

I've Got Nothing to Prove

When you've got nothing to prove to anyone, how should you approach life? What happens when you no longer care about being right or wrong?

Live as if everything is in public view.

For what is to be gained of something as concealed from man when nothing is barred from God? - Seneca

I just want to be, to do, without care for external validation or approval. When you recognize that our final judgment comes from a higher power, the perception of other humans becomes insignificant.

Citizenship

One of the latest movies that I watched in theaters with my mother was *Cabrini*. The story follows the life of Mother Cabrini, who left her home in Italy and arrived in New York City through Ellis Island in 1889. When she arrived, the city was plagued with disease, crime, and poverty. Her mission was to secure healthcare and housing for hundreds of orphan children and built a network of schools, hospitals, and orphanages. She was the first woman to be supported by the pope to carry out such a mission and became the first American Saint and the patron saint of immigrants. She became an American citizen in 1909, and because of the work she did, which spread throughout the country, my family was able to successfully move from Italy to the United States. One of my great-great-grandfathers actually lived within one of Saint Cabrini's locations in Philadelphia for a brief period of time while my family was undergoing their naturalization to become American citizens. The movie was beautiful, and the story helped connect myself to my past ancestors and all of the trials and tribulations overcome to find our place here in the United States.

To be a citizen provides meaning

I believe recognizing our citizenship is a critical aspect of the American experience because it provides the individual with meaning, to go beyond individualism, in pursuit of the collective and shared responsibility. This responsibility fosters a sense of purpose and belonging to a larger community.

Imagine Philadelphia is ancient Athens, wouldn't you want to defend it against the Persians that attack our borders? Hector said in the movie Troy,

All of my life, I lived by a code and the code is simple: honor the gods, love your woman, and defend your country. Troy is mother to us all. Fight for her!

Hector believed he could defeat Achilles, a demigod. Nobody can defeat Achilles, and this was known amongst all warriors. Despite this, Hector met his tragic end, being slain by Achilles. Achilles was filled with rage, eager to kill Hector after he killed his best friend Patroclus.

While Hector put up a noble fight to defend his country, perhaps we should be like Achilles, an invincible warrior. There is wisdom to draw from this ancient tale of the battle of Troy, the story of Achilles and Hector, and how they viewed the relationship to their nation, their family, and their gods.

God, tribe, and land

I believe for a functioning society there must be a hierarchy between God, nation, and land. When I consider my Peace Corps service in Zambia, Africa, I am reminded of this critical hierarchy that kept the community thriving. At the center of the village, there is a church, where everybody in the community comes to sacrifice, to strive to become greater than themselves, through studying the life of Jesus, and carrying out his teachings in everyday life. Every morning, women come home with firewood on their heads, babies on their backs. Men are building churches and homes. The boys are building bricks with sand and mud. Girls are sweeping the floors and preparing food for the day. Everybody has a role to play within the village, and every individual serves a greater purpose for the collective. What shocked me

the most was how big the families were in these villages, how each house had around 10 children per family. I believe that this is something neglected in the modern world here in the United States.

We have replaced this critical hierarchy, through recognizing God at the top, with government or bureaucracy. It is quite evident that our population is decreasing, and families are no longer being formed. Instead of sacrificing our individual selves for children to be made, we purchase dogs instead. Men would rather chase material things, such as fancy cars and watches, instead of being a protector of women and children. With no family, there will inevitably be no patriotism, no pride in our nation. Also, consider our relationship to the land itself, where everybody is renting, hardly anybody owns anything anymore, or even has a relationship with their neighbors. Actually, I was speaking with somebody in the park recently, who was visiting Philadelphia from North Carolina. She discussed how she lives in a log cabin, in a community that exists 30 minutes away from any major city or area where you can find highways and roads. She described that even here, seemingly off the grid, the HOA, homeowner association, gets in the way of their neighborhood, and causes more division than inclusion. Apparently, in this community, neighbors complain if somebody simply paints their door a different color. She told me how somebody changed the color of the door, and how the neighbor confronted the HOA, before even talking with their neighbor, causing this minor part of this bureaucratic system, our newfound God, to step in, and force this homeowner to repaint their door. If this is happening in a community in North Carolina, where there are log cabin homes, just imagine the effects living in condos and apartments will have on our relationship to the city, community, families, and neighbors.

Generation

We off the grid grid grid grid grid.

“This for my kid, kid, kid, for when my kid, kid, kids have kids.” - Kanye West

It’s quite obvious that we’re more disconnected than ever. We don’t think about our kid’s, kid’s kid’s anymore? We need to think generationally, into the future, and about our city, our community, and our families more in order to thrive as a

collective. This is what gives the individual citizen meaning and purpose, to serve their community, to engage locally, to make change, and effect a greater good for the people. Maybe we get too caught up with national politics, and this is foolish at best. Who cares who the president is, what's going on in other states or cities. We should treat Philadelphia like our own miniature country, where everything else happening in other states and the rest of the world does not truly matter to us. The younger generation, my generation, Generation Z, seems to be much more interested in worldly affairs, that have nothing to do with our immediate surroundings. This is concerning.

What do men need?

The biggest question that I have is,

Why doesn't anybody want a family anymore? Or to think generations ahead?

The more young people I meet from my generation, the more pessimistic or nihilistic I realize their perception about the future is. People would rather advance their careers than have children. Many people believe that they don't want to have children because it would be a burden on the child to grow up "in a world like this." Meanwhile, this is the greatest time to be alive...

Men need a family to provide for and to protect. This is what makes man feel like a citizen of a larger whole, which guides them to fight for a cause they believe in. Think of Hector, defending the walls of Troy. If a man has no woman and children, why would they go die in battle? For what end? Remember Achilles wanted to stop fighting, so that he could be with his woman, Breisis.

