

The Frontlines of Freedom

Every morning, I start my day off with a nature hike. When I look up beyond the horizon and watch the sunrise, I remind myself how open this world is, how much there is to see, to do, and to explore. As a photographer, I find myself on the frontlines of freedom. No matter how mundane life may seem, I'm always seeking to go beyond the mundane. I believe that with an open mind, two legs, and a camera in hand, life becomes more beautiful. Maybe this modern world tries to sit us back—or literally just sit us down—in a system of conformity, of slavery, of both the mind and the body, and I seek to go beyond this, to seek simplicity, a path to freedom.

Embracing Simplicity and Self-Sufficiency

After a decade of traveling the world, I've come to the conclusion that I really don't need much from this world. Everywhere I go, I simply pack a backpack with only my essentials: clothing, my camera, and a passport. I enjoy spending at least one month, three months, six months, up to a year or more in new locations while living nomadically. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I learned how to become self-sufficient by washing my clothes by hand, slaughtering chickens and goats, cooking food on the fire, drawing water from a well, and living in a mud hut.

One strange thing about me is that I've never owned a car and can only count on one hand the number of times I've actually driven. I remember there was a period in college where I would drive so that I could get groceries and stuff like that, but then I realized I could just order them on Amazon or simply walk or take the light rail in Baltimore. I enjoy having fewer possessions because I've realized that they wind up owning you. The more stuff you own, especially in the context of a vehicle, you wind up becoming a slave to the system, with car insurance, payment plans, and the simple fact that you're stuck in traffic for 30 minutes to up to multiple hours per day. I do not seek to own a car and have zero desire to. I think the path to true freedom is by removing more clutter from your life, not adding unnecessary burdens to it. The car is simply not my interest in life. Most people look to increase their money so they can purchase a nicer or better car, but this means nothing to

me and never has. I simply see it as a way to give yourself more headaches than you really need in life. Honestly, the more I contemplate the future, nobody is going to have to drive. There's bound to be millions of self-automated driving Tesla cabs everywhere. Even now, I simply use the bus to get to work, or if I need an Uber in a pinch, I simply use my iPhone and hail a taxi. It feels like I'm in a video game when I call an Uber—simply clicking a button and a car arrives.

I think the biggest problem with work and life is that we simply live to make money in the hopes of spending it in the future or retiring when we're 65 and can finally do the things we've always dreamt of, but we're simply not as healthy. This, to me, is a scam and not how I want to live my life. Honestly, I just want to live my life. I only want to do things that I want to do in my life. I find that anytime I'm doing something that I genuinely am not interested in with 100% of my focus, I feel like I'm wasting time or simply not enjoying myself. If I'm not enjoying myself, if I'm not happy with my everyday life, well, this, to me, is a life of misery and dread and regret.

Reflections on Mortality

I'm currently 28 years old, and I've already accepted death. I've lived such a full life, I have zero regrets, and honestly, if I die tonight in my sleep, I would die happy and fulfilled, knowing that I did everything I dreamed of. I'm simply so excited for the next day because I know that I can go out there one more time and live my best life. I'd rather live a short life full of experiences than a long life with regret at the end of my last years. Of course, I seek to optimize my health and live as long as humanly possible because I simply just love life too much. I know how much there is out there to see, do, and explore, and I can't get myself to stop being curious. Ultimately, at the end of our lives, we're not going to look around at the possessions we own or the money we acquired and say, "Yes, I'm so fulfilled." We're most likely going to think back on our memories, our experiences that we've had along our journey. At the end of the day, I believe it's the journey itself that provides meaning.

Nature, Humanity, and the Balance of Life

The reason why I love the city of Philadelphia and am so proud to be born and raised here is because we have the perfect balance between nature and society. We have so many green spaces, parks, rivers, and trails all throughout the city. I grew up with the Wissahickon Forest in my backyard in my youth, playing alone or with friends, exploring caves, building forts, climbing trees, and spending all day riding my bike on the dirt paths. I still feel like I have this inner child within me and spend a lot of my time throughout the day on the outskirts of the city, in the woods, the parks, or by the river.

