

CHILDLIKE

I believe we all have an inner childlike spirit, but the world suppresses it through societal norms. When you hear the word "child" or "childlike," you may think of immaturity, but I believe it's beyond this idea of being "childish" and is rather pure innocence.

Why?

At age 28, I still have not let go of my inner child, holding onto it as dearly as I do to my own life. Actually, yesterday, during one of my conversations, I kept asking "why?" I was just curious about the discussion. I wanted to know more, and the person I was chatting with asked me:

"What are you, a little kid?"

The TV was on in the background, and the discussion revolved around some show and some commercials that frequently pop up. I was just saying how I didn't know what they were talking about because I don't watch TV. I think the TV can be a powerful metaphor for modern human beings. When you're speaking with people, it's almost like you're just speaking to a television. Everything becomes predictable, cookie-cutter, or fits perfectly within a box. But a child, when coloring a picture, doesn't necessarily follow the lines or the colors that should be presented in the image. A kid might start painting a turkey green instead of brown. When a kid looks at a bird's nest in a tree, they're curious about these things. But I believe through television programs, societal expectations, the public education system, and everyday modern life, curiosity is removed from the masses.

Explorer

When I was a child, I would explore in the Wissahickon Forest, blazing paths with my bare hands. I would literally go back into the woods and carve my own trails deep in the woods where there were no trails at all. I would build teepees with

sticks, sharpen spears and attempt to hunt deer, and place rocks in the creek, making my own bridges to cross over the water. As much as I loved my video games and exploring within digital worlds like in *Kingdom Hearts*, *Skyrim*, *Assassin's Creed*, or *Spyro*, I knew the real adventure was outside my window, in the open world. I find these open-world video games were always the best because there are infinite possibilities and quests that you can go on. To me, this is a metaphor for real life, and personally, I don't like to follow a script or play video games that force you through a story. Sometimes I like to wander, climb to the top of a cliff, take a leap of faith, and do my own thing, without the need for guidance.

Warrior Spirit

When I was a little boy, I traveled to Rome, visiting family there at a very young age, around 9 or 10 years old. I'll never forget buying those warrior figures from the toy store at Piazza Navona—the gladiators and crusaders—positioning them all throughout my bedroom. I loved to set them up in intricate scenes, almost like a layered composition in a photograph, giving dialogue to each character and moving them around an open space. What draws me to the woods, to nature, is open spaces. Open spaces give man endless terrain to conquer, to control, to put order to. I think this is what's missing in the modern world: all the roads are paved, all the land has basically been conquered, and there is nowhere in this world anymore for a warrior spirit, besides a battlefield fighting wars with drones.

I played most sports growing up—basketball, baseball, football, ice hockey, lacrosse, skateboarding, snowboarding—essentially every sport except for soccer. Football was certainly the closest thing to being on a battlefield. My favorite part of football practice was when they would line you up one versus one, and each player had to tackle the opponent to the ground. I was really fast, and remember the feeling of kickoff, picking up the ball, and both teams just rushing full force towards each other. I played tight end and remember getting a small pop pass, running as fast as I could for a touchdown. However, football requires a team.

You Don't Need a Team to Play Basketball

Basketball and skateboarding are interesting sports, considering you actually don't need a team to play either. All you really need is a basketball hoop, a basketball, and you're set. Skateboarding, I believe, requires the most courage out of all sports—even more than football, honestly. I learned to skateboard at FDR Skatepark, one of the most legendary skateparks in the United States, completely DIY, built by skaters, all concrete, oversized obstacles. The first day I arrived, I was probably six years old or something. This guy scaled the wall—one of the tallest ramps you could ride, up to the highway ceiling of I-95—fell completely backwards and slammed against the ground. His head cracked open, blood gushing at the scene. I'll never forget it. We kept going back there. My brother and I kept on hitting those ramps, throwing ourselves down these obstacles, falling, and getting back up again. I think skateboarding is probably the best sport for young boys as it gives you the most courage out of any other sport. It's the one sport where you can go out there and exercise both the physical and creative muscles.

Boneless, Don't Ollie!

When I skateboarded, I was always drawn to the old-school skateboarders. I remember seeing that movie *Lords of Dogtown* or being inspired by some of the greats like Rodney Mullen in his video part *Almost Round Three*. Mike Vallely was my hero, haha. He had the most courage, was the most aggressive, the most punk-rock skateboarder I remember. I was inspired by his style and specifically the trick that was a part of his signature, the boneless. While the ollie is the most fundamental skateboarding trick, I preferred the boneless. I preferred grabbing the board with my hand, pressing my foot against the ground, and launching myself on obstacles. I think there was something in me that just wanted to be contrarian when I was at a skatepark, as I noticed that everybody would skate the same way. Despite knowing how to ollie, I didn't want to. I wanted to do my own thing, so I just picked the board off the ground with my hands and freestyled!

Leaders and Followers

Don't be a new slave.

"There's leaders and there's followers, but I'd rather be a dick than a swallower." - Kanye West

What does it mean to be a new slave?

