfill one’s sense of who one is and at the same time aspiring to be a different person than one was before the child came along. In becoming a parent, one creates not only a child and a relationship, but oneself; one creates a new and ideally better self-identity,” she writes. “To choose to have a child is to take on a life-changing project.”

We are always changing, a little. Why not change like this?

Philosopher Ruth Chang’s 2014 TED Talk on making hard choices has been viewed at least 9 million times. I suspect it’s a popular watch for my fellow bridge measurers out there.

Chang discusses how we might compare two compelling options. In a categorically similar choice, we might see Option A as better, worse, or the same as Choice B. But for hard choices, where the measures of quality are messy, blurry, and human, Change introduces a fourth relation, “on par.” “On par” is not the same as equal, and complicates the comparison beyond “better” and “worse.” When two options are “on par,” it matters very much which you choose, but they’re in the name neighborhood of value.

The existence of on-par choices indicates that people have the power to create their own reasons. We imbue choices with meaning beyond the value of externally dictated quantifiable factors. Some of that’s cultural, but some of that comes from within.

Chang argues that a world of only choices based on logical, preexisting reasons would be flat and boring. By looking alternatives that are on par squarely in the eye, we invite ourselves to make reasons our own. Reasons are building blocks of meaning, and meaning gives us purpose.

In the space of hard choices, Chang explains, we get to exercise our own personal normative power: we not only create reasons, but the specific reasons who make us who we are, each reason refining how we define ourselves.

This feels doubly true to me when it comes to the decision to have a child. Not only because of the major material changes to our day-to-day lives. Not only because embarking on parenthood is a bell that can’t be unrung. But because parenthood essentially recasts us, reforges us, makes us even more us than we were before.

Chang argues that hard choices should not be sources of agony and dread, but moments of freedom and possibility that we should celebrate. We forge ourselves in choice. We author our own ethics. Hard choices, Chang explains, are where the road of external logic runs.

In other words, sometimes the bridge’s geometry proves incalculable.

So I remain on the bridge, a useless protractor in hand, suspended over the unknowable churn. I grip the railing. I know I’m a strong swimmer. Who will I be if I take the plunge?

MY COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH I-5

"In many ways, this interstate freeway system encapsulates the American identity. Its practical prioritization of automobiles embodies our personal prioritization of industrial progress, individual comfort, and the freedom to "do it yourself." Its brutalist architecture and path of displacement reflects our preference for brute strength at all costs. Its perpetual state of maintenance, a poignant metaphor of our nation as a whole: grand in ambition, aging in upkeep."

WRITTEN BY
NATALIE Q. GODFREY

I.

I-5—formally known as Interstate 5—is a crucial corridor that runs north-to-south though Seattle's core. It serves as a central artery for commuters and couriers, transporting more vehicles than any other road in Washington. Further, as one of the longest freeways in the country, it connects the West Coast from border to border, facilitating interstate travel, commerce and progress.

Like many of us, I personally became acquainted with my section of I-5 for work. A new job called me to Seattle, for which I spent a significant amount of time using major throughways to visit local hubs. The learning curve felt immense. Confusing signs and signals caused pause; traffic and construction triggered angst. Daily accidents and abandoned bumpers littering the shoulders were a stark reminder of our collective speed and precarity. But quickly and instinctually, I began to memorize traffic patterns, lanes to avoid, and universally hated exits (see: Mercer Street, Exit 167). I-5 became second nature—a part of me.

As I continue to shuffle from metered on-ramps to join fellow drivers in traffic, I use this time to reflect on our city—the place that I am proud to call home. Between stalled yet steadfast truckers and tech-bros, as we weave to our destinations of presumed choice, I enjoy my own company. Exhaust plumes around us as we crawl over the bridges into downtown, together, the low rumble of engines almost meditative. I glimpse layers of graffiti, encampments nestled between fences, and flurries of seagulls amongst aged evergreens.

I feel kinship with all these beings, and this structure. We are connected by I-5, while separated by metal and the mundane. Collectively, we motion throughout the day, passing through the

same places we've all been before. Our routes become our stories; our stories become our identity. Grooves deepen with use. What might I-5 represent for Seattle?

II.

I-5 originates from a larger cultural need. At the turn of the twentieth century, the wild west coast had started to settle and boom. The gold rush and land grab of the western frontier captivated new settlers and displaced the last remaining indigenous communities. Railways were built to and from the waterfront, carrying more and more laborers and provisions. Soon, the region's lucrative lumber industry established Seattle as a major shipping port.

Concerns for urban density sparked decisive infrastructure planning. City systems needed to evolve with new population demands. Brick buildings replaced old wooden structures; pavement reformed treacherous muddy roads. Streetcar systems expanded. With the rise of the all-mighty automobile, people changed how they experienced the world. Cars offered unmatched reliability and convenience: maneuvering quickly and easily over new roads, enduring long distances in all weather conditions, allowing travelers to explore new places, visit old friends, and conduct business in ways previously unimaginable. Individual travel became preferable, driving an American pastime.

After World War II, the American economy was booming, leading to national investment in cross-county travel, intra- and inter-state commerce, and emergency preparedness. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act into law, which earmarked federal funds for a vast interstate freeway system. [1] At its core, this project sought to connect the nation. It served as a shining beacon of American ingenuity, industry, and identity. Equally, however, it also came to represent the underbelly of American values.

In many ways, this interstate freeway system encapsulates the American identity. Its practical prioritization of automobiles embodies our personal prioritization of industrial progress, individual comfort, and the freedom to "do it yourself." Its brutalist architecture and path of displacement reflects our preference for brute strength at all costs. Its perpetual state of maintenance, a poignant metaphor of our nation as a whole: grand in ambition, aging in upkeep.

III.

Seattle had already begun surveying for a new north-south route to alleviate automotive congestion by the time federal funds flowed in. Seattle's distinct "hourglass" landscape – pinched by two large bodies of water – combined with its San Francisco-esque hills, limited I-5's placement options. Much of the area had already been commercially developed and required a significant amount of "right-of-way" land purchases and demolition of existing structures. While many other cities allowed for construction outside of developed land, I-5 seemed destined to part the city in two.

Like most American decisions, construction of the Interstate system disproportionately affected areas with little to no political power: namely, the more impoverished and less white. The final route approval for I-5 necessitated the severing of entire neighborhoods, foot passageways, and community centers, fundamentally altering population patterns to this day. Construction most affected what is today referred to as the International District, dividing an already eviscerated Japantown at its center.

Much of I-5 today is still the original structure finished in 1962. "The highway's busiest stretch — just north of Mercer Street — carries about 274,000 vehicles per day," David Guttman of The Seattle Times reports (2017). "In 1976, the earliest year for which WSDOT has comparable data, it carried about 187,000 vehicles. That's a lot more cars. The road hasn't gotten wider." Its obstruction issues also stem from its original construction, which purposely undershot congestion projections to avoid buying more developed land.

As Seattle's population continues to grow, the maintenance and expansion of I-5 has become increasingly critical. Traffic and construction efforts feel ubiquitous. New issues and values feel at odds. I-5, like other major freeways, categorically contributes to air pollution, traffic fatalities, and overall pedestrian inaccessibility. But I-5 remains staunchly vital to many, and essential to almost everyone. Its history and centrality to our landscape reflects the best and worst of us, its fate tied to our own. It is defining in

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[1] In the United States, the terms "highway," "freeway," and "Interstate" are often used to describe different types of roads. While there is some overlap between these terms, they generally have distinct characteristics and uses.

- A highway is a general term that is used to describe any public road that is maintained by the government and is open to the public. This can include roads of varying sizes, from small local roads to large multi-lane highways that connect cities and states.
- A freeway is a type of highway that is designed for high-speed travel and has limited access points, meaning that there are fewer exits and intersections than on other types of highways. Freeways are typically divided, with multiple lanes in each direction, and are intended for through-traffic only, meaning that drivers are not able to turn off the road at most exits.
- The Interstate Highway System is a specific network of highways in the United States that was created under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. These roads are designed for long-distance travel and connect cities and states across the country. The Interstates are marked by distinctive red, white, and blue shields, and are typically freeways, with limited access and multiple lanes in each direction.

It is defining in the most literal sense. I-5 defines the city and our relationship to it, whether we like it or not.

IV.

Locals might not initially think of I-5 as part of Seattle's identity. In the same way we might list our own best qualities first, Seattleites might pick something more iconic, or distinctly unique, to encapsulate Seattle, like the elegant Space Needle or vibrant Pike Place Market. But locals and tourists alike all-but-certainly know of—and depend on—I-5. Almost everyone who moves in and out of Seattle must traverse the infamous concrete mire in some way. A necessary evil, most will say. Our very own "concrete scar," David Guttman of The Seattle Times' traffic declares.

Sometimes, when the sun is out and the sky is clear, when sharp clouds frame the city skyline, I feel grateful to sit in traffic on I-5. South of downtown, Seattle's industry is on full view: the sharp lines of the shipping port, stacks of matte-colored shipping containers, and crosshatch of railroads remind us of what Seattle once was – and still is – at its core. Seattle's distinct landscape limited I-5's placement but today results in a view. I watch the large "R' of the old Rainier Brewery pass through the window as I bounce out of the downtown corridor, only to see more traffic ahead.

Traffic will make anyone question their morals. The impressive design of freeway structures, complete with bottlenecks, will too. The way freeways look, feel, and cut throughout a city define life for the commuter, tourist, and citizen. The story of I-5 is a historical and cultural one; it reflects a larger narrative of Seattle's developing identity. I-5 stands as a very physical metaphor for our contemporary reckoning with past decisions made.

WALKING IN WONDERMENT

"None of us are strangers to awe. Poems come and go, so do sunsets and star-studded skies, yet they remain marvelous each time. In collecting everyday awe, we can expand our limited storage for life."

WRITTEN BY
ARDHRA S

It is a rainy afternoon in Mumbai and I'm wading through an ocean of people holding *Amma's* hand. I'm turning seven and we're headed to get soul warming *pav bhajis* from Hotel Ramakrishna, a welcoming little eatery in the area. I don't remember how it tasted, but no one gets *pav bhaji* wrong in Mumbai. What I do remember from that day is a wonderful rainbow ring, floating precariously in a puddle on the wet street. *Amma* had explained that it was formed by oil dripping onto dirty rainwater. It occurs to me now that two immiscible liquids, dirty ones at that, can meet each other to create something beautiful.

Now when I see oil rings, especially in rainy Seattle where I've been living for over half a year, brings back an entire world around me with it. The bustling streets, the feeling of being tiny in a giant, interim city between mandatory uprootings, living at a distance from my dad, moving away from my only friends. But, it would all be temporary. Every move was. Soon enough, one of my parents, hopefully both, would get transferred to another place and I'd be replanted again. This I could rely on. Moving always felt more concrete than settledness.

Author Jhumpa Lahiri, reflected on this podcast, about her move to Rome, her mother's passing, and finding her way to the Italian language. "Everything is borrowed. Nothing is ours. Life is borrowed. We're here for such a short time, and we just pass through it. And we borrow it all, we borrow the sky, we borrow the trees, we borrow people. And then, we let go when we pass through, and the world remains." She mentioned how her art is inspired by "the panic of it all slipping away."

I carry a similar panic in my pocket. I hoard reminders of people, words, and times. These totems of memory allow me to relive the awe I experienced previously, and serve as my anchors while I ebb along new waters. I walk through places like a tourist, an outsider, even in familiar towns. And I enjoy the view. My phone is usually at the ready to capture anything interesting—a banana plantain in Seattle (could there be a more polar idea?), a sticker on a light pole that has an alarmed frog screaming, "Anarchy!" A *pokéball* (the ball from Pokémon that houses the super creatures) painted on a wall that I often walk by, which reminds me of someone.

Compared to the multiple shocks of letting go of familiarity—our house, belongings, staple food, people, languages—moving to Seattle to study was a decisive and slow, even painfully slow, journey. This time I got to choose, to mentally and logistically prepare, to bid wistful goodbyes, and most importantly, to pack a lot of what I was leaving behind in little electronic devices, gifts, and relics. However, new experiences don't come with a compass or roadmap. Often, our immediate response to them is trepidation or caution. Neuroscientist and researcher, Beau Lotto, says that we do this in defense of the biases we harbor, because our biases are inherited or accumulated information. Letting go of them, can leave us in the dark space of complete uncertainty. "The barrier to doing so is that we hate not knowing. Fortunately, evolution gave us a solution to that fear: namely, awe," says Lotto.

He urges us to consider awe as another way of embracing uncertainty. "What if we could use awe, not to get rid of conflict—conflict is essential, conflict is how your brain expands, it's how your brain learns—rather, to enter conflict in a different way?" To me, this means looking everywhere, scrounging if need be. The touch-me-nots that line roadsides of Mangalore, the manic mafia that is the crow federation of Chennai, the diversity in auto-rickshaws (*tuk-tuk*s) across different cities of India, or the sun rising and setting along an arc rather than a semi-circle, when you get closer to the poles.

I remember a day from when I was around six, skipping around the hall of our house, waiting for Amma and Ammamma (my grandmother) to make tea. The late afternoon sun hit my face periodically, if I jumped high enough to be in line with the window. A bolt of words about the sun suddenly appeared in my head, with a rhyme scheme and everything, and I knew I couldn't hold them in me for too long. I ran to find my little red diary and wrote them all down. This, I believe, was my first poem.

The diary is now long lost, but I can recall the thrill of jotting down those words that felt like messages from another realm. I was in awe.

Years later, I wrote about reeling from this feeling:

To get to the moon and be back,
Is this how dull it is?
The high, this light-headedness
Keep me wide awake,
Locked in awe.

Awe has been described as a state of feeling more connected to the universal, almost outside of ourselves. A study on the human brain suggests that when in awe, the brain conducts minimal self-reflection. "Awe blows us away: It reminds us that there are forces bigger than ourselves, and it reveals that our current knowledge is not up to the task of making sense of what we have encountered. We need that everyday awe, even when it's discovered in the humblest places," says researcher Dacher Keltner in her essay on "the quiet profundity of everyday awe."

The Anthropocene Reviewed,' which I believe is John Green's finest book, has a chapter titled, 'Our capacity for wonder.' "We are never far from wonders," he writes. He describes walking in the woods with his then two-year old son. Together, they look down at a valley "where a cold haze seemed to hug the forest floor," and he tries to get his "oblivious son" to appreciate the beauty of it all. After some time his son grabs a brown oak leaf from the little tree next to them and exclaims, "Weaf!" Green further writes, "Marveling at the perfection of that leaf, I was reminded that aesthetic beauty is as much about how and whether you look, as what you see. From the quark to the supernova, the wonders do not cease. It is our attentiveness that is in short supply, our ability and our willingness to do the work that awe requires." In a similar sense, awe has been my storyteller, a companion on my daily tourism, excitedly pointing things out to me to gasp at, to take notice.

'Take a minute to think of a time you were in awe recently. Was it when you made someone smile? Maybe you caught a fingernail-sized moon during the day? None of us are strangers to awe. Poems come and go, so do sunsets and star-studded skies, yet they remain marvelous each time. In collecting everyday awe, we can expand our limited storage for life.

"Experiences of awe bring people into the present moment, and being in the present moment underlies awe's capacity to adjust time perception, influence decisions, and make life feel more satisfying than it would otherwise," research suggests. Turns out that in this era of "time famine," awe can make us feel less impatient, and believe that we have enough time. The Japanese celebrate the blooming of the *sakura* blossoms in spring, as Hanami, meaning flower-viewing. The festival is rooted in celebrating the transient, ephemeral beauty of the blossoms. It seems to literally nudge us to stop and smell the flowers, given that they'll be gone for a year, or twelve, as is the case with the blue *kurinji* flowers of the Nilgiris in India.

