

AN ABRIDGED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A METAMODERN EVOLUTIONARY OF INTEGRAL NEO-TRANSCENDENTALISM

By now, the “mystery” of my true identity has been revealed. And just in case it hasn’t, this abridged autobiography should finally settle the issue once and for all. But first... the day we were born begins another strand of the cosmic journey for the universe to become more conscious of itself. This cosmic consciousness seeks to learn more of itself through all of our lives. It is the evolutionary impulse that exists not only all around, but inside of us, with everything else in the universe. However, some of us are more “tuned in” to that “spiritual force” than others, but we all have the potential to realize its power of intention. I know, I know, this all sounds like New Age mumbo-jumbo and self-help hippie bullshit and to be honest with you, a lot of this type of crap is incredibly narcissistic. For others, it usually serves as a substitute for belief in an anthropomorphic deity especially by those who have abandoned the monotheistic belief of a patriarchal and authoritarian God that the majority of the world believes. But this is not that. Some of the remaining few seek some sort of guidance from sources outside of their daily perceptions of reality and gravitate towards things bigger than themselves, which is why we tended to gravitate towards myths in the past. As such the following will serve as a sort of metamodern mythology (coupled with the advent of Artificial Intelligence) to the experience of life that alludes to the wonder of existence and acts as guidance to pursuing a path of being truly alive, an exploratory expedition that maps this particular life form, from *Being* to *Becoming*.

OPENINGS: The Accidental Origins Of My Inaugural Steps Towards Integral Activism

My childhood was a tale of two *lives*, making it the best of times and the worst of times (to appropriate a famous opening line in Western literature by Charles Dickens called *A Tale Of Two Cities*). I was always straddling at least two worlds: being both a rambunctious child and a reluctantly responsible older brother who tried to safeguard my siblings from harm as the eldest of three brothers and one sister. Paradoxically, I was a behavioral burden to my mother who would be “visited” by complaining parents or police for my mischievous deeds (not the felonious type) on a weekly basis, yet I acted as her protector by calling the cops on my alcoholic and unfaithful father who would verbally and physically abuse her almost every weekend beginning on Friday nights and right on through Sunday evenings (as he would come home late from his baseball playing outings that involved more drinking and philandering than playing ball).

Then, as a Mexican-American, I toggled back and forth between two cultures, often disavowed by both. I was too “American” for my Latino family members in Mexico due to slowly losing my ability to speak Spanish fluently, while not “American” enough from some Anglo-American neighbors and the local authorities due to my Spanish accent—making my childhood somewhat conflict-ridden due to the occasional prejudice and discrimination, while wrought with identity issues and challenges caused by such cultural juggling. However, by overcoming such obstacles, I realized it has made me stronger and more resilient (also a typical upbringing result as a Gen Xer) by becoming flexible and open to accepting one of life’s most fundamental truths—*face everything, avoid nothing*. But this abridged autobiography is not going to be about a second generation immigrant story, considering there are plenty of Latino writings that document such bicultural struggles—this is not that.

I was born on June 30, 1970, in Southern California at the General Hospital near downtown Los Angeles. Just seven months later on February 9, 1971, at 6:05 am “a devastating 6.6 earthquake struck the densely populated metropolitan area of Los Angeles, leaving death and destruction in its wake,” this according to the California Department of Conservation. I lived in the area for the first four years of my young life. It wasn’t until around 1974-75 that we moved to City of Commerce in East L.A. for two years before relocating to Pico Rivera where I would live out my rambunctious childhood “adventures” that has made me neighborhood legend as a calculated risk taker that I am today.

One such example happened when I was age 12. I arrived late to my Junior High School. As I walked the school halls enroute to my 7th grade, third period class, I saw my fellow classmates gesturing to each other with three fingers extended to their sides or four in a covert fashion. This continued as I walk to class and at times accompanied with yells from across the school halls....

“Fourth period!”

“No! Third period.”

Despite such shouts among these particular students that defeated the purpose of secrecy that others were trying to maintain, it was a strange scene, and the mystery only resolved itself once I entered my third period class. Moments after taking my seat, my fellow classmates informed me of the “plan” to orchestrate a school walkout as a form of protest against the permanent closure of our campus and what was being “debated” in the hallways was when it should start—the beginning of third period or fourth? As this “discussion” droned on and on, I quickly realized that the proposed endeavor was in danger of becoming all bluff and bluster with no action to back it up. Even the “cool kids” and “school jocks” that many students looked up to as pseudo leaders of our school were paralyzed with inaction and the fear of looking foolish and being humiliated in front of the entire school if they were the first to leave the campus and no one followed, despite their popularity. (Popularity is wasted on the “influencers,” even back then).

Nevertheless, the end of the third period bell rang and all of the students poured out of class and to our surprise we discovered that the teachers and other school officials had learned of the students’ plot and were now barring all exit doors and gates on campus (ours was not an open campus). The students were stunned into submission. At that moment, one of my closest friends at the time approached me from behind and said, “That’s it... game over...total school lockdown.”

Suddenly, something subconsciously clicked in me (to this day I can’t quite explain it). From this moment on I experienced the following events as if in the third person, who was outside and looking in. Without thinking of the longview nor a word to anyone, I rushed to the school cafeteria and my friend followed close behind me with a few others behind him. I headed for the cafeteria’s school exit knowing full well there weren’t enough school personnel to cover all of the entrances and exits, especially those out of the students’ usual line-of-sight. And as I led this small, spontaneous, school insurrection towards the emergency exit, another administrative assistant blocked the doorway just moments before we could reach it. This rebellious thrust towards campus “liberation” was briskly thwarted. However, in a split-second I peered over to my left shoulder at the cafeteria stage and saw another door, (an actual “exit stage left”) and stormed right up the steps, through the double doors and out into the bright, sunlit parking lot—“Freedom!”

“This Great Escape” had erupted in a collective roar of euphoria and defiance as students started pouring over the extra tall chain-link fences that encircled the entire school campus like water brimming over the edge of a boiling pot of hot water. At this point, nothing could stem the tidal wave of students that surged out of the school. A crack in “the student’s space-time continuum,” if you will, had been breached as most of us flooded out from school grounds and ruptured through the monotony of our daily academic routine. We all jumped up and down in jubilee, grasping each other like the victorious 1981 L.A. Dodgers baseball team that had just won the World’s Series defeating the “Empire State’s” New York Yankees, 4 games to 2.

It wasn’t long before both the media and police arrived to scenes of student protest signs and screaming chants of “Hell No! We Won’t Go! For that very moment it seemed reminiscent of the sixties students’ protests that had all but disappeared since the seventies. From that moment on, as you can imagine, the following events developed in predictable fashion: television crews interviewed students, teachers and staff; the principal threatened students with suspension for truancy and police called in to intimidate us with a show of force and arrest anyone who would not comply with orders to return back to school, so I assumed the “anti-hero” role and left the carnival scene with some of my buddies before the rest of the students would get corralled back to class an hour or two later.

Looking back at it now, we weren’t more than a handful of students, but we persisted, while the rest of the school remained immobile until that breakthrough moment and when it did happen the floodgates poured open. However, despite this personal victory, I learned early on that without commitment for long term follow-through, such temporary triumphs ultimately lead to failure. Just as we failed to save the school and in the following Fall semester Meller Junior High was permanently shut down. So it is with today’s activism, especially with social movements of the recent past including Occupy and now the second resistance movement against Trump authoritarianism; otherwise, we would not be in such dire straits today. However, unbeknownst to me at the time this was the origins of my unintentional first steps towards the creation of integral activism that I would formulate decades later.

And although this experience may have proven to be my baptism into activism; it was not the start of my inner awareness of empathetic consciousness that allows me to be the effective integral activist that I am today. This is partially done by ceaselessly honing my ability to continue to take on other people’s perspectives—intensely intuit-

ing what others feel even at some distance away. No, that began further back when I was 4 years old. It was the first time I became consciously aware that I had such a “natural ability” so early in life despite the fact that we all have it but are less attuned to it for several different reasons to be discussed later. For me, this new level awareness occurred ironically enough when one life was beginning to develop further, while another life came to an end. This realization would happen at a family funeral in Mexico.

A “SIXTH-SENSE” FAMILY SCENE: The Start Of My Intuitive Awareness & Empathetic Evolution

I come from a fractured family. However, it did not start that way, at least not for me. Growing up, I had a mother and father who were happily married or at least it appeared that way to me in my early years as a child and before their divorce years later. In fact, for most of my youth I led an idyllic childhood (with a few traumatic experiences thrown here and there that no child should ever live through at any age) but for the most part it could be characterized as a sublime mix of innocent childhood adventures like that of movies like “The Goonies” “Super 8,” “The Sandlot,” and “Dazed and Confused,” that occurred in my early adolescence sprinkled with malicious mischief similar to movies like “Blvd Nights,” “Walk Proud,” “Stand and Deliver” and “American Me,” in my teen years. For my mother, however, it was a different story.

She was born in some part of Mexico in 1949 on February 12 or is it the 14th? Perhaps it’s the 21st or the 22nd? I don’t really know. The reason for this uncertainty is due to the dysfunctional splintering of my extended family on my mother’s side and her different birthdates on her birth certificate compared to what her sisters had told her years ago, not to mention her reluctance to celebrate birthdays at all (a personality trait passed onto me but now resurrected by my wife). So, it should come to no surprise that I met my grandmother on my mother’s side only once and it happened at a family funeral of a relative unknown to me to this day. I just remember it as a somewhat momentous family reunion between my mother and grandmother who hadn’t seen each other for over 20 years since she left her father for another man and abandon her 12 children who were reared in a Catholic convent for orphaned children.

The funeral served as the setting for this family reunion of sorts between an estranged mother and daughter (my mother’s siblings had already reconnected with her over the years, yet I did not know any of this until after the incident that I am about to describe). It occurred in an open air plaza at the funeral parlor for the wake. There was a lot of disturbing weeping and dramatic wailing during the viewing, which was quite frightening to experience for a four-year-old, so much so, that I stepped aside, away from my mother (who I was virtually always surgically attached to her) so to separate myself from here in an alien environment was less traumatic for me than to have stayed at her side. So, I put some distance between me and the grief-stricken scene but still in view of the whole area. All of the sudden the space went silent as my grandmother entered the mourning site and saw my mother from across the room. The air got still and not a sound emerged for more than a few moments, as if I was viewing the whole thing in some snapshot moment frozen in time. I didn’t know or understand what was really going on; as both my grandmother and mother slowly walked towards each other in dramatic fashion and after a brief exchange they finally embraced for the first time in over 20 years. Everybody in attendance clapped and cheered in jubilee after witnessing such a “heartwarming reconciliation.” But to me it was a different story. While everybody was expressing emotions of elation I was hit with an empathetic sense of great discomfort coming from my mother. So much so, I felt what I could only now describe as my first cognitive dissonance experience even though I was too young to know what that meant back then and fully understand what I had witnessed. What I was observing did not match with what I was feeling. And while all the adults were cheering together in joy, I was weeping for my mother alone. This was not out of a sense of jubilation or cathartic release like you see from parents “giving their son or daughter away” in matrimony and overcome with tears of delight. No, instead, I was overwhelmed with an uncontrollable sense of uneasiness coming from my mother.

A few hours later as family members began to filter out from the scene, I found my mother sitting around a table with three of her sisters who were gushing over the “magnificent moment” of “redemption and resolution.” My mom was going along with her sister’s sentiment by smiling and nodding in agreement. In that moment, I felt it again, but it registered on a lower level of intensity, but nevertheless, I was compelled to resolve this inner conflict within me about what I was feeling for and from my mother.

So I interjected by blurting out in Spanish (because no one spoke English). “But why were you so sad when my grandmother hugged you mom?” The room came to a quick hush. Then my aunts responded, “Nonsense. It was beautiful and happy moment.”

My mom remained silent, while my aunts continued to celebrate the moment for what they thought... until... my mom exclaimed, “How did you know?” Her sisters seemed to be caught off-guard and in disbelief. “How did you know that is what I was feeling?”

The question seemed odd at first since it was so obvious to me but to my aunts’ they were in complete bafflement, which led me to tell them that “I felt it, didn’t you?” Everyone was astonished that someone so young could empathize with such complex and conflicting emotions, even if I couldn’t grasp the intricate dynamics of social relationships that brought them on. Nevertheless, that experience made me realize that very few people had such a highly developed sense of empathy. Later in life, I would learn how significant that natural ability would be with regards to my relationships with other people different from me and a valuable social interaction asset in general for the future survival of humanity. However, having such a high sensitivity to other people’s feelings is not without some significant downsides like becoming overwhelmingly aware of one’s mortality at an early age.

A CHILDHOOD’S END: The Existential Anxiety Of Becoming Aware Of One’s Own Mortality

It was not too long after that funeral experience that I would lie awake at night in bed staring at the ceiling and crying myself to sleep due to the realization that I was going to die someday. I would try to imagine what it would be like not to exist then I would be caught in feedback loop of a “mental masturbation of sorts” by trying to imagine what “nothingness” was and what it looked like but anything I pictured, I realized it was still something whether it was white blank page or a black void—a paradox that perplexed me and “short circuited” my mind to finally sleep. (Years later, I would postulate to myself that perhaps “inexistence does not exist,” and it is merely a social construct created by humans. It would be life’s greatest ironies that our existential anxiety would be self-induced due to our unique ability for abstract thinking). Other nights I would convince myself that the reason people died was because they lack the will power to “stay awake” and allowed themselves to die because they were too weak and surrendered to the dark serenity of the void. I even put this hypothesis to the test by trying to stay awake all night by sheer force of will, thinking if I succeeded, I could further develop this skill to eventually stave off “human’s eternal sleep.” Of course, I failed, but I tried again and again, each time lasting a bit a longer than the day before then crashing all together and not getting up until 1 p.m. on one Summer Saturday afternoon.

Night after night, I tried to resolve this existential dilemma, of course to no avail. When I look back on it today, it’s interesting to notice it always took place at night as if the enveloped darkness was a constant and daily reminder of our ultimate mortal fate. I realized later that most of go through this developmental process at some point, just usually not this early in life. Add to that the oversensitivity that I was able to feel from other people, especially the poor in Tijuana (Baja California), begging for food or money on the filthy sidewalks and dirt roads in many parts of Mexico or even here in the United States on “Skid Row” in L.A. or in downtown San Diego, California. This would lead to bouts of uncontrollable sobbing there and then, so much so, my father would get angry at me for being so “weak” and prodding me to be tougher. Every time I would cry, for whatever reason (like falling off the bicycle while my father was trying to teach me how to ride without training wheels), I would be subjected to some form of punishment like being locked up in a closet for short periods of time. After a while, two or three years later, I had adapted to it and learned how to shut this emotional sensor down or at least lessened it to a great extent, as a mode of self-preservation in my youth around my father. I truly understood (no, strike that) empathized with artists, musicians and intellectuals who were torn with the mental, emotional or spiritual anguish and dissatisfaction of modern life, to the point of ending their lives in order to extinguish the pain. But I vowed never to succumb to such clichés of self-destruction. (Even then, at an early age, I detested such hackneyed notions). However, as time rolled on, the emptiness would be too much to bear alone, and I would seek solace in the most common human refuge—GOD.

SALVATION: The Blue Meme Of Mythic Order By The Absence Of Existential Anxiety & The Temporary Serenity Of Silenced Lucidity

Before immigrating to the United States from Mexico, my parents were Catholics and baptized me as such when I was an infant. I can even remember attending a few Catholic masses when we were living in downtown Los Angeles and City of Commerce at age four and five, but it never resonated with me, nor should it, I suppose, not at such a young age. Nevertheless, I *felt* my parents were just going through the motions out of habit, tradition or religious ritual, I don't know why, especially back then, particularly without any understanding of the custom and theology behind it. Secondly, I remember being read to by my mother from an illustrated, Spanish language, Catholic, encyclopedia of biblical stories as a child, but at that age I perceived them as folklore, even though I did not know what that word meant.

Apparently, my parents had similar sentiments and abandoned Catholicism for Protestant Christianity. When we moved to Pico Rivera, California near East L.A., my parents started attending the "1st Southern Baptist Bilingual Church," when I was around age seven. I was indoctrinated in the teachings of that church without question considering it resolved my existential angsts through the belief of immortality with a God in heaven. Without being consciously aware of it I cruised along with this worldview for next few years; so much so, I grew complacent and disinterested in such metaphysical questions that led me to become an adolescent mischief-maker on a legendary scale, this according to my childhood friends who often recount such experiences as the best years in their lives and strongly encouraged me to write a book on such irreverent fun (maybe someday, if we survive through this civilizational transition phase, but for now, time is a luxury we can no longer afford such self-indulges). Nevertheless, for a few years, my *passive* belief in God resolved my existential albatross... at least for a fleeting period of time. I won't go into details, but the following is a broad overview.

Between the ages of 6-11, I was an unholy terror—you can say at this period of my live I was driven by one maddening question: What if? More specifically, what would happen if I did this and/or that? The impulse to answer this question was really an exploration of our exterior phenomena, which sometimes led me down precarious paths. It was also a welcomed but "impulse-driven" **red meme** stage (see the "Prologue" for the "Spiral Dynamics" model of human development) but not because I was a delinquent but mainly out of curiosity in trying to learn how things work by taking them apart and reassembling them or testing the boundaries of people, places and things through playful experimentation. (Or is this what all "deviants" tell themselves to rationalize their nonconformist behavior?) When it came to my friends and I, you could say we, "free-range" Gen Xers, were one of the unofficial innovators of MTV's "Jack Ass" stunts, pranks and practical jokes for our time and neighborhood, the only difference was that affordable VCRs and video cameras were not yet widely available in the late seventies and early eighties to document our shenanigans let alone make them widely available without today's internet. Setting fire to a neglected or abandoned structure just to see what would happen or accidentally igniting neighborhood trees on fire during the Fourth of July, due to my friends and I firing illegal fireworks with skyrockets and saturn missiles cross-fire at each other like the military riverboat bombardment scene from "Apocalypse Now." In malls and shopping centers we would provoke police and security to chase us on foot and on bicycles like the end scenes of "E.T." over petty theft like sampling from food and candy containers and minor property destruction through graffiti with magic markers. On other days, accidentally shooting my next door neighbor in the leg with a BB air gun or riding a mini-bike all over the neighborhood while being chased by cops. Forming clubs that mimic neighborhood gangs but without extreme violence and dangerous criminal behavior. Halloween was *the* favorite hell-raising night for us with egg fights at parking lots in front of supermarket stores and on school grounds during afterhours with rival neighborhoods, pissing over the street overpass to "water" passing vehicles' roofs. Vandalizing bullies' houses and toilet-papering our least-liked authority figures from the neighborhood. Playing daredevils with our own version of the now famous "X-Games" by jumping on the back of ice-cream trucks to hitch an illegal ride and see how far we could go without being detected by the driver. Playing tag with our bicycles by sometimes ramming each other off the sidewalks and streets and doing skateboard jumps over our friends who would be lying down on the ground (I pitied the last one towards the end) of our homemade wooden ramps. During after hours, we would create unconventional obstacle courses on school grounds or in open fields where we would use water guns and "water" balloons, both filled with urine, while also shooting each other with BB guns without any kind of safeguards (this was before paint ball and its protective gear requirements). In addition, walking our BMX bikes up for a mile or two of narrow and winding residential streets only to rapidly ride down in speeds over 50 mph as we dodged ascending vehicles on Spyglass Road in Rose Hills. And even when we would play conventional games and sports, it was usually with an aggressive edge like sliding in the street, while engaged in "disorganized" baseball or playing touch football

on blacktop roads, which always led to “accidental tackles” and usually resulted in the occasional broken neighborhood windows through miss-thrown balls or from a whack-of-a-bat, leading all of us to scramble and evade apprehension by hiding out for the rest of the day at the local public park. These and many more misadventures that threaten my safety and survival ironically provided me with the necessary existential reprieve of my mortality that I so needed and craved.

However, when we first moved into the neighborhood it was not without some street violence from Chicano neighborhood gang members of “Pico Nuevo,” “Pico Viejo” and “Horseshoe,” to name just a few who would wage territorial disputes that culminated in late night shootings and dawn stabbings at a cul-de-sac at the end on my street—5323 Bridgeview Ave. For a while, there wasn’t a weekend that went by that helicopter spotlights did not shine through my bedroom window, while the microphone voice from the “roaming red dotted stars” swirling in circles right above boomed out instructions to the neighborhood down below: “Lock all your doors and windows. And please remain indoors.” It was surreal. During the day we felt safe and lived a “Wonder Years” kind-of-existence, playing in a somewhat carefree environment but at night it would descend into the darkness of violence like “Boyz In The Hood.” This went on for only a brief time, may be a year or two, before all gang members in the area were eventually killed, arrested or relocated. However, this kind of violence was not limited to our neighborhood. Almost every weekend, entire boulevards in Montebello, Garfield, City of Commerce and other parts of East L.A. would be corridor-off for miles like one long sobriety check point and with good reason. I recall a time when I, age 9, went to the concession stand to buy popcorn at a movie theater (The Garmar) where we were watching “The Warriors,” in 1979 that I heard two men outside in front of the lobby entrance, brawling over a female who was standing in between them, when all of a sudden one of them pulled out a knife and repeatedly stab the other in the abdomen in swift multiple pumps—1, 2, 3—bits of shredded intestines falling to floor and other lingering strips dangling from the body. The woman screamed hysterically as the male victim fell to the ground clutching his now bare abdomen, while the bloodied perpetrator ran off. (I never knew what happened to any of them).

Of course, being exposed to such surroundings inevitably led to getting into trouble in school with teachers, bus drivers and the principal for fighting at the bus stop, inside moving buses and during classes at least once a week but it was always in self-defense or in defense of someone who was being bullied—a prevalent predicament in such a predatory environment. Not to mention my father encouraged me to defend myself by teaching me a few skills that he often used, while incarcerated for six months due to multiple counts of drunk-driving and operating a vehicle with a revoked license. I must admit, I liked fighting. It was a release for my anger. I was quick, fearless and tenacious, qualities that made me a formidable opponent despite my “ectomorph build.” And the bigger the bully the more aggressive I was and the more likely they would be caught off-guard and lose. I realized early on in my life that fighting guys twice my height and double my weight was a win-win. I learned that even if I were to lose the fight, I would win, as long as I got a few licks in that demonstrated my courage before getting pummeled, but surprisingly that only happened once or twice. I rarely lose fights. At worse, there were a few stalemates where the brawl would get broken up prematurely, before any decisive blow was struck by either one of us. I was kind of addicted to the adrenalin rush and the sense of invincibility (which accounts for my ability to avert the prevalent adolescent dangers of drugs, alcohol and teenage sex, unlike many of my friends who fell victims to such “vices”). However, my aggressive temper eventually got so bad that all it took was a look from a bully and I would strike. This led to the realization that I was becoming the type of guy that I would defend others against. One day this epiphany hit me harder than all the punches I had delivered.

It was during 5th grade that my temporary absolution from my past existential burden expired, so-to-speak, as my (then) best friend, Carlos, introduced me to the Christian concept of the rapture with an illustrated booklet that depicted the haunting horror of “the end of the world.” This terrorized me to a new level of fright that I refused to hear it. But Carlos persisted. He was intent on “saving me” through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I warned him to stop but he wouldn’t. He continued and continued and after a few moments more I punched him on the mouth! The blood on his lip was nothing compared to the look of devastating disillusionment on his face. It hurt me more than any physical blow I had received in my entire life. Here was a friend, my best friend, trying to “save my soul,” risking physical harm and still persisting out of concern for my “eternal soul.” It was a type of self-sacrifice I hadn’t expected to experience outside of my parents. At that moment something triggered me. My empathy chip was unwillingly turned back on, and I could no longer suppress it to the extent that I had before my temporary reprieve.

I listened to him for hours and would later become a convert—fully embracing the **amber meme** of “traditional, mythic, conformism,” (as described, once again, by Don Beck in *Spiral Dynamics*). Soon thereafter I was baptized in a public park by a non-affiliated “People’s Church.” However, months later it was officially “sanctified” in another church. In no time I became one of the youngest “Born Again Christian” in our 1st Bilingual Southern Baptist Church after personal consultation sessions with my minister. Upon being baptized or “dunked.” In other occasions, I felt “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and supposedly “spoke in tongues” and “danced with joy in the presence of the Lord,” while swaying in the aisles of the church. When I couldn’t go to church for whatever reason, I would devoutly watch televangelists, programs like Fredrick K.C. Price’s “Ever Increasing Faith,” American Pentecostal pastor Jimmy Swaggart and Robert Schuller’s “Hour of Power,” among many others. I became a “religious zealot” of sorts, attending church twice a day on Sunday, walking 2 to 3 miles to weekly bible studies, preaching to my family at home, testifying in church, preaching to friends in public parks, evangelizing door-to-door and converting my fellow classmates during recess in elementary school by age 12 in sixth grade.