Being a new slave is being enslaved by branding, marketing, following trends, being a slave to the system, the modern world in general. You could call it the Matrix, but I just call it sheep mentality. I remember in high school, everybody wore that stupid brand, Obey. This, to me, is the worst clothing brand—the worst kind of "streetwear" that ever came out of that early 2010 era. I still see people who wear it, though. I remember the trend on Tumblr: everybody had an Obey snapback on, and some "swag." I think we all wanted to follow trends when we were younger, especially when you're like a freshman in high school and you're kind of influenced by your peers, and everyone tries to fit in or be the same. Even myself, I loved those Neff beanies, strange wooden necklaces from Zumiez, spiked hair, bowl cuts, indie music, etc. Nowadays, I just like to wear all black, barefoot shoes, and strip myself down, even just being naked without a shirt on. I think the less that you wear, the more you subtract, the more of an individual you actually become. The more that you add, the more that you wear, purchase, etc., you just become a slave, you become a follower.

Testosterone and Puberty

I remember around 12 or 13 years old, when you hit puberty and your balls drop, and you start to have all these strange hormones firing, and you feel really angry for no reason—that was awesome! Hahaha. I'll never forget playing UFC on the Xbox with some friends, and for no reason at all, if one of us lost, we would just start beating the shit out of each other. We would literally wrestle each other so hardcore that it was getting kind of scary, like we would almost kill each other. It was really fun, though, because afterward, you just brush it off and go play another game or whatever. This will sound strange, but I remember we would flap our balls under our shorts, and you could hear the sound of it hitting your thigh, signifying some

sort of primal dance, like we're now men, haha. It's like we all knew that we were changing on the hormonal level, and we now had the ability to fight, to defend, and channel rage into power.

The Rage of Achilles

When I was 14, I had the heart of a saint and the rage of Achilles. I was in a Catholic school from grades pre-K to grade 8, and then transitioned to a public high school, Central, in Philly. The first day I arrived at school, I sat down with my lunch, started to eat, and this kid came up to me, took my lunch, and threw it directly in the trash. I remember just not reacting, getting up, walking away, and exploring in the library. I liked to hang on the computers, find ways to bypass the Internet blockers to go on Newgrounds, and play flash or Java games. However, this kid was like a pest, always bothering me, typical freshman year bullying situation. It was really bad; I'll never forget giving a presentation at the front of the class, and him just socking me in the nuts for no reason, which hurt so bad—it was so embarrassing! The problem is, he was very physical, and I was taught through Catholic school to suppress my inner rage, to turn the other cheek, kind of like Jesus did. However, at the end of the year, I was fed up with it, and it was the last day of school. I was standing at the bus stop, surrounded by all the students, waiting to go home for the summer. This kid came up to me again, tried to press me, but I wasn't having it this time. I beat the shit out of him, was fueled with so much rage, almost to the point of wanting to kill him. I felt like Achilles, ready to tie the body of Hector to the back of his carriage. The difference is, the carriage would be the SEPTA bus hahaha.

Public School is a Prison

This story reminds me that public school was like a fucking prison. You literally had to fight your way through the days, just to get by or prove yourself, kind of like when a new prisoner arrives in the cell. The crazy part is, my particular public school locked all of the doors, and when you entered school, you had to go through metal detectors and put your backpack through an X-ray machine. I remember one time being threatened by some kid with a pocket knife in the bathroom... anyways, being the inner explorer that I am, and the rebel that I always was, I would find ways to

skip class, to sneak out through the back doors, and explore in the park nearby. I could never be tamed, caged in, and a public school classroom certainly felt like a prison cell to me. I still can't believe that we weren't really permitted to go outside during lunch, despite having such beautiful grounds in the back of the school. The fact that there were so many security guards everywhere and locked doors just felt so unnatural to me. Public school trains you to be the perfect slave, the perfect prisoner, another pawn in the system.

Courage

During my recent trip to Rome and Florence, I fell in love with the sculptures of David, Achilles, and a variety of Greek heroes like Hercules. David, being the ultimate depiction of courage, as he was a small shepherd boy, faced with a giant, Goliath. With the precision of a slingshot and a stone, David won the battle. Through his unwavering trust in God, with his heart full of courage, he went through many trials and was eventually crowned the king of Israel. I actually remember visiting the Valley of Elah in Jerusalem where the battle was fought. I went on a tour, crawled through caves, discovered pottery from thousands of years ago, and got to gaze out at the battlefield. There's something about visiting a location and putting yourself in the position of these ancient stories. Anyways, courage is the number one virtue that skateboarding, football, or playing sports as a child has taught me. Through exploring in the woods on my own, I mustered up courage at a very young age. I believe this inner courage, this warrior spirit, is what guided me throughout my journey as a photographer. Despite how chaotic the places I've put myself in, I somehow came out alive in so many different situations where I certainly should've died. It's like I've got Saint Michael the Archangel on my shoulder, defending me in battle!

