

**20 Exceptionally Brief Observations
About The Brain, The Nervous
System, And On Our Collective
Blindness, Gorgeous Vulnerability
And Tragic Beauty**



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Dedication:
For Jane, my mentor and best friend



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INTRODUCTION

Hi. My name is Dan. If you're reading this little book it's because I probably sent you a copy -- hopefully not postage due.

First off, and just to be clear: I have about as much of a patent on the so-called truths of life as does anyone; in fact, perhaps less. And, I had best not be one to preach -- I may possess a modicum of knowledge and understanding, but *walking the walk* and *talking the talk* are clearly not one and the same thing.

Who am I? I am a 58 year old divorced parent of two, a sober drunk of some thirty years (the sober part), a survivor of complex trauma with a ton of history around attachment, abandonment, lovability, etc. I am also just a tad neurotic (insert wry smile here). I have moved around from job to job, puzzled at how I would manage to pay the rent, and spent quite a bit of time sleeping on couches and in the back of my old Toyota Highlander. I am... imperfect. That said, I'm also creative, loving, open of mind and heart. I have been a relatively successful high school teacher and educational leader for three decades. I have spent the better part of the past thirty years learning about myself, about how I move through the world. I

have also taken a deep dive into the science of the brain, and it has changed my awareness about life in most dramatic ways.

And so, as I amble quietly into the incipient twilight of my time on this silly and inexplicable rock, I thought it timely to write down, for the world to read (or perhaps just you and seven others), 20 observations and reflections about living, about life, and about the frailty and brilliance, the primacy and complexity, of the human brain and nervous system.

Please take these observations for what they may be worth to you.

In this book you will hear a lot about neuro-physiology, about the human nervous system, about neurotransmitters and hormones, etc. While this is not a science text, and while I am not going to spend countless chapters explaining processes that you could just as easily understand with but a few google searches, what I *will* do is spend time, go to great lengths, to describe how our collective lack of knowledge and understanding of our internal processes go a long way toward creating the beautiful, misguided, lost, and utterly heroic mess-of-a-species that we seem to be.

These chapters appear in no particular order. The material does not necessarily build upon itself and reach some kind of a crescendo. Feel free to skip around. In fact, I would encourage it. My musings herein are observations about life, having lived it for a while and having done so quite consciously.

Introduction

This book is not built from the mindset of “new ageism”, though new age and postmodernist thinking can be engaging and are not in any way objectionable. This is also not a treatise solely intended to reach those who are inclined toward introspection, nor is it replete with dogma about right and wrong, good and evil, etc. It is a collection of observations about the intersection between the human brain and human neuro-physiology, human awareness and choice-making, all framed by the reflections of a conscious sojourner -- me.

Finally, my goal in writing this book is to share with you what I believe to be the one quintessential truth: that we are all unique and beautiful, confounding and troubled, generous and loving, confused and blind; and that so much of who we are, how we move from moment to moment, would be better actualized if we each built an ark from our understanding of brain and mind, and if we sailed the seas of existence in that ark and with an ever-present awareness of how our brains, our minds (they are different things), our nervous systems, our unique physiologies, our histories and our constant meaning-making impact our choices and actions.

And so, without further explanation...

(Oh and p.s. -- I don't use people's real names in the anecdotes in this book.)

OBSERVATION #1

Each Human On The Planet Has A Unique Internal Experience

Today I was chatting with an old friend. We used to teach together at a prep school in New Hampshire, and she's staying in Maine for her winter break. As we were visiting, looking out over a gray winter ocean, she said something interesting. She mentioned that the school has decided to forego a spring vacation and just power through from January until June. This of course is driven by the challenges around COVID-19 and all of the quarantining and other hoops that boarding schools have to navigate. I told her that I certainly understand the decision. What she said next was worthy of a gentle retort. She said, "It'll be OK. We have lots of three day weekends built in so everyone should be able to make it." My response was swift, and perhaps took her by surprise: "Well Joan, it might be OK for you, but everyone has a different internal experience."

We quickly went on to the next subject.

In the parlance of psychology, Joan was *projecting* her view of things onto others. And, I *will* spend an entire

chapter or two delving more deeply into projection, narrative-creation and meaning-making. But this moment in my otherwise delightful visit with Joan was instructive. And this seemingly benign interaction is illustrative of something much more profound, which is this: each and every human being on the planet, all almost eight billion of us, experience the world uniquely. Our brains secrete and digest a cocktail of hormones and neurotransmitters uniquely, our nervous systems respond to these biophysical processes uniquely, our bodies experience feelings precipitated by these neurological events uniquely, and our histories (also entirely unique) inform our minds' attempts to interpret all of this data uniquely. We may all be part of a larger human biome, but our internal experiences are ours alone, entirely alien to every other being on the planet. We may try to use words, paint pictures, to describe the quality of these feelings and internal experiences, but all of those with whom we try to reach some kind of experiential symbiosis can never, ever truly live inside of our bodies -- and it's in that place that we feel all of our feelings, and it's in that universe that we are entirely alone.

So, what does this mean?

In order to answer that question, indulge me as I employ the wayback machine. I'm going to provide you with a brief snapshot of my life, and then try my best to describe to you how I experience the world, what sensations and feelings come to life in different parts of my body, how my mind tries to interpret and explain and rationalize

and filter all that I feel, and how utterly alone I am in that experience (though not necessarily lonely, because once we come to accept that each of us is alone on our internal journey, the isolation is perhaps more of a truth than a burden).

Briefly then. I was born in 1962 to two loving people, MBW and HDW. As they are both entirely unique themselves, I will not spend time trying to interpret *their* experiences and upbringings, their histories. Suffice it to say, myriad and complex impactful and traumatic episodes in my youth -- some dramatic, such as the death of my younger sister, and others less so -- shaped much of my landscape. Add to this my brain's chemical and electrical predispositions, my mind's defaults and choices in the interpretation of data and feelings, my body's physiological response to these states of brain and mind, and my nervous system's manner of processing (unconsciously of course) all of this data, and the result was that I moved through my days as someone with a penchant toward addictive behavior, with a sense of grandiosity, and with an overwhelmingly tempestuous barometric physiological response to difficult input.

And so for me, the internal experiences surrounding, for example, love and relationship were (and remain) wildly variable: from waves of ecstasy to a darkness and pain that is quite inexplicable. These internal experiences possess a quality I cannot accurately convey as no one shares my unique internal frame of reference. No one can feel how much pain *I* feel when my brain reacts to input

that tells my mind and senses that love is being withdrawn from me. That physical pain is unique to me; and my ability to withstand that turbulence, those feelings, is also entirely distinctive.

In our world today -- the echoes of the ages of Renaissance and Enlightenment -- we are told that, with enough and sufficient therapy, with the right combination of mindfulness practice or exercise or diet, with some carefully titrated melange of psychotropics, we can move toward wholeness and health, toward some idealized state of being -- that with enough courage and strength, we can withstand anything. In fact, there are many schools of thought that tell us that the entire point of being human is to learn how to be OK with being in pain. I am offering a somewhat different analysis.

My argument is this: the uniqueness of our internal experience requires us to make choices that may seem anathema to the narratives that guide social mores and norms.

What I have learned through my life's journey, and as I have come to more deeply accept the truth of *my* internal experience, is that my way of moving through, of perceiving, the world is singular to me. I have attempted romantic love many times, and I have come to recognize it as perhaps being beyond my capacity to integrate into my being (the jury is still out). No judgment, just a simple reality. And here's the thing: just as my body has to work too hard in order to metabolize the experiences and vicissitudes of romantic attachment, another person may

have the entirely opposite physiological response! Another person may find the experience of being *unattached* as too stressful and painful to (by choice) bear. But again, in our world, we judge and we label, we create meaning around these states of being, and the individual who is too dys-regulated when *not* in a romantic and committed liaison is called needy and codependent, and the person more like me is deemed cowardly and underdeveloped. And the truth is, we are all trying to work with our unique neuropathologies and histories, and we are all trying to live lives that, for lack of a better way to put it, make internal sense.