Also, men need a relationship to spirituality, and have common shared beliefs amongst other people. This is why I believe religion is so important in society. Churches and places of worship have always been the center of every community since ancient times. My theory is, when religion disappears, the fall of society is the inevitable outcome. Because of the death of religion, nobody is growing towards this ideal state of being, becoming the ideal man or woman.

No distractions

So, in the meantime, what can we focus on to give our lives meaning? I say, let's lead a beautiful life, like our lives are that of Achilles, and we are creating our own Epic Greek Poem.

Make your life a living work of art.

I believe that our artwork can be like our children, and through creating new photographs each day, we are giving birth to new works, ideas, or metaphorical children. However, it can be difficult to focus our attention on the creation of new things in a modern world of distractions. We must go forward with courage, at the forefront, with a sharp visual acuity, with a strong vision, to guide us towards our goal. The goal itself is an auto one, where we are simply creating things for the sake of creating things. Creation is an endless pursuit, and this drive to go beyond ourselves is what will provide meaning in our lives.

Askesis training

Put on your armor, it's time for Askesis training.

Ever since I picked up this rogue 40-pound plate carrier and barefoot shoes, I feel like an ancient Roman soldier, or Spartan, marching each morning. It honestly feels like I'm putting on a chest plate, or even a bulletproof vest. Sometimes when I walk around, people think I actually am wearing a bulletproof vest, and I actually do feel like it's got the same effect as one, and is probably impenetrable, or at least serves as armor if you were to get into a fistfight. By waking up early in the morning, and marching with discipline, I'm embarking on this journey of Askesis training. Askesis is an ancient Greek word that means training or exercise. The word has evolved to denote spiritual exercise, ascetic practices, to strive to become the greatest version of yourself. By embracing this very simple routine each morning, I am sharpening all aspects of myself, my mind, my body, and my soul. I am nourishing myself each morning, embracing simplicity, self-discipline, and rigorous training. By walking in nature, and going on a daily hike, to the top of a cliff, I embrace contemplation, where walking becomes my meditation.

Meet me at the eagle

While I walk around barefoot, I often sometimes get looks from other people. Some people are curious, others laugh, and one man in particular, my neighbor, made an interesting comment, exclaiming, "Discalced!" while pointing at my feet. I asked him what that means, and he described how there are certain Catholic monks who embrace an ascetic lifestyle, by removing their shoes, wearing simple sandals, walking barefoot. After bumping into him again throughout the past month, we've had some great conversations, and I learned that he lived in a monastery for 20 years. He invited me to join him in church, and I was eager to do so, as I've been looking for a church to attend once again. My problem is, it does become more difficult to go to church alone, where you feel maybe a bit strange being there by yourself, where church is supposed to be a place to bring family. However, I joined him in the oldest Catholic church in Philadelphia, old Saint Joseph's, in Old City.

The church was founded in 1733. At the time, Catholic churches were not permitted to be facing the street, and Catholics faced many restrictions and prejudice. William Penn believed that the church was a symbol of religious tolerance, and was very liberal regarding religious freedom, and is why the church was able to thrive. Apparently, the Protestants tried to burn down the original church. You have to enter the church from a small alleyway because of this. When I arrived, I was confused as to where I enter the church, but upon entering, I noticed there is a beautiful courtyard in the center, where they offered free food and drinks after mass.

The church is very small, which I definitely appreciate, and reminds me of my time when I was a little boy, attending Easter mass in the tiny local church of Caserta, Italy, where my family lives. There's something about the size of this church that makes you feel more connected to a community. The great thing about churches, while you are alone, there is a formality in tradition to the Catholic practice of mass, that I appreciate. Where everybody sings together, comes together, no matter which church you enter, you know what to expect when you arrive. Despite my absence from church for the past year, it feels like I picked right back up where I started again.

One aesthetic and artistic aspect of the church that I greatly appreciated was the lectern, which is a golden eagle sculpture. I've been having a fascination with eagles lately, as I admire the sculpture of the eagle in the Wanamaker building, as I listen to the world's largest playing pipe organ. The eagle is seen as a symbol of spiritual aspiration and contemplation. It represents the soul's journey towards God, as eagles are believed to soar high towards the heavens.

The first reading at the eagle lectern at mass was about God delivering manna to Moses and the Israelites while they were wandering in the desert. These Israelites complained that they were very hungry, but by receiving manna, they had to put their trust in God. During the homily, the preacher discussed how as much as we need physical nourishment, we seek spiritual nourishment, through receiving the Eucharist during mass. While wandering in the desert, through having faith in God, we will be nourished even in times of uncertainty. While this story derives from the Old Testament, Jesus describes himself as the bread of life in the New Testament, where we can seek eternal spiritual nourishment through him.

'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' - Jesus

Perhaps by attending mass each week on Sunday, and receiving the Eucharist, the bread of life, I can seek the spiritual nourishment I crave and thirst for. Who knows, maybe I found a new church that I'd like to attend from now on, as I typically enjoy visiting Old City on the weekends, lounging in the hammock at Spruce St. Harbor just nearby. I feel like there's a lot of wisdom to draw from church, through the biblical stories discussed in both the Old and New Testament. A lot of the parables that Jesus laid out for us in teaching are not necessarily meant to be taken so literally, but can be seen metaphorically, even philosophically, which can provide meaning in our everyday lives in modern times.

Ultimately, I am embarking on a journey of discovery, through physical training, mental strengthening, and spiritual nourishment. I have nothing to prove to anybody in this world. It's time to overcome myself, to go beyond myself, and soar like the eagle.

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