In 'The Hour of Land', Terry Tempest Williams writes about the marvel of national parks. "Awe sneaks up on us like love. Cynicism flourishes in air-conditioned rooms. Our fear of being touched removes us from a sensate world. The distant self becomes the detached self who no longer believes in anything. Awe is the moment when ego surrenders to wonder. This is our inheritance — the beauty before us." We must pass on our ability to experience this inheritance in all its glory, and let it sneak up on us. However, stories and sights and sounds are always coming at us, and perhaps beyond a threshold, we develop some numbness. "You don't love because: you love despite," as William Faulkner suggests. Perhaps this is the work that awe requires—to enjoy, admire, and relish, beyond reason. To not constantly look for reason.

Awe is light on the heart, easy to take along on walks to the grocer's. The lucidity

and sense of connectedness once experienced, leaves us wanting for more. This could explain why divers and surfers keep going back to the sea, and musicians revisit the same compositions over and over, and why people fall in love despite the difficult nature of heartbreaks. When the world buries us in noise, awe helps us rise over the disdain.

Looking up at the sky, you are free to feel absolutely anything and to experience it begin within you—the epicenter. That emotion of profound gratitude and reverence will resonate with the universe far and wide. What does a distant blue star know of our tears? It knows, and we know that it does. Awe only asks that we believe as well.

HORSE GIRL

"Rooted in our childhood and adolescence, this quiet connection between horse girls is freighted with the understanding of what it means to work tirelessly, and care for something unconditionally. It empowered us, built our confidence, and though many of us left it long ago, it continues to define us."

WRITTEN BY
NANCY TROTT

I could feel her staring at my boots, caked with Seattle mud collected during some last-minute yardwork before my flight. Now at the airport gate, I looked up and caught her eye. She was well-dressed, probably in her 70s, waiting, like me, for our turn to board the plane.

“Do you ride?” she asked.

At that moment, I realized she wasn’t judging me for all the mud I’d tracked into the airport. She recognized a fellow horse girl. Though it had been decades since I last seriously rode a horse, my fashion preference for paddock boots, purchased online from a Connecticut saddlery, gave me away.

“Oh,” I said, self-consciously brushing the dried dirt from my heel. “Not for years. I gave it up when I went to college, and then, well, life took over.”

Two grown women, sharing a common bond in an unlikely place.

Rooted in our childhood and adolescence, this quiet connection between horse girls is freighted with the understanding of what it means to work tirelessly, and care for something unconditionally.

It empowered us, built our confidence, and though many of us left it long ago, it continues to define us.

And yet, in adulthood, so many of us rarely speak of it. The idea of being a horse girl is openly mocked by many in American culture. Not to be confused with the wealthy, and more revered, equestrians, horse girls are portrayed as oddballs (nerdy, asexual). Society forgives us our childhood obsessions, but expects us to move on, put away our youthful passions, and grow up.

As an adolescent, horses and ponies offered freedom and an escape from my complicated relationship with my mother. When things got tense in the house, I sought refuge in the barn, meticulously grooming Pridey by combing the tangles from his tail, scraping dirt and small stones from inside his hooves, and tacking him up to hit the trails.

“Horses are just deeply powerful, beautiful, metaphorical, soul-feeding animals, and I think being around them is deeply impactful and healing,” Writer and Editor Halimah Marcus told me in a recent interview.

She explored the phenomena in her 2021 book of essays, "Horse Girls: Recovering, Aspiring, and Devoted Riders Redefine the Iconic Bond."

Pridey, steady and fearless, taught my two older sisters to ride before me. The three of us were raised around horses, a lifestyle rooted in our mother's obsession. We rose early every morning to feed and turn them out in the pasture behind our garage, which had been repurposed into a small stable with four stalls and a tack room. We rode competitively, working with trainers and traveling to horse shows on weekends. Though by the time I hit my teenage years, I was done with the pressure, both from competition and in particular, my mother. But I was not done with horses.

On the trails, Pridey and I wove through the forest, following streams and unmarked paths with no destination in mind. I often dropped my reins and let Pridey lead the way, taking me far from my teenage troubles at home into our own special world. Pridey was my best friend, my protector, and my guide.

It was on one of my trail rides that I met Kendra Hansis. Turning a corner, Pridey's ears pricked up and there they were – Kendra on her pony, Butterball. We were both trespassing on land owned by a local farmer, and I immediately understood that it was Kendra who had been pulling tree branches over the dirt-bike paths to make fences for jumping.

Unlike me, a horse girl by circumstance, Kendra got there through sheer will and determination. As a girl, she read every book about horses and riding that she got her hands on. Her parents discouraged her, saying they could not afford a horse, and definitely didn't have the money for vet bills, farriers, trainers, grain, and boarding costs.

But from their first lesson, riders are taught that if they fall off, they must get back on. Kendra applied that lesson in every aspect of her life.

A friend of her family's knew a woman in the next town who needed someone to ride and take care of her backyard pony. Kendra immediately took the job, riding her bike every day to the woman's house. Eventually, the woman gifted Kendra the pony, Butterball, and the woman's friend later offered Kendra another horse, Katy, knowing the mare would receive far better care and attention under Kendra's supervision.

In the months and years since our accidental meeting on the trails, Kendra essentially became part of my family, riding out each weekend to our house, where she'd join me in my daily chores, mucking stalls, filling water buckets and lugging hay bales from the garage. Together, we'd hit the trails. On horseback, Kendra took chances and pushed her limits, setting up makeshift fences in the woods and racing over them, dodging branches and trees in the way.

"There is an empowerment to be found on horses," Kendra shared with me recently. "When you're riding, you're literally above everyone. I remember hearing women say they lived in fear of men attacking them when they were out. I grew up on a horse. No one could catch me."

In a 2018 interview with Buzzfeed, Musician Neko Case – also a horse girl – said throughout time, women have had an intense connection with horses, which "evolved right next to human beings."

"The horse was the great equalizer," Case told the interviewer. "The horse made you as strong as a man. I think that's one reason little girls are obsessed with horses — because they're this piece of fucking coal in our souls that's like, I remember. It can't be taken away, because it's in our DNA, which is beautiful. But oh my god, the fucking shit you get when you're a girl and you love horses!"

That sense of independence and freedom that is so empowering to girls is a threat to others. A quick search on TikTok surfaces a meme about a girl with "horse girl vibes," which the voiceover describes as "quirky, like bizarre, like unhinged." Horse girls aren't self-conscious about showing up for school with hay in their hair or having a little mud on their boots.

"Horse girl is often paired with horse crazy girl. She doesn't care about her appearance at all; she's not right in the head," Kendra said. "Horse girls kind of start out as maternal and nurturing, but that escalates quickly to crazy."

That stigma starts to really stick when girls become young women, when society expects us to trade in our obsession for horses for a more traditional path. Go to any horse barn, and you'll find that the people who work around horses are overwhelmingly women. And yet, it's often assumed that they can't be horsewomen and have families. It's a different story for men.

"Cowboys are American icons," Marcus told me, summing up the double standard. Riding the range, men on horses gain expertise and build their athleticism. They're revered as they grow old on horseback, working from dawn to dusk, living out the American dream. They're not expected to go to college and give up their careers for babies.

In an article titled The Subtle Misogyny Behind the Belittling of Women's Interests, Amanda Izzo, professor of Women and Gender Studies at Saint Louis University said gender stereotypes reinforce the idea that men are more rational in their life choices.

"The corresponding stereotype is that women are emotional, subject to irrational and unreasonable feelings that make them behave in ways that show a lack of control and intellectual capacity," Izzo said.

Sadly, many horse girls feel society's pressures and give in.
Marcus said she stopped riding when she went to college, and as she was putting together her book, she said she saw a trend among girls giving up horses as they

moved out of adolescence. I was no different. I was 18 when I last saw Pridey. It was time to "get serious" and go away to school. Time to think about my career. Fall in love. Have babies. Pridey was sold so he could teach another little girl to ride.

Once in college, I packed up my horse photos and rarely spoke about my first passion. Part of me thought I was ready to move on, and part of me felt embarrassed and ashamed of my adolescent past. I didn't want people to immediately link me with horse girl stereotypes, and I was also aware that many people associate horses with wealth and privilege. I knew those girls, too. Their horses cost more than a luxury vehicle, and their families paid to board them at stables with trainers, grooms, and staff who did all the work. I didn't want to be mistaken for one of them.

Kendra took a different path. Though she gave up Butterball and Katy when she went to college, she never let go of horses. She entered the University of Connecticut pre-vet, but realized after taking four science classes in her first semester, that she was better suited as an English major.

She fell off.

Instead, she worked in the school's horse barns, rising at 5 a.m. every day to clean stalls before class. Over time, the barn manager sent her to work at the breeding barn by herself, where she said, "she kind of got the bug."

She got back on.

After graduation, Kendra started teaching English, but knew deep-down she wanted to breed world-class Warmblood dressage horses. And with every turn, she met a skeptic. Her sister told her, "There are enough animals in the world" – and even a potential mentor told her, "Women like us don't breed horses like that." In addition, there tends to be a bias against U.S. breeders of Warmbloods, a breed that originated in Europe.

Kendra was not discouraged. True to her roots, she studied everything she could about horse breeding and bloodlines, learning the science of selecting the right stallions for the right mares. In 2001, she started Runningwater Warmbloods, her own backyard breeding operation, with a goal, "to make better horses."

When she gave birth to her twins 12 years ago, Kendra recalls, people asked, "So you're going to give up the horses, now that you have babies, right?"

"To me, that's like asking me to cut off an arm," Kendra said. "It's part of me."

Her breeding career hit a milestone in 2021, when Fortunato H2O, the only horse she could afford to breed in 2015 went on to win grand championship at the prestigious Breeders Championship Series Finals at dressage at Devon, one of the biggest multi-breed horse shows in the United States.

"He won every single thing and won it by huge scores," Kenda said. "When they called champion, I'm bawling. Me, a middle-aged lady doing her best with the one horse she bred in 2015. You hope you have a day like that in your life."

Unlike Kendra, I did give up that part of my life, but it's still a part of me. It's the part that doesn't mind a little dirt on my boots. It's the part of me that, in other aspects of my life, keeps getting up, even after I fall. Like Kendra, the woman in the airport didn't give up her horse girl days. She told me she made sure her kids rode, and then her grandchildren.

"Nothing is more important than learning how to be responsible for something, for having something that relies on you every day, and children need to learn that early," she told me before we boarded our plane.

I haven't returned to riding, but my daughter is starting to take weekly lessons. Back in the barn each week, I'm getting to know the horses again. I sit on the sidelines now, listening to her trainer's instructions, watching the different personalities of the school horses, admiring their grace and power as they patiently support my daughter as she learns how to ride. Just like Pridey did for me.

BEYOND THE LOW HANGING FRUIT

"Weightlifting, opposed to a team sport, is largely an autonomous undertaking, it is you and the bar. The energy exerted is the reward reaped, and not always in the material ways of increasing size or strength."

WRITTEN BY
NICK HYDE

I crouch on the small strip of turf that runs the length of one of the large rooms at the VAC, my local gym. I spend the first period warming up slowly waiting for a lifting rack to open. There is the smell of chalk, sweat, and steel in the air. The voices of people mix with the banging of weights and music in the background, the acoustics of the large room amplifying everything. A shriek startles me, I look up to see two groups of teenagers joking with one another as they crowd around the squatting rack. A couple toss a medicine ball back and forth on the far end of the room. A trainer coaxes a group on the pull up bars giving words of encouragement. The teenagers guffaw again and insist one in the group tries to best his friend on a heavy squat, his hesitancy of the weight clear in his eyes. I wait my turn.

I can't help but feel curious about these teenagers' motivations in the gym. They are often caught up in challenging one another to feats of strength that send shivers up my spine, the way they goad one another, the way they jerk and wrench on the barbell. Why are they here? I think. Certainly they work hard, but at times it looks to be a contest of ego as well as a social hour. Yet it dawns on me that I am not always sure of why I am here. Hours and hours of lifting steel up and down for perhaps similar egotistical goals these boys feel. To get strong, to get big. I think on my humble beginnings of weightlifting. Trying to lift away the genetics of a tall lanky boy insecure of his string bean figure. Though I resemble that boy less and less I can sense that what I now chase isn't the same thing it once was. The reasons I come to the VAC are more ambiguous to me these days.

Later, I pose the question to Zoe, a trainer and committed powerlifter. "What exactly are we doing here? What is the point?" She is prepping for a lift and looks at me in the mirror with a similar hint of fatigue on the edges of her eyes. She shrugs, "It's just something we do I guess, a way to get the happy chemicals to the brain." I ponder this as she goes back to her lift and flip open my notebook. This is my program, my dataset of everyday that I spend here. Each lift scrawled in crooked handwriting, pages and pages showing progression, plateaus, good days, and bad days. I sigh, looking at the numbers: I have not improved much in the last month; I close the notebook and get on with it.

Three weeks later I attempted a one rep max challenge, an act of strength where I

work to lift as much weight as I can for a single rep. For the past nine months I had been running a rigid weightlifting program: three sections of strength training and three sections of hypertrophy training. Hypertrophy is the type of exercise that promotes muscular mass gains opposed to strength. Simply put it is more reps at less weight where strength challenges more weight at less reps.

My goal is to squat 385 lbs, and my coach, Dr.Tuchak is going to work me through it. I start by working the percentages. By calculating 30 -90% of 385 lbs I will touch each weight with a decreasing rep count. I do 8 reps at 30%, 8 at 40%, 6 at 50%, 5 at 60%, 4 at 70%, 3 at 80%, 2 at 90%. At this point I am properly warmed and "primed" for this lift. "Remember Nick, clear your mind. Don't think about it, do the work"

Dr. Tuchak says as I pace back and forth. I nod to this remembering these helpful words we had talked about beforehand. I put my back under the bar and lift it off the rack, stepping back with my mind clear. No thoughts, no daydreams, anxieties, or fear. I can either do it, or I can't. Down I go, then I drive my legs and power my way back up. Success. Racking the bar Dr. Tuchak congratulates me. I smile and thank him for his help and look around, another trainer gives me a thumbs up. There are just the three of us in this big room. No applause, nor celebration past the high fives. Yet I am smiling, proud and happy, feeling fulfilled. Satisfaction is its own reward, and within that satisfaction I find the answer to the question, "Why am I here?"

Often weight training is viewed as a masculine, testosterone, ego fueled activity. But as I have marched through the time, the rep counts, experienced the success, and failures it has become abundantly clear to me that there is another side to weight training that often goes unnoticed. Weightlifting's unique ability to provide presence, peace of mind, and physical wellbeing through the peaks and valleys of successes and struggles.

Weightlifting in conceptual terms is an accessible sport. The barriers to entry for weightlifting are low, the payoffs are high. There is no denying the benefits of a fit lifestyle. According to fitness coach Vincent Lam just 2.5 hours of exercise a week can ward off a myriad of chronic illnesses as we age. The raw act of picking something significantly heavy up and putting it down again is easier than the technical aspects of martial arts or a sport like tennis or beach volleyball. Lifting weights can quickly increase your metabolism, improve your cardiovascular health, help lose weight and promote skeletal muscular health for aging well.

Even in small doses, weightlifting and the act of strengthening and defining your muscular structure has been shown to have a marked increase on individuals' confidence across a lifespan as well as increased mobility and longevity. There is also evidence from health and science journalist Gretchen Reynolds that it can have a significant impact on reducing anxiety, easing depression, and improving mental cognition and decreasing the risks of memory loss.

In a conversation with my coach Dr. Tuchak, a talented powerlifting and fitness coach in his own right, we discussed how weightlifting can "cut out all the noise." The constant notifications, emails, texts, and 24-hour news cycle that is often discouraging. "The trick is to be present in the brain and body because you've got distractions happening around you all the time," he reminds me. These distractions have an impact on an individual's wellbeing, and an accessible and driven activity that can take you away from them should not be taken for granted.