What makes this reflection so important for me is that, knowing and accepting this truth, I am able to build extraordinary compassion for myself and for those around me. I am able to choose empathy over judgement, loving-kindness over self-righteousness. I am also able to challenge the prevailing social narratives about who we are supposed to be, and build a story that is in line with my internal experience.

I used myself as an example here, and I focused on romantic love, as but one example of myriad examples of our true individuality. All I am asking *you* to do is strive to become deeply attuned to your own internal experiences, to make choices based upon what seems to bring you the most internal stasis and peace, to not get caught up in the narratives that describe us as damaged or troubled when in fact we are in all likelihood doing just fine, and to have abundant empathy for all humans as they

contend with and navigate their own internal compasses. By way of example, one of my former colleagues introduced herself at a meeting one day as “consciously single in life by choice.” I thought that was brilliant! No shame. Utter clarity about her own dance.

Final thought: This reflection is not meant to let people off the metaphorical hook for behavior and actions that are hurtful and destructive, either to themselves or to others. And because of our ingestion of, and internalization of, so very many societal narratives, we often find ourselves making choices not based upon our internal guidance systems but more upon convention and accepted norms. For example, there are many people who should not have become parents, but did so because the stories and pressures were too loud to silence. And once they acceded to this tremendous responsibility, they failed; they acted injuriously toward their children and spouses. This type of reality is lived out everyday by millions of individuals, not just parents of course. It can be seen in the work people choose, in the lifestyles they pursue, etc. All I am saying is if we can, without judgement, come to know and embrace the uniqueness of internal experience, and to make life choices that align with that internal barometer, our chances of finding peace and joy and contentment are infinite, and our time on this rock will be suffused with myriad moments of light and love and delight. And once we can acknowledge and accept that everyone’s experience is different from our own, we can refrain from adjudicating and passing-sentence on

them for their foibles, and we can stop judging them for not acting in accordance with our own compasses.

Everyone's internal experience is truly unique. Honor that truth as you move through your days.

OBSERVATION #2

Say Hi To *Everyone*

Look, we live in a crazy, messed up world. I suppose people have been saying that forever, but things seem nuttier than usual. The internet, the echo chambers that stoke anger and hatred, the ideological vitriol that seems to spew forth from all corners of the political spectrum -- it all feels so loud right now. The Trumpers despise the Libs, the Lefties despise the Anti-Maskers, and on and on it goes, ad infinitum. Indeed, the language on digital domains like Twitter is more often than not 140 characters of finely crafted disdain. We all seem so quick to accuse those with whom we disagree, those who hold views anathema to our own, those whose values appear to clash with the values we hold on high, of ignorance and bigotry and selfishness or worse, of being patently evil and complicit in any number of unholy ventures. And if we let ourselves play in those rabbit holes for too long, if we attach ourselves so feverishly to those so-called values and beliefs that form our claimed identities, we can become entirely consumed by our own disaffections.

Observation #2 is more of a plea than a reflection, and I try to practice it daily, and it is perhaps the most important of all of my daily practices. I say hi to everyone: to the Trump supporter and the Anti-Masker, to the Leftist and to the corporate lawyer, to the militiaman and to the BLM activist. I say hi to *everyone*. I wave and ask them how they're doing. I do it while I am walking, while I am shopping at the local co-op. I say hi...to *everyone*.

Here's a truth that is difficult to refute: we are all made of the same stuff. We are also all susceptible to similar struggles, traumas, tragedies. We are humans whose minds are trying so hard to interpret, to make sense, out of the way our bodies experience life. And we have brains and nervous systems that can precipitate a cascade of feelings and emotions that often feel impossible to navigate. And thus it's in the realm of values, of beliefs, that we tend to make sense out of those feelings; and it's in the echo chambers and communities in which we dwell that we have our feelings and values acknowledged and witnessed, our beliefs and actions validated and lauded.

I have discovered on my journey that our lives and experiences are defined less by our thoughts and beliefs, and more by our actions. And it is here, now, that I want to introduce the idea of "practices". I will employ this concept often in this book. Indeed, I will devote an entire chapter to the subject later on. Practices simply refers to daily actions, subject to conscious repetition, that comprise the bulk of our waking moments. Practices can be

as simple as brewing coffee and making oatmeal upon awakening, or as complex as engaging in a daily attempt to solve the most arcane and challenging questions in discrete mathematics. Practices are rituals, though they do not demand flowery language and glowing music in the background in order to be impactful. The point of undertaking certain practices is to avail ourselves of that most marvelous of things, our neuroplasticity. Our brains can be rewired; not entirely and not always, but our brains are eager to develop and exploit new neural pathways. Take the atheist who enters Alcoholics Anonymous for the first time. He is dogged in his rejection of the idea of a god. He also desperately wants to stop drinking, and will do pretty much anything to feel better. He gets a temporary sponsor (a sobriety guide of sorts), and the sponsor tells him to pray, on his knees, for fifteen minutes every morning and every night. Don't pray, the sponsor says, for a new car.

Pray for the world, for those around you, to be a vehicle for god's love. The atheist is like, "fuck off"...but the pain is great, and he tries. For the first days, weeks even, he feels silly, embarrassed, as he kneels at the end of his bed like a child on some T.V. Christmas special.

But over time something mystical happens. He comes to believe in god. Now I'm not here saying that praying to god should be one of your practices. I don't pray. But what I am saying is that our brains are open for growth,

*for change, and practices -- prayer, meditation, exercise
-- are often the catalyst for such neurological shifts.*

OK, back to saying hi to everyone. This is a practice. I don't care who you are, who you say you are, who you think you are, or what you appear to think about me. You are a person, and I'm going to say hi to you.

This simple practice has helped me come to believe that all people are worthy of my attention, my kindness; that regardless of everything else, they are people and I am a person too and we have that in common. And this easiest and most sublime of practices has changed my neurology. When I am assiduous in my determination to say hi to all, I feel better. I feel good. My penchant to drift down the political slippery slope into vitriol and disgust melts away and my desire, my commitment, to be a friend to all sees me gliding more serenely through my days.

All of you, all of us, deserve to be seen. And I'm going to say hi to you. Best be ready. I am convinced that this is one way we save the world, or in the very least help it along a better path.

Say hello to everyone you see.

OBSERVATION #3

Finding Home

I adore Ted Talks. They are not too long, they are usually quite compelling, really brilliant people with unfathomable amounts of intellectual charisma tend to make them, and they are great for classroom teaching when you lose your voice (or simply don't want to teach that day). I of course have favorite Ted Talks. The one on creativity by Sir Ken Robinson is joyous. I also revel in Lidia Yucknavitch's Ted Talk about being a misfit. What I want to share here, however, is a little bit about Elizabeth Gilbert's Ted Talk about finding your core, your home.

Elizabeth Gilbert wrote the wildly successful book *Eat, Pray, Love*. (As you probably know, Julia Roberts starred in the movie adaptation of the book.) The book made Elizabeth Gilbert famous. A struggling writer prior, her career went bonkers in the aftermath of the book's release. In her super brief Ted Talk (only seven minutes in length), Elizabeth Gilbert essentially says that her incredible success was just as alienating and challenging to her as were the so-called *failures* she had experienced to

that point. (You should really watch her Ted Talk, as her presentation is far more impactful than is my summary.)

The point she makes is profoundly important. Just as failure feels dysregulating and disorienting, so too can success. We label them differently based upon social constructs of good and bad, but they are equally confounding, for each state of being throws one away from their core, away from home.

In the reductive vernacular of the 21st century education system (that's my next chapter, by the way), Gilbert is imploring us to know what our passion is -- *our passion is home*. I would say it differently, as the term passion lands on me like something I must not only love but that must hold some social value and be in some way monetizable (but that's just my story about the idea of passion, certainly not everyone's). I tend to like the word *core*.

