

**I worked** for ten years as a counselor and a job coach for runaway and homeless teenagers. Of course, the fact that I accepted this job for \$6.50 an hour should probably disqualify me from job coaching anyone. I was in the same tax bracket as Sally Struther's kids. Asking me for career advice was like consulting a blues musician for tips on sustaining a long term relationship.

But it's worse than that. I was an anti-capitalist job coach. I didn't even want to help exploited teenagers become well-adjusted workers. Why should anyone adjust well to what is unacceptable. I'd rather help them form revolutionary unions, fight back, and find a life's work.

I've been following advice like that since High School, and, I'm telling you, it's opened doors: freelance poetry, subsistence dairy farming, stand up comedy... The world is full of career opportunities if you don't mind not getting a paycheck.

For ten years, the closest I came to success in farming or comedy or poetry was a poem that isn't that funny and for which I found no market about how I can't farm because I have neither cows nor land. That poem is one of three that I carry with me everywhere. It's called FFA:

You won't see my grandfather's farm on a milk carton  
or in your junk mail.

The land is now a tax shelter for the accountant who bought it,  
and I have about as much chance of farming that land  
as I have of winning the lottery.

Apparently, I may already be a winner.

Until I know for sure, I'm certainly free to wander off  
into the desert of Las Vegas,  
where slot machines stand like voting booths,

and I'm free to compulsively pull the lever for a hope tax.

Maybe I can still inhabit my hometown,

haunting the supermarket dairy case,

watching other people purchase processed cheese style food

with credit cards.

Maybe I can apply myself to becoming a real estate agent,

or a stock broker,

or follow my high school guidance counselor's advice

and fall back on retrieving change from fountains --

which is a more sensible way than most

to live off the lipo-suctioned fat of the land.

In fact, I've found that public fountains are some of the only institutions

still willing to lend to the aspiring small farmer:

If you have the change, you throw it in.

If you need the change, you take it out.

It's kind of an aquatic Marxist thing,

trickle down economics,

or the damp and shallow remains of a safety net, depending.

I used to find as much as \$12.60 in an hour,

which in my generation is a yuppie wage,

but then I'd have to spend the rest of the day granting wishes,

the kind people make with a thoughtless coin toss.

Once I wished I'd been born Amish,

who are some of the only people making it in farming,

maybe because the Amish understand

the politics of electric light.

They don't gamble with anything as important as land,  
and, whether they are raising barns, or funds, or kids,  
they know that people can accomplish almost nothing alone.

I once joined a communal farm,  
apparently so I could be exploited by people with whom I identify.

I worked 75 hours a week for \$25 a month --

proof we need a commune workers union in this country!

If only Cesar Chavez had been born a hippie...

or if Jerry Lewis could have held a telethon

for kids born without the sense to get out of farming...

or if I was back in my high school chapter of the Future Farmers of America...

this would be my direct mail appeal to you:

Our nation needs so much of the kind of work

that those who hire don't care to see done,

that we appear to need a revolution

just to attend to what needs doing.

Like any other sensible conservatives,

unwilling to let good things die,

farmers come by radical roots honestly,

not out of ideas of utopia,

but from common sense as timeless as shared land,

which is why farmers either shape the character of a country,

or are night soil for nations to come.

Our spirits are not easily displaced by debt, speculation, and sprawl.

We are like amaranth, also called "pig-weed,"

an unencouraged grain that sows itself in disturbed ground.

I counseled kids who ended up on milk cartons. I suppose you've seen some of those sad and dejected faces. It's worth remembering that those pictures were taken when they were with their parents. Sometimes there's reasons why they leave.

About a third of the kids I worked with weren't even runaways so much as throwaways. Turns out their parents didn't want them back.

I remember one girl I worked with, 18 years old, in and out of foster homes, shelters, squats, pregnancy, and prostitution since she was 12.

I asked her, "If a miracle takes place tonight, and tomorrow things are better, what will be different?"

She said "I'd be at home, eating enough breakfast."

Home was not an option. Mom and Dad had written her off. She had either blown out of, or was getting too old for the services I knew about. I found myself telling her about that commune I used to live on.

I'm not sure that's ethical to do. It's not a shelter, nor a foster home, nor even a particularly functional farm, but it is a place where just about anyone can trade plenty of honest work for the basics a body needs.

Sometimes I wonder why I ever left the farm.

There *are* reasons why I left. There are reasons to leave any place. For one thing, trying to demonstrate a decent and sustainable way to live ... is actually a giant pain in the ass. Every third day I had to face a new wave of visitors, anxious to see utopia but shocked and confused to see an omelet on our plates. Instantly disillusioned, many demanded to know why we eat ova. We were trying to run a dairy farm under the scrutiny of

people who oppose the exploitation of cows for milk. I had to tell people “There are no vegan dairy farms.” One visitor even proclaimed that if we weren’t willing to become an animal shelter, we might as well call ourselves “Animal Farm” because some were more equal than others.

Besides me, the only other guy on that commune who’d ever worked on a real life actual functioning farm was a former tobacco grower named Nox. God, I miss Nox. That man wore overalls with all his heart. I’ll always remember him leading squeamish hippies into the field to pick slugs off broccoli. Many a hippy would rear back in objection, “Don’t slugs have a place in the ecosystem?”

Sure, Nox could have told them to blow it out their rainbow colored nylon wind sock, but he never did. He allowed as slugs do have a place in the ecosystem. “The slugs keep the broccoli from shading out the cedar trees. If it wasn’t for the slugs, this whole valley would all be broccoli, one giant monocultural brassica nightmare.”

Nox had the conscientious objectors go plant a sign by the road advertising “Free Range Organic Slugs, U-Pick for \$.67 a pound, Perfect for Beginning Gardeners!”

I remember when coyotes were systematically harvesting our chickens, but the commune’s pledge of nonviolence forbade us from even speaking hypothetically about harming our canine brothers.

I saw one of those coyotes. He looked great. Well fed. Shiny coat. Trotting along in broad daylight, as if to say “I hear y’all don’t kill things. Cool!”

One day Nox’s basset hound, Anna Blue finally got pissed and took off after the coyote. She got her ass handed to her of course, but the coyotes all stayed a way a long time after that. I guess word got around, “Yeah, they don’t kill things, but they got basset hounds!”

Satisfactions like that were few, but they were real. I also got to do childcare for Nox’s adopted son and newborn daughter. I got to plant an orchard that’s fairly likely to outlive me. I got to cut grass and grain with the snaking snathe of a good sharp scythe, that peasant tool of life and death of which we are supposed to be as afraid, as of its cousin, the sickle.

I was farming! Becoming one with the cycles of birth and death and rebirth!

So why did it feel like I was spinning my wheels?

I wanted to find traction and to stir things up. I wanted to accomplish things I didn't even dare to hope for. I wanted to be liked by people I don't even know.

I tried to explain this to a Taoist who lived on the farm. I said "I want to feel like my life is going somewhere."

She said "There isn't any place for it to go. Desire itself is in your way. Annihilate desire. Then you can be at peace."

I said "What has desire ever done to me that I should annihilate it?! I mean, what if I want to experience desire?!"

"Besides, I'm a comic; inner peace scares me. What if I achieve inner peace only to discover I'm no longer funny? Have you ever noticed how few Taoist stand up comics there are? The ones who do exist tend to perform to the sound of one hand clapping. That's called bombing! If you are a comic on the road and you discover you are the Buddha, you may as well kill yourself. This is the comics koan: everybody wants to be happy but to be happy enough, to be satisfied, to be complete and without desire is to die!"

And if that's true, maybe I didn't even want to be a successful stand up comic. I didn't want to perform for people who already understand and accept and like me. I wanted to say "You are my people!" to people who are pretty sure I'm not their people.

That's why I was glad to get booked into frat houses and army bases, cowboy bars and motorcycle clubs. Who they need to visit with is an ordinary, working class, postmodern, permacultural, Oregonian, ecoqueer, revolutionary, feminist witch comic of not very dark color. I wasn't absolutely sure what every one of my labels meant, nor if they really

belonged to me, but I was willing to be someone else if that what it took to not fit in. For instance, I wasn't sure I was attracted to men, but I knew I had a thing for bullies.

I thought of gay bashers as participants in an enormous lottery of scratch it cards. "Look!" I wanted to say, "You might already be a winner!"

People assume queers can't fight, but, good Good, who gets more practice? I was obsessed with fighting, and, when it came to homophobes, I wanted the attention. I told one of them "I'm not so sure about the sex part, although I do want to be liked, and I can tell you really want to fight. Well, I have wrestled and scrapped and boxed since I was a little boy, so I tell you what: *For you, I will be very, very gay!*"

More than once, I tried to explain all of the fighting to friends by quoting Eugene Debs: "So long as there is a working class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it. If there is a soul in prison, I am not free." I liked how that made me sound more principled and less like I was just misrepresenting myself for the opposite of profit.

