

Sacrifice and Tribe

During my service in the Peace Corps, I worked as a rural aquaculture promotion specialist and lived among the Bemba tribe. One of the greatest things I learned from this experience was the hierarchy that exists within a flourishing society.

God, Tribe, and Land

I was born and raised Roman Catholic, attending a Catholic school from pre-K to grade 8. I absolutely loved this experience and believe that those childhood lessons, teachings, and experiences in church—learning about Jesus, science, and history—shape the way I perceive the world to this day. In the morning, we gathered as a class and recited the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by prayer.

There's something about the way in which a community comes together under God and a nation that promotes human thriving. Even when I think of my time in the church, singing as a class, learning musical instruments, and acting in dramas during Christmas—reenacting the story of Jesus' birth—I see how community brings people together and keeps families connected, as we recall the stories that shape our reality to this day.

In the village, there's a hierarchy within the family. The mother comes home with babies on her back, firewood on her head, while the father builds homes and churches, the boys make bricks with sand and mud, and the girls sweep the floors and prepare food for the day. **At the center of the village, there is a church.**

Within that church is an altar, where sacrifices are made, reminding us of the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. When I consider Jesus and his teachings, I see him as a hero—the ideal human—at the center of a community, who everyone strives to emulate to the best of their ability. **There is a blueprint, a place to start, a person to strive to become.**

Perhaps here in the modern world, in cities like Philadelphia, these places of sacrifice, community, where a tribe can come together under God to strive towards an ideal self, are lacking.

Water, Architecture, and Sculpture

I start every morning by the water, specifically the Schuylkill River. Schuylkill means "hidden creek" or "hidden river," and it's where the Lenape tribe went to drink in Manayunk, where I grew up with the Wissahickon forest as my backyard. I remember being a young boy, exploring the forest—the unknown—building teepees with sticks, sharpening spears, attempting to hunt deer, building bridges with stones, fishing, and even carving my own paths and trails. We would explore caves, climb trees, and I remember discovering a totem pole in the forest after a long hike up a mountain—a monument to the Lenape tribe. **The teachings I learned from Catholic school about Native Americans and these tribes sparked my curiosity and had me unconsciously emulating their lifestyle at a young age.**

I remember my time in the village in Zambia, gathering as a tribe at the well, drawing water, carrying buckets on my head, boiling the water, filtering it through a gravity filter, adding iodine, and then finally being able to drink it. **I learned how critical water is to keep a community thriving with vitality.** Here in Philadelphia, all I need to do is turn on my tap, and I have clean drinking water available instantaneously. **There's a lot of trust involved in a community at scale, like the city of Philadelphia, to keep the water running, to keep it clean, and to keep people thriving.** At the center of Philadelphia, we have the largest municipal building in the country—City Hall. Initially, there was a water pump located here in the center of town, and it reminds me that water is the first thing that a community needs to form cohesion and flourish.

City Hall never ceases to uplift my spirit, my vitality, my lust for life. **Every single day, I walk through the tunnels of City Hall and revel in its beauty—the way this building defies gravity, filled with endless sculptures, ornaments, detail, columns, and tunnels that showcase grandeur and achievement.** For me, City Hall in Philadelphia is one of mankind's greatest artistic achievements here in the United States. Nearby, the Wanamaker Building contains the world's largest playing pipe organ, which sounds every day at 12:00 and 5:30 (except Sunday). **To me, this is also one of the greatest art forms humans have ever achieved.** When you stand in the center of the building, with its tall, looming, high ceilings, and listen to the sounds of the organ—**music that fills your soul, makes you feel powerful, uplifts you, and transcends you to a new place—it's the apex of beauty.** It

reminds me of my time in Rome, exploring the various basilicas and Catholic churches, filled with the sounds of Gregorian chants, men and women singing in Latin, while looking at the paintings of Caravaggio.

I'm starting to think that the Baroque period produced some of my favorite works of art—like the paintings of Caravaggio and the biblical stories depicted in them. They are dramatic, aesthetically beautiful, with high contrast—I can't help but feel something when gazing at them.

