

Intellectual Savagery

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Jonathan Hontz

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Hypocrisy is horribly difficult to avoid.

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0.0: Easing You In

0.1: A Point-By-Point Refutation of Everything You Just Said

Look, I don't hate you. I just think you're wrong. We all are. Without even knowing it, we end up being mistaken a good chunk of the time. The misconceptions and errors in judgment that follow humanity are laughable and I enjoy pointing them out. Because I can see the flaws in myself, it makes them easier to point out in others. When I see them in others, it makes the whole human enterprise easier to understand.

It's nitpicking, really, and I'm not sorry for doing it. You'll have fewer nits when I get done picking them off, or at least that's the hope. Nobody wants to be covered with insects. One little creature doesn't hurt you much, but when you're coated with them it's revolting. The cumulative effects can become irritating and distracting. *That* is what many of these little essays are: descriptions of bugs, flaws in the organism. I realize I switched metaphors just now, and you'll need to deal with that. These are places where human intelligence fails and human nature succeeds. Places where the metaphor switches. Each by itself isn't really much of an issue and makes me seem to be a misanthropic everyman, frothing atop his soapbox. Taken together, there should be some patterns apparent. It starts to become clearer why people think and act the way that they do.

At least, this is the way I've come to understand humanity. We are a species of savages, intellectual and otherwise. We've come a long way technologically and not very far evolutionarily. A friend described it as a child being strapped inside a giant, mechanized battle suit, with all the capability for destruction and creation such a thing wields, but none of the adult faculties required to apply those capabilities appropriately. I think that's pretty freakin' funny.

I think it's hilarious when we talk about “progress”, when politicians talk about morality, and when religion is used as a justification for anything other than one's personal beliefs. We are silly little creatures, and you should pick up on some of my own silliness as you read. That is, if you're not too offended to continue.

Make no mistake, this is a difficult process. Reading about all the dumb shit that we do stings a little. This book is a bit abusive in that way. But then, you're not reading *Subtle Observations By A Polite American Gentleman*. (Title for third book = found.) This is *Intellectual Savagery*. I am one of the savages. Intellectual goddamned savagery is what you'll find here. If I were a bestselling (better?) author, then I wouldn't even need an essay like this to warm you up. Someone in the press would have already done a review, and she'd assume that I must have some higher purpose for my premeditated polemic. It's like when an artist with a reputation and a nobody both make the same crappy art, but only one of them gets lauded as amazing. Since I'm a barely-selling author who self-publishes, this rates just above a high school English paper. Nobody knows who I am nor do they have any preconceptions about my motives.

Thus, this explanatory essay. Do I sound bitter? I am a little. But not really. It's not bitterness so much as it's the *truth*. The truth is what I'm trying to offer. In some places I exceed my own expectations for success in this regard. Being human, I have limited access to anything that could be called real Truth. Still, many of the things I offer you here, as uncomfortable, rude, or abrasive as they may be, are the result of my examining the world and trying to come up with the truth. I really don't care about feelings or egos, yours or my own. To a certain extent, the more it stings, the more we need to hear it. Past that point I'm just hurling insults, and I've tried to avoid that unless it's really deserved.

There. I think you're ready now. You've seen the man and his middle finger, and now you know why he's holding it up.

1.0: Some Form of Paradise

1.1: The cruel domination of the written word...

...is that it conditions us to expect information to come in certain forms. First, an introduction, then a body paragraph, and then a conclusion to wrap things up. Things not written this way aren't generally given much attention as legitimate works of literature unless it's clear that the author was *intentionally* trying to be obscure or unique. Naturally obscure and unique things are, well, obscured by the fact that they're different. That, and we only really like it when someone knows the *right* way, but chooses to go another way, don't we?

We love our printed words, but this love affair isn't always beneficial. At least part of the reason I feel like I'm being re-visited by the same ideas when I read is because they have that expected form. The form is sought after by publishers because it is known to sell. Here's a book, and it has a particular look and feel. There are references for every point that just might be controversial. Original research is frowned upon. Thoughts without citations are cause for discrepancy. If everything in a book takes this form, then how the hell am I supposed to find anything different? The Internet is the obvious option, and I've had some success with it. The success probably comes from the less-policed version of ideas that float there.

To illustrate, let's use a work of dazzling ingenuity and bravery, Isaac Asimov's *The Last Question*. (You can find the entirety of the story online.) Compare this short story to most of the shit that's drifting about in popular futuristic sci-fi channels. So very few people create visions of the future that really surprise.

Oh, look, it's the future, and now our cars are flying.

Oh, look, it's the future, and we still haven't figured out that war is criminally dumb.

Oh, look, it's the future, and yet people still punch the clock every day.

They're crudely updated versions of our past experiences. I once played a tabletop-miniatures game set in the 31st century which featured gigantic bipedal battle machines powered by compact fusion reactors. I hear you asking, *What were the aircraft propulsion systems like?* Rotary-winged aircraft. Helicopters. YAWN. You mean to tell me that over one thousand years have passed, we've developed compact fusion reactors that power walking war machines, and the best aircraft you can come up with can be seen lighting up the people who run from the police at night? As a drill instructor once said,

"There is *nothing* that you can tell me to get me to believe that you're that stupid."

How about a computer-turned-A.I. etherware-turned-deity in the style of Asimov? That'll have you staring at the lava lamp all day pondering possibilities if you really think about it. You really can't help but think about it, since Asimov wrote the story so well. Now how many people do you suppose know about *Star Trek*? How many have read *The Last Question*? This is more than just parading around how many obscure, "undiscovered" things I know, despite how cool obscurity very obviously is. (My sarcasm may not be translating here. I may just be coming across hipster.) This is the homogenization of thought and our willingness to forego the possibilities of imaginative creation in favor of digestibility. If we can't even develop fictional visions of the future that go beyond faster ships with bigger guns, I'm very sad for us. And so help me, if I see a helicopter when I'm eleven hundred years old, I will eat my own face.

A major publisher doesn't want a book with an original idea because it cannot sell it. A large record company doesn't want dissonant, through-composed music because it cannot sell it. Most of the things in your library are there because they fit the format, and decidedly not because of the greatness contained between the covers. There's probably an inversely proportional relationship between the attention something gets and its actual value, although I have no idea how I'd prove that point. (The whole notion of "proof" and the requirement that I provide it is a testament to how far this has come, as if simply repeating something provides more merit to the idea of its truth.) This is precisely why those annoying assholes parade around their indie rock and act like they're better than you because they heard the first EP by Trolling for Rooty before you did. The assholes are on the right track, annoying though they may be. I'm not even close to suggesting that there isn't anything on your library shelves or in the record store that's worth your time.

However, true vision and imagination isn't going to be easy to find in a bookstore. It might not even make it into a book because the author is fed up with trying to convince someone that her stuff is important enough to print and sell. The tyranny of the written word is that if we don't see something in writing, then we

distrust or dismiss it. A culture with oral traditions is somewhere below us on our hierarchy. If we can't read it or if it is unpopular, then it must not be worth our attention. A version of this is the way people tend to view foreign-language speakers as ignorant for their lack of fluency in the native tongue. Methods of exchanging ideas or visions that don't fit the format just slide right through the holes in the net.

I know that every book started with an idea like the ideas that I have, in a brain not much different from the one in my skull. If there's one thing I can assert about my ideas, it's that they are often worthless and my brain often makes mistakes. It's easy to imagine that similar ideas from similar brains have, more than once, made it into print and become successful, highly-regarded works that nonetheless contain only so much chaff.

1.2: The Human-Centered Vocal Information Repository

Awhile ago, while shelving library books, I toyed with the idea that there was a type of library that wouldn't require so much effort to keep in order. Most people don't recognize or care to learn the categorization systems of libraries because they just want to find their books. Children don't really seem to care which books they find. The linchpin in the whole setup is the system of organization. Without it, books can't be found in anything like a timely fashion. Among other things, my job as a shelper was to make sure that the materials took their proper places within that system so that the collection could be utilized.

This was a constant battle against various factors, some of which are societal, others institutional, but all of which tend to degrade the organization into chaos. It seems that the natural state of a book collection is a giant pile on the floor and left alone, such a pile would inevitably become manifest. So I played with the idea that perhaps there's a system of collection and organization of information that doesn't tend toward disorder. This would be a system that works itself out more often than not, because its very nature is such that disorder isn't an option. It is ordered just by being itself. How does someone even envision something like this? More importantly, what does it mean to be *ordered*?