If I was fairer to myself, I would note that it's pretty common for male survivors of sexual abuse to suffer confusion about their own sexual orientation. I was kind of like Czechoslovakia in the late 1930's, when many of them thought invasion made them German. It might have been more honest to say I identify with the Sudetenland.

"I'm certainly not glad to be a survivor of child sexual abuse," I told my comedic audiences, "but it has prepared me for the global economy. At least I know that we're getting bent over. If I had been a survivor of early childhood yoga, I might think we are in a Forward Fold."

That was not the feel good comedy that everybody wanted to see, but I found I could always supplement my income with street performing. Unfortunately, there's already a pretty fine line between any sort of stand up comedy ... and loitering.

Loitering is illegal. You can be put in jail for loitering, apparently so

you can stand around in a more structured setting. Webster defines loitering as “wasting time,” but that definition applies to a substantial block of all economic activity.

So, while I accept that street performing is no more productive than, say, tax preparation, it beats the Hell out of accepting a position on either side of the bars in a locked down incarceration facility.

Still, compared to the possibility of farming into my old age, surrounded by friends, and at peace with the land, it continues to surprise me that I chose street comedy. I never made as much money as a skilled panhandler, never enough to pay even metaphorical bills, but I’ve always felt that real artists ought to have day jobs.

So, I tried to find one, for months.

I saw one sign out, “Valued Employees Wanted: \$5.15/hour,” which was the minimum wage at the time. The job did come with benefits and a retirement plan, primarily Food Stamps and Social Security. In fact, I couldn’t help but notice that all of their benefits were either federally provided or state mandated. Why, they valued us so much, they were willing to observe the law!

The manager asked me, “So, why do you want to work at McDonalds?” I had to think about that.

“Because I’m content with a low wage. I enjoy being supervised, and I so little consider questioning authority that it never even occurs to me that I do what I’m told.”

I didn’t get the job.

That hurt. I mean, when you’re turned down for work in fast food, it’s not really clear what you’re supposed to settle for.

So I went outside to sit with the defenselessly drunk, among whom I learned that, if you’re homeless, it’s against the law to sleep. In fact, it’s illegal to carry a blanket with the intent to nap. Somebody explained it’s like poverty itself is what’s illegal, *and they fine you for it.*

In the time it took him to tell me that I watched a McWage Slave carry

two trash bags full of food into a padlocked dumpster.

A padlocked dumpster? What kind of greed is behind a policy of putting padlocks on dumpsters? Are you saying that even the assets you no longer want remain your property? Are you trying to occupy market share in the landfill?

I called “Bullshit!” and began my crusade: to cut the padlocks off dumpsters all over town and let the garbage be free for all!”

I got caught after a week by a worker at the Burger King. He said “Hey! What are you doing with those big old lock cutters?”

So I told him.

He said, “Oh. Well, then, why don’t you just put superglue in the keyhole and make the company cut the lock?”

Americans have such a genius for convenience! Whether we are monkeywrenching or making a sandwich... I mean, think of the time fast food customers save, by eating garbage.

I was so hungry myself that I found it convenient to volunteer with a vegan group called Food Not Bombs! feeding homeless people and each other in the park with the stuff we cooked in a squat with vegetables from dumpsters. That’s illegal too, which is probably the other reason why I did it.

The cops would come for us, and I would come back at them with scripture, like “Beat your billy clubs into soup ladles,” which ought to be in the Bible! I think I made up scripture because it was better than joining my fellow Food Not Bombers in chants of “Bad Cop! No Donut!” I hate chanting, and I would never deny so much as a pastry to anyone.

Still, I was arrested along with everyone else, charged with “Conspiracy to Commit Lunch,” and thrown in a jail cell full of vegan anarchists chanting “Eat the Rich!” It was surreal.

When I got out, I was still hungry and without a job. A business owner saw me going through his trash. He reeled back in disgust and said “Oh man, I wouldn’t eat that.”

I said “I know. That’s why it’s available to me.”

Reflecting on moments like that was not making me look forward to my ten year high school reunion, this year. The ten year reunion is like a report card on your whole life, and I haven't even achieved perfect attendance yet.

I tried to cheer myself up by rereading *The Limits to Growth*, published three years after my birth and laying out for me the rough contours of the life I could expect: overpopulation, resource depletion, global warming, pollution, and ecological collapse. I felt utterly in tune with my times. I was just ahead of the curve!

Even as an infant, I knew that something was terribly wrong. For starters, I wanted my fucking foreskin back!

When will the madness end? Did you know they even circumcise dildos? You can't justify that. What are you going to say? Health concerns? Religious beliefs?

Circumcision sent me a very basic message as a child: "Don't fuck with your parents." I hadn't even done anything yet. Imagine if I had actually misbehaved. It was like I was born on their bad side.

When I was still a baby, my mom checked into a mental institution. She let me know it was time to be weaned by drawing scary pictures on her breasts. It's hard to make breasts look really scary. They looked kind of like muppets, but to this day, the Cookie Monster scares me.

When I was four, I made my mom a model atom out of Tinkertoys. She screamed "WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SIMULATE THE QUANTUM MOTION OF ELECTRONS WITH A STATIONARY MODEL?!!!"

Nothing I did was good enough for her.

I made my mother a Lincoln Log Cabin — to code. Do you have any idea how hard it is to wire and plumb a Lincoln Log Cabin correctly. She hated the neighborhood. My mom taught me the three most important

things about real estate and family: location, location, location.

I wanted to shrink down, climb in my Tonka Truck and UHaul my ass out of Legoland.

Summers on my Grandfather's farm were some relief, but cows were nowhere to turn for the kind of answers I was looking for.

Getting along with other kids, for example, was just an impossible puzzle for me. The whole trick appears to be acting cool. "Cool." You're supposed to act with aloof indifference. I asked, "If it's so great to be cool, why aren't autistic kids more popular?"

There was an autistic kid in my class. This guy was the King of Cool, but as far as I could tell he was entirely alone.

I started smoking cigarettes in the boys bathroom as a strategy to try to make friends. I guess I thought we'd be like a whole posse of preteen Marlboro Men, because I'm a cowboy, but you can just call me "cow."

I got pretty desperate. Especially, when my mom would punish me by physically breaking my dish, which meant I wasn't allowed to eat in the house. In her version of Time Out, I had to find somewhere else to sleep.

That's how I came to spend so many nights over at Jeremy Meyer's house. So it seemed pretty important to do whatever Jeremy wanted to do. Jeremy wanted to be my boyfriend.

I asked him what that meant exactly. He said I had to quit smoking and he gave me a reading list. Jeremy was actually a pretty wholesome influence on me. It was less like a relationship and more like a very small book club.

We were both twelve, but to me at the time, Jeremy seemed like an unbelievably empowered, practically self-actualized human being, and it was Jeremy who taught me what a truly terrifying thing self actualization really could be. I was over at his house for dinner with his whole family the night Jeremy decided to come out to his parents over soup. He quoted Foucault and the DSM.

Jeremy's dad was a progressive Jewish psychotherapist, very

accepting actually. He didn't even mind that I wasn't Jewish. He just wasn't so sure I should keep spending the night.

"But Dad," Jeremy argued, "I'd be repressing my homosexuality."

His father threw up his hands, "And what's wrong with a little repression?"

Jeremy never forgave me for siding with his dad that night. I never went over to his house again because his father called my mom on the phone.

I was not allowed to come home until they could come up with a better punishment. They decided on grounding.

I was grounded until my father retired from the Navy and we moved back to his hometown, just in time to watch most of my grandfather's farm get sold off.

My mother responded to what she called "the crisis in our American family" by attending the lectures of a motivational speaker from whom she came home convinced that the solutions to our family's problems could not be found in our family alone without addressing the larger decay in society. She decided that God wanted her to run for School Board on a platform of decency, dress codes, and getting tough on moral decay. My mother proposed summer detention camps. Her answer to youth violence: capital punishment, because how else are they going to learn? In fact, as the campaign went on, my mom proposed the death penalty for kids younger and younger until she concluded that the Republican Party ought to support abortion, as a means of parental discipline.

Both the Republican and American Nazi parties distanced themselves from my mother.

I offered to help her moderate her image by coming out as her confidently queer but somehow still supportive son. She did not answer me directly, but I did receive a letter from my mother's attorney, informing me I was grounded for the rest of the fiscal year.

I was allowed to spend as much time as I wanted talking to military

recruiters. Besides Judo and wrestling, recruiters pretty much were my social life for a while. I did like the attention. Though I feared the kind of commitment they were looking for.

I wasn't even sure if reading Jeremy's books alone made me ineligible to serve. I should explain because some of you might not remember: there used to be a controversy about queer people serving in the military, but I was in school even before that, before they weren't supposed to ask you and you weren't supposed to say.

So I talked about it a lot.

I asked the recruiters what they thought. Did they think it was like trying to integrate the Klan? Did they feel that the military was, first and foremost, an equal opportunity jobs program? Was it perhaps more properly focused on bombing and killing people?