There is a further layer, when weightlifting is taken past the point of a simple fitness activity to one of performance. Where it impacts ever deeper. Dr. Tuchak has spent years coaching performance weight training. Though his clients run the gamut from fitness freaks to the average individual his specialty resides in the arena of powerlifting. Powerlifting is defined as competing in maximum strength training, comprised of three lifts: the squat, bench press, and deadlift.

My one rep max test was a performance lift. I had trained and prepared for many months, and this was an opportunity to test my body and mind. In some ways this seemed ridiculous to stress my body to its furthest point just to see if I could. But it is in this arena that we allow us to find what we are made of in physical and mental terms; it's when we reach past the low hanging fruit of our capacity and stretch for something sweeter.

Weight training is an accessible activity, when working toward a performance level however there is some tedium involved. I had to find a good trainer or coach to start me off. I had a lifting program written up for me so I could stay consistent and track my progress. I had to stay cognizant of nutrition, sleep, and calorie intake. Then I practiced and practiced...and I practiced.

The lifts have a specific form but to get good you must practice the lifts and find what works well for your body. For Dr. Tuchak this is where the personal comes into personal training. "You need to find what works well for you." Personally, I opt to do my squats and deadlifts in bare feet, it's what works for me and how I perform at my best level.

When I asked Dr. Tuchak about achieving lifting mastery he said, " I don't like the word mastery as it has these expert connotations. I think there is a level of skill that is higher than someone else with less experience." But this is hard to quantify. One of the teenagers at the gym is pressing huge numbers, he points out. (Far above anything I personally can press.) He is genetically built for it. But is that mastery? Not at all. Powerlifting associations have standards: beginner, novice, intermediate, advanced, and elite.

Each one of these categories represents an amount of time spent weightlifting. To achieve advanced, in accordance with the International Powerlifting Federation, you must have demonstrated progress over a minimum of five years.

The unfortunate reality of performance weight training, or any attempt at that mastery, is that it tends to turn into a slog. An inevitable stagnation of improvements that is disenchanting to say the least. Any great pianist feels stagnation, every gymnast hits a wall, and every warrior hits a threshold of their skill. This is just a difficult part of progress and what led me to wonder "what is the purpose of this?" When days and weeks go by without any improvement, coupled by a culture of fitness and health fueled by quick fixes and thirty-day abs, it can be hard not to settle for the low hanging fruit. The quick grab that will give you what you want. When you combine that with peer pressure and modern body standards, time in the gym might seem like a fast solution to size and strength. It was for me. For a time.

The inevitable slumps and low periods of weight training can be draining. I often find myself in a place where my deadlift may be improving, yet my bench press seems to be almost deteriorating. "One of the hardest parts of this game is keeping your eye on the ball during those lull periods," says Dr. Tuchak. "It's hard when you are getting nowhere week in and week out. Why am I working so hard? What's the point? And I think that if you are going to be successful you've got to trust this process. That's the reason that we do this because if it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be fun! It's what makes it fun, interesting and a challenge. If you just hit every single target every week then you have to ask yourself, what is the point?" In an age of short-term satisfaction and quick gratification, lifting weights is a long, hard haul. These slogs and plateaus can be, and should be where the joy comes in.

Like a lot of things in life it is hard to see the forest for the trees. Often when the slog is grinding along, and the weight feels heavier one day than it did the last, it can be difficult to find that joy and recognize that this is indeed a purposeful challenge. When bestselling author Ta-Nehisi Coates was asked about his creative breakthrough after years of struggling as a writer he said, "It's not really this mystical – it's like repeated practice over and over and over again, and suddenly you become something you had no idea you could really be."

Performance lifting is for me a practice of patience as well as lifting. By witnessing these challenges as part of the growth strategy they do become as much a part of the work as successes and high points. What differentiates those who call it quits in these periods and those who shoulder through is a willingness to accept this challenge as a foundational part of the journey to mastery and achievement. One of the greatest cellists to ever live Pablo Casals was asked in his nineties why he continues to practice four to five hours every day. "Because I think I am making progress." The quick fix and build muscle fast mentality is a trope that leads people astray. It is patience and persistence that breaks and builds us simultaneously.
Let's look at it a different way.

Organizational behaviorist Amy Wrzeniwski believes motivation manifests itself in two ways: internal and instrumental. Over a period of years, she studied West Point cadets and tracked their military careers by assessing their motives and how it influenced their career decisions. These motives included the desire to land a good job, an instrumental motive, and a desire to be trained as a good leader, an internal motive. Cadets that had strong internal motives were more likely to graduate, did better in the military, stayed in the military longer and fared better over time. The study suggested that efforts should be made to structure activities so that instrumental motives do not become the primary factor for decision making.

Sure, I had an instrumental motive for lifting weights: I wanted to get bigger and stronger. But the further I go in performance lifting the more I enjoy the internal challenge of pushing myself than I do the external rewards, such as the mental health benefits, the ease of anxiety and stress. I am not saying that someone can't hold onto the instrumental motivators as well. I certainly still do in many regards. But when the mind shifts to a more internal motivator there might be a shift that allows an individual to find new energies in weightlifting. By saying I want to squat 405 lbs at 210 bs body weight I set an instrumental goal, by saying I want to see what I am made of in the journey to get there I lean closer to the internal.
Weightlifting, opposed to a team sport, is largely an autonomous undertaking, it is you and the bar. The energy exerted is the reward reaped, and not always in the material ways of increasing size or strength. At the end of a workout something tangible and real was performed but when you look a little deeper there is a great depth and breadth to the process and how you approach it. I asked Zoe, who is training for her first powerlifting competition, the same question I had so many months before: "What is the point of all this?" She came up with a reply that lands. "I get to practice failing regularly, then figuring out how to move on from it." By establishing this mindset, she stays focused on the eight months of preparation training for this competition.

Performance coach and writer Brad Stuleberg says, "Most people I know who stick with the sport over the long haul don't do it because it's a means to an end. For us, lifting weights becomes a transformative practice to be undertaken primarily for its own sake, the byproduct of which is a nourishing effect on the soul." These days my time spent in the gym reflects this sentiment. I show up wishing to present myself with the opportunity to give a little extra than I did the time before. And when that doesn't happen, that is an opportunity in itself.

Few things in the grapple of life have tangible results that come solely from autonomous effort and will power. The results that are given, are traced back to effort exerted, and how you show up to the bar bell and the process.

The weight is simply the medium by which I push myself and test my capacity to persevere. My capacity to perform. I am not implying this is the end all be all for performance weightlifting. But in times of struggle and fatigue maybe it's best to find the motivation and inspiration in the very act itself and the opportunities that such a pursuit can present. The Danish physicist Niels Bohr once said, "Every great and deep difficulty bears in itself its own solutions. It forces us to change our thinking in order to find it." When we do that, we reach beyond the low hanging fruit and find our true strength.

PLAYING LIFE'S LONG GAME

"One cannot avoid talking about finance while discussing compound interest. But compounding has an incremental value in one's life beyond monetary concerns. While we may think of compound interest as a concept where we invest money and the rest is taken care of over time, we fail to realize the work that goes in the background by portfolio managers and investment bankers to make that happen."

WRITTEN BY
NANDHITA NANDAKUMAR

Have you ever wondered as a student how manageable school would be if we studied everyday lessons daily, so we didn't have to scramble before the exam? Or instead of giving up on piano lessons, you still practiced regularly? Even as an adult, haven't you wondered how skilled a writer you would be if you wrote every week or every day?

I have always been told that the only thing standing between me and a goal is myself. I could envision doing the work on a constant basis and even the results but never been able to do the work itself. I used to hit the gym regularly back home. Once I moved to Seattle for my Masters, without a proper routine in place I was unable to work out regularly. This took a toll on my mental health, which by extension made me lethargic and unmotivated. During one of the foundational classes at grad school, we set our goals for the year. This is the part where I talk about why I started this piece - I set myself a goal to build a routine of working out four to five times a week.

Just like any other Millennial, the first place I looked for inspiration was Google. Not surprisingly, all the results were a summary of these points:

- **Create an enjoyable workout regime**
- **Find an accountable partner**
- **Make exercise a part of your day**
- **Start with mini goals**
- **Reward yourself**

What I found interesting was that almost every single link's title either began or ended with "how to stick with it." It doesn't take a genius to know why most of us get a gym membership and never use it. It takes consistent commitment, small compromises, certain willpower, and rejecting the urge to be lazy.

My decision to build a routine for working out started around the time I had to make final presentations for my graduate class and I was quite nervous about it. But I then remembered one important thing. I have been making presentations every week for the last three and a half years at my work. So, when I sat down to prepare the presentation, it took me much less time and mental energy to create something of excellent quality. I was fit for the task.

It's at this point I felt the effect of compound interest. Those three years of weekly meetings meant one presentation didn't loom as large.

Einstein called compound interest “the eighth wonder of the world”. And he was right. But the effect of compounding over the long term in a world of instant rewards and express shipping can be a challenging behavior to form.

But first, a definition is perhaps in order. For those hearing of compound interest for the first time, it is when the interest you earn on savings invested begins to earn interest on itself. As interest grows, it starts accumulating more and more and builds at an exponential speed. Compound interest can have a significant effect on your savings. For instance, $100 gaining 10% interest, compounding annually, grows like this:

Year 1: 10% of $100 = $10,
Total balance is $110.
Year 2: 10% of $110 = $11,
Total balance is $121.
Year 3: 10% of $121 = $12.12,
Total balance is $133.12.
Year 4: 10% of $133.12 = $13.31,
Total balance is $146.43

And by year ten, the amount would have compounded to $259.36 and by year twenty $672.73. The growth is almost 7x. Of course, this cannot be explained to a 10-year-old, so I was told an old Indian folktale as a kid, about a girl who outsmarted a king. During a period of famine, he did not share any rice from his granary with his subjects during the famine. The tale goes as follows, the girl through good deeds to the king proved her loyalty to him and was thus offered a reward. Her request was simple: to be given a grain of rice and to have it doubled each day for the next 30 days. Not understanding the power of compounding, the king agreed only to see his granary being emptied over the next 30 days. She received 1,073,741,823 (more than one billion) grains of rice - enough to feed the kingdom. This is the power of compounding.

Now back to my fitness goal. Over coffee I asked my partner how he started to run. It turns out that like me he also stopped every two minutes for a break when he . began, which not only made me feel better, but shed a lot of light on the power of compounding. How seemingly small investments can have a big payoff.

One cannot avoid talking about finance while discussing compound interest. But compounding has an incremental value in one’s life beyond monetary concerns. While we may think of compound interest as a concept where we invest money and the rest is taken care of over time, we fail to realize the work that goes in the background by portfolio managers and investment bankers to make that happen

One of my favorite thinkers of all time, Naval Ravikant agrees in his book The Almanack when he writes, “All the returns in life, whether in wealth, relationships, or knowledge, come from compound interest.” Nothing in life ever builds exponentially by just being around - we either put in incremental work before or during the process for the growth to happen. This is the same in developing relationships, learning skills, maintaining our health, or building a career.

That got me thinking: in extending this concept to different aspects of life, I uncovered many instances where playing the long game has become beneficial.

Take a moment to think back to a time when you unwittingly invested time over a period of time to grow something — a garden, language fluency or even your own hair! You could come up with at least one or two things that you have seen grow beautifully over the years. But be honest here, how much attention have you been paying to its growth? Unless you have intentionally been working on that aspect of your life, I’d say most of our answers would be “not much.” We don’t wonder why we have good teeth - maybe because for the last decade, we have been brushing and flossing them every night before bed and taking care of them with regular visits to the dentist. But this isn’t something we would know right off the bat. Playing the long game is rarely noticed.. And when it is done to develop a skill or a particular goal in mind, it is even thought of as a slog or boring. While helping out your partner do the dishes every night or even talking to your child for ten minutes every day may seem mundane, and inconsequential today, it will have a lasting impact on your relationships in the long term.

Coming back to the conversation with my partner, it is similar to how he started to run. For the first few weeks, he paused every two minutes or even less to complete just ten minutes. But at the end of a month, he was able to run for thirty minutes without a break. Why? Because he ran every day consistently, even if only for those ten minutes. While we can intellectually understand why that was possible, we still don’t practice it.

The world-famous investor, Warren Buffet said, “Read 500 pages every day. That’s how knowledge works. It builds up like compound interest. All of you can do it, but I guarantee not many of you will do it,”. While reading 500 pages a day is unrealistic, we could definitely read five to ten pages. But why do we find it difficult to invest a small amount of time every day towards building knowledge?

The reason is simple: we are human. Yes, I am calling us generally lazy and generally procrastinators. And I am one of you as well, and I fully understand why it makes sense to think that the distance to mastery is so great, why even try? We would not only spread ourselves too thin, but we would get severely burned out.

So how do people ever intentionally build or gain a skill while also spending time on everyday things?

BE SPECIFIC

After many conversations with friends and family, I saw a pattern emerge, which was true from my experiences as well. We all focused our attention on one thing or a few things at any point in time while also trying to see the bigger picture (long-term goals). Some of the long-term goals are intentional, like my friend perfecting a winged eyeliner that would help her in her career as a make-up artist or my partner

running for better health.

The answer is specificity. As authors Gary W. Keller and Jay Papasan write, “You need to be doing fewer things for more effect instead of doing more things with side effects.” And it makes more sense to me now than it did in the past when my parents lovingly scolded me to do one thing at a time.

Speaking of my parents, take my father and his line of work. He was the Managing Director of an Engineering company focused on renewable energy and has been invested in that space for two to three decades. He knows everything there is to know about renewable energy and its adjacent industries and built his network around his life’s work. His goal was to retire and start a consulting practice where he could provide expertise to organizations in that industry. So, when the time came for him to retire, he was entirely set up to start his firm with paying clients and a team that could help him out.

My father is one example of knowledge compounding - unlike investing money and letting compound interest and the people at the bank take care of it, here he did the work to make the results happen. This individual effort is more difficult for us than compounding money. We have to consistently engage and learn incrementally to build a skill or habit to achieve our end goal.

From my best friend learning how to drive a car to me doing arithmetic calculations much faster because of the weekly abacus classes, we need to engage consistently with a desired skill to develop it. I no longer can do arithmetic calculations at the speed I did when I was actively learning abacus but my best friend who drives every day has only become better at it.

This is a slightly modified way of looking at the concept of compounding - when you make anything you want to build long-term a habit or investment, it can take less effort to maintain over time (maybe barring physical exertion as we grow older, but surely the benefits of having practiced it for so long would be a pay-off in that). From cooking every day to learning how to drive. Do you remember the first time you started driving? I remember sweating bullets and being extra anxious. But right now, it is a cakewalk.

In the early days of me working out, I found myself making excuses to go to the gym. I realized quickly that I found it boring to run on a treadmill because I would stop every 2 minutes. From my past experience, I also knew that I enjoyed playing sports even if it involved running. So, I found a squash partner and began playing regularly. I built my stamina this way and also, made sure I at least ran 5-10 minutes on the treadmill till I could run 30 minutes without a break.

DISTRACTED

Before we move further into the tactics, it is important for us to understand what distracts us from compounding. We already know that human motivations and spreading ourselves too thin along with other factors play significant roles in distracting us from playing the long-game.

For three years, I worked in the venture capital (VC) industry in India. If there is any market that symbolizes playing the long-game, it is this industry (though not all the time). It takes decades to maintain relationships with Limited Partners while fundraising for funds and a similar timeline for investing in startups and then exiting them. LPs have seen that funds perform better over a long period of investment compared to short-term. And when it is done to develop a skill or a particular goal in mind, it is even thought of as a slog or boring.