In her talk, Elizabeth Gilbert tells us that she's always been a writer, ever since she was a little kid. For her, writing is her core, it is home. And so despite being initially frightened by the fact that her follow-up book was bound to fail (relative to *Eat, Pray, Love*), it didn't matter. Writing is home for her. She was going to author more books, not in an attempt to replicate the success of her breakthrough novel, but because it's what she does, it's who she is. And, she says, the externalities of success and failure matter not. Her home is writing.

I have spent the better part of my adult life puzzling as to what constitutes my core; not always consciously of course. I have worn many hats, plied many trades,

Finding Home

danced in many circles, all in an effort to find home. I am and have been a high school teacher, a touring musician, a professionally licensed soccer coach, an activist, a dad, a husband, an author, a waiter. For years at a time I have cultivated and honed identities that I believed reflected the essence of my being. Only recently have I come to actually recognize what my core is, what is home for me.

And, it's not all that profound. And it's not all that important. Home for me, honestly, is just spending time shooting the shit with strangers. All of the other manifestations in my life -- the careers, the explorations -- were either attempts to create an image of a core (not an actual core), or activities that allowed me to experience my true core. As a high school teacher I really didn't give much of a hoot about academic rigor or about the supposed importance of understanding the past; I mostly just enjoyed spending time in the classroom, shooting the breeze with the students and talking about interesting and compelling stuff. Same as a soccer coach. Even when I was a high level coach, it is clear to me now that the process of *becoming* that coach afforded me the ability to teach a bit about the game, and the yummy luxury of being able to watch the players compete while I sat on the bench and schmoozed with the other players. Sure, I coached the game, and sure I taught the history lessons -- but they were not the true motivation for these endeavors. My core...is people: not teaching them, not coaching them, not playing music for them...just chatting with them,

hearing their stories, listening to their struggles and joys, hearing them talk about anything, or nothing.

What a relief. And what a sense of wonder! At 58 years old, having fretted and chafed and puzzled and ruminated over the question of what really forms my core, where do I feel most at home, the truth was right there in front of me. *That* is why I adore laundromats, long stays at outdoor cafes, the hairdresser's or the pedicurist, Uber rides!! I want to talk to people, to hear their stories, to spend brief moments connecting in a world that often feels disconnected.

And so you have work to do, and it may not be as simple as it seems.

Find out what truly forms your core, your home. It might be family, or racing cars, or making beef jerky. Remember, your core, your home, is the place you return to no matter what, regardless of success or failure or attention or remuneration or anything.

Find your home, and return there often.

OBSERVATION #4

There Is Nothing More Cleansing, More Healing, Than Tears

Perhaps this will strike some of you as trite, overly maudlin, saccharin even; a patchouli-scented stereotype from the annals of Haight hippiedom. Regardless, it is true: *tears heal.*

On a most basic physiological level, tears literally wash away stress (in the form of such hormones as cortisol) and trigger the release of endorphins. But tears are also so much more.

Tears -- the kind that come from that place of such bottomless grief that your body trembles as they are released into the air - resolve pain. They may not bring to a conclusion the root of your pain; indeed, in all likelihood they won't. But tears, like waves crashing against the rocky coast, are the solvent that smooths the crags and sharp edges and, that over time, grinds those hard edges into the sparkling sands of the most pristine and luminescent beach.

Tears also accelerate healing. They may for a time throw us headlong into places that feel so very dark and frightening, but there is always a path out of these places and into the light airiness of the most perfect and sublime dawn.

When we suppress tears, when we eschew the perhaps torturous feelings of vulnerability and shame that arrive with our breaking down, we sow the seeds of those states of being we refer to as anxiety, and stress, and even psychosis. You see, tears are the antidote to needless and ancillary suffering, the kind of suffering that so many experience in a fruitless attempt to avoid the honest and entirely vulnerable place of tears.

If you are someone who doesn't cry, you'd best learn how. I'm quite serious. I somewhat recently experienced a heartbreaking end of a relationship. After my beloved and I spent our final days together holding each other tightly and grieving as two, my first solo impulse was to seek out distraction and a different state of being -- a quest for dopamine and endorphins really. Go online, find a date, escape the sorrow, move on, stay busy, find new projects, drink more coffee, go for ten mile hikes...and for god's sake, don't listen to any music in a minor key! No James Taylor, no Carly Simon, no CSNY. (In fact, if *Helplessly Hoping* or any such song came on my ipod I would leap up and immediately push pause. Ouch!) This impulse makes complete sense. Grief feels awful, and tears can feel so very disorienting. (I would assert this is even more true for men, as there are all manner of emotionally disastrous

narratives for men that serve to negate the beauty of tears and instead celebrate such mind-states as anger.)

This is beyond tragic. It is tragic for the individual, as tears move us through grief and to wholeness, while avoidance conversely moves us around tears and toward mental illness. And this is also a tragedy for the world, as tears are a human's way of reaching out and asking for help, and for love.

Look, I cannot state this with more urgency. You need to cry. You need to find time to cry. You need to put on your Bose headphones, close the door, turn on James Taylor, and weep; weep for all that you have lost, for love no longer in your life, for your terrible loneliness, for the innocent child you once were, for the sorrow and suffering you see around you. You must cry. It, like everything we do, is a practice. Practice crying. You simply cannot grow, cannot love deeply, cannot find wholeness and gentleness and peace without tears.

And think about it -- there are so many moments in our lives when we circumvent tears rather than move toward them. I know it can feel daunting. I know for some there may be shame and embarrassment that accompanies even the *thought* of tears. And still, I beg you, I beg all of us, watch the sad films and cry, listen to the haunting ballads and cry -- cry for the world to see, or cry in the solitude of your own nest.

But Please. Cry.

OBSERVATION #5

Our Schools Have It All Wrong

OK, so this is where my potential grandiosity comes into play. I am about to excoriate the entire system of education in our country: public and private, elementary and secondary, non-affiliated and parochial -- no one will be spared. Let's get right to it.

To begin with, here are my credentials. I have worked in schools since 1987. I have pretty much done it all during those three decades: teacher, dean, department chair, principal, coach, diversity coordinator and even summer camp director. I have taught music to elementary school age children, history, writing and math to middle and high school students, meteorology and literature to college students. I have guided institutional strategic plans, developed myriad curricula, won national recognition for technology integration in the classroom and spoken at symposia around the country about various and sundry topics that seem to vex many in my chosen vocation. I am, as the somewhat self-serving and snooty saying goes, a master teacher. I have worked with thousands of students

in a variety of settings. Here is what I *know*. We have it all wrong. (And let me be quick to dispel your possible assumption that I am going to now spend time rehashing the increasingly familiar refrain that public schools and public school systems were created during the industrial period in America, and that they no longer serve their intended purpose, and that we need to innovate for the 21st century, yada yada yada.)

The purpose of schools should *not* be to provide information, it should be to create and nurture an environment in which young people's brains and nervous systems are attended to and cared for. Allow me the chance to explain further.

Young people are smart, intuitive, curious beings. They are also beings, like their adult counterparts, who are, moment to moment, navigating entirely unique internal experiences. Young people are subject to the same neuro-physiological turbulences, the same onslaught of biochemical processes, with which all of us must contend. There are of course differences between adults and young people. Youngsters' brains are changing and developing quite dramatically throughout youth and into young adulthood. And as such, children and adolescents are perhaps neurologically incapable of engaging in the types of thinking and processing of data (meta-cognition, etc.) that adults can, if they possess the tools and the willingness, engage in.

That said, kids are also neurological sponges, soaking up and metabolizing all of their experiences -- from the

seemingly inconsequential to the more manifestly traumatic -- and metamorphosing daily into ever-emergent and blossoming beings.

Here are two more things we know: The first is that if a child's brain is "hijacked," for any reason, she cannot learn. It is a virtual physiological impossibility. When a child's brain and nervous system are activated by some perceived threat, the neuro-physiologic response takes the child's prefrontal cortices offline. (This is neuroscience 101. Google it. When the sympathetic nervous system is firing -- when she is triggered, in the current vernacular -- and when the youngster is experiencing a fight/flight/freeze/fawn reaction, when she enters survival mode, the part of her brain that is responsible for learning shuts down. And survival mode, like all internal experiences, is unique for each individual.) Secondly, while some *stress* seems to be productive for children as they contend with the complex landscapes of school and learning, too much stress (the release of cortisol and adrenaline in particular, but not exclusively) inhibits both a child's learning and sense of well-being.