I'm not trying to lay any kind of heavy judgement trip here. I mean there are people I'd like to kill, if I wouldn't get in trouble for it, but they're generally people I know, not total strangers. Maybe I could accept that bombing is a lifestyle choice if the same military didn't threaten to throw men out for holding hands because that would be wrong.

They said gays shouldn't serve in the military because they would be vulnerable to blackmail. But I said what about a guy like Jeremy, whom I imagined was likely to come out in the first five minutes of any conversation. That guy would put a pink triangle right between the stripes, and he would make it look stylish. Trying to blackmail him would be like approaching Colin Powell and saying "Give us the plans, or we will leak it to the media that you are actually black."

They said there could not be gay soldiers because homosexuals are promiscuous, and that made a lot of sense because we all know marines are monks.

Concerns then arose about being observed in the shower which stems perhaps from a misplaced fear of critique, like "Is that all you can be?"

That would not be a sensitive thing to ask. There is enough fear in the world.

"Mainly," said one of the recruiters, "I don't want to worry about

somebody motivated to put anything up my ass.”

I said “Fair enough. That sounds like a fear of rape. Rape is a bad thing. So is getting smacked in the head with a skillet, but I don’t mind if people cook.”

Some people think queers can’t fight, but, as far as I could tell, even appearing a little gay presented constant opportunities to learn hand to hand combat. I never thought I looked all that particularly queer, but I guess it was enough to intrigue a number of bullies. “What?” they inquired, “Are you some kind of faggot?”

I just asked for some time to think it over and get clear on the question. They had no patience for me.

I did not always win. Sometimes I got the fuck beaten out of me.

I learned that to be in any way authentically who I am was just to take incredible risks, and I wasn’t particularly well liked to begin with.

I did make one friend I wasn’t supposed to have, an honors student named Scott, a deacon in our church who distinguished himself in sports and music. He eventually became our class Valedictorian, and I was the one who introduced him to taking LSD. He wasn’t so sure it was a good idea to drop acid without parental supervision. I guess he imagined we would throw back beakers full and wander out into traffic.

Scott had heard the story — you know the one — about the kid who had a thousand hits of acid in his pocket when it started to rain, so that now he thinks he’s a glass of orange juice. You’ve heard this story, right? (It’s not always a glass of orange juice, but it’s generally some kind of citrus.)

Maybe I wasn’t such a good influence on Scott, but when he came back from the Harvard University Classical Music Summer Camp with a really bad case of head lice, I was the one he came to for help. Probably because I’m from the socioeconomic background that has to deal with head lice all the time. I took him to the pharmacy. I showed him the lice isle. I even helped him get a two dollar rebate on the lice shampoo in exchange for letting them use his photo for promotional purposes.

I met Scott in the same place I met most of my friends, in the Congregational Church Youth Group. We were not so much of a clique, more like a sect. My closest friend in the bunch was a new kid in town named Virgil, easily the most Protestant person I have ever met. Virgil was the kid who wrote out his own 96 theses of protest and taped them to his pew.

Virgil allowed that God might not be dead, but noted that she did not look at all well. What woman deep in labor does?

Virgil asked isn't it possible that we create gods by acting as if they exist, and, if that's true, should we be creating a malevolent Devil and a jealous God? Why not Venus? Aphrodite? Gabore?

And who decides who's god of what? What if I decide: I am the GODDESS OF LOVE! YOU are the goddess of LITTLE BUGS? That's not particularly fair.

So Virgil proposed free elections for the offices of God, with gender balanced, proportionally-elected party lists representing diverse ethnic groups and constituencies.

Sure, Virgil acknowledged, many Americans would vote for Elvis, but, if we enacted term limits, he wouldn't be in office forever. We'd have deep fried communion wafers one, maybe two decades tops. The truth is that Elvis was not that persuasive, even as an actor. He couldn't even die convincingly.

But, then again, neither could Jesus Christ.

I asked, Virgil, "Why do you go to church, man?"

"Because I'm lonely," he said. "Besides I have to go to church, whenever I need more of those cool little pencils, or whenever I get the kind of munchies that can only be satisfied by the blood and body of Christ. Sometimes you eat in, sometimes you go out, sometimes you join the cannibal minions of the zombie god."

I said "Careful, Virg, they still have the technology to burn us at the stake..."

He said "Isn't that the damndest thing? You'd think that a religion

whose focal figure was the target of capital punishment might hesitate to employ the death penalty, but then again, maybe even if God wasn't dead, we would still feel the need to kill and eat him."

I reminded Virgil there are people who would be willing to put the fear of God into us, manually.

He said, "I resent that. There is nobody more God-fearing than me. In fact, the whole idea of God frankly scares the shit out of me.

Nevertheless, one Sunday Virgil organized an alternative day of worship complete with a punk rock service and a sermon entitled "The Cross is a Crutch." But only six of our closest friends showed up, counting Scott, Christie Caffee, Brian, Elijah, me, my little brother Kyle, and Peter, my pet rock. We were not much of a foundation for a new faith.

Still we seemed to wield a certain influence in the Congregational Church Youth Group. One kid, who never even liked us, nevertheless raised his hand in a Youth Group meeting and asked, "If power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, why are we in favor of an all powerful God?"

Virgil said, "Yeah! What if God sells out? What if He's just in it for the chicks? What if God becomes an Asshole? Who's gonna stand up to this Guy?"

"This is the God who said unto Abraham 'YOU MUST KILL YOUR SON ISAAC TO PROVE HOW MUCH YOU LOVE ME!'

"How come nobody asked, 'God, what do you want to be such a dick for?'"

There are reasons church youth groups don't usually ask questions like that. We are not talking about after school detention here, or writing on the blackboard one thousand times "I will not think." No, technically, this is heresy. The sentences sort of start with excommunication.

But though our church was a one party state, we were blessed with a relatively progressive pastor who allowed a kind of a Congregational Perestroika. He decided we didn't need any extra persecution because we were already going to high school.

And he was right. Virgil had an especially bad high school experience. He viewed compulsory education as not unlike being drafted, and he tried to get himself classified as a conscientious objector. Every quarter he'd call a demonstration and burn his report card.

Early on our Principal marginalized Virgil's demonstration by assigning him to all remedial and Special Education classes. To anyone with eyes to see, Virgil had become a martyr to slack.

But he studied in secret, and he got hip to things I still haven't figured out. By his sophomore year Virgil could read Finnegans Wake in his sleep. He wrote anonymous and iconoclastic term-paper like notes against the interpretations of cycloptic english teachers, the literary equivalent of an eye jab from an insurgent stooge. His pen name was Noman, a nobody as far as the blind are concerned, and in no hurry to be graded, burned out, or stoned.

It wasn't all principled delinquency in our little sect. My little brother, Kyle's, big ideological statement was to steal gas with a mouth siphon — and I always wondered if he did it for the buzz.

But why steal something that's cheaper than bottled water and not nearly as refreshing? Why live in the difficulties of being stoned and lost in an RV park, confusing the gas tank with the sewage hook up.

I can't believe they pressed charges. That's just abominably cruel.

Another of our companions, Brian, set a higher ethical and intellectual standard of troublemaking. See, Brian was confined to a wheel chair, and he cut the figure of a younger, angrier Stephen Hawking, with attitude. Brian hated to be called "Special" — as if he was to be found in the Best Buy bin at Bi-Mart. He hated to be called "Differently Abled" — what does that mean, I can fly?! Brian preferred to be called "Severely Euphemized," and he railed against a lame-ass language in which 'lame,' itself, is an ableist construct.

But Brian saved his most evangelistic passion for math and the physical sciences. The man was a mathematical anarchist who laughed in the face of algebraic law. He engaged the Math and Physics Departments in a campaign of letter bombs, beginning with elementary devices that divided

them by zero, rendering them undefined. He then sowed dissent in the ranks of the tenured faculty by pointing out that the twin theories of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, the great pillars of modern physics, don't like each other at all, in fact they are completely incompatible theories. He was convinced unto quaking by the logic of Godel, such that he asserted that no self respecting mathematician would be part of any set that would have itself as a member.

He than taunted the physicists with lurid discoveries of naked singularities in which matter collapses on itself and the laws of physics completely break down! It was the equivalent of mooning the mathematicians with the existence of black holes.

Not content to remain in secret, our sect staged a populist rebellion in the Future Farmers of America. We took over the high school newspaper and changed the name to "Class War."

I became the editor, even though I am dyslexic. In fact, I wore my disability like a badge, every misspelling a thumb in the logocentric eye of The Man.

Naturally, we avoided the boring boosterism of all high school sports because they dumb us down. Take baseball. Once on base, you have very few options to choose from; it's basically a run/don't run situation, but are you allowed to make even this smallest of decisions by yourself, or are you expected to defer to The Man in the Base Coach box, keeping you down?!

We aimed to channel the energy ordinarily squandered in high school athletics into more constructive fitness activities, like rioting. If we must have spectacle, couldn't we at least organize into meaningful activist groups, like bowling leagues and be pitted against each other in ideologically caged combat?!