Of course, this religious conversion invited a whole new slew of problems. Since I was now a Christian, I had to forego my tendency to defend others and myself through physical violence. Turning the “other cheek” was so counter-intuitive and the hardest thing I had to do at the time. Between the ages of 13-15 (right on through my Junior High years and the first two years of High School) I had a “bull’s-eye target” on my back. The previously fought foes now had heard of my Christian conversion came out of obscurity to “test my so-called nonviolent resolve.” And test they did. However, my reputation for being clever and relentlessly fighting back preceded me, so it deterred many of the bullies from exacting revenge for fear that the rumor was false or just another cunning ploy on my part to entice them into another beating. Nevertheless, a half dozen or so did take advantage of my predicament and came around for pay back, but it usually happened when I intervened in defense of their victims of bullying. On those occasions, I would have to take the brunt of the abuse that was originally meant for the kid being initially picked on, who I urged to leave the scene, while I became the lightning rod for their rage. However, in one of those instances, something happened to the perpetrators, they noticed I was neither resisting nor afraid to get beaten down. It seemed to me that they began to either empathize or admire my resoluteness, maybe even both. In either case, they stopped and so did the onslaught of assaults against me or at least dramatically reduced. I’d attributed this to God answering my prayers—deliverance through faith, fellowship and fasting.

The other contributing factor that relieved me of the constant burden from the threat of being beaten by “pay-back bullies” was when our family relocated 121 miles south of Los Angeles to San Diego, California, in 1986. My father was a smart, hardworking, blue collar, diesel mechanic virtuoso who repaired big rig 18-wheeler trucks for Delta-Lines but after working there for about 10 years it shutdown. It was his first job in the United States after teaching himself English with a home language course of vinyl records that I would hear him repeat the audio lessons every evening after dinner. So, when he lost his job he opened his own diesel truck repair shop. As the sole wage earner, my father was able to support our entire family but soon sought out better prospects at the international border city in South San Diego. He would eventually make the move out there alone first, in advance of the family to explore the potential prospects. He commuted back and forth every weekend, which went on for a year, until the whole family relocated permanently in the summer of ’86 when I was age 16.

As soon as we arrived at our new home, just seven miles away from the San Ysidro, California and Tijuana, Mexico international border, I went searching for a new Southern Baptist *Bilingual* church for the family but found none. This led me to broaden my search to other Protestant denominations, which went on for over a year, with music from U2’s Joshua Tree album to accompany me on my search. Songs like “I Still Haven’t Found What I’ve Been Looking For,” “Where All The Streets Have Names,” “In God’s Country,” and “With or Without,” resonated with me as if it were a soundtrack made specifically to my spiritual quest and considered U2’s “Joshua Tree” the most soulful album. This exploration expanded my spiritual horizons by exposing me to the various different theologies and religious communities that I may not have embarked on in the first place if we were never uprooted. This period of dislocation from my own Baptist denomination in Los Angeles proved to be profoundly valuable because it allowed me to take the time to pause and reflect upon my own belief system in comparison to those I was evaluating. To make any kind of assessment, I had to create a criteria for joining a new church, which would no longer be based on emotions of being “born-again” but how a religion answered some the following theological questions that had begun to emerge uncomfortably within me and remained unresolved from my previous church: What are we, “the saved,” going to do in heaven besides worship God with song and praise forever? I realize avoiding eternal

suffering in hell is no small reward; nevertheless, spending all of eternity in constant adoration of God makes him seem vain and the afterlife quite boring, which led me to ask: what are we going to do in the afterlife forever? And a question more pertinent to our earthly existence: what is the purpose to life? If God is love, what's the reason for human suffering in the world? Why banish many ordinary humans whose only major sin was not being aware of his existence yet upon death they would be cast down to the Lake of Fire to suffer forever? The generally accepted Christian concept of hell as a place of eternal suffering and damnation seemed contradictory to an all-loving God the Father. I can't imagine any parent willing to do that to their child, no matter what they have done short of mass murder, rape or molestation. These were just a few of the questions that I sought answers to in order to determine my new faith in a different church or religion. Then an answer emerged.

One day in 1987 I came across a religious television program called "The World Tomorrow," by the Worldwide Church of God. By this time, I had weaned myself off charismatic televangelists who appealed to me and others based on emotional fervor rather than reason *and* faith. So, it was refreshing to discover religious programming that did not center on a single charismatic preacher and instead provided biblical sermons in a newscast format that did not solicit money and discourage proselytizing, while offering free booklets on the subjects of its broadcasts and provided a complimentary subscription to their "The Plain Truth" magazine. They did not believe science and religion were mutually exclusive and instead encouraged verifying what was preached and not blindly following religious dogma due to faith alone.

For example, without getting into details I became a Christian that no longer celebrated Christmas and Easter after discovering its true pagan origins that most believers were not aware of including me. Another example is the nearly universal acceptance from Judeo-Christian traditions that hell is an actual place of eternal suffering in fire and brimstone for damned souls. However, according to the Greek language, the word "hell" is translated as "hades" merely meaning "death," not a place of everlasting punishment. Therefore, dead Christians who were baptized with the Holy Spirit and remained faithful to the end would rise up out of their graves and meet the Lord in the clouds upon the Second Coming of Jesus Christ during the "First Resurrection." Christians still alive upon his return would become spiritual beings and be lifted up to the heavens with Christ as the "Second Resurrection." Those that have died unbaptized without the Holy Spirit would not immediately go to "hell" but remain dead until after the 1,000-year rule of the Kingdom of God on earth and proceeding Christ's Return and the "End of the World." Those who died without Christ would rise again in the third and final resurrection to be shown God's utopian society as the only and best form of government, giving them one last chance to freely choose God's way or humanity's way of death, and those that still refuse to submit to the rule of God would be considered irredeemable and be condemned to "hades," not eternal suffering in hell fire, but permanent death—the final extinguishment of life. This was thought to be done, to avoid creating more evil beings because once a spirit you cannot be destroyed like Satan and his demons, so the Lake of Fire was reserved for them and only them. God's millennium reign on earth would be the training ground to those that did finally repent in the third and final resurrection and eventually become immortal spirit beings. We would spend eternity creating other worlds in an infinite universe with the Lord and Great Creator, in other words, literally becoming the sons and daughters of God and co-creating new planets and sentient beings in an endless cosmos. Such explanations answered some of the questions I sought answers to—resolving many of my religious quandaries for the time being.

These and other revelations (pun intended) were brought to light through bible study along with the secular research of history, archeology, anthropology and cultural studies that opened my eyes to other more widening perspectives and "truths." It formed the foundation to question commonly held beliefs without guilt or reprimand. Upon this realization, I wanted to be re-baptized not out fear of God, the devil, hell and the end of the world, this time it was out of joy and love for God, his Holy Spirit, his wisdom as expressed in the Holy Bible. However, I did not wish to repeat the same mistakes of past "conversions," and I wanted to be sure that I had "the truth" this time. So, I postponed being baptized until I knew for certain instead of just basing it on feelings since it had led me astray before.

It was around 1988 as a senior in high school that my search for truth intensified and expanded with others. It happened in the most unexpected place by an unconventional teacher and to preserve his privacy I will refer to him as Mr. X, a teacher at Montgomery High in South San Diego. He was an avowed Atheist, and I was a born-again Christian. He gave thought provoking lectures and introspective assignments based on contemporary issues and allowed students to engage in dialogue with him and each other during class on a regular basis. It was one of the

most intellectually invigorating classes in high school I ever had. He would treat students as young adults and respect our ideas enough to allow us to express them in class. One personal example was on the subject of religion, specifically whether it was possible to logically prove that God exist? I answered yes and one need not rely on faith alone. He challenged my statement and encouraged me to elaborate, which got the entire class even more engaged than usual, so much so, we ran out of time, and I did not finish making all of my points, which he then offered me more time at the beginning of the class the next day. I accepted and went home to prepare my remarks. I drew from religious philosophers like Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury, Roger Bacon, John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and others, using metaphors like “The watch and the Watchmaker.”

The next day I presented my case to the teacher and the class. All of the students watched the back and forth between Mr. X and me like spectators at a tennis match. Before I knew it, I had been in front of the class sparing with the teacher and answering questions from my fellow students for the entire class period. As a result of the high student participation due to their keen interest on the subject, and the number of unanswered questions I decided to proceed with my plan to form a student group to explore answering such questions like: How do Christians reconcile the fossil remains of dinosaurs with biblical history? Are we the only life forms in the universe? Do UFOs exist? If so, how would the bible explain it? What about telepathy? Does the paranormal exist? There are so many religions, can they all be correct? If not, which one is the True Church? What is the true gospel? Is the Holy Bible the inspired word of God? What about the Apocrypha or the Quran? Or for that matter, how about the Book of Mormon? (I ended up reading them all).

Such questions prompted me there and then to form *THE SEARCHERS FOR TRUTH: A Theological & Philosophical Students' Association*. I immediately passed out a flyer and contact sheet and had 10 to 15 students sign up to meet at a public library every Saturday morning where I would reserve the “Conference Room” or “Community Room,” depending on the size of the group. We would diligently research, discuss and debate such critical issues over the next year. The dialogue and research would continue during the school week inside the school library or if the debate got passionate outside on the quad where we would eat our lunches. We developed quite a following. There were Agnostics, Secular Humanists, Muslims, Seventh Day Adventists, Assembly of God, UPC (Pentecostals), Methodists, Jehovah Witness, Baptists, Wiccans, New Age, etc. However, after all was said and done, and by putting my beliefs and faith to the test by other students, I could not find fault at that time with the religious ideology of the Worldwide Church of God. So, after graduation and my 18th birthday, I decided to get baptized.

Officially this was my fourth baptism in four different denominations and each time (with the exception of the first) I felt I had received the Holy Spirit. However, to most Protestant Christians, the first one done as an infant in the Catholic Church was considered to be symbolic and no redeeming value outside of tradition and ritual. The second one was done at the public park by an unofficial “street preacher” shortly after my conversion by my friend Carlos. I experienced the same joy with the third one done at the Bilingual Southern Baptist Church but I was instructed that wasn’t really a valid baptism since it wasn’t done “in the name of Jesus,” therefore, regardless of how joyful I felt and whatever “manifestations of being in the spirit,” it wasn’t real but either self-induced in the “falsely perceived” receipt of the Holy Spirit or deviously induced by Satan to keep me deceived. I thought to myself, this would explain why I always felt guilty of falling short of being a “good Christian” and a good reason for constantly failing to live up to God’s commands. Of course, this line of reasoning proved to be short lived upon my fourth religious conversion this time with the Worldwide Church of God.

With them, I learned one’s elated emotional state was not a reliable indication of possessing the Holy Spirit (and my past emotional experiences bared that out) instead it was having the true word of God as manifested by living out the right practices like observing the holy holidays and not Christmas, Easter, or other pagan holidays like Halloween and birthdays and instead observed the weekly Sabbath on Saturday as one of the markers of identifying God’s “True Church” or his “Chosen People,” among many other spiritual indicators. I soon joined the “Young Spokesman Club,” and even decided to apply to “Ambassador College” to become a minister in the Worldwide Church of God and believe it or not, I had Mr. X write me the letter of recommendation to the school, which I’ve retyped in the following page....

ACADEMIC RECOMMENDATION: Josue Kyle Aceves

It is my genuine pleasure to recommend Josue for admission to your college and to invite your consideration of him for any scholarships or financial aid that might be available. What is best about Josue might not be immediately evident from a cursory look at his GPA and SAT scores. **He is articulate in class discussions and has a seriousness towards those discussions that are well beyond the norm.** Whether the topic is of immediate interest to him or only obliquely related to his own interests, **he brings an intensity of focus that any teacher would admire and appreciate.** For a class like mine that relied on class discussion and student involvement, Josue [which in Hebrew means: “God with US”] **was a godsend. He would discuss any issue and raise a series of probing questions.** In this he is a welcome addition to any classroom, and exactly the kind of student every teacher wants.

Aside from his contributions to the class as a whole, I found him **personally open-minded and tolerant of most other points of view. This was especially unusual because he had such strongly held positions on many issues, notably those dealing with religious questions. Josue even formed a discussion group that met in a local library on a regular basis to discuss religious questions.** In talking to Josue and other students about him, it was clear to me that he was sincerely interested in hearing different points of view and in verifying what he believed to be true. This kind of open-mindedness is extremely rare anywhere in our society, but probably more so in young people. This is not to say that I agree with Josue—we differ on almost every religious and philosophical question, and he knows that. It is all the more interesting that he would choose me to write a recommendation for him, don’t you think?

An accurate evaluation of Josue as a student would have to include some lack of background in his studies common to most high school students outside honors programs and specialized high schools and some problems in written expression. **It may be that his writing is actually better than I remember and that it is only in comparison with his persuasive speaking and debating skills that I mention it as problem. Josue has the knack of outworking problems and will develop into a superior writer before long. I am confident in that prediction.** There are other predictions I am confident in making about Josue. You are legitimately concerned with his ability to handle college-level work and my prediction is that he will be highly successful in college because he will enjoy it so much. **He is a “natural” intellectual, as you will discover.** My other prediction is that if he is given scholarship consideration, he will reward that investment in every way you might imagine.

Bill Xander [Mr. X.]
Montgomery High

I thank Mr. Xander for his insightful words of wisdom, however, my application to the theological university in Pasadena was rejected because I was too young. I was devastated. But soon put a positive spin on it by deciding that it was God’s plan and took a year off school to work in “the real world,” experience life, become a little more independent and save money to purchase a motorcycle to ride cross-country at the end of my one-year “academic sabbatical” from school. However, little did I know that such a motorcycle journey across the nation on America’s “blue highways” (two-lane back roads) would trigger another existential crisis.

EXODUS: Chronicles Of A Cross-Country Two-Wheel Trek

During the end of my gap year of suspending any institutional pursuit of higher education in order to work and live in the real world, I became existentially dissatisfied with the mediocrity of everyday life. A feeling of contempt against conformity came over me, which was best manifested in a movie that I saw that same year in 1989—“The Dead Poets Society,” which I would say was the unofficial Gen X Neo-Transcendental film where its characters wailed against the constraints of conventionality spurred on by a brilliant teacher (played by Robin Williams). This sentiment so resonated with me that I was compelled to express it in a poem that I painted on my white bedroom wall that served as a daily reminder of my personal pledge to live an extraordinary life by fusing three *RUSH* songs “Subdivisions,” “The Analog Kid,” and “Losing It,” from their 1982’s “Signals” album and appropriating a line

from the girl I am referring to in the poem is a dear friend of mine (and exhibited in my coffee table art book *The Rebel Rodder*). I haven't seen her in over 30 years since she last attended one of my Saturday public library meetings of "The Searchers For Truth." You could say she was my first unrequited love that I denied myself during my senior year of high school in San Diego. I was extremely drawn to her due to our heightened level of spiritual, psychological and emotional maturity and our shared intimate talks, which I had never experienced with any other girl up until that time but didn't allow myself to go any further than that friendship due to my grand desire to create positive change in the world and make a name for myself in the pages of history. As lovely as she was, I sought more out of life than the "blighted bliss of matrimony" and all that it entailed, thus postponing, for a period of time, the conventional ensnarement of matrimonial adulthood. I felt the need to depart, despite tearing my heart apart.

This was one of the many reasons I decided to go on a transcontinental motorcycle journey during the summer of 1989 at age 19. I felt the need to make it a personal rite of passage into adulthood, since the usual ones of college, career, marriage, a house and kids were no longer becoming youth benchmarks since we were putting such things off at a much later time— what I call the "Suspension of Matrimonial Adulthood." Quite frankly, at that time, such a life would have been the death of me. In fact, for most Gen Xers, we recoiled at such traditional rites of passage. Is it any wonder why I sought to create my own by going on a cross-country expedition into adulthood? It would be a decade later that the absence of such rites of passage would be echoed in pop culture by the fictitious character, Tyler Darden, played by Brad Pitt in David Fincher's movie, "Fight Club," who makes a similar argument in a brief monologue at a basement underneath a bar where existentially disaffected Gen Xers beat each other to a pulp in order to feel alive and eventually lead a destructive siege to the city in "Project Mayhem," in order to free citizens from economic servitude via erasing the debt record by blowing up the buildings of monetary institutions at the financial center of the world.

The other reason was to conduct reconnaissance of the planned itinerary of back roads across the United States in preparation to establish a new Guinness Book of World Record for being the first motorcycle touring group to do it in record time of three days. There were a few motorcyclists who had done it in less than 48 hours but it was accomplished on the interstate and as individuals. We would attempt to be the first to attempt it as a group and only on winding, scenic, back country roads often referred to as "blue highways," since that is the color of how they are depicted on US maps. We would have also been the first Christian motorcycle club to do it, which I formed called "TOURING FORCE: A Christian Sport Bike Association." My idea was to bring the "Word of God" to the people in the most unconventional manner in order to attain mass media attention to capture the imagination of the youth in America. It was to be a demonstration of what young people can do for fun without engaging in sex, drugs and a "rock n' roll" lifestyle of narcissism, while providing them with new Christian role models and "glorifying God" in the process. Looking back at it now, it sounds a bit self-righteous, but it was done in good faith with the most sincere intentions.

My road odyssey began, with a zip of my leathers, clamp downs of my boot buckles, a slip of my head into the helmet and the sheathing of my fingers into my gloves. Finally, with a twist of the wrist I roar out of the garage and towards the pink-purple horizon cutting through the morning mist. The dying night gave rise to the birth of another dawn that warmed my leathers and brightened my path ahead... north, back to whence I came from...where I once thought of so fondly as my home...the "bottom-full" basin of Los Angeles, California. Back then I eagerly awaited my return to see all of my childhood old friends not seen in four years, an eternity for a teenager. My first stop was Pico Rivera, specifically my neighborhood street of Bridgeview. There I was happy to reunite with a half dozen different friends (Mike Frias, Martin Soria, George Monje, Oscar, Jimmy and Danny de Leon). We had a great time reminiscing but after two days it became painfully obvious that they were both celebrating and grieving our "childhood's end," unsure if they would live such glorious days again as adults, since there has been little of value and excitement that had happen thereafter. In addition, I had learned about a dozen of other friends who had gotten girls pregnant, were in jail or prison for violence, drug use or narcotics sale and distribution, while some had even been shot and/or killed. *None* of my friends had gone to college nor had any intention of going, not even a community college. For me, it was a choice to temporary postpone it, but after learning of my friends' fate, I made a decision there and then to enroll in my local community college in Chula Vista (near south San Diego) as soon as I returned from my motorcycle tour of the states. It seemed to me that the usual avenue of escape from a poor and lower-middle class life was to either join the military, become a cop or just muddle through with a low-wage, blue-collar job.

I proceeded to visit my other friends from elementary school near North Ranchito and North Park Junior High (Jose Guerro, Ralph Gomez, Rudy Garcia and Oscar Magallon). It was here that I was strongly reminded of the predatory environment that I grew up in, which did not always come from criminal elements. While catching up in the front lawn of my friend's street corner house with another half dozen buddies from this further away neighborhood, two police cars "rolled up on us." With no explanation, they immediately ordered us to place our hands on the squad car, while frisking us and asking general questions. I had asked the officers what was the reason for their "stop and frisk" action. They told me and the others among us who were asking the same question to "Shut the Fuck Up!" They were not in search of anyone in particular, we did not match the description of suspects in a past crime, and no neighbor had called to make a complaint. They were simply there to hassle us. The police saw a group of Hispanics hanging out on the front lawn and just wanted to humiliate and intimidate us. In addition, it was a pair of Latino cops and one African-American officer. You would think they would be much more racially sensitive to such straight out harassment but instead they seemed even more belligerent, as if we were an "embarrassment" to them and were vindictively taking it out on us. Whatever the reason, we were degraded and mistreated by being slammed against the hood and trunk of the squad cars in front of the neighbors and passing cars. An inner rage not felt for years had reemerged within me and almost led me to challenge the officers, but I knew what road that would lead me down and it was not trip I wanted to take. Not discovering any criminal wrongdoing, they left as quickly as they arrived with no apologies.

Nevertheless, I had the same feeling I had with my other group of friends reminiscing fondly of our past exploits. But whenever I tried to steer the conversation to other more relevant topics like current events of politics, religion, philosophy, economics and controversial social issues, they expressed no interest or desire to engage. When I inquired about their plans for the future, their career and life aspirations I got nothing. Instead, they were reliving our past lives with little or no hope of a better one in the future and the only thing to look forward to was the possibility of killing some "Arabs" in the then imminent first Iraq War, as if it was a gateway of opportunity for them to live out their cinematic fantasies and video game adventures. There was a pervasive sense that only a historical war time event could provide them with a legitimate rite of passage into adulthood. For that very reason, a few friends of mine expressed envy of my motorcycle journey as if they were stuck in a loveless marriage, with a bunch of kids and toiling in a factory for 12 hours a day to support them. It was quite jarring to see such despair in their eyes; to resign themselves, at such a young age to live lives of slow disintegration—purged of passion—without direction, without vision—no new dreams for them tonight. At that moment in time, the past is all they had to revere, and it was a **red meme** worldview and value-system (of raw egocentric self—the renegade, the power-self, the hedonist, the clan, rage and rebellion) that I could no longer operate in. I knew that was a threshold of development, once crossed could not be retreated from, if one is to truly develop forward. At that moment, I realized that the home I had hoped to return to again no longer existed and it was time to move on, not only in the travel sense, but in the psychological, social, moral and a little later on, in the spiritual sense. I bid my childhood friends goodbye and rolled on out of Los Angeles into the desert sky of Arizona to visit one of God's greatest granite monuments in the United States in the hopes of getting a new glance at the Creator of such magnificent splendor.

The Grand Canyon had always been a destination point for me since I could remember, because I always had an affinity for grandeur. I knew that as beautiful professional photographs had depicted such a natural majesty, it would not compare to being there in person. So, I set out east on Interstate 10, a 14-hour motorcycle ride crossing the California desert past the Joshua Tree Monument right on through Nevada ghost towns and soon found myself riding on over the top of Hoover Dam upon entering Arizona. It was in that state that I "opened up" my red-white-and-blue, 1987 Honda Hurricane 600 (the motorcycle of the year then) to 145 mph for 15 to 20 minutes, while tightly tucked behind the windscreen on a straight 99-mile stretch of desert road on the infamous Route 66. At such speeds, it was both terrifying and exhilarating. Terrifying because there is little to no margin for error, so just going over a rock on the road could catapult me to my death. And even if I managed to survive any crash at such high speeds there would be little to no chance for medical treatment since I hadn't seen a soul anywhere for miles, thus, survival in such a desolate place would be virtually nonexistent. Yet it was excitingly invigorating doing something so dangerous and illegal. (Odd isn't it? That engaging in such unnecessarily precarious behavior should make one feel so alive, going against the traditional and modernist belief that it is human nature to maximize self-preservation above all else in life). Barreling like a bullet down the hot and dusty desert highway demands great focus that in a short period of time I began to feel a kind of "runners high" and experienced the distortion effect of slow-motion

tunnel vision. In such a “transcendental meditative” stare into the horizon, I felt a tremendous sense of “oneness,” only it wasn’t triggered by intercessory prayer to a monotheistic God, in fact, it made such a belief seem small, finite, off-putting and even petty and petulant compared to the “vastness of being” that I felt and transcended such human constructs of divinity. Ironically, this acute insight or “spiritual understanding” did more to move me towards the non-existence of a Judeo-Christian deity than all of the logical agnostic and atheistic arguments flung at me in the past, although they now resonated more with me after this “religious experience.” You could say the doors of a new perception of reality swung wide open and I was now, without fear and guilt, riding straight through them, while the barren landscape of dirt, cactus and tumble weeds blur past me like the end scene in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* when astronaut Dave Bowen ejects from the “Discovery One” main spacecraft in a EVA space pod and finds another black monolith in orbit around the planet. “Approaching it, the pod is suddenly pulled into a tunnel of colored light, and a disoriented and horrified Bowman finds himself racing at great speed across vast distances of space, viewing bizarre cosmological phenomena and strange alien landscapes of unusual colors”⁵ and in the end scene of the movie becomes the first human to breakthrough and transcend corporeal existence as the “Star Child”—a new birth and evolutionary leap for human kind.

Soon thereafter, my concentration was broken by an unidentifiable dark spec crossing the road a few football fields ahead of me. At first I thought I might be seeing things since it looked like a black rectangle lying on its long side but now it is appearing stationary in the middle of the fever-blistered road radiating wiggly heat waves. I gradually downshifted to decelerate to speeds of 95 mph, which now seemed like a snail pace compared to the extended duration of high velocity, while the object fast approached, becoming more and more discernible... then all of a sudden... SON OF A BITCH!... IT’S A FUCKING COYOTE! I squeezed the shit out of the front brake handle and slammed down the rear brake in unison, skidding and twisting violently, the erratic motion threatening to take me down, while at the same time preparing to crash into the coyote that just stood there, in the middle road, looking at me. 200 feet...125 feet...it’s going to be close... 95 feet... 55 feet...crap! I’m not going to stop in time! 30 feet...15 feet.... I cringed in anticipation of impact.... Then a motorcycle miracle, the coyote takes a step to my right just enough time for me to lean left (no time to even steer away) and squeeze my legs tightly together while my right knee smacks its tail down—whew... disaster narrowly averted. When I came to a full stop and caught my breath, I look behind me and just watched the coyote walk gingerly across the street without any indication of how close we both came to becoming roadkill. Usually in such a close call I would have given thanks and praise to God for protecting me, however, I no longer felt such an impulse, it now felt perfunctory. Something in me was jarred loose and it would come to the surface soon enough.

