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Discomfort

I'm looking for a mighty forum, a Parthenon, where I can express my story. And I'm looking for the story. I'm looking for the story of my life. I'm looking to tell you how I feel, who I am, what I am, in some kind of spiritually useful way. But I have to confess to you that I'm feeling cramped.

This modern life is crowding me. Fences everywhere. Fences in my head. Fences to keep me out, to protect me, to protect the people on the other side of the fence FROM me. Warnings everywhere, on buildings, on bottles, on books, even on toys. I'm seeing a lot of red lights, stop signs, no parking, prohibitions, police tape, barricades. And faces that say no way, don't do it, don't say it, don't act it, hold back, lighten up, stay away, text me and for the love of whatever's holy in heaven, don't touch me.

I'm feeling the overproduction. Too much stuff. The distance between what's brand new and wonderful, and what's completely useless garbage has narrowed to the width of a salesman's smile. I feel like I have a million CD's and no music.

Among other things, overproduction has destroyed my deep love for money. Remember when money was fun, spending it was fun, getting it was fun, counting it was fun? Remember that old good money that made you feel happy? Remember that fat fistful of silver coins you occasionally had that rang with the upbeat melody of prosperity? Remember that good old money? Well, overproduction has ruined that good old money.

All we have now is money that buys now crap and stuff to replace other crap and stuff that's crossed over from being treasure to being trash. All we have now is money that creates obstructions to happiness. I don't know. Money has disappointed me. It isn't helping against the onslaught.

And there is an onslaught, very like a flood, which requires resistance. Gotta push back, on the one side, against the crush of stuff, and on the other side, against the walls of prevention energy, but that effort creates discord, damage, strife, the arrival of police, the distracting carnival of force. It is not an easy time to find a big tent or an elephant to put in it. It's like Genesis has been ongoing and God just kept making stuff, but the bible guys got tired of writing down what it was, and now somebody's gotta tell the Big Guy "Stop. That's enough. You have created enough." Stop with the Styrofoam cups and nail salons at least!

Or is that us creating all this stuff? Is there a distinction between God and us?

Same thing with the commandments. There's actually millions of commandments but Moses just quit writing them down and left after ten. God is still up on Sinai dictating commandments

but everybody lost interest. That's why we all feel guilty. Everything we do is a wrong. We just don't know it because there's all these invisible unrecorded commandments we're breaking. We're actually not supposed to do ANYTHING.

Or is that just us, feeling guilty that we're alive, adding to the problem by being alive?

I am not a pessimist and this is not a rant.

I'm looking for a mighty world where I can finally have the size love story my heart demands. And I am looking for the one to love in that story. I am looking for a love that defeats time and the rot of death, a love that allows for rampant rainforests of poetry, pink lights and impossible gestures, that unfolds over decades if not centuries, that inspires artists and accountants and pastry chefs, that leads the way to a finer culture, a more perfect society. I need banker kings to put themselves at risk and pay for it all, pay for the romantic effort, pay till their treasuries implode.

And if I want something that doesn't exist, I want to declare that I am right and the world as it is is wrong, the world as it is needs to change. That's what art is all about. And not just art. That is what love and philosophy and spiritual experience are all about. Having visions and sharing them with such a conviction that they become real. The Taj Mahal started as grief in a king's breast, became a dream in an architect's head, and now is real. You can go there. A dream has become a destination.

But let me digress to my subject. Discomfort. That's my subject, and don't I know it. Life is hard. When the sun comes up, it burns and blinds. When the night comes on, it freezes and frightens. In between, we struggle for recognition, for love, for a nourishing lunch. All of it, the whole is experience, is rife with discomfort, disquiet and dismay. Why? Am I in error to ask why life is so hard?

The reward on your way out is Death. Death waits at the double doors at the end of the mezzanine. Look at you. You're like a bunch of bowling pins waiting to go down. I ask you, why did our parents even bother to give us names?

Time is running out. I need to claim my territory right now, but who am I to speak before I have a story? But I must speak or else how do I clear a space for the story that must be told? And where is the story? I wonder how many of you are already having assassination fantasies that include me being dead? To stand and speak, to clear a space for a story that does not yet exist is only hubris awaiting the arrival of some Clytemnestra.