"In this corner, wearing the red and black trunks, it's the Bisexual Anarchists with Bad Haircuts ... and in this corner, weighing in at an average of one hundred and six pounds, it's the People Who Wear Black and Scowl a Lot! Winner to face the Leftist Punks who Flunked Gym for a Final Smackdown!!!"

Our newspaper, created and reported on a broad array of front

organizations and counter-organizations. I'm especially proud of creating "Rednecks For the Reforestation of Golf Courses," "Premeditated Parenthood," "The Mime's Anti-Defamation League," and "The Womyn's Auxiliary of the North American Man-Boy Love Association."

Not to be outdone, a number of our more popular classmates organized a legitimate anti-nuclear organization called "Fallout." Maybe I'm bitter because those of us who weren't quite cool enough to be part of Fallout had to join the "Association of Non-Alligned Losers Against the Atomic Machine." I was secretly pleased with the reactionary JROTC students formed "Fall IN!" and mobilized to crush all hippies. Undaunted, my friends and I assembled a band of absurdist theatre geeks called "Nuclear Winter Wonderland."

When Fallout called for a Die-In, from which the losers were excluded, Fall In! crashed the demonstration, threatening to beat up anyone who took part in the Die In. We were outside selling concessions and memorabilia including "Jim Jones Memorial Kool Aid," "Andy Warhol Blemish Paint," and "Unibombarama Baseball Cards." It was better than Homecoming!

Naturally, the faculty condemned it all and questioned how any of this could possibly be preparing us for "The Real World." Sometimes I think adults get a sick thrill out of the existential threat inherent in words like "The Real World." It's not enough that we're miserable and in high school. We're not even *real*?!

We couldn't take that lying down. We responded, by inviting representatives from Burger King and the local Vice Squad to a Career Fair. We called it "Bosses and Pimps in your Fast Food Future."

We gave equal time to the opposition. We even allowed our guidance counselor to keynote the affair, and he delivered a shockingly unoriginal speech. "You may find yourself," he began, "living in a shotgun shack. And you may find yourself in another part of the world. And you may find yourself living in a beautiful house with a beautiful wife. And you may ask yourself 'Well, how did I get here?'" His basic advice might as well have been "Plan ahead, work hard, and inherit wealth, or at least just

don't embarrass yourself at the ten year reunion."

No pressure.

My parents didn't believe anything should come easily for me. They had me paying market rate rent by the time I was sixteen. They let me know I was definitely on my own when it came to paying for college — actually, what they said was "You can go to college anywhere you want, so long as you get paid to attend." It was all to be part of lifting myself up by my own bootstraps — a telling phrase, because [demonstrates] it is physically impossible to do. You try to get stronger; you just get heavier. It's hard as Hell to pick somebody else up by their bootstraps.

Virgil did what he could. He helped me get a job where he and his dad worked, at Torrington Special Products, making tilt steering wheel columns for Ford Motor Vehicles — \$8/hour if you made piece rate, \$5 if you didn't.

I mostly ran a turret lathe. The coolant that splashed over the spinning metal was a toxic pink when it started and a dark grey when it would no longer ooze out of the hose. OSHA had closed the factory twice because the coolant had been found to carry Legionnaires' Disease. (That was back when burdensome health and safety regulations were still being enforced.)

Except the spline machine, which Virgil ran, would occasionally just shoot its part straight up over where he had to reach. Twenty feet up you could see how it was damaging the ceiling.

Out in the warehouse, the parts were stacked in two ton metal bins, sometimes six high. That high, the forklift operator sometimes had to climb the bins to see what was in the top one. One time while he was up there, I guess a weld popped in the bottom bin. The whole stack fell over, and the guy was crushed.

It was obvious that we needed a union, but I didn't know how that worked. I tried arranging the push pins on the company bulletin board to spell "UAW NOW!" It's hard to tell if a tactic like that is working. It was my first glimpse into the ugly reality that organizing for social change requires social skills. Bummer.

Virgil and his dad were down with organizing. We had promising

conversations with most of the other workers on the overnight shift, and I tried to make contact with some of the guys on the first and second shifts. Somebody must have ratted me out to the boss because I got called in for the talk and then reassigned — to clean the spent coolant from all of the machines. I hadn't been that good at organizing when I wasn't constantly nauseous and vomiting.

It was enough to make just about any college promotional material start looking good to me. Did you know that Michigan State University boasts the largest freestanding ceramic statue in the world? What more did I need to know? The application was short. The admissions were rolling. I was as good as matriculating, if I could just find a way to pay for it.

I took out loans, got a little scholarship, moved to East Lansing, and found a job in the newspaper — in the personal ads, under “Men Seeking Subsidy.” So, I wasn't dependent on my parents, but rather on a relationship with a much older man to whom I was not attracted. It wasn't as bad as it sounds. He didn't end up supporting me all that much, and he really didn't get much of a relationship. Still I felt like a marginal sex worker who was bad at his job. It was better than the first job the University offered, helping to conduct hideous experiments on subjects from the animal shelter. I have scruples.

Instead it became my job to have an affair with a married man. His job was being a Marriage and Family Therapist with a sideline in consulting at a mental hospital — and you have to be careful how close you let yourself get to someone who puts people away.

I guess my next logical career move might have involved selling my soul to the Devil. I think a lot of people do that. They all just seem to strike better business deals than I would. I'd probably trade my soul to the Devil for like a sense of integrity. That's incredibly fuckin' dumb. Because having a sense of integrity in this world is like seeking the moral high ground — in Hell, or justice in prison.

[Optional Intermission]

There's tremendous freedom when you go away to college — tremendous freedom, but when you don't know who you are or what you want and you have terrible judgment, freedom is not your friend. I pledged fraternities in which I am sure I would have been miserable. I practiced sleep deprivation like a sport. I struggled in every class except Russian Literature and Microeconomics, and I turned in the same research paper for both classes. I discovered that as sales of Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment go up, the population of elderly women goes down. I considered a seven-day waiting period on all Russian novels, but I decided that words don't kill people. Ideas kill people.

Nowhere was that clearer than in my college dormitory where I shared a room with a kid who had tattooed "667" on his arm. He was like the neighbor of the beast. He was really into the occult, but he was a very bad speller. He had given his soul to satin. The least depressing thing he said to me all semester was a reassurance that, if my roommate commits suicide, I get an automatic 4.0 in all of my classes. That was his idea of taking care of me.

I said, "Jesus, man, you're talking about suicide. Isn't that going to interfere with your career plans? I mean what do you want to be doing in ten years?"

He didn't know.

I said "Make something up!"

He told me he'd always thought about entering the priesthood.

Well, I supposed that convening Satanic prayer circles is kind of a peculiarly Christian heresy, but I had to think some of his spirituality might conflict with his vocational choice. We talked it over, though, and, not only didn't he commit suicide, but also, he is a priest today!

It was my college roommate who first suggest that I should consider becoming a counselor, he suggested maybe a drug and alcohol treatment counselor. I pointed out that you can't really get that job unless you've been a drug addict or an alcoholic, yourself, and that's more hassle than

medical school! I mean, getting drunk, throwing up, passing out, being hung over day after day after day ... I just don't have that kind of motivation. I don't even know if I could break into the client side of that industry.

Although I did drink so much peppermint schnapps one weekend that I became permanently unable to use conventional toothpaste. And I experimented with taking crystal meth amphetamines because it was cheaper than crack, and I'm a cost conscious narcotic consumer, but I don't know if you've ever read the ingredients in crystal meth: including kerosene, Drano — This is not like a very nutritious drink. So I switched to coffee, which is like decaf amphetamines, but caffeine addiction is no picnic either. I actually had cafe workers refuse to serve me. They said "Look, buddy, you have had enough!"

I eventually weaned myself off coffee by asking for progressively more and more room for cream, until that's all I drank.

I think I had hit bottom and was on my way up again when I accidentally stumbled into one of my scheduled classes and discovered my academic calling: Philosophy, specifically Ethics. Michigan State University allowed me to major in Ethics! That's like majoring in love or becoming a mensch!

I found myself in class with a former Marine studying nonviolence on the GI Bill.

That was the year my little brother Kyle joined the Marines, in the hopes of affording college himself someday. It was also the first year of the first Gulf War.

Kyle wrote me in a letter from Saudi Arabia that he was against the war, "not that anybody gives a fuck what I think," he wrote, "but I can think whatever I want. And when I come home a veteran, I ought to be allowed to heat my home with the American flag. Tell me all about how you support the troops while you deploy me to defend any convenient Monarchy. It's not like the Corps is a union gig. If we walk off the job, that's called 'desertion,' you can get shot for that. The closest thing we have to a grievance procedure is the fragmentation grenade." Little

brother also turned me on to Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler, two-time Medal of Honor recipient, once the most decorated Marine in US history, and his book War is a Racket. With your indulgence, one quote:

“I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street, and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.<sup>1</sup>”

Little Brother, Kyle asked me to do my duty as a college student, to stand up to the Bush Crime Family and end this war.