Ok, so where am I going with all of this?

Schools have it all wrong because we (the adults, the industry, the teachers) have come to accept the narrative that without a "proper education" children will flounder. And we have also come to accept the belief that a proper education means teachers imparting information and serving as conduits for the transmission of said information. This all sounds innocent enough. We are the adults

and we know what's best. We look into our crystal balls and peer into the future, and we decide what's important (STEM for example). We provide lip service to the idea of health and wellness, while simultaneously setting the agenda and making decisions about health and wellness based upon our own biases and stories. And along the way, we ignore the single most important factor in the development of a happy, healthy, engaged, self-possessed individual; as we diligently set ourselves to creating the perfect math lesson or the most powerful cooperative-learning project, we ignore our childrens' nervous systems.

Teachers and administrators should spend pretty much all of their time discussing ways in which they can attend to the neurological needs of their charges. All curricula and units and lessons should be developed under an umbrella of conscious awareness surrounding the impact that actions, words, tone of voice, demeanor, stress-inducers, etc. can have on a child's nervous system. Each child should be evaluated and reevaluated, and plans should be developed that hone in on the most effective path toward quieting each child's neuro-physiology.

Some of you are reading this and thinking that I am suggesting an education system devoid of challenge, in which all competitive sports are eliminated, in which no one takes tests or writes papers, in which all of the adults move through their days like zealots in a cult. I am not. For some children, the competitive athletic arena may manifest as a healthful and helpful neuro-physiological

environment. But the new frontier in education should be driven by an unwavering commitment to getting to know each child, to creating a program of study for these children that attends to their neuro-physiological road-maps, and to implementing teacher training programs and evaluative tools that focus *not* on what a teacher knows vis-a-vis content, but instead on how a teacher helps make each child feel, for lack of a better word, safe.

Our schools have it all wrong, and we must make them better.

OBSERVATION #6

Story-Authoring, Meaning-Making And Observation

Here's a quick story.

I recently left a long term relationship. Valerie and I were together over two years. She's an amazing person and I will miss her.

When I moved out we agreed that we would talk on FaceTime twice a week. Our schedule was Sundays and Wednesdays at 8pm. Those hours were blocked off and sacrosanct. Of course we made this plan for myriad reasons, and also of course, with time, her experience and my experience vis-a-vis our break up changed and shifted. Just the other night I received an email from Valerie: "Hey, sorry for the late notice but I can't talk tonight. Catch up with you on Sunday."

OK. First I'm going to share what occurred for me physiologically -- in my body. When I read the email, my first physical experience was a rising sense of dread (Here's where we run into challenges with words. It's nearly impossible to capture a sensation in language.), an

immediate *whoosh* feeling that left me trying to catch my breath. (Adrenaline, Cortisol, other hormones, the result of an amygdala talking to a hypothalamus and activating a flight response) Next came a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, something I can only describe as an intense longing and feeling of homesickness. Next up was my heart, which, due to my seven-mile-a-day walking regimen has a resting rate of between 58 and 62. My heart started pounding, my heart rate skyrocketing to 90 beats per minute, give or take. In the lexicon of the neuro-informed, I was experiencing a moment of hijack. My brain told my body that I was in danger. It was quite something; and, due to a good deal of practice around these sensations, it was something I could, in that moment, simply try to observe. The intense pain and discomfort lasted about twenty minutes. (The dysregulatory hangover, on the other hand, lasted several hours.)

Now comes the *mind*. In my construction of things, the brain is the unconscious “filterer” and gatekeeper, the mind is the interpreter. The mind quickly tries to understand the feelings and sensations in the body, and subsequently tries to make judgements and levy decisions about the reasons behind such disorientation and pain. The mind also demands action. It has assessed the feelings and it is rendering a verdict as to what is happening, and why. The problem is, however, that the mind is a lousy interpreter. The mind is cluttered with detritus and bias, with thousands of pages of history and a legacy of saving the body, time and again, from death. The mind,

in an oft misguided effort to explicate and mitigate the pain, to excise the poison, creates stories. In my case and on this occasion, I watched, I observed, as my mind told my body why Valerie had cancelled our chat time: "She's met another man and they are away for New Year's Eve together." "She's trying to pull away because she doesn't want to lean on me the way she once did." "She's struggling and wants me back, but doesn't want me to see her cry." So many stories, so many narratives. And the reality is, *they are all just stories*. My mind has created them -- but my mind wants me to act! "Email Valerie and tell her we should stop all communication!" "Reach out and ask if everything is OK. She needs you."

All complete fiction. Magical assumptions. All stories that my mind has created out of thin air as it tries to both interpret the reasons for, and mitigate the power of, the feelings in my body.

We are meaning-making and story-authoring machines, or at least our minds are. And our minds author these stories in an effort to regulate the sensations in our bodies -- because the truth of the matter is that it all begins with physiology. We are, at our most fundamental levels, a pastiche of electrical impulses and biochemical processes.

The human nervous system is really quite the omnipotent character.

So, observation #6 is this: know that your mind *will* play tricks on you. It is dedicated to your safety and well-being; but not unlike a bad parent, it will make

decisions for you that are misguided and perhaps not in your best interest. It will demand that you drink more alcohol to ease the pain, rage against those who it is sure have wronged you, convince you that you are in mortal danger, compel you toward actions that you will, in all likelihood, look back on down the road with shame and horror.

Your mind is to be observed. When your body cries out, try to observe the sensations, and then try to observe the mind's response. To become an astute observer, to recognize where your meaning-making and stories and narratives come from, is the path of the warrior.

Keep an eye on your mind. We are story-authoring machines, and we need to be careful not to misconstrue those stories for truth.

OBSERVATION #7

Beware The Mind's Desire For Salvation

This is a copy of an Op-Ed I wrote and that was published in a local newspaper.

I was an extremist. Twice. Once when I had just graduated from college in 1985, and once when the economy tanked in 2008. I wasn't a terrorist. I am afraid of violence. But I am convinced I could have become one if I had continued down the rabbit hole. Now, after decades of study and reflection, I understand what happened. I also know two other things: the first is that the maxim "those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it" is false, and the second is that the United States, despite the election of Joe Biden, is in very, very big trouble.

Let me explain.

My first foray into extremism came at the end of my college career. It was the mid-1980s, and I was quite the wayward lad. I had jumped on the Grateful Dead bandwagon early during my freshman year and had partied my

way through four years at Brandeis University. I majored in history because the classes were interesting enough. While I scoffed self-righteously at my pre-law and pre-med friends for their reductionist, soon-to-be corporate lives, I anxiously approached the climax of my undergraduate daze with absolutely no plan.

It was 1985, the height of the Reagan years. The U.S. was knee deep in interventionist machinations in Central America. The anti-Apartheid divestment movement was gaining steam on campuses around the nation. But I remained relatively uninformed at the time; that was until I was invited to participate in a pro-Sandinista rally at The Federal Building in Boston. I'm not sure how I ended up there, but the event was a game changer for me. Looking back, it was just what I "needed" at the time. Within months I was attending political actions up and down the East Coast. During my two years of full-time leftwing political activism, I ran from police at CIA headquarters and bought cans of spray paint to author slogans of resistance on the sides of buildings; I spent nights in jail and days in courthouses; I penned excoriating screeds about the evils of U.S. geopolitics and smiled self-affectionately as they were published in local newspapers. Abbie Hoffman slept on my couch. Amy Carter dined on grilled cheese sandwiches in my kitchen. Life was, well, good! I was a radical political extremist, an advocate for the overthrow, by any means necessary, of the Capitalist system, and I knew beyond any doubt that I was right. I was also 100% certain that violence in support of such an end was entirely justified. Had

I not been scared of such and perhaps a kind person deep down, I would have, in all likelihood, been willing to hurt someone in an attempt to reach those ends.