Moses and his people felt discomfort in Egypt. They were slaves, cooped up in a tiny tale of woe. So Moses pushed backed against that narrative and created a space for the story of his people. He parted the Red Sea. He pushed back against his environment. The story of the Jews turned from tiny pages in a tiny book into a mighty page in a mighty book, and they went into the desert. Was that a good idea? They were in the desert for 40 years. Long time. Was this an improvement of their situation? Who cares. It was an improvement of their story.

The physical reality is I'm standing here. It's not easy to stand. Shifting your weight, becoming unduly aware of your crumbling knees, your flattening feet, your unfortunate biological design. It makes me think back to when we were monkeys, back when we were monkeys on all fours. Why did we do it? Why did we stand up? I'll tell you why. Because we had become uncomfortable being on all fours. And there's the crux of the matter. We are never satisfied.

Ultimately, no matter how you orient the body, the flesh, the flesh rebels. The flesh, the flesh says no more! It's a scourge to be alive, to exist. And yet it is also terrifying that we are all going to die. Beckett described the span between being born and dying as very brief, that we're born into an open grave. And I think that's true unless a story intervenes.

Aren't you glad you came today? Is that all clear? Don't worry, we'll get there.

What's to be done with this dilemma, this pickle of life? This too brief moment in the sun? Some say the secret is: Live for the Now. They say It's all about Now, the eternal Now. Now is everything. Take one day at a time and live it as a series of nows and live it well. I bet many people in this room would agree with that. What do you know?

That's not what we do. It's not happening. Look at us. Look at this moment we're in. THIS is our best shot at now? This is the day we're in? What have we chosen? What are we doing here? Sitting, standing. What are these terrible clothes we're wearing? What did you eat this morning? Why aren't we making love in some tropical paradise? Why aren't we speaking our true hearts to those we love most deeply? Why are we in a fucking auditorium containment dome while the stars and the planets are cartwheeling in the ultimate Van Gogh atomic fireball sky pageant of celestial beauty? Why did we put up this roof to block the show? Why are we not witnessing the magnificent leviathans in the shocking cold depths of the deep deep sea? Why are we not surrounded by shamans, immersed in revelation? Or playing with children? And puppies?

The truth is we don't exist at the core of life very often. In a way, we're rarely where we are supposed to be. When I'm on an elevator, sitting in a waiting room, when I'm stuck in a car and it's too hot or too cold I don't think: THIS IS WHERE I'M SUPPOSED TO BE. I think: Get me out of here! Discomfort! The Now is uncomfortable. When I'm in the Now I'm usually dreaming of Then. And if the Now isn't uncomfortable, wait a minute.

But let's not harshly judge ourselves. I think there's more to our behavior than meets the eye. Spiritual seekers in days gone by used to starve themselves and whip themselves and go out into the desert without sunblock to humiliate the flesh. I don't believe they did this to simply teach their bodies a lesson. I think it was about their souls. I think they did it to force their souls to the point of desperation and action. I think they tortured their flesh so the soul would plot its great escape from this mortal predicament, this corporal Alcatraz.

It's the body that will die. The ancients knew the body is a physical prison, and that our human knowledge of mortality is an intellectual prison. They knew that outside the body--that's the only hope for some kind of Paradise. That's probably where the word Paradise comes from. Paradise actually means "outside the body." No it doesn't, but you believed me for a minute,

didn't you? You untutored wretches. Paradise means a garden with a wall around it. And I've never been there.

Humiliation of the flesh was a way of forcing this other thing, this other entity they called the soul, in desperation, to find seek or create a world of the spirit. My body is hell. Through the force of my imagination and longing and need, I will create an exit and an alternative. I'll leave this uninteresting predicament and somehow transport myself into another better realm. This is why people daydream at the Motor Vehicle Bureau.