I did my best, because unlike a lot of activists, I don't have a principled commitment to being perpetually ineffective. To the extent that I was useless, I blame only a failure of my own imagination. Early on, I couldn't think of anything more clever by way of demonstration than walking around ... with signs ... don't make us start chanting!

And what chants they were: “The people, united, will never be defeated!”

What history professor wrote that chant!? I suggested an accurate alternative: “The people, united, will sometimes win and sometimes lose and sometimes be co-opted!” No one would chant with me.

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<sup>1</sup> Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler, War is a Racket.

I got bitter: “A slogan, exhausted, should never be repeated!” And a lot more people chanted. It was almost like a movement.

The signs we carried weren’t any better. I was handed one that read “Fight War!” Fight war. You could be for or against the conflict and still carry that sign.

Kyle asked me what I thought might really stop the war. I figured strikes might do it. One good General Strike could stop most wars in a week. I mean, what if they called an economy and nobody came?

Hunger strikes, however, make no sense to me at all. What are we saying? “Stop the war, or else ... we won’t take very good care of ourselves.” This is the ideological equivalent of anorexia, which does not come from a very powerful place. Starvation and poor nutrition are not revolutionary; they are the status quo.

Rioting, on the other hand, is remarkably effective. It’s very difficult to ignore, although it is also hard to convey a precise and positive message with street fighting. Subtle points tend to get lost in the tear gas, and getting tear-gassed appeals to surpassingly few people. Although, after a few successful demonstrations, getting tear-gassed each time, people would begin to develop a Pavlovian association of tear gas with success. Our eyes would begin to water and our mouths would begin to water at the mere mention of crowd control.

You see, the truth is that people *like* pain. Look at how we exercise. Look at how we eat spicy food. Some people even feel that food isn’t properly seasoned unless it’s painful to eat. That’s why I started cooking with pepper spray. It gives it an amazing kick. They say it’s just for muggers, but I find it’s good on just about everything. I’ve even started to use mace, like Binaca. I discovered it’s not a very social drug, in an enclosed space, not like marijuana —

That’s what the cops should use for crowd control!!! A big cloud of pot would turn the most militant mob into a peace demonstration, kind brother. In fact, if I was The Man, and I wanted a complacent population, I would distribute marijuana door to door!

Ah, but then it wouldn’t be cool, and the prisons would be empty. Who

would sew the “Made in the USA” labels on Eddie Bauer clothing?

No, we must keep pot illegal, even from a liberal perspective. Think of the drug dealers who would be thrown out of work and have to be re-trained. What are they going to be, mathematics instructors? Well, they are remarkably well positioned to teach American kids the metric system.

The ugly truth is that drug dealers are just plain better prepared for the global economy than Philosophy majors like me ever would be. I was becoming qualified for little more than making revolutionary gestures and carrying on Socratic dialogue with street people, and, after the Gulf War ended, all of the constructive energy that had gone into trying to stop it just seemed to disperse into pointlessness that made me wonder what I was even doing in school.

The most constructive thing I did my whole second semester was play in the interdepartmental softball tournament alongside my fellow Philosophy majors. We were called the “Fighting Food Service Workers.” We played against the Women’s Studies team in the first round, and they totally kicked our asses. We went on a rampage, lifting toilet seats in women’s restrooms all over town. It was senseless violence. I don’t defend it.

We had all of the unjustified bitterness of men destined to work jobs that require us to wear name tags. I was paying tuition to walk a path that rendered me progressively less employable.

So I dropped out — smartest consumer decision I’ve ever made. I could have bought a house with what I was spending on tuition, or paid my own way at the grocery store. Suddenly, I could afford to break my sugar daddy habit, and I graduated myself to the adult world, of wage slavery.

I got a job in a mail order company in a department known as “Catalogue Fulfillment.” Fulfillment. I know it sounds like an incredibly Buddhist job, but I was handling the frenzied orders for Tickle Me Elmo Dolls. You would think I was delivering life saving plasma, instead of dealing in muppet flesh. I found myself telling the increasingly desperate

customers, “Look. If you have to wait an inordinately long time for this doll, good. The whole secret to happiness is to delay gratification. You are probably a lot happier wanting it than you will ever be owning it, but thanks so much for calling.” I think I may have played some role in the bottom falling out of the Tickle Me Elmo market, but that also meant I was laid off.

I was rescued from poverty by Evelyn, a woman I’d met through ACT-UP. She offered me a dream job in her socialist bookstore and won my undying affection.

It’s hard to judge the success of a socialist bookstore. We didn’t want to encourage the consumerist mindset, and it’s pretty hard for a business to thrive when it systematically discourages its customers from buying stuff. I didn’t care. I had the least exploitive job of my entire life. Every paycheck felt like a love letter. I wanted to give it my free time too, which is how I ended up spending so much time with Evelyn. I just thought we were comrades — comrades who cuddled a lot.

I was totally blindsided when Evelyn proposed marriage to me. I remember saying something romantic, like “Does this mean you’re interested in men?”

Evelyn did confess to some disappointment in her attraction to me. It had been so much work to come out! If she went with a man now, what would her friends say? She felt like a failure as a homosexual. “I can’t do anything right,” she protested.

But Evelyn picked flowers for me. She wrote me poems, one about a kingfisher queer for a porcupine, another about two stone butches in a tickle fight. She made me a sweater. And her kiss was like cream from a Jersey cow on lush grass. And it was spring! I find some bicycles attractive in the spring!

I found myself asking couples on the street how they became heterosexual. “Was it like a taste test?” Or, I shouldn’t assume, maybe you are bisexual? Or just greedy? Opportunistic? Or like a three-pronged adapter just trying to fit somewhere?

I feel like a survey is in order, right now. Are there people here who harbor secret feelings for the opposite sex? You can tell me; it's just us. I'll validate you I promise. [If yes, "Good, usually the part of heterosexual has to be played by Richard Gere." If no, "Nobody? Once again, the part of the heterosexual will have to be played by Richard Gere.]

I don't think anyone should be ashamed of being a breeder. It could happen to anyone. My gayest friend got a vasectomy; guy's taking no chances.

In fact, the way he explained it made so much sense, I got fixed too. At 22, I had to ask plenty of places before I found one willing to perform the procedure. Eventually, I found the world's sketchiest Planned Parenthood — it was actually located in a back alley, in a place that looked like it should sell cigarettes, like a Plaid Parenthood.

Evelyn tried to talk me out of the vasectomy. Oh yeah, she wanted the whole deal, marriage, kids, PETS!!!

When Evelyn's lesbian friends heard about us, they had about a cow each. These were women who actively argued about whether men were inherently violent and oppressive to women and other living things or whether it's simply necessary to see men that way so as to muster the rage to heal.

Evelyn tried reassuring them. "I'll still be a part of the lesbian community."

One said, "What? As a disinterested third party? That's like celibates fighting for free love, or plankton for an independent Palestine." Evelyn lost three close friends over me.

My parents were much more accepting. They even came to our wedding, a Judeo-Pagan affair, in which we tied the knot, jumped a broom, and came down, mazel tov on a glass, and bless their Republican hearts if they didn't smile through the whole thing. They said, "That was very nice."

Evelyn's parent's liked it too. They even complimented me on my tux. I thanked them but admitted that I didn't feel so much like a well dressed groom as an incredibly lazy drag queen. I said "It's kind of a generational

thing, I'm kind of a slacker queer, apparently. Although grunge is not really a fashion statement for me. I *am* poor, actually.

"In another generation, I might have been like a communist drag queen, with a wig on layaway at the Goodwill, for after the revolution, because if I'm going to do drag, it's going to be proletariat drag, in shoes in which I'd be comfortable rioting." I reassured my in-laws that I wasn't really a communist, "although if Bill Clinton can call himself a Democrat, I ought to be able to call myself whatever I want."

So I declared myself a feminist, because I like cranky women with all the answers as much as the next guy, and I will fight for the right to be cranky, the right to be bald, and the right to have answers. 'That is why I've decided that I am a feminist drag queen. I like my hair short. I prefer to wear pants. I burned my bra years ago in an act of cleansing rage, and now I'm growing out my facial hair as a statement of feminine power. I gave up make up, except maybe a little mascara, to touch up my leg hair — better than what I used to do when I shaved it all off and penciled it back in. That was stupid. But I'm still a sucker for perfume. Tonight I'm wearing Ennui by L'Oreal, because existential terror is more than just a pose.

I'd like to think that marrying Evelyn had nothing to do with her family's wealth, but it did mean I wouldn't have to work or scavenge food.

I cooked, cleaned, and tried to be a good husband to Evelyn, and she was very good to me. She especially encouraged my poetry, comedy, and farming. I fed us out of our urban homestead, faithfully enough that I spent less than \$237 at the grocery store in a year.

