

Purity is Perfection

During my trip to Rome and Florence, I remember gazing at the sculptures of ancient Greek heroes. The sculptures reminded me that I can strive for greatness, to overcome this modern world, through embodying the myth of the heroes in the art. All of these heroes have flaws that lead to their ultimate demise—demigods, half-man, half-god—mortal creatures. Despite this, I find that by viewing the beauty in the sculpture, the perfection, and the stories behind these figures, I've given myself permission to strive to become godlike, to purify myself, to go through the fire like Hercules, and to come out on the other side as the embodiment of perfection.

In Christian theology, Jesus is considered pure and sinless. He is the embodiment of divine perfection: light from light, God from God, embodying the Word of God in flesh and blood. He transcends the concept of a demigod, being fully God and fully human.

As mere human creatures—flesh and blood, who cut, bleed, have bones that break, and a heart that will stop beating, who will and must die one day—why strive to be perfect? I know that the path moving away from perfection leads to the decay of the physical body at a faster rate. Smoking vapes, doing drugs, consuming alcohol, and indulging in hedonistic sexual experiences will lead to our ultimate demise earlier in life. We are all imperfect creatures, but without a guide, an archetype, a hero, a myth, or God himself, why even strive to be perfect at all?

Advertising and television will tell you that you must consume, seek pleasure, comfort, and conform to the masses. The problem is, the majority of these television shows, media, music, and movies promote degenerate culture, and it feels like an attack on the souls of the world. Body positivity becomes a hallmark for commercials, making the masses feel comfortable being sick. Pharmaceutical companies remind you that it's okay to be imperfect, that a quick pill or medicine will solve your health problems, both physical and mental. Don't worry, you can keep eating Cheetos and Tastykakes, because we have an injection for that or a pill for this. The irony of these CEOs and people who promote junk food and processed

poison is that many of them come from the tobacco industry or simultaneously work in healthcare. The soullessness of these individuals and corporations is palpable, and the corruption is real.

Let us not forget the root of the word corporation: "corpus," or "corpse," meaning a dead body. Dead body, dead mind, dead soul.

Our current battle in this modern world is a spiritual war—a war for your body, your mind, and your spirit.

Why Purify?

When I consider the death of Hercules, the searing of his flesh by fire, the pain is excruciating, probably the worst pain man can experience. But in the end, his body ascends to Mount Olympus, where he is seated alongside the gods. No longer suffering in his mortal body, his soul then goes to live on forever.

Like Hercules, the life of an individual will have many trials and sufferings in life. This is a part of our reality as humans on this earth. Pain will teach us and guide us in life. When we do something wrong, there is a repercussion, as we do cut and bleed. If we do something right, maybe we'll become stronger, grow muscles, and become more wise.

All Is One

When I consider purification, I think about my current job, working in horticulture. I'm constantly pruning the plants, as the leaves wither and change with the seasons. Some plants are more formidable than others, some become disturbed by the temperature, others go into shock when planted. There are constant cycles of death and rebirth. One of my favorite things to do in the garden is to take off a piece

of a plant and propagate it into another pot or in another area of the greenhouse, and watch as it grows again. By removing the dead parts of the plants, you give them the ability to regrow and become born again.

I noticed some very small bugs eating the leaves on the palm trees that were recently planted. I washed them off with water, removed the cobwebs, trimmed and pruned the little brown parts on the tips of the leaves, and soaked them with water from the soil, giving the palm tree the nutrients it needs. Maybe those little bugs will find a new home somewhere out in the forest, and hopefully, find what they need. Managing the greenhouse is challenging because it's in a very controlled environment, so you kind of have to go out of your way to disrupt nature's process. It's kind of like purifying and cultivating the perfect paradise.