And I think that's maybe why we live in places like New York or Michigan...or New York; it's a way of humiliating our flesh. I can't tell you how many times I've been struggling my way down the street in February in New York City with the wind tearing at my face and I've thought: If I wasn't used to this, if I'd been born in Hawaii for instance, instead of The Bronx, **HOW LONG WOULD I PUT UP WITH THIS HORRIBLE WEATHER?!** And the answer is about ten minutes. No one in their right mind wants to freeze, but we do. We put up with the sleet and the cold and the rain as if it wasn't possible to get in a cab and go to the airport and fly away to some Polynesian paradise. "What about my job?" You'll get another job. "What about my wife?" Send for her. "What about my mother?" She had her chance! Save yourself. Go.

But very few people ever do. Very few people ever choose to live only in the NOW and head for Hawaii. They plug along. They make do. They endure. And they have their reasons for not making their lives a lot better. "I'm doing this for the kids." Really? Don't you think your kids would like to live at the beach? "My mom needs me. My job needs me. I need my job." Well, what if you died? Would your mom need you if you died? She'd cry. Can't she just make believe you're dead and have a good cry while you learn to scuba dive on the Great Barrier Reef? Your job needs you? Even you don't believe that.

I would suggest to you we operate from wisdoms beyond our ability to express. The reasons we so often give for keeping our lives as they are, those reasons are usually not the real reasons. Carl Jung suggested we have a collective knowledge, a species wide memory, which informs us as individuals. I think in our collective wisdom, we know what happened in for instance Hawaii. And that's why we don't go there.

Hawaii just a few hundred years ago was paradise. There was an abundance of magnificent fruit, the sea was teeming with fish, turtles, dolphins, tortillas, no one had to work, wild fragrant flowers everywhere, fantastic weather, heartstopping landscapes, abundant fresh water, rainbows, birds of every stripe, seascapes in every direction, the people were physically beautiful, no other countries nearby to deal with. So what did the Hawaiians do? They went to war. They were in a constant state of conflict. They made war canoes and put on battle makeup and stole each others' women and killed each other a lot, and then they partied and did it again. In between, they sang songs about killing each other. Aloha indeed.

That's why I live in New York City. So I don't become a homicidal maniac from living someplace really nice. My dreams of Hawaii are more wonderful than any earthly principality could be. I physically abide in one world and dream my soul into another. My culture keeps me occupied so I don't get bored and start carving war canoes. My physical world is harsh and

difficult and I live in an economic system which forces me to work far more than I care to and my children think I'm an idiot for living this way and I humor them for thinking so because my reasons are subtle and children are stupid.

I make many concessions to the physical world because I want no part of it. The physical world is like Rome and I just pay tribute to have peace. I want to be forced into dreaming and spirituality by the misery of my actual life. In the words of Richard Lovelace: "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage." He wrote that poem in prison. He would not have written that poem in Hawaii. A man, no matter where he is, can prevail over his circumstances. But it's easier if it's harder. Yes, Gauguin painted well in Tahiti, but he was French, and they can be miserable anywhere.

I had a dream this past October. I had just gone through a bumpy stretch of several months. Economic setbacks, my kids being tossed around roughly by the realities of young adulthood, troublesome contentious neighbors, nothing in my head to write--life had lost its sweetness. I felt directionless, uninspired, lonely, and put upon. My brain, my consciousness felt like a small gray wet dog. My spiritual experiences, of which I'd had many, seemed distant and questionable. Somebody told me I was going through Saturn's second return, and all I can say about that is, dodge that planet if you can. I had come to that place in the woods, the bad part. I was lost. My death seemed near.

And then there came a night.

I went to bed one night and I was dreaming and suddenly, in the middle of my dream, my father erupted out of the ground like a mighty mahogany tree. He was younger than I had known him in life. His hair was a rich lush brown and he was beaming and he was dressed in dark brown corduroy and he embraced me and told me with that rich brogue of his that he loved me. His embrace was strong and immediate. I embraced him in return and told him repeatedly that I loved him, which was and always will be true. I started to look into his blue blue eyes but he cautioned me not to do it. He told me if I lingered looking into his eyes he would disappear and I would see only the woman I would love tomorrow. I looked away. I felt like Orpheus. He told me that life is weirder than I thought. I was relieved to hear it.