It’s now dusk and I am just a dozen miles away from the southern rim of the Grand Canyon. I arrive at a middle-of-nowhere gas station and truck stop to refuel both body and bike. While pumping gas a white convertible 5.0 Mustang pulls up beside me to do the same. I noticed it’s the same one with California plates that I had passed up once or twice before that day after waving to each other as an expression of “same-state-solidarity.” An interesting thing happens when one travels outside of your home state and towards a world renowned sightseer site like the Grand Canyon, you notice out-of-state license plates and different international tourists, so much so, that when you find “one of your kind,” in our case, fellow Californians, there is instant camaraderie, something I would have never expected to happen so quickly and among strangers outside of church, especially to the extent that they invited me to join them at their camp site, considering I hadn’t made any reservations at the filled-to-capacity campgrounds. I accepted and formally introduced myself to the two white males and one female, all three in their late twenties.

Over the next few days, we would hike the Grand Canyon like the “Blue Angel Trail” that took three hours to make it down to the river and have lunch but a grueling 9 hours to make it back up, arriving at our campsite late at night with excruciating painful and paralyzing muscle cramps. We awoke the next morning with sorrowful soreness previously unimaginable, even as young and fit as I was due to high school gymnastics in Pico Rivera and an ongoing regular exercise regimen of cardio, weightlifting and stretching in commercial gyms in San Diego. During the evening campfires I would engage my new companions in those subjects that my neighborhood chums refrained from and learned they were atheists. You can probably imagine the back-and-forth discussions on God, life after death, the meaning of life, ethics, social issues, economics, politics, secular humanism, religion and spirituality—all over the course of three days and three nights. These were very nice, charitable and ethical people and what my time with them did for me more than anything else is break down the barriers of “the other” by realizing, as atheists, they were not the evil, god-hating, Satanist they were portrayed to be by most Christians. Nor were they “poor misled

souls with no moral compass,” embroiled in hedonistic debauchery or disintegrating into nihilism. My time with them allowed me to be ok with what I was feeling and thinking, making me a little bit more receptive to accept the **orange meme** (of modernism, rational, self-reliant, free-marketeer) and the **green meme** (of postmodernism, egalitarian, pluralistic, environmentalists) almost simultaneously by allowing myself to explore and accept new modes of thinking more deeply than I was willing to do before by asking questions without fear of retribution from God and the guilt usually associated with doubt that would usually shut down any transcending tendency that I would religiously repress. I now began to perceive all the different religious traditions in the world as voicing universal “truths” common to most faiths—the many different religions are paths up the same spiritual mountain. This was an idea I held in the back of my mind during the “Searchers For Truth” meetings but then temporarily subdued by my membership with the Worldwide Church of God. It took this motorcycle’s “religious experience” for me to feel it—intuition complimented by the intellectual knowledge of other theologies. This new “spiritual realization” made any concept of an anthropomorphic God seems so small, ethnocentric, limited by our own imagination, ego and frailties. So, upon my final bid farewell to my newly found friends, I also, in retrospect began to say goodbye to god—a fond farewell to my invisible childhood friend that didn’t get fully solidified until a few years later....

The serenity of the silenced lucidity that I got from the theology of the Worldwide Church of God began to unravel as I came to ask more and more complex questions during carpool rides with congregational members of the church and private discussions with ministers that eventually ended with unsatisfying answers like: 1) If we had the answers to such questions, we ourselves would be God. 2) It’s not God’s plan for us humans to know at this present time. 3) If we had the answers to such questions than there would be no need for faith, which is belief not based in logical proof.⁶ 4) Using the New Testament biblical decree to “not be of this world,” as a justified capitulation to the pervasiveness of social injustice, environmental destruction, population overshoot, financial servitude and economic unfairness that exist in the world because humankind is doomed any way without the grace of god. 5) Unanswered prayers is not God’s failing but our own due to a lack of faith, belief and righteousness. 6) Any and all mishaps, missteps and miseries in life is part of God’s overall but unknowable plan or due to our own shortcomings and failures not God’s. 7) Any remaining doubt I may have after such counseling is just the devil trying to tempt me away from God through intellectual arrogance like in the Garden of Eden by Adam and Eve. After all, there is a verse in the New Testament Bible that states: “Professing to be wise, they became fools.” However, in time, these responses were appearing to be more and more like copouts than satisfactory answers, but nevertheless, I would continue temporarily put aside such doubts and instead viewed them as tests of my faith from God or deceptions from the devil. (So powerful was the sanguine seduction of self-deception for silenced lucidity).

The details of my roadside adventures will remain private since they do not warrant the same attention of famous figures of the past like American author Jack Kerouac of “On The Road,” or the journal writings of the Bolivian revolutionary who helped Fidel Castro liberate Cuba. However, in regards to the latter, there are some parallels that I became aware of only after I watched the 2004 independent film, which was the first time I had heard of his personal journal documenting his two-wheel trek.

The Motorcycle Diaries is a memoir that traces the early travels of Marxist revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara, then a **23-year-old** medical student, and his friend Alberto Granado, a 29-year-old biochemist. Leaving Buenos Aires, Argentina, in January 1952 on the back of a sputtering single cylinder 1939 Norton 500cc dubbed La Poderosa (“The Mighty One”), they **desired to explore** the South America they only knew from books.^[1] During the **formative odyssey Guevara is transformed by witnessing the social injustices of exploited mine workers, persecuted communists, ostracized lepers, and the tattered descendants of a once-great Incan civilization.** By journey's end they travel for a symbolic nine months by motorcycle, steamship, raft, horse, bus, and hitchhiking, covering more than 8,000 kilometres (5,000 mi) across places such as the Andes, Atacama Desert, and the Amazon River Basin. The diary ends with a declaration by Guevara, **born into an upper-middle-class family, displaying his willingness to fight and die for the cause of the poor, and his dream of seeing a united Latin America.**

The book has been described as a classic **coming-of-age story: a voyage of adventure and self-discovery that is both political and personal.**^[2] Originally marketed by Verso as “Das Kapital meets Easy Rider,”^[3] *The*

Motorcycle Diaries has been a New York Times bestseller several times.^[4] The dramatization of a motorcycle road trip Che Guevara went on in his youth that **showed him his life's calling**.⁷

The following are segments of the synopsis provided by the 2004 film version of the book. I include excerpts from specific scenes of the movie.

[...] However, it is a visit to the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu that inspires something in Ernesto. He wonders how the highly advanced culture gave way to the urban sprawl of Lima. His reflection is interrupted by Alberto, who shares with him a dream to peacefully revolutionize modern South America. Ernesto quickly responds: "A revolution without guns? It will never work."

In Peru, they volunteer for three weeks at the San Pablo leper colony. There, Guevara **sees both physically and metaphorically the division of society between the toiling masses and the ruling class** (the staff live on the north side of a river, separated from the lepers living on the south). Guevara also refuses to wear rubber gloves during his visit choosing instead to shake bare hands with startled leper inmates.

At the end of the film, after his sojourn at the leper colony, **Guevara confirms his nascent egalitarian, anti-authority impulses**, while making a birthday toast, which is also his first political speech. In it **he evokes a pan-Latin American identity that transcends the arbitrary boundaries of nation and race**. These encounters with **social injustice transform the way Guevara sees the world, and by implication motivates his later political activities as a revolutionary**.

Guevara makes his symbolic "final journey" that night when despite his asthma, he chooses to swim across the river that separates the two societies of the leper colony, to spend the night in a leper shack, instead of in the cabins of the doctors. This journey implicitly symbolizes Guevara's rejection of wealth and aristocracy into which he was born, and **the path he would take later in his life as a guerrilla**, fighting for what he believed was the dignity every human being deserves.

"Wandering around our America has changed me more than I thought. **I am not me anymore. At least I'm not the same me I was.**" ~ Guevara at film's end.

As they bid each other farewell, Alberto reveals that his birthday was not in fact April 2, but rather August 8, and that the stated goal was simply a motivator: Ernesto replies that he knew all along. The film is closed with an appearance by the true life 82-year-old Alberto Granado, along with pictures from the actual journey and a mention of Che Guevara's **eventual 1967 CIA-assisted execution** in the Bolivian jungle.⁸

My cross-country journey also served as an awakening of sorts and led me to become a "cultural evolutionary." Although my journey was essentially a spiritual one there were some parallels to Che Guevara's roadside adventures. One, we were both approximately the same age, he at 23 and I at 19. Two, we both possessed the desire to explore. Three, in such a "formative odyssey" we were both "transformed by witnessing social injustices" only in my case it was with exploited day laborers, ostracized homeless, persecuted Mexicans ("wetbacks") now dethroned descendants from the ancient Aztec civilization and later intermixed with the Spanish. Four, he was born into an upper-middle-class family in a developing world, whereas I was born from a lower-middle-class family in the mightiest Western nation in the world. Five, a common willingness to fight and die for the cause of the poor, but I would eventually extend it to humanity's continued cultural evolutionary development. Six, his dream of seeing a united Latin America is similar to my current dream of uniting the fragmented subculture of 80 million Cultural Creatives in America and the 500 million and counting around the world. Seven, his was a classic coming-of-age story so was mine a personal rite of passage. Eight, ours was "a voyage of adventure and self-discovery that was political and personal." Nine, the motorcycle voyage showed us both our life's calling (mine was to be an activist, artist and author). Ten, we both saw the "physical and metaphorical divisions of society between the toiling masses and the ruling class," whereas, in addition, I witnessed and experienced the hospitality and hostility among all three dominant worldviews in America of the Traditionals, Moderns and Cultural Creatives (Postmoderns). Eleven, for both of us it confirmed our "nascent egalitarian, anti-authority impulses." Twelve, for Guevara it "evoked a pan-Latin American identity that transcends the arbitrary boundaries of nation and race," whereas for me it did something similar for my Mexican-American heritage and for the possibility of an interfaith alliance among spiritual progressives to promote social justice. Thirteen, our "encounters with social injustice" transformed how we both saw the world. Fourteen, "by implication it motivate[d] our later political activities" but for me as a "cultural evolutionary." Fifteen, "the path

he would take later in his life as a guerrilla” [revolutionary] is in the similar spirit that I would take as a “Guerrilla X Artists,” conducting clandestine street art to break the trance of false consciousness by subverting the dysfunctional social system and supplanting the superstructure (the values and worldview that support the dominant culture). However, one major caveat, Guevara insisted that revolution was not possible without guns, whereas I contend with the utmost conviction that a long lasting, sustainable transformation can only happen through a cultural evolution that precedes a **nonviolent** structural revolution leading to new social system that transcends socialism, communism and capitalism. There lies the rub.

Finally, this trip began my drift to existential agnosticism shortly thereafter but avoiding the nihilism of the popular music that was reflected at that time with breakthrough underground bands of alternative music like *The Cure*’s “Disintegration,” *Depeche Mode*’s “Violator,” *Nine-Inch-Nails*’ “Pretty Hate Machine,” and subsequently a few years later “Downward Spiral,” and “Songs of Faith and Devotion” by DM. Without getting bogged down with specific events that occurred on the road, the beginning of “Letting Go of God” was like experiencing death. I was already starting to mourn what religion had given me in the past: community, the belief of life after death, meaning, direction, and purpose, with outcomes determined by an all-powerful Supreme Being who could intervene on my behalf through faith and prayer. A “Divine Power” who enforces a code of conduct based on absolutist and unvarying principles of “right” and “wrong.” Following the code, that supposedly yielded rewards for the faithful and provided an unambiguous way of life—one right way and only one right way to think about everything. It relieved me of my mortal anxiety while giving me law and order—a false sense of serene stability.

However, I realized through personal life experiences that it was thoughtlessly controlled through guilt; conventionally constraining and uncomfortably conformist due to its religious fundamentalism that encouraged patriotism despite living in an empire of oppression here and especially abroad. But worst of all, on a conceptual level, it was always a “lose-lose” situation for me and “win-win” for God. For example, I found myself always attributing my successes and great achievements to God and all the failures and shortcomings as my fault due to my sins or a lack of faith, bible study or other human frailties God has equipped us with. This seemed quite suspicious like awakening from a con or finally breaking away from an abusive relationship after making excuses, telling yourself that the mistreatment is temporary, things will improve and your partner has more good than bad qualities. But then there comes a time when one can no longer tolerate the cognitive dissonance brought about by the contradictory life experiences unaligned with the “feel good” theology of God’s love, life after death and church community that was instead filled with delusions, fear and guilt. And as for the “community” component, I was quite shock, that no one from my Church bothered to call, let alone come visit me to see how I was doing. And this seemed indicative of most other ex-Christians’ experiences that I have had, met and talked with over the years and not just from my former church denomination. On my motorcycle road trip I found instant community among three atheists, something I thought was not possible outside of the church without the common value system of Christians and Christianity.

It took both experience and reason to break away. And whatever “personal miracles” or “signs” I thought I experienced in the past, in retrospect, they were easily explained with logic or mere coincidences once I finally allowed myself to take in the “modern, rational and self-reliant” **orange meme**. This was proven to me, over and over again in the short term during the cross-country motorcycle trip and consistently years after. Whenever I would get embroiled in some kind of precarious situation that would have ordinarily led me to pray to God for deliverance, I didn’t, and I still overcame such obstacles and even imminent threats to my life or my family and friends. Imagine if I had given in to such a now superstitious impulse, I would have attributed my rescues, victories and triumphs to God. (This is not to say there aren’t some “meditative” benefits to prayer). Nevertheless, because of this “Amber Mythic Order” consciousness / worldview or values system, I would have interpreted such resolutions to my problems and crises as personal proof of God’s intervening miracles, guidance and protection, due to my faith, prayers and possession of the “Holy Spirit.” Unfortunately, in the end, it is a faulty belief system because it provides an erroneous view of reality that leads to self-deception that could do more harm than good if one stays stuck in such a stage of personal development. What was once so real is now seen with new eyes of clarity—bursting out of the bubble world. I was like a child who had grown out of a story that once entranced me as being real and now made painfully aware it was only fiction. New data points from my personal life experiences and education disrupted the story from the outside, ultimately leading me to my own true spiritual liberation.

However, just as I can admit there is no logical basis and reinforcing life experiences for the belief in a monotheistic, Judeo-Christian God that one can have a personal relationship with, I would be making a similar mistake if I were to swing in the extreme opposite direction and declare there is no divinity with absolute certainty (at least in the “Cosmic Consciousness” sense). So, I live my life, like so many other Cultural Creatives—as “spiritual refugees”—wandering about, searching for new truths, not certain of anything in the metaphysical universe and without knowing what to call ourselves... until now—*The Integral Neo-Transcendentalists*. Secondly, religion for me proved to be a good thing because it was part of my psychological, social, moral and spiritual development. I see it as a positive steppingstone to my personal evolution. Third, religion is only a detriment when it begins to curtail logic, guide one’s life through superstitious signs from God, stifle human potential and bring about intolerance to other groups and people due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender that generally leads to violent conflicts they profess to be against like in the case of bombing abortion clinics and killing abortion doctors (not that my church did such things, but just generally speaking). Some historical examples include justifying injustices like slavery and the subjugation of women as second class citizens who would not be allowed to pursue higher education or career opportunities as it did in the past in many western industrialized societies and as many still do today in developing nations and the Middle East region.

Both education and experience proved to be the undoing of my religious faith of traditional spirituality, which only grew as I entered a decade-long path of higher education in 1990 and in doing so evolved from the “**Amber Mythic Order**” meme and now sought truth and meaning in individualistic terms and eventually transitioned from this “**orange meme**” of scientific rationalism to the pluralistic-relativism of “**Green Sensitive Self**” meme of postmodernism that I learned in academia.

TOGGLING BETWEEN MEMES: Traversing Through Red, Orange & Into The Green Tier Thinking

If there were any lingering hopes for a religious reconciliation with this traditional institution, they were completely extinguished by 1991. This was the year that *Nirvana*’s “Nevermind,” was released and considered to be the “flagship band” of Generation X, along with other subsequent alternative rock bands like *Sound Garden*, *Alice in Chains*, and *Pearl Jam* that made up the Seattle “Grunge” movement. Enter the **Green meme**: a year later my inner liberation from all authoritarian institutions was accompanied with *Rage Against The Machine*’s self-titled album with songs like “Wake Up,” “Killing In The Name,” and “Know Your Enemy,” as the new soundtrack of my activist life.

In 1992, at 22, I voted in the Presidential Election for the first time in my life. The reason for my political abstention was due to my Christian faith while in the Worldwide Church of God. We were taught that in order to comply with Christ’s command “to not be of the world,” then by their theology that included electoral politics of any kind, since all were inherently corrupt and “man’s government” was fundamentally flawed without god. However, I saw this now as a cop-out and our civil inaction as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the very corruption they preached against. So, I voted for Bill Clinton, the Obama of Generation X, who was the first presidential candidate to appear on late night television shows back then like “Arsenio Hall.” However, that was the first and last time I ever voted for a candidate of the two-party system. 1996 was the first time I abstained from voting as a non-of-the-above-vote. That would change once more by voting for presidential candidate Ralph Nader three times: 2000, 2004 and 2008, then boycotting the presidential election all together in 2012 by not voting at all (except for local issues) but this time as a protest against third parties’ inability to unite to create a “People’s Party.” However, this bout of activism expanded beyond the political arena and into the journalistic world that I would soon find myself at odds with.

During my early community college years, I enrolled in creative writing courses (studied and wrote plays, poetry, fictional prose, screenplays, experimental narratives, historical fiction, psychological novels, short stories or novel-las) and joined the school paper. As a student reporter I tried to do edgy stories. One of which was proposed for the winter holiday season issue. Instead of doing the traditional pieces I opted to volunteer to go undercover as a homeless person in downtown San Diego for a few days during Thanksgiving and write a first-hand account of the experience in the style of “The New Journalism,” in order to apply a new perspective from the inside of social situation none of us in class had ever experienced. The room quickly came to a hush. I then asked who would like to

volunteer with me. Silence filled and expanded across the room. Then our academic advisor basically rejected the idea due to school liability issues. I said, I would volunteer to sign a waiver form to absolve the school and her of any responsibility. She then raised health and safety concerns. I explained I would take every precaution like arranging safety protocols by assigning someone I trust to be my “life-guard,” who I would check in with twice a day (morning and evening) at specified times and give that person my current status, description and location in case I fail to do so in the future that way local authorities would have my last known location and any background information that I had provided during my last phone call that would be useful to them to track me down; similar to CIA case officers with their field agents and assets. She declined and discouraged me. I said I was going to do it anyway. She then said it would not be allowed to be published in the school paper. So that was that, right?

By now you should know, of course not. I ended up doing the self-assigned undercover homeless article titled “Where All The Streets Have Names” with a friend of mine. The following is an abridged version of unpublished series of log entries in one 24-hour period. It includes late 20th century homeless statistics, data points and the economic, political and social justice concerns surrounding the issue and for the purposes of illustrating my ongoing personal evolution, I also include my individual experiences during this homeless undercover journalistic endeavor; offering a snapshot of my path of personal development during that time period and an example of how I toggled between the red, orange and green memes; demonstrating how the best of each remained within me but jettison those components that would have made me stuck in any one of them. The article opens with vital statistics of the early 1990s on the issue of homelessness to communicate its social significance and personal relevance even among those of us who are not directly affected, then proceeds with part one of T.S. Eliot’s poem entitled “The Hollow Men,” which its remaining four parts are interspersed throughout the article. I use the title of the poem to not only allude to the homeless people I encountered back then, but those of us living such similar lives of quiet desperation in our modern society only dwelling in much sturdier and socially acceptable “cardboard boxes.”

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“WHERE ALL THE STREETS HAVE NAMES”
Chronicles From The Concrete Jungle As An Undercover Homeless Person
By [Formerly] Josue Kyle Aceves

“In the United States at least 600,000 people are homeless each night. There are 1.3 to 2 million who are homeless during the course of an entire year. And 5 to 9 million people who had experienced at least one episode of homelessness over a five year period, during the last half of the 1980’s.”⁹

“In the city of San Diego, at least 5,000 homeless people exist at any given time. And as high as 23,000 throughout the county, that’s including the day laborers, rural workers and urban homeless.”¹⁰

“In 1994, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 39 million people, 15 percent of the nation’s population, lived below the poverty level. Of those, 4 to 7 million are considered extremely poor, with income below two-thirds of the official poverty line; thus, making them tomorrow’s potential homeless.”¹¹

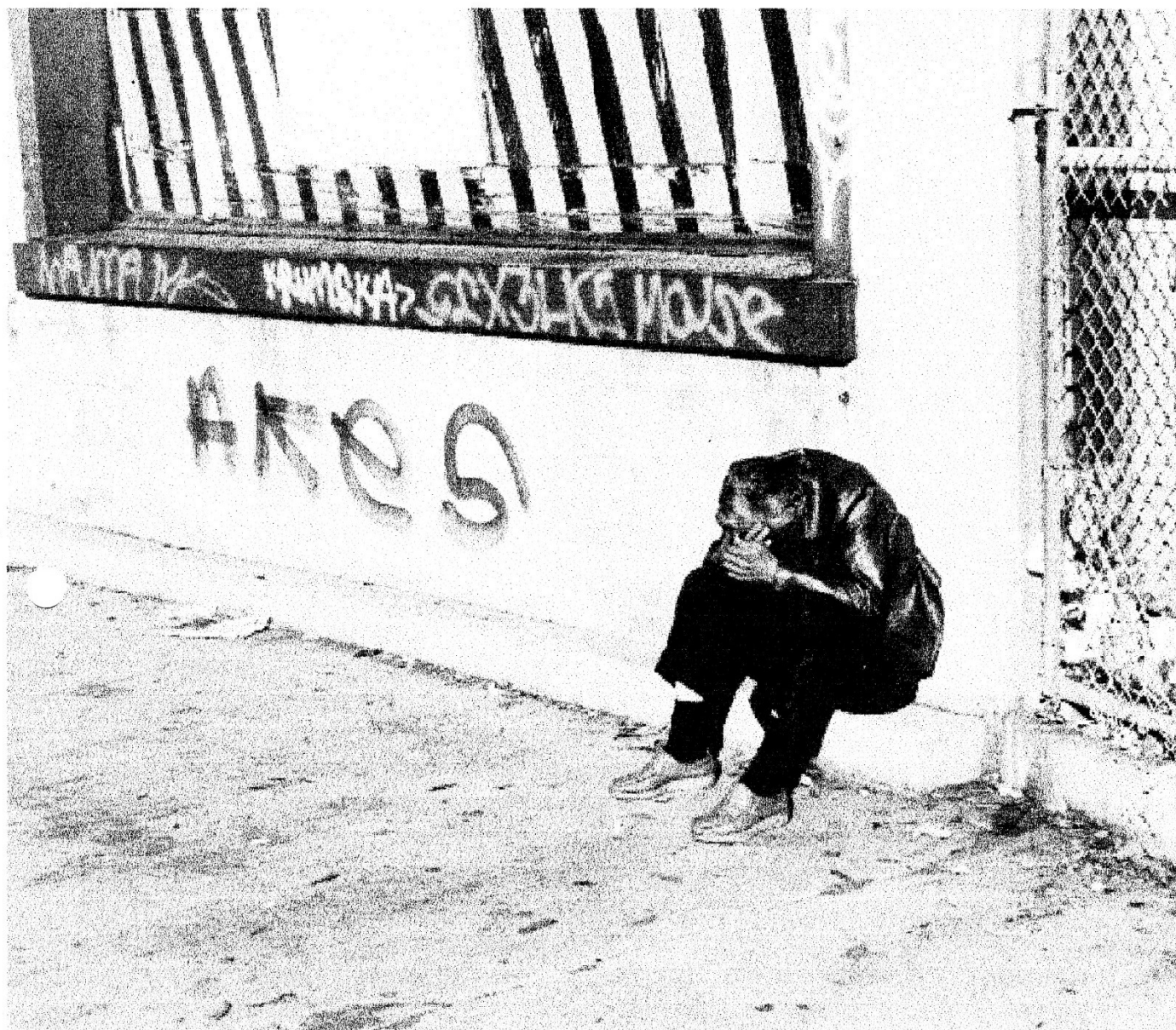
“In 1995, a study by the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development examined the 41 largest metropolitan areas in the country, San Diego is the 5th worst for poor renters; having the highest proportion living in unaffordable housing, a sum of 80,000 low-income households, which comprise 20 percent of the county’s population.”¹²

“In 1995, approximately \$900 million in grants issued nationwide to fight homelessness, with the biggest proportion—166 million—distributed to California. In total, 818 projects in 228 communities throughout the U.S., were awarded HUD funds.”¹³

[Track 1: Bruce Springsteen, "Streets Of Philadelphia"]



I WAS BRUISED AND BATTERED. I COULDN'T TELL WHAT I FELT.
I WAS UNRECOGNIZABLE TO MYSELF.
I SAW MY REFLECTION IN A WINDOW. I DON'T KNOW MY OWN FACE.