As much as humans are animals, I believe we are more similar to plants in a lot of ways. We require very simple things like water and sunlight in order to feel good. By drinking water, we support the flow of blood in our bodies, carrying nutrients throughout our veins and arteries, which helps repair dead cells and regrow new tissue. Our bodies are like batteries, and the sun is the ultimate supercharger. The more sunlight we get in the day, the more energy we will feel, similar to a plant undergoing photosynthesis.

I've been spending a lot of time in nature and around a variety of plants. When I go really close to plants and photograph them on the macro level, I recognize how similar we are in terms of the structural elements that make up a leaf. Just look at the pattern of the veins that carry the nutrients of water throughout the leaf—they are very similar to the veins that flow through our bodies. When I look up at a tree and see the way in which the branches extend into the sky, I breathe in the fresh oxygen the trees produce while recognizing the connection between the pattern of the leaves and the trees' branches, similar to that of the lungs within my physical body. I exhale the carbon dioxide, and the trees inhale it. The trees exhale the oxygen, and I inhale it.

Recognizing these very simple patterns in nature reminds me that all is one.

From the smallest cell within my physical body to the vastness of the universe and the grandeur of the stars in the sky, we are all interconnected in many ways. I think we get so caught up in this modern world, with distractions, that we have forgotten how connected we all really are. I think a lot of the time we like to divide ourselves

based on specific identity groups, whether we identify with the color of our skin, white or black, Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, or whether or not we identify sexually in a particular way. I can't help but think about how we all stem from Africa. We all have spawned from the same gene pool, the same body of water, the same cells that make up the entire population. I think we need to take a moment, step back, spend time alone in silence and contemplation, and remind ourselves of this fact. This simple fact alone, I believe, can generate a wave of peace and ripple of prosperity for the entire world. I've traveled this entire world, and I can tell you with 100% certainty, we are more similar than different. The more we divide ourselves, the more we will devolve as a people.

Division is a Distraction

During my time at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I had a professor who was extremely anti-Palestinian. He wouldn't shy away from cruel jokes and often used me and my photographs as an example for the class, considering I traveled all throughout the West Bank. He actually told me that I should go into a Palestinian home and strap a fake bomb to the chest of a Palestinian baby and make a photograph of this staged scene. The professor would often remark and laugh out loud, saying, "Allah Akbar, baby!" This experience was insane to me, considering he was a professor, someone with authority in the classroom. You can't really talk back or do anything about it; you kind of just laugh, brush it off, and recognize that he's just a nut job.

But I'll be honest with you—he was being authentic. He definitely wasn't wearing a mask or pretending to hide his feelings. He genuinely felt this way and had animosity toward a group of people, and there are probably real reasons why. During my time studying abroad, one of my classmates was stabbed and murdered on the light rail. She was a very sweet young woman from the UK and was killed by a Palestinian man in broad daylight. Maybe my professor feels the way he does because his perception of reality revolves around the terrorism and violence that occurs within the Holy Land. I'm not justifying his thoughts, but I am making the point that we all have different perspectives, feelings of hatred, love, anger, and grief.

When I would walk around certain locations, Palestinian cities in particular, many young teenagers or young adults would always ask if I was Jewish, saying that they hate Jews, want to kill them, and would draw Stars of David everywhere. They expressed general animosity toward Jewish people and Israelis. The problem is, a lot of them grow up with bad role models who only teach them to fight because that's all they know. That's their reality. Many of these people feel as though they only have one option: to fight back; otherwise, their people will perish.

Maybe the more authentic we become, the more we actually let out our true feelings—our raw and real emotions—the closer we can become to the truth. If we consider this idea of wearing a mask, or a personality that you put on when you go out into the public, and you're constantly wearing it, how will we ever find the truth? If you genuinely feel a certain way about somebody, you might as well just say it instead of wearing a mask. I think the truth is difficult and hard to discover when we all pretend and don't actually share the real, the raw, and the true. I know the saying, "the truth hurts," but honestly, it should. It's only through hurt and suffering that we can ever grow.

Take Off the Mask

One thing I noticed through everyday interactions in public spaces or just walking around the city is the fact that everyone's just wearing a mask. It doesn't seem like anyone's authentic anymore. People have their shirts tucked in, say "yes ma'am," "thank you, sir," color in the lines, and all simply abide by the rules. This system of conformity, of obeying guidelines, rules, and dogma, has led to the mass adoption of the mask. The mask is a metaphor for a personality, a persona that we put on when we go out into the world. We hide our true selves, our innermost voice, and suppress it when we go into public spaces.

We've become so uptight. Everything is offensive, controversial, and politically incorrect these days. We shy away from speaking our mind, from telling the truth, because we're afraid to hurt people's feelings. What if this idea of wearing a mask is

leading to a separation from the truth in general? The more that we don't speak the truth, the more that we live in a lie, behind a mask, behind the façade, a wall, in a matrix, the worse off society will be.

I think it's time for us to get more ratchet, more ghetto, and just start fucking speaking up, telling the truth, and stop being afraid.

Stay Focused

I think men are supposed to keep their mouths shut and just live their everyday lives. For instance, when the teacher was saying these horrible things to me in the class, I didn't bat an eye. I never responded, just kept my mouth shut and moved on. If someone says something bad, something that doesn't align with you, there's no need to rebuttal, start debates, and bicker over trivial things. Misery loves company and will always try to drag you down into it.

If you're thinking about other men, their lifestyle, their decisions, their thoughts, that's a personal problem. Maybe this is a byproduct of low testosterone? The lower the testosterone, the less physical strength the man feels, the more they are inclined to behave through reputation destruction. Low testosterone makes you behave passive-aggressively. High testosterone makes you a man, more stoic, and less emotional.

I remember when I was a teenager and would play competitive online video games, like Counter-Strike, Halo, or Call of Duty. Some people would buy these gamer supplements, like G Fuel, Gamer Fuel, or some weird pre-workout drink to keep them focused while gaming. Ha ha ha. I just find it hilarious that there were products made for gamers to keep them focused while playing. When people play competitive video games and have a screen in between them and the physical person they're playing against, they become so emotional and enraged at their opponents. I'll never forget the pregame lobbies in Modern Warfare 2 or Halo 3, when people would scream back and forth at one another. These online spaces are like the epitome of low-testosterone men raging and firing with their hormonal imbalances. I think that's what these drinks do as well. A lot of these hyper-

processed, weird gamer fuels, pre-workouts, sodas, monsters, and candy, they all disrupt your hormones. The more your hormones are imbalanced, the more prone you are to rage and passive-aggressive behavior.

Life Is the Ultimate Video Game

When I look up at the moon in the morning, during dawn, it feels so close, almost like I can reach up and grab it. I think life is like the ultimate video game, and anything is possible. We limit ourselves based on our beliefs, dogma, traditions, religions, and identities that tie us down to this earth.

What if we break free from these limiting beliefs, from the chains that bind us by gravity, and strive upwards infinitely? Even if you max out your stats to level 99, you can still play the game and strive for perfection. I think we need to realize how infinite life, the universe, and the mundane moments we experience truly are. This feeling of abundance flows through me when I look up at the sky. I remember being in Zambia, Africa, looking up at the sky and seeing every star in the galaxy. Every single night I saw shooting stars. I could even notice satellites moving in the night sky. My host father and I would speak about life, philosophy, and how different yet similar our lives are because of where we live.

It's this connection to the universe at large that reminds me I am bound by gravity. When I look up at the moonlight, I'm reminded that I can strive to move upwards, to touch the sky. Although I am bound by gravity, I will cut and bleed. Despite the suffering, I will never stop striving.

I believe that through purification, trial by fire, we ascend upwards. By shedding your skin, or pruning the dead, through simple actions like removing toxins, drugs, alcohol, people, and even physical locations from your life that make you feel down—make you feel like you're being pushed down by gravity—you become lighter and float upwards.