From Warren Buffet to any VC in the world, VC firms know patience and perseverance are key to winning in this space. Some of the distractions are ones most of us would agree with: glorification of speed, incentive structure, and extreme goal orientation to name some. One of the most important distractions was the discomfort with uncertainty and change: we all fear what we can’t control, and long-term changes are one of those.

With the fear of missing out and the unruliness of time we focus all our efforts on gaining short-term rewards. US Bureau of Labor reports that people on average spend only four years in a job in the early stages of the pandemic. Currently, there has been so much movement in the employment market that it is being coined “the Great Resignation” period. Many professionals (some of my friends included) switch professional fields every six months or one year instead of building a career and network in one field while climbing the ladder. Though the pandemic caused a lot of people to reevaluate their priorities, it isn't the only reason. From stagnant wages to increased workload to the option of remote work, the professional’s breadth of options has expanded geographically and cross-functionally. Making decisions toward long-term goals is difficult.

I have been distracted many times since I started working out, especially by 30-day abs workouts, evenings out with friends, and even a quick binge of my favorite dessert. But slowly by keeping the long-term picture in mind, I have been able to say no to these distractions.

THINKING LONG-TERM

There are more layers to long-term thinking than a towering birthday cake. To begin with, how do we know which habits, practices, or even relationships to develop long-term? How long is long-term exactly? When do we see the effects of these investments? How do we know if we are on the right path to it? Such complexity.

While we contemplate where to spend our time, we should understand our current position and then decide where we want to be. I always knew I wanted to be in management, even though I am an engineer. Knowing this helped me take the next steps: an internship in a startup’s CEO’s office is one example of a step in that direction. Subsequently, becoming a

Communications Director in a new country prompted me to enroll in a Communications degree at a prestigious university and to build my network and community.

While these decisions may appear straightforward on the surface, there are often the could-have-done-it possibilities weighing down on us. Knowing what matters to us is important. It means understanding the value of long-term gains and forgoing the satisfaction of instant rewards. This takes sacrifice. Leaving a party early, eating healthy, investing every day into a relationship and so much more until effort becomes a habit. Identifying what matters to you in life is important in playing the long game. Choosing what is right versus for you versus what is convenient.

But the question remains, how do we make these choices?

Simon Sinek, in his book Start With Why has explained why companies get lost along the way when they lose sight of their why's. "A why without how has little probability of success." I have gradually come to question the "why" about anything I want to build. It has helped me come back to my reason and also, stick to building it. When I started working out, I found it difficult to not skip workouts whenever I have had a long day or was just feeling lazy. In knowing "why," I was able to push myself to stick to my routine.

Beyond why the how and the will are very important questions to ask ourselves: "Will I be proud of this decision in the next decade or two?", "Will this decision be one of those turning points in my life?" or "How disappointed am I going to be tomorrow with this decision?" - especially when I am offered desserts! Questioning anything that involves an investment of time, money, or energy sets our perspectives straight and helps us understand the importance of our decision. It helps us build responsibly, let serendipity work for us, grow trust with sound decisions and so much more. have always found it hard to stick to habits, and I give in to whims and short-term rewards.

It's why this topic is so interesting to me. But in the last few years, I have found it increasingly easier to stick to habits by making better decisions.

A few years back, I was thrust into the position of manager with no warning. Having no prior experience leading teams, I quickly realized that I was using up all my mental reserve in making decisions, sorting out complications, and holding on to my patience. I knew it was time for me to change my way of decision-making. Then my colleague introduced me to mental models.

MENTAL MODELS AND HABITS

Research shows that willpower is closely linked to mental reserve. Why am I talking about willpower? While I was spending more energy and time making simple decisions at work, I was using up all my mental reserve. So, when the time came to make decisions for myself such as saying no to that last piece of cheesy dumplings or going to the gym, I took the easy way out.

Okay, so what are mental models? Mental models are the literal equivalent of a toolbox and will help simplify the complex into understandable pieces. Some that I use daily are Second-Order Thinking, Thought Experiments, First Principles Thinking (also known as reverse engineering), Theory of Relativity, and so on.

First principles thinking was really big in my previous company. It is where you work on a problem inside out - for example, if our monthly social media performance was low, we don't start by hiring another social media expert, but look at the platforms and the content that was posted and then work our way out in figuring out the problem.

I started to use mental models in small ways to create decision frameworks to simplify my workflow, even though it took me more time than usual initially. As I made more decisions using these models, I became better at it and stuck to my habits.

By following simple rules and being less efficient in the short run, I ultimately optimized for the long game. My favorite model is the thought experiment, where I usually envision what would happen if I made a decision A, B, C, or D. This particular model along with first principles thinking has helped me come up with quick solutions and form backup plans by simply imagining what could go wrong with a situation and figuring out what can be done to solve it.

While making decisions related to my long-term goals, second-order thinking has worked best in sticking to habits. While I might say yes to my midnight craving for boba tea, because I worked out earlier in the day, this model pushes me to remember that if I opt for boba tea I will be sabotaging that workout along with my diet for the week and pushing me further from my goal.

Second-order thinking is to think through the consequences of our actions/decisions not at an immediate level, but at the second and consequent levels. While using this mental model in the long term, you will automatically be stopped by the no from the first and second question. Easy ways to do this will be by asking "And then what?" after deciding the first-step consequence. Equipped with these tools, playing the long game becomes a little more achievable with established habits and better decision-making skills.

From giving into my procrastinations and excuses, I am now able to push myself to do the routine things, exercising at least twenty minutes a day and reading one news article a day, keeping the long-term goal in mind.

This can sound too tiring and time-consuming. That is exactly why it is also vital to factor in periods of rest and regrouping for this long run. Recharging will help you clear your head for making better long-term goals.

DO WE EVER STOP CONSUMING?

One of the important things in playing the long game and letting the compounding

effect take place is understanding when you need to take a break. Over-consumption of anything, even the good, can turn toxic in the long run. Sufficient pauses are a necessity in today's world where we are incessantly bombarded by information from different mediums in all directions. I learned this the hard way, when I pushed myself to work grueling hours and didn't step back from the variety of commitments I had both inside and outside of work. I burned out severely and was forced to take stock and take down time.

It is important to carve out moments for celebration, recharging, and the occasional indulgence.

Before my burnout at work, I would take a week's vacation every four months to travel and would leave my laptop back home. Knowing I was taking a well-deserved break helped me in recalibrating and truly enjoying my time away from work. And when I got back to work, I was usually more enthusiastic and creative. With my workouts too, I take 1-2 days off in a week to allow myself some down time and eagerly go back to it.

Without all these rewards, focusing only on the end goal will make the journey cumbersome and the joy of achievement is eventually lost. Remember that this is a marathon and not a sprint. So, it is important to prepare for the long run (mentally and physically).

HOW TO GET STARTED?

After reading this piece, its message might easily take the backburner given the amount of information we consume daily and the amount of effort it takes to commit to something over a period of time. But we can start small as that's a first step.

- Start realistically and make the habit so easy that you can't say no
- Choose something that can be performed within a few minutes, because starting a new habit is hard
- Measure your improvement by the smallest quantity possible (Running 10 minutes or reading 10 pages a day)
- Set simple and achievable rules to avoid using your mental reserve so your willpower isn't overly tested at first
- Reward yourself after completing a goal (rewards need not be elaborate)
- Establish habits by removing all the little bits of friction in the path and creating an incentive structure around it. For example, taking my gym bag with me to work so I could remove friction by heading home to change and have a lemonade after workout as a treat

One easy way to make decisions can be with Suzy Welch's 10/10/10 rule: What do the outcomes look like in 10 minutes, 10 months, and 10 years from now? This has helped me think through my reactions when I feel overwhelmed. While our brains are hardwired to prefer short-term rewards, this rule helps me think of my decisions with the long-term in mind. An example is deciding to buy a $100 dress on a credit card before or after an interview:

How will I feel about it in 10 minutes: I am super excited about looking great in that dress and I'm going to get hired for dressing the part. But I am also slightly anxious about the debt I have taken on without a job.

How will I feel about it in 10 months: If I get the job, I am going to feel good about the decision and can also pay the credit card bill with the salary but if I don't, I am going to feel horrible about spending $100 on a dress without a job. I am sure given my skills and talent I would get the job and could get the dress to celebrate the offer.

How will I feel about it in 10 years: If I had gotten the job, I'd be considering it my lucky interview dress. But if I had waited to buy the dress after I got the job, I'd feel great about taking a sensible decision and it would be my celebratory dress.

Using tricks to make your mind envision long-term effects has always proven a useful tactic in making better decisions. As Dr. Stephen Covey put it, "Happiness can be defined as the fruit of the desire and ability to sacrifice what we want now for what we want eventually."

While looking to understand more about delaying gratification, I came across the Marshmallow Experiment. Walter Mischel, a Stanford professor, in the 1960s conducted a series of psychological studies on hundreds of children, aged between 4 to 5. During his experiments each child was asked to sit in an individual room in front of a marshmallow and was asked not to eat it for 15 minutes while the researcher left the room. Their reward would be a second marshmallow. Research found that 70% of the children managed to delay gratification to some extent while some were able to fully wait it out.

Child psychologists showed that children who delayed gratification as part of this experiment showed better performance in many aspects of life from higher SAT scores, and better response to stress to better social skills. Measured forty years later, they performed better than the children who were not able to delay gratification.

What intrigued me was how they grouped the children before the experiment. They were separated into two groups: one exposed to reliable experiences, where what was promised was delivered to them, and the other to unreliable experiences, where what was promised was not delivered to them. The results were immediately apparent. The kids exposed to unreliable experiences were the ones that did not delay gratification.

It is important to note how the environment and experiences shaped children. For the children who were exposed to reliable experiences, their brains registered that waiting for gratification was worth it and they had the capability to do it.

What do we take from this? That the child's ability to delay gratification and exercise self-control was not a pre-determined trait.

It is the same as training our muscles in the gym. You and I can do it by training ourselves.

Habit. Consistency. Routine. None of these characteristics have been my strongest suit especially when it comes to keeping up my health. Playing the long-game to make compound interest work for me has been one of the vital things I have learned in the past few years. I have developed lasting habits around my physical fitness routine and learned to prioritize things that had taken a back burner because of my scattered workstyle - eating at inconsistent times because of long meetings, working for 18 hours and sleeping for 4 hours were some examples.

In recounting the ways I was able to achieve these habits, I hope I have planted a seed in your mind to do the same.

MY REVELATION

"She no longer wanted to depend on anyone, so she decided to break away from the role imposed on her by society and cultural background and give herself a new role in life."

WRITTEN BY
IZABELLA LI

When I mention someone serving in the United States Navy, what kind of person do you imagine? A tall, sturdy sailor like in Popeye? Maybe it's a handsome male pilot in a plane on an aircraft carrier, flying into the blue sky? Perhaps it's a famous romantic love story like Sailor's Kiss, where a boy serving his country and a girl waiting for him to come home are finally reunited. Or do you think the Navy community is a boring group of male chauvinists?

These different mainstream answers are what I get in most of the conversations I have with people. But what is often overlooked about the U.S. Navy community is the power of the women who make up 20% of this division of the Armed Forces. Since the 1970s, the U.S. Navy began allowing women to participate in a variety of Navy positions and has gradually expanded the scope and opportunities for women to participate. Today, women can serve in a variety of positions in the Navy, including the captain, air squadron commander, submarine officer, and a variety of technical and support roles.

Women have made important contributions to the U.S. Navy. Many women have distinguished themselves in the Navy with outstanding performance and accomplishments in a variety of fields, including acts of courage and valor in military operations. For example, women have played key roles in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have received many medals and awards. Women are playing an increasingly important role in the Navy, and their efforts and accomplishments make a significant contribution to the security of the Navy and the nation. Among those women, the story that touched me deeply was one of the Asian American women serving in the Navy.

According to U.S. Navy statistics, approximately 8% of the Navy is composed of Asian American women. These East Asian American women are often stereotyped as weak by society at large. Due to the perception of the passive role women play in Asian culture and the stereotype of Asian women's appearance, they may be seen as incompetent or powerless. But they are incredibly powerful women. Among these legendary naval officers, is a woman named Tawaki Ma. Her story breaks a new path set for Asian women from the moment they are born, and she builds a wonderful life path of her own.

At the same time, the power of Tawaki's

story made a deep impact on a young woman who was confused about her life. This girl thought her life was to be married and be a Navy dependent on a base island, taking care of family and children. After hearing Tawaki's story, she felt the strength of spirit of a woman and decided to continue her education, come to the University of Washington, and start writing and running her own company.

I am this woman.

I am someone who has been deeply affected by the power of Asian American women serving in the Navy. I did not grow up in a military family, nor were any of my parents or relatives in the military. However, during my childhood, I was often perceived as rebellious due to my non-conforming behavior. Both my parents and teachers believed that the ideal feminine traits were modesty, decency, and gentleness. My interests and personality leaned towards activities such as having fun and seeking adventure and challenges and pursuing my dreams and goals in a manner that was typically associated with boys. When I was a child, I told my relatives at the Chinese New year's party that my dream was to become an astronaut to explore space or a pilot like the one in Top Gun, and I wanted to wear that handsome uniform. But they said, that is too risky, a girl should become a ballerina or teacher to be good. Consequently, I was often regarded as unconventional and misguided since girls were expected to be quiet, gentle, hardworking, and place value on family and marriage in most Asian societies.

Most East Asian girls are educated to be a lady, good wives and mothers, and not independent strong women. In her book "Misogyny" Chizuko Ueya, a well-known Japanese sociologist, provide the fact that there is widespread sexism and misogyny in East Asian societies, which stems from inherent stereotypes and perceptions of women, such as the belief that women should be gentle, considerate, voiceless, etc.

This misogyny manifests itself in many ways, such as in the workplace, where women have relatively fewer opportunities for promotion; in the political sphere, where women are underrepresented; and in the family, where women bear a disproportionate burden of housework and childcare.

I think this misogyny has somehow greatly affected the East Asian female influence itself, making East Asian women more prone to low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, as they feel they are on the margins of society and unable to receive fair treatment and opportunities.

Even in a family like mine, with open-minded parents, sometimes my parents' ideas still made me feel that I was not treated as an independent woman. Gradually I started to cater to and accept this idea rather than trying to change it. After I graduated from college I followed my fiancé, who was in the Navy at the time and moved to his base. I thought my life would be like my parents expected it to be, and I thought it would be a good life or at least my family members would be happy with it. Until Tawaki Ma and the power in her changed me.

I first met her because she had been a colleague of my ex-fiancé, and in his description, Tawaki was an outgoing, lively woman who was willing to help others. After I was introduced to Tawaki, we discovered that we shared very similar hobbies despite a 13-year age difference: we both loved to sing, we both loved the Chinese singer Faye Wong, we both loved to play video games, and I was learning Cantonese at the time, and she happened to be from Hong Kong, so she was very eager to teach me Cantonese. When she was very busy at work, I would help her take care of her two children, who called me "Gae " which means "big sister" in Cantonese.

Tawaki was born in 1985 to an ordinary family in Hong Kong. She is the third child in her family, and her eldest sister is 14 years older than her, so Tawaki received a lot of love and care since she was a child. She has grown up to be an optimistic and joyful person in a wonderful family environment.

Like many Hong Kong women, she had a stable but all-consuming job in an advertising agency after graduating from college and fell in love with the Hong Kong boys around her. She woke up at seven in the morning, hurriedly put on her makeup, put on her jacket and high heels, dashed to the bus station, went to a party with her colleagues in Tsim Sha Tsui after a busy day at the office, and then came home slightly drunk. She thought her life would remain the same until that summer when she suddenly wanted to visit Las Vegas.

It was here that she met her husband.