Surprisingly enough, the gender roles never bothered me, it was class that screwed us up. I knew Evelyn had inherited wealth, but I figured, 'This is a woman who started a socialist bookstore. How dirty could her money be?' That's when I found out her real estate company was buying up farmland for strip malls and subdivisions. The honeymoon was over.

We argued over whether it was wrong to own things for a living, and the more I found out about her investment portfolio, the worse it got. She was buying up starter houses and flipping them for a profit. That's like

scalping tickets to the middle class.

I found out she owned over forty lofts downtown. I said “Would you stop yuppifying everything? You’re driving up the rents and driving out the very people who make it a good place to live. At first Evelyn was defensive. She said, “What do you think I’m doing some kind of spiteful thing? My tenants have pissed me off, so I’m getting back at them, by fixing up the building?”

I said, “No, Honey, it’s more like a kind of passive aggressive gentrification.”

Evelyn was willing to meet me halfway. She would see a shrink to try to develop healthy urban growth boundaries, if I was willing to admit I had a codependent community development complex. We might have made peace, if I hadn’t found out that she also owned slum tenements.

Even in its most benign form, rent is a ripoff. And the whole tenant-landlord medieval torture session of a power relationship is the kind of thing better worked out through healthy sadomasochistic sex play.

But our arguments were making it difficult even to enjoy sadomasochism. She said, “Fine, then. You be the master. Command me!”

I said, “You could start by divesting from South Africa, but I don’t want to nag...”

The more I found out about animal cruelty, the less I could even enjoy sadomasochistic accessories. I don’t think black leather looks good on anyone anymore — not even cattle!

Evelyn’s father was a cosmetics magnate and the owner of a company that tests products on animals. There was a time when I thought animal testing was ok. I thought it meant like trying to find out which shampoo gave Fluffy the Rabbit’s fur more bounce and body. Then I found out they put the shampoo in the rabbits’ eyes. Now, I’m no scientist, but I figure that’s gotta hurt like a bitch! Couldn’t we just put warning labels on the shampoo, like “The Surgeon General has determined that getting shampoo in your eyes pretty much hurts like a bitch. Shut your eyes when you wash your hair.”

Evelyn’s father was unmoved.

So I said, “Ok, then, let’s make all shampoo gentle, like baby shampoo — no more tears.

That’s when he explained how “no more tears” works. It isn’t any less damaging to the eyes. They just add some anesthetic so the babies cry less.

I said, “You are an evil man.”

Evelyn not only agreed with me, she gave all of her shares in daddy’s company to the Animal Liberation Front, and, let me tell you, anti-vivisectionists definitely know how to liven up a gathering of shareholders.

Evelyn even surprised me by turning over the title to the slum tenements to the tenants themselves. Unfortunately, a few tenants cheated the others out of their share and promptly turned around and rented the same apartments to even poorer people for even higher rents. That was disappointing.

I decided it may be easier to avoid exploiting people when you don’t have any power, but I’m not interested in a politics of pure weakness. It reminds me of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration speech in which he declared that our greatest fear is not that we are powerless, but that we are powerful beyond our comprehension. I realized it’s not going to be enough to smash capitalism. We have to replace it with something better. What a hassle! Organizing a functioning economic democracy is just going to be a fuckload of work!!!

Audre Lorde said it’s irresponsible even to walk away from race and class privilege. What we have to do is put that privilege to work for justice.

Evelyn took that as seriously as a heart attack. She made a plan to put all of her money into the movement. My favorite grant was to some former Black Panthers whose vision was that the Crips could become this country’s Sandinistas. We gave money to Earth First!, the IWW, the American Indian Movement, and to dozens of groups so radical they constantly denounced us. We founded an anarchist political party that demonstrated its independence by purging us from the party for life.

I voted in favor of the motion to purge us. Why should Evelyn’s money give me any particular say, especially when it is so likely to amplify my faults. I was afraid to get out in front, only to discover I am in everyone’s

way. What if everyone starts listening to me only to find I say incredibly stupid things?

In a similar way, the closer that Evelyn and I became, the more I found myself at odds with her until she finally threw up her arms and asked “What do you *want*, anyway?”

What do I want? What *do* I want? I’m afraid of what I want. I want to be taken care of ... so I can be independent. I should have admitted that, maybe even resolved my contradictions.

Instead, I asked for an open relationship. Somehow I’d gotten the idea that free love is more revolutionary than monogamy, apparently because wrecking my life is a revolutionary act. We tried polyamory. We even crossed the line between group sex and community organizing. I can’t say as I recommend it; it is a lot of time on the telephone. Some people won’t do anything without a reminder call.

I don’t suppose I can really blame polyamory for our troubles. I could have used any distraction to do in our marriage. Our relationship was like a pet I stopped feeding. We snapped at each other, and I’m embarrassed to say I concealed my aggression as some kind of pseudo political infighting. Our divorce was like a split in the Socialist Party. I left like a man in exile.

I was gone a long time before I found myself on that communal farm. Then I left the farm also, to be a street comic. Then I was just living on the street.

I decided to look up my brother, Kyle. After he’d been discharged from the Marines, he got a job in an underwear factory in Las Angeles. That was until Fruit of the Loom announced it was laying off its entire domestic workforce — yet another wedgie for the American working class. My brother was about to become an unemployed underwear worker. It made me feel closer to Kyle, like our lives were going in the same direction. I hitch-hiked down to LA to try to cheer him up.

I said, “Try to have faith in people, bro. Look at how we come together in the face of natural disasters. Well, sometimes we come together.

Sometimes we loot. But sometimes we come together, then loot.”

That was the summer of the Rodney King riots. Couldn't have come at a better time for Kyle and me. In a way racist cops furnished our entire apartment. It wasn't just good for us. The looting seemed to draw our whole community together. I saw a young Crip helping an old lady carry a television across the street. It was beautiful, like a commercial for the United Way: “Thanks to you, it's working for all of us.” Why can't we all just get along.

Unfortunately for Kyle, looting isn't a stable occupation. It's more or less seasonal work. And you can't loot by yourself; that's just stealing.

Kyle said maybe he could have kept his probation, if he hadn't had such a good experience with violence in the Gulf War. They welcomed him home with a parade for participating in mass murder, but they put him in prison for aggravated assault.

My brother found God in prison. My first response was that prison is exactly where I would expect to find God, as if the Almighty had finally been apprehended. But Kyle became the kind of Christian it's hard not to respect. I wondered if finding God isn't like finding my brother now that I know where to look. He's also a lot more likely to write back now that he has little else to do.

It makes me wonder if I don't move too often to find God, or even to know myself. I've gone through places and lovers and jobs like some people go through running shoes. I was temping, taking showers in the YMCA, living in squats and cardboard boxes for longer than I'd like to admit before I found work that really felt like it was mine.

Can you believe I was hired as a preschool teacher? It wasn't bad at all, because, if you're willing to work for as little as they're willing to pay, you can tell other people's children pretty much anything you want! In my class, we read If I Ran the Circus as the Marxist text that Dr. Suess intended it to be. In my class, the kids overthrew me as a dialectical exercise, and we governed ourselves as an egalitarian collective. And in my class, Curious George began to ask a few questions... like, “who is this ‘friend,’ the Man with the Yellow Hat?” Friends don't steal friends from

Africa, or get them hooked on ether, or exploit them for 'nature films.' Suddenly, he's not just curious, he's mad as Hell! And he refuses to be known by the slave name of George. From now on, he will be called Mohammed Assaka Shakur. Fuck the Man with the Yellow Hat!!!

By the end of the school year, the parents of my preschool class were recommending a broad array of alternative career paths for me.

One parent helped me find work canvassing for the Minimum Wage Increase Initiative in Oregon. I believed in that cause, although, as a canvasser at your door, a good cause is not enough. I tried to be an honest confidence man, a door to door hope merchant. I have about a minute to convince you that with your help, and your \$36 contribution, we can actually win this time.

[Improv: Canvas an audience member. Really try to get money. If they pretend to give money, "Maybe mimed money will be accepted after the revolution, but we need pork chops now, my brother." "If we cannot manage a simple canvassing transaction, how can we hope to be able to manage an economy?" Acknowledge that giving money is not enough, nor will winning the Minimum Wage Increase be enough. "What we really need is for you and your neighbors and coworkers to organize and win this concrete improvement, feel a sense of power, and change the relations of power as a step toward truly free and sustainable direct economic democracy with enough for all. Can we hold the meeting at your house?"]

I was like a Jehovah's Witness for the Left. And it worked! We did win the Minimum Wage Increase in Oregon and we built toward something larger in the process. As canvassers, we gained so much confidence from that victory that we decided to fight for improvements in our own working lives. I formed a canvassers union, and we won a pretty ok raise. But before the campaign even had time to conclude, my fellow workers got tired of me hitting them up for dues and they decided the union would be a lot more united if I was ejected from it.

That was a blow.