OH BROTHER, ARE YOU GONNA LEAVE ME WASTING AWAY
ON THE STREETS OF PHILADELPHIA?
I WALKED THE AVENUE 'TIL MY LEGS FELT LIKE STONE.



I HEARD THE VOICES OF FRIENDS VANISHED AND GONE.
AT NIGHT I HEAR THE BLOOD IN MY VEINS
BLACK AND WHISPERING AS THE RAIN ON THE STREETS OF PHILADELPHIA.



AIN'T NO ANGEL GONNA GREET ME.
IT'S JUST YOU AND I MY FRIEND.
MY CLOTHES DON'T FIT ME NO MORE.
I WALKED A THOUSAND MILES JUST TO SLIP THIS SKIN.



THE NIGHT HAS FALLEN, I'M LYIN' AWAKE.
I CAN FEEL MYSELF FADING AWAY.
SO RECEIVE ME BROTHER WITH YOUR FAITHFULNESS OR WE WILL LEAVE
EACH OTHER ALONE LIKE THIS ON THE STREETS OF PHILADELPHIA

[Stop: End of Track 1]

THE HOLLOW MEN

By T.S. Eliot

I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Learning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rat's feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without color,
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As The hollow men
The stuffed men.

Personal Log: "Dawning Of A Waking Life" November 24, 1993, 6:25 a.m.

Dawn. Thanksgiving Day. I'm awakened by that rude, obnoxious and unrelenting sound that millions of Americans scornfully wake-up to; yes, it's that digital red-eye, electrically fed, dream slaying, micro-monster-machine we call... the alarm clock, only this morning most Americans have the gratifying satisfaction to do the slaying themselves and put the beast to sleep while retreating back to their dream world. I, on the other hand, begin my exit from that dream state and leave behind my Generation X life to journey into a foreign world, alien to me and most Americans, a place that moves from futility to nothingness—where God's eyes do not reach, the land where sidewalk images of cardboard beings are beaten and blown by the wind—senseless... directionless... unproductive motion; no further, no nearer. They are the throwaways; discarded candy wrappers—crushed coke cans kicked around. It is where my second coming of age takes place; a world just 15 miles away from my south San Diego home, where people are awakened, not by electric alarm clocks, but by the death-infringing coldness that can freeze souls into wakefulness.

6:41 a.m.—"A Precursor Of Social Juxtaposition"

I stepped out of my house, took in a deep breath and made my way to the trolley train station on Iris Ave. The cool, crisp, morning air rained down on me as believe it or not, neighborhood roosters greeted the dawning day with a crackle. As I walked through my neighborhood streets, my mind regressed back to last night's phone conversation with my "partner in crime," Mark.

"...So how many are going?" Mark asked.

"Counting you and me—two," I answered. An "I knew it" laugh was heard bellowing out of the other end of the phone.

"What happened to the other ten [college students] that were going?"

I got defensive, up until now everything I had planned had gone to shit, "Don't tell me you're not going!"

"No, I'm going, I'm going," he reassured me.

"Good. Set your alarm clock. We leave at dawn tomorrow morning... I'll meet you at the "E" Street trolley station between 6:30 and 7:00 a.m. Don't forget to..."

Suddenly my regressive train of thought was derailed by my first negative experience as a homeless person. An encroaching feeling of being watched falls upon me. I looked up and across my field of vision. There, in the distance, not too far away, sat a trolley security officer in his white patrol car, staring straight at me. I looked around and about, only to have discovered public onlookers visually invading my presence. But upon eye contact they retreated into a state of social reclusiveness—pretentious ignorance of my existence. I then turned toward the trolley security officer and found him peering right at me as he carefully sipped his cup—cautious not to avoid eye contact with me. I imagined it was because we do not find too many homeless people around our area, except on busy divided roadways like Palm Avenue, where they're panhandling for food and work, but mostly money.

It's funny how posturing in different sets of clothes can create false perceptions of social status that leads to emotional uneasiness among other people. But out in downtown San Diego (as I soon discovered) social juxtaposition is not only present, it is the norm—for anyone could be homeless and not look it.

6:57 a.m.—“*A Band Of (Two) Brothers*”

I rendezvous with Jed at the “E” Street trolley station. He stood anxiously anticipating my arrival. A sigh of relief was written on his face as he spotted me. I got off the trolley to greet him. Jed informs me of his relieved concern, “I thought you had come and gone on the last trolley.” We talked briefly while waiting for the next trolley to arrive. During our discussion we inspected each other's “homeless wardrobe.”

Jed was thoroughly prepared, almost too prepared, I thought to myself, as if he was going to some camping trip in below freezing temperatures. I, on the other hand was prepared to “rough it” with only the basics: the clothes on my back, a pencil and notebook and a micro cassette recorder. (However, later that day, as night would fall, I'd be cursing myself to sleep while shivering in the night.)

Mark bared a popularized image of a young Paul Bunion; wearing brown, heavy duty hiking boots, blue jeans with thermals underneath, several shirts buried under what looks like an Eskimo winter coat and a plain, blue, baseball cap to crown his homeless ensemble. His gear also consisted of a huge back-pack that contained old clothes that he planned to donate and personal “survival” possessions like: a sleeping bag, a large buck-knife (for self-defense), a journal and some rope which he intended to string up aluminum cans with and surround the perimeter of where we would sleep to alert us of any intruders. Yeah, he's quite a character. And I was grateful to have him as my number one pick in my “Urban Survival Team,” even if it just turned out to be the two of us.

As we both sat there, waiting in silence for the next trolley, I began to reflect back on the first time I met Jed. It was the summer of 1987. We were both rough-tough rebel spirits born to rise above the human propensity to live mediocre lives. For even the non-denominational church (Worldwide Church of God) that we were both prospective members of had their merciful patience tested by our unrepentant independence. I always thought it was more than just a coincidence that we not only befriended each other at the same church but that our friendship and loyalty to each other was sealed when we were both baptized together on the same day and time. As our friendship grew, I realized we were both cut from the same cloth. We are brothers he and I—flip sides of the same coin—rugged individualists carving our way through life. And there would be no other person I'd rather have on my side and backing me up than Mark Gambala.

7:33 a.m.—“*The Lonely Crowd*”

Ta-tum, ta-tum, ta-tum, ta-tum went the tracks rolling thunderously underneath us—we, the stern, drone occupants who breathed not a syllable to one another, travelled north to nowhere on a little-red-ridding train, puttering in a predetermined course of scheduled stops. I look out its window and observed men, women and some children, blurring by like a moving sequence of out-of-focus photographs. The experience was entrancing. So much so, that by listening to the advancing and trailing rails of train tracks, my mind transported me back to a time when transient homeless people, formerly known then as “hoboes and tramps,” and even children, would travel from place to place in freight cars in search for work during the 1930's, the era of the Great Depression. My mind extrapolated that perhaps it was “yesterday's” Great Depression that is the cause of today's homelessness. I entertain the idea for a while, knowing full well that uncovering the roots of American homelessness would require digging far deeper into our buried past.

Homelessness has always been with us but has not always been the same. It has existed almost throughout the whole world and virtually since the beginning of recorded human history. But it was in Colonial times of early America that the birth of homelessness emerged in our country.

In the 17th century New England, the town settlers, governed under the Elizabethan poor laws. Each town was responsible for the welfare of its own poor. This would be critical of newcomers who would petition for “settlement rights” (permission to settle in their town), because of financial concerns over additional tax burdens for the town due to the applicants’ lack of resources to be self-supportive.

The new prospective settlers that usually fell in this category were widows, children, disabled and the elderly, all of which were forced to leave town. Here is thus, the beginning of transient homelessness, barred from settlement to settlement because in town after town they were rejected the right to settle down.

Such facts are revealed to us in the pages of the New England town meetings minutes in the 17th century. But the town meeting minutes are mute about the fate of the banned newcomers. We can only assume many became squatters, living on unoccupied territories or found themselves overlooked in larger settlements.

It was these indigent and poor migrants that were ostracized in a social and geographical “No-Man’s Land,” where no jurisdiction was accountable for their welfare. All of which was due to colonial preoccupation with “settlement rights” and the benefit entitlements accompanying them that persisted throughout most of our history. (It wasn’t until 1969 that the Supreme Court ruled that the settlement issue in public welfare was unconstitutional).

This lack of lament and public benevolence continued well into the 19th century. In fact, it gave rise to more homelessness during the post-Civil War era. The industrialization of America, with the advent of the railroads, produced an immense necessity for transient laborers who could supply temporary, seasonal work. These transient workers were comprised of restless youths, discharged Civil War veterans, and immigrants. They were mostly young, single, men with inadequate education and poor job skills. Some settled long distances away from their native land due to their temporary employment that took them all over the country

These were the transient laborers who were labeled as bums, tramps, and hoboes, in spite of their significant contribution in developing the foundation of America’s industrial evolution. When the demand for their work ceased, they were discarded and forgotten—becoming, in a sense, one of America’s earliest disposable laborers since the African-American slaves

The institutionalization of homelessness began with the emergence of “Skid Rows” that segregated our transient. By the late 19th century, these sections of homeless habitats were established in all of America’s major cities.

These Skid Rows consisted of a concentration of enterprises catering to the needs of transient, poor, familyless working men. The core businesses that defined Skid Row were hotels, lodging houses, and restaurants providing inexpensive housing and food, where meals and a bed for the night could be had for pennies. Bars, brothers, pawnshops, and cheap clothing stores also served the men who ate and slept on Skid Row.

Urban missions of Christian denominations also participated by attempting to provide hope and inspiration by converting them over to their faith. Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s when the homelessness skyrocketed to a new high. Figures ranged from 125,000 in 1933 to 1.5 million during the peak years of the depression.^[9]

And it was in this time period that a different kind of homeless emerged from the earliest periods of the hoboes and tramps. The homeless of the depression were people that would remain permanently unemployed because their chances to obtain consistent employment were decimated to virtually zero. These moderately young men became the equivalent of unwanted overstock to the U.S. employment market.

And again, sympathy over the homeless single males and females was not given—a reoccurring factor throughout American history. Only homeless families in the Dust Bowl states illicit more concern than the more common unattached homeless individuals.

The only thing that effectively reduced the population of the homeless was the outbreak of World War I, which acted as a catalyst for economic production. The homeless were drafted into the military and defense in-

dustries. The habitual unemployed shrunk to almost nonexistent levels within a short span of time. And shortly after 1943, the Works Progress Administration (WPA, successor of the FERA), were enormously cut as the homeless were absorbed into the military and job opportunities soared. Emergency shelters and municipal lodging were shut down. The only places left were Skid Rows.

In the 1950s and 60s, after World War II, employment sustained its heights and both homelessness and Skid Row areas decreased tremendously from the figures of the 1930s. Positive as the results were, homelessness was far from being vanquished. Urban renovation led to the deconstruction of Skid Row, which ended the source of affordable housing for the homeless and the extremely poor.

By the mid-1970s, most of the SRO's (Single Room Occupancy), which were the cheapest lodgings, were destroyed and substituted by parking lots, executive buildings and apartment complexes for the new workforce. The necessity for extremely inexpensive housing for the old age pensioners decreased due to the social security system and its generous benefits for those who had worked under its coverage throughout their lives.

In addition, subsidized senior citizens' housing was an inexpensive source to the elderly. Also, increased assistance became more available for the handicap and the chronic mentally ill through an enlarged Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) program, and Supplemental Insurance Security Income (SSI), which permitted this portion of the population to advance forward in the housing market.

But by the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, homelessness began to take on new forms. Literal homelessness became more prevalent in contrast to the earlier periods of American history. The "new" homeless no longer tucked away in Skid Rows and hidden from public view, they could now be seen under freeway overpasses, park benches, train stations, bus terminals, snoozing in libraries, along doorways and cardboard boxes, in empty alleys or abandoned cars. Now they were highly visible and impossible to ignore. A contributing factor to their new visibility was the decriminalization of public drunkenness and relaxed enforcement of city ordinances regarding status crimes.

Another aspect of the "new" homeless was the increase of females among the homeless. The disturbing image of the "bag lady" emerges. We observe them pushing their net worth through public streets in shopping carts. Homeless families were another new factor in the 70s and 80s. Although they weren't often seen on the streets, they did appear at welfare offices requesting assistance for housing. Public awareness grew to new heights with television clips and news articles on the streets. Also, the deinstitutionalization of the chronically mentally ill becomes a factor in the rise of homelessness in the 70s and 80s, along with drug abusers, alcoholics, teen runaways and prostitutes.¹⁴

8:03 a.m.—*"Departure From The Society of the Spectacle Without Pageantry"*

We arrived at downtown San Diego and began our journey with no more fanfare than a slurp of hot coffee and a puff of a cigarette. And with no money, no identification and no idea what lay ahead of us, we ventured forth into the unknown urban underworld and commenced our exploratory descent into the primitive sources of being. Only to ironically come alive—awake from our somber slumber induced by our inauthentic consumer culture that we Gen Xers have so earnestly sought to negate.

8:28 a.m.—*"The 'Con-Free' Clothing Drop"*

Our first stop was at the San Diego Rescue Mission. Our awareness level was up for we have been forewarned (and perhaps to some degree of exaggeration) by college professors and public servants, as well as, from family and friends that the street inhabitants in this area are nothing more than "rogues, degenerates and dregs of society waiting to con 'newcomers' [like ourselves] out of our personal possessions." So, in light of such warnings, Mark insisted on donating his extra clothing personally to the Rescue Mission to ensure its "con-free" delivery. Suffice it to say, the clothing drop was an uneventful success.

We depart and head over to the St. Vincent de Paul homeless shelter center. On route, block after block, the stench of urine completely awakens my olfactory senses as we encountered several African-American homeless people that lay squandered and still sleeping on the sidewalks. I took snap shots after snap shots, recording everything I saw. Moments later, some distance away, vehement protests erupted from three of these individuals like a

dormant volcano awakening from its deep slumber; their screaming words of profanity spewed out of them like hot molten lava. As their shouting steamed with intensity and blew out into the open air, we exited the area. Mark relieved his tension with an uneasy chuckle.

8:42 a.m.—“*Cardboard Tent City*”

We arrived at the St. Vincent de Paul’s Joan Kroc Center—the Taj Mahal of homeless shelters. There we witnessed a food line that might as well been as long as the serpentine Wall of China, slithered its way into the center. Jed and I grew impatient of the long, unmoving, brick after brick of people and decided to depart.

We headed east on Imperial Avenue. Along the way we came across what looked like a primitive encampment temporarily established under the overpass of the Interstate-5, “J” Street, freeway on-ramp. On the sidewalks were homeless people sleeping in cardboard-made-box-houses along both sides of the street and under the freeway overpass. Each of them with their own shopping cart parked adjacent to them like some family station wagon parked on the side of their suburban home.

10:07 a.m.—“*A Pseudo-Crash Course For Surviving The Concrete Jungle*”

After hours of roaming the streets aimlessly, I began to realize, as did Mark, that life on the streets was boring more than anything else. But things began to pick-up as we befriended Michael McDonald, a 44 year old Irish American whose been homeless in San Diego for over two years. His face was covered with bruises and abrasions as if he had been in a recent fight.

“At first it’s strange,” Mike began, “when you first get out here. When you leave the comfort of society and you are out here with a blanket, you say to yourself, ‘Shit, I’m homeless, what the hell is going on.’ But then you get accustomed to it. You adapt and survive.”

“Give me a typical day in your life,” I asked.

“At this point right now... uuuhhhh... just chasing the food lines... waiting for the weather to break and hitch on out of here.”

Mike is a typical homeless person. He vividly demonstrates the demographic composition of the homeless that constitutes the following: 1) 82% male (four out of five); 2) 94% currently not married (33% divorced or separated, 56% never married and 5% widowed); 3) 54% of the homeless have had children, despite the low proportion who have never been married; 4) The average age being between 30 and 46 (heavily concentrated, although not exclusively, in their middle ages of their productive years.)¹⁵

“I’m alone out here, but my family is in Boston. I was going to head back there, but at 44, you don’t want to go home to mom.”

“But anything is better than being out here,” I interrupted.

After a pause, Mike responds in a meditative tone, “No... no, not really. This isn’t hard... this isn’t hard. This is the easiest thing in the world. This is just like a big camping trip. That’s all this is. And the reason I haven’t moved on now is because I’ve got lulled into it. I get up when I want to get up and eat when I want to eat. I’m going to have a turkey dinner this afternoon at the Salvation Army... I’ll eat so much today that I won’t want to eat anymore.”

Surprised by Mike’s claims of easy-living, Jed and I listen more attentively.

“... At 44, I’m looking at 64, waiting to collect social security. As far as life goes we are all taught that by 65 we’re going to retire—Fuck, I’m retired already.”

I begin to doubt the sincerity of his statements since it is not what I expected to hear. To be honest I even felt a sense of disappointment; I mean where is all the human misery & starvation that I was supposed to report on?

“If you go hungry on these streets of San Diego,” Mike continued, “then there is something wrong with you... because there is so much food out here it’s incredible... I mean the cuisine out here is terrific, except for one or two places, but all the rest are great... if they only served you white wine or red wine, then there would be no reason to

go home...” Mike laughs, “Man I have no complaints. I’ve gone a day without food sometimes because I’ve just been too lazy to go to the goddam food lines and that’s the only reason.”

“What about personal hygiene?” I inquired.

“You can get a shower every day at the Neil Good Center of 16th and Imperial Avenue,” Mike muttered.

This explains why Mike and other homeless people like him look decent, appearance wise. In a combined homeless study, found in Rossi’s book, “Down and Out in America,” over half (55%) were presentable in appearance in the conventional sense. But this does not mean that the “dirty and unkempt” looking stereotype is nonexistent, for 21% were in this category, 32% were “shabbily dressed” and 11% were carrying their personal belongings.”

When we divide these statistics into two separate categories of street homeless and sheltered homeless, the results of the survey samples taken by Rossi were unprecedented: 71% of the sheltered homeless were considered “neat and clean.” Compared with the not so surprising 28% of the street homeless were judged to be the same. This illustrates the differences in appearance between the two groups which cast doubts upon the overall characterizations of the homeless. Evidently, the use of shelters and access to cleaning facilities makes maintaining a good personal appearance easier. It is especially helpful because they do not have to resort to living out on the streets with only the clothes on their backs. It is virtually impossible to keep your only set of clothes clean when you’re scavenging around the grungy areas of the city. The shelters also offer a secure place for storage of extra clothing to keep up with appearances.¹⁶

“... I think things are getting better for me,” Mike asserted. “I think you flirt with this, you stay out here or you don’t. It’s that kind of thing that I flirted with so long that I said, ‘So why don’t you go out there and do it? Get it over with and get the fuck back to your original life.’

(No...no, not what I expected at all, I think to myself).

The thing I want to say about being homeless is, if a guy wants to straighten out and find work he can. HE CAN! I saw a guy the other day; he’s been drunk for two years since I’ve been here. Finally, he was cleaned up. He says, ‘hey I got a job today, finally.’ I said, ‘no, you sobered up, finally!’ He says, ‘Yeah, well, I guess you’re right.’ He found a job as a security guard. He’s a homeless guy; would you trust him to watch your car?”

We all laughed at the irony, and then Mike continued. “...If you want to do something for yourself in San Diego, and I had my chance and I blew it, there are programs you can become involved with. The Salvation Army has an eight day program that you can stay in. Then they put you in ‘Jobs of Promise’ which you can stay there as long as you want and they help you find a job. St. Vincent de Paul has got a 30 day program which provides three meals a day, living in a four bedroom dorm. That turns into another program. In turn when you stay there, you pay them a third of your salary, which is not bad considering you’re living in a beautiful place like that. Sure, it is a little restrictive and you have to play their politics, but where in life don’t you have to play politics. That’s what puts a lot of alcoholics and addicts out here because they don’t want to play the politics in this American system, which is a difficult system.”

On a national average approximately 32% stay in shelters in the Fall and 70% in the Winter for a combined average of 52%. As far as rating the quality of homeless shelters (and aside from Mike’s favorable review of San Diego’s shelters) a survey from New York’s sheltered homeless rated prisons superior to shelters safety, cleanliness and nutritional quality. Apparently the only good marks were the freedom to walk out at any time.¹⁷

“Again,” Mike continues, “if you want to get off the streets, you can. The ones that are out here choose to be out here. There are a lot of people who will stay out here forever. And it’s the same people who will say, ‘Oh my, we’re homeless, people are fucking with us.’ You’re fucking with yourself man. You have to take responsibility for your life.” (Keep in mind that this is one homeless man’s perspective and experience in one metropolitan city during the past two years living on the streets of San Diego).

“... A lot of it is a scam!”

What is?” I retort.

“Welfare,” Mike answers, “most of the welfare money goes to booze or drugs. A lot of people at this point will collect SSI (Social Security). I think that people who do need it belong in the hospital. I think the politicians found SSI cheaper than keeping them in the hospital.”

“Another scam is getting money through one of those bucket collection missions. You guys know about this?”... They put you in front of a grocery store with a bucket... that money goes no place... I’ll get 50% of it. But I should get all of it. If I am going to stand out there with that bucket, I should be allowed so much time. They should say, ‘Look, you got a week here son, you collect as much as you can and then you hit the road—then you’ve helped a homeless person. But what they do is they set up a little business on it and 50% goes to the house or church which in turn goes no place. Which in turn is their money. And one of them (homeless missions) I know most of the money goes to the sports book down in Tijuana” [Baja California, Mexico].

“You mean gambling?”

“That’s right!”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“I know the guy who used to take the money down for them. That’s the truth—it’s all a scam! [Incidentally, after pursuing some helpful leads on the possible gambling book scam. I did not find any concrete evidence to support his claims but such corruption, if it were to exist, would not surprise me anymore.]

At this point, I feel comfortable enough to ask Mike if he would allow me to photograph him. But he refused, due to his fear or falling victim to exploitation by propagandizing his “misfortune” in order for charity organizations to profit at his expense.

“In your case I know that it’s going to go in a paper and the truth is going to be there,” Mike consoles me by explaining. “They (the ‘money making mission’) will take that picture and say: ‘See what a wonderful thing we’ve done for the homeless, we want a donation.’ So, if we haven’t got our hand out, they have them out for us,” Mike sardonically laughs.

“So, how much money have you made with this money bucket business?” I asked.

“Yesterday in 45 minutes I made \$15 but that was a holiday. On Christmas Eve I know I can make \$300. But that’s only on Christmas Eve. Last New Years Eve I made \$250 for 10 hours. But those are the only big days you are going to have. Everybody says we make a hundred dollars a day. That’s bullshit! There are days when I’ve gotten \$17 for 10 hours.”

The panhandling “money-bucket-business” that Mike mentions is only one source of income. There are at least six other major forms of attaining income while being homeless: welfare, scavenging, contract labor, disability, pensions, charity, and family or friends. The following is an elaboration of such sources of income for the homeless:

- 1) *Welfare, which consists of food stamps, General Assistance and AFDC, is the biggest source of income for the homeless. According to Rossi’s study in Chicago it comprises 30% of the homeless total income. A relatively low figure compared to the 80% of the homeless that could qualify for welfare benefits. But such figures are consistent with the results from the Chicago General Assistance study, which demonstrates that an extremely minor percentage of the GA clients were without housing.¹⁸*
- 2) *Contract labor and financial endeavors like Mike’s “bucket business” and other economic activities like daily labor pools of employment, bartering, collecting recyclables, plasma sales, and unemployment payments all constitute about 29% of the homeless total income—slightly less than welfare.¹⁹*
 - a) *The money basket business “is the quickest form of income.” You see them by the entrances of your local malls and stores, on sidewalks, divided roadways and public parks or gas stations—they hold up signs like “Will work for food.” But in reality, at least for the urban homeless most of their basic needs are met by shelters and missions, so they use the solicited money for non-essential items like cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or even sex Mike even informed me that he knew of 12 drunks who alternated in using the same sign to fund their drinking habits. “If one of these guys comes up to you, begging money for food, don’t give them any. If you feel the need to help them, buy them a burger or a soda*

that way they can't turn around and sell it to feed their (bad) habits. Otherwise, you donated money will only help them to fuck up their lives even more," Mike expounded.