My second deep dive into the realm of extremism came in 2008, when the economy entered what we now refer to as The Great Recession. I was, at the time, quasi-employed. My teaching career had foundered on the rocks of bad decisions and overwhelming circumstances. I had moved to New York from Texas in 2003 to become a high school principal, only to find that the school at which I was newly employed was failing and that I was wholly unprepared for the demands of the role. I was married, had two little kids, and things felt as if they were falling apart. At the mid-year we packed up our lives on Long Island and moved to Maine, and then four months later to Vermont. I took a job at a public middle school in 2004, only to resign in the spring of 2005. Marriage was a struggle, being a dad terrified and confounded me, and I had started drinking again (after seventeen years of sobriety). Cue the economic collapse of 2008. For many, this moment in time was disastrous. Indeed, I was laid off from my technology support job at Dartmouth College in the winter of 2009, the first wave of such moves in the wake of the ongoing global financial meltdown. For me, however, The Great Recession was not a cliff dive, it was my savior. As I learned more and more about the purported malfeasance committed by those in government and within the banking sector, my blood boiled. I began blogging about the impending doom we all faced,

about the end of fiat currency and the destruction of civilization as we had come to recognize it. Every move by the Obama Administration to recapitalize the financial markets was met by my pen with shouts for their heads (metaphorically for the time being). My blog was picked up by many who concurred with my analyses. I became a relatively well known figure in the resistance movement. I hosted a radio show on blogtalk radio and many listened in. I bought my first gun (I'm an upper middle class neurotic Jewish guy from the suburbs. I had never held a gun before, let alone fired one.). I began hoarding food and ammunition. I knew with 100% certainty that the end was nigh, that the collapse was coming.

Had I not received a teaching job offer in 2010 and moved to Oklahoma for a year, and had the efforts at quantitative easing not succeeded (They did, by the way. I was wrong.), I would perhaps have ended up hurting people in defense of my certitude.

Frighteningly, my experience is not so unique.

The human brain, despite all of our growing understanding of neuro-physiology, is a renegade organ. The melange of neurotransmitters and hormones that wash over and through our brains and bodies, the unrelenting and mystical power that our amygdala and sympathetic nervous system holds over our consciousness, seems more from the pages of a science fiction novel than from the journals of medicine and psychology. And the reality of our minds' ignorance to these internal processes is both tragic and inevitable.

I became an extremist because I was in distress. On both occasions, my life had become unmanageable. I was, at the two aforementioned moments in my life, adrift. I had no foundation, no floor beneath me. I was sure of nothing. My future was unclear. I was scared and confused, ashamed and defeated. And the feelings that these states of being precipitated were unbearable. In the parlance of the neuro-informed, my nervous system was entirely dysregulated. I was quite literally experiencing an unrelenting and crippling dearth of the feel-good neurotransmitters and hormones (oxytocin, serotonin, endorphins, dopamine to name a few) and an overflow of the edgier stuff (adrenalin, noradrenaline and cortisol; substances associated with amygdala hijack, stress response, etc.). The resulting experience was physically painful and emotionally ruinous.

Enter extremism. It was a godsend. It gave me purpose, and meaning. The certitude I felt, the communities I became integrally connected to, changed my neuro-physiology. I felt good again. I had a future. My nervous system was no longer jangly. I was quite literally saved!

It has been ten years since I emerged from the bunkers of my Great Recession meltdown. I moved back from Oklahoma, got a job teaching history at a local independent school, managed better my fear and anxiety around parenting, and emerged mercifully from the fog of delusion. In the years that have followed I have devoted much effort and study to understanding the complexity of the human brain. I have become somewhat of an astute

observer of how our minds often misinterpret the feelings that our brains and nervous systems entertain. Here's what I have come to know: I know that human beings are fragile creatures; I know that, during times of distress and uncertainty, our brains often trick us into unwittingly undertaking actions in a desperate attempt to feel OK; I know that, perhaps never in the history of our nation has there existed more uncertainty, more shifting sands, than exists now -- from a terrifying pandemic to epidemic economic insecurity, from a future of quasi-employability to the spectre of a seemingly irreversible climate crisis. Add to this toxic neural stew the incendiary accelerant of social media and a president bent upon exploiting these variables, and you have the perfect storm for a humanitarian crisis of gripping proportions.

As a history teacher, I used to hang my hat on that old saying about history repeating itself. It was, I suppose, somewhat of a justification for the existence of my profession. But now what I realize is this: it's not ignorance of history, but ignorance of human neuro-physiology that haunts us as a species. The United States, I believe, stands on the brink of tragedy. Extremism is on the rise, and it is moving inexorably from the fringes toward the middle, the mainstream.

Conspiracy theories floated by some fellow named "Q" have captured the hearts and minds (well, the brains and nervous systems really) of millions. Armed militias descend on state capitals, ready for battle. Spend time in the comment sections of such political websites as Breitbart

and Zerohedge, and you will read the words of those who have, quite literally, lost their minds.

This is a national disaster. These are people in terrible distress. And in Donald Trump, and in “Q”, they have found neurological salvation. They are convinced, beyond doubt, that they are engaged in the battle to save humanity from evil. And the deeper they sink into this belief system, the more willing they become to hurt people in its defense.

The stage is set. In a world riven not so much by political difference but instead by inequality, insecurity and fear, our ability to employ reason has been all but destroyed. We are experiencing a mass neuro-physiological hijacking, and in an effort to feel “better” people are going to do terrible, terrible things. I should know. I came close to being just like them.

Beware the mind's blind and destructive quest for salvation.

OBSERVATION #8

Don't Make Life Decisions Based Upon Sex

It's fascinating to me, and also not so fascinating at all, how much we think about, talk about, pursue, and yes, contort our lives, because of sex. As I said, I am 58 years old. That's over 500,000 hours of aliveness. And during those half a million hours I have probably had sex on the brain, in one way or another, for like $\frac{1}{5}$ of that time. That's 100,000 hours! (I would assert that during my teens and twenties the percentage of time that sex and thoughts of sex invaded my waking hours was insanely substantial. It has certainly declined with time, but it's still there, kind of like the squirrel living in the wall -- the one that comes out at night and makes all sorts of troubling noises, but that simply refuses to die.)

Think about it for a moment: how many people do you know -- or maybe you yourself? -- whose loving, committed relationships have been complicated or even undermined by sex; and by sex I mean the seemingly insatiable desire for it, the willingness to go to extraordinary

lengths to procure it, and the single-minded march toward self-sabotage and duplicity in an effort to have it.

The desire for sexual interaction is predominantly hormonal, instinctual. We are animals, after all. We are neuro-physiologically programmed to want, to *need*, sex. Spend but ten minutes on any reputable web portal whose focus is human sexuality, and you will read about such neurotransmitters and hormones as oxytocin (the love hormone), endorphins and dopamine.

Seriously. Just Google “*how do hormones and neurotransmitters play a role in sex*” and you’re on your way to degrees in sexology and neuro-psychology.

As a side note, I will assert in this book, time and again, that we are more often than not utterly defenseless against the machinations of our neuro-physiology. Our brains are mutinous organs, as beyond our control as are the winds that blow. And the confluence of our personal histories, our complex wiring, and our entirely unique internal experiences, makes it quite difficult, if not impossible, to reign ourselves in -- awkwardly stated, but it will suffice for now.

I’m not looking to engage in some deep philosophical conversation around sex. And far be it from me to make any kind of a moral argument here about human sexuality. From where I sit, the desire for sex is neither moral nor immoral, destructive nor wondrous; it’s truly

just a natural human occurrence. *But the pursuit of sex is different.*

Don't make life decisions based upon sex. If you find yourself in a loving relationship but the sex is wanting, don't worry about it so darned much. If you find yourself looking for hookups and perusing porn on the web, take time to ask yourself why you're focusing so much effort and attention on an orgasm. Is it a distraction from your seemingly complicated and confounding life? Are you simply, and perhaps unconsciously, looking for that hit of oxytocin and dopamine that to you feels so elusive and distant? And what's the cost? There are so many broken relationships, shattered on the rocks of infidelity (again, not a statement about morality. Just a fact). There is so much suffering, particularly for those who end up as objects, used for sex by others. And there are so many people, mostly women, who are exploited for sex.