The Weapon of Mass Distraction

When the United States military went to battle in Iraq after 9/11, did we ever find the weapons of mass destruction? I don't think so... However, we created the weapon of mass distraction, the iPhone, and it sits in the front pocket of every human being in the United States and the world. What's incredible about these devices is where they are built—in those Chinese factories that have suicide

windows, those nets that prevent the workers from killing themselves. The parts are mined by slaves, and most likely these villages in the Congo use child labor to gather the parts necessary to create the iPhone itself. I remember when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia, and you were never allowed to visit the Congo. It was one of the countries that were off-limits on the list of places you can travel in Africa as a volunteer.

Abundance

What my Peace Corps service taught me is that we already have everything we need. I think back to my time living off the land, the lake, the fish ponds, the farm. This experience really shifted my paradigm, to the point where I still can't believe that there are places in the world like this, where people have to travel long distances with buckets on their heads just to get drinking water. Despite this, the people in the village are filled with abundance. Every individual in the tribe has a role to play. Spiritual connection is at the center of the community, through the church, and the families are very big. Despite the resilience through the living conditions, they have a connection to something higher, something greater than themselves. I think this is why I like to live a simple life here in Philadelphia. I recently purchased a half cow from an Amish farm in Lancaster. I went out, spoke with the farmers, and got to know their family. The guy that was working there was 28 years old, just like me, and said he's been working with the cows since he was one year old, hahaha. When he said that I couldn't help but laugh, because it's just so different from modern life in the city. But it makes sense to me—when everybody has a duty, a role, everyone thrives in abundance. I think the problem with modernity and city life in general is that there is a lack of community, family, or spiritual connection to something more than our obsession with consumer culture and entertainment. Now I basically like to live like an Amish person, waking up at 4 AM, working in the park in horticulture, tending the land, engaging in physical work, getting dirt in my hands, literally connected to nature. I just know that this is where I belong, all along, just like when I was a little kid, blazing paths, crossing streams with rocks. What's amazing is, in Fairmount Park, there's this stream that I cross each day, which is just a bunch of logs and a makeshift bridge with stones. Once I cross the stream, I visit the pavilion in the trees, a treehouse, similar to when I was a little kid, walking to my teepee.

Life is Fun

I'm always on the move and I can't sit still. I hate being caged in and believe I have the heart of a lion. I like to march all day, to be physical all day long. I like to explore, to experience life on the front lines of life. I believe that life is just so fun, and as a photographer, life becomes more beautiful through the act of observing small details, fleeting moments, and putting four corners around life, saying yes to life, affirming it. Life is just such a joy, and I believe in order to feel this sensation of abundance, you must return to the childlike spirit of play. I don't like to think of what I do as work, but play. When you return to play, to being a child, life is interesting forever. I'm just so eager to wake up when the sun rises, to see it peer above the horizon. When the birds chirp, I smile and laugh like a child.

The Metamorphosis

So, in order to return to this childlike state, I believe the first step is to remove all feelings of shame and guilt. We must cast away this idea of sin, especially if you're a Christian or practice any religion. I think when you consider sin, for all the rules and guidelines of the 10 Commandments, whatever—that's fine and all. But humans have evolved to play by the rules too much, to fit themselves inside a box too much, or to even just stare at a box—the TV—a little bit too much. A child has no preconception of what sin is; a child simply follows their intuition, their gut, in the spirit of play. When a child sins, it's pure, it's innocent. When a child has an emotional response, the child cries loud, the child pouts, screams, and shouts. I believe the rage, sorrow, greed, joy, or love are all part of the human experience of what makes our time on earth so beautiful. We're all gonna die at the end of our lives. So maybe it's best for us to leave the world free from judgment. Stop judging yourself. Just love yourself. At the end of the day, God is the final judge.

I recently finished reading *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus. In the final and third play, *The Eumenides*, to keep this as brief as possible, Agamemnon's family—the Greek leader in *The Iliad*—suffers tragically. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to the gods, his wife then kills him and cheats on him, and her son and daughter kill their mother. In the end, the gods were the final judge. Despite their sin, their wrath, and the tragedy of matricide, the gods held the last judgment for what is right and just, not a mortal human. I find the story to be a powerful metaphor for humanity's

tendency towards sin in our everyday experience. While we may not have the most tragic lives, like those in these ancient Greek plays, I believe it is wise to recognize the divine role in our fate or judgment.

Untamed Spirit

I believe we all carry a part of the divine within us. We are infinite and luminous beings. As I finish this essay while riding the bus in the darkness, I try my best to let my light shine. Even in the darkness, we create the light. We are the dancing flames in the void of space, all with our own individual burning fire. So I say, be untamable, beat on your chest, and roar like a lion. Be an uncontrollable wildfire until your flame goes out at the end of your life.

Be Free

Maybe in order to be free, not only must you return to being a child, but you must also have no hopes or fears in life. When you completely detach from what's out of your control and control your own spirit from within, you become free.