- b) Labor pools are temporary jobs assigned on a daily basis. According to Mike, you arrive at East and 10th, no later than 5:00 am. There, potential employers hand pick their "mules" for the day. If chosen you could end up at a car wash or at the waterfront loading and unloading merchandise for minimum wage, if that.*
- c) Bartering is another economic alternative. "It's the trade game," Mike enlightened me. There is such an abundance of surplus, clothing, canned goods, sleeping bags that many of the homeless possess the luxury of trading or selling these items for other more popular merchandise like cigarettes & alcohol.*
- d) Scavenging for recyclables like aluminum cans redeemable glass bottles and plastic jugs are another alternative source of income. These homeless work hard, 12 hour days seeking out cans in dumpster, gutters, alleys, parks and roadways. And for what? 80 cents to \$1 a pound. It sounds ridiculous, insane even, when you consider they only make and \$12 for the whole day. Why? Why do these homeless people do it? For most, it gives them a sense of freedom to work on their own without a boss dictating their actions. For others, collecting cans, bottles and plastics is a subconscious, psychological defense mechanism against depression, suicide or insanity. By focusing their attention on the task at hand they keep from going over the edge.*
- e) The selling of plasma (blood substance) is another economic option. Earnings range between \$9 to \$25 a pint. But one must pass strict eligibility requirements. Mike claims that the purchased plasma is resold to hospitals or other blood banks for \$175 to \$300 a pint. (I confirmed Mike's claims through several interviews with many employees at several Plasma centers that refuse to go on the record.)*
- 3) Pensions and disability payments make up about 21% of the homeless' total income; making it the third major category of financial resources. (The above three categories account for 80% of the homeless income.)²⁰*
- 4) Contributions from family and friends is 3%, while charity makes up to 5% of the total homeless income.²¹*
- 5) This brings us to the last and miscellaneous category that accounts for 12% of the homeless income.²² It's here that theft, prostitution and drug dealing makes its way as the three extreme forms of acquiring cash. According to Mike, mostly substance abusers resort to such criminal activity like grand theft-auto, burglary, robbery and assault. The reason is simple: they're desperate—captured and enslaved by their addictions. Prostitution is the second extreme source of income. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals engage in this kind of activity. They too are usually drug addicts and alcoholics with teen runaways thrown into the lustful mix of perversion. You find them in Balboa Park for five dollars. Mike refers to the homosexual prostitution section of the park as the "fag drag," because the gay-male hustlers attempt to drag you into the bushes, where one of the two things can happen: you either get their sexual specialty or get ambushed by three others that beat the living hell out of you & steal all your personal possessions. "They lure customers or victims," Mike elaborated, "by saying: 'he needs a job? I could get you a job.'" "Yeah, a fuckin' blow-job," Mark interjects with his usual comedic timing & ejaculatory humor. We all burst out laughing.*
- 6) Drug dealing is the last of the 3 extremes, because the likelihood of the homeless engaging in such activities is highly improbable but not impossible especially if that's the activity that caused them to be homeless in the first place, in which case they still may be "connected." In the end, life's cruel ironies emerge once again as they become strung out on their own product that provided them with the means to make a living. "They steal to buy drugs," Mike explained, "then turn around to sell, it's what they call "doubling-*

up.” This all happens on 13th & Broadway in downtown San Diego & in plain sight of the public & the police.

Suddenly, a short, thin, light skinned and well-groomed, mild mannered man approached us. By the way he presented himself, I assumed he was Mike's social worker or drug counselor visiting him out here in Balboa Park.

"Marcos, they're writing a story on the homeless," Mike gesturing at the stranger.

"Oh yeah, on us?" Marcos replies in a sarcastic tone.

Mike then laughs as if he himself wasn't homeless, but just inconveniently without shelter—tent-less in a two-year camping trip.

"Marcos is homeless right now but he's very intelligent man, he'll find something soon."

After a brief discussion about their dinner plans, Marcos departs without much more conversation. Later I discovered from Mike, that Marcos is a very private person and enjoys reading and spends most of his time in the City College library.

The educational level of a typical homeless person is, not surprisingly, not grossly deficient. Although 37% of the homeless were high school dropouts there exist 32% who are high school graduates. However, no significant differences in education levels between the sheltered and street homeless.²³

Mike resumed to “pass-down” to us two years’ worth of experiences as a homeless person. We sat there, listening attentively to every word he said, as if we were his pupils, giving us a 55-minute crash course on what I jokingly referred to as “The Urban Survival Guide For The Concrete Jungle Of Downtown San Diego.”

“If you want to write an article about anything make sure you go to the 7:00 p.m. thing for the Rescue Mission. Go to the meal. They’re in the business to make money. They are not in the business for anything else. All the clothes you donate to them goes to their store across the street and they sell them.” (*This was an accusation not verified by me and made over 20 years ago, so it may no longer be applicable even if it was proven accurate back then.*)

I began to laugh as I looked at Jed and recalled his donation of clothing he made to the same Rescue Mission that Mike now warned us about. And even though Mike’s allegations were not confirmed, I couldn’t help but think that our first altruistic act for the homeless people could have well been a con after all, however, not by the usual suspects that we were forewarned about by our family and friends. This was a perfect example, why our generation (Gen Xers back then in the early nineties) was so apathetic. We felt our earnest efforts would be betrayed.

“All I can say about them is at least some of the money does go someplace. But go experience the food for yourself, because I can’t say enough about it. If you put it down in front of a dog he wouldn’t eat it. Tonight, will be misleading because it's Thanksgiving Day and they might have turkey. But in turn they do something. It’s the ones out there that are collecting all the money and not going any place, those are the ones I dispute.” (*Once again, keep in mind these were unverified accusations and made over 25 years ago.*)

It seems that no matter what social problems plague society, money always becomes a factor in the solution or in this case, in the treatment of homelessness. And as mentioned in the beginning of the article, in 1996, our federal government allocated \$45 million to San Diego County and according to Ronald W. Powell, staff writer for the San Diego Union-Tribune newspaper, that breaks down to just \$9.45 a day per homeless person. Where does all that money go? And how can \$45 not financially adequate to sustain the homeless in San Diego?

Well, out of \$45 million distributed to San Diego, about \$13 million is manifested as food stamps (grants) and the remaining \$32 million is utilized for programs and services.

The official distribution of these government funds is outlined in financial detail in a report from the “San Diego Regional Task Force on the homeless.”

- 1) Approximately seven cents for health programs like the county’s Department of Health Services, the Logan Heights Family Health Center and other minor clinics around the county.*
- 2) Almost 10 cents goes to treatment of substance abuse and rehabilitation programs offend by numerous non-profit organizations.*

- 3) *Roughly 13 cents is allocated to emergency shelters provided by non-profit organizations and agencies.*
- 4) *15 cents is distributed by the county to mental health services for the chronic mentally ill homeless.*
- 5) *As much as 40 cents is granted to temporary housing (transitional shelters) to assist homeless to return to financial self-sufficiency during an average two year period.*

“...What about the women? I don’t see too many of them out here, why is that?”

“It’s true,” Mike responded, “there aren’t very many women out here. That’s because there are very few women who are alcoholics and drug addicts, at less than men. And women by nature like to be indoors more than men do. Women seem to be more homebody.”

The female homeless population has increased dramatically over the past few decades. This is attributed to the changes in the labor market, the decline of marriage (leaving more women to fend for themselves) and domestic violence. Approximately 20 to 25% of the homeless are women. And 18% are out on the streets while about 30% are in shelters.^[12] These statistics are alarming considering that in the 1950s and 60s female homeless percentages were virtually zero compared to current estimates. The lack of females in earlier times was due to special accommodations offered by shelters to women with young children.

Today, we find that most unattached females are single mothers and head of families. And although, homelessness may afflict more male than females, that is not the case with extreme poverty.

“In 1986 there were about 400,000 AFDC recipients in Chicago and approximately 100,000 GA clients. It appears that the domiciled extremely poor are predominantly female, constituting about 75% of the combined GA and AFDC populations. Women also predominate as the extremely poor throughout the nation at 56% of unattached males earning less than \$4,000 a year”^[13]

From these figures, we can conclude extreme poverty affects more women than men with a stronger inclination among single female parents. “Given the responsibility,” social researcher Ron Rossi, “single mothers take on for feeding, clothing and housing their children, their poverty must be judged even more extreme than is the case for men, few of whom take on such responsibility.”^[14]

This begs the question as to why more men than women succumb to homelessness when confronted by extreme poverty? One reason is gender. In our society, males and females are viewed diversely in a universal sense and understandably more compassion and aid is extended to females. More so, if they are rearing children alone, thus, families offer extra assistance and protection of their female children.²⁴

“What about stories of police harassing the homeless, is there any truth to them?”

“Well, I can’t speak for anyone else but one time I was up at 25th and Imperial... they [San Diego Police] were giving some Mexican guy a ticket for Jay-walking, so naturally I wasn’t going to Jay-walk. So, I waited there until the light changed... I waited three times for it to change, it didn’t, I figured it was broken. I went to walk across the street, the cop says, ‘Buddy come here, you are Jay-walking.’ But I said, ‘the light is not working.’ ‘No, you’re Jay-walking,’ Then he wrote me a ticket. Now I have a warrant for my arrest. I got a Jaywalking ticket while people from across the street were dealing crack. They were passing rocks! This fucking cop gives me a ticket for Jay-walking and they were dealing fuckin’ crack across the street. If it was two blocks down I could understand but it was directly across the street. I said, ‘Buddy, look at this.’ He wrote the ticket out and left.”

Mike went on to tell me another incident that involved his Trinidad friend, Elikio. According to Mike, Elikio found a VCR in a trash dumpster. He hauled it around town in his shopping cart until he stopped and questioned by police. The officers then confiscated the VCR and told Elikio he can claim it in 30 days. Elikio asked for a property receipt to reclaim the VCR after the 30 days expired. The officers told him not to concern himself about that because they would remember him. In the end, when Elikio went to reclaim it after the "required 30 days" a police department official announced they had no record of a VCR. Elikio suspects it's in one of the officer's living room right now.

“You’ll find a lot of prejudice out here,” Mike said. “I find it more so than back east. A lot of racial tension between Blacks and Whites. The nicest people out here are the Mexicans. There is no doubt about it. If I get a little bit of money I eat up at the Mexican restaurants down on 25th. Even the guys that come across the border are nice. It’s

not them that are robbing people, it's the crack addicts and of course the 'wetbacks' get pinned on it. They want to work, that's why they are here. They want to go to L.A. They come here and get the hell out as fast as they can."

*Homelessness possesses no racial and ethnic boundaries—it's widely represented among all: 52% are black, 33% are white, 11% Hispanic, 3% native Indian and 1% Asian.*²⁵

"You mentioned crack addicts, how bad is the drug problem out here?"

"There is a lot of crack out here," Mike, answers. "There is a ton of crack. Not necessarily up here in the park, but when you get down there on 13th... I've been a bartender and used a lot of cocaine. It's a bad, bad, evil and ugly drug. I don't know how a guy like Richard Pryor lived as long as he did... a guy who had all the money to spend and didn't have to stop.... It will be good for you guys to go down to 13th and Broadway at 4:00 p.m. That's where you'll see a lot more. It's a heavy drug area. In that place you'll find \$5 prostitutes. Five dollars and you get it. They sell themselves for drugs. It's where all the drug connections are made. They'll make their phone calls and hook up with it. The police have their hands tied because of the legal system. The police know who the dealers are but for every dealer put away there are five others waiting to take his place. This way they know who they are dealing with."

"What about crime, do you find yourself victimized by thieves?"

"I was robbed at knife point one night by three young white men," Mike confessed, "...They were just hoods down on 13th and Market... then, there is what we call 'bush-beating.' You'll stash your stuff down their (pointing at the brush of the park canyons), and somebody will beat the bushes during the day. You might go to downtown while someone robs your gear. And downtown at night with gear like that (referred to ours), they might gang up on you. Another thing too, it's like any street outlaw, they're going to prey on the most weak."

*About 21% of the homeless have had at least one prison term. And 35% had some jail term. In addition, 16 studies in Rossi's book, "Down and Out in America," suggest that 42% have been in prison or jail or both. Obviously, the conviction rates for felonies and minor crimes among the homeless are higher than the mainstream adult population and the extremely poor. The criminal record becomes an economic cross to bare since it clearly becomes a liability in seeking employment.*²⁶

At this point Mark interceded by asking if we can join along with him for the next couple of days.

Mike replied, "I kinda' travel alone and you would only be getting my opinion."

He was right; we would only be limiting ourselves to a single person's perspective.

*Michael McDonald epitomizes the typical homeless person by being unmarried, no steady job, extremely low income, if any, too young to qualify for old-age pensions, no children and who's been homeless for two years which falls into the average time range between 3 months to 25 months. Incidentally, 13% of the homeless have been homeless for four years or more, according to Rossi's Chicago Homeless study.*²⁷

I finally ask Mike *the* question that's been gnawing at me—"So how did you end up homeless?"

"I've been a bartender," Mike responded without hesitation, "for years I've worked from Boston to Florida, from the Virgin Islands to St. Thomas... I spent about six years in Colorado... worked in casinos in Las Vegas... made more money in the 1970's than I did in the 80's... at least \$5 an hour and \$100 in tips a night. That was 1972. I had a sports car, man. I had everything I wanted. I used to take months off and go down to Florida spoiled like a bastard. Then I'd go skiing to Colorado for the winter. Then I started to drink and ended up in the streets. I had a high rate burn-out syndrome. Snorting cocaine and doing booze. See, what puts people out here is basic problems in their lives, whether it's the loss of a lover, wrecked marriage, alcohol or drugs." (Again, I am completely surprised by his honest candor—no lame excuses... no forfeiture of personal responsibility.)

"That's about basically, all I can say," Mike resigned. "The rest of it you can feel out for yourselves. I think what will happen is you'll find this more boring than anything else. After a couple of days, you guys will be bored stiff. When you get here by yourself, with nobody to talk to, you'll soon be talking to one of these trees."

With that we parted company and agreed to meet back at the park, later that night. When the darkness of the dying day dawns upon us again.

We arrived at the Rescue Mission. Live gospel music was being played as we walked through the front doors. Mark and I were directed to go to the basement to store our gear where we received a ticket stub upon relinquishing our possessions for temporary storage and preceded upstairs into the dining area.

At first, it seemed like a party, beautiful young girls and lovely women hustling about, eagerly serving homeless people who were sitting and waiting to be served seconds. Mark and I look at each other in disbelief and shrugged our shoulders at the uncertainty of the unfolding scene before us as we advanced forward, only to be escorted to a table by one of the many female volunteers. As we sat down we noticed a television cameraman interviewing homeless people (those who would volunteer to talk, that is).

Our food arrived with no delay and served with a smile; in fact they were so accommodating, I was expecting them to ask, “Do you want fries with that?” In front of us was exactly what Mike said to expect on this holiday: turkey, mashed potatoes, biscuits, gravy, cranberry sauce, sliced carrots, two pints of milk with pumpkin pie for dessert. Wow, I thought to myself, these people eat better than I do at home. Then I recalled Mike’s remarks that today’s meal, at the Rescue Mission, would be misleading due to the holiday.

The crowds of voices in the dining area sounded like buzzing bees humming in constant motion. There was a strange harmony amid the reverberating buzzes; a symphony of voices with its own crescendos that invited my conscious mind into an open-eye trance of tranquility. But the curtain fell and ended my hypnotic state, when a mentally disturbed man seated next to me mumbles to himself about “angels.” Instantly, I’m jolted back to the current reality of the moment and begin to feel uneasy about the close proximity of the mentally ill stranger. I’m suddenly reminded of where I am and what I am doing, which brought back a certain apprehension I first felt when Mark and I first got off the trolley and began this trek of tragedy. Suddenly my tough inner resolve dissolved away, as my eyes darted across the room, desperately seeking visual seclusion; attempted to avoid direct eye contact with any of the homeless people, as if for the first time I had truly acknowledged their dire circumstances of these people and not just mere components for my literary text.

THE HOLLOW MEN

By T.S. Eliot

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.
Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crow skin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer—

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

Mark and I finished our meal and headed back to the basement to recover our gear. There we decided to split up. Mark explored the auditorium where live gospel music was being performed, while I re-entered the dining area to photograph and interview people. It is here that I met Channel 8's News anchorwoman, Margaret Radforth.

Upon reuniting with Mark, I explored the building further and observed and recorded one of those rare but tragically ironic situation scenes that professional photographers seek to shoot. A young white male with shirt and tie standing upright on my left side, religiously giving praise to his God by having his right arm raised and fully extended, while his eyes closed in a submissive manner—paying homage to his savior.

To me, he signified all the hope and inspiration, all the success and triumphs, all the faith and belief in God and the American Dream. But out of the corner of my eye, through my camera lens, a sorrowful and sobering image shattered that illusion of prosperity with the harsh reality of a raggedy man sat on a chair on my right hand side. This image took hold of me. It took hold of me like nothing else ever had in my life. He sat there, with his arms and hands clenched together between his legs in a semi-fetal position, staring straight ahead like some sitting corpse—gazing into nothingness.

Here, sat before me, hopelessness and despair, failure and abandonment, faithlessness and disbelief—the by-product of the American Nightmare. This scene of two diametrically different individuals burned into my mind like some cattle prod, stamp and still sizzling into my brain. It was like witnessing the physical manifestation of Taoism—a perverted personification of Yin and Yang.

But why?

Why was this destitute person in such a stark state of affairs in our society? Was he out on the streets of his own choosing, like Mike had explained? Or was he one of a small percentage of mentally ill people unjustly discharged from mental institutions in the early 1980's, under the Reagan Administration due to budget cuts or misappropriation of government funds? Was he a victim of the government's bureaucracy or just a sad product of his own laziness?

Right now, at this moment, I have to say, I don't know... I don't know. But here was a man, in a distraught state of being. Psychologically wounded, emotionally depleted, and socially numbed. He sat in a catatonic state, crying out for help—screaming out through his silence! And yet, in an auditorium filled with workers from different “charity” organizations and “Christian” servants from various churches, his cry for help went unheeded. Sure, they fed him. Yes they provided him with food. But what was most needed for this person and others like him was not physical nourishment but human contact that can provide the mental, emotional and spiritual sustenance they so much starve for and urgently need to truly be human. Otherwise, by just providing for their basic physical needs and isolating them, we only prolong their waking coma of existence. They become urban zombies living out a dark and deluded existence. And it is this lack of human contact that is the most destructive. For everywhere they go, as Ann Bennett has noted in her book, “it is silence that greets them; each of these individuals live on their own, sleep on their own, without taking any account of their neighbor. They sever their contact with other human beings and grow accustomed to this lack of human contacts. They end by no longer knowing what day it is, and also by no longer caring, in the absence of human connections. This is how street life could, for them, become easier than life in society. Because the loss of physical feeling involved an emotional numbing as well. And since it is through feelings that one knows oneself, when the feelings go, so does the Self.”²⁸ The end result sat before me and all I could do at the moment was take a photograph and leave, knowing full well there wasn't going to be anyone to save him and his kind at the Rescue Mission.

"Love Town" by Peter Gabriel



THE HOLLOW MEN

By T.S. Eliot

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

4:30 p.m.—“*Dysfunctional Individuals Due To A Social System Disorder*”

After waking up from a short nap and roaming around the museums in Balboa Park, we decided to search for our dinner. We walked no more than a half a mile, when we discovered a food line down on a vacant parking lot where several television news crews were setting up for a live broadcast.

There we find Mike, Marcos and Elikio eating among the other 20 or 30 homeless people. I learned that the majority of the homeless population are at the Salvation Army, which explained the presence of Mike and his friends stocking up on canned goods, clothing and of course a thanksgiving meal.

For the first time, I saw a lot of couples with children. They appeared to look like middle-class folks than homeless people. It's a strange sight to see because up until now, we were only exposed to the stereotypical false images of homeless individuals associated as the dregs of society. And as our “Expedition to Homelessness” continued, we saw more and more of these families in shelters and employment centers. Most of these people were victims of unemployment, overdue bills that led to bankruptcy or they were victims of life's indiscriminate, unforeseen and unfortunate external forces beyond their control.

At the time I believed there were only 6 categorical causes that contributed to the socio-economic epidemic of homelessness: 1) The Economy, 2) Lack of Affordable Housing, 3) Inadequate Public Assistance, 4) The Collapse of Social Ties with Family, 5) Domestic Violence, and 6) Disabilities. I cite them here and now as an example of how I used to think about the issue.

5:20 p.m.—“*EROS: The Enemy Of Reason*”

Mark and I returned to Balboa Park to rejoin Elikio, Mike, Marcos and their friend Dave, at the same site where we interviewed Mike earlier. There, Elikio (who is 29 years old) is talking to the guys about a recent relationship with an upper-class female that he had to break-up within light of his independence.

“...I just don't want to be a victim of slavery...,” Elikio exclaimed.

Dave laughs and overbearingly razzed Elikio with good-nature humor like, “...Elikio, you're full of shit! You're just embarrassed to say the truth; you and your little dick just can't handle that pussy...”

The conversation degenerated into a short round of penis jokes, until it's interrupted by Elikio's rage, “Shut the FUCK UP!”

Mike diplomatically intervened to prevent a hostile situation from escalating. “Elikio is right. Nothing in life is free. Being married or having a girlfriend is self-defeating. And once you sling your ding in her, you've fallen prey to

the most prehistoric feminine trap since the Garden of Eden—[romantic] passion. Passion for a woman. It brought down Adam; it will bring you down too. It's the most expensive luxury on earth that you can do without. Otherwise, it will bankrupt your life—sorry, no cash back, no withdrawals folks!"

"So, you're saying," I attempted to clarify, that romantic passion is a drug, a voluntary addiction that enslaves and abandons you with excruciating withdrawal symptoms upon break-up?"

"You got it!"

Jed rolled his eyes; however, I pondered upon such an extreme perspective regarding relationships while the rest of the guys carried on with their conversations. I found myself in a meditative daze; tuned out of the ongoing conversation, while dwelling upon the possible reality of Mike and Elikio's statements. Don't misunderstand me, I realized their statements were sexist and exaggerated beyond reality, but underneath their extreme line of reasoning, lays a legitimate concern: how much of giving yourself to another person is too much? Should one compromise their goals, ambition, career or identity if it interferes with the relationship? If not, do you go your separate ways and risk losing your perceived one true love forever? Let's take it a step further and say you do achieve the success you've sought for all your life in whatever form or fashion, and when it comes time to hang it up you're left alone and realize that all your hard work and extreme sacrifices were in vain if you have no one to share them with. Then the true question emerges: is there a middle ground where you can have both a loving relationship and one of your dreams fulfilled?

Judging from dozens upon dozens of couples that I've met and come to know very well, including my parents and my girlfriend's parents, the answer seemed to be a dishearten—NO. And belief otherwise is another form of delusion, and I now detest delusions of any kind. The guys' on-going discussions were drowned out by my own thoughts, mostly by attempting to recall Voltaire's very appropriate quote: "Love is of all passions the strongest, for it attacks simultaneously the head, the heart, and the senses." It's a testimony to denounce romantic relationships that interfere with the personal pursuit of a self-reliant individualist, striving in singular passion to excel beyond oneself. For this individualist, the pursuit of one's goals and dreams become a fight for self-preservation in order to avoid becoming an "Inauthentic Being." It's funny, up until now, I had completely forgotten this quote. It was as if a subconscious fog has been lifted and allowed my conscious being to awaken and rediscover that we all have a human responsibility to ourselves to make our lives extraordinary.

I'm afraid, however, that my relationship and love for my girlfriend—Dazza (not her real name), had, through no fault of her own, subdued my need for transcendence in the mainstream mode of playing it safe. It has humbled me to seek security rather than opportunity. It has made me a kept citizen dulled by mere existence and inhibited me to take the calculated risk, to dream and to build, to fail and to succeed. It made me prefer the guaranteed existence over the challenges of life; the stale calm utopia over the thrill of fulfillment. It has subverted my stand for the "outright rebellion against those who would institutionalize our most precious possession, personal human responsibility for living meaningful lives."

It was now time to abdicate that role as a conspirator of the common person for conventional existence. And as unrealistic as that may sound, it's not. For I have learned from personal observation and experience, you can choose to be who you want to be, as insurmountable some life circumstances may be, if you have some foundational pillars of support and self-discipline, it can be done. But, as Mike and Elikio suggested, when romantic love enters the picture and you become struck down with romantic passion, discipline goes out the window and be assured so do most of your daring dreams.

At this point in my life, I realized that to some small degree this has begun to happen to me. Because there is a part of me that longed to be back home with my girlfriend—Dazza. I yearned to feel her touch, to see her smile, to kiss her tender lips of flames; to willingly give into her and forget about "My Restless Dreams of Youth."

But there was another part of me that was afraid—terrified of ever marrying her. Horrified of what that could mean; that succumbing to romantic desires would mean surrendering a part of my identity and sacrificing some of my bold dreams. It would mean living out an ordinary existence of false contentment and unwanted complacency. For sexual passion can be an intoxicating "soma" that "fades in flavor" then becoming a stern master, you live in its house you will be its slave. (At least that is how it's beginning to be felt).

So, there were times that I thought it was a mistake to be romantically involved with her at that point in my life. But all it took was just one look, one look from her and I began to think that sometimes it was good to surrender to

your mistakes—surrender to *Erns* (sexual love or desire), for the heart has a wisdom of its own (Or so I thought or tried to rationalize).

Then there were Dazza's career goals and personal feelings to consider. For her, a life with me as an eXistential Journalist would mean putting her through unnecessary emotional strain, for at that very moment, she was deeply and overwhelmingly concerned for my personal welfare. Sure, after this assignment was over, I would go to her and she would run to me and envelop herself into my arms and at that moment our lives would seem perfect and complete. Everything would be as it should—normal—until the next self-appointed assignment and the next one after that and so on. I couldn't expect her to continue to endure the mental anguish and emotional distress that I would be inflicting upon her.