Wait. Do you think I'm going to say that this romantic and beautiful love completely changed her life? No, if that was all, then this story would only be published as a fairy tale. But instead, the encounter in Las Vegas was the beginning of real control over her life. The Arya Hotel in Las Vegas is where Tawaki first met her husband, who lives in the United States and was born in northeastern China, and speaks Mandarin and English. She was a Hong Kong woman who spoke only Cantonese and a little bit of English. Even so, they remained in frequent contact, sharing their lives and staying in touch with one another. The language gap could not stop the power of love.

They got married a year after they first met, and soon Tawaki had her first child. She said goodbye to her family in Hong Kong to start a new life with her husband in the United States. At that time, her husband was at the beginning of his career and he was almost always on the road on business trips, completely unable to take care of his wife, who was already seven months pregnant. So, Tawaki was left to live alone in a country that was still new to her, and where she had no family and no close friends.

Soon her first child was born; a healthy baby boy. However, as a new mother, Tawaki lacked the knowledge and experience in childcare and did not know how to handle the needs and problems of her baby. This led her to feel extremely helpless, anxious, and upset. She did not know who to turn to for help or support. After a difficult first few months, she soon became pregnant again. "I still remember that time when I was holding Jermaine [her first son] in one hand, holding my belly like a watermelon, with bread from the fridge in my mouth and formula in the other. And my husband didn't even know what country he was in."

When she told me about that time one day six years later, I could still deeply feel her sadness and exhaustion. With a sense of loneliness and powerlessness and severe sleep deprivation, she was diagnosed with postpartum depression. Her deteriorating mental condition made her no longer want to go out or have contact with anyone. Then one day, her neighbor knocked on her door.

Her neighbor, Hanako, a Japanese woman about the same age as her mother, showed up with a plate of cakes and asked if Tawaki wanted to try her new recipe. Hanako's friendship with her began, and finally, she had someone to accompany her through this difficult time. Hanako's daughter was a journalist and often traveled to different countries for her work, so Hanako was living alone and rarely saw her daughter. But from time to time, her daughter would send Hanako different views of the world on her cell phone. Tawaki was moved. "I felt like I couldn't find a direction in my life at that time; I was lost. I knew I loved my kids and my family, but was my life going to revolve around this 1500 sq foot house forever? Is my world going to be all about the bedroom upstairs and the kitchen downstairs? I want to have a life like Hanako's daughter."

Then one day on her way to buy groceries, Tawaki came across the U.S. Navy recruiting table which reminded her of her childhood dream of becoming a sailor or a pilot. But she was worried that she didn't know how to start a whole new life at age 30 and was the mother of two children. The maximum age to join the Navy is 34 years old, and she qualified after undergoing a series of specific investigations into her immigration status, education, physical fitness, and background details. But her decision was opposed by her husband and even her family in Hong Kong. In today's America, it is no longer radical to suggest that the next president may be a woman. In the Nordic countries, no husband would scold his pregnant wife for expecting him to share child-rearing responsibilities. There are now female heads of state around the world. But in East Asia, despite significant progress in gender equality in recent decades, words like "women's liberation" and "feminism" are still almost as taboo among women as they are among men.

After an argument with her husband, she couldn't stand the thought of having all the childcare responsibilities of a family on her own. She no longer wanted to depend on anyone, so she decided to break away from the role imposed on her by society and cultural background and give herself a new role in life. Because it was her life after all.

It took great courage and pressure for Tawaki to make this decision. She joined the U.S. Navy.

They trained hard in boot camp. She faced many challenges, the first being physical fitness. Bootcamp usually requires the trainer to achieve a certain level of fitness and physical requirements in a short period. For some women, it may take more effort to meet these standards. There is also gender discrimination, as many people believe that women have different body conditions and physical characteristics than men, and many women in boot camp are seen as "weak" or "different" and suffer ridicule and rejection.

It's not just the U.S. Navy, but the entire U.S. military community that has perpetuated injustice against women.

According to a 2020 U.S. Department of Defense report on perceptions of sexual harassment and gender discrimination among military academy and ROTC cadets, the report found that 26.4% of female cadets reported experiencing sexual harassment during their service and 36.5% of female cadets (2020), including Tawaki, reported experiencing gender discrimination. It is imperative that the U.S. military continue to address these issues and ensure that all service members are able to serve in a safe and respectful environment. Because if these issues are not addressed, this can affect the self-esteem and confidence of women in the US military community. And as importantly, the mental stress of boot camp is a lot to bear, as is living in an unfamiliar and competitive environment. "Because of this, I redoubled my efforts and I want to prove to all those who look down on me that a 30-year-old woman is no worse than anyone else, " Tawaki told me, full of determination.

Things went very well, and she worked hard to transcend her physical limitations, keep learning complex new ideas, and eventually entered the Navy base in the northern part of Washington State as an aircraft maintenance engineer. Her outstanding performance and hard work on the job made her the fastest-promoted soldier on this base. While much of the nature of her work is a state secret, the workshop that she leads has the highest efficiency and the least errors of its class.

Tawaki once again became the cheerful, outgoing, compassionate person who loved to help others all those years ago. She helped her female Navy colleagues who were first-time mothers learn to take better care of themselves and their children, and she often went to church to take care of the lonely children whose parents were in the Navy and very busy.

During a conversation at work, she learned about Samantha Rice's story. Rice is a F/A-18 fighter pilot who served as a member of the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels aerobatic team. She was the second woman to

become a member of the Blue Angels and the first female pilot to fly F/A-18s in a Blue Angels show. Rice's selection to the Blue Angels is an important milestone for women in the military, as it opened new opportunities for female pilots and helped break down gender barriers in aviation.

This story of courage, determination, and breaking barriers deeply touched Tawaki. Last year, Tawaki worked hard to meet all of Blue Angel's recruitment requirements and was recommended by her supervisor to apply to join the team as a technician. She went to Florida to intern with the Blue Angel team, pending a final decision on her acceptance. Although she does not yet know what the outcome will be, she is still willing to do everything she can to make her dream come true.

I describe Tawaki's story as one of an Asian woman breaking stereotypes and engaging in self-actualization. I learned from Chizuko Ueno's work when I was an undergraduate that women should have the right to pursue their dreams and self-actualization, rather than being bound by family, social, and cultural expectations. By sticking to their ideals and pursuits, women can continue to grow and develop and make greater contributions to themselves and society. But the scholars' perspective didn't affect me as profoundly until I met Tawaki.

After meeting Tawaki, I began to wonder if I should also make some changes in my own life. After graduating from college I chose to follow my ex-fiancé living on Whidbey Island to better take care of his work. Whidbey Island is an island, where the U.S. Navy community makes up the majority of the population. I didn't have any friends on the island, and I couldn't continue to develop my career. There were no professional networking contacts, and there are no suitable opportunities for me to continue my work as an event planner. Although my life was smooth and happy, I often felt that I could not realize my self-worth in Whidbey.

This made me feel very anxious and depressed, but my ex-fiancé believed that I am already lucky to have a life with him as a family. He said, "You don't need to work, that's hard. I want to make you happy and you could take care of our family at home and take care of our children in the future. I'll be responsible for earning money just fine." I know he didn't mean any harm; he just didn't want me to work hard, but I think this is definitely not the life and future I want. I was very confused and didn't know how I should choose.

So, I talked to Tawaki.

"If one day you weren't on Whidbey Island and had to leave the U.S. Navy, what would you want to do? Return to your family like you used to?"

Tawaki answered: "I would like to try to be a firefighter."

I was surprised. "A fireman?"

"Firewoman," Tawaki corrected me.

Tawaki encouraged me to pursue my life as she had done in the best possible way. She reminded me that I was young and had my life in front of me. These conversations reminded me of one of my favorite stories of all time: the "Lord of the Rings" scene in which Eowyn, a female warrior, fights with Witch-king, the Dark Lord wizard. In this battle, Eowyn uses her sword to stab Umbar in the helmet, causing him to fall to the ground.
Umbar taunted Eowyn: "No man can kill me."

And she replied, "I am no man."

Then she uncovered her helmet to reveal a beautiful face and long shiny blonde hair. She swung her sword and stabbed him through the skull.

As a child, I felt that this scene showed the strength and courage of Eowyn. But I have a whole new insight now after meeting Tawaki. In a male-dominated world, Eowyn takes on a huge challenge, showing the strength and value of women. Now it's time for me to be Eowyn.

I made my decision. I decided not to get married and to restart my career.

I used to run my own social media account, which was a food review and cooking-themed brand on a Mandarin-language social media platform. I love cooking and have inherited the gift from my outstanding culinary talent as a mother. Combine that with my social media marketing skills and experience and hard work, and my account once boasted over 10k followers. But now rebuilding is not easy.

Starting over with a social media brand that was already in a slump was a difficult task, and I soon found that I needed more professional training and experience. Influenced by Ueno's belief that education is vital to the development of women in East Asia, I decided to further my education and apply to graduate school. I believe that a quality education will provide me with more opportunities to realize my career dreams and enrich myself. While Tawaki's story has left a lasting impression on me and provided great inspiration, I have decided not to join the US Navy in the future due to my asthma condition and my aversion to strict adherence to dogma. Instead, I have opted to pursue further studies to share this amazing story and the strength of women with a wider audience.

I am grateful that I made this decision to allow me to tell this story to you.

When we are bound by society's stereotypes and traditions, it is easy to overlook the people and events that have broken through those boundaries. By exploring this Asian woman's story in the U.S. Navy, I was able to see a different kind of strength and courage that can help me break through stereotypes and go after the life I truly want. In her story, this woman also shows us the challenges that women face in the U.S. Navy, challenges that still exist today, but that we need to

continue to work for gender equality and diversity. By paying tribute to this woman's experience, we can learn how to transcend our self-imposed limitations and face the challenges with courage to pursue the life we desire.

FINDING HOME IN A PAIR OF JEANS

"And there it was, threading its way from this interview to the description of her jeans: the feeling of home. O'Rourke's brand represents a piece of the east coast so well that to wear her jeans makes you feel like you're wearing a piece of that memory."

WRITTEN BY
MOLLY SCUDDER

How many pairs of jeans do you own? Of those, how many do you truly love? And I mean wear-them-to-shreds kind of love. Do they have a story?

I've always had a love-hate relationship with jeans. The styles I grew up with were not the most forgiving, from the ultra-low rise to the matchstick skinny jean, it was always about the new trending look that I needed to adopt. I've added pairs to my wardrobe over the years and typically gravitate, unenthused, towards one or two. I consume the latest styles and jam my body into them with increasing frequency. But recently, there is one brand that has stood out amongst all the rest. A brand that represents much more than just a pair of jeans, but rather a cultural shift in how we want to live and consume: Rudy Jude.

I remember the first time I came across the Rudy Jude jeans. I had traveled to Argentina that spring to see my friend Bryn get married. Bryn lives on a small piece of land with her husband and dog, and they both work as fishing guides in a small town south of Buenos Aires. Bryn always embodies this effortlessly cool look, and that afternoon was no different. One day after the wedding, a group of us visited their home. She stood outside in her arden wearing her androgynous style boot cut jeans, looking as picturesque as ever, when I asked, "Where are those from?" She told me they were Rudy Jude and some of our friends nodded in this knowing agreement, Rudy Jude, of course.

I'd never heard the name before.

In the conservation that unfolded, they told me to follow the designer on Instagram. There was a palpable excitement as Clare and Tess explained to me the presence she had on the internet, "her clothing is cool but it's more than that. She lives in this tiny house in Maine and is in nature with her beautiful family. She makes fires and cooks food from her garden. Oh, and she is always canning something. It's a whole thing." And so began my journey into the micro influencer world of Julie O'Rourke and my favorite pair of jeans.

O'Rourke is a designer who lives in rural Maine with her husband and two young children and founded Rudy Jude in 2016. The clothing brand, despite now being widely known for high-end adult clothing, began for children and babies. In an interview O'Rourke did with Enterprise back when she was still building out the

brand she is quoted as saying, "[My clothes are] durable, natural, beautiful, and gender-neutral...So much research goes into parenting, and I want this to be a no-brainer for any kid in any season in any climate." Children's clothing is still a large part of the online store and is carried in the brick-and-mortar storefront in Venice, CA, but she is now more known for her adult clothing line, and in particular, her utility jeans.

Utility jeans could have an essay all their own. A style typically associated with a boxy cut and emphasizing functionality over all else. The Rudy Jude utility jeans are both fashionable and considered utility because of their looser fit and reinforced knees. The entirety of O'Rourke's clothing line, utility jeans included, holds true to her vision of creating clothing that is durable, natural, and gender-neutral, with many of her pants being unisex and favoring earth tones for the limited colors she offers.

Since hitting 'follow' that day in Argentina, I developed a strong attachment to the Rudy Jude brand through O'Rourke. Over the years, she has amassed a large social media presence, and every day 153,000 followers tag along as she invites you to scroll through her DIY projects that range from sewing children's bathrobes to building her home (not just designing, quite literally building it by hand with her architect husband).

O'Rourke's clothing brand could be considered high fashion, given the overall exclusivity and luxury price point, and yet they fall into a work-wear category, identities that seem in opposition of one another. But O'Rourke harnesses this opposition and use it to her advantage, leveraging social media as a mouthpiece. It's difficult to separate the brand from the designer, as both display a down-to-earth, minimalist style.

And there is something about this style, this brand, that absolutely captivates people — me included. Perhaps it stems from a hunger we all have for things to have deeper meaning, especially when we are so accustomed to instant gratification and mass replication. The presence O'Rourke, and by extension Rudy Jude, has on the internet is deeply satisfying. I might not be digging my knees into the dirt tending to my garden or making lilac enfleurage, but in wearing these pants you feel a bit closer to that lifestyle. And to give people that feeling, of clothing that has a sense of a place and purpose, is enough.

After following her account for months, I knew I wanted the look. I wanted those jeans. I spent hours and hours scanning the internet for second-hand pairs. The jeans are only released in small batches, two to three times a year, and are exceedingly hard to come by, frankly a genius marketing tool on O'Rourke's part. Once you have a pair, you keep them. I'll also include that they are what I considered ungodly expensive for a pair of pants, retailing at $240 a pair. But I kept going back to Bryn's lawn, chatting about O'Rourke and all she represented. As I slowly transition into adulthood with my own income, I have a deep yearning to be part of this group of Rudy Juders. I want to be seen the same way Bryn was as she stood in her garden. So, despite the cost, or perhaps because of it, I pushed forward in my pursuit.

The Rudy Jude brand identity did not just simply appear overnight. It has been curated and built by O'Rourke, like the distinct clothing designs themselves. In recent years, there has been a shift in traditional marketing with the rise of social media. Influencer marketing is a significant part of a brand's digital marketing strategy. We see brands partnering with athletes, celebrities, and personalities with a large social media presence to feature their products. Followers often trust these people much more than traditional advertising and influencers have a level of authenticity—or the appearance of one—that an ad can't provide.

In the case of Rudy Jude, the brand and the influencer appear as one. And the trust O'Rourke has established with her followers is largely based on her seeming vulnerability on the platform. I want to acknowledge that we may never know how real it is, but from my perspective, I see it as authentic and have chosen to write through that lens. I've seen discussion threads on different platforms that do call into question O'Rourke's 'cultivated aesthetic,' and how at conflict her minimalist and slow-fashion lifestyle is with her high-end designer wear. However, I don't agree with the binary people create between the two – I believe you can exist authentically within both identities. I see her vulnerability in the repetition of her routine, the visible messes and missteps, the fatigue she allows to show after long days. It's through her vulnerability that she has established a loyal fan base, like Bryn, who turned me into one as well. It builds this sense of trust, that if she were to show the imperfections in life, wouldn't she then show the good and bad of her clothing?