When I woke up, I was excited by this encounter. My ordinary dream had been interrupted by the extraordinary arrival of my father. And he was alive! He was love. He was mythological. He was everything my conscious life had lost. Where did he come from? If waking life is what it is, and dreams are a scroll of what's happening underneath that, then where the blazes did my father come from? What was this sudden rough emergence of my dad? And what about his message? Life is weirder than you think.

As we go along living, we start from a place of wonder and go to a place where wondrous things become ordinary. The first time you fall in love, it's champagne. The seventh time you fall in love, it's Prosecco. Even our dreams become experiences we have had before. Our teeth are falling out. We're late, we're lost, we're embarrassed, we're naked, we're old, we're young, we're in the house where we grew up, we're in the bathroom, we're in the backyard. Your dreams become as monotonous as your waking life. The whole thing, waking, sleeping, it

becomes so ordinary! And then the ordinary becomes pointless, slips down that fatal notch into pointlessness.

At this juncture, my father had to come back from the dead to embrace me and remind me that life is weird. It's weird that we're here. Sitting, standing, suffering, sleepy, talking, listening, it's all very very strange. We have made many accommodations. To freshly encounter this experience of life as it actually is, well, once in a while, you just have to step away. Maybe this speech is a kind of stepping away from everyday life. And of course if you step away from the path for too long, you just might get lost and not be able to find it again. Or just seem really eccentric.

The dream reminded me what my purpose is. My job is to interrupt the expected flow. My routines of thought, my assumptions accumulating like cholesterol, the forward automatic gathering momentum of job, kids, marriage, religion, law, coffee, sex, day, night, breathing in out, dressed, undressed, the respiration of life, the autonomic nervous system, cruise control, cell phone tyranny, email tyranny, auditoriums, gazebos, standing, sitting, speaking, listening, fake wishing wells, sentences with verbs, underwear, language, heartbeat, body temperature, normalcy, squares in a crossword, the detritus, the debris! How much is real anymore? Where's my life? Where's my God? Where's my love? Where's the explosion of something alive up through the center of this house of junk we have built? Where am I? Where are you? Where am I going? How can I break free? I started out as an egg, dear God, I don't want to die an egg, ungerminated, refrigerated, stacked like a zero in society's calculator of oblivion. Where is the great lactating goddess? Where is my ancient family? How did I get cut off from beauty, the beautiful? How did I get separated from my life?

I am looking for a mighty forum, a Parthenon, where I can tell my story. My comfort be damned! We have created an artificial world and now we're in it. Almost everything about this moment is artificial except for us. This room, the chairs, the roof, these clothes, the microphone, the climate control, the carpeting. All of this artificial stuff and us. We did this. WHY? Because we were uncomfortable. We were cold. It was raining. We were dirty. There were problems. We were dreaming of Hawaii. People were misbehaving. The wind was blowing. People were talking and no one was listening. We needed to get organized. We have made many many decisions as a race that have added up to us being here in a totally artificial environment so that certain things could be accomplished. Like a man could give a talk and you could hear him and see him and be comfortable. Sacrifices were made. It's amazing how completely nature had to be outwitted in order to manage this simple goal. And that's just to make a public address possible. Think about transportation. Think about what we've done in this world, to this world, what we've sacrificed of this world in the name of transportation. The Aztecs didn't sacrifice as much. And they made their sacrifices to satisfy an insatiable, bloodthirsty God. We made our sacrifices because we were uncomfortable. And we always will be uncomfortable. That's what I've come to tell you today, friends and allies. We always will be uncomfortable.

Is that enough of a reason to shield ourselves from the stars, to cease to make love, to shut out our families, to shun the old, the imprisoned, the sad, the weak and the sick? Is that enough of a reason to worship money and information and neglect people? Is being uncomfortable or tired

or logical sufficient reason to die? Because after you have ruled out everything else in the natural world, the only organic matter left to expunge is yourself. You are the last candle burning after you have blown out all the others. Your light, your consciousness is all that stands in the way of a vast quiet and peace.

When we have been sitting a while, we will want to stand. When we've been standing, we will want to sit. And when we have lived long enough, we will want to die. But not yet. This moment is sweet and deserves a story. Perhaps you have one for me. I promise, I will have one for you. Thank you.