The obvious alleviation was to give up my work. But "every man's work is a portrait of himself." So, I would be giving up not what I do but surrendering who I am. That's the ultimate existential sin! So, for our relationship to work, Dazza's needed to accept that my work comes first because it is a big part of who I am. In return, I needed to understand the difficulty and sacrifice in that acceptance. It was a burden we both would have to bear. If not, then my professional life would reign down on her in ways that she wouldn't be able to survive.

Then there was the issue of marriage and starting a family, what kind of a father would I be to my children, when I'm off investigating other journalistic leads instead of tucking them in at night or missing their first performance in a school play and not being there for them on their birthdays or graduations. What kind of a husband would I be to Dazza when I'm too preoccupied with my work, consumed by the fire in my gut, and unable celebrate our wedding anniversary on the actual day or spend enough intimate time together. She would begin to harbor deep resentment and profound bitterness towards my career and eventually for me. I didn't want to do that to her; I cared for her too much. And so, I was left to choose one or the other; between my life's dream or my "dream girl." (Or what I thought back then was my dream girl).

6:10 p.m.—*"The Soulful Subjugation By The Corporate American System"*

Up until then, Marcos had been virtually silent, as if observing Mark and me and not knowing what to make of us. I decided to make an attempt to illicit some form of dialogue. It didn't take much, before a communicative human being unfolded before my eyes.

"Did you read that article in the *San Diego Reader* [a free local newspaper magazine]?" Marcos asked in his Spanish accent. "That's all bullshit! It's about a guy who goes homeless like you (gestured to Jed and me), for one night. And on the first night he came to Balboa Park and when walking, he said, from a bush a hand grabbed him. At last, it was a homeless guy that only wanted a cigarette. But that's false. That never happened to me or to you (pointing to Mike). That's for giving more emotion to an article. But that I tell you is false. False, false, false. Never from a bush has a hand grabbed me, that's from detective stories."

We all laugh. Of course, he too committed a fallacy by presuming that since he and Mike never experienced such a scene, then no one ever has, thus, he was making a faulty generalization that demonstrated how we can be confined to perspectives from our own personal involvements and anything outside our realm of experience does not exist or in this case did not happen.

Marcos refused to reveal his true origins, but Jed suspected somewhere deep down south as far as Central America. Marcos informs us that it took him two months to travel from his country to Texas, where he first entered the U.S. illegally.

"So, Marcos, why do you sleep out here when there are shelters all over the city?" "No rules and no restrictions while sleeping outside," Marcos answered. "I have the freedom to do my own thing. That's why I sleep in the canyons, because I have the freedom... I have the power!"

"Give me your thoughts about your situation, about homelessness."

"Free food, free clothing and free shelter... it has its goods and its bads," Marcos articulated. "Because our basic needs are being provided for, we can pick and choose which jobs to work. We don't have to prostitute ourselves or commit crimes to survive out here. We don't have to be financially raped for twelve hours a day of hard labor, shoveling concrete or tar for minimum wage. But what happens is your will becomes weaker and weaker every month. I become lazier and lazier. The body gets stronger, but the spirit gets weaker. They feed our bodies but starve our souls."

Mike elaborated, "I think they're helping us too much."

"Really?!" I exclaimed in a surprise manner, expecting to hear whining complaints of not enough help.

"...They almost encourage us to be homeless. It's like they're supporting a subculture. Don't get me wrong, the food is good, but I think they're helping too much. I think they think they're helping, but it can sedate you... it can sedate you. If everything is given to you, then you get lulled into it (homelessness). I've seen guys spend their welfare money on drugs knowing that they can come up here and get something to eat. Whereas, if they didn't have the food they would have to think a little bit."

Marcos intervened by saying, "Homelessness is the price that American society has to pay for the American Machinery. The American way of life is the problem... the things you think are right are the most wrong. The American way of thinking is not progressive thinking but regressive thinking."

Suddenly a shadowy figure jumps on top of the roof of the park's public restroom facing in front of us.

"Oh, that's Larry," Mike explained, "he sleeps alone up there as a defensive tactic, you know, homeless predators won't think to look up there and those who do make enough noise to give Larry time to prepare a defense."

"That's pretty clever. I imagine existing in this kind of environment makes you very resourceful," I added.

"We've got our moments," Mike asserted.

I then proceeded to ask how he and Marcos go about acquiring money when the need for it presented itself. He explained nine ways of acquiring funds, which I will simply list and not elaborate on as he did: 1) Public Assistance like welfare, food stamps or social security; 2) collecting and recycling aluminum cans; 3) Money bucket collections or scams; 4) selling plasma from their blood at \$20 a pop; 5) daily labor pools or other forms of temporary jobs; 6) bartering/trading; 7) theft (one of the three criminal extremes); 8) prostitution (the second); and 9) drug dealing (the third). I will only expound upon five of the nine.

Collecting and recycling aluminum cans is hard work according to Mike. "These people work hard 12 hours days seeking out cans in dumpsters, gutters, alleys, parks, etc. And for what? 80 cents a pound. It sounds ridiculous, insane even, when you consider they only make about \$12 the whole day."

Why? Why do these people do it? For most, it gives them a sense of freedom to work on their own without a boss dictating their actions. For others, collecting cans is an unconscious psychological defense mechanism against depression, suicide or insanity. By focusing their attention to their task, they keep from going over the edge. In an existential sense, is this so different from the rest of us? Today, many of us live and work in analogous circumstances but once again in socially acceptable ways.

Selling plasma ranges from \$20 to \$35 a pint. But Mike insisted that the plasma sold by donors is resold to hospitals and blood banks for \$175 to \$300 a pint. If true, our for-profit medical industry is literally sucking the life blood out of the homeless at basement low prices.

Labor pools are temporary jobs assigned on a daily basis. According to Mike, "You arrive at 'E' street and 10th avenue, no later than 5 am. There, potential employers hand pick their 'mules' for the day. If chosen you could end up in a car wash or at the waterfront loading and unloading merchandise for minimum wage, if that." (This extreme exploitation of the economic underclass not only epitomizes the Marxist's critiques of capitalism but it's the stark reality come to life).

8:01 p.m.—*"A Human Tragedy Behind Every Homeless Person"*

Conversation died down to a snore as my partner Jed and our homeless friend Mike slept as comfortably as one can get on the cold concrete slab that is our bed. Amber overhead lights flickered on, its yellowish luminous glow, glared upon us in our crib of sleepless-hibernation that was adjacent to Balboa Park's storage facility.

Marcos leaned forward and towards me and whispered, "There is a human tragedy behind every homeless person... What each of these people need is love. We need friendship. We need tenderness and care. I need love. Love is the most important thing."

I immediately felt his isolationism, the abandonment and absence of human connections. All of this swirled within me, as instant memory flashes of "the Raggedy Man" of the Rescue Mission whirled wind into my mind. More specifically, the charity workers' and Christian servants' hollow display of emotional concern towards him; appearing to be nothing more than a lifeless lifeline into the wind.

I realized that without genuine sentiments of concern for our fellow “selves,” we cannot feel another’s grief; we cannot understand another’s joy. We imagine that we can reach one another but in reality we only pass each other by. With this realization, I leaned forward towards Marcos and extended my right hand. With a slight hesitation—a mental pause—he reached back with his right hand and nodded in a sympathetic manner as we established the human connection of friendship, however brief it may be.

With that he gathered up his gear and departed for the valley; into the park canyons to retire for the evening. As he walked away, he stopped to look back at me and made a subtle, semi-self-conscious hand gesture of hope, then he slinked off into the shadow of night—the deep black of midnight—into the oblivion of obscurity.

THE HOLLOW MEN

By T. S. Eliot

IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

Personal Log: Nov. 25, 1993; 7:15 a.m.

It was the morning after Thanksgiving. After waking up a few thousand times during the glacial night and early frosty predawn hours, I finally surrendered all effort to sleep. Apparently, Mark has done the same. After washing up in the public park restroom, we packed up our gear and headed over to last evening's vacant lot where Mike informed us yesterday of that morning's breakfast feast.

7:30 a.m.—“Most Americans Just Two Paychecks Away From Homelessness”

We arrived at the breakfast site and waited along with 25 other homeless “brunchers.” Suddenly, an elderly white gentleman, who looked a bit like comedian George Carlin, with long white hair in a ponytail, ushers us towards the front of the line. He informs us that “it’s ok, they’re in line for seconds. You and your friend are allowed to go ahead of them.” He introduces himself as Carl Christie, a retired 52 year old San Diegan. He seems lonesome and eager to talk to us, earnest even, as if we were the first surviving humans he's encountered in a post-nuclear holocaust.

As we approached the front of the line I noticed that pancakes were being served with either coffee or orange juice by other homeless people who just ate. These homeless people served us are under the supervision of Carson, a servant from the Community Church of San Diego. After a brief interview with him, he informed me of his motives for having the same homeless people he's feeding to serve and feed their fellow homeless. “By allowing themselves to participate in the cooking and serving of the food gives them the opportunity to reinforce their self-worth

and regain their self-esteem.” Carson went on to say, “We are all just a few paychecks away from becoming homeless.” The thought of that startling reality unsettled my soul based on past personal experiences (but I digress).

7:41 a.m.—“*Carl Triggers The Tingling Of Our ‘Spider’-Sense*”

“You know if you’re still hungry,” Carl informed us, “the 1st Lutheran Church is having a Thanksgiving breakfast...”

Thanksgiving breakfast, (I think to myself), you got to be kidding me? At my house, my family would be fighting over the dry, day-old, leftover turkey.

“...I’m heading over there right now, if you two would like I’ll show you where it is.”

“No, I know where the church you’re talking about is at,” Mark Intervenes, “we’ll just meet you there.” Mark sensed the same thing I did about this guy; he was hiding something.

We walked for about a mile and a half and along the way we saw dozens among dozens of homeless people walked in the same direction, towards the same destination like the biblical exodus out of the land of Egypt and the 1st Lutheran Church is the Promise Land for all the “soulless” wanderers of the concrete wilderness.

8:36 a.m.—“*The Dark Matter Of Two Shadow Worlds*”

Upon our approach of the church, the same reoccurring sight greeted us—the enormously long food lines. There was no escaping them. Standing and waiting in line becomes a way of life and ironically enough a metaphor for this kind of existence. The “outside world” railroaded past us like blurred apparitions in a passing metro train without so much as an introspective hiccup to our dire existence. This dismal pretense and socially apathetic attitude of our presence made me feel that we lived in another dimension or primitive plane of existence that was underserving of attention by those who thought they were living their lives any more meaningful than those who existed on the streets.

I began to perceive that there were two worlds. The first was the world that I came from, the one we inhabited daily, the world of alarm clocks and traffic jams, a world sized between communication and noise. It is ordered and predictable. No card-board-box-houses and shopping-cart-automobiles here. Everything seems possible, but rarely anything is existentially meaningful. Far beyond and all around, lies the second world, a primal and empty “shadow world,” where the day begs the night for mercy.

Both worlds—the one at the classroom and the one in the shadows—coexisted oddly in my consciousness. The result was a cognitive dissonance; a social and psychological paradox that began to transform this homeless mind of mine into a headless corpse—the shattering of my self-image—the genesis of the annihilation process of the Self.

This psychological perception continued to propel within me as we stood in line on the sidewalk while KPBS public television camera crew shot video footage of us without a word or a friendly gesture, as if we were some species of exotic zoo creatures at a wild animal safari; merely features for one of their “nature” documentaries. I guess it was true, there is a season for everything. Just as there is a season to film birds flying south for the winter or broadcast live news coverage of groundhogs that come out of their holes to cast its shadow for a seasonal forecast, so it is with Thanksgiving—the season of the homeless. (I realized later that I was little better than anyone else since I decided to do this story on Thanksgiving.)

10:10 a.m.—“*Averting Being ‘Railroaded’ By Carl*”

After finishing our breakfast and preparing to depart, I noticed that Carl has been waiting for us, long after he finished his meal. He insisted on escorting us back to the park. He became our self-appointed “tour guide,” as we ascended up the grassy hill of Balboa Park. “They call this place ‘Queen’s Circle’ or ‘Fruit Loop.’”

“Why do they call it that?” I inquired.

“Well, you can see, the parking lot has a figure eight shape, and this is the place where male homosexuals solicit customers and so this is how we got the name...”

Carl, a resident in downtown San Diego for 15 years, walked and talked with all the authority of a hostess. Then suddenly, with no observable warning, picked up what could be one of the planet’s most feared instruments of slow death off the ground—a used syringe. I froze. As a virtual stranger possibly held one of the most devastating and

deadly virus in his hands—AIDS. (Keep in mind this was a period of time that the HIV scare was so pervasive that its public service announcements were, to Gen Xers, the equivalent danger that nuclear war was to Baby Boomers growing up in the shadow of the atomic bomb).

It was moments like these that made the sands of seconds seem like an ocean without a shore. Time. My guard went up, my awareness level jumped to a new high. Time. The adrenalin surged through my body and pumped my blood into a throbbing state of readiness. Time. I prepared myself for battle, against the most life-threatening assault of my life. Time. Like an instant white flash, Carl broke the needle off the syringe on a nearby tree, thus, immediately diffused a potentially explosive assault on our health.

“This is the reason why I get tested,” as he gestured to the dismantled needle. “I test myself every four months,” he reassured Jed and me in such an ambiguous manner as to have made me wondered how he knew so much about this area. “I have a lot of homosexual and bisexual friends... (he gauged our facial reactions, as if waiting for some sign of approval). “In fact, I knew a fellow who we called ‘Spider Woman’ I forget why, but he was a black San Diego city official who dressed up as a girl... I can't believe anyone who would go to so much trouble to look like a woman... I mean, you don't have to dress up like a woman to be touched like one.”

(OOOOHHH SSSSHHHIT! I thought to myself). In that instant of realization, Mark and I looked at each other while in a temporary state of paralysis. After we recovered from this subtle sexual solicitation, Mark speed walked past me but not before muttering to me, “Yeah, and you don't have to look like a bitch to be slapped like one.”

From this subtle request, Carl became bolder by inviting me and Mark to his place to “acquaint ourselves better with a nice massage.” By this time Mark is already a good 25 yards ahead of us and accelerating. I, on the other hand, overcame my uneasiness of the initial shock and attempted to handle the situation as sensitively as I can by cordially declining his offer and rushing out of there while Carl followed.

We all three arrived at the museums in Balboa Park. There, at the Railroad Museum, while Carl goes in for a closer view of the trains I made my departure and rejoined Mark, who by this time is a good eighth of a mile away.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” Mark sarcastically asked.

“I stood him up at the Train Exhibit,” I bantered.

“So, you ditched the old man.”

“Yeah,” I answered, “And with no assistance from you I may add.”

Mark laughed and retorted, “What’s the matter, were you afraid he was going to pull a ‘train’ on you at the Railroad Museum?”

“Pull a train on me, what do you mean?” I unwillingly asked.

“Well, that’s when you’re the passenger car and his is the caboose and you get rear ended.”

We both laughed.

Personal Log: Nov. 25, 1993, 11:30 a.m.—“Mark’s Downward Spiral of Nihilism”

“It’s hopeless,” Mark shook his head while he whispered to himself. “There’s nothing I can do... There’s nothing any of us can do.”

“What? What are you saying?” I inquired.

“This whole thing... homelessness... it’s hopeless,” he answered. “I don’t even know what the hell I’m doing out here anymore!”

“Easy man, take it easy... Now, tell me, what’s piercing your skull?”

“For the past few days,” he began to explain, “we’ve been ignored and outcast by the public and the police. And the only time our presence has been known by them is when we’re ticketed for loitering or being kicked out from stores or restaurants.... In many ways we’ve been discriminated against and socially persecuted by merchants and authorities while the general public continues on its merry-apathetic way,” Mark stated with unusual concern never before witnessed by me. “They just don’t care.... They just don’t.”

“I understand how you feel,” I responded, “But THEY, my friend, are US and WE are THEM. And as ashamed as I am to admit it, my actions prior to this homeless endeavor were no more fundamentally different from THEIRS. And I suspect your behavior towards the homeless wasn’t any more profoundly altruistic either. But look at us now, you and I have attained a new level of consciousness—a deeper and more psychological and emo-

tional understanding into the problem of these people. We took action. We acted. We sought to understand and not just by reading about it but by doing. That has to count for something, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but what impact can two guys make with this 'new consciousness' when people don't even want to hear about the homeless.... The public's previous interest about the homeless during the 80's was only a trendy wave of temporary concern that has now become a passing fad and swept under the rug along with the rest of society's unsolvable problems like racism, crime, and drugs [...]. Nobody wants to hear it anymore... nobody wants to care. And with our current survival of the fittest society and cut-throat economy, no one can afford to care."

"Then we have to make people care," I tried to reassure him. "We have to get them to stop looking the other way and force them to stare caringly straight into downtrodden faces of our destitute—into our own vacant hearts of our compassionless disaffiliation with the poor and homeless."

"And just how are you going to do that," Mark intercepted with a dismal tone.

"By getting people to see past the popular stereotypical attitudes and convenient myths that presupposes most homeless as slackers, alcoholics, criminals, drug abusers, or insane, in order to absolve ourselves of the guilt and relieve us of the moral responsibility to truly help solve this social problem. And although we've seen our share of dregs of society, we both know they are the visible minority, maybe making up only 10% of the homeless population, but we prefer to paint the entire poor and homeless population with this brush in order to shift the blame away from society and onto them, as an individually caused dysfunction."

"But we can't make people care," Mark asserted vehemently, "no matter how aware the public becomes, that's not going to make them act."

"You're right, but we can't just sit around and do nothing. We can't lie under the cool shade and hope things will get better. Or be so preoccupied with making a living to lull us into a state of social entropy. We need the American public to evolve emotionally and mentally into one collective consciousness that responds to the social dysfunctions or the loss of human connections as intensely as one would feel the agony of a severed arm or leg."

Mark began to listen while crossing his arms over his chest in a solemn manner.

"... And the only way to accomplish this," I continued, "is to make them see the worry and the weariness of the homeless parents whose only consolation at the end of a long futile day is their child's tearful embrace. We need mainstream society to feel the longing and the loneliness of the working poor whose debilitating descent of depression have only earned them the wages of suicidal thoughts; to feel the nauseating growl of hunger bubbling in the empty stomachs of the physically disabled homeless. We need everyone to hear the silent surrender of the human spirit out of the hopeless sigh of today's homeless veterans; to hear the loss of human self-worth coming from the soliciting lips of our teenage runaway homeless prostitutes. We need everybody to smell the drunken-booze-breath of desperation and isolation from the disavowed humans by our society; to smell not only the stench of the lack of human hygiene but the existential decomposition of our own humanity; to see the psychological deterioration of our mentally disabled thrown out of our hospitals like disposable beings. All of us need to taste the very cup of hemlock that we've been serving the poor and the homeless and who have drunk from it for so long that it has either numbed or soured them to the existential extinguishment in order to force ourselves to create the anecdote to save them... and ultimately ourselves."

"What do you mean, save ourselves?" Mark asked.

"Just what I said, we need to view homelessness not as an individual affair of personal responsibility but as a deteriorating condition of our society at large and in general. A symptomatic ailment of a greater disease—homelessness is the Ebola virus of the American dream. George Bernard Shaw, English playwright and social reformer put it this way, 'such poverty as we have today in all our cities degrades the poor and infects with its degradation the whole neighborhood in which they live. And whatever can degrade a neighborhood can degrade a country and a continent and finally the whole civilized world, which is only a large neighborhood.'"

Mark doesn't say a word but nods in such a way as to acknowledge what I said.

"You see, homelessness is not an individual matter. Contrary to popular belief, homelessness is not solely the result of bad personal characteristics. It is not just due to poor individual traits but instead it's also the by-product of the past political and economic changes that occurred throughout our nation."

"I don't know about that?" Mark interjected. "We've met a few homeless people who have personally admitted to us that they choose to be out here, they choose to be homeless... that this is 'just one big camping trip,' remember?"

"Yeah, I remember... I remember what Mike said."

"Do you also remember what he said the cause of his homelessness was?" Mark asked, as he paused, waiting for a response from me. "He attributed it to his drinking and cocaine abuse. I'd call that a bad personal trait, an individual cause for his misfortune, wouldn't you?"

"Granted, Mike did admit that but I would argue that something is fundamentally wrong with our society when there are people who feel they have to resort to substance abuse to feel better and alleviate the problems and pressures caused by our society. And even then, that only confirms that Mike represents 5% to 10% of the total homeless population that claims to be homeless. That leaves us with 90% of the homeless who are out on the streets not by choice or individual fault. So, you see, it's only until we perceive the homeless situation as a broken link to the human chain that we will begin to mend the broken pieces of society as a whole. But if we continue to allow this human chain to come undone then the moral foundation of our society will continue to unravel."

"Come on, aren't you being a little melodramatic here?" Mark asserted.

"We've had homelessness and poverty all over the world for thousands of years, probably since the beginning of human history. And I'm willing to wager my life, that it will continue to be that way as long as this planet continues to orbit around the sun."

"That's being a little pessimistic don't you think?"

"Its reality is what it is," Mark answered.

"You know I never pegged you as a cynic. Isn't that the type of nihilism that justifies our inaction. This is the reason why homelessness and all the other social problems plaguing humanity have existed for so long," I interjected. "We merely accept it. Because it's a lot easier to tolerate poor conditions and injustice than it is to change them unless, of course, it's personally affecting us in some direct manner through friends or family. The only reason we would bother to put a fire out from a neighbor's house is because we personally know them, the ego satisfaction of becoming a hero or because the flames threaten to engulf our own home."

"You can't alter poverty for anyone except for yourself," Mark retorted adamantly.

"Wow. You know what you sound like don't you?"

"No... what?"

"A Republican."

Mark laughed because he possessed a massive disdain for them. "Seriously, how can anyone expect to solve huge social problems like homelessness when no one gives a fuck.... I mean, the only time you'll get anyone to care about the homeless is on Thanksgiving and Christmas. There's something about the American psyche that needs to see everybody fed on at least these two days of the year—a turkey for every adult, a toy for every child. But the mob mindedness of the public fails to produce adequate incentives to resolve the true causes of homelessness. They simply feed it on holidays."

"You're right, you are absolutely right. And the reason most of us give to the homeless is not out of the true spirit of giving, but out of guilt. Because we feel very fortunate for living our own comfortable existence but disturbed about the lives of the poor and the reality that they suffer just to survive. Many of us give because we feel guilty and do it more out of remorse than out of compassion. And it's this type of "guilt giving" that manages to contaminate the act by not truly sharing with them our own benevolence. Instead, we only end up erecting a wall between us and the homeless—a wall where we throw our gift over to them because we don't feel their anguish and desperation; to emotionally perceive their human connection to us."

"Yeah, and what is just as shallow," Mark vehemently added, "are those who only volunteer to help the poor on the holidays. I understand the importance of helping the unfortunate on these days, but why stop after the Christmas season? And what makes it truly tragic is that even a convicted murderer is supplied a bed to sleep on, shelter to dwell under, and food to eat for more than a couple weeks out of the year. And it's this type of absurdity that makes me believe that there exists virtually no hope of solving any of humanity's problems."

"If that's how you feel, if every attempt we make towards change is futile, why are you even out here?"

Mark hesitated before he attempted a response and then surrendered all effort completely with a sigh.

"What? What is it?" I asked. "You sound like you're trying to talk yourself out of something."

"More like trying to convince myself to keep going forward. It's just that... I came out here because I wanted to get a firsthand look of who I'd be helping and what kind of impact I could make for these people once I finish school and become employed as a social worker. I wanted to know that my years of college education would be

worth it... that I might make a difference. That this trip out here would be a beginning... a starting point for me to give something back to society... to become re-inspired... but instead uh... uh..."

"—Instead, it made you feel personally insignificant—impotent," I intercepted, "in the face of this monumental problem that seems to be too large and complex to even fully comprehend, let alone solve."

Mark took a deep breath while remaining verbally unresponsive to my comment and only stared at the ground.

"We all feel paralyzed at times by the social problems we see as our inheritance. Our generation is almost forced to be passive in light of all the global problems that appear to be out of our control. After all, for a generation who have seen so much failure in the law and hypocrisy in the government it's only natural for us to be apprehensive about taking a passionate position and then abandon it like the previous generation did before us. But resigning yourself to a paralysis of cynicism is not the answer."

"I never said it was," Mark responded quickly. It's just my way of coping with it. It insulates me from burning out before even beginning. It keeps me from losing complete faith for helping."

"I understand and I even empathize with you. After all, this resignation leaves no false hopes to crush, no dreams to dash. I can see how this can be used as a defense mechanism. But the disillusionment that you are feeling right now is similar to what I experienced when I was exposed to the contrived conformity of the journalistic world and its arbitrariness and standardized form of operation."

Mark moved in closer, "Oh."

"I realized I could just bitch about it and do nothing or revel in the resistance against it in whatever sustainable form that might take. Sustainable is the key word. It has to provide you with moral moments and peak experiences. It is the pursuit of peak experiences that makes us feel alive and it is this sense of feeling alive that is one of the purposes to life.

