

And So, What Now? : A Study of Myself as I Sit in This Moment

The question posed, to assure you I have not forgotten, was regarding the meaning of life. Approaching this question, I began by explaining within ten pages how I had lost my answer. I cannot stay in that state, though, which I understand from having tried. And, so - what now?

The next facet that I cannot get further without exploring is my understanding of myself. The concept of "self" is something that scholars have debated, and there are all sorts of concepts to consider, but what truths about me are mine? To find that out, I want to utilize this work. I have spent my time at Allegheny taking philosophy courses, for no reason outside of finding answers within the writings that were born of this same exercise I wish to attempt, but performed by others. It is necessary to absorb information, but also sit down and sort through it.

Going about learning the self is not equitable to learning a concept, or skill, or language. Self, as I understand it, is variant; it is a process. As soon as I think I know myself, I have already changed. It is not something that is predetermined, either. These are things that I have recently concluded to be true, because they align with my own experiences. However, there is a lot of ground to make up. After spending my life thinking I was a predetermined thing to be discovered, only to conclude I now find that a fallacy, I cannot just start hammering away at a foundation for the rest of my life when I have no idea what I've already built. I hadn't even known I was building!

Now, it is time to attempt to learn, and I will do so by looking at who I have become, and writing it down. I am loosening the wires that have kept me tightly wound, slowly but surely. In determining for myself how to exist, I am essentially figuring out what to *do*. I enjoy doing a wide array of things, though I know I do not dedicate all the time I could towards them. Time is

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something which looms over me, and causes many frustrations. Within childhood and adolescence, there were a lot of circumstances which limited my capacity for fulfilling my time the way I would have wanted. That is the part of adulthood kids aspire for so strongly. However, now that I am in a position where I am the sole determiner, I am still not always doing what I want to be doing. Figuring out how to implement them would require specialized action towards each interest, and it is not feasible to perform that for all of them.

Therein lies the question constantly barricading me, which I walk into like a glass door over and over: which? Not what, but which? How do you go about deciding without planting a spontaneous bomb of regret to hit somewhere down the line? You choose something so good you'll forget any other whim you had, or at least that's the idea. Or perhaps, it is necessary to take a lesson from Kierkegaard in this moment, which is to pick something for the sake of having to. I cannot remain stagnant, and so I have to pick *something* to do at any given moment.

At the beginning of the fall, my first choice in doing anything was to engage in the blissful act of Nothing. Laying still, preferably in the dark, inebriated, and clean. However, this cannot be a state of permanent existence. My ventures out were limited to volleyball (which I despised), school, eating, and smoking cigarettes. I had no difficulty making regular conversation with the passerby - but I could not think of them as anything more than just that. Within the context of volleyball, this was an incompatible attitude to have with a team sport, and I could only pretend for so long. I inevitably discontinued my time on the team.

School was a regularly scheduled obligation, and I treated it as such, with last-minute entry and quick exits. Eating was another obligation as well, and I did not mind doing it alone,

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though it was obligatory to tag along with my roommate or classmate to lunch or dinner from time to time. Any interaction was performative, because I was not enjoying myself.

Smoking stuck around for quite some time, and I most frequently did it outside of my dorm building. My dorm, in general, became my first source of genuine human connection, and it happened with the other girl who frequented the steps by the back door. There is something about cigarette conversation that plenty of writers have already romanticized. It is a disgusting habit, and at this point, we both knew we were pieces of shit for doing it. There was some solidarity in it. It organically progressed so that I would end up meeting her group of friends, most of whom lived in the same dorm. It became a perfect union of girls who did not want to do much.

Finding what interests me has been accomplished through a series of trial and error, and my group of friends provided a safe haven of Doing Nothing to return to without sacrificing my (annoying) need for human interaction. It was unique to the other opportunities I found because it was in my home, which somehow negated any barriers that would normally prompt me to perform. There were still obligations to attend to, but this reliable source for a mental break was effective in allowing me to recharge. I maintained regular attendance in classes, finished homework for the most part, and finished out better than I had hoped for.