My point is this: you can have love -- wonderful committed intimate nurturing supportive love -- and not have sex. (Lots of old people do it, even if they'd rather things worked like they used to.) If love is what you seek, if a true life partner is what you desire, and if sex and sexuality feel complicated, then I would suggest a series of conversations with your partner, perhaps involving a neutral third party, about the possibility of creating a compact regarding the role sex plays in your life together. I would also suggest considering a partnership that agrees to be *non-sexual*, at least for a stretch of time. Sex may feel great, and it may have a place in a loving relationship, but

Don't Make Life Decisions Based Upon Sex

it is *not* love. It is sex. And we can get our needs for oxytocin and dopamine met in so many other ways: warm embraces, long walks holding hands and sharing loving musings, intimate time spent together listening to one another, attending to each other's needs for comfort and praise, for intellectual challenge, non-sexual touch, and of course, fudge brownies with ice cream and sprinkles.

Again, this is not a screed against sex. It is a reality check. Sex feels good, but don't make sex such a priority.

Don't let sex ruin your chances for love.

OBSERVATION #9

I Am Changing My Middle Name

My middle name is Ian. My father's father's name was Isadore. (It's a funny, traditional name that was perhaps more common in communities of Eastern European Jews in the early 20th century than it is now.) My parents chose Ian for two reasons: one, because they liked it, and two because it was close to Isadore without providing for their son the stigma of having a name that, in theory, the other kids could make fun of. In retrospect, my mother tells me that they wish they had chosen Isadore. My children each have multiple middle names. My daughter has two middle names - one with Hindu roots and the other Muslim. Her mom and I believed such an expression was a powerful symbol for the hopefulness that love could exist between two religions that have such a tragic history of conflict with one another. Our son also has two middle names, one Buddhist and the other a combination of grandparents melded into one.

I am changing my middle name. No, I'm not changing my middle name to Isadore. And no, I'm not making

some grand political gesture and changing my middle name to reflect a growing identification with a particular social movement.

I am changing my name from Ian, to *Unloveable*.

Of course I'm not *really* changing my middle name, but here's my point: the center, the psycho-spiritual and neuro-physiological locus of my challenges in life surround feelings of

unlovability. As I mentioned in the introduction to this little book of observations, I experienced a quite traumatic childhood. I thus identify as a *complex trauma survivor*, with a baked-in penchant for struggles and challenges around feelings and perceptions of abandonment and unlovability. In the parlance of Star Trek, my screens are naturally up, and my tricorder is always scanning the environment for threats to my safety and well-being -- and for me, these threats surround the sense that I am disliked, rejected, dismissed, and not worthy of love.

Back to the science of the brain. These data filters are obviously misaligned with reality. They are like a doppler radar array that *thinks* it is seeing a terrible storm, when in fact it's just a flock of migratory birds on the wing. But because of my history, and because my physiology reacts to these unconscious perceptions so powerfully (rushes of adrenaline and cortisol, nervous system dysregulation that takes the shape of deep pangs of isolation and abandonment arising from the pit of my stomach and sitting weightily on my chest), the narrative of unlovability is an inextricable part of my neuro-physiological identity.

I am changing my middle name *not* to reinforce or reify this mind-state, but instead to acknowledge that it is part of my shadow self, that it exists in the background and can be seen lurking in the corners, waiting to emerge if and when I am not attending to my awareness. (Does this mean I must be ever-vigilant, to the point of obsession? No. But it does mean that, when my body records a physiological response to stimuli, and when my mind tries to interpret those feelings, I need to be wary of the interpretation as it may be more the voice of shadow -- of unlovable Dan -- than of reality.)

We can all have our own middle names, claimed by us as a way to keep an eye on our habituated states of mind and being: *fearful, dogmatic, angry, defensive...*the list of such adjectives is endless.

I would encourage you to change your middle name. My daughter, the child whose parents chose to channel their political sensibilities into their offspring by way of naming, might choose an entirely different, more personal, middle name; a middle name that reflects her understanding of her own history, and that serves as a sentinel, ever watchful of when her own shadow intrudes and speaks to her in ways only she can understand.

What's your middle name?

OBSERVATION #10

Life Is A Series Of Daily Practices

Practices are akin to rituals, undertakings of the conscious mind that take a certain amount of effort and intention. Many of the practices in which we engage are activities that we have learned from the youngest of ages: brushing our teeth every morning, making and packing our lunch to take to school, etc. Other practices have emerged as part of our lives over time: daily exercise, a glass of wine with dinner, Sundays at church.

The practices in which we choose to place effort, that we intentionally make part of our days and pursue rather assiduously, are very much up to us, are personal in nature, and can have a profound impact upon our neurology and sense of well-being.

There is a line of thinking that decries ritualization of this sort as being productive of a kind of rigidity. And indeed, there are rituals that, undertaken out of fear or some other elusive mind-state, could interfere with and hinder our health rather than enhance it (ritual hand washing for example, or smoking tobacco after meals). But even here, we must be careful not to defer to judgemental and

negative social narratives about such ritual behaviors. Each of us has the job of identifying our actions and, upon careful and thoughtful reflection, deciding whether or not such rituals, such practices, are choices that bring us closer to neuro-physiological serenity, and if so are worth the potential side effects (For example, smoking cigarettes can be very calming, quite therapeutic. The social narrative around the evils of tobacco, around the spectre of disease and the dirtiness of such a habit, is just that, a narrative. It may very well be that the trade-off -- smoking to quiet the nervous system with the inherent risk of future difficulties -- is worth it.).

Over our lifetimes, the practices in which we engage will certainly shift. The woman who runs five miles each day in her 30s and 40s, may find walking or hiking more in line with her knees' cries for mercy in her 50s and 60s.

What I am asking you to contemplate is twofold. First, are the actions in which you currently engage, day in and day out, practices that you feel (truly *feel*) bring you closer to neuro-physiological health, or are they counterproductive toward such ends. And secondly, have you spent time considering, and trying on for size, new practices in the quest for such health.

Important side note: you will notice that I am very much focused on the construct of neuro-physiological health rather than physical, spiritual or other measures of health. And to be sure, health is perhaps not the perfect word. But it is my heartfelt contention that attention

paid to our neurology, to the health of our nervous systems in particular, is indeed far more critical to our overall health and wellness than anything else we do; and if we are able to be in a place in which our nervous systems are quiet and cared for, the result is balance and harmony and health in the other compartments of our lives as well.

Back to practices. As each of us is unique in our neuro-physiology, unique in our histories and in the ways in which we filter information, the practices we develop and nurture will be unique as well. For one person, quiet meditation and contemplation by a babbling brook in a cedar grove may be central to the release of certain neurotransmitters, and concurrently to the inhibition of others; a physiological response that aligns the central nervous system and the body and thus is productive of healthfulness. For someone else, thirty minutes of dancing around the room while listening to heavy metal music may be just as productive toward neuro-physiological homeostasis. While the social narrative around some actions, some ways of being, is strong and persuasive, each individual has to spend time uncovering their own muses, and each person then has to build their own unique and deeply personal practices around those investigations.

My brother in law, a gentle soul of 62, plays video games. He does so everyday. Colloquially, this practice “brings him peace and joy.” In the lexicon of neuro-physiology, this practice aligns his nervous system through the release of certain hormones and neurotransmitters and

through the inhibition of others. My sister works in the garden. She is a woman of the physical. Again, the work of gardening, of hauling wood and raking leaves, works for her.