As much as I have a passion for nature, I also love society and especially humanity in general. As a photographer, I believe it is my duty to uplift humanity through the photographs that I create. No matter if I'm in my hometown or on a trip to Rome, I look to make pictures of humanity—of what it means to be alive. I find that through the act of making photographs, I become closer to life itself, closer to understanding human nature, behavior, and society at large. I feel as though society is one of the greatest phenomena of modern life, and it's a miracle that we all coexist at the same time, in this particular year, 2024. I find similarities between Philadelphia and Rome, considering the architecture, history, as well as the tourism. When I was in Rome for about two months last summer, I felt so at home, as I am a dual citizen between Italy and the United States. I absolutely love walking around these ancient streets, surrounded by beautiful people, places, and buildings. When I'm in a city full of rich history, like Philadelphia or Rome, I feel like I'm connected to something greater than myself—like I'm a part of history in the making and the societies and civilizations that have come before me.

Taking Risks and Pursuing Adventure

I've always been a risk taker. I remember when I was a young boy, and we all rode our bikes down the hill at Kelly Park. One after the other, we tried to jump a ramp—this little dirt mound—falling, getting back up again. I remember going to FDR Skatepark, scaling these tall, looming concrete walls with my board, falling down, scraping my knees, and continuing to push myself, taking risks.

There was this one particular instance during my travels in Israel and Palestine where I made a very quick decision—a dangerous decision—one of the biggest risks I remember taking in my life. My friend Matthew and I were photographing together, traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho during our time studying abroad. When we arrived at the checkpoint of Jericho, Israeli soldiers guarded the path, and fire was rising as conflict broke out. The soldiers told us that we could not enter, and so we got into a random man's car to get us as close to the borders as possible and see if there was another way in. As we arrived at the border, we snuck through the barbed-wire fence, pushing ourselves through the desert, ducking and running, making our way to the city of Jericho as quickly as possible. As we arrived in the village, we strapped our cameras around our necks, pushing to the frontlines of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. I remember inching closer and closer during this particular conflict, getting to the frontlines of the battle, hiding behind a concrete barrier. As I stood behind this concrete barrier, I turned to the left of me as fire rose from a tire in the background, and a man with a looming and scary mask stared back at me in the foreground. I pressed the shutter, made the photograph, and returned to Jerusalem the next day.

There are countless stories like this amongst my journey traveling the world, but this one, in particular, was one of the most powerful and dangerous experiences with the most risk involved. What I realized is, the more the risk, the more the reward. For instance, this photograph that I made, as I reflect on all of my past work, is honestly probably my best photograph of all time. I remember continuously going back, traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho time and time again, feeling so alive each time my body descended to this low-elevation city. Your ears would pop, and the sight in front of you was so vast and wide as you looked out towards the Dead Sea and the Jordanian mountain range. I spent so much time here amongst a group of brothers, sleeping on the floors of mosques, and even taking day trips to the top of the Wadi Qelt mountain range with a family who shared tea and coffee with me, dancing and singing on the top of the mountain.

The experiences we have will always be more important than the possessions we acquire along our journey of life.

Questioning Modern Systems

Why do we work 40 hours a week? When I consider hunter-gatherers, they would probably just spend a couple of hours out there getting the things they need, like food or water, and then for the rest of the week, just relax by the campfire with their family. I feel as though we live this very hustle, work-hard, productive way of life that doesn't make sense to me. We prioritize productivity and being busy worker bees over things that matter in life, such as family, sharing stories, and experiencing life in general. We sacrifice all of our time in the modern world, in the present moment, in hopes for a better future, but in reality, this is merely an illusion. You could die tomorrow and still have not lived today. The point is, I want to live fully each day, knowing I'm doing things that I actually want to do.

Of course, you need to work, and I'm not saying that we shouldn't. I'm just trying to challenge these modern societal norms that we've decided upon, which, in my opinion, is self-slavery. Not only are we slaves of the mind, believing we have to conform to the way Hollywood, the media, or the news tells us, but we also become enslaved in the body, confined to the four corners of a room, caged in like zoo animals in this beautiful open world. The trend towards spending time indoors, sacrificing your physical health by sitting on your butt, miserable, for the pursuit of money, to me, is a fool's life.