"Oh, you have the meaning life all figured out, do you?"

"Enough, to know it this feeling of "aliveness" that allows one to get closer to that which religions all over the world have labored to describe and even codify. This is what I know to be true from personal experience. This is what metaphysically motivates me to live. What comes afterward no one really knows, but while I am here on earth, I am going to engage in life, with all of its dangers and despairs, regardless of being fraught with fright and frailties of human existence. However, if we hang in there long enough, if we persist and persevere, it will also yield to moments of unimaginable triumphs and improbable transcendence. Such life experiences strung together leads to an authentic life of self-fulfillment at the very least to the actualization of our collective social potential."

"That's what gets you through, uh?"

"Yes," I answered. "Without a belief in an afterlife, as described by the world religions, what other choice is there?"

"I don't know. I don't know," Mark somberly sighed.

"Well, you know what they say, acknowledging not knowing, is the beginning of wisdom."

"Then right now, I am the wisest person I know," Mark jokingly retorted.

We both laughed... again.

12:13 p.m.—*"Dante's Inferno"*

Mark stayed behind at the park as I departed to the Reuben H. Space Theater to make a phone call to my "Life-guard"—Dante. This is a person I know and who I trusted with my life. This person is instructed to contact the authorities in an event that I fail to check in at our agreed upon time, in this case, once every 24 hours. I've got three hours after the deadline before Dante calls the police and gives them the last known time and location of my last phone call.

I met Dante through a very close and special person—his daughter and my girlfriend—Dazza. And over the short years that I've known him, I've discovered Dante to be a very wise, insightful and independent thinker. These qualities are matched only by his musical creativity and artistic side of him. His vision and passion for music provided the essential ingredients for the making of a talented and thought provoking Spanish singing Mexican musician. Essentially, he is an existentialist—to be more precise, an "Existential Musician" of spirit and conscience that could potentially provide the social and political impact of a locomotive. A person he dreamed of being since his "awak-

ening.” What he meant by this is that it’s a great misfortune for a human being to go through life asleep, with their identity unknown to them and natural interests, talents or gifts to go undiscovered and undeveloped.

But it’s a greater and more existentially devastating human tragedy for people like Dante, who are aware of their identity and talent and have been for years, but unable to act or achieve their goals due to personal inaction, life’s external circumstances, marital and family responsibilities or health life struggles. As a result, this person is living out an unfulfilled life. And having a home, wife and kids is of little and true existential satisfaction and authentic value for a remarkable person like him; accomplishments that no doubt would fulfill those easily content and conventionally satisfied.

But it is this personal dissatisfaction that Dante experienced which is the most destructive existential tragedy of its kind. Because just as the fallout of a nuclear explosion cannot be neatly contained without contamination of its immediate surroundings, it is with the emotional fallout of the human implosion from personal frustration and dire despair that contaminated his present state of existence and poisons those immediately close to him. Among the casualties of this cruel contamination are his children and his wife, Darla.

Dante and Darla have been married for over 20 years. They’ve shared a lifetime together. Each damned by the refuse of a past failed marriage, but fortunately enough to find salvation in each other. Together, they have endured the angst and hardships of life, and experienced the joys and triumphs of love, marriage and parenthood. But through the years, Dante has had to make choices and decisions that involved sacrificing opportunities that would have led to fulfilling his dreams, for the sake of his unconditional love for his wife and the safety and security of his children.

William Yeats once wrote, “I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” Somehow along the way, his dreams got trampled underfoot. And each time they did, he kept falling further and further away from just who he was. This pattern of existence had culminated into a manifestation of everyday resentment. He had unwillingly made life unbearable for his children and unlivable for his wife and ultimately himself. For Dante, the past had become a self-destructive incarceration of regrets, while the future perceived as a nuclear winter; dark and cold—devoid of life. In the end, it left his wife and children suffering along with him and enduring his venomous fate.

“...Yeah, I’m okay, how about you?” I responded (as some awkward silence intruded upon our phone conversation). “How’s Darla?” I asked.

“She’s here... she’s fine...,” (again more silence... the silent cries of broken dreams).

“Can I speak with Dazza, please?”

“I’m sorry; she’s gone to the store,” Dante responded.

As our phone conversation continued, I couldn’t help pondering upon his predicament, upon “Dante’s inferno;” it scared the hell out of me! We were so alike in many ways that I was afraid that I would end up in a similar scenario, only decorated in different circumstances. He had even warned me on several different occasions not to give up my dreams for anything and anyone in the whole world, including his daughter—Dazza, which was ironic considering I was exactly what they wished for in a boyfriend and some day in a husband for their daughter. I heard the existential anguish in his voice more than usual, perhaps because I served as a reminder of his failure to do what I was doing—passionately pursuing my bliss.

Options... what were they for him, I thought to myself as I continued to be on the phone with him. He’s got three I quickly surmised: 1) He can stop fighting it and surrender his dreams to live a comfortable life with his wife and family by coming to grips with that acceptance. 2) He can leave—escape from his dire dominion of darkness and into the sunlight of passionate rediscovery of the passion to pursue his dreams once again. If he was to leave, he must go and go fast, before it would be too late. Perhaps with time and the attainment of his goals to achieve his life’s dreams he would return as a new reinvented and rediscovered individual and become a much more fulfilled father. 3) Or he can take up the most challenging option of them all and stay with his wife and children, acquire the means for financial independence through any form of employment to fund his musical projects that could bring about him permanent fulfillment and true existence.

Carrying out the action, especially in this case, is devastatingly difficult. And the memories of past failed attempts seem to become a meaningless dance of advances and retreats, of successes and defeats; an endless shuffle of interpersonal disillusionment between Dante and Darla, where marriage becomes the only war where you actually sleep with the enemy.

And between his desire to act and the act itself falls a shadow that paralyzes the action. The shadow may be fear, perhaps apathy. Nevertheless, it is a paralyzing effect to motion.

"... Please tell her... tell her... that I called."

"I will," answered Dante. "Are you ok?"

"I'll be fine," I muttered. "What about you?"

A long pause...as if he was about to confess something to me but then changes his mind. "You take care of yourself," Dante retorted.

"Yeah... you too." I remained on the phone line. Many more moments later, still no sign of disconnection, as if he stood on the other end of the line, listening for some sign of life—some sort of acknowledgement to his "shadow" state of being. The somber silences of existential death are deafening.

THE HOLLOW MEN

By T.S. Eliot

V

*Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.*

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Days... hours... minutes, tick-tock by... tick-tock, tick...tock, tick..... tock,..... tick..... tocktime. I found myself in front of Dazza's door, anxious to see her, hesitant to knock. This was it, the end of my homeless experience and the moment of my final decision. Time to choose between my life's dream or my "dream girl."

As I waited to be greeted by my girlfriend, I went over the events and experiences of the past few days in my head and came to one conclusion—homelessness can be eradicated! This is a social problem that at most can be solved but not under the current mindset. We've become like the proverbial circus elephant that I had the personal experience of encountering before a show in Mexico some years ago in my youth. I was astonished to see this enormously powerful beast tied down by nothing more than a single, string-of-a-ratty-rope strapped to a wooden stake in the dirt ground that could easily be uprooted with little effort by the elephant. I asked one of the trainers, how was it possible that such a large animal that could kill me be held down by such a flimsy restraint. He told me they had this elephant leashed since its infancy. At first, it was shackled with chains. The baby elephant, he told me, would pull, tug and jerk with all his might but could never break loose. This struggle went on for some time, eventually long enough for the elephant to surrender all effort and resign itself to complete and total submission, to such an extent that it no longer possessed a single impulse for further attempts. We are like the elephant, conditioned in the similar manner throughout our period of personal development by our major social institutions like: the family, religion, the government, the education system, the media and our economic structure—all of which have indoctrinated us to embrace cynicism, nihilism, narcissism and apathy as virtue. We've become pathologically defeatist.

Occasionally when we finally do insist on solutions to certain social problems we rely on someone else or some other organization to do it. Or we expect our government to legislate our problems away, which they in kind respond to this public pressure by merely approving and even we are lucky distributing government funds to address the symptoms of the problems and never truly treating the root cause of our societal ills, while at the same time falsely perceiving that money alone will solve our social problems.

We shouldn't be so critical at efforts like President Bill Clinton's call to end homelessness within the first nine months of his presidency in 1992, if we ourselves failed to ask: how responsible are we for the well-being of our fellow humans? If we ourselves are (I continue to think to myself) without patience, decency and basic kindness to prevent those we know and are related to (such as our family and friends) than what hope can we expect that others will care for them. Let's face it; the nearly one million homeless people sleeping out on the streets tonight are someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother, neighbor or co-worker.

It's time we all realize that the homeless issue has been grossly misdiagnosed by theologians, politicians, journalists and academics as an individual dysfunction of alcoholics, drug users, prostitutes and runaway youths (like Mike stated) or exclusively as the result of the predatory social system of capitalism (like Marcos said) or some kind of physical defect in the brain (like psychologists, psychiatrists and health professionals exclusively espouse). All of these are contributors to the causes. But what often gets left out is the root cause, which is the superstructure (the worldview, values and ordering of society) that supports the social institutions—all contribute to the loss of basic human connections which is at the root of the problem—a lack of community and a culture of the survival of the fittest. If we would only recognize this and truly convince ourselves right down to the very essence of our existence then we would want an end to it but that in and of itself would not be enough. No, we must act ourselves. Everyone must do more than desire change, we must demand it! We must act!

The journalist must do more than just inform the public and expose the evils and corruption of society ills, which, when discovered only get handed-off to other dysfunctional institutions for them to resolve. Instead, they must follow up and become active participants in its solutions.

Philosophers must do more than indulge in intellectual discourse regarding theoretical problems of metaphysics, ethics, the perception of reality and the theory of knowledge but also engage in different modes of thoughts that created the problems and encourage activity that is directed in enhancing the meaning of human existence through the pursuit of excellence and social justice.

Sociologists must be more than mere statisticians expounding broad theoretical perspectives, which are important and necessary but must not stop there and instead become active social reformers out to reinvent social institutions and create a new narrative that alters our social consensus.

Police officers must do more than just enforce the law as a reactive measure of social order but become a proactive force in preventing crime, while judges and courts must move beyond punitive sentences of vengeance but institute restorative justice to break the cycle of recidivism, violence and retribution.

Every single one of us must insist on informed action—on doing, not just “being” if we are to prove our integrity as human beings and truly fulfill our selfhood.

It’s funny; I couldn’t help but think back to Mark’s despair. Hoping... wishing that my words had some effect upon his dismal outlook. But he was right about one thing, it’s going to take more than a tap on the shoulder to get all of us to listen. Nowadays, we have to be hit over the head with a sledgehammer. It’s going to take a unique movement; some kind of profound acts and creative “change of consciousness campaign.” Only then will we recall... will we remember how to care.

The question remaining is: will it be a total emotional recall through a gradual and peaceful process or are we going to let the homeless crisis worsen to the extent that we begin to segregate the extremely poor into skid rows once again? If we continue to cease beating our human hearts for them and allow our warmth to freeze-up to such an extreme, then someday soon, it will reach a point of critical mass and explode into a fierce fireball of frustration that will make the L.A. fire riots in ‘92 seem like a summer campfire.

If human history provides us with any indication of what course we’ll take, then I hope I can exercise enough merciful self-restraint not to procreate in such a society. A society where the homeless become nothing more than the equivalent of abandoned junkyard parts—wrecked tragedies of humanity, dumped all along the sides of American cities like mere scrape metal or for the more fortunate ones, temporarily warehoused like empty-living-carcasses in homeless shelters that have become little more than existentially dilapidated salvage yards.

As I rang Dazza’s doorbell once again, I noticed from across her street an Anglo-American homeless man who is generally thought to be mentally ill. It’s the same one I usually warn Dazza to stay away from when shopping in that mini-mall. I stood in front of her door and observed. Watched with new eyes, people passed by or walked over the slouched-lying old man. A police officer and border patrol agent drove on by within seconds of each other, both without giving a concerning glance to this fragile soul that appeared to look like an empty and discarded trash bag of a human who could not sit upright.

Before this undercover homeless assignment, I would have dismissed these people as lost causes beyond the reach of help, too crazy or far gone to bring back from their dark abyss that was the result of their own individual failures. I realized it is we who are mentally ill! We are “normal sick” people living a marginal existence that turns its back on its own. We are normal only in relation to a deeply abnormal society that allows a part of our own humanity to fade away without so much of a shriek of concern or mournful sigh. Our adjustment to our abnormal society is a measure of our own mental sickness for if we were truly mentally fit we would not have tolerated, adjusted or be so accommodating to their dismal decay and thus, our own collective existential demise.

The door finally opened, and Dazza emerged from within. She greeted me with the most festive welcome I’ve ever received in my entire life. After the novelty of my return died down, I escorted her out onto the balcony.

“Dazza... sweetheart, we need to talk...”

(Sometimes doing what’s right for you means breaking someone else’s heart... including your own).

###

“AMERICA’s ROAD NARRATIVES (ARN)” **(An American Devotional To Divergence)**

By Josue Kyle Aceves

I. I’VE WALKED THESE STREETS....

Of Fading Pulses And Gasping Breaths
Where Faint Heartbeats Thump Silently Onto Me
Haunting Apparitions Of Sedated Souls
It Is Here This Lonely Crowd Comes To Be
Bodies Offered As Exchange For Currency
As Determinist’s Self Shall Bow The Knee
To Shadows And Delusions of Liberty
In This Sahara Of Sorts, A Frost-Barren-Tundra
The Summer Day Begs The Winter Nights For Mercy
As The Spring Season Of Their Lives Goes Down In The Fall Of Their Eyes
Metro Dwellers They Are Who Groan Within
And Live Only In The Vague Memories Of Others
Foes, They Are Not, These Horrid Shapes That Get Ban
All Are Just Grave Decorations Of Sad Abodes In The Tomb Of Man

WE BURY OUR DEAD ALIVE

...From 13th Street...

Ears To Sound, Eyes To Sight
Behold Tomorrow, To Them, A Vanish Plight

...To Zero Avenue...

At Dusk, Ghosts In Silent Halls Of Death Appear
To Them, No Light This World Of Darkness Brings
Dionysus Warm But Parting Hand Looms
The Black Dawn Of Doom Is Near
To Dust We Dash Them While We The World Repose
Like A Blacked-Out Lighthouse Or Abandon Fort Dismantled
Gray Shades Of Essence They’ve Become Only To Decompose
From These Farewell Lines, Of This Darksome Night
Authenticity Lies Buried Deep Underground
Within The Graveyard Of Their Lives
Theirs Are The Faces That Fade From Sight
Until They Resume Their Lives, And We Dare To Shed
Life’s Total Vengeance On Existence’s Bed
And No Being Take Note Of Their Demise In Silence From The Living

WE BURY OUR DEAD ALIVE

...WHERE ALL THE STREETS HAVE NAMES...

II. I'VE WALKED THESE STREETS...

Of Conquered Hearts And Vanquished Dreams
We Who Commenced As Loving Friends
Become Laborers Of Love In Secret Pain
That Lead To Different Roads With Separate Ends
An Aurora-Borealis You Are To Me
No Other Celestial Beauty, I So Love More
That I Surrender My Luminance For Your Divine Light
But My Higher Reasoning Knows Of The Void Within
Helpless, I Am, In The Fiery Passion Trapped
For Your Desire To Safely Dwell On Conformity's Shores
Stifles The Winds That Would Blow My Sail Out To Sea
Forgive Me, That I Should Speak What My Heart Beats And Burns
But To Weep Through Life With The Fervor Of Angry Sorrow
Is The Equivalent Of Hanging Oblivion's Wreath On My Unlived Urn
I Cannot Be That man, Who Dreams His Very Life Away
Just To Be In Some Repeating Rut Of Some Worn-Out Plan
Disembark Your Port, I Must And Traverse To A Light From Across The Sea
Which Haunts My Soul And Will Not Let Me Be
For It Beacons, Still, From The Heights Of My Degenerate years

LOVE IS GOD'S MISTAKE

...From Sunset Blvd....

My Hands Have Held, My Heart Has Swoon
Eros' Touch Gave My Transcendence It's Deadly Wound

...To El Cajon Blvd...

In The Drugged Dungeon Of Heaven
Two Married Souls As Quiet As They Can Keep
Side By Side In Bed They Lay
Each The Enemy They Love To Sleep
And Buried Deep Within Their Hearts
Secret Wells Of Hidden Emotions
Danced And Dreamed Like Lovers
Now, Only Tear Drops In The Ocean
And For He Who Exists In Existential Pain
Wailing And Sighing Yet Dares Not Die
A Drowning Deluge Of Dred Descends
Upon The Man That Cannot Cry
He Sleeps Amid The Inner Wrath
That Resides In Him Like A Being Set On Flames
And Dreams—Like Those Who Dream As I,
As The Corrosive Hours Of Fate Erodes Him Away
He Aspires To Strive And Shine Only To Be Damned To Die
Always To Yield, Never To Stand
Living In Full Snore And Suffering In Silence
He Awakens, Only To The Somber Sounds Of Soulless Suffocation
And He Waits... Of Saving Me.

LOVE IS GOD'S MISTAKE

...WHERE ALL THE STREETS HAVE NAMES...

III. I'VE WALKED THESE STREETS...

Of Crystal Rivers And Transparent Gold
That Cease To Run In The Wilderness Of Glass
Here Sculptured Ivy, Ceramic Flowers And Stone Beings
Coexist Among The Economic Elites Of The Soulless Class
They Who Have No Time For Idle Cares
Pursue Pleasures That Turn Into Pain
And Feel Their Spirits Spring Divinely Tall
Up Marvelous Mansions And Powerful Palaces
Up Shiny Shrines And Kingly Halls
After Their Little Hour Of Strut And Rave
Their Fate Shall Fall Like Babylon Walls
But What They Dare To Dream, Dare To Do
At The Expense Of Meek-Sheered-Lambs
Offered Upon The Alter Of Moral Bankruptcy
Life Is Held At Too Cheap A Rate For Them That Race On By
Enormous Accounts Of Nothings, Paid With Essence Lost
Softly Do The Maggots—No, Pardon Me—The Silk Worms Creep
Towards Them Who Live Their Lives As Existence Clone
All In All, Nothingmore, Than A Mortal Melody Of A Deadly Tune
For Death Has Reared Himself A Throne

INEXISTENCE RULES IN ETERNITY

...From Wall Street...

Above Or Below, Within Or Without, Is A World Of Sweets And Sours
Good & Bad, The Worst & The Best, All Of Us End Like Folding Flowers

...To Main Street

In The Sea Of My Generation
Are Passive Creeds With Docile Dreams
Are We Doomed To Inept Lives Of Inert Masturbation?
We Gyrate Comfortably To Gyroscope-Living While Acknowledging
Our Draught Of Zest And Zeal Has Been Deep
Inertia's Fire Melts Away Life's Vibrant Colors Into Gray
And After The Drunkenness Of Our Souls, We Now Only Sleep
In Love, We Fall With Melancholy Waters
That Lie Among Days Let On By In Time's Monotone Of Our Lives
For Even The Frustrated Rays Of The Sun
Batters At Us When She Exhales From Out Her Golden Rim
We Balk From Photosynthesizing Our Lives
By Not Shaking Mediocrity's Shadow From Our Carpeted Path
For Mere Existence Itself Cannot Breathe Vital Essence
Into The Lungs Of My Generation
Shall We Bet On The Odds Against Us Or Wager On Ourselves?
For Charcoal Fungus Of Sunsets Past Slumbers In Slow Degeneration
Towards Our Final Disintegration
Lowell's Immortalized Quandary Begs Us All To Ask: Is The Earth Too
Poor To Give Us Something To Live For, Here, That Shall Out Live Us?

INEXISTENCE RULES IN ETERNITY

...WHERE ALL THE STREETS HAVE NAMES...

IV. I WILL WALK THESE STREETS (RIDE THE ROAD LESS RIDEN)

Of Open Fields And Unpaved Roads
Living In The Purest Frenzy Of Poetic Fire
Harvesters Of The Desert, Are We, Inhaling Great Draughts Of Space
Here, Meaningful Deeds Have Room To Absolve
From The Unremembered Form Of Life's Frantic Pace
Where Transcenders Of Nothingness Dream Of Things Beyond The Moon
And Rebel Against The Comfort Of A Stone Or Tree
For We Do More Than Hope To Dwell There Soon
By Engaging In The Violent Storms Of Life We Truly Reign Free
Always Striving, Fighting, Suffering, Pushing, Straining Against

THE BEING

Who Hides In Pure Transparency Of Dusty Cobb-Webbed Lives
And Resides In Those Of Us Who Linger In Quiet Valleys And Shaded Plains

The Dungeon Of Heaven

He Lurks Within, Inside Our Marsh Meadows And Motionless Streams Of Our Souls
A Mass Forest & We Its Trees Take Leave Of Living Like Fallen Leaves In Autumn's Breeze

The Paradise Of Hell

Awaiting Always For Each Of Us To Yield To His Pull To Lie Down To Pleasant Sleep
The Mob-Mindedness Of Mass Society, The Fathomless Abyss Of Oblivion—Deepens

THE BEING

Comes For Us All, Not Only From Exterior Forces But From Our Very Own Whirlwinds Within
From Our Inner-Most Strong-Holds Of Self-Estrangement And Self Stagnation

Breathe On, Air Of The Open Field!

For I Will Breath In It's Effusion Of Living Beyond The Confinements Imaginary Lines
Always Considering, Pausing, Searching, Learning, Contemplating The Existence Of Our Lives

Breathe On, Air Of The Open Field!

For I Revel In Living Intensely By My Fellow Flower Of Fire's Immortal Flame Of Fact:

WE ARE CONDEMNED TO BE FREE

...From Desert Hot Springs Way...

I Know I Am And I Exist As I Am
For Being Human Is Not A Fact But A Battling Task
I Am Larger Than Myself, I Postpone Living No More
For Who I Am Is More Than What I Am

...To The Rocky Mountain Road...

I Forsake The Mass Transit, Smooth-Concrete Highway
And Take To The Rugged-Route Of The Unpaved Road
The Far, Unearthed Dirt Trail Extending Before My Eyes
Authentic And Free I Travel Wherever I Please
To Walk The Earth In Lone Wandering, But Not Lonely
Eager To Confront My Shadow, By Myself, Alone
I Divorce Myself From Those Who Dare Not Venture Forth
And Deviate I From The Norm;
The Soul Cages Of Silent Screams From Softly Spoken Lives
I Take Leave Now And Depart For Earthquake-Shattering Before

The Being

Yawns By My Path As His Quickening Presence Breathes Near
I Will Rock Against His Trance-Song Of Funeral Eloquence And

RATTLE THE COFFIN LID OPEN!

Living Life To A Roar; From A Whisper To A Scream
Achieving, Creating, Moving, Committing, Endangering, Standing Against
The Continuum Of The Subsuming Individual
And Defy What Seizes Upon The Hearts Of All In A World Held Captive
For I Envy Not The Quiet Streams That Flow Under The Cool Shade & Into The Calm Pacific

RATTLE THE COFFIN LID OPEN!

Be, I, A Hurricane Of Fire, A Tidal Wave Of Molten Lava, A Typhoon Of Global Warming
Halt Not Ever, For I Will Hear His Encroachment, The Hollow Beating Of Footsteps From

The Being

A Sacrilegious Sound For A Desert Rose To Be Named I
Committed Solely To My Actions And Form Prayers To A Deaf God No More
But Praise The Deity Of Individual Self By Living The Sin Of Life Without Transgressing Us
And Until I Fall Away To The Silent Flight Of Eternal Dreams
I Live Not Tomorrow For Today

WE ARE CONDEMNED TO BE FREE

...WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAMES.

Carnival by Natalie Merchant

I've walked these streets
a virtual stage
it seemed to me
make up on their faces
actors took their
places next to me
I've walked these streets
in a carnival
of sights to see
all the cheap thrill seekers
the vendors and the dealers
they crowded around me
have I been blind
have I been lost
inside my self and
my own mind
hypnotized
mesmerized
by what my eyes have seen?
I've walked these streets
in a spectacle of wealth and poverty
in the diamond markets
the scarlet welcome carpet
that they just rolled out for me
I've walked these streets
in the mad house asylum
they can be

where a wild eyed misfit prophet
on a traffic island stopped
and he raved of saving me
have I been blind
have I been lost
inside my self and
my own mind
hypnotized
mesmerized
by what my eyes have seen?
have I been wrong
have I been wise
to shut my eyes
and play along
hypnotized
paralyzed
by what my eyes have found
by what my eyes have seen
what they have seen?
have I been blind
have I been lost
inside my self and
my own mind
hypnotized
mesmerized
by what my eyes have found
in that great street carnival
in that carnival?