Is this the ultimate goal of art? To make the viewer feel something, to evoke an awe-inspiring sensation that uplifts the human spirit and transcends you to a new height? I think so.

I remember visiting the Trevi Fountain since I was a young boy, around five years old—a tradition of mine every few years. The Baroque sculptures that surround the fountain are larger than life itself. One sculpture in particular—Oceanus, the god of water, who personifies the vast ocean in Greek mythology—is depicted sitting on top of a shell chariot, being pulled by two seahorses.

There's something about the hero, the myth, and the stories that shape our reality. Some of the most uplifting sculptures I find in my hometown of Philadelphia depict great men like George Washington on horseback, charging into battle. **The hero, the myth, the legend—the stories of these men inspire the community to strive to become something more.**

Trust Your Intuition

I've always been a curious person, a creator—someone who likes to tinker and make things. **As a young boy, I enjoyed opening my Nerf guns, modifying them, painting them, removing the air restrictors, opening up the bladders to allow the guns to shoot further and increase the airflow of the darts.** I also jailbroke iPod Touches, allowing all the students in my eighth-grade class to access software that could allow them to customize, download, and enjoy their iPods to the fullest.

Some of the earliest artwork I remember creating, back in kindergarten, was of battle. I would create these large-scale drawings of battle scenes, with mere stick figures, all across my notebook during class. **After class, when I returned home, I'd play with my toy warriors—figures I bought in Piazza Navona in Rome—depicting heroes on horseback, gladiators, and crusaders at battle.** I would position the figures in particular ways all across my floor, at different vantage points, heights, and elevations, showcasing stories as I narrated them, giving life to these inanimate things. **Imaginative, creative spirit was within me then, and it has never left me.**

Last year, I began to dream. I don't mean dreaming of vast goals I wanted to achieve in life—those are good, and we should all have them—I mean real, vivid dreams during deep sleep. **The first dream I remember was extremely primal. I was lying on my back in a snowy place, presumably Antarctica. I looked up and saw an eclipse. I gazed downwards and saw a man lying in the snow next to me. As I turned to my right, mammoths began to charge towards me, and I woke up.**

On Easter Sunday in 2023, I finally went back to church after a very long hiatus—over a decade. **At the end of Mass, we began saying a prayer that was unfamiliar to me—a prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel.** This prayer invigorated me and filled me with a vitality I'd never felt before. **The Archangel is the leader of God's army, and in the prayer, we ask him to defend us in battle.** At that moment, it felt like a prayer for wartime.

Something in my intuition led me back to Rome. **I was working as a photographer for the city and felt unfulfilled, as the work I was creating felt meaningless.** I quit the job and went straight to Rome. I began visiting the castle outside the Vatican, attempting to learn the prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel, whose sculpture stands at the top of the castle. **He looks graceful, with a sword in hand, thrusting the devil downwards.** During a day trip to Paris to practice street photography, I had a vivid dream of a double rainbow that appeared in the sky, transformed into a clouded dragon, chased me, and then disappeared. **The next day, as I wandered through the streets of Paris, I discovered a sculpture of Saint Michael the Archangel surrounded by two dragons.** As I looked up at the sculpture, this hero, so graceful and beautiful, I saw a rainbow in the sky directly above him.

I had no clue what these dragons represented, nor did I know much about Saint Michael, so I called my godmother, who had been a nun for 40 years. **I asked her about the dream, curious about the dragon, Saint Michael, and the rainbow.** She told me that in the Book of Revelation, Saint Michael fights against the dragon, who represents Satan, in the final battle.

“And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire.” (Revelation 10:1)

“And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.” (Revelation 12:7-9, KJV)

My godmother told me that this was a wink from God, as the correlation between my dream and what was embodied in reality the next day is quite miraculous.

I followed my intuition, trusted it, and the road led me to Rome. During these past 18 months, I know that I found God, reached the height of my spiritual journey, and understand the role that each individual plays within this cosmic drama of life. **We are all significant players upon this stage that is the world.** While this modern world distracts us, removes us from any real sense of community and tribe under God, I believe that we can connect with the divine through our Godlike intuition.