This all sounds so simple, right? Just do what makes you feel good. And on some level that is true. But of course there are potential traps in such thinking. Following *that* logic, drinking a bottle of scotch everyday would seem a worthy practice (and it may be for that unique someone). But it is important also to build awareness around practices (actions) that may feel good in the moment, but that lead to dysregulation and suffering over time. And, I would assert that it is important to move through the world in a manner that doesn't precipitate, or that minimizes the potential to precipitate, nervous system trauma for others. For example, while a controlling parent may unconsciously *feel* that demanding a child keep a spotless bedroom feels good for them, it may be productive of negative neuro-physiological experiences for their kiddo. (And that's a minor example. Narcissists undertake actions that may feel good to them, but that summarily destroy the lives of those around them. And addicts, in their desperate attempt to find neurological homeostasis, do not recognize that their neurology has been forever altered by their addictions and that the search for serenity is perhaps just a drug-informed mirage.)

My neurology, my history, inform my own practices: going for walks, eating healthily and in moderation, watching familiar movies from the 1980s as well as old

TV shows, chatting up strangers on elevators and in laundromats and in Ubers, making my bed, listening to jazz. This list is not comprehensive, and it may shift depending upon the moment in time, but is a good approximation of the way I move most gracefully and serenely through my days (Again, words fail to accurately capture internal experiences. Indeed, that is the subject of the next chapter.). I also have come to know, through decades of experience and reflection, that my nervous system can become most dysregulated, and thus I am most apt to suffer physiological and emotional distress, when I am around angry people, when I am struggling in a romantic relationship, when I am in any high stakes environment (playing poker for example, or watching a sports team I like). Again, offered without judgement, these are just observations.

I would encourage you to reflect on the practices you have constructed, to make changes where perhaps wise, and to understand each practice for what it brings to you and to those close to you.

Choose your practices with intention and awareness.

OBSERVATION #11

Words Always Fail

I'm sure that writers would argue this point. And to be sure, words can conjure transcendent images and can move us to tears. From the poetry of Walt Whitman to the lyrics of Bob Dylan, words can be transformative and lush, fearless and devastating. I'm sure you've all read books that simply blew you away, listened to songs whose rhymes brought you to your knees.

Words are infinitely powerful.

And yet, when it comes to describing our internal experiences, when we try to describe a physiological sensation in words that a friend, a therapist, a partner can truly understand, words fail. They fail because explaining how we feel is like trying to explain what food tastes like, or how we experience a summer breeze, or what we experience when we are in pain. The words we use derive from our own experiences, our own imaginations, our own frames of reference.

So why is this an observation of any import? Because understanding and internalizing this truth helps us meet all other travelers with a more open heart.

We should take care not to impose our understanding of the words someone uses to describe their conception of things upon them, because even as we seek to empathize with another's experience we must realize that we can never walk in their shoes, live inside their bodies. We need to recognize that the power of each person's unique internal life is in some manner always beyond words, and *that* truth should provide us with pause if and when we move toward making judgements about the worlds in which they dwell.

Words always fail, and humility asks us to accept this fact and to love deeply, even when we just can't understand.

OBSERVATION #12

Walk. A Lot.

I recognize that each of us must find our own practices, explore and inculcate into our days actions that mark out our own paths, that guide us toward living lives that feel right, that make sense. But I still think everyone should make a practice of walking. Simply and pertinently:

1. Walking slows us down
2. Walking allow us the chance to say hi
3. Walking strengthens our bodies
4. Walking releases endorphins and dopamine
5. Walking is non-violent
6. Walking is inclusive and communal
7. Walking saves the planet
8. Walking gives us time and space to ponder, to imagine, to create
9. Walking is collaborative
10. Walking is timeless and ancient
11. Walking is sustainable
12. Walking is new each and every time

Walk. A Lot.

I'm sure there are myriad other reasons why walking is the perfect activity. And while I am not asserting that walking should replace other activities, I am telling you to consider building daily walks into your practices.

Walking is that most human of physical endeavors.

OBSERVATION #13

When It Comes to Social Media, Caveat Emptor

If you don't know how social media works -- how the computer algorithms and targeted advertising function as manipulators of human neuropathology -- I'd encourage you to read up a bit on the subject. There are several enlightening Ted Talks on the topic as well, including recent pieces by Yael Eisenstat and Carole Cadwalladr.

The bottom line is this: Facebook (not just Facebook, but they are the standard by which all other social media seem to be measured) is a money-making venture. Indeed, as a publicly traded entity, they are bound by fiduciary law to try and maximize profits for their shareholders. Facebook's executives understand that the most efficient and effective way to engage users is to appeal to the most vulnerable aspects of our neurology -- and in the case of social media, this means providing users with content that stokes their tribal narratives and that gets them fired up. It's actually quite simple. We used to call such unconscious manipulations *propaganda*; but now

it has permeated every nook and cranny of our digital lives.

I'm betting that none of this is new to you. I'm certain you've read about how receiving "likes" on social media posts provides users with a little hit of dopamine, and conversely how a lack of said likes precipitates an entirely different neuro-physiological response. (Many people use words like *addiction* when discussing social media, but I will stay away from such pejoratives.) This is simply how advertising works. And in the social media age, the challenge at hand is this: which company can sufficiently up the neurological ante for users so that unique traffic is driven to their website. That's the whole game.

The problem with this game is that, in an effort to drive people to their web portals, social media companies and news media outlets and political websites must employ increasingly incendiary content, targeted to exploit the brains and nervous systems of the most vulnerable and susceptible people, in order to win. And thus "fake news" is not simply born, but perfected into a high art form.

In a world in which clicks mean dollars, the institution that manipulates brains and nervous systems most effectively wins -- and all of the data tell us that exploitation of fear, and appeals to tribalism, are the quickest paths to profit.

That's all.

Caveat Emptor.

OBSERVATION #14

Don't Believe Everything You Feel and Think

I've written about this before. I even created an activity for my students called "Feel, Believe, Think, Know" in which we ask questions and then try to figure out if our responses to the questions are based primarily upon a feeling, a belief, a thought, or actual knowledge. It's an interesting exercise as it compels us to consider how different questions perhaps evoke neuro-physiological responses, how and in what unique manners our bodies become engaged by these triggers, and how we might discern our parsing of data and information from our vulnerability to feeling-states.

The bottom line is this: just because you think it, that doesn't make it true. And just because you have a feeling, that doesn't mean your feeling accurately reflects an honest accounting of the data.

Examples of the aforementioned reality are beyond the counting. Everyday we are bombarded with feelings, bio-neurological impulses, that compel us to belief. And

everyday, if we're paying careful attention, we are repeatedly disabused of the notion that our feelings consistently and accurately measure the truth. I will dive into this in more depth when I discuss *projection*, but the premise here is quite straightforward: our neuro-physiology leads the way through the release of hormones and neurotransmitters, our nervous system is activated, our history informs the grooves that are deepest in our response-cycles, and our mind tries to interpret and explain what we feel and see. And very often we make decisions, initiate actions, that are based on flawed analyses of our feelings; and we choose to believe things that simply aren't true, that are not borne out by an objective appraisal of the facts.

For me, the practice of *not* believing everything I think and feel is an important and ongoing awareness. As but one example, my neurology, in concert with my history, often compels me toward peace-seeking rather than toward truth-seeking. This is neither good nor bad, but it is worthy of circumspection. As a peace-seeker (someone who *fawns* in order to avoid others' anger or conflict), my physiological response to certain stimuli can precipitate feelings of discomfort that I unconsciously seek to mitigate through the manifestation of belief. Thus I might create a belief system *not* because I actually believe something to be true, but instead because my body is perhaps asking me to protect it from danger.

Again, when I'm putting this to paper it all sounds so easy and simple; and yet, in practice, discerning feeling and belief from thought and truth is quite a delicate

dance. And frankly, for many, the practice of engaging in this kind of truth-seeking is too threatening to their need for certainty, or indeed to their very identity.