O'Rourke also embodies brand loyalty by living in her clothing. She shows her followers how she layers thermal underwear beneath her utility jeans for the cold days. Or how she has two different sizes of the same jeans, the larger one for winter when she describes having an extra softness that comes with the season. Her feed feels authentic. Not performative. It's unadorned by the rapidly evolving styles and trends of influencer culture. It's simple, a no-brainer. Her presence in life and on social media has created a unique identity for the Rudy Jude brand.

And even if it is all framed, a curated window into a well-manicured scene of her life, even the seeming imperfections, is that a fabrication? O'Rourke is using her platform to build a strong brand presence, but the nature of her clothing - its higher cost point, limited style options, and longevity of design - is moving consumers towards a more sustainable way of engaging with fashion, which is a universal positive.

At the time I started my search, the utility jeans were not available online as they were in between their releases.

Because of this, I was funneled into the digital secondhand market world. Rudy Jude pant sizing is a 1-8 scale, correlating to a 24-40" waist. I figured I was in between sizes and so I used Poshmark to search for a size 2 utility jean and after a few weeks eventually landed a pair. Unfortunately, they were slightly higher than their retail price, but at $270, but they were the cheapest pair I could find so I clicked purchase. They arrived and sadly were just too snug in the waist, a size 3 it would need to be.

If this says anything about how coveted the Rudy Jude jeans are, I resold the size 2 for $5 more than my purchase price, so you could say I made a small commission. Eventually, I managed to find a size 3 utility jean for less than the retail price, securing my first pair for $220.

The process of mentally wrapping my head around spending $240, give or take, for a pair of jeans, was not a small task. I'm a cost-conscious person and consider myself frugal. So deep was my love for this brand, a brand I had yet to own, that I jumped feet first into a pair of jeans. And despite the trial and triumph of obtaining these jeans, once I had my hands on that size 3, I actually almost sold them...again. They were a different style and look than I was used to, and I thought they were too boxy for my frame. Before the utility look came into my life I was cramming into those skinny jeans, occasionally trying a boyfriend look, but traditionally stuck to that matchstick. Even so, I decided to give them a chance and started wearing them around, tentatively at first. They grew on me with every wear, quickly becoming a staple in my weekly wardrobe.

But I wasn't the only one they grew on.

It is fascinating to experience the responses these pants receive. People ask where they're from, friends try them on in the bathroom at a bar, and the brand's style and approach to fashion are seemingly constant conversation topics.

The jeans are minimal in style, old fashioned and built for work, and yet here we all are: wearing them to urban happy hours and sitting behind computers in our offices. Such is the paradox of the high fashion utility jean, the Rudy Jude brand, and Julie O'Rourke.

So, what is it about these utility jeans— and the Rudy Jude brand— that pulls people in?

It exists in the blurring of the binary and the juxtaposition of a seemingly rustic way of life O'Rourke has built through her high-end luxury clothing line. I've boiled it down to three reasons they are so coveted. The first is that the jeans and their designer have a non-sexualized yet feminine, work-centric cut. You want to build a house? Craft? Work in Tech? Run around the backyard with your kids? Well, here you go jeans that you can actually live in and make you look good at the same time. When newly elected congresswoman Marie Gluesenkamp Perez was spotted wearing Rudy Jude, The Strategist wrote, "I could pick out a pair of Rudy Jude Utility Jeans on a crowded Brooklyn street from blocks away. They are high-waisted, slightly barrel-shaped, and though they are unisex (and look great on many different body types), they have a magical taper at the waist that follows the curve of your hips like no other jeans can." Magic they may be, for they seem to give us all what we want in a pair of pants.

But beyond just the cut, the second pull is that these jeans fulfill a growing hunger to own beautiful things that will last. In a world consumed by fast fashion and even faster trends, there is a desperation to hold onto something that will stand the test of time. Today, clothing is more commonly made with polyester, acrylic, and nylon than with recycled cotton and wool. Clothing has become cheaper so we can buy more of it and buy it more often. A study done by McKinsey & Company found that the number of garments purchased per capita between 2000 and 2014 increased by about 60%. However, across nearly every apparel category, consumers are keeping their clothing items for half as long as they did 15 years ago. The analysis goes on to say, "some estimates suggest that consumers treat the lowest-priced garments as nearly disposable, discarding them after just seven or eight wears." We've become so accustomed to cheaper clothing that we don't mend it. Instead of fixing a tear or adding a missing button we are simply tossing the item and moving on. This is the byproduct of fast fashion.

But even more troubling, according to the UN, the fashion industry is responsible for 8-10% of global emissions and a majority of fashion's environmental impact comes from the use of raw materials to produce new clothing. Not to mention the immense amount of water it takes to make our outfits and the water pollution from the millions of tons of chemicals needed to dye them, which inevitably ends up polluting our waterways and land.

The landing page of the Rudy Jude website reads as follows, "We are dedicated to keeping toxic chemicals off of our bodies, out of our water-ways, soil, ecosystems, and communities, and to creating timeless clothing for the whole family that stays in your closet and out of the landfill." The site later goes on to describe the clothing itself, "Rudy Jude clothes are made for collecting shells, laying down in tall grasses, and for throwing on the ground to take a quick swim. They're made to get dirty, to be passed down, and to be really, really loved."

In a hyper consumer-focused world, where fashion trends are no longer by season but by week, here exists a brand that rejects fast fashion and encourages us to slow down. Buy less, make it last, and wear it again. This sentiment comes to life through O'Rourke's social media: the gardens, the swims, and the labor of rural living. As counterintuitive as it sounds to use a social media platform to feature an unadorned way of life, O'Rourke appears to have struck a natural balance. Her social media feed is an unabashed window into her everyday life. Followers can see how much she really does live in the Rudy Jude

clothing and how, despite patches and stains, they continue to look lovingly worn-in and durable. And perhaps most importantly, how few pieces she owns. If we are starving for authenticity, she is feeding it to us on hand crafted platters.

This is not all to say we as consumers need to go out and buy expensive clothing to change the destructive pattern of fast fashion, although there is an argument to be made about the longevity of well-made clothing. To have an impact as a consumer, the emphasis needs to be on how much we are buying and how often. We need to give our clothing a much longer shelf life. We are simply producing, buying, and discarding too much. Finding clothing we love can help us keep them for the long haul and out of landfills.

This shift in consumer behavior is slowly taking shape. In response to the enlarging problem of destructive fashion there is a growing rejection of consumerism. As we begin to see the effects supply chains, like the fashion industry, are having on the environment and societies, people are seeking out less. They want to buy better made clothing that will last, such as a pair of pants they can wear more than eight times and will mend when it needs repairing. Many large brands like Madewell and Levi's are also making this shift by including a pre-loved section to their websites, recognizing the benefit of having a brand that can speak to sustainability and longevity of their product. Consumers are demanding more by buying less.

And then there's that third reason these jeans are so captivating. In an interview O'Rourke gave in Apiece Apart, she is asked to describe what she loves most about coastal Maine. She says, "I can easily recall the way light moves through tall spruce trees, or what it feels like to step on a fresh moss sponge, I can smell lobster boats without thinking. I can actually conjure up the smell memory of every boat I've ever been on if I think a little harder. Maine is magic in this way; it sits with you, it stews in you."

And there it was, threading its way from this interview to the description of her jeans: the feeling of home.

O'Rourke's brand represents a piece of the east coast so well that to wear her jeans makes you feel like you're wearing a piece of that memory. For me, it's my home on the eastern end of Long Island, of late summer nights filled with kids running around on the beach, sticky fingers from s'mores, the flowers pulled from my mom's garden sitting out in cleaned milk jars. Although I'm far removed from that place, O'Rourke's brand gives me a piece of home I've been missing. A brand so closely associated with a place itself, it helped me find my own home in it.

We are all consumers. We decide how we want to fuel our bodies or decorate our homes. We choose how we want to physically move through space whether it's in a car or on a bike or on a bus. And all these choices, these forms of consumption, are how we choose to show up and present ourselves in the world. And that's so evident in the clothing we wear. It's part of how we tell our stories to the world.

When I think about what Rudy Jude means to me, it's much more than a pair of jeans, because the brand means so much more than a place to buy clothing. In my eyes, these jeans let me have a foot in several worlds that while normally exist in opposition of one another, O'Rourke has blended: high-end fashion, sustainability, outdoorsy, crunchy.

These jeans make me feel like I'm wearing a piece of home. And they are the ones I will live in for many years to come. And, if the day comes that I decide to move on, I hope they find their way into another closet, where no matter if they are worn while reading a book, going to the grocery store, or out on a dock looking for crabs, they will be loved as I loved them. I hope they continue to be worn in two senses of the word - on a body and materially - reminding us of the lasting value of quality and intentionality. And for some, a reminder of home.

ANOTHER YEAR AND STILL NO HOBBY

"Hobbies have morphed into production-based activities that impact our desire to master and monetize them."

WRITTEN BY
BLAIR SIEGAL

Should I take up ceramics?

This question pops up every few months when, once again, I realize I don't have a hobby. I tend to blame it on time; life is too busy. And in a culture that views busyness as a status symbol, that always seems to quiet my mind for a few more months.

However, at the onset of COVID-19, my quest for a hobby reemerged. Leisure activity was back in full force, at least for a portion of society that wasn't essential workers or suddenly tasked with an at-home teaching career. A report from LendingTree even noted that about 6 in 10 Americans picked up a new hobby in that first year of the pandemic.

In those Spring 2020 virtual hangouts, friends and coworkers asked how I was keeping busy. Did I make a sourdough starter? Did I pick up a new instrument? What about knitting? (This one I did try). At some point, these questions felt unintentionally pointed, as if my worth was being measured by a new pursuit that felt both productive and gave me a sense of accomplishment.

Which made me wonder: What is a hobby and how has our view of hobbies changed?

We live in a hustle culture where society is obsessed with productivity, external validation, and turning anything we're passionate about into a side gig. As referenced in a Vice article that explored what counts as a hobby, Marie Solies writes that hustle culture "makes us acutely aware...that time is money."

I thought it might be more prominent in my generation of millennials, where we're facing what feels like an impossible task to be as well off as our parents. However, hobbies and money have gone together long before the 20th century, and that connection grows even more during tough times.

In 1933, The American Magazine referred to hobbies as "a job you can't lose." In the 1970s, The New York Times published an article sharing how hobbies grow during times of economic uncertainty. When money is tight and inflation is high, people may spend less money on traditional entertainment like travel, which leads them to take up activities they can do at home.

While examining my lack of a hobby, I had to ask: Is enrichment solely for pleasure enough?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a hobby is "an activity that someone does for pleasure when they are not working." If the focus of a hobby is supposed to be pleasure, where have we gone wrong?

Take my brief foray into knitting.

I thought it might relax me. It even had the added benefit of a family connection during that time of isolation. Twenty or so years ago, my grandmother (or as we called her Oma) tried teaching me to knit.

It was now August 2020, she had just passed, and I rediscovered the yarn and needles she had given me years before. I figured if there was ever a time, this was it.

Eventually, I got into a rhythm: Insert the point of the needle into the cast stitch, wrap the yarn, and pull the stitch to the opposite needle. Repeat. Off I went. Row after row. While progress was slow, it felt like something to occupy my mind. I'd look back at this small patch of gray yarn and think of my Oma sitting in her home knitting baby hats for local hospital newborn nurseries.

However, suddenly I felt a grave disappointment with the lumpy rectangle I had created. Why weren't my stitches aligned or even? What was I going to do with this when I finished? What was the point if I wasn't making anything?

Knitting was no longer about the rhythm of the needles or the brief reprieve in my day. Rather the focus was now on the outcome of this effort and the need to somehow share this new skill.

When talking about why he thinks so many people lack hobbies in The New York Times, Tim Wu noted, "we are intimidated by the expectation — itself a hallmark of our intensely public, performative age — that we must actually be skilled at what we do in our free time.

Our 'hobbies,' if that's even the word for them anymore, have become too serious, too demanding, too much an occasion to become anxious about whether you are really the person you claim to be." Even though we think of hobbies as an activity we do to relax or find joy, hobbies have never been purely about pleasure. As stated by Marian Bull in Vox, "leisure does not exist without work and is therefore defined by it."

Take the Industrial Revolution. Many people were suddenly graced with much more free time thanks to reduced working hours and the establishment of the five-day workweek. Hobbies became something to do that filled the hours outside of work with something fun and yet productive. In his book *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* Steven Gelber stated that "Hobbies were a Trojan horse that brought the ideology of the factory and office into the parlor."

Since the amount of time available outside of work can determine if you can take on a new activity, it also defines who can participate. In *The New York Times*, when remarking on their benefits, Jaya Saxena acknowledged the structural barriers surrounding hobbies. For example, take someone who works multiple jobs to get by and provide for their family. Arriving home and devoting time to an additional activity may not be realistic, no matter how passionate they are about it.

Not only do hobbies require financial flexibility, but they are also fraught with societal pressure. Everywhere we look, we're being encouraged to follow our passion or turn it into a career. As Rutger Bregman shared with Godwin in *the Guardian*, "Humans are meaning-seeking creatures…the less meaning you find in your 70-hour-a-week job, the more extreme you will get as you pursue your leisure time." Work is no longer enough on its own.

In addition, with the rise of social media, the desire to have (or at least portray) a lavish lifestyle has grown. However, millennials earn far less in comparison to the generations before us. Our 9 to 5 is no onger sufficient. Therefore, we're encouraged to exploit every aspect of our lives for profit.

And now we can.

Social media and the attention economy have changed how people earn a living. Hobbies can play a vital role in supplemental income. Not only can you use these channels to sell the physical results of your hobby, such as a painting or mug, but they also can lead to a career as an influencer. Take Charli D'Amelio. She was a competitive dancer who turned her short dance videos on Tik Tok into a multi-million-dollar career. Easily monetizing a hobby now seems possible.

At one point, many years ago, I even considered taking a pursuit and turning it into some extra cash flow.

I used to love to bake, and sometimes I still do. If you had asked me years ago what my hobby was, I would have said baking. Seeing a row of perfectly iced cupcakes that were somehow fluffy yet moist gave me a sense of accomplishment and joy unlike anything else, except for maybe finishing a 1,000-piece puzzle by myself at 2 in the morning.

But, once I became validated for being a good baker and sold that first couple dozen bacon bourbon cupcakes to a coworker, something in me switched. Baking was no longer relaxing. I suddenly felt immense pressure to supplement my income (or at least my hobby) and continue to prove my skills.

The transition from a hobby to a product I could monetize further ignited my inner perfectionism. With this new expectation of mastery, baking became fraught with anxiety and the pursuit of a level of perfection that could probably only be achieved by a professional pastry chef.

In his TED Talk, social psychologist Thomas Curran shared, "Socially prescribed perfectionists feel an unrelenting need to meet the expectations of other people.

And even if they do meet yesterday's expectation of perfection, they then raise the bar on themselves to an even higher degree because these folks believe that the better they do, the better that they're expected to do." Ultimately, it was easier to avoid the activity altogether, which brings us back to my lack of hobbies.

And sadly, far fewer cupcakes.

For many years, even until I wrote this piece, I felt a sense of guilt for not having a hobby. The right hobby is supposed to lead to greater relaxation and enjoyment. Studies have even found that hobbies can affect your health in a positive way, such as lowering blood pressure and levels of depression or stress.

What did my lack of hobbies say about me or signal to others?

But overall, our interactions with hobbies seemed to have changed. Hobbies have morphed into production-based activities that impact our desire to master and monetize them. While this wasn't just a switch in the last few years, financial strain and the attention economy have expanded the pressure to apply our work ethic to our relaxation time. And when I want to relax, I don't want to think about what I'm getting out of that time.

What I've come to realize is that perhaps hobbies—or at least the pursuit of mastery at the expense of delight—aren't the right fit for me. It's not that I don't relax or have things that bring me joy, but those activities aren't in some circles considered hobbies.