I was disillusioned, which could only happen because I was illusioned to begin with, because I let myself feel hope. Sometimes I feel like trying

to build solidarity is just a participatory way to get my heart broken again and again, like being dated and dumped, leaving or getting left by everyone I've ever met and a mess of people I will never know. Somehow it feels connected to how I need a date when I can barely even make it through the day. It's like the old joke: "What do the desperate bring on a first date? Furniture. And what do the desperate bring to your door on a second date? Do we get a second date?"

I called Evelyn. She was working as a counselor with runaway and homeless teenagers. She helped me get a job where she works — the job I hold down to this day.

Evelyn had personally taken in and adopted a teenage daughter named Nina.

She took me in also.

It was a long and uncomfortable time before Evelyn could begin to trust me again, but it was all different this time. For one thing, Evelyn's inheritance was all out of her hands, off in the movement, bumbling around, trying to do good things. That meant that she and I actually needed each other, and Nina needed a lot more than that. I've never been particularly good at caring for myself, but caring for someone else got me into the habit of taking care. It anchored me and grounded me in a way that made my life stop feeling like an accident.

I hesitate to tell you about Evelyn and Nina, seeing as how everything I touch turns to caricature. I almost don't want to tell you we are becoming a family because I don't want to jinx it. I know what it is to live in shelters. It feels really different to have a home.

The closest thing before this was that commune I used to live on. Sometimes Evelyn and Nina and I feel like a commune. Sometimes I even think the American Family is the most Communist Institution left in this country.

I wrote my scariest poem about the confusion of family planning and playing house and becoming something more than myself. It's called "Fixed."

With a baby girl dry nursing on my bicep,  
I remember recalling Horton on the egg.  
You've heard of Horton,  
the elephant with the queer faith to adopt outside his species.  
I was, of course, intentionally not the girl's father,  
just somebody who happened by.  
Who wants to be so much as the myth of the man  
from who's migraine springs Athena,  
full grown and ready to make up for all the missed battles of adolescence?  
One wonders what possessed the male gods  
to ever muscle in on the matter of motherhood.  
I sure bear all due respect,  
alongside the usual envy of the ovulating Goddess,  
reborn herself in Humpty rituals of the overpopulated present,  
and/or in communities of separatists,  
among womyn with a "y" and wimmin with an "i,"  
and women who flock with the chickens,  
fly the coop, and range free.

But I am blushing now to remember  
how that real baby girl's grin swelled in my cheeks,  
how I dreamt free childcare into godfatherhood  
and foresaw myself husbound and house-holding someday  
extending into a family of friends,

but somehow settling for no less than a bachelor's expanse of time  
to give myself to a whole life of worthwhile labor,  
happy as Pan on a Pogo Stick,  
nestled in the shade of the hundred acre wood,  
respectably employed,  
a man among his people, with a place on this Earth.

Many of these may be good myths for the young to adopt,  
but what use in telling them when my adult life already fell apart?  
I no longer live near that baby girl, her parents, my friends,  
not even the Man with the Yellow Hat.

There is no one I know that well  
because my address keeps changing  
and I am forever moving away.

When people ask where I'm from, I have to explain  
I'm from a military family and so am not really from anywhere.  
In each new place, a different person,  
imagining it better to be promising, than a disappointment.  
Friends I may once have had are no more now  
than the spare and drafty words I am still able to recall,  
like Christie Caffee's, who at thirteen theorized  
that the black things in Doritos could be Jimmy Hoffa.  
Christie was half Cheyenne and knew more of her relations  
than I could even believe.

It was from her that I first grasped the obvious, grown-up fact  
that all of this is Indian Land.

Christie said North Americans could never bear so much as a cursory brush  
with the scratch and sniff history book  
of our unspeakable violence, and still wish to remain ourselves.

She told me the story of Black Kettle,  
who gave his life for the people again and again  
because, he said, "I have not got two hearts."

I am told my own people are Swedish American, like Joe Hill,  
who often said of his beloved labor union, "We never forget."

I am not equal to these words.

My own father took his first job off the farm  
as a scab in his own home town.

Who on earth could find honest pride knowing that?

At best, I've been able to paraphrase a Kurt Vonnegut quote,  
to act as if I am good, so that even God will be fooled.

Maybe the trick for broken people  
is to act like we're together,  
because I can do *that*.

I can be whatever seems called for  
and give as many hours as there are left,  
canvassing unfamiliar neighborhoods,  
walking other people's picket lines,

preschool teaching for next to nothing,

foster parenting...

I'm more than willing to exhaust and invent myself.

I will occupy as many parks

and sit in as many trees as it takes,

but that's bound to be hard on grounded relationships

especially the kind for which my work is supposed to provide.

What right do I have to be a father?

I can't even name everyone I have neglected and abandoned.

Do I have to remember running away

and imposing again on an estranged friend's couch?

Passing sleepless nights like so many kidney stones...

Slipping outside where at least it was raining...

Trying to walk around the block in a subdivision of cul de sacs...

Passing floodlit garages with attached houses...

And one lawn guarded by an unsatisfied sprinkler...

Pacing back and forth over the muddy turf...

There was something I read once in Time Magazine

that permanent vacation is a good working definition of Hell.

I realize now there was a wise terror in the urgency Horton heard:

*"Don't move!*

*Freeze, if that's what it takes,*

*but abandon no one!"*

The good news is that every screw up I make  
comes round again to haunt me.  
Whenever I find myself gone,  
there is nothing to do but come back.  
And now that I have yoked and promised myself  
to a daughter of immediate teenage fury  
who is no myth and no joke,  
I can go nowhere but home  
and be no one else without betraying all.  
And the shock of my many myths shattering  
is not at all like a crushed egg  
but like the nagging pecks  
and genuine promise of a hatchling.  
So maybe myths can become as real as rabbits,  
not distant nor abstract at all  
but of the everyday garden variety  
like the dregs of the dump recycled,  
or my wallet, empty as the tomb on Easter.  
And if I have even a little sense, I'll know  
I am lucky enough to be where I am,  
alive in the wake of falling walls and no kings  
when Yurtle the Turtle finally falls,  
yet somehow survives,  
with only his home to bear on his back.  
And when in the course of made-up events,

and do-it-yourself repair kit projects that got totally out of control,  
if I finally find it within me  
to stick with the long and unglamorous  
grown up and legs asleep work of staying put,  
I find myself strangely convinced  
that I can recover a common integrity.

On bad days, having a family feels like being a combatant in a civil war, long after the cause is lost. On good days, the losing feels more like surrender and letting go but somehow still holding on to what is already gone.

Nina and I passed a milestone recently. She no longer insists that I drop her off six blocks away from her school. It's not quite acceptance yet. I still feel like a closet stepfather, but it's a start.

It gives me an almost brave enough to attend my high school reunion kind of feeling, which is good because the reunion was last week.

I called Virgil to see if he was going. He said "I can't go to the reunion. I haven't evolved at all! I still say 'dude.' And you should see me with my kids," he said. "I *am* my parents."

Virgil still works in that same auto plant. So does his dad. They did eventually succeed in organizing a union there, despite management threats to move the plant to Mexico, Korea, or Indonesia. Virgil said you can keep your job in the global economy, as long as your willing to follow your boss around the world like the Grateful Dead.

I wrote the third poem that I carry everywhere for Virgil and the guys in the auto plant. It's called "Piecework."

With the manufactured luxury  
of a camera that was my grandfather's,

I used to make photographs on my day off  
to encourage reconsidering  
what everybody generally sees but neglects,  
like the word "luxury,"  
which ought to have come from the Latin word for "light,"  
something no one can do without.

I sold that camera at a pawnshop.  
Now I just take discarded pictures,  
from the dumpster out by the Fotomat, for instance,  
placing other people's pictures  
alongside cut up bits from tossed out copies  
of Time, People, Money, and the like  
to paste together meaning  
the way some folks redeem roadside bottles and cans,  
organize unions, or remain in families.

My dad recently organized a recycling center for his whole town,  
subtle proof that sometimes even Republicans can become real conservatives.  
People are full of surprises.

A pastor at my church was outed as a gay man,  
and my mom lead the campaign to allow him to keep being our pastor.  
She stood up in front of a church full of people who don't like her very much  
and said "I get tired of throwing people away."  
My mom was the last person I expected

to teach me the single most important thing  
about recycling, redemption, and being somebody's son,  
and it's the next best thing to nothing at all.

Lately, I'm getting the impression  
that whether anything beautiful happens or not  
depends less on a flash of creation  
than on ordinary recognition,  
on respect, on literally being seen.  
It makes me think meaning,  
without which we are nothing,  
is everywhere an afterthought,  
like the way I enjoy that a church is named "The Assembly of God,"  
like a jigsaw puzzle, a quilt, or the auto plant in which I work,  
or how I misheard my Marxist coworker say "Poetry is theft"  
and something else about property crime, graffiti, and vandalism,  
that I could not hear over the dull factory din,  
while I shaving razor sharp ribbons of metal off bell housings  
at my turret lathe.