Humans don't appear to be well-equipped to deal with ordered systems. Rules must be set up and enforced to keep people from doing what they'd naturally do, which is not in the realm of order. Those of us who do tend to be more orderly have a little German in us, or perhaps a touch of obsession. I can't understand why people don't put their books back where they got them instead of just leaving them where they feel like it, but then I've got the German thing going. People throw trash around and tend to be messy. Naturally, this trait is exaggerated in societies that have accumulative tendencies, because if people have more stuff, there's a good chance that there won't be a place for it all and that it probably won't be in its place. Humans might just be sloppy creatures. Their traditional roles within their ecosystems might be such that sloppiness is a good thing, and when placed in the context of civilization, it just looks messy without purpose. If we pull the camera back a bit further we might see that the current role of humans within the ecosystem is to be sloppy and messy, although that is probably too objective and uncomfortable to prove.

However, what struck me recently is that a system of knowledge-keeping and knowledge-getting that doesn't rely on the *stuff* would probably also be one that tends toward something other than disorder. After all, if you empty a library of its books there's no opportunity for anything to be out of place or miscategorized. This looks peculiarly like an oral system of knowledge, where librarians aren't just database jockeys who operate computers to locate media. They are transformed into wise people of learning to whom you may direct your questions, providing answers when they can, and consulting amongst themselves for answers they cannot provide individually. This may simply be a juvenile ideal of the perfect librarian that I'm presenting, but I like it anyway. Many librarians are already of the wise, discerning variety, but they are increasingly used for skills other than these. On the other hand, a verbal system uses copious quantities of human learning and experience as the vehicle for lifetimes of information, and it doesn't need a card catalog.

The biggest complaint that I could imagine would probably be directed at the fact that librarians would become mouthpieces of information, and mouthpieces have filters. Taking into consideration that most books on the library shelves must go

through a publisher who also has a filter, this doesn't seem like we'd be opening ourselves up to grand-scale censorship and ignorance. In order to sell a book, an author must dance the publisher's dance. Opting out of that system by self-publishing can doom an author to obscurity, or at least won't grant her the wide exposure of a large publisher. So all of that "objective" knowledge lining the shelves of your local branch or bookstore has been run through a filter or two before it has been made available to you. You're essentially reading the works of the popular people, mostly. Unless you're reading *this* book.

A human-centered vocal information repository...the library of the future. Such a place has no need for complex computerized cataloging systems, check-outs, overdue fines, or even shelvers. (Sigh.) Although to be fair, it's really the library of the past. Think old, white-haired people in cozy robes sitting in comfortable chairs by a fireplace, waiting to consult you on whatever information you seek. I may be channeling the Harry Potter aesthetic. Question about shoes? You're directed to a cobbler along with some time-tested advice about what makes good footwear. Need relationship advice? Why yes, the librarians have heard of your problem before and have seen it resolved in many ways. This is so low-tech as to be primitive, but especially in the United States, we've been so brainwashed by the self-made man and the woman who pulls herself up by her bootstraps that we forget that it's okay to ask for help. It's also okay to actually *need* help once you find an answer to your question, and it's okay to seek that help from a person rather than a machine.

Such a system is self-correcting. Many old and wise people would find uses for the lifetime of experiences they've accumulated instead of vaporizing them in a medicated haze at a nursing home. The tendency of such a system is toward greater humility and genuine inquisitiveness in communication, both sorely lacking in modern industrial civilization.

The library would be transformed into a great hall with smaller nooks at its edges, filled with librarians of all stripes, some engaged in political discussions with groups, another engaged very closely with one other person, discussing marginally-legal affairs. The library is neutral, but the librarians are not. It would become a gathering place where ideas and knowledge are respected as human

phenomena that are too complex, too malleable to be confined to a printed or typed page. Think of it: volumes of information, always up to date, always translated into a local vernacular. Oh, and plain old books would be welcome too, cumbersome and disorderly as they are.

Such a thing requires a different society. As we prepare to enter an era of drastically less consumption, accumulation, and collection, this doesn't look like such an impossible thing.

1.3: The Sluff Track

A railroad yard is like a library of freight. Each track is assigned a particular destination, and freight cars going to that destination or at least riding in a train that's pointed that way are sorted into the appropriate track (shelf). This is called *switching*. The yardmaster's job is to oversee all of this activity along with a whole mess of other happenings, all at once. Outbound trains (library patrons) take the cars away and inbounds drop the cars off for sorting onto the "shelves".

Any sizable yard has a sluff track. Most of you probably spell it *slough*, but the computer program that I used as a yardmaster had limited space for describing what was in each track, so five letters got the better of six. Sometimes it's better to be phonetic in railroading anyway. The sluff track is where we sent the cars that didn't have any other home. It could be for any number of reasons: the track you needed was full of cars already; the destination of the car, usually an empty car awaiting a customer, was not yet determined; maintenance was being done on the track you needed; the track for that particular car was in a portion of the yard that was inaccessible for some other reason. So we sluffed cars.

The other day at the library, we needed a sluff track.

I have three Japanese non-fiction books. Where do you think we should put these?

We had just recently switched to a "floating" collection of books. This means that rather than assigning a branch for every book in Denver's public library system, each piece of material stays at whatever location the patron chose to return it. The alternative, used for many years prior to this, was to send them back to their assigned branches every time they were returned, which expends

valuable transportation fuel and employee time. Implementing a floating collection after years of assigning books to particular branches also leads to interesting situations like this one, when unique materials take up residence in branches that have had neither the need nor the inclination to provide shelf space for them.

Non-fiction? As in 'learning how to speak Japanese'?

No, just a (looks at book) self-help book printed in Japanese.

The librarian holds up a child's board book, printed in Spanish.

Yeah, we got one of these yesterday and I asked the boss (senior librarian) what he wants to do with them. I think we should just put them over on their own little shelf near the bilingual kids' books, like their own separate library. I'll see what the big man wants to do.

In the panoply of organized things in this world, libraries must rank in the top five. So when you implicitly suggest that you really have no place to put something, it's a small catastrophe. It feels like a failure of the system to admit that you don't know how to categorize something. A fair amount of librarians spend time deciding how to classify things on a regular basis.

Later, the librarian:

Well, we're going to run with Plan A. I set up an area over by the bilingual stuff, so if there are any more of these, just put them over there for now, and we'll see if we need to change that later.

It's a sluff track!

This was followed by the distinct sound of the silence that comes when you say something that might as well have been in Yiddish. Or backwards. It might be the sound you're making now as you read this jargon-laced essay. Really, a sluff track is just a concrete admission that systems of organization not only require constant inputs to stay organized, but also that the world itself tends to defy organization in general. Put labels on things, and suddenly you find something that needs a new label. Eventually you find that you have so many labels that the organizational structure breaks down and becomes cumbersome rather than helpful, and so you must reorganize. After some time, wisdom dictates that you can only usefully classify *so* many things, and that sometimes, you just

need to sluff it. Call it the uncategorized category, but this controlled piece of anarchy functions as a relief valve for the world's tendency to defy artificially imposed order.

Somewhere, there's a yardmaster sitting down at his desk, poring over the computer data, trying to figure out how to build tonight's freight train bound for Laurel, Montana.

Yardmaster 1:

Who the hell switched my Laurels into the sluff track? The train needs to be built in two hours!

Yardmaster 2, at the other end of the yard:

Oh, yeah...well the Laurel track was full on my end, and my switch crew needed to go to lunch. I just told them to sluff the cars for Laurel. Sorry. (He probably wouldn't even apologize.)

I wish you wouldn't do that. There's plenty of room left in that Laurel track for those cars, you know, even if it's not on your end of the track. (pregnant pause) We have to reach in the sluff track to get the Cheyennes anyway, so I guess it won't matter much.

And so it goes.

2.0: Diabolus in Scientia

2.1: Close Your Mouth and Open a Window

It's been hot this year in the States. (Which year? Pick one. It's always being talked about during the summer.) I'm sure that anybody with any kind of brief access to "news" at any point in their day is aware of this. Much is being made of it, and considering the heat comes with a spectacular failure of many agricultural crops and food-producing enterprises perhaps much *should* be made of it.

What is actually being made of it, however, is a mockery. A mockery of science, really, since everyone keeps blaming it squarely on global warming or climate change. Look, this is not a denouncement of climate change theory. I believe that human activities are probably altering many things about this planet, climate included. The people who deny that it is happening are usually quite ignorant of the preponderance of evidence supporting anthropogenic climate change.

But just because it is called global *warming*, this is not sufficient reason to blame every warmer-than-normal day, month, and season on the phenomenon. Average global temperature rises, but many places get colder and wetter. Some places will actually experience a positive (from a human perspective) change in living conditions as temperatures become milder and formerly harsh conditions become more moderate.