So for now, I'll continue to find myself with a puzzle, zoning out to the satisfaction of the pieces connecting until I realize it's 3 a.m. and I have a job to report to later that morning. I'll crawl into bed with a lingering sense of contentment, which, after all, is the point.

THE SPACE TO FEED THE SPIRIT

for Love and Art

"Creation is the truest expression of the human experience and yet we treat art as the past time of the privileged."

WRITTEN BY
MAKEDA BECK

As a young child I fell in love with music, theater, and dance. I was enamored with stage craft and production value, how every piece fit together, from the costuming to the scoring, everything in its place. I was also the one of 30 Black students at a high school of nearly 4000, 2 of the others being my own siblings. This was during a time before colorblind casting became the norm. It's difficult looking back and wondering was I really not good enough such that I was constantly passed over the pretty white girl? Did I ever have a chance or was I destined to be the plucky best friend forever? Every show was about the look and when we did put on Once on this Island it was suddenly only about talent.

When I was in elementary school, Masters of the Arts, a local art program that serviced our district, would host an all-school assembly for 90 minutes to teach us about a specific artist and their technique. They would then spend the next week visiting each class for a hands-on lesson about that artist and their style. Before I finished sixth grade, the school cut the program and it was replaced by a similar paid program after school. The same shift happened with music and theater. While still cheaper than private lessons, the after-school programs were limited to kids with money and parents that had flexibility in their schedules.

In middle school, choir, drama, and art were popular electives, so there was never enough room for every kid who wanted to take them. This pattern continued in high school, despite the fact I lived in a very well-funded district with high test scores and a balance of students from both underserved and privileged communities.

Many schools put emphasis on sports and at more specialized schools, STEM programs that emphasize math and science. Sports programs treat many kids with an interest as if they have a legitimate chance at going professional even though most of them won't even go on to compete at a collegiate level pushing recruiter packages, private clubs, and training camps. This is exacerbated in underserved communities as the best way to get out of poverty. Nearly 8 million students in the US play sports at the high school level. That number drops to around half a million students competing as NCAA athletes, with a smaller fraction going on to play professionally. Teachers are encouraged to

grade athletes generously so as not to interrupt their ability to play. This favoritism is often to the students' detriment as it breeds entitlement and a poor academic work ethic.

My father only valued athletics and academics, though he was never as pleased with my straight A's as he was with my brother's winning goals on the lacrosse field. My interest in the arts was a cute thing I did on the side while I should have been dedicating my life to team sports. An interest that most people won't pursue professionally and yet millions of Americans have sports and other physical activities as a skill that they can just pick up no matter the circumstance or situation. An open field and a ball is an opportunity to indulge, to have fun.

To play.

According to UNICEF children need play to learn and develop, it is their work and the way in which they learn to view the world. Learning through play removes the pressure of having to be the best and helps build foundational skills that can be built upon later. The over commodification of the arts removes the joy from the practice.

As we move further into the digital era, STEM has drastically commandeered academic attention. STEM is treated as a viable avenue for a successful career in the future. Entire K-12 academies have been dedicated to a STEM focus to make students more competitive at the collegiate level.

Historically, schools taught introductory trade skill courses, allowing students to differentiate their skills sets through research, practice, and mentorship. Somewhere in the Millennial school experience the focus became overwhelmingly college preparation and the trades were considerably devalued as a real path towards being a productive member of society. Many trade skills have largely been privatized or labeled as hobbies while sports have maintained their supremacy in education from the elementary to the university level.

As early as the 2000s the New York Times was reporting on the trades phasing out of schools. Some researchers attribute this shift toward college readiness to the implementation of No Child Left Behind, a bipartisan federal act implemented by the Bush Administration meant to standardize K12 learning and push career and college readiness. Evidence showed that many of the participating students in the trade programs were those not excelling at the desired academic level.

Privatizing non academic and athletics skills contributes to the class gap seen in the arts. Without the support of K-12 education and after school programs, many underprivileged students will never be exposed to the full breadth of possible careers—graphic design, musician, designer— until they are old enough to seek out these interests on their own. But if they are not exposed to the fact that such a path exists, will they know where to look?

Since 2008, approximately 80% of American schools have experienced significant budget cuts and the first classes on the chopping block are the arts. Research done by the KM Performing Arts school found that historically 20% of schools offered dance and theater and another 87% offered visual arts classes as part of the standard curriculum. Today, only 4% of schools offer dance theater and while 83% of schools still offer visual arts, that number continues to decrease with budget cuts.

While arts are being cut across the board, studies have shown that the presence of these class options have a direct correlation to greater academic success for students. Participation in arts classes makes for more engaged students with reduced stress levels, better emotional and social emotional skills, improved focus, and the ability to better handle constructive criticism.

We've shifted the focus from well-rounded individuals to pushing children to specialize at increasingly younger ages. Furthermore, the privatization of these skills has contributed to the class gap seen in the arts. The average cost of private lessons for any art performing, visual, or otherwise runs anywhere $35-$100 per lesson depending on your area and skill level. This is not to say that private instruction isn't valuable or priced fairly given the instructors' expertise, but by removing arts from schools we remove art from the lives of a significant chunk of the population.

This privilege gap around the arts widens further at the collegiate level. Many of the creative and art-adjacent programs require a portfolio to apply especially to the more specified or prestigious institutions and without the support of high school programs financially disadvantaged students are at a severe handicap.

Very few fields require an intermediate understanding of the material to begin higher learning. There's no requirement of knowing how to build a robot to start an engineering program nor having to have run a successful company prior to getting into business school. While there are some programs that allow for students to start at a beginner level there is still the matter of tuition or having a family that can financially support their student's interest with no guarantee of financial success.

This leads to a culling of the herd in a way that is detrimental to the overall artistic community. Having this class barrier to higher learning in the arts narrows the pool of those creating it. It also narrows the kind of art that is made. The lived experiences of someone who grew up middle class or higher are going to be drastically different than those of someone who grew up on or below the poverty line. Their art will reflect those differences.
However, the engagement of less privileged students alone does not fully mitigate the issue of economic class in art. As students or independent artists, the work they produce is still limited by access

to resources, and to make art you need access to quality materials and supplies for these pursuits need to be constantly maintained and replaced. Without access to funding, artists rely on side jobs with hopes to make money from an early project to fund the next one.

I was given the message at a young age that I would be going to college, and I would be studying a field with strong financial promise. This is reality for many young artists of color. The pressure of having to better the family and be a good representative of the race is something many of us share. The very idea of pursuing an artistic future was laughable, so despite my desire to go to school for theater, I became a business major. To be fair, even if my dreams of a career in the arts were supported as a career choice, my family couldn't have afforded to support me, even if they wanted to.

Now financially independent, I have pursued another sensible degree in communications both because I enjoy the work and my program but more to the point it was the most art adjacent I could get without completely starting my collegiate career from scratch. My program has been invaluable, and though I have learned much there's a tinge of regret over what could have been if I had the means or the opportunity.

I mourn the stories that were never told and the voices never heard.

When you think of the greatest American artists, dancers, singers, and creators they are overwhelmingly white. There are very few people of color who have gone on to become household names. Despite heavy influences on American music since the first Africans arrived on slave ships, even in classical music where there is a greater diversity of Asian musicians it is still rare to see Black or Latine principals. A 2014 study done of American orchestras showed that only 2% of their musicians and 4.3% of their conductors were Black.

This has been attributed both to the lack of access to music programs and the long history of racism in this country. Nathaniel Taylor, a black classical cellist, recalls growing up and being told multiple times he wouldn't get far because of the color of his skin. In 1977 New York Philharmonics' Black violinist Sanford Allen resigned citing that he was tired of being a symbol. I am intimately familiar with this feeling. Tokenism is exhausting and removes the agency of people of color that allows us to be seen as individuals.

Creation is the truest expression of the human experience and yet we treat art as the past time of the privileged. We denigrate its value to society, to learning, to life. Art helps frame history; it is a crucial part of the record of our time in this mortal coil. It is one of the ways we express ourselves and share our stories, to pass knowledge and teach lessons.

Which begs the question why are the arts a viable pursuit only if they yield financially positive results? Why is love not enough? Or the joy of play? Shouldn't we pursue things just to live fully in the human experience?

Not everything needs to hold economic value to be valuable.

I have found a way to weave my creativity and love of production into my very sensible career through events. There is something about creating an experience for others that warms my heart. I enjoy facilitating fun and ease. I love the prep work and the dress rehearsals, practicing the lighting and having something go off without a hitch. I also kind of like it when there's a crisis to be solved and I can add the solution to my toolbox for next time.
I also weave art into my private life. I'm always putting on grand living room productions for my cat and my shower concerts are legendary. I make jewelry and I take dance classes. I'm constantly redecorating my apartment and curating my collections. I've even picked up nail art and getting better with every set.

My very first job was as an art teacher at Art Smarts, a local paid after-school program operating in several districts that taught a new artist and technique each week. In a way, it was a full circle experience from Master of the Arts, except now I was the teacher. I was 18 and the youngest teacher on staff. I had the biggest classes because I connected with the kids as a peer in a way that the other instructors didn't. I met them where they were.

I used to say I would've done my job for free if I could afford to because I saw the same love for art that I had when I was young in my students. I taught Arts Smarts for almost 5 years. It was such a joy to watch those kids grow in their practice and improve year after year. I wanted to do for them what Masters of the Arts had done for me.

As I move through my life and gain greater financial freedom, I look forward to being able to sponsor these kinds of programs in the arts. To give opportunity to the kids who don't have the support. And the point isn't to make them believe that they'll be a star but to instill joy and skill regardless of talent because cultivating love for one's artistic sensibilities is not just enough, it is a crucial part of being human.

For myself? I'll keep taking dance classes and singing songs and painting pictures on my furniture. Because art shouldn't require a price tag, instead it should leverage love. Love of play and exploration. Love of creation and collaboration. But ultimately, love of self-expression.

Because in the end love is enough.

WHAT MAKES AN INTIMATE COMMUNITY?

"How is it that in such a short time a group of strangers moved from being uncomfortable introducing themselves to sharing their most vulnerable parts of their life?"

WRITTEN BY
EMILY TAPP

“We’re never so vulnerable than when we trust someone. But paradoxically, if we cannot trust, neither can we find love or joy” - American painter, Walter Anderson.

All slightly jetlagged and meeting for the first time, the six of us sat timidly around the cafe table waiting for direction. We were scheduled for 85 miles of trekking across the Argentine and Chilean Patagonia region over the following ten days. The sunny, almost oven-like breakfast nook cradled us as we waited, and while the level of discomfort easily could’ve been attributed to the heat, it instead was from the broad and open-ended icebreaker question proposed by our eager, cheerful guide, Gero, “Tell me about yourself.”

I watched a room full of adults suddenly transport back to grade school, as eyes shifted in any direction except toward Gero, coughing or examining their shoes as an avoidance tactic. Gero continued for just a moment longer holding the space for any volunteers to chime in, and then gracefully pivoted to more details about our upcoming trek, forgoing introductions for the time being.

Fast forward just a few days later during lunch mid-hike, in the company of Summer wildflowers and majestic surrounding mountains, and that same group of adults generously shared some of their most vulnerable life experiences: struggles of infertility, details of a failed marriage, the guilt and desire to spend more time with aging parents. Through relatable nods and tearful pauses, the conversation ebbed and flowed in a collective exploration through life’s most challenging moments.

How is it that in such a short time a group of strangers moved from being uncomfortable introducing themselves to sharing their most vulnerable parts of their life?

Our now community had been strangers before the Patagonia tour. Some signed up years before only to have their adventures continually postponed by the pandemic, others signed up with only a few months' notice. Everyone joined for the same reason: a once in a lifetime trip to explore and adventure through breathtaking Patagonia. I surely didn’t sign up with the expectation that I would also walk away with a photo album of group snapshots and a stronger connection to a few people who I met just days before.

It’s really a gamble when signing up with a tour company. A social experiment throw-

-ing folks together simply because of a shared interest and serendipitous alignment of timing. This realization introduced the question of exactly what elements are required to inspire people to stay engaged and foster a sense of community, even when among strangers?

I reflect back on the intentional facilitation of our local guide, Gero, who seemed to have laid the foundation for this quickly formed trust among us.

Young, energetic, and eager, every evening together Gero would insist on a group meal even after a long day of trekking. In true Argentinian fashion, a bottle of red wine was introduced to the table right away. Often after a tired and sometimes reluctant "salud!" the table would eventually unfurl into unending conversations on reflections from the day, cultural comparisons, and lively debates about music genres and food preferences late into the evening. A common bit of wisdom on leadership is how people don't really care how much you know until they know how much you *care*. Once a leader demonstrates authentic investment into the shared goal or group, it can ignite the flame of collective care and trust. Those meals were part of Gero's commitment to our well-being.

It was moments over meals where I learned about Gero. Native to Argentina, he attended a Waldorf school in Buenos Aires and moved to the small Patagonia climbing town of El Chalten in pursuit of his passion for birdwatching and environmental recovery. He spends his free time solo hiking around the region to document photos of native bird species. His collection of photos, along with his GPS coordinates are regularly shared with his birding community via WhatsApp. This volunteer, digitally-based community spans across the region, bringing fellow birders together with the shared interest of better understanding and supporting local endangered bird species.

Gero's birding interest and passion for the great outdoors was an element that we all grew to love. Whether we had a previous interest in birding or not, Gero enthusiastically welcomed us into his obsession. Often with a child-like grin, he would abruptly pause to point out a massive Andean condor circling above or a Magellanic woodpecker sitting in a nearby Lenga tree. Gero would encourage us to not just snap a photo, but fully be present to the sights, sounds, and experience of the rare encounter.

His enthusiasm was not limited to native wildlife, but included native plant sightings (and samplings). Easily mistaken for a blueberry, the indigenous calafate berry is a consistent element in seasonal Patagonian cuisine, or foraged by hungry hikers with Gero's help. Calafate berries are deeply rooted in Patagonian folklore and legend has it that anyone who eats the calafate berry will eventually find themselves beckoned back to the region. Gero ensured that everyone in the group had an adequate sampling of the berry throughout our trek, and would then proceed to joke that he would see us next year when the calafate would lure us back. As we soaked up these experiences, Gero made us feel that we belonged.

And Patagonia certainly provided an abundance of new sights and sounds. Spanning across the bottom portion of South America, the region covers more than 260,000 square miles and is home to the prominent and iconic Mount Fitz-Roy and Torres del Paine. The massive Southern Patagonian Ice Field, one of the largest non-polar glaciers in the world, divides Argentina and Chile. The ice field partnered with the powerful South Pacific westerly air current consistently brings brisk 50-75 mph wind gusts over the summer months. In fact, local Patagonians remain in tune with these intense wind patterns; they have to vigilantly alter the direction they park their vehicles to avoid getting their car doors blown off.

To spend any amount of the summer months in the Patagonia region takes diligent dedication to thrive in this simultaneously inhospitable and alluringly sublime locale.

Our group quickly fell into a routine with each trek, guided expertly by Gero: as we grew more accustomed to the erratic weather patterns and powerful winds, we were comforted by the meditative crunch of our boots, the rhythm of our hiking poles meeting the rugged trail, and patterned audible breathing. We eventually earned the name the "sunny group," with the apparent luck we had for sweeping clear views.

We climbed steep inclines and down shifting sands and rocky paths. We powered through the ever-changing weather: rain showers, dramatic swings in temperature, and the occasional dust storm. Amongst the accompanying elements, our hours of hiking provided spaciousness for curious minds to learn about their neighboring hiker. One participant, Julie, reflected that "being able to walk along and get to know someone while taking in beautiful scenery together was really lovely." She emphasized that by casually traveling from place to place without much pressure from the guides or the group to make specific timelines provided a freedom to choose your own pace, which naturally led to different connection opportunities.