It may be that my family needs  
to supplement our diets  
with bread that survives the best buy date,  
but we manage to gather our dysfunctional selves  
around a common table.

I may have to work in a factory,  
but it is peopled full of semi-nonconformists,  
somewhat united in the mundane struggles  
that win us, not just the crumbs of our wages,  
but scraps of time, itself,  
to know and be known,  
be become familiar with what may yet finally be made worthwhile.  
And because we make carpal tunnel clumsy attempts to look out for each other,  
I don't have to be entirely alone against the senseless ugliness.  
I can be heard once in a while.  
I can even afford the dream of artwork  
that is no stranger to everyday people,  
in the spirit of sharing lunch,  
or listening to a neighbor on the bus home.

I told Virgil about how, in all the shuffled applications between social and anti-social work, Evelyn helped me find my way into counseling and job coaching runaway teenagers. It's a strange business. Imagine marketing it.

Actually, that's exactly what's happened. This work used to be done by public employees paid two and a half what we earn. Then the work was contracted out to the company that hired me. I suppose the next logical step would be to replace us in turn with people working for free — and I've actually heard a manager suggest exactly that. He said, "You know, there are volunteers who would be willing to do this work..."

He was by no means the first in the public sector to suggest that work doesn't need compensation. Southern Confederates made an especially

eloquent case.

Social workers may not be an inherently militant people — what, are we going to seize and collectivize the photocopier? Well, maybe we will, but for now, all we are doing is organizing a union. It kills me that this is considered a radical act. I'm reminded that at the turn of the last century, American socialists had to found a movement and a party and fill jail cells and elect mayors in order to finally succeed in their long campaign to build public sewers. They were called "Sewer Socialists." At the time it was considered radical to systematically keep poop out of drinking water.

We're supposed to be impressed that our boss says he's pro-labor — I know I prefer to have my rights violated by a progressive employer. He's pro-labor, he just doesn't think a union is appropriate here. That's one of his favorite words, "appropriate." It's not appropriate to demand a living wage, you see. It's tacky.

I hear the boss refers to this organizing drive as my personal pet project when he speaks to my coworkers in his captive audience meetings with my coworkers. I've started to look on stand-up comedy as my family's most secure back-up plan, in case I can't keep my day job.

On the way out to my high school reunion, I got booked into a week long gig in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, and let me just say that eco-queer comics should perform in Northern Idaho as often as possible.

I especially enjoyed seeing the Confederate flags on the way into town because I sort of grew up in the south, so it was almost like a homecoming for me. I did feel compelled, however, to point out that Idaho was not a state in the 1860's, and it's nowhere close to the Mason-Dixon line. I said, "Maybe you all think with a drawl, but hasn't anybody noticed that, even in the most convincing Civil War reenactments, The Confederacy gets its collective ass kicked every single time. If we're going to fight for a lost cause, can't it at least be for a cause we would like to have won?"

I'm as fundamentally alienated as anybody and God knows I feel like seceding from the union and declaring the People's Republic of My House, but even I want to have a conversation first about what kind of republic

we want.

Somebody in the back of the audience yelled “No immigrants!”

I asked “What are you? Lakota?” And I allowed as I am against the immigration of factories and capital. So we found some common ground.

Another fella shouted out that the problem with this country is Welfare. “Yes,” I said, “Welfare fosters a sense of dependency, unlike inheritance which creates the leaders of tomorrow.”

As a counselor, I work with some of the kids whose parents participate in these sub-minimum wage Welfare-to-Work programs. The politicians say people need incentives to work. Could we try an incentive of income?

Somebody called me a socialist.

“Does that mean income is a socialist concept? If so, then Hell Yeah! I’m a socialist!

“In fact, I’m such a radical, I support socialized roads. I even support socialized Fire Departments. I mean, really, do you want to leave firefighting to the free market? Your house is on fire. Do you want to call for an estimate? Some competitive bids? Inquiries into your credit history? You are in the process of losing everything. You think they are going to take a check?”

In the non sequitur of the night, somebody then tried to heckle me by yelling out “Clinton sucks!”

I said “Yes?”

He seemed to think I would leap to the President’s defense. This is the President who brought us NAFTA, who stood in the way of Single Payer Healthcare, who incinerated dissent in Waco, Texas and then conducted an investigation by bulldozing for fingerprints.

There is a President who threatened NUCLEAR WAR with Iraq because they *might* have weapons of mass destruction. Just before launching a missile attack on Iraq, Bill Clinton actually said that we must bomb Saddam Hussein because, quote: “He cheated, he lied, and he dodged.” Bill Clinton is a bold man. He may be one of the boldest presidents ever to hold the office.

I said “If he’s so bold, I want a State of the Obvious address,

somewhere between the inauguration and half-price pardons at the going out of power sale. I want to hear him acknowledge that it's true: he has had sexual relations — with a multitude of multinational corporations. In fact, our elected government is really just the nonprofit public relations arm of the corporations that actually rule our lives.”

So I said to the people of Idaho, “If you want to overthrow the government, I am right there with you, as long as we finally get to govern ourselves.”

Well, I had all week to talk it over with the Coeur D'aleniens until they agreed that a decent world is possible and we need to make it happen. I've had my whole life to convince myself, but tonight, y'all and I have only tonight.

Nevertheless, I'm confident that you will conclude that the time has come to rip up the streets, throw up the barricades, and redecorate. I'm imagining the nation as text, an anarcho-syndicalist workers' paradise with solar panels and composting toilets, where every aerobic exercycle turns an electric turbine. Are you with me?! Clap in time with your pulse! [respond to applause] Seek medical help!

We need a movement so inclusive that even the barricades we build will be wheelchair accessible. I want a world where the amount of money you earn is directly proportional to the number of ways you know how to prepare Top Ramen! Are you with me?! Where people will eat animals *because* they love them! Where they will refrain from bestiality only because the issues of consent are unclear ... and where even the most vanilla heterosexual feels comfortable coming out in a warm and accepting space for all that is sacred.

You are my people!!! And this is the kind of moment that made me feel proud to walk into my high school reunion.

Virgil came after all. When I arrived, he was conducting a survey of each of our former classmates to determine when they first realized that

the system is fucked and everything we've ever been taught is a lie — and just about every one of them could tell him pretty much when they had come to that conclusion.

Brian came too. He helped me with one of Nina's math problems I've been carrying around. [Show the homework diagram — the diagram that was featured on the first blackboard problem from Good Will Hunting, if anyone looks close.] I used to be considered good at math. Nina is thirteen. Thirteen year olds are doing math that is too hard for me.

Nina is an amazing kid. When she was ten, one of Evelyn's exes taught her how to walk on stilts. Then Nina taught all the kids in her class how to walk on stilts. They made their own stilts. Then Nina persuaded fifteen of them to march with her, on stilts, in the PFLAG section of the Gay Pride Parade. Damn! When I was her age, I couldn't organize my way across a medium wide street. I like to think that Nina will surpass everything I'll ever accomplish. In her Middle School, Nina is organizing her own section of a group called "Art and Revolution." She's establishing her identity and her independence by positioning herself *to my left*. That is an achievement.

Something felt really right about telling Nina stories at my ten year reunion. Other people talked about, like, their therapists. Everybody had a therapist. Two of my classmates even had pet therapists. I asked one of them what kind of issues her dog was working through. She reminded me that our ancestors have been calling their ancestors "Bad!" for thousands of years.

Another classmate, who was too cool to talk to me in high school, now conducts random drug tests for a living. A guy from my gym class works for the FBI. In a four minute conversation, he said "I can't talk about that" six times!.

Some people wore suits. Some people brought babies.

I found out my friend Scott, our valedictorian, had dropped out of Harvard Law School to join the Zapatistas in Chiapas. That's a good thing when you find out one of your friends is helping the indigenous farmers of Mexico to defend themselves from the death sentence of NAFTA. I'm

happy when my friends do anything progressive.

As our valedictorian, he was supposed to give a speech at the reunion.

He sent a communique:

“I have been going in the wrong direction all my life. Coming to Chiapas has also been the wrong thing to do. It’s like I was thinking globally that I could act a lot more locally somewhere else.

Anyway, I’m here now. There’s no point leaving this place too, especially since I’m only now learning to be a little useful and less a burden on everyone. Please, though, do not come here. Stay home. The work is exactly where you are. It may have little to do with erecting barricades, and it definitely has nothing at all to do with seizing power. Our work is entirely humbling, but they have a saying down here: ‘Vale la pena,’ which means ‘It’s worth doing, it’s worth the humiliation, it’s worth the pain.’”

I’m not saying that all my classmates could relate to the communique with much more than an unsettled silence. They were confused. But for us North Americans, maybe confusion is a good step. Without confusion, how can there be struggle? Without struggle, how can anything get better? I even think the word “confusion” could become another word for “coming together,” and if we’re willing to confuse what is with what ought to be, then maybe a kind of powerful integrity is possible, and who am I to be satisfied with less.

Thank you for your time.