

Live Like a Homeless Person

Yesterday, while listening to the Wanamaker Organ, I was lying back, lounging underneath the eagle statue. I love just kicking back and enjoying this place to relax while listening to some beautiful music every day. They actually played the song most commonly associated with the movie "Titanic," "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion.

One man came up to me and said,

You must listen to this organ often!

I replied,

Yeah, I'm here every single day, I'm a local. I live just down the street.

He then remarked,

Wait, so you're homeless?

I broke out into uncontrollable laughter, stood up, and began chatting with this man, who was from Georgia, with a very obvious southern accent, just visiting for the weekend. I showed him around the Wanamaker building, took him to the organ on the second floor, we looked at the TV display which showcases the keyboard, and he even told me he knows how to play an organ. After showing him my sketchbook of photographs and talking about my adventures and lifestyle, he was quite impressed, but also made a comment that maybe a lot of people in my life, family, and friends, probably think it's really strange or don't get why I do the things I do. To be honest, I've always been the black sheep.

I Am the Black Sheep

I remember when I was a kid, and my neighbors, brother, and I wanted to learn how to Ollie. We spent an entire summer doing manuals down the hill and jumping over sticks. While the Ollie is certainly a good trick to learn and the foundation of pretty much every skateboard trick, I always wanted to pick the board up with my hands, and instead of doing an Ollie, I would always simply do a boneless, planting my foot on the ground, and grabbing the board with my hand. This felt more natural to me, and I found that it allowed for more creativity in the streets when I skateboarded. Even when everyone was trying to learn the kickflip, I would simply flip the board with my fingers and do my own thing. The beauty of skateboarding is that it allows for the individual to express themselves creatively as much as it is a technical endeavor. I just never liked doing what everyone else did.

Life is too short to do things just because other people are doing it or because society tells you that you should behave a certain way. We should become more gay, jolly, and authentic, similar to that of skateboarders, expressing themselves in their unique way with courage at the forefront.

I've always enjoyed solitude and simply going my own way. When I was around 12 years old, I would ride my bike for miles on end, following the Schuylkill River Trail into the far distance, sometimes going even 50 miles by myself because none of my friends could keep up. I remember exploring Valley Forge, the log cabins, the bunkers, monuments, and this beautiful national park on long summer days, on my own. In eighth grade, everybody got the iPod touch, and I was the first person to find out how to jailbreak them, and install software that would allow me to play all of my favorite games like Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, and upgrade the device to its fullest potential. Everybody paid me 5 dollars before we got on the bus, and I jailbroke the entire class's iPods by installing Cydia. I spent my days after school modifying Nerf guns and making it so the darts could shoot farther as I explored with them in the forest where I would build bridges with stones and tipis with sticks.

I always loved to explore, go on adventures, tinker, break things, and create anew.

When I got to high school, I felt confined to the box of a classroom and did not enjoy public education in the way that they force you to learn useless information. School was always very easy for me, and I excelled in every class except for

Algebra, with a high GPA. I remember deciding to take physics instead of the basic algebra classes they offered, and preferred the way math was applied to reality. I would skip class, explore the park outside, the streets, and even the university nearby. I felt like time just passed by, and my soul was slowly dying, as I sat there, waiting for the bell to ring. The only people I found myself relating to in high school were the break dancers that would also ditch class and glide along the floor in the halls, perfecting their craft. I've always desired to express myself creatively and had a call to adventure bubbling up within me from the time I was born until I turned 18 years old.

When it came to art school and photography during my time in university, it seemed like most students preferred the conceptual approach to making pictures, but I just wanted to hit the streets and explore. Nobody ever appreciated my work, and my professors and peers would always slam me in critiques because I was an outsider, making street photos in Baltimore. They always wanted me to discuss concepts of "race," and how this played a role within my photographs. The hilarity to me is that my photographs have nothing to do with race. I could never take these questions seriously, simply wouldn't respond, or just walk away.

While I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, in a nice neighborhood in Andorra, and attended a very nice Catholic school, I also spent my summer days in West Philadelphia, in Overbrook, at my grandmother's house, drinking hugs, eating water ice, walking to the papi store, playing football, basketball, and attending block parties with a demographic of 100% African Americans. I was always the only Caucasian person hanging out on the block. The fact that the demographic of people in Overbrook was different from my neighborhood in Andorra meant nothing to me.

So, when I am posed with critique or questions regarding race in an academic setting, it's quite baffling to me. The fact that people in "higher education" are concerned with some of our most base differences is honestly just amusing. I never thought anything of it and just continued exploring Baltimore, where I made some of my best work.

Will we ever move on from our primal instincts to divide ourselves?

I'll never forget in 2016, when one of our projects was to make work for a theme, "culture war," because there was an election coming up between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton.

Why so much division?

I just don't understand why we always have to divide ourselves based on the color of our skin, political ideology, and call for a culture war. In a world that is so red versus blue, black versus white, can we just find the middle ground, and find peace with purple?

I Have an Open Mind

I decided to study abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I initially began photographing around the old city of Jerusalem, prayed in a synagogue, saw some cool sites, and learned about the local area. As I walked around, I noticed the big looming wall that separates Israel and the West Bank, and I started to take interest in traveling beyond the wall, as I'm an American citizen who can freely travel there. I would take the road from Jerusalem to Jericho very frequently, and found myself photographing in various Palestinian cities all throughout the West Bank. I probably visited every major Palestinian city there is. I even tried to enter the checkpoint of Gaza but was not permitted entrance, and spent some time in Ashkelon instead, which was just nearby.