THE “CUL-DA-SACS OF CRUISING”: From The Homeless Streets Of Downtown San Diego To The Hot Rodding Roadways Of State Route 905

The homeless writing series was included in this abridged autobiography to compare and contrast my perspectives back then on a number of issues like romantic relationships, poverty, religion, friendships, economics, politics, social issues, American culture, values and worldview, etc., to my current perspective, worldview and level of personal development that will be self-evident as I continue with my personal narrative and as you come to read my proposed ideas, solutions and framework. In addition, it demonstrates how I had to toggle back and forth in a “flex flow” manner (a term coined by Clare Graves elaborated in *Project S3K*) between memes due to the new extreme environment of temporarily living out on the streets that forced me at times to regress to the **red meme** (warrior, tribal and criminal) when I had to entertain the use of violence to defend myself from dangerous situations. However, my thinking or analysis of homelessness was more **orange meme** (modernist)” and **green meme** (postmodern like egalitarians, environmentalists, cultural relativism, pluralism). In other words, my personal narrative offers a real world illustration of how different worldviews are responses to different life conditions and sometimes regressing to a previous stage of consciousness is helpful in order to adapt and survive to the new life circumstance, however always being “centered” or anchored at the highest level of personal development achieved.

When I returned to the community college newspaper, the academic advisor and student staff declined to publish my homeless series for fear it would encourage others to strike out on their own like I did. So, I vowed to start an underground college newspaper called “FALL OUT,” to get that article and all other controversial stories normally rejected by the school paper. But we never got it off the ground due to a lack of funds. This experience proved to be very disillusioning because if a college paper in an institution of higher education was this conservative, imagine how much worse it would be to work for mainstream corporate media outlets that refuse to jeopardize ad revenues in lieu of investigative journalism. In the Summer of 1995, I would try my hand in freelance journalism with another provocative piece called “Flowers Of Fire In The Garden Of Demon Seeds,” about my daily eyewitness account of my ten-day stretch in jail. But how did someone like me end up incarcerated? This is where my temporary regression to **Red meme** (the “heroic, power-driven, impulsive, raw egocentric self—the renegade, the barbarian, the power self, the hedonist, the clan, tribalism, rage and rebellion, the microcultures of inner-city gangs and organized crime”) comes to reassert itself in my life for a short period of time due to my dire circumstance of being incarcerated for illegal street racing.

Back then, I was ending my sports bike motorcycle association called “Touring Force,” which members and I would race each other on back rural roads during the weekends in Eastern San Diego and beginning a new recreation club. I was the Founder and President of hot rod club called “DetoNation: The Most Explosive Classic Car Club in San Diego,” which consisted of 1960s and 70s muscle cars. I owned a black 1971 Mach 1 Fastback Mustang with a 351-W engine equipped with a 250 horsepower Nitrous Oxide “Cheater System,” and a 450 horse powered “Edelbrock Power Package” engine that I rebuilt myself. The black ‘Stang was eventually equipped with a 4.11 posi-traction rear end and estimated to put out a sum of 700 horses, made me the fastest in the 20-member car club, at least for a while, considering such a title would change from weekend to weekend as club members would make their own high performance modifications to catch up and beat me with their own souped-up improvements. We would street race illegally every Saturday night in south San Diego.

I was the originator of the “905 Street Racing Scene” in Southern California known back then as State Route 905 (SR 905). Soon to become Interstate 905, it was also known as the Otay Mesa Freeway, which is only an 8.964-mile-long (14.426 km) state highway near the military “Brownfield Airport.” It connects I-5 and I-805 in San Ysidro to the Tijuana, Mexican border at Otay Mesa. The entire highway from I-5 to the international border is a freeway with a few exits that continues east from the I-805 interchange before turning southeast and reaching the U.S./Mexico border. SR 905 begins at the intersection of Tocayo Avenue and Oro Vista Road in Nestor (South San Diego area code 92154 and where I use to live for 10 years between 1986-1996 before I moved out to “G” Street in Chula Vista, 91911). It begins as a freeway, intersecting with I-5 at a partial cloverleaf interchange. After interchanges with Beyer Boulevard and Picador Boulevard, the freeway then intersects I-805. Following this, SR 905 veers southeast to parallel Otay Mesa Road, with interchanges at Caliente Avenue (in Pacific Gateway Park), Britannia Boulevard, and La Media Road. It was this region of Britannia Blvd and La Media Rd that I discovered an empty, industrial-commercial complex parking lot and a two-lane, 2-mile stretch of road that was usually deserted during

business after hours to test my performance updates done to my classic hot rod. I later introduced this “personal high performance test site” to my friend Jerry Garrison who would later become my Vice-President of my classic car club by having our first practice run against each other before the border patrol showed up. However, instead of giving us a ticket for illegal street racing they asked to see what was under our hoods and admired our high performance set up of our muscle car engines. It was then and there that I asked if it was ok to continue testing our “mean machines” against each other and they said they had no issues as long as it was after business hours and received no complaints from the surrounding area (which was not an issue considering it was an “abandon industrial park” after 6pm). “Hell, after dark, you could probably make it your personal drag racing strip,” one of the border officers jokingly remarked. I, however, took it as border patrol blessing turn this blacktop patch of road as the hottest illegal drag racing scene in San Diego.

Prior to my discovery, it was customary for car enthusiasts to travel 20 to 30 miles to Clairemont Mesa Blvd before getting just a couple of illegal drag races at Kearny Villa Road around 2 am before police showed up and busted road racers with tickets, impoundment and permanent confiscation of illegally modified street racing muscle cars. The racing scene up north had become a “drag” in more than one sense of the word. I would ask: why are we wasting time, fuel and money driving for a half-hour around midnight to park at closed doughnut shop parking lot for two hours before ever getting down a single racing pass on an active two-lane freeway around 3 am for fear of police and to dwindle down the chances of oncoming traffic. Now, thanks to my discovery and car club leadership as President of “DetoNation,” I was about to dethrone Kearny Villa Road and make “905” the new, popular alternative racing site in Southern California. At first it began with just drag racing between our classic car club members, which was about a dozen of us. And instead of waiting until midnight to head north on Saturday night, we would first meet and gather at the Chula Vista “Sonics” drive-in restaurant on Third Avenue around the dinner time to eat, drink and swap stories, while we checked out each other’s rides and most recent racing modifications with our “honeys,” family and friends. Soon after dusk we would begin to roll out and cruise across “Orange Avenue” onto 805 North to 905 East and into the “DetoNation” drag racing arena near Cactus Road. We would get dozens and dozens and dozens of street races with border patrol watching from afar and occasionally waving to us with approval as we provided them with so called “nighttime entertainment” while taking their evening dinner break. This went on for about a month. We would occasionally revisit Clairemont Mesa Blvd and spread the word of our new drag racing site. After another month, word got around, and street racers from up north were showing up and loving it. After a while, even drag racers from Hemet and Los Angeles came down to us. 905 had arrived. It was *the hot spot* to street race. It went from a dozen of us drag racing to over 100 cars. I couldn’t believe what I had done and what we had created. But then, after a few months, the invasion of the modern imports began (like Toyota Supras and Mitsubishi’s Eclipses) and ruined everything. They brought with them old race grudges and vendettas among their different car groups and with it drugs, alcohol, girls and guns. And the last time I and my classic car club would race there was when there were over 200 cars that overwhelmed the site and a brawl broke out that led to gunfire creating a crazy mass stampede of slick and modified import cars battling for the exit against raging hot rodders hauling ass out of there. That was the beginning of the end.

I would later find another street racing spot in the South Bay area of Chula Vista—“Bay Blvd.” It was sandwiched between “Palomar Ave” and “L Street” and paralleled the city’s electrical power station while on the opposite of the street were small industrial complexes and outlets. Once again, like 905, the businesses would shut down around dinner time and the area would become a virtual ghost town. And like the Otay Mesa Freeway, the site “blew up,” in a matter of weeks, only this time there were so much traffic that we had to relocate the “pre-drag racing hangout site” from “Sonic” to the much larger “Rally’s Burgers” parking lot near “L Street.” The same pattern of reaching mass popularity then becoming a big bust, which soon afterwards I resigned myself from the whole street racing scene and even abdicated my leadership in the local car culture by disbanding DetoNation altogether. And like my previous sports bike club, it was time to move on but not before being caught, cited and my car impounded. This hot rod hobby was expensive and would eventually cost my freedom for a short period. I racked up quite a few tickets, which led to my driving license suspension and eventually revoked due to additional violations that led to my *voluntary* incarceration. That’s right I volunteered. How that came to be is an interesting story that perhaps someday, someone will go through my collection of rough drafts and retrieve my unfinished and unpublished draft entitled, “Flowers of Fire In the Garden Of Demon Seeds,” which depicts with great detail my ten

day detention at the San Diego County Jail system. In the meantime, the account of how I went to jail will have to suffice for now.

Just prior to arraignment in court, I was assigned a public defender who informed me of my legal rights and options. She told me I basically had two choices: 1) Go to jail for 30 to 90 days and once time was served all charges would be dropped; 2) Serve 1200 hours of community service, probation for 4 years and driver license suspended for six months.

She was about to check the box for this option when I said, "I'll take the jail time."

She preceded to check-mark the community service box almost as an automatic reflex action.

"I said I'll take jail time."

"What? I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked in a very perplexed manner.

"I'll take jail."

"Why?"

"Because I've never been there before."

"Ooookkkaaayy. I don't think that will be a problem for the judge," she retorted in disbelief.

Of course, there were other factors like knowing myself well enough that I would have probably violated my probation and not finish the community service hours in time, thus, incur more fines, longer extensions of probation and inevitably go to jail but for a longer period of time, anywhere from six months to a year. However, the main reason was to write a freelance article about a daily experience account of my time in jail. Nevertheless, when I went before the judge and pleaded guilty, he too was shocked by my decision. And after speaking to me for a few minutes (I assumed to assess my mental health) he then proceeded to sentence me to one month in jail and ordered me to turn myself in to the court in a few months' time to serve my sentence, which I did but that is story for another time and place.

WANDERING IN THE "WILDERNESS" OF WORLDVIEWS:

Navigating Through Different Career Prospects & Philosophical Paradigms

Beginning in 1989 and right on through 1999, I immersed myself in a decade-long **Orange meme** (modernism: scientific, rational, and globalism), and **Green meme** (postmodernism: pluralistic, egalitarian, sensitive sense) thinking when I explored every conceivable subject and career field that interested me at the time. My intellectual pursuits began in a local community college in Chula Vista, California. At the same time, I worked two and sometimes three part time jobs: UPS (sorting packages from 4 am to 9 am), Super Shops (working on hot rods from 11 am to 7 pm, Friday-Sunday) and armed security (at the Federal Auto Auction, Monday-Friday, during the swing shift between 6 pm to 12 am). When I was not working I received Pell Grants or some other form of financial aid to get me through financial hard times. For a time, I would sell my plasma twice a week for \$15 a pop for \$30 a week that supplemented my monthly income to \$120 when work in the early 1990s dried up. Back then, I figured it was the best time to embark on an intellectual exploration without paying big-four-year-university prices and once I finally decided what career path to take I would transfer as a junior to attain my bachelors in two years in order to keep the overall college debt down (I still ended up having a \$43,000 school loan debt after attaining my Master's Degree years later).

It took a wide variety of community college courses to continue my search for universal truths while expanding my thirst for knowledge in subjects like: Art (Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Color & Black/White Photography, Desktop Publishing, Computer Graphic Design, Architecture & Art History) Archaeology, Physical and Cultural Anthropology, Astronomy, Biology, Cultural Studies, Geography, History (Ancient, American, Western Civilization, Mexican-American & World), Literature (Latino, American, Western & World) Philosophy (Logic, Ethics, Politics, Economics), Comparative Religions, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, and Economics (to name a few). By 1997, I had earned over 158 units, two Associate Arts degree, one in Philosophy and the other in Journalism, before transferring as a Junior to San Diego State University and attaining a Bachelors in Criminal Justice and a minor in Sociology. A few years later I would attain my Masters' Degree in Human Services: Organizational Management & Leadership (for Social Change) at Springfield College. However, during my decade-long academic explorations for new "truths," I still found myself wanting. I wasn't fully intellectually satisfied with the current descriptions of reality, the worldview of our global society and the values supporting it. Something was missing. I saw different truths in

different fields of knowledge and religions, but none were all-inclusive. In essence, as the U2 song goes: “I Still Haven’t Found What I’ve Been Looking For.”

Just a few months before I graduated in May of 1999 from San Diego State University (SDSU) with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and a minor in sociology I attended their Federal Law Enforcement job fair that Spring with the intent to apply to become an FBI agent. I figured I would have a better chance of success in accessing confidential files like the assassinations of MLK, RFK, JFK, not to mention the secret UFO files and unresolved controversies and criminal conspiracies as a federal agent than an investigative reporter. (LOL). All kidding aside (sort of), and after all, I already had given up becoming an investigative journalist back in my community college days due to my negative experience as a school reporter for the *Southwestern Sun*. I will spare you the details but in the end, I realized that if the “fourth estate” was fundamentally compromised by inauthenticity and the conventions of the status quo system at the college paper level then it was only reasonable to think that it would only get worse the further up I would climb due to the corruption of individual integrity and the collective surrender of our noble purpose due to the prevailing financial considerations of advertisers and influence of the concentrated power of corporate media monopolies. Nor was I going to be a “complete unknown” and endure poverty without any real impact and influence by writing for “independent rags,” (no offense to those who chosen such a noble pursuit). So, I thought I’d be “practical,” and enter a career field where there would always be a never ending need for law enforcement. But not just any constabulary but what is considered to be the highest level of law enforcement—the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). It became my career back up when my guidance counselor noticed with all my completed courses and credits that I would be just a few classes away from attaining a double major. I would have a high steady paycheck, health benefits and a secured government pension (and as a Gen Xer, this, along with be a homeowner, was the promised American Dream). I was about to turn 29 years old and I had struggled enough through life trying to keep my idealism intact, but to no avail, it was now time for “pragmatic realism.”

So as I walked into one of the university’s auditoriums I immediately was hit with an alphabet soup of at least a dozen federal law enforcement agencies like the CIA, DEA, ATF and FBI, all lined up in a big row before me. I bypassed the U.S. Border Patrol booth to get to the FBI table where I found a dark suit, middle-aged agent sitting silently by himself. As I approached him he looked up and greeted me as he looked me straight into my eyes then up and down as if assessing me. I greeted him back and inquired about applying for the FBI. He handed me an employment application packet after I answered a few of his basic qualifying questions. In turn I asked a few probing questions (I forget what they were) but they were unique and intriguing enough that it prompted him to ask a few probing questions of his own. I remember that my responses surprised him to the extent that he suggested I should not bother applying to any federal law enforcement agency, especially the FBI. At first I laughed. Then moments later I realized he was not joking.

“Why?” I responded.

“Because you’re too smart,” the agent said in a dead pan manner.

I chuckled, “What do you mean?”

Well, first of all you ask too many good questions. I can tell you are an inquisitive person who needs to know the “why of things.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” I asked in a perplexed manner.

“The FBI, like the rest of these federal agencies are basically a civilian military corps. And like the military we want federal agent that can follow orders without questioning “why?” They should only be concerned with the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when” and “how,” never the “why.” The “why” just gets you into trouble with the higher up authorities.”

“You’re kidding right?” I retorted. “How does wanting to know the why behind matters get anybody into trouble?”

“The bureau does not want people who can think for themselves but instead wants agents who can just follow orders, not question them. You strike me as the type of person who needs to know the “why” behind the orders. At the very least you’re a liability or troublemaker at the very worst a threat to our system. As a recognized liability you will not be afforded any career advancement and as troublemaker you’re going to be demoted, marginalized, ostracized or scapegoated, if not outright fired.”

I pause for a couple of moments to take it all in—digest everything he just said. Then finally I respond, “How do I know you are not just saying such things to discourage me from applying to the FBI? What if this is just the bureau’s way of screening out mediocre applicants?”

“You see! Right there! What you just said. It proves to me you’re too smart for a career in law enforcement!” the agent proclaimed.

“Oh, come on. You’re just stroking my ego and I’m not going to take the bait. Besides, in the process of trying to dissuade me you just disparaged your profession and insulted your fellow coworkers, I don’t think if anything you said is true, otherwise why would you still be working in the bureau trying to recruit more agents at a university job fair?”

“Once again, you’re making my point,” the agent replied. “You’re too smart for your own good if you were to join the bureau. This is not a test to screen out second-rate applicants, as you say. Take it from me. I speak from personal experience.”

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“I see a lot of myself in you,” the agent soberly responded. “I was where you are now, only I wish someone was as honest with me as I am being with you right now.”

“You’re good, you are really good. But I’m not buying it,” I replied cynically.

“Listen. After 20 years in the FBI, why do you see me, here at a job fair, working from a fold-out table and canopy booth? I was “why” person who questioned the morally ambiguous process and sometime shady procedures—it is all about the ends justifying the means, when even the ends were questionable.”

I begin to listen more attentively.

“And those like me who have invested time, money and energy and never known any other life than being in federal law enforcement, not to mention, at the same time being tethered by the financial obligations that come with a wife, kids, mortgage payments, household bills, vehicle payments and health insurance dues, etc., it leaves one with little to no choice but to accept career banishment by doing what I do now on the way down. So, you surrender. You give in. You capitulate. You go along to get along. You go with the flow. You no longer resist. You comply.”

“But you’re in the minority, right? What you are describing is an anomaly. You are an exception to the rule, right?” I asked.

“Go online and search for what occupation has the highest rates of suicide and divorce, drug and alcohol dependency rates. You’ll discover what I and many of us in the bureau already know, it’s the FBI,” the agent soberly stated.

“Even if what you’re saying is true and this is not a screening test to discourage me from applying, it’s too late,” I desperately replied. “I will be graduating in a month with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice. I’ve already spent all this time, energy and money. I’m too invested now. I would have wasted a few years in attaining this academic achievement and for what? To quit before I even start based on what a stranger is telling me?”

“Listen. I, like so many others like me, have dealt with the politics of the agency by abusing alcohol, drugs and engaged in extramarital affairs,” he eyes begin to water. “I lost my wife, my kids, my house and my old life. So, if you don’t want to end up like me take my advice and cut your losses now before you’re in too deep and it becomes too late,” he sadly states as he wipes a stream of tears from his left cheek.

“I’m so sorry.”

The agent nods with what I perceived as hope that he’s getting through to me.

“But if things are as bad as you say, then can and those like you change them? And if not for the system or the bureau than at least for your sake to preserve your personal integrity and authenticity?” I asked in an attempt to salvage the possibility of redemption.

“That’s what I call the ‘superego trap,’ where well intentioned individuals believe they can ‘make a difference’ within a corrupt and dysfunctional system by enacting some kind of reform on the outer edges of the system without fundamental change at its core. A perfect example are insurgent political candidates that believe they can change congress and by default the government and presidency, if only they were elected. It’s what I call the ‘good-doer-delusion,’ that somehow they will be the exception to past failed efforts for deep change. But without a profound paradigm shift within the culture of the institution, you’re trying to change that must include a significant segment of the work force, then it’s all to no avail, like so many doomed and unsuccessful attempts in at least the past 100 years.”

His words resonated with me. After all, it was the same sentiment and rationale I used to forfeit my journalistic pursuits. And now, it appeared that I was going to do it again—my third career relinquishment (the first being when my father said ‘I was too smart’ to be a diesel mechanic like him). And so with that, we parted company as other fellow students and applicants approached him.

Some days later, after confirming the stats the job fair FBI agent gave me regarding the federal law enforcement profession, I decided to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at SDSU. I’ve always had an affinity to the literature of style, form and the communication of novel and provocative ideas, while breaking creative boundaries. And after filling out the application and submitting the fees and my writing sample, I later learned that I would have to take the GRE test “in order to demonstrate college level proficiency and aptitude.”

What?

This made no sense to me. Didn’t earning a BS in criminal justice and a minor in sociology in their academic institution of higher learning prove that? Not to mention, the other two associate degrees in journalism and philosophy at Southwestern College reinforce this. Or the cumulative 300 school credit units of over 50 college courses demonstrate this academic competency? I called the office of the dean of the department to confirm if such a requirement was serious. It was no joke. And when I challenged such a requirement as a ridiculous notion they just blew me off and provided no other rational reason for the need to take the \$99 GRE test. An exam, like the SAT, there was whole scholastic industrial complex behind it. It is a financial boondoggle comprised test fees, study guides and books, not to mention, mentoring programs, test preps and practice exams. A whole money-making industry has enveloped such tests.

But who was I to question it, right? “Just shut up, take the test and move on,” I would tell you myself in an effort to be pragmatic and try to rationalize such an absurd notion that an academic institution can test for creative writing in a standardized exam. “Just pay the hundred bucks and get it over with,” I told myself.

So I did. (Or at least I tried to do).

Because I didn’t take the test seriously and saw it for what it truly was (another mandatory, money-making hoop to jump through, only this time, in order to be accepted in the Creative Writing MFA graduate program at SDSU), so I didn’t bother to learn about the contents of test, let alone purchase any of the test prep paraphernalia and tutoring services. However, this would set me up, for my second school “walk-out” in my life.

It’s test day, and I walked into what looked like a computer test lab with about two dozen prospective grad students. I’m assigned a “computer station” where I, along with the others, would be doing the GRE exams on and not like the high school SAT tests that I took almost a decade ago with booklets, scantrons, scratch paper and yellow #2 pencils, which I purposely “sabotaged” as an act of “rebellion” by filling out the bubbles from my test sheet to spell out a variety of defiant phrases like: “this test is a sham,” “another fraud scam,” and “fuck this shit!” I knowingly “torpedo” my prospects to attend 4-year university as a college freshman because I had already chosen the much more sensible and cheaper option of going to a local community college then planning to transfer during my junior year to a four year institution like SDSU, to do my last two years to attain a BS but without incurring large college loan debts.

So, I sat and turned on the test program from the computer and inputted my student ID number. As the test loaded, I was able to see the test overview and to my shock, I saw that it included math, science and other academic subjects that had nothing to do with writing or literature. It was bad enough to momentarily suspend disbelief that a standardized exam could legitimately measure imagination and creative writing skills, but it was quite another to be tested on unrelated academic subjects that then and there the complete absurdity of this test hit me hard like a fist across the face. This made as much sense as when my Southwestern Community College counselor wanted me to enroll in remedial math courses when I had past chemistry, geometry and trigonometry with “B” averages in high school but because I had done so poorly in the basic math placement exam that tested for Pre-Algebra, Algebra and Algebra 2 efficacy, I would have to virtually start over again. What? I told her: “Just because I forgot the formulas doesn’t mean I no longer have the intellectual aptitude required to graduate from high school again, does it? After some further discussions, she could see my reasoning and passion that she agreed to allow me to skip over all the remedial math courses if I could show her proof of completing those math classes from my high school transcripts. I did and she allowed my advancement. However, if I was going to transfer to a four-year university like SDSU, I would have to take a class in statistics and those courses require taking the advanced math placement test that demonstrated proficiency in Geometry and Trigonometry. I wasn’t about to take those classes again just to pass a

two hour exam. So, I bought a “practice test” from the student store to familiarize myself with the exam and to my horror I couldn’t remember a damn thing. I realized I would have to relearn all the formulas—basically reteach myself all the math needed to pass the test, which I did by reviewing all necessary math texts from the school library over the next few months. I barely past, nevertheless I was enrolled in “Statistics for Sociology” and was soon on my way to San Diego State University in the Fall of 1997.

So, you can imagine the cognitive dissonance that I experienced when I saw the GRE’s table of contents and realized this fantastic farce. Nevertheless, I was already here and had already paid the non-refundable test fee so that’s that (I told myself). But was it? Was it really? I mean, I’m quite sure I wasn’t the only person in the country who made the same realization, right? I’m sure there have been others over the years. So, why haven’t I heard about them? Why wasn’t this issue in the news or circulated in the student paper or around academic circles? Is it possible, no one has ever said anything, let alone fight it? And if that is the case, why? (I thought to myself) Why? Is it perhaps I was about to do what so many have done in the past—at worse thoughtlessly obey or at best knowingly comply? Or is the latter worse? Whatever the case may be I was in the throngs of it then and there. And at the risk of sounding like a cliché, I starred at the computer screen for what seemed like an eternity and suddenly got up to my feet and shouted “NO!” at the PC display. The entire room looked up and over to me and then I shouted, “I REFUSE TO COMPLY!” and walked out of the school in protest... for the second time in my life. A few days later, I wrote a letter to the Dean of the Literature & Creative Writing Department stating what I had done and why. In a return phone call, he stated that he agreed with me but said I still had to take the test despite acknowledging the irrationality of it. “Those are the rules.” I refused out of principle and remained true to my values and worldview—refusing to surrender to the moment of complicity with the hope that my minor rebellion would create some small ripple effects through the dean, test facilitator and students present at the test site.

But career-wise, where did it leave me? This was the fourth career path abdication. So, where would I go next? I didn’t know, and I was ok with that for the moment. So, I gave myself time off from academics and got a single full-time job as an armed security officer (instead of holding on to the three part time jobs). Little did I know that in the Fall of 1999, while alone at my job site during the graveyard shift the trajectory of my entire life would dramatically change in an unprecedented manner and would transition into a new life stage much like the 20th century transitioned into the Third Millennium.

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Cons of a MFA in Creative Writing