Disconnected from the repetitive pulls of everyday life, we were in a space of adventure and play. The infusion of play and shared laughter created a space to foster empathy and increase our sense of belonging.

My varying hiking pace helped me learn about David's comical tribulations due to his intense 4:30 am training schedule preparing for this trip. It's how I learned about Marcus' close encounter with the Kremlin while traveling through Russia in the 90s, how Julie was inspired to get her PhD in her late 40s, and Rebecca's drive to learn Spanish to more closely connect with her work clients.

On more than one occasion, a sweeping view or reprieve of an uphill portion of the trail would interrupt our conversation mid-sentence.

It's only then that I'd realize how far we had traveled. While conversation may have distracted us from the discomfort of our physical exertion, it may have also cultivated the type of vulnerable state to experience authentic social connection.

Our real test as a group came on day six of hiking on a particularly cold and rainy morning. We took extra care in layering any item of clothing we had, prioritizing the waterproof ones. With only seven miles to travel (a relatively short day), we were encouraged to take it slow.

All a bit groggy and attempting to savor any final sips of the mediocre instant coffee, we gamely began our ascent. As we traversed the first mile looking a bit too similar to a wobbly newborn deer, we slowly became accustomed to the level of care that was required to navigate the slick mud and cold bursts of wind. The focus of each step eliminated the possibility for much conversation; I was instead engaged with the consistent chattering of my teeth. Every so often, I'd pause to ensure I could still see the hiker in front and behind me, and even holler a "You good?" Each time we'd commonly lock eyes and share a sarcastically enthusiastic thumbs up and continue the slog onward.

It wasn't until dinner that we collectively agreed how integral the bond of our group had strengthened and influenced our motivation to complete the trek that day. The act of being together was embodied through mindful acknowledgements checking in with each other, the sharing of snacks and rain gear, or physically helping someone after they've fallen. The uncomfortable, and at times extreme, elements tested our limits and the power of the collective kept us from turning back.

On a separate occasion, our group had the opportunity to experience the Perito Moreno Glacier up close. We spent hours from a catamaran and the trail experiencing this overwhelmingly massive sheet of ice from all different angles. Every perspective was uniquely dynamic in shape and with varying shades of blue; its magnificence incapable of being fully captured with a camera. At every stunning viewpoint, we were also confronted with a regular cadence of ominous cracking and crashing, where chunks of the glacier the size of skyscrapers would tumble into the open lake. Fellow onlookers would stand slack-jawed in the direction of the ice collapse; we were simultaneously in awe and distress experiencing the impacts of our warming climate firsthand.

Our collective mood was noticeably heavy the evening after our visit to the glacier, yet the ability to reflect on our experience together somehow made it all feel a bit lighter.

Typical evening accommodations had a summer camp vibe with large gathering rooms filled with picnic tables, huddles of tired hikers surrounding the central wood-burning stove, and multiple socks and shirts strewn about for drying for the next day. Unless dinner was being served, each table would be covered with snacks and beverages and often a game; the sunny group's game of the trip was cribbage, a card game played with a complementary board and pegs for keeping score. With no access to wifi and to savor phone battery for photos, cribbage became the focus of a lively competition each evening and tended to provide a perfect environment for reflections from the day and frequent personal stories.

Each evening provided a contained shared space to repeatedly experience mutual support further reinforcing the cohesion among us.

Since returning home, I've reflected on my own communities' shared spaces. Noreena Hertz, author of The Lonely Century, emphasizes how current urban design in cities across the US has eroded our sense of connection and community, and recent headlines and studies find that more people are experiencing a sense of loneliness. While Hertz believes that "community is predicated on people doing things together, not simply being together," research actually suggests that simply increasing access to shared spaces can decrease feelings of alone-ness. Developing more communal greenspace, public art installations, and even increasing the amount of public benches, can all contribute to building a stronger local community even if everyone enjoys the public space individually. Community housing movements have already demonstrated successful ways to maximize shared space like lobbies, and perhaps it's worth adopting creative ways to create communal areas that welcome a mental break, reflection, and collaboration.

I walk away from my time in Patagonia recognizing that as social beings, when the opportunity arises, it's truly worth putting ourselves out there. While this requires courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to let things be awkward, community provides meaning and connection is what heals. Social ties are a fundamental human need, and decades of research demonstrates how closely linked this is to our psychological and physical health. Not only does it contribute to mental wellness, but is also linked to physical health, including a stronger immune system and even longevity.

If social connection can help us live happier, healthier lives, it makes me consider how to further replicate authentic connection and trust not just when on vacation, but also in my everyday life. In what ways can I incorporate a little more kindness and seek out social connection here at home? Instead of spending my days trekking alongside Gero and the sunny group, I can spend more time in nature, seek out volunteer opportunities, and be a bit more intentional about showing up to my local gym more regularly. It inspires me to consider how I can show up for my colleagues at work differently, too. How can play, adventure, and reflection be more readily infused into my work community even while working remotely?

Globally, as we continue to experience challenges like a global pandemic or navigating our evolving climate crisis, we

must get creative on ways to remain connected to our shared humanity.

And perhaps it starts with something as simple as being willing to introduce yourself to a group of strangers. Next time, I'll be the first to accept that invitation to share my story.

LESSONS FROM PINK PRISON

"Style is one's expression of taste, but taste is deeper. Taste is the precursor to curating our sense of sartorial style—those things which we use to decorate our corporeal forms. Taste is the discernment between what is for us and what is not."

WRITTEN BY
CLARA YOUTZ

For a moment I was a vision in pink. An "It Girl." The picture of the "clean girl" aesthetic. I donned the coveted millennial pink boilersuit and pristine white Nike Air Force 1's. I smoothed my hair. I fixed my nametag to my breast pocket: "Glossier. Hello, I'm Clara. She/her. Smile, Wave emojis."

I steeled myself for the pink tile framing pink tables holding pink packaging housing pink products. A large rock as a centerpiece—just for good measure. Eager faces pressed against the windows of their beauty Mecca. I plastered on a smile and stepped into the contrived glow of the oppressively pink showroom.

I worked at Glossier, a makeup and skincare brand, for one year. It had been a dream to work for the company since it launched in 2014, completely disrupting the beauty industry with its minimal products and Direct-To-Consumer model. I thought that because their marketing espoused the sacred nature of "you" and a general philosophy to enhance rather than change one's appearance, I was joining a community of thoughtful, beauty-fluid individuals.

Instead, I found something much bleaker.

The vast majority of my clients—over 90% I'd estimate—asked me, "what's your most popular product?" No further questions. Many asked for a specific product because "it's viral on TikTok." I expected this from 14-year-olds, but when 40-somethings were coming in to buy their wedding makeup using this same method, I got concerned. When pressed, these people had no unique desires, no favored tones or textures, or holes to fill in their routines. They just wanted the thing that would make them like everyone else. The in-crowd. But what they didn't understand is that in trying to stand out, they were simply becoming part of the herd.

I use body decoration to discover myself and express that identity to the world. Beauty products are how I play with color and texture. To have a sensual experience. To communicate nonverbally to the world who I am. Sometimes that means neat hair and perfected no-makeup makeup. Other times it's a black smokey eye and a hot pink undercut.

Piercings! Tattoos! I love them all! Beauty products and body ornaments are mediums—like paint and clay—for art making, expression, experimentation, and for following one's internal aesthetic compass.

While at Glossier, observing TikTok's effect on people of all ages deeply disturbed me. Beauty and aesthetics should be tools for individuality and manifestation, not conformity.

Honestly, I felt bamboozled. I had been tricked by this industry, company, and the Glossier community. "Come work with us," they said. "Let's foster an inclusive, creative community," they said. But once I put on that pale pink jumpsuit it became blatantly obvious that I was, as Kurt Cobain once put it, a "radio-friendly unit shifter." My sole purpose was not (as they'd told us in training) to get to know our clients and help them identify their perfect routine, but to move more units. Exactly which unit would be determined by whatever contrived virality Glossier fed into TikTok that week.

On the one hand, the beauty industry is just that: an industry. A multi-billion-dollar industry to boot. Sales and profits were always going to be part of the equation. But the takeover of online virality as the arbiter of taste on such a mass scale feels scary precisely because it seems to rob consumers of their humanity.

Taste relates to how humans identify beauty and value. How we form opinions and seek experiences, not just for survival but for joy. Yet so few of my customers had any sense of their own aesthetic opinions. Their sense of style had been cluttered by someone else's taste. They had seemingly turned off their own judgment and handed the keys to a larger aggregated taste.

Glossier customers looked the same, dressed the same, and took the same picture in the same pose in the same place making the same face. They bought the same products as Gen-Z pop sensation Olivia Rodrigo, as their friends, as the influencer on TikTok, as the celebrity on Vogue Beauty secrets who had access to the best estheticians and non-invasive treatments on the planet but still had the audacity to say drinking water was the secret to their success.

But here's the thing: I am a person with many, many beauty products, and I spend much of my extremely limited spare budget on makeup, skincare, and hair care. I too have been influenced many times.

And yet!

My collection is painstakingly curated. I have an intense sense of self and an intimate, active relationship with my own sense of taste.

Therein lies the difference.

Style and taste have become interchangeable in the modern American English lexicon, but they're not actually synonymous. They are two ideas intimately enmeshed, but ones require some picking apart.

Brie Wolfson's 2022 piece on taste identified taste as "requiring originality." She writes that "taste honors someone's standards of quality, but also the distinctive way the world bounces off a person." Put simply, your taste is your inherent aesthetic sensibility, your North Star for all things true and beautiful. Style is one's expression of taste, but taste is deeper. Taste is the precursor to curating our sense of sartorial style—those things which we use to decorate our corporeal forms. Taste is the discernment between what is for us and what is not. That practice of discernment requires thoughtful consideration, which is what I fear is lacking.

So, why should we care? Why does a developed sense of taste matter?

For one thing, because our wallets demand it.

We are inundated with ceaseless advertisements. Influencers and sponsored content rule the casual media we consume on our various smartphones, tablets, watches, and laptops. Their success in the beauty space can be attributed to the visual nature of most social media platforms, but also their ability to build hype disguised as organic gathering around a shared interest.

Style blogger Rosie Findlay wrote that we use clothing and other adornments to "make sense of one another and of ourselves. In other words, what is superficial is not only superficial." But subcultural identities that once signified beliefs and belonging are less and less possible because of digital culture's rapid cycling of aesthetics. Last week it was 2002 again, the week before that it was 1998. This week, who knows? We'll all wear our wide-leg trousers and various shades of beige while we appropriate baby hairs and stipple rosy creams across our noses to look chilly. The revolving door of styles has created this ubiquitous Frankenstyle. In attempting to keep up, so many of us are becoming more or less the same.

Another, perhaps more practical problem is that we're all handing over our senses of taste and style to people who are literally *selling* us things. Advertisers make money hand over fist every time we take their word for it, and their opinions are prioritized by an algorithm = based on their sensationalism.

Platforms like YouTube and TikTok nurture parasocial relationships between influencers and their audiences. They become not just advertisers, but trusted sources. They tell us when things aren't sponsored and also what new meal prep they're eating to stay fit. We feel as though we know these people, not as supermodels or celebrities, but actual friends, and that is what makes their influence more insidious than the marketing tactics of the past. We buy the new shoes, or new mascara, or new supplement to bring us one step closer to their cultivated, curated personas, regardless of our own budgets or opinions. We can buy approval, buy status, buy a personality! No need for messy self-reflection. Choose a pre-approved style and buy on demand. Free shipping when you spend $50 or more!

I open social media and am bombarded by an endless barrage of viral products. My Google searches pull up list after list titled "The 44 Viral TikTok Products to Buy in 2022," and "28 Viral Beauty Products You Need to Buy ASAP." YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are overflowing with videos by dewy, well-coiffed young people using words like "need" in their titles and peddling aspirational Internet tropes like "It Girl Era" and "Cold Girl Makeup." I guess I just wonder when we started conflating popularity with our own sense of value, our own taste? How did I miss the meeting?

We don't exist to be like everyone else! We are new and interesting collections of matter and we should live as such! Conformity, or herd mentality, is described a "desire for social acceptance, a lack of confidence in one's own belief or actions, or a perceived safety in numbers." Aside from the perceived safety in numbers, which at least has applications in evolutionary biology, these are not exactly aspirational qualities for sentient beings. We should aspire to possess a strong sense of self. To discover what makes us feel alive or in alignment with our inner world. We don't exist just to buy things or to fit a mold. We are here to explore and sense and feel! Right?

Since working in the beauty industry, I've noticed a shift within a subsection of the Beauty Influencer community. Specifically, an awareness of the consumerism they help propagate and a profound frustration with the increasingly churn-and-burn nature of products and shorter-form content alike.

Hannah Louise Poston's work has given me hope that a more mindful relationship between style and consumerism is not only possible, but growing in popularity. Poston began her channel with a "no-buy year" in 2018, a practice that can be observed across digital platforms where people purchase nothing beyond essentials and restocks. The subsequent four years of her content have remained focused on conscious consumption. Her "duping the vibes" series unpacks what she is attracted to in any given product, then recreates it with things she already owns. Not only does she talk to her viewers about engaging in the creative process she imagines a popular new product would bring to her life, but she demonstrates how mimicking the things she's attracted to in the aspirational product leads her to appreciate the tailored collection she's already gathered. Her taste is the connection across her trove. Newness isn't a necessity.

Poston describes the "trance" of consumer culture as an overwhelming transfer of our emotional needs onto objects. Through shopping, we can fool ourselves into believing that the new, beautiful things will fix us, make us whole, and make us correct. But most of us end up in debt surrounded by things we never touch, still feeling broken but running on the hamster wheel of longing and acquiring.

Her suggested cure? Inner work. Meditation, dialoguing with yourself, journaling, reading, spending time with loved ones, making art, anything that gets you offline and into your own experience. Bolstering your sense of self makes you more clear-headed about your consumption. It also makes you harder to influence.

Jackie Aina is one of the most successful Black women in the beauty space with a following of 3.54M subscribers on YouTube. After 13 years on the platform, Aina stopped uploading to YouTube for several reasons, including the audience's waning interest in tutorials. In the post-TikTok landscape, audiences are primarily consuming product reviews, hacks, and "viral" reaction videos. Gone are the days of learning techniques. Viewers want what's new and what's next. Aina is thriving on TikTok, by the way, her relatively young account has already amassed over 2M followers. But YouTube is her Internet home. Since returning to the platform in September of 2022, she has pivoted to producing videos beyond beauty, but she occasionally resurfaces with beauty hot takes. The latest: individuality is dead.

Samantha Ravndahl, a makeup artist and early adopter of Beauty YouTube, has all but left social media, choosing to build her own small business, but not before raging about short-form content, the over-saturated market, and the swathe of celebrity brands descending on the beauty industry like locusts. Kackie Reviews Beauty is a channel where a woman regularly shows audiences what she uses *off-camera* when she's not filming reviews telling them what to buy.

These four influencers, drowning in every product under the sun, spoiled for choice, have cultivated their sense of personal taste. Not to belabor the point, but when the people benefitting from selling us things are curating their collections and renegotiating their relationships with products, perhaps, we would be wise to listen and follow suit.

I want to live in a world of thoughtful, creative people. I want my nephew to tell me he's going to wear purple pants every day for the rest of his life if that's what sparks joy. I want my friend's children to live rich sartorial lives without falling into debt and shopping addictions. I don't want the masses caught in the cycle of consumerism buried by products they bought for fleeting clout and not for deep love. I want us all to feel freer and more empowered in our modes of self-expression.

I want us all to have a relationship with our own point of view—our unique and miraculous sense of taste! I want us to be more in touch with our inner worlds so that we might become discerning enough to cut through the noise and see ourselves. I want us to be able to look at tomorrow's pink jumpsuit-clad salesperson and say, "That's not my journey. Where's the orange lipstick?"

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