I find it funny that we have to jump through so many hoops just to have a piece of meat and a place to sleep at night. When I consider the Native Americans that dwelled in Philadelphia before me, they didn't believe that anybody but God owned the land. Then some guys with top hats came, gave the Native Americans some gold coins or whatever—maybe even some paper—and said, "Hey, this is ours now," built some trains, some beautiful buildings, and infrastructure, and created the system that we currently live in today. Once again, I'm not saying that we need to go back to being Native Americans living in the woods or whatever; I'm just challenging the fact that this way of life is not natural. It's not natural to sit inside all day. It's not natural to take orders all day. What's natural is being out in the world, exploring, spending time with people you love, and living life in a way that aligns with both nature and your passions in life.

Critique of Consumerism and Financial Systems

Even if you own land or a property, you don't technically own it 100%. You're still paying taxes to the United States government. I find that these systems we adopt, like credit cards, are another thing that enslaves us. We wind up having money loaned to us, thinking that the banks are cutting us a deal, when they're actually just keeping you a slave to their system. The more that you're spending credit, the more you're a slave to the system. I don't use credit cards, and when I go to stores and want to purchase something, the only times I go out and actually buy anything is once per week when I have a bowl of Vietnamese pho, and I always spend cash. Not to mention, these restaurants only accept cash, and I understand why—because they actually want to keep their money and not have to give it to the government. The Vietnamese are very clever.

The more I learn about Bitcoin, the more I realize it might just be the only thing in the universe that you can truly own with 100% certainty. It's a place to store your time and energy. Bitcoin is not necessarily a thing that you would adopt so that you can get rich quick, but to me, it is a path of freedom and autonomy, disconnecting from the system at large. If I'm spending hard days laboring physically and mentally to acquire fiat currency that will depreciate in value over time, and I do not want to spend it, well, then I might as well store it in a place that will preserve that time and energy for me in the future. My current plan is to store 90% of my money in Bitcoin and then use the extra 10% to actually live my life. This way, if I want to go for a trip somewhere, I will simply use that money to experience things, to travel places, to spend a month or two here and there, to work on my art and my photography. I'm not going to spend my money buying shit that I don't need but simply store it in an immutable place—in Bitcoin—a place that I can trust with no intermediary between me and my capital.

Breaking Free

So my ultimate goal in life is to be free. Is this not a simple idea? I don't understand the idea of playing life safe, living by the rules, and doing things the same way as everybody else. For instance, why do we subscribe to these bullshit services like Netflix, Hulu, or whatever other subscription services there are? It seems like the only subscription service worth having is for ChatGPT, as it actually provides value

in your life. My goal is to disconnect and break free from the system so that I can go and live my best life. I don't want to live my life simply to make money. I want to do things that I love in my everyday life.

For instance, working in horticulture at my seasonal job is so freeing. I get to spend time in solitude, working in a park, surrounded by beautiful plants, engaging in contemplation, reading, writing, and making art. I'm actually spending my time during the day in fresh air while simultaneously making money. To me, there's no other job that I can personally see myself doing. I have learned over the years through experiences such as volunteering on a kibbutz, working on farms, doing aquaculture in Africa, milking cows, tending gardens, and landscaping, that I'm a very physical person. I prefer to live a very simple life, working in nature, making less money, than spending my entire day locked away in a cage making \$100,000 per year. Again, the goal is absolute freedom—freedom of your mind, your body, and your time.

Health, Pain, and Listening to the Body

I currently have lower back pain, but it's a clear sign that I did something wrong in the gym. I find pain to be the ultimate teacher in life. I was hanging from my pull-up bar, thinking about how long I could last, testing my grip strength, and whatever. However, my finger was strained the next day, and my lower back is in pain. Because of this, I'm practicing yoga more, trying to align my spine once again. I think that your body is like a temple and that aligning it and putting things into place each morning and before you go to bed at night brings peace.

For instance, I think a lot of bodily pain leads to anxiety or even disease. When I consider the spinal cord, the nervous system, and the connection between our mind and our body, simple things like lower back pain can impede the way you think and feel throughout the day. Maybe it'll make you more anxious, and having bad sleep will make you feel a little bit angrier the next day. So for this, I listen to pain and let it guide me. I know that I need to take rests, to not go so hard, to slow down, and to align my mind and body through simple practices like stretching.