When I would go to class and put my photographs on the wall for critique, one professor treated me like I was the cream of the crop. He was always so amazed by my work and would say nothing to improve or change. However, he told me that I should strap fake bombs around a child inside a Palestinian home, and make a photograph of this staged scene, constantly making a joke about my photographs saying, "Allah Akbar baby!" This was extremely shocking, as the teacher holds the "power" in a classroom setting, and you can't really talk back, just have to keep your mouth shut, and walk away. I will never forget finishing my six months traveling all throughout the West Bank and displaying hundreds of photographs of Palestinian life on the walls of Hebrew University, of places that none of the students have or will ever experience in their lives.

Because I fell in love with the holy land, I decided to return for three months in the summer, and volunteered on an Israeli kibbutz in Haifa. I worked on a cow farm, gardened, and even traveled to Caesarea for a tour of the famous aqueducts. I wasn't finding many interesting things to photograph in Kibbutz life, as most of the volunteers I was with just sat around drinking and doing nothing after we finished our chores, and were quite separated from the local inhabitants of the kibbutz. There wasn't really anything to do or anywhere to explore, as you were just isolated on a farm. My intuition told me to leave, so I packed my bags, and headed back to Jericho, where I volunteered and lived with a Palestinian family. I started to go to the mosque and integrated myself much more deeply with the Palestinian lifestyle. I would wake up each morning, knock on my friend Mohammed's door, and go water Hassan's plants. I even traveled all throughout Jericho from Mosque with an Imam named Hirsham.

The thing about me is, I'm extremely open-minded, and will pray in a synagogue and a mosque, despite my Catholic upbringing. I might be one of the only people that can say I traveled all throughout Israel, worked on a Kibbutz, and lived and worked amongst the Palestinian people in the West Bank. I enjoy experiencing new things, people, and different ways of life, and is why I decided to join the Peace Corps as a volunteer in Zambia, Africa, working with the department of fisheries as a rural aquaculture promotion specialist.

Ultimately, I've learned that we are more similar than dissimilar after all of my experiences. My critique of modernity's obsession with identity is that it simply divides us more than anything else. I seek a middle ground, where we can return to challenging each other, not censoring ourselves, and speaking the truth more. Maybe this will mean that you will be somebody who stands out, a black sheep, somebody who is perceived as weird or different. I don't like fitting myself in any box. I want to be boundless and carve my own path.

I Just Want to Be Left Alone

At the end of the day, I just want to be left alone, and maybe it is most wise for me to do the same for others. I just want to make art, sing, dance, and explore. I don't want to sit down, take orders, and live for the future. I want to let the chips fall as

they may, embrace the spirit of play, and seize the day. I've never felt like I fit in anywhere, it's always been hard for me to relate with most people in my hometown, and I've always desired to go beyond the horizon.

I've always been a homeless wanderer. I've traveled from place to place, just getting by on scraps of pita bread and hummus. I never really needed much, and can travel anywhere with just a backpack. The endless pursuit for wealth for wealth's sake seems like a foolish goal. None of our toiling is even worth it if there is no spiritual growth. I feel like we're losing touch with things that matter most in life, such as family, love, and curiosity. We're replacing these simple virtues with materialistic and hedonistic pursuits.

Consider the story of Aladdin and the cave of wonders. When Aladdin entered the cave, he was surrounded by beautiful treasures. If he were to take the treasure, he would be locked in the cave forever. However, Aladdin decided to take the lamp that contained the genie in the bottle, omnipotent power, knowledge, and wisdom. There is a lesson to learn here, that the pursuit of wisdom is much more fulfilling than anything material.

Consider the story of the allegory of the cave from Plato. I believe this is very applicable to this day, even thousands of years later. Prisoners are shackled in a cave, and they're watching shadows casted on the wall from the light that is peering from the outside. The shadows in the wall become the truth for these prisoners. When they come out of the cave into the light, it is blinding to them, and they deny that this is the real truth, and find comfort in the cave. Perhaps this is applicable to modern society and the way in which we use technology. The news and media that is shared upon the phone screens, TVs, and computers, become the shadows on the wall, similar to that cave allegory by Plato. I believe we are living in a spiritual war, a battle for your mind. The information that we consume, consumes us, and often times be deceiving.

Just recently, while walking through City Hall in Philadelphia, the largest municipal building in the country, draped with beautiful, sculptures, detail, columns, and grand tunnels, a man was walking with his girlfriend, and said, in a very disgruntled and angry tone,

"This was built with slave labor."

I should've just held my tongue and left him alone, but when I hear falsehood, I have an urge to speak the truth. I replied,

This way actually built by a diverse group of European immigrants, long after the abolition of slavery.

I feel a burning desire to always tell the truth. One thing I've recognized about our independence hall location here in Philadelphia is that when you visit George Washington's house, our first president, all you really learned is that he owned some slaves. Maybe the way that we frame history, and share information, is to blame for his misinformed observation about City Hall. We just assume that America was built by slaves. One person that mocked Plato and who was very critical of his philosophy was Diogenes of Sinope. The more I learn about the famous Diogenes, the more I can relate to him. He lived an extremely ascetic and simple lifestyle, spending most of his time laying outside in his house that was just a big clay pot. One day, Alexander the Great visited Athens, and everybody in town went to visit him. The only person that didn't go to see him was Diogenes. Because of this, Alexander the Great went out of his way to visit Diogenes himself. When he approached Diogenes, he asked him if there is anything he could do for him and that he would grant him any wish.

Diogenes replied,

Stand out of my sunlight.

Alexander then went walking away with his comrades, describing to them how if he were not Alexander the Great, that he would be Diogenes. His commitment to self-sufficiency and independence is inspiring to me.

Maybe I'll just live like a homeless person from here on out. You can find me chilling under the eagle statue, lounging back, relaxed, without a care in the world. We may not be able to become the next Alexander the Great, as there is no more land for man to conquer. However, we can become the next Diogenes, and conquer the realm of art and photography.

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