There is a wrinkle here. Geologically speaking, most climate and weather data comes from very recent information collected only in the past two hundred years or so, with the bulk of the deeper historical data (the more extensive the history, the more confident the assertions about patterns, averages, "normals", and so forth) inferred from things like ice core samples and geological data. This data is much more speculative because it is less accurate than more recently collected information and subject to revision. Subject to revision like, you know, everything in science. One day a new technique for measuring the air content of ice core bubbles will reveal an unforeseen variable that will throw the whole collection of ice core data into question, rendering conclusions

drawn from this collection entirely suspect. This happens constantly, albeit usually on a smaller scale. It's a good thing it does, too. Because a science that is loathe to revise itself is called something else: dogma.

Can we please stop blaming this (every) summer on climate change? Can we just have a hot year without invoking El Nino, the ozone layer hole, or global warming? I of course realize that these things will continue because people love drama. People once would have blamed a sweltering year on the wrath of a god. Since our god is now science, there is very little difference between the behavior of folks then and this crap that passes for social and scientific commentary now.

What the inclement weather is doing a very good job of exposing is the frailty of the world's food infrastructure and supply system. All it takes is the destruction of a corn crop to send prices cartwheeling in different directions for a multitude of different reasons. After all, when we make an astounding number of food and food-related products from corn, and then we start making fuel and fuel additives from the stuff and the crop fails, we're asking for trouble. I'm aware that criticizing ethanol production almost feels cheap, like kicking a blind man. However, the point stands that there's little resiliency built into our food (and fuel) production to absorb things like bad weather or a string of hot and dry years. We simply take it for granted that we'll be able to produce as much or more food year over year, regardless of the weather. After all, we have science to guide and protect us! Even as we ignore its salient data points.

One more thing. If this isn't just a hot year and this is all the sole responsibility of the forces of climate change (And really, how many things in this world are *ever* the *sole* responsibility of anything?), then the fight to stop or slow its effects is already lost.

2.2: A Question of Need

Some folks have a funny way of defining the word *need*. So when I run across a debate in *The New York Times* which presents points on the necessity of air conditioning¹, I pretty much know what to expect. There were predictably ridiculous points made, although some of the debaters had very reasonable things to say about A/C.

Even the director of the Air Conditioning Company (its actual name), who is obviously pro-A/C and probably shouldn't have been allowed to contribute to such a debate, raises an interesting idea. If we live in a world where machines or constructed environments require air conditioning in order to function, then it certainly appears as though the A/C has become a necessity. At least that's the way mister director argues.

However, defining need in this way is the same as saying that the leather conditioner you just bought to maintain the seats in your new Acura is a necessity. You merely want it because of that other want, which was also unnecessary. It's true that modern technologies like computers would be worthless in hot climates without some sort of cooling. I don't agree that such technologies are necessities. I also don't believe it's wise to design devices to be dependent upon fragile, wasteful technologies like air conditioning.

I prefer a primitive definition of *need* that means something more like "something required for survival" rather than just "a thing required or desired", as my version of *Webster's Standard Dictionary* defines it. One of the other definitions of *need* found in my dictionary is "to have want of" which is leading me right into the definition of that other word, *want*: "to feel a wish for; to desire; to lack; to request or require." Sounds a tad synonymous with *need*, doesn't it?

Now I acknowledge that my dictionary is just a step above a pocket dictionary, but I don't care what it says. *Need* and *want* are not synonymous. We *want* computers, air conditioning, and the big office buildings that require both of these things but there is

1 <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/06/21/should-air-conditioning-go-global-or-be-rationed-away/air-conditioning-made-this-debate-possible>

nothing anybody can tell me that would get me to agree that we *need* them. We need food, air, water, simple shelter, clothing for extreme environments, and good health. We need other people to help us do those things we can't do alone. We probably need things like fire and basic weapons to comfort and protect ourselves so that we may live more secure and enjoyable lives.

Somewhere between a fire burning in a hut with a spear in the corner and the air conditioned office building we were led astray. I don't know what point to name as this place of divergence and it probably doesn't matter much, but I can say with some certainty that by the time the Industrial Revolution took place, we had already diverged. We still don't need air conditioning. We need to slow down in the heat and stop pretending like we can keep production lines running in hot weather. People need rest. People are not invincible, no matter how much refrigerated air we pump into their workplaces and homes.

Ignoring this fact will result in people who are acclimated to 72 degrees and little else. Their bodies don't know how to deal with anything outside the climate control and they become dysfunctional and unhealthy in extreme heat and cold. Our ignorance will also lead to spontaneous calamity when the power goes out, panic when solar storms wipe out computer networks, and mass idiocy in between as has already been demonstrated. So of course we can pretend that A/C, cars, computers, office buildings, constant production, and so forth are needed. We can pretend that they are necessities and then it becomes self-fulfilling. Take them away and people begin to suffer. Does it seem ridiculous to anyone else that a power outage or even climate control malfunction becomes a life-threatening disaster? Are we seriously that ill-equipped for life that the removal of these things is potentially lethal?

2.3: Simply the Best

Through talking with a few people about the nature of science, I've discovered that many of them put their faith in it because it is their belief that science is the best we have. In their experience there are simply no other disciplines that have as good a track record when it comes to revealing mysteries and generally getting things done. They believe this with good reason. I tend to

agree that science is the best we have, but there are at least two other categories that bear mentioning if we're going to be handing out achievement awards to various disciplines: the best *we know of* and the best *possible*. While science may be the best we have, acknowledging these other two categories should give a more realistic view of the place held by such a thing in the realm of human endeavors.

The best we know of is an ethereal brainstorm. This is to say that though we may not be able to use a particular thing, it is the best when compared to all other human knowledge. We are now diving deeply into the pool of theoretical entities and things that ought to be possible, even if they aren't yet. If nuclear fission is the best we have in atomic energy, then cold fusion is the best we know of.

The best possible is closer to physical reality. While something may be the best thing known and theoretically sound, it may still be currently impossible. The best possible thing is not only excellent, but also within our grasp. We know it works and we know how to use it. We only need begin devoting ourselves to its use. Distributed electrical generation by way of small wind turbines, solar arrays and the like would be the best possible solution when contrasted with enormous centralized power plants that fling electricity across a broad expanse of antiquated wiring. Devotees of decentralization are slowly appearing.

The best we have is a title earned by science because we can use it fluently. Of the many methodologies and approaches that we have access to, science is the best. Its methods have been fleshed out and tested enough that it can be utilized and relied upon in most situations.

The progression seems to be in just the above order. First we know about something, then we see how it is possible, and finally we have it in our toolbox, ready to hand. Modern technology follows this progression and it is here that I begin to disagree with the people who carry the banner for science. *Scientism* is the slogan scrawled on that banner. To paraphrase, scientism is the belief that scientific methodologies are universally effective and that science is not only the best we have, but also the best possible and the best that we know of.

Now, it will be the case that many of the things we know of will remain impossible forever. I will humbly submit that I believe the following list of things fits into this category:

- a space elevator
- perpetual motion machines
- time travel
- faster-than-light motion
- a world without leaf blowers

We know of all these things, but they are ethereal brainstormers of the human scientific mind. They need not ever be possible or actual. They are simply fantasies.

Where scientism and I begin to diverge is on the idea that we should attempt to make possible all those things that we know of, and further, that we should have all of these things at our disposal. Having knowledge of something is no reason at all to make it a reality. Time travel sounds pretty cool but I cannot see any reason why human effort should be expended to try our hand at making a time machine. Scientism forgets that science is not some essential property of the world. Rather, it is an overlay used by humans in order to understand that world. Science is the chart you draw using pages worth of data so that something can be understood by people. Science is the map of the mountain you're climbing and not the mountain itself. Science is the artist's painting, not her subject.

So while science may indeed be the best we have, there is nothing in it which suggests that it should also be the sole proprietor of things known and things possible. It is one choice among others, holism and intuition being two alternatives immediately coming to mind. The technology often rolled out as a "solution" to a "problem" is quite often nothing more than scientism predicating our devices and activities. Scientism says, "This will further science. It is begotten of science. It is therefore necessary and above questioning."