I use the phrase Doing Nothing sardonically, because no one is ever truly in a state of nothing. However, I would say my friends and I try to come as close to it as possible. Staying in one place is part of it - it directly reduces the motion, and hence physical exertion, required. We do from time to time choose to sit quietly together and work on homework, interrupting the background music to ask a question of the collective. More often than not, though, we are smoking together, trying to, or experiencing our high by enjoying a show, card game, or

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conversation, each undoubtedly paired with the sound of each other's laughter. It is all very simple, and absent-minded, which are characteristics of most of my coping mechanisms.

I did begin to engage in casual conversation with classmates outside of our obligatory interactions, and I found great company in professors as well. I was making baby steps, but I definitely leaned on my crutch as much as I could.

Perhaps it was the return from winter break when this set-up became unsatisfactory to dedicate the majority of my time to. I was refreshed, and much more energetic. Doing Nothing was devoid of stimulation, and that was intentional. However, my mind was stewing in its stagnation, and I could feel myself growing irritable at my lack of initiative. I recognized it in how I projected it onto those around me; I became the Group Grump. The truth of this definition only frustrated me further. I knew there was more I could offer to myself, and the people I had grown to care for.

My next form of genuine human connection came from my acceptance of a position as gallery assistant. I had greatly enjoyed my Art History professor in the first semester, and she is the gallery director. When the position became available, I immediately expressed interest. From the first meeting, I understood this job to be more like a club, to which I was pleasantly surprised. It was much easier making friends with my coworkers, because we all shared very similar interests, and spent a lot of time together during the initial installation of the first exhibit.

The subsequent weeks have been spent trying to find a proper balance. I do need to maintain some form of Doing Nothing in order to decompress. However, I also need to spend time mentally stimulated, both with others, and alone. The latter portion of that is something I have recently discovered. I found in my attempt to find balance in my relation to others, I was

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losing track of myself. I was inadvertently returning to blind building. This is another motivation to engage in this exercise in the first place.

As I have found in sorting through my recent history, I have values, and it is important to understand what they are. I value genuine connection with others, which can be found in a variety of formats. I value authenticity, and compassion. These are necessary aspects to any genuine human connection. However, it is not something which benefits from forceful, but rather, organic development. It is therefore necessary to not make it an end, because while humans share an experience, they are unpredictable. The only ends worth pursuing are those pertaining to myself. The connection just naturally follows as I allow it.

It is important to be cautious when thinking about ends, because I cannot give them any more substance than what they are: an idea. I feel a misconception I have carried is that I am to strive for what I lack; however, I am not lacking anything, yet simultaneously void of anything. For example, I viewed my unhappiness with things as being a result of lacking something. When hungry, I eat, but when I am unhappy, what am I to do? I then minimize it: I am just missing a friend, a cup of coffee, an hour in the sun, and so on. However, each lack is filled and immediately replaced, and that filling is an exhausting process.

Looking at and analyzing the unhappiness is a tedious process, and one that has not proved to be beneficial for me so far. It has grown into an incomprehensible layering of problems dealt with improperly, if at all, which seem to expand the same way ants come into vision: I see one, now ten, now fifty...with infinite steps towards solution for each. It always makes me cower when I attempt to process it on my own. It is something which takes time, but I cannot allow it to take up all of mine. The rest of my time is best spent trying to be happy, by doing things which make me feel content and fulfilled. Balancing it all.

There are often times where the cyclical yet unpredictable nature of life makes me feel like I am insane. I even get angry at time for moving forward. I get angry at all of the things outside of my control. This, of course, is far too much anger to contain in an individual and so, I go numb. I choose that. I am done being numb, and so I have to be done being angry as well. However, I find that even when I am alert and sober and paying attention to the surrounding world, I cannot always find happiness. It seems the best moments are unplanned, and the things I position to go perfectly are hollow of enjoyment for one reason or another. I can choose to not plan, but then it seems I also choose to not do anything at all. It is the dread of having to choose in the moment which prevents me from living the unplanned moment. It seems as though I could benefit from forcing myself into that more often; I would even go so far as to say as often as possible.