We live in a world in which our values -- our political ideologies, religious beliefs, tribal affiliations -- are of paramount importance to our identities, to our sense of belonging. And in defense of those identities, we are often willing to leave our feelings and beliefs entirely unchallenged, to accept them as absolute truths, rather than admit that our beliefs may be constructs of our unconscious and unexplored neurological needs. This is not to say that holding certain values is problematic. But believing in the veracity and infallibility of all of our feelings can lead us astray. In fact, I would conjecture that the majority of wars fought over the millenia have been initiated and pursued by those who refused, for myriad reasons, to challenge their own beliefs.

The other day I was chatting with a former student of mine. A brilliant individual, Julia holds dogmatically to certain accountancy of what she sees as immutable and unchallengeable truth. When I pushed her a bit and asked if she knew for certain that her analyses were correct, she refused to budge. Her values, her identity, could not bear the weight of uncertainty. A fascinating repose for such a scholarly intellectual.

The primary purpose of this little book is hopefully clear. I'm inviting you to spend more time considering the extraordinary impact that our brains, our nervous systems and our individual histories have on our lives. I am

Don't Believe Everything You Feel And Think

inviting you to become more astute observers of self, particularly in the realm of neuro-physiology. If you accede to such a journey, you may find that the realms of feeling, belief, thought and knowledge are far more nuanced and intriguing than previously considered.

Don't believe everything you feel and think.

OBSERVATION #15

Music

Music. Spend time everyday listening to your favorite music -- to the songs that transport you, move you, that have been your friends for so very long. Your nervous system will thank you for such care.

Enough said.

OBSERVATION #16

Projection Is The Misguided Magic Of The Mind

Simply put, *projection* is when you think something, and you unconsciously assume that others think the same thing. Or, that you have an internal experience or narrative, and you unconsciously assume and assert the universality of your experience. Examples will help.

A gentleman I know told me that he wasn't going to apply for a job because he knew that his would-be employers would look at his résumé and be concerned about leaving a job mid-year.

That's a projection. He doesn't know what they are thinking. No one ever knows what others are thinking. We call that *magical thinking*, and projection is a form of magical thinking.

A woman decides not to reach out to old friends because she feels as though she is being a burden; that they are busy and the last thing her old friends need is her pestering them. That is a projection. The woman in question is assuming that her friends have the same internal

experience as she does. She has created a story based upon her “stuff,” and she has decided (unconsciously of course) that her friends see the world similarly. She actually has no idea what her friends feel. In fact, she is in all likelihood totally wrong and is simply projecting her fear of rejection onto them.

A teacher presents material to a classroom full of students, convinced that the way he teaches is the right way to teach. In fact, Mr. Smith presents his lessons to the class as if he is presenting to twenty-five little Mr. Smiths. This is a projection. Each child is entirely unique. For some, Mr. Smith’s style will resonate. For others, it will not.

You get the picture.

Perhaps what I’m about to assert is a tad hyperbolic, but it is my heartfelt belief that projection is an unmitigated catastrophe! When we unconsciously assume that we know what others think or feel, when we move through our days making decisions and undertaking actions based upon these assumptions, the result is confusion at best and global thermonuclear war at worst.

I recognize that honest, open communication can be hard. And, if we are not aware of how our internal experience and history impact our reality, any attempt at honest and open communication is challenging at best. When it comes to projection, the way forward is twofold: we begin with awareness, and then we own our awareness and assumptions with words. For example: “This may be a projection, but the story I have created is that you don’t

want me bothering you so much.” Now the metaphorical ball is in the other court. And you cannot control that part. All you can control is ownership of *your* narratives, and the ability to recognize that those beliefs and feelings and thoughts are possible projections.

Magical thinking is definitely not so magical.

OBSERVATION #17

Don't Worry About Meditating. Just...Pause

How many times a day, a week, do you simply stop: stop planning, stop scrolling, stop moving and organizing and shopping and working?

Meditation is great. I use specific meditations as part of my daily practices -- though to be honest I'm not always so good at follow-through. One meditation that I try to employ is a reflection on grief. This is not a guided meditation. I simply put on my noise-cancelling headphones, play some really sad and evocative music, and meditate on loss, on sorrow. It works quite well. The sobbing usually begins rather quickly. (*Side note: my son Eli is a wonderful young man. He is an empath. I have to warn him, remind him, when I am entering grief meditation. I am afraid he will be frightened by my tears.*)

This observation, however, is *not* about meditation. Mindfulness practice is all the rage, and has been in the U.S. for a while now. My guess is that you're pretty up to speed

Don't Worry About Meditating. Just...pause

on your mindfulness and meditation knowledge-base. What I am inviting you to do is...pause. Just pause.

I'm not asking you to watch, to observe, to let your thoughts float away in little bubbles. I'm not imploring you to label your states of mind as thoughts arise -- planning, fear, anger, what have you; I am simply asking you to pause. Pause. Daydream. Lie on the couch and stare at the ceiling. Go for a drive to nowhere. Sit on a swing. No phone. No AirPods. No journal.

Just...pause.

OBSERVATION #18

No Pain, No Pain

In 1988 I was offered and accepted a job teaching at a boarding summer school in suburban Boston. It was a blast. I was 26, and the students were high school age. I taught a music history class and a seminar on political protest.

Ben was my colleague. He worked as the program coordinator. He was a bit nerdy, super smart, and totally hilarious. He once told me that his guiding philosophy in life was, “no pain, no pain.” I’m confident you recognize this as a funny take on the old adage, *no pain no gain*. Ben’s thinking was, why seek it out if it hurts?

I came from a different school of thought. I had read Scott Peck’s seminal work, *The Road Less Traveled*. “Life is difficult” he opined, and I concurred. I was entirely in agreement with those people who argued that if it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger; who preached that pain is the touchstone of spiritual growth. I bought in 100% to that narrative.

I see things a bit differently now.

While I am not averse to the belief that pain is not always to be avoided, that sorrow and hardship must be integrated into our being and are natural parts of life, I have come to recognize that we *can* choose how we entertain such a process. For example, someone might encourage me to go skydiving. "Face your fear!" To which I would probably respond, "I'm good, but thanks." Whereas they might see such an act as a metaphor for facing *all* fear, I might view it more as an expensive and artificial and transitory leap. I'll pass, but thanks just the same. Or, someone might ask me to go for an arduous hike up a steep mountain. I'm good, but thanks! I'll go for a long walk, maybe just around my neighborhood, and say hi to everyone.

Look, I recognize that this observation may seem silly. But the idea that I must suffer in order to grow is anathema to the health of my nervous system. I am sometimes willing to risk the possibility that my personal growth may be limited by my choice to attend to and nurture a regulated and quiet neuro-physiology.

I'm not saying avoid all pain -- but it's prudent to be wise and judicious.

OBSERVATION #19

We Are All Seeking Normalcy

I have an ever-increasing abundance of empathy for people I once found utterly reprehensible. In this case, I am referring in particular to white men in the 30s and 40s who refuse to wear masks during a pandemic. I used to want to scream at them (though I never did because I am afraid of anger and violence, as I explained earlier), to ridicule them, to call them sheep and to hurl insults their way. Time has surely softened those edges. What I didn't expect, however, was to end up in a place where I feel mostly sadness and compassion for them.

These men just want to live in a world that makes sense, that they recognize. They, like me, just want normalcy. For them, the rejection of masks, the denial of disease, the angry lashing out at the *fake news media* for stoking the fear of a "fraudulent pandemic", is just their way of expressing their distress. And we are all in distress.

When I look at them now, I don't see angry, belligerent, violent men -- I see frightened little boys; boys

We Are All Seeking Normalcy

whose brains are hijacked and whose nervous systems are in shambles; boys in pain. And it makes me want to cry.

We all want the world to just make sense.

OBSERVATION #20

Salvation Lies In Vulnerability

Here is my final observation about life. Don't hide. Don't hide your fear, your sadness, your confusion. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help, to share your sorrow with those around you, to be needy when you are in need. The salvation of the world lies in your willingness to open fully to the entirety of everything. If we all wept together, for just one day, we would be saved. The health of our planet, of our species, can be measured in the collective health of our nervous systems -- and vulnerability truly brings us to that place of peace.

CONCLUSION

Thanks for reading. Hugs to you.