I say that the world is such that stupid, pointless, and detrimental things can exist. Filling the world with stupid, pointless, and detrimental things simply to prove that we can make them exist doesn't divorce those things from their adjectives. I realize that these adjectives are subjective. They are reflections of my own values and viewpoints based upon my experiences and

knowledge. They are, however, as valid as those of scientism's color-guard. So when scientism cheers the release of the latest electric car (or insert whatever technological device you please), proclaiming it is the best we have, I am still free to offer this:

It may be a damn fine car (or device). It may be a superb example of human engineering and ingenuity that eclipses the internal combustion technology (insert whatever technology is appropriate for the device in question) it is supposed to supplant. However, for all its virtues and accomplishments, you still cannot change the fact that the blasted thing could also be an unnecessary and irresponsible waste. It may be the best we have, but it is most definitely does not need to be the best possible nor the best we know of.

2.4: A Retraction

Originally, there was an essay here regarding an article that appeared in *Time* magazine. Coincidentally, that article appears to have been written by a technocrat, waving that fucking scientism banner.

You can imagine what that does to me.

So the essay that was slotted for this space was ranty. It was angry. It wasn't terribly charitable and probably bordered on slanderous. The next chapter goes in that direction with an essay that I pretended to retract, so you can now exhale if you find that part of my work charming.

Let me instead drive home the thesis of the actually-retracted atrabilious essay, which could also be interpreted as the thesis for the printed essay in the next chapter, the retraction for which I've printed before *that* one, just for fun. This thesis states that humans and nature are not different things. Humanity is a part of nature. No matter how many ways we try to change the wording on that, no matter how many times some jerk tries to tell us that we “control” nature or that we “dominate” the natural world, it remains true that humans are a part of that world. We are inseparable from it. Except maybe when we go to outer space. Not even then, really.

This is not a bad thing, but it *is* a thing. Ignoring this is like ignoring gravity but with a more ponderous and deliberate punishment for the oversight.

Come to think of it, this essay is ranty and angry too.

3.0: Mr. X

3.1: Another Retraction (Almost)

At this point in the adventure, I had a lengthy essay devoted to an online exchange with a person who, charitably speaking, makes shitty arguments. Regardless, he still painted a picture of the world that was, to all appearances, internally consistent.

More explanation is obviously necessary. I was debating the man about the idea that to be civilized is an advancement over being uncivilized. His view is the common one that this is obviously true, and mine is the more rare (and possibly insane) idea that these things are really just subjective values. The two viewpoints aren't really even that important to why the essay you're reading now is titled as it is.

The more I read the essay and reveled in the damning precision (Huzzah!) with which I eviscerated the man's quacky arguments, (insofar as he was actually able to construct them) the more I realized that he would go back to his own camp feeling victorious. Or at least undefeated. The simple reason is that he's built a worldview, subscribes to it completely, and in that worldview I am a jackass.

Oh, it pains me to (almost) eliminate the three thousand words with which I explained how flawed were his ideas, to edit out the very title track of this album. It was here that I showed where the book's title came from in the words of the man who thought and then typed them. Though in all intellectual honesty, I don't (didn't) think I can (could). There's really nothing to show except that he and I live in two very different worlds. As much as I love the essay, the resulting sword fight is slightly embarrassing, if I'm sincere. (But then, the embarrassment is probably precisely why the essay ought to be included. I don't really want this book to be comfortable for me, either.)

This (near-)retraction was born as I started thinking about whether or not I would actually need to obtain permission to quote as much of his stuff as I would need to make my point. There are several hundred of his words in my explication. I really don't want

to give the guy any more attention than he has already and mentioning him by name seems to run counter to my purpose of neutering his arguments. I also recognize that while I've mentioned not giving him attention, these two essays are mostly about *him*. I then came up with the idea to use a pseudonym, eliminating anything that would point to him as an actual person and using the whole thing as an example of how his kind of people construct arguments.

During the course of the discussion, I became increasingly aware that I couldn't honestly find fault with something that was never based in reality to begin with. He argues from the position of a man who imagined a world, lives in that world, and uses the imaginary place as a lens through which he views everything else. *Of course* he's going to say wacky things. They make sense to him, and if his blog is any indication they make sense to a large number of other wacky people.

Too charitable? Perhaps, but I can't see the benefit in going through the proof of an equation when the other man doesn't understand mathematics. I can't work with two fractions until I find a common denominator. Unable to find one, I'm left with mine, he with his, and the two of us can never find a solution.

(In the end, by using an argument not based on reality and subjecting it to familiar rules of logic and rationality, what I did with X is akin to what fiction writers do everyday: I made *entertainment*. Entertainment out of his ideas, entertainment out of my own, and entertainment out of the thought processes that led me back and forth on whether any of it was worth printing. Are you not entertained?)

3.2: On Intellectual Savagery

I attempted to engage a man in an online discussion of the superiority of civilization with respect to uncivilization. I ended up with a proof for one of the claims in my first book, *The False Division*, which states that religion is the only defense of a separation between humans and everything else (in this case between civilization and everything else) that I cannot attack.

Here, in my original drafts of this essay, I describe my interlocutor by name, giving him some background and an identity. After lots of thought about this, I have erased the traces of him and

turned him into a faceless drone. For all you know, he may be imaginary. If you do some digging, you'll find out that he's quite real and that our exchange was public. At least, as public as you can be on a fairly obscure science fiction blog.

The reason for this, what amounts to censorship, is because of my aforementioned reluctance to lavish him with more attention. The man thrives on it. He is a rhetorical genius and provocateur without many equals. Publicity and acknowledgment feed him and provide him the justification he needs to continue arguing in the way that he does. When you finish this essay, you may also conclude that censorship is the only sane option. You may also disagree with my assessment of who the insane party in this discussion actually is.

From a purely mechanical and stylistic perspective, this essay isn't a takedown. I'm not trying to belittle and ridicule the guy. His arguments speak for themselves. I'm trying to illustrate how a particular type of person, in this case an evangelical Christian, responds to the type of thinking that I do. By extension, similarities can be noticed in all fervent believers of one religion or another, and from this comes the claim mentioned in the first paragraph. It is the structure of what is said, rather than who says it, which provides the benefit to you who read what I've produced here.

Now, the man in question is an intelligent, prolific game designer and writer who will be known for the rest of this explication as X. What follows will be quotes from the exchange, which took place at the blog of a science fiction author. I'm going to try to keep them in context as much as possible, but without reading the dozens of posts in the wildly divergent discussion, some stuff will be missed. I'm not going to be able to keep my opinions out of this so it will be a biased account. The logical flow or lack thereof will be apparent.

It began with a post by X in which he discusses immigration with another poster:

X: ...you believe a mere change in geographic location is going to magically change the uncivilized of the world into an advanced civilized population. It won't. It never has...

My reply: *You're assuming that "civilized" is an advancement from "uncivilized". There is no basis for this in anything but opinion and cultural inertia...*

Understand that X is under attack from a few different people at this point, but believe me, he can take it. Just ask him. Although "attack" is probably too strong a word since most of them just get ignored. I engaged him on this point because I wrote a book based (partially) on the belief that *civilized* and *uncivilized* are subjective terms. If he gives me a good reason to doubt that, my book has a lot of 'splainin' to do. Since he is clearly on the opposite side from me on this issue, who better to spar with?

X's response: *That says it all about you uncertainty morons right there. You're the intellectual version of the women chopping off their daughters' genitals. And yes, I will absolutely argue that "civilized" is an advancement from "uncivilized".*

The comment about genital mutilation is actually completely in context, as it was a part of the discussion at the time. I included it here because of the attacks on character, which are one of X's trademarks. I learned to "adjust the volume" when reading his posts.

Me: *Well, start arguing. And stick to attacking the issue, not my tendencies toward the genitalia of an idea.*

I'm trying to break the ice. Actually, I'm trying to get him to lower his shields.

X: 4. *On what basis is "uncivilized" society superior to "civilized" society?*

This is a part of five questions he has for the people posting responses to him, but only number four applies to my inquiry. Notice that he's already assumed my position to be that uncivilized is superior. That was never said nor implied.

Me: *Simply put, uncivilized society isn't superior or inferior; it's just different. This all depends on how you define each term, but notions of superiority are simply statements of preference. Some people act as if there is one dot on the left, marked "uncivilized", one dot on the right, marked "civilized", and a line connecting them. Moving to the right is "forward" and to the left is "backward". Any points that fall above or below the line are seen as aberrations. Movement to the left is viewed as heretical. There is nothing but opinions and cultural inertia behind such associations. Your turn.*

I'm hinting that he needs to define what he means by *civilized* and *uncivilized*. I realize later that I should have been more explicit about this.

X: *So you see no superiority in one society where people live 30 years longer on average than another, or inferiority in a society where men rape children in order to cure themselves of AIDS versus one in which they take chemical cocktails? Let's be perfectly clear: would you...regard Austro-Hungarian society of 1875 to be superior to the Mongol society of 1175?*

My reply: *Those life averages include the people who spend 10 years connected to an oxygen tank. They say nothing of the quality of those long lives. See the above paragraph. [The paragraph had a response to another person. In it, I disagree that more people living longer is automatically better. That person conceded the point.] The rape/AIDS thing: not every uncivilized society does this. Not every civilized society has chemical cocktails. Even of the ones that do, those cocktails can be withheld from the people who need them because they're gay, for instance. An uncivilized society can be better or worse than a civilized society. The same goes for a civilized society. It seems like you're arguing that a society is better simply by virtue of being civilized. It might actually be that your definition of "civilized" is simply "a society that is better." I'm not really sure what you're defining civilization to be, so we might just be typing past each other.*

The societal comparison thing: you're using your own measuring stick to measure societies that wouldn't even have known how to read said stick. You're taking your own measures of success and

superiority, applying them in retrospect to two groups, and then determining one of them was better because it reaches farther up the stick that you made. Neither one is better. They're two completely different ways of living, with two entirely different philosophies. They were probably completely incompatible with one another for this reason. From the perspective of a modern, Westernized thinker, one is going to look better. From the perspective of an ancient tribal American, "better" might be different.

I want you to notice that thus far, X has only provided three points to back up his claim that civilization is superior to uncivilization:

1. To live an average of 30 years longer is equivalent to superiority.
2. A society where men rape children to cure themselves of AIDS is inferior to a society where people take chemical cocktails for the same purpose.
3. In the opinion of X, the Austro-Hungarian society of 1875 is superior to the Mongol society of 1175. I realize that he didn't say this explicitly, but his bias is so transparent that it should be obvious.

That's it. Three statements of opinion, only the second of which I would agree to, the third of which is almost pointless. In no way does that second statement provide evidence in support of the claim that *civilized* represents an advancement from *uncivilized*. All it really states is a preference for a particular course of treatment. I'm curious which one is actually more effective. Note also that X has still not yet defined his terms and that I'm getting more insistent that he do this. Alas, it's probably too late:

X: Irrelevant. We were considering the direct comparison of two societies, not all possible societies. But you've made it quite clear that you place no intrinsic value on civilization, so I have no more regard for your opinion than I have for that of an illiterate cannibal. You're an intellectual savage and therefore merit no regard from the intelligent and civilized.

Ouch. Now his argument runs as follows:

1. I am intelligent and civilized.
2. You don't place any intrinsic value on civilization.
3. Where you place your values is crucial to my consideration of your points.
4. I don't like where you've placed your values.
5. Therefore, I have no more regard for your opinion...

All he's really done is say, "I don't like you, Jonathan Hontz. You disgust me." and given me an excellent title for my book. Let's move on.

Me: *"We were considering the direct comparison of two societies, not all possible societies."*

Yes, but you used that comparison to argue for the superiority of all civilized societies. Just following your lead, my brother.

"But you've made it quite clear that you place no intrinsic value on civilization..."

Correct. And I can do that because we place our own values on it; you value it highly for your reasons, and I don't place nearly so much value on it. People have differences in value attribution all the time. Literacy is only valued in a society that uses the written word. I can't then say that you're wrong because of the value that you place on civilization for being itself. After all, you made your measuring stick and you are free to use it how you see fit. But you also can't condemn me for attributing my values in an entirely different way. My stick looks different.

We all run into people who disagree with us, and many of them have reasons for their arguments as strong as our own. Not knowing how to talk to each other doesn't make either one of us ignorant. It makes us different. What we need to cultivate is a sense of humility to understand that our interlocutor might actually have a point; that there's a good chance he's more intelligent than we are, even on our own scale.

What you're actually doing is saying, "You disagree with me for reasons I don't understand, so you must be retarded." I don't understand many of your reasons at all (mostly because you're not really giving many reasons) but that doesn't seem to be keeping me from engaging you. I haven't even compared you to a cannibal yet. My opinion may no longer warrant your regard, but remember that

everything you've typed here, [X], is an opinion. (An opinion based on science is still an opinion.)

Kinda speaks for itself. At this point, someone called explicitly for a definition of *civilize*, to which I gave my definition and X finally gave his:

Me: *A civilized society is one displaying a supply-side focused culture of manufacture, dedicated to the service of an ever-increasing number of invented needs. The four main points being a supply-side focus, manufacturing, ever-increasing numbers, and invented needs.*

X: *Brought out of a savage, uneducated, and primitive state.*

Finally, something resembling a definition. I should add what X posted above this:

X: *Look, I speak four languages. I live in a society where people have vastly different views from the one in which I grew up, some of which I've adopted, most of which I have not. But what I've learned from living in America, Europe, and Asia is that most people are idiots, so their different views are almost always ill-considered, poorly reasoned, unevidenced, and easily invalidated. I understand that your views are different, but unless they are both logically consistent [and] empirically supported, they're not equally valid with my own.*

You subscribe to what Heinlein calls "the democratic fallacy". But while one has a perfect right to hold one's erroneous opinions, that doesn't make them any less erroneous. The fact that you can't show my arguments to be incorrect, but instead waste your time concocting vacuous theories about me shows how fundamentally poor your reasoning skills are. You've got nothing, so you retreat to ad hom[inem] in lieu of substantive criticism. [An ad hominem is a logical fallacy in which a person attacks the arguer rather than the argument.]

Me: *"I understand that your views are different, but unless they are both logically consistent and empirically supported, they're not equally valid with my own."*

Okay, now we're getting somewhere. Stop kneecapping yourself by

insulting other people when you try to get a point across. You value logic and empirical evidence. Noted.

“You’ve got nothing, so you retreat to ad hom in lieu of substantive criticism.”

Coming from the person who compared me to an illiterate cannibal. See the above response and read it again.

“Brought out of a savage, uneducated, and primitive state.”

You want to know the sick part? Now that you’ve actually stopped insulting me and taken the time to address the issue, I actually understand where you’re coming from. But when I look at the word “savage”, I see a cultural distinction being made. You might consider ancient tribal Americans to have been savages, and I would disagree with you. You might also just consider bloodthirsty, warring, and brutal people to be savages, and then I agree. This gets tricky when we consider that genteel people can act like savages. You might look at the word “uneducated” as being descriptive of somebody who never went to a formal school. I would reply that not all education takes place in an institution. You might whole-heartedly agree with that, and then we’re reading from the same page. When you say “primitive”, it seems like you mean “pre-civilization”. That one is more difficult for me to understand with respect to your own position.

My definition of civilization, given in another post, is far more specific. Savage, uneducated, and primitive are all relative terms that depend on what you consider their opposites to be. I’m thinking those opposites are genteel, formally educated, and technologically advanced. The main points of my definition aren’t dependent upon value judgments:

1) Supply-side focus: either you usually apply your efforts to problems of supply or problems of demand.

2) Manufacturing: either you use it or you don’t.

3) Ever-increasing: it’s either necessary for the continuation of civilization or it isn’t.

4) Invented needs: they’re either actual or they’re not.

I’m sure I’m missing something, but I’ve tried to introduce some rigor into the definition. The definition that you gave is less specific, and if that works for you, great. But now that I actually know what in the world you’re talking about instead of just trying to wade through the insults, I can better understand why the two of

us don't see eye-to-eye on the issue of civilization: we're not really even talking about the same thing.

X had no response to this. He did not address the fact that his definition of *civilize* includes two words, primitive and savage, whose definitions include "uncivilized". His definition says, "A thing is civilized if it's been brought out of an uncivilized state." Murky, at best. In actuality it is just sloppy and ill-considered. Now, this wasn't a formal debate and judging by the man's character, he probably just lost interest in engaging me. However, the fact that he never responded to this highlights the glaring omission of any argument that civilization is an advancement over uncivilization.

The final touch came when I finally decided to do some background on X to figure out why he tries to argue this way. In one of his books, X describes himself as an evangelical Christian. X has already accused me of using ad hominem to discredit him. If he bothers to read any of this he will probably accuse me of that now. Take note now that he explicitly states, "I understand that your views are different, but unless they are both logically consistent and empirically supported, they're not equally valid with my own." He takes great pains to mention this in many of his discussions with others. This is coming from the man who is an evangelical Christian, where not only is suspension of disbelief a requirement for acceptance, but *faith*, the precise opposite of logic and empiricism, is necessary.

I'm keenly aware that this entire essay appears as though I'm setting up a straw man to show how awesome my intellectual abilities are, but Mr. X is not the only one who's argued this way with me, and there are versions of his method used everywhere from the fireside to the legislative halls of government, and a person doesn't need to be all that smart to sniff it out. He has also cultivated quite a following of obviously well-read people on his website, and has been featured in several radio interviews. There are many in his circle that argue this way and it is becoming a pattern among radical political parties to engage in this sort of dialogue. I'm not so foolish to believe that his is the sole method used to defend things like progress, religion, and civilization. Though it does echo with a certain cocky decisiveness that is

rhetorically powerful, but substantively empty.

So, his argument for me here is this:

1. I value logical consistency and empirical validation.
2. My views are valid because they are logically consistent and empirically validated.
3. You should ignore the inconsistency that my religious views, about which I am evangelical, are based neither on logic nor empirical evidence.

Because it is not based on reason, religion is the one defense of civilization that I cannot assault. My complaint is not that he's Christian. My complaint is that X's view, and that of the evangelical community he unofficially represents, often fails to acknowledge that those views are based on faith, which is the opposite of empiricism and logic. There is certainly a logical flow to a religious belief system, but that flow is based on the acceptance of tenets that require faith in order to adopt them. Once accepted, the system appears rational, because it is. However, it's often forgotten that it is a rational argument with faith-based premises. Believers accept the contradiction of this, but cannot pull themselves out of that haze long enough to consider that another person's views will likely contradict their own if those views are strictly rational. If you don't adopt the premises, the system breaks down immediately.

X has tricked himself into believing that all his opinions and views are actually facts based on logic and empirical evidence. What he actually does is apply his faith as justification for beliefs about the world, like those found in an article he wrote about rape and morality. In it, he states that an adulterous woman and the man with whom she consorts are committing equally reprehensible acts according to Christian morality. Furthermore, if a man rapes this woman, she is *still* committing an act of equally sinful substance. To X, all sins, in this case rape and adultery, are equally bad. Fine. Dandy. But his justification for their equal status is *because Christianity tells me so*. No comparing facts, collecting evidence, or using logic. Just opening the Bible and following along. Somehow, the victim of a sex crime became a lecher right under your fucking nose.

Here, then, is where I'm going to make an assumption. To use his words, I'm going to construct a “vacuous” theory about him.

X's views about civilization don't come from logic or empirical evidence, but from faith. The Christian treatment of native people throughout history is enough to show what those views are.

Because I was arguing like one of those native people, he adopted precisely the same stance that would've been easily recognizable in the people who tried to civilize the natives and get them to worship the god of Christianity, and failing that, destroyed them. It's a modern rendition of Crusades thinking, just as stupid now as it was then.

My formulation of what X is actually saying is this:

You must use logic and reason in the treatment of all my views, except my religion. If your arguments don't accord with my views, you are a savage. You must always use logic and empirical evidence when you engage me, because all of my views are logical and empirically supported. Except one.

We will be vehemently forbidden from talking about that one. Yet most of what he argues will be underpinned with that one. He's inventing a game for me to play, and if I won't use his rules he will take his toys and go home. Sometimes it seems as though he doesn't realize he's actually playing a game. I should have seen this coming. I should have read his Wikipedia page earlier. Mr. X is, after all, a game designer.

3.3: I'm Not As Smart As I Might Be

I enjoy taking tests. This probably puts me in some small percentage of people who also happen to think that Sudoku puzzles are fun. I have an ability for testing and I enjoy having that ability "measured" in some way by the answers I give on a test. It's like an arcade game. On a whim, I took the SAT before graduating high school just in case I ever decided to go to college. Even that was a bit of fun, testing for four hours with a room full of other people who appeared to be having much less fun than I was. I didn't study or stress out about it, which is probably why I wasn't, you know, stressed out about it. I like taking personality tests and other quizzes at job interviews. I've taken dozens of standardized tests over the years, probably half of them just for fun. I know my SAT score. I know my Meyers-Briggs personality type. I have an

ASVAB general/technical knowledge score. This probably identifies me as obscenely self-absorbed. I have no idea what my IQ is measured to be and I'm a middling Sudoku player.

A little while ago, I ran into a person who takes great pains to establish his own intelligence. In doing some background work on him, I discovered that he claims to be a Mensa member. I knew that Mensa was some sort of group of smart people, but beyond that I had no idea what they did or how someone became a member. I figured that if he was a member and they were an elite group of rigorously inducted people, that he probably deserves a bit of respect for that.

Mensa has only one requirement for membership and it's probably not what you think it is. Actually, since I'm bringing it up in this essay it's probably *exactly* what you think it is. The requirement is that an applicant must score higher than 98% of the others who take a Mensa-approved intelligence test. Since scoring varies depending on the test, your score isn't important. When the scores are tallied, you must simply do better than 98% of the other people who bothered to take it and you're in.

According to the organization's website, "Mensa was founded in England in 1946 by Roland Berrill, a barrister, and Dr. Lance Ware, a scientist and lawyer. They had the idea of forming a society for bright people, the only qualification for membership of which was a high IQ...Mensa has three stated purposes: to identify and foster human intelligence for the benefit of humanity, to encourage research in the nature, characteristics and uses of intelligence, and to promote stimulating intellectual and social opportunities for its members." I want to examine these purposes.

The first is the identification and fostering of human intelligence for the benefit of humanity. The way that Mensa identifies intelligence is through testing. Let's think for a moment about what an intelligence test actually measures, because it's not intelligence. It's a person's ability to take a test. I can be the most intelligent man on the planet, but if I really hate taking tests and the irritation causes me to do poorly, then I can't get into Mensa and it's not for lack of brains. If I find the act of taking a test about as pleasurable as the caress of a nail-spiked bat, I'm not taking a test voluntarily. I also need to know that Mensa exists, I need to have the resources to set aside to go take an official test, and I need to be

interested enough in my own intelligence that all of this sounds like a good idea. Fostering human intelligence also seems to be a bit lacking with this approach, since it only appears to encourage people to get high scores on standardized tests. This is precisely the same reason why standardized testing gets so much criticism in our elementary and secondary schools. As opposed to their stated purpose, the first purpose of Mensa is actually to identify the top two percent of scorers out of a group of people who have actually taken a Mensa-approved intelligence test, and to encourage the taking of tests as an accurate and reliable measure of human intelligence. I'll be damned if I can see how that benefits humanity.

Because I like taking tests, I decided to take the Mensa Workout, which is a free, self-administered online test to give a sense of what an intelligence test will be like. (How did you score?) The questions are probably what you'd expect if you've taken standardized tests before but I don't know how representative they are of an actual intelligence test. However, the thirty questions seem to spend an inordinate amount of time on abstract pattern recognition like number sequences. They also dwell on word jumbles and English phrases. If English is not your first language, you will bomb this test. I imagine there are Mensa-approved tests in other languages, but who knows. There are a total of four questions out of the thirty that deal with patterns of numbers. There are seven that deal with either scrambled letters or vocabulary. There are absolutely no questions asking things like, "Here is a picture of a common North American plant. What would happen if you rubbed it on your skin?" (different geographic regions would have different plants) or, similar to some vocational aptitude tests I've taken, "Gear A has 52 teeth and rotates clockwise. How many teeth should gear B have in order to make gear D rotate twice per rotation of gear A? Which direction would gear D be rotating?" These are questions of what I would consider "practical" knowledge. Well, okay. Let's say *more* practical.

This is the old book-smart versus street-smart debate. How intelligent is a person who can unscramble HCPRAATEU into *PARACHUTE* but cannot tell you that poison oak will give you a rash? How smart is a person who knows the Fibonacci sequence (and probably only because they listen to Tool) but doesn't know that a heavy thing will roll quite a bit farther than a lighter thing

and cause far more damage when it hits something? Is a speed-reader smarter than an excellent rock-climber? Perhaps I'm being unfair and the actual intelligence test features a vocational battery along with timed tests that measure coding speed and so on. Maybe it even has a bouldering test. The point is that there's no test that will accurately measure human intelligence. A person needs to be interested enough in the results of the test to sit still for a few hours and take an otherwise boring and misleading test. There's a certain amount of intelligence required to take one of these tests and get correct answers, to be sure, but being a successful test-taker is as much about knowing how to take tests as it is about knowing anything else. Test-taking is its own skill. Intelligence tests of this sort are really best at measuring that skill and not actual intelligence. There is a reason why it's common for people to distinguish between street smart and book smart.

The second stated purpose of Mensa is to encourage research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence. This purpose is already on shaky ground since it assumes that it has successfully identified intelligent people *at all*. Presumably, it takes those people it has identified and holds them up as examples of intelligence for the rest of the world to study. Since all it has done is gather together a bunch of self-interested test-takers, I don't see how it could possibly have much to say about the nature of human intelligence. There will be intelligent people among the members, but then there are intelligent people everywhere. It could be of great use in determining the nature, characteristics, and uses of test-taking. I don't know if Mensa actually uses its membership for this purpose.

The third and final stated purpose is to promote stimulating intellectual and social opportunities for its members. This is where the gold is. This is *really* why you start a society of smart people when you're a lawyer in mid-twentieth century postwar Great Britain. You want to make friends, hang out, and sip brandy. I'd be willing to bet that Mensa does this very well. It has over one hundred thousand members as I type this, and they're all good test-takers who all probably enjoy talking about things together. Like how excellent they are at testing. In general, it takes a more extroverted person to join any type of society. Those people also tend to be a bit more vain. Gathering them all together just enables

them to enjoy each other's company, which I can't help but see as a good thing. Oh, and they do charge an annual membership fee to cover the cost of the brandy.

The last point I want to talk about is the membership demographics of Mensa. The two largest international groups are...wait for it...the United States and Great Britain, with fifty thousand and twenty-two thousand members, respectively. That means that 72,000 of the 110,000 members either live in the United States or Great Britain. Doesn't it make sense that a society founded by two Britons would feature more Americans and British than any other nationalities? It looks like this just means that we have more smart people than everybody else, which is precisely what the stated purposes of Mensa would have us believe. I'd wager that the Mensa-approved intelligence tests are also largely developed by the Americans and British, and so they would naturally measure intelligence on a scale that makes sense *to them*. What this actually shows is that Americans and British alone are both more concerned with their own "intelligence" and surrounding themselves with other "intelligent" people than the rest of the one hundred countries with members, *combined*.

I have a theory about intelligence with respect to Mensa that I have absolutely no empirical evidence to back up. I have an intuition that a truly intelligent person would recognize that this is a crock of shit. Her intellect would easily reveal how biased and misrepresentative intelligence testing in general, and Mensa specifically, is. A truly intelligent person would not feel the desire to measure her own intelligence, and neither would she want to surround herself with a society of people who do feel that desire. An intelligent person would be able to recognize that arrogance with a test attached is still just arrogance.

Naturally I want to be included in the group with that truly intelligent person. I still like taking tests.

3.4: Hontz's Uncertainty Principle

How do we ever really know what the hell is going on?

I had an instructor of mine tell me something that has proven invaluable. To paraphrase, he reminded the class that whenever we read or hear something, basically whenever another person gives out information, those words come with an implicit "I

think" or "I believe" in front of them. Remember that those words are not doors to The Truth, but rather the truth as the person speaking them sees it.

Think about how ridiculously simple that is relative to the amount of heartache and confusion it eliminates. Also think about how utterly impossible it would be to carry on in a society like the US without taking people at their word. Science would lose most of its power, since most scientific information is conveyed to us by experts. People would need to resort to direct experience in order to have any ironclad information. The spontaneous adoption of such an approach by each and every citizen, were it actually possible, would lead to revolution. Whether or not we actually believe that everything people convey is essentially an opinion, it's probably true. Sometimes that opinion should carry more weight, like when it's coming from a trusted friend or one of the aforementioned experts. Most of the time it should come with a grain of salt.

In a previous essay, I discussed a man who has built his own little construct of a world. He's not the only one who does this. I do this all the time. Most of the time I'm aware that I'm doing it and it makes me laugh, but sometimes I only catch it after the fact. How much of human logic, reasoning, and intelligence is simply a cognitive overlay? How much can we actually trust our empirical information before we begin to encounter errors and aberrations? How accurate are the little pictures of the world that we paint?

The construct that I've built includes the premise that it is impossible to know anything with absolute certainty. Uncertainty and a certain amount of chaos are inherent in this great existence engine we call the universe. It is my humble estimation that every attempt to take all the mystery out and replace it with ordered, logical rationality has been misguided. I don't really want to find a cure for cancer. I don't think space exploration is actually worthwhile. I don't believe that all accidents are preventable. I'm fascinated by these things, but only in the same way I'm fascinated when I see a Lego set. Because every time we appear to have learned something new, we also appear to lose touch with something old. Sometimes that just means a revision of tradition. Sometimes the methods used to search for cures also bring further disease. Sometimes exploration in one area leads to an atrophied understanding of more important areas. Ultimately, after all the

searching and exploration, all the questions and answers, we still just break even. If we're lucky.

This comes from a fair bit of psychological study I've been doing lately. I typically have no taste for it but there's something to be said for the idea that we are constantly deluding ourselves. There's power in remembering that there is always the distinct possibility that I am wrong. Naturally if I have that limitation, so do all the other humans no matter how they measure up on one intelligence scale or another. It's humbling but empowering.

It means that no matter the source, there is always the need to question. No matter the source, there is always the opportunity to learn. Sounds like fun to me.

4.0: Waste

4.1: Intelligent Design

I spend quite a bit of electricity being cranky. For this essay I'd like to focus on what I see as a small success story in my neighborhood. Specifically, how my neighborhood spends *its* electricity.

As city budgets continue to decline for any of the myriad reasons they do, savings are sought. Some cities have had the excellent idea to turn off large numbers of street lights. Detroit and Colorado Springs are two such cities. However, it forces us to come face-to-face with our fear of the dark, which is alive and well. Apparently Americans believe that they will be robbed at gunpoint the minute they step out of the protective light barrier formed by the multitude of illuminating devices. Every possible avenue must be lit up like an operating room or there's a safety issue.

Other lights burn (waste) electricity and city money. Traffic signals are one example. Within about one half mile from my home, there were three signals on streets that could definitely do without traffic lights. The City of Denver noticed and a while ago they posted signs at each one of these intersections stating that the signals were under study for removal. There was a phone number to call for questions or to voice an opinion on the matter.

I wanted to call and beg them to get rid of the stupid things. They could put in stop signs. Two-way, four-way, it didn't matter. The signals were useless wastes of human and electrical resources and we would be better served by signs that never need to be plugged in. But I also wanted to perform a social experiment in non-action. I believed that if I were to call and express that opinion, it wouldn't make one bit of difference as to the decision made by the city to remove the superfluous signals. Instead, I wanted to just let the thing go and see what happened, at the risk of appearing to be a little bit too interested in Eastern philosophy.

There are no more signals today. The city wisely chose to pull them out and replace them with stop signs and this will probably end up saving them lots of cash. Maybe not *lots* of cash, but I suspect that the savings over time will be pretty impressive,

especially since my neighborhood isn't the only place I've seen this in Denver.

People like traffic signals. They feel safer under the protection of lights. People get more nervous around intersections that don't have them, and they should be. Intersections should always make you a little nervous since signals can be run through as easily as stop signs. There is a subset of people in the Netherlands who have dispensed with *all* traffic signaling and guidance devices and made the roads safer as a result. The idea, borne out in practice, is that if you give people all these instructions and safety notices, specifically instructing every move to be made, you have taken away people's responsibility for their own actions. They will just do what the signs and rules tell them to do and hang logic. These safety devices that we have come to rely upon for our everyday well-being and peace of mind function as a crutch without making us any safer. They simply make explicit those rules that we, as drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians should already have as part of a skill set that allows us to do these things without harm coming to anyone.

After all, what is the purpose of a stop sign or traffic signal? It is not to stop traffic, but to prevent accidents. If people can do this without all the extra appurtenances, and at least in the Netherlands they definitely can, then why use all the cluttering roadway signage at all? The other edge of the safety sword is that increasing safety measures usually has a point of diminishing returns. At some point people begin to depend on the functioning of the safety appliances rather than experience and sensory data. They will drive sixty-five miles per hour in a snowstorm because the sign they just drove by posted sixty-five as the legal limit. So now, here in the States we have digital speed limit signs which adjust the limit based on the roadway conditions. People will ride their bikes like jackasses because after all, they've put on their helmets and reflective vests.

You simply cannot add layer upon layer of rules and regulations and expect people to be safer. I've worked for an industry that likes to say its rules are “written in blood”. The idea is that people got hurt, so the industry made a rule about the injurious situation in an attempt to prevent it in the future. The underlying premise is that injury is the result of aberrant behavior rather than

the confluence of unfortunate circumstances. This industry's belief that *every accident is preventable* only makes this more obvious.

What moron actually believes that this is true on anything but a rhetorical level? Accidents have their own word because they are unintentional, unpredictable, and are often *inevitable*. Otherwise they would just be the effects of a particular cause, like running out of gas. In an ideal world, sure, we would be able to enumerate and identify all the causes of misfortune and completely eliminate the human errors that cause accidents. Of course this isn't an ideal world and that will never happen. It's not even a noble goal to attempt such a thing. It is foolish, naïve, and insulting. A better strategy would be to ensure that people are prepared for accidents because they *will* occur. The thinking would be, "What will I do when this shit goes pear-shaped?" instead of "If I just follow the rules, nothing bad will happen."

Most people don't come to work to get injured or break stuff. Those who do won't be stopped by some silly rules. That being said, most people will always act in ways that keep them safe. You won't need to codify anything for that. We ought to be protecting people from dangers that they aren't aware of. In that sense, a nuclear reactor probably needs an operator's manual. But a signal of some type at an intersection? Do you need to be reminded that someone could come from the crossing route and smack into your car? This goes culturally deep, but if the Dutch can figure out what to do, so can we. If city budgets continue to fall, we will probably have few other choices. If instead the coffers stay full, it might be wise to start looking at safety in a different light in any case.

4.2: The Self-Repairing Machine

It's been said that the difference between a machine and a living system is the ability to self-repair. Living systems have this ability while machines need mechanics. What if it's also true that no machine is capable of paying for itself in terms of energy and materials put in compared to the machine's useful output? This could simply be a matter of how we define and measure the output of any system, but suppose that living systems are the only ones capable of maximizing this return on investment. The laws of thermodynamics seem to suggest that there is no way to completely

balance the scales. Any system will be putting out less useful stuff than was put into it. Less *ordered* stuff. Waste is inevitable. Chaos is a byproduct of operation. If these laws can be relied upon, then it makes sense that the surest way to maximize resources and the life cycle of any system is to ensure that as little *stuff* as possible is on the input side of the entropy equation. In this way it should be possible to minimize the inevitable loss, simply because less is at stake. A system that uses ten units of stuff will lose less than one that uses twenty, provided the rates of loss are equivalent. With this philosophy of less-input-equals-less-waste the system experiences less wear and tear and its resources are more sparingly consumed, perhaps coming close to natural replacement rates.

This sounds for all the world like I'm cheating. *Of course something will lose less if you just use it less! You're advocating for frugality!* You're goddamned right I am.

Let's compare two systems, a tree and a solar panel. You can probably already see where I'm going with this. If this isn't the first essay of mine that you've read, you *definitely* know. Both of them gather energy from the sun and transform it into energy to do work. In the case of the tree, the work done is growth, food production, and whatever else a tree does with all the light that strikes its leaves. A solar panel takes the light and transforms it into electricity for use by other systems. If any of the opening paragraph is true, then a solar panel has far more potential for loss on investment than a tree, just through its complexity. The materials mined to produce it, the factory in which it is produced, the transportation systems used to move it, the infrastructure required by the electricity it produces, and the many systems it feeds with electricity are all separate systems with requirements for the stuff of the world. They all have input requirements and an entropy debt to be paid.

The more work is done, the more stuff is sacrificed to the gods of thermodynamics. The more material and effort thrown into a system, the greater the deficit created when that material and effort is run through the cogs and wires and fibers, giving off heat and transforming itself into generally less concentrated and useful forms.

By contrast, a deceptively simple living system like a tree requires the bare minimum of input in order to function. A solar panel would not exist without the living systems of this world, such as the humans who make them, the plants and animals eaten by those humans, and so forth. All machines invariably depend upon living systems for their very existence. The very first power plants are *actual plants*, if you will. Since this is true, removing a machine from the world will never increase the total amount of stuff consumed and therefore lost by way of entropic decay. The machine is only a layer applied over the living systems, for the purposes of human activity. However, neither human activity nor living systems depend on machines. I'll allow that certain machines seem necessary but only within the framework of modern civilization. Their necessity is of the I-need-a-suit-and-tie-for-my-new-middle-management-job variety.

In a world where resources are now perpetually scarce and humanity is desperately scrambling for new ideas to save its own collective ass, doesn't it seem prudent to recognize that the most efficient systems are living systems? Adding more machines will simply speed up the depletion and exacerbate the scarcity. We can't control the fact that entropy exists. If the way of the world is that we're always getting less out than we put in, then so be it. A complex technological marvel won't change that. What we *can* do is take that information to heart by applying our efforts to the cultivation of living systems. If it is not alive, it is more wasteful than it needs to be and should be used with great restraint. Frugality.

It's beginning to sound as if I'm going the way of a neo-Luddite, but this isn't a grudge against technology. I happen to enjoy mechanical things and appreciate their utility most of the time, but as a person who's repaired my fair share of them, I recognize their inherent limits. At some point I began to wonder why I was expending so much of my effort to keep a machine running when equivalent effort expended on myself would've resulted in an enhancement of my own abilities to self-repair. In the garden, expending that effort to help all the living systems in place there is ridiculously easy compared to changing spark plugs. When living systems are tested and pushed they also tend to improve up to a point. The best way to strengthen the stems of a tomato plant is

to subject it to some stem-bending wind. The best way to get better at walking is to walk. Try improving the quality of your car by driving it. See if you can strengthen your computer by never shutting it down.

These electro-mechanical systems do not self-repair nor improve. To some extent, human ingenuity can limit the effects of these two drawbacks, but they are inescapable traits of mechanical systems. Our current sci-industrial philosophy would have us believe that we are able to engineer our way out of any problem. Alternatively, allowing living systems to become the focus of human ingenuity simply enhances the natural abilities of those systems to repair themselves and improve what they touch. When the time comes for those living systems to die, their unavoidable return to a rather large living system, Earth, is the culmination of a process that ultimately ends up feeding the development of other living systems. Decay and decomposition into the soil is the returning of a life's worth of improvement and work to the original source of that life. The machines don't compost nearly so easily.

4.3: The grass is greener...BECAUSE YOU KEEP WATERING IT.

Spring came early to Denver. It's been warmer and drier than we've been conditioned to expect and I had decided by early March that our regular spring snowstorms weren't coming this year. Usually I can tell that a few warm days signal what they usually signal around these parts: a false sense of security before a large, vicious spring storm dumps feet of snow on the Front Range of the Rockies. This year it wasn't a few warm days, but rather about two weeks of them. It prompted me to plant what seeds I had and I'm glad I did. I now have a very good-looking crop of seedlings coming up everywhere. There hasn't been a frost in a long time.

Our summer-like spring has also prompted people to water things. Sprinklers are popping out of their winter dormancy like the buds on the trees above them. There are various devices distributing water in some very silly places like highway medians, sidewalks, gutters, lawns, and streets. Did I say *lawns*? Why, yes I did. And did I say *silly*? I meant *really stupid*.

I cannot think of a more senseless waste of something as precious as water than to spray it over something that does nothing but appeal to the eye or foot of its caretaker. I recognize that there's

no accounting for taste, (I also recognize that this topic is almost cliché now.) but why has it become common practice to sprinkle something so necessary to human life on top of something that is absolutely *unnecessary* to human life? Brown grass really isn't that ugly. It doesn't even feel ugly. It's rarely even dead. Most of the time it's brown because it is so seriously dry that it has gone into dormancy until some type of moisture can revive it, if only temporarily. This isn't even a question of taste but of intelligence. Sure, there are worse things a person could do with water, like make soda and sports drinks with it. You could just be leaving the tap on while you brush your teeth. It could be squirting from a pipe in the middle of the sidewalk under the premise that it looks really neat. Lawn-watering may rank ever so slightly above these things, but it's still pretty dumb.

Some of the worst offenders are sports fields, particularly the golfing courses. Does anybody but a golfer really care about keeping golf courses green? I know if you're a white, male manager, you probably golf, but you're still a minority. Don't even get me started on the multiple machines employed to waste fuel and time on maintenance after we get done wasting the water. Play the outdoor-recreation-is-good-for-you card if you want, but some of my most pleasurable outdoor experiences have been in areas that have never been touched by water from an irrigation system. Nobody needs green grass to have a good time. Have you ever been to the beach? Thrown a Frisbee? Flown a kite? Kite-flying is my new recommendation for the American business transaction. Find or build a kite, bring beverages, and talk about strategy.

Look, Colorado is dry. Most of the state is in a perpetual drought. One year of good rain should not lead us to set our sprinklers to "waste". Colorado is also not the only place where this is the case. Drinking water is precious everywhere. One season of good rain doesn't undo decades of desiccation. When I see irrigation, I always see puddles and streams in the gutters and