

OFF GRID

We off the grid, grid, grid, grid, grid. Thanks to William Penn, he laid the city of Philadelphia out on a grid. While this has its advantages, I believe that the grid itself is something that we must go beyond.

A sculpture of William Penn sits atop the City Hall building in Center City, the largest municipal building in the country, crafted by the Scottish Freemasons. This is one of the most incredible structures I've ever witnessed in my life, and I have the privilege of walking through its tunnels every day. The sculptures, columns, and intricate details throughout the building provide an endless sea of wonder to gaze upon.

One of my favorite things about William Penn is his relationship to green spaces and his commitment to creating a green town within the city of Philadelphia, laying the grid out with various parks throughout the streets. We also have beautiful Fairmount Park, which is larger than Central Park in New York City. **There's something about nature that is vital to my daily life; I feel called to return to it each day and go off the grid.**

Perhaps we should go off the grid both physically and mentally, creating our own grid, our own universe, our own world. We hold the power to create a new world in a fraction of a second through the medium of photography.

What could/should the world be?

God, Tribe, Land

Another thought I have about the city of Philadelphia, in relation to William Penn, is his peaceful interaction with the Lenape tribe, making an agreement to create the city. The native tribes never really believed that anybody owned the land itself. They believed that God held supreme ownership and the tribes merely dwelled there.

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia, Africa, I spent one year in a remote village, Mpanta, of the Samfya District, in Luapula Province, as a member of the Bemba Tribe. I spoke the local language, prayed under the Seventh-day Adventist Church, worked as a fish farmer, and integrated myself within this community. The thing that struck me the most was the hierarchy that exists within the society between God, tribe, and land. Also, within the family unit, where mothers come home with firewood on their heads, babies on their backs, the men are building churches and homes, the boys are making bricks with sand and mud, and the girls are sweeping the floors and preparing food for the day. Everybody has a role to play within the village, the tribe, the family.

The church is the center of the community, with an altar, a place for sacrifice. Everyone within the community makes their daily sacrifice for the greater good of the community. Whether farming, teaching, or working in transportation along the lakes with boats, everyone provides goods and services to nearby villages. **I believe that the church itself, and the beliefs and teachings within it, keep the community thriving, and the people within the village become harmonious.**

However, I witnessed firsthand what happens when someone acts out of place and causes chaos amongst the tribe. One young man pushed an older lady to the ground, who was suffering from old age, and wound up killing her. The community took matters into their own hands, beating this man to a bloody pulp and forcing him out of the tribe and the village, as there are no police, laws, or bureaucracy to keep the village together.

If someone dies, especially children, for uncertain reasons, and there is presumably a witch within the village, they visit the witch's home with the coffin and throw stones at the witch or destroy their house.

I remember during my trip to Central America, in Belize, I was on a tour by boat, a small canoe, going downstream through a cave system. The tour guide described how the Mayans would perform rituals, kill and sacrifice babies, and leave the skulls behind. As I went downstream, looking at the walls of the cave, I remember seeing these skeletons firsthand.

Philadelphia is Athens

Athens is the birthplace of democracy in the world. Philadelphia is the birthplace of democracy in the United States of America.

Perhaps we should treat Philadelphia similar to Athens, or even ancient Rome. Let's consider that the Western world, Western civilization, the United States of America, is essentially the Roman Empire 2.0. Has Rome really fallen?

Look around you—at the roads, architecture, churches, and beautiful sculptures. Surround yourself with these beautiful spaces, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and remind yourself of how great this country really is. Similar to Athens or Rome, two of the leading forces in the world, we can create our own paradise here in Philadelphia.

Choose Paradise

One thought I have is that we can create paradise on earth, right here. Or, you can create hell for yourself, right now, on earth. **How? Quite simply, honestly.**

Maybe hell is war. When the United States went to the Middle East, did we ever find the weapons of mass destruction that we were looking for? No. What we made are weapons of mass distraction, sitting in your front right pocket, the iPhone.

I believe that we create hell through endless distractions from media consumption, whether television shows, movies, social media, YouTube, podcasts, etc. Most especially, the news. When you surround yourself with beautiful things and live in the present moment, you create paradise.

When you indulge in digital distractions, your mind becomes clouded, distracted, and slowly but surely, you create hell for yourself.

Paradise is simple to create by surrounding yourself with beautiful things, beautiful thoughts, and elevating your body, both physically and metaphorically, to new heights. My personal suggestion is to start your day along the river, any body of

water, with an elevated view so that you can see the horizon. When I see the horizon and watch water flowing, **I'm reminded that this world is open and endless, with so much to see and do.**

Conquest and World Domination

Perhaps one of the greatest things that modern Western civilization offers is comfort and pleasure. Are these things so bad after all?

When I think of war, battle, and conquest, I think of people like Alexander the Great, on horseback, leading an army to conquer parts of the world. It feels like there was more to conquer, and glory to be had on the battlefield during these ancient times. Nowadays, war feels like slaughter, with the advent of technology, nuclear weapons, drones, robots, and artificial intelligence. War, to me, feels like the product of cowardice, not courage. **An 18-year-old kid sitting behind a computer screen, operating a drone using an Xbox controller, like they're playing a video game, but the consequences are real, and people are being slaughtered.** Real war was hand-to-hand combat; these new war games are akin to playing *Call of Duty*.

My thought is, since there is no more glory to be had on the battlefield, **where can man seek to conquer?** Perhaps the realm of art and photography is fair game to dominate, as there is endless terrain, off the grid, to conquer.

The Pursuit of Wisdom

I know that I am wise because I know nothing.

One funny story about Alexander the Great is when he went to visit Athens and greeted Diogenes, an ancient and prominent philosopher known for his ascetic lifestyle, critical of social conventions, and lived a life of extreme simplicity.

Everybody in Athens went to see Alexander the Great, but Diogenes stayed put, in his clay pot that he used as a home, living practically homeless, enjoying the sunlight. Because Diogenes was the only person that did not go to greet Alexander, he went to seek Diogenes himself, as he was intrigued by his reputation.

When greeting Diogenes, Alexander told him, "I am Alexander the Great."

Diogenes responded, "And I am Diogenes the Cynic."

Alexander asked if there was anything he could do for him.

Diogenes famously responded, **"Yes, stand out of my sunlight."**

This to me highlights the basic and founding principle of stoicism, where the simple pleasures in life, such as being outside, enjoying the fresh air, and the rays of the sun, is all man really needs. Diogenes, presumably unimpressed by this world conqueror, did not care for his fame whatsoever.

The story goes, when Alexander walked away from the scene, he joked to his comrades that,

"If I were not Alexander, I would wish to be Diogenes."

While Alexander's greatness was external, based on conquest and power, Diogenes' greatness was internal, based on wisdom and self-sufficiency. This highlights that true wisdom and contentment do not depend on external circumstances, such as material wealth and social status, a lesson that even a powerful king such as Alexander could appreciate.

We too, should seek wisdom by studying the ancient philosophers of ancient Greece, and treat Philadelphia as a new Athens.