Spirituality and Trust in God

About a year ago, I was working as a photographer and was absolutely miserable. I didn't like having to go to an office, check my email, be on call, and work on projects I did not care about. I thought to myself, "Will I live this way for the rest of my life?" And the answer was absolutely not. Because of this, I took a year off from working, had trust in God, and listened to my soul in silence. What happened was, as I decided to leave this job, I became closer with God. By walking alone on nature paths each day, I became more aligned and in tune with who I am.

This journey led me to return to Rome, as I began to pray more. I spent maybe every single day praying in churches while also working on my photography. To me, it was a spiritual journey of enlightenment that brought me to Rome. I find that by listening to God, you can align yourself with how you must be in life. I'll never forget spending my time in the gardens in Rome, realizing how much I love nature, and how, when I returned, I must work in some capacity in nature. Now I'm working in horticulture, spending my days in gardens, and absolutely loving my life. I believe there is something about this journey—of disconnecting from modern societal expectations of what you should be doing with your life—and just putting your trust in God.

Confronting Truth and Seeking Freedom

As I became more critical about how I am and how I would like to spend my time during the day, I decided that I cannot just make photographs for a living. Frankly, I can't just focus on photography throughout the entirety of my day. I can't spend all of my time walking the streets, as the chaos can become overwhelming. I decided to design my life in a way where I can practice something else besides photography—that being horticulture, which, to me, is an art form besides photography.

I needed that time at the beginning of my days in solitude and peace because that's just what I need. I have no other way of explaining it other than understanding that this is the way I am. Speaking of needs, maybe we need to need less, because the more that we need in life, the more desires we have, the less free we become. I find that by being content with what I have, without seeking more, I am on the path of freedom. I feel like I had to confront the truth of who I am to embrace authenticity.

By disconnecting from social media, comment sections, and feedback, I no longer need external validation for anything I do in life. I do not need praise, and I do not seek it. To me, this is also a path of freedom, as I can focus on my true and honest curiosities without the need to impress other people. If anything, I seek to impress myself with the things I do in life. My goal is to take charge of my life as a leader of my own life, eternally growing each and every day.

Philosophy of Life

The meaning of life is in the process itself. For me, as a photographer, the meaning of life isn't to make the best pictures. The goal of a photographer is to continue making pictures without any attachments to the outcome. As long as I'm curious and waking up each day with openness, I consider myself successful. I think that you shouldn't have to ask what the meaning of life is. You just know that you've found it when you find it. There's really no way of explaining it.

Maybe we can live our lives like it's our own odyssey, our own journey of coming home. But I feel as though it's on a more metaphorical front, where I'm not necessarily coming home physically, but mentally, into my essence—into who I truly am. Through photography, exploration, creation, writing, reading, and thinking, I become closer to myself, my soul, and the photographs I make become a reflection of that. I seek to understand who I am by coming home into my essence. My goals are to make photo books, of course; I do seek some sort of outcome from my photographic process. But this does not keep me up at night. It's simply not my concern. My concern is curiosity, creation, and remaining in the spirit of play.

Observations on Modern Society

Why are people so serious these days? Yesterday, I saw this lady with pink hair walking down the street with a shirt that said "Kill All Men." Could you imagine if I walked around with a shirt that said "Kill All Christians"? You could tell that she was serious about wearing it too, because she looked so pissed off at the world around her, marching with such a serious and stern stride.

We've become so divided from one another, and maybe we just generally have a lot of mental illness in modern society? Just think of the television and the amount of pharmaceutical commercials that pop up every single time. Or think back to when you were in public school, in high school, and the amount of students that were prescribed ADHD pills just to keep them still. Maybe a lot of people are medicated, and because of this, you will see mental illness on display throughout the streets. I'm not really sure what we can do about this, but just laugh in the face of chaos and embrace it openly. As much as I love society, I can't help but recognize these flaws and strange things in human behavior.

Onwards and Upwards

As I walk along the trail towards the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I contemplate freedom and what that means. If I were to step to my left, I would fall into the river and drown. If I go right, I'll get hit by a train and die. However, if I continue on the straight and narrow path, onwards and upwards to the cliffside behind the museum, a beautiful vista awaits. A view of the horizon and the sun shines upon the cliff for me to gaze out. And when I stand there, I feel unbounded, unburdened by modern society, by the chaos, and all of the noise. I feel connected to something greater, something larger than life itself, that keeps me pushing onwards and upwards to freedom.