

## High Vantage Point

### Finding Perspective

I need a higher vantage point—somewhere to go to look out, see the horizon, and find my place in this world. When I start my day off in the city, walking through a grid, surrounded by tall, looming buildings, following traffic signals, and using crosswalks, I feel like a mouse stuck in a cage.

### Mouse Utopia

John B. Calhoun conducted a mouse utopia experiment in the 1960s and 70s. The goal was to study the effect of population density on behavior. The mice were given everything they needed in this cage, where they lived in abundance. At first, the population began to grow at a very fast rate. Once the population grew, they began to run out of space, the mice became stressed, and the population stagnated. At this point, the mice became aggressive, they began to eat each other, there was a breakdown of maternal care, social withdrawal, and many stopped mating.

Despite the abundance of resources that these mice had within their cage and their utopia, the social structures broke down, causing the population to collapse. **Maybe we are currently living within mouse utopia on a larger scale, with real human beings.** It's quite evident to me that the chaos within society has reached a breaking point where we are living in an age of abundance—with everything at our fingertips—yet we face imminent threats of artificial intelligence, automation, weapons, war, nukes, false news, lack of communities, and a decline in our population.

*It seems like we are raising more dogs than human beings these days.*

I see people walking around with dogs that have shoes on, tucked away in baby carriages, and hear stories of people who actually feed their dogs real food and cook for them over a stovetop. We have the choice to live our lives however we deem fit, but I am reminded of the human being and our natural biological goal of

reproduction. If we replace this primal goal with the creation of artificial intelligence, the operation of technology, and the pursuit of pleasure, perhaps there will be a reset in the world, where the strong will inherit the earth.

## Hamster Wheels

I often hear people who work in offices complain about this notion of the hamster wheel—how they feel like they can't leave, but constantly need to go back, on a loop, completing the same tasks over and over again. You also see people who love to run on treadmills indoors, after a long night of drinking or binge eating. Humans are funny and often find themselves stuck on a wheel, in a loop, doing the same thing over and over again, expecting something new or different. Think of the movie *Wall-E*. The problem with this is that we may never reach the peak, the goal, the end in itself. **If we're all hamsters stuck on a wheel, maybe it's best that we find joy in the process itself—find ways to play this game while maintaining our sanity, clarity, and strength upon the wheel itself.**

## Cars and Technology

What is the city but merely cars and computers?

Sure, we have people in the street, walking upon the sidewalk, but to me, this space becomes a no man's land. When I walk around the city, it feels like the movie *The Matrix*, where the agents are all wearing sunglasses. Have you ever noticed the abundance of people wearing sunglasses these days? It always bugs me as a street photographer who wants to photograph the soul of the street.

### **People with sunglasses lack soul.**

While we have the choice to wear whatever we please, it certainly does concern me. Why? I believe that wearing sunglasses is not only bad for your health, but it seems antisocial and makes you a bit less human. I cannot see your eyes, and something doesn't feel right. You don't feel human to me, especially with the advent of technology, and the combination of someone on their phone, wearing AirPods, and wearing sunglasses. This seems to be the trifecta that I see so frequently in the city.

I understand that the street is merely a place for people to walk, bike, or simply pass through, but something still does not feel right. I find it difficult to make eye contact with people, even when holding the door open for others, where people are afraid, shy, bashful, and gaze the other way.

*How are we to overcome this antisocial world that we live in?*

What are the repercussions and outcomes that could arise through this behavior pattern?

**My fear is that the more antisocial we are, the more aggressive, violent, and depressed we become.**

During a long journey from the capital of Zambia, Lusaka, toward my village in Samfya district, as a Peace Corps volunteer, I hitchhiked on the back of a truck, had a bus break down on me, and even took a taxi with a drunk driver. As this driver began to drink, he didn't really think that anything bad could happen, as the road was open, and there was no real threat that could turn him off course. However, his oblivious and drunken state caused problems during this ride, where he popped his tire and drove down the road with sparks flying from the wheel, like a scene out of the video game *Grand Theft Auto*. As the sparks flew, I smelled the burning asphalt, plastic, and the stench that the car was making. He was eventually pulled over by police, arrested, and I found another truck or bus to hitchhike on.

**Maybe a lot of people in this modern world are souped up on a plethora of medications, drugs, and alcohol on a day-to-day basis.**

It's funny how roads control the systems, cities, and communities all across the world. During my time spent in Hanoi, Vietnam, or Mumbai, India, I recognized how controlled the chaos is on a street corner. While people typically do not follow the law or abide by traffic signals, there is still safety, where every driver and pedestrian is hyper-aware of their surroundings, following intuition, and somehow managing to leave the scene with no accidents. I genuinely never saw an accident or problem with the way people drive in cities such as these, but here in Philadelphia, you constantly hear about hit-and-runs, and I often see car crashes throughout my daily commute during the week. Also, the street life in these cities is bustling, alive, and full of soul.

*It feels like we enslave ourselves to technology quite easily.*

You hear the phone ring, you pick it up right away. That's not a way that I could ever see myself living life. Do people seriously have the urgency to pick up a phone when they get a notification? Are you excited to speak with a robot?

I see the traffic signals—the red, green, and yellow colors, the countdown numbers, the flashing red hand, or the white walking man—as a system within a giant computer, or the city, that controls our behavior.

## **Thrive in Isolation**

When I am in isolation, alone, I thrive. While I maintain my friendships from childhood and have a healthy social circle, I can find joy in the mundane, entertain myself, and experience life this way. I find joy in nature, surrounded by birds, the trees, and that crisp, cool breeze. **There's nothing that surprises me more than a person who cannot just be.**

There is so much endless opportunity for you to find joy within yourself and the external world. However, we turn to simulated universes, through the power of our phones, entering digital spaces, and engaging with society this way.

*In the wake of artificial intelligence, I believe it is critical to become skeptical of these spaces.*

Just assume that all people on the internet are bots, and only trust physical flesh. I understand that we are still early with AI and technology, but I believe that it is best for us to recognize the power of it now. I enjoy using ChatGPT to study the etymology of words, summarize texts that I am reading, and draw from this well, an endless sea of knowledge, to enhance my learning and everyday life. One of the fun things I've been doing with it recently is making a photograph of a sculpture and asking ChatGPT what is the title of it, who the artist is, the history of it, and what it means. I can also photograph trees and plants, find the species names in Latin, and understand things more deeply. There are certain advantages that we can draw from using this technology, and I'm not entirely against it. Perhaps we must be aware of who has the power and why they choose to use it.

**When you consider the term depression, depressed, I believe in this notion of it meaning you are physically lower than.** You are being pushed down by gravity itself, where your body cannot move. Think of a depressed person—are they typically outside? Are they on a walk? Moving their physical bodies? No, they are typically bedridden, sitting down, or lying in bed, unable to move.

I believe that we currently have a lot of disease in our country, world, and cities. This disease does not necessarily manifest as physical ailments, but there is a lot of anxiety, mental illness, and crazy people out there. To be diseased is to be uneasy, unwell, and anxious.

You often see in the newspapers or on commercials the promotion of pharmaceutical drugs to cure depression, anxiety, and even schizophrenia. You see a lot of drugs that are being used on a day-to-day basis, especially among the youth, that alter your hormones, brain, physiology, and even these new, strange drugs like Ritalin that are given to people with ADHD. Ritalin increases the dopamine in your brain. Maybe we have too much stimulation through technology—thinking of the iPhone and the media that it produces, video games, etc. Perhaps this increase in dopamine fries your brain. In order to reset this, you must return to nature.

*What does this even mean? ADHD... maybe these drugs are used to administer to children so the parents can go back to their hamster wheel and not deal with a child that has an abundance of energy.*

If somebody cannot pay attention, maybe the teacher is just boring, uninteresting, and not engaging with the student. I question the validity of such conditions, and especially the use of these drugs, such as antidepressants, to cure patients.

**If you are a man, do not go to therapy.** Therapy is bad. Speaking about your problems puts you on a hamster wheel, an endless loop, a spiral to insanity. Men should seek to conquer themselves—whether in the gym, reading books, or creating art.

## Ant Colony

In the movie *A Bug's Life*, Flik uses a dandelion to fly across a canyon. He left the ant colony in search of warrior bugs to bring back and fight against the grasshoppers who held power and control over their community. Flik was the first ant within the colony that decided to hop off the hamster wheel and play the game his own way. While the rest of the ants toiled around, carrying grains on their backs, providing the grasshoppers with food, Flik liked to make things, tinker, and create inventions that would speed up the process of harvesting food.

According to the Bible, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire. Perhaps this is the inevitable outcome of a colony or a city that is in decline. However, it is not God who holds the power—it is the human.

When I was a young boy, I remember looking at ants and the different ant hills in my backyard. Sometimes I would take a magnifying glass, face it towards the sun, and create a beam of fire, burning the entire colony down, and watching as the ants scurried away, running from the omnipotent power I held over them.

I would also craft boats using sticks from my popsicles that I would eat and throw them down a stream after the grass was freshly cut, the plants were watered, and the hose created a waterfall going downhill for me to play with.

*Maybe we need to find that dandelion, that popsicle stick, avoid wielding the magnifying glass, and find ways to use technology to thrive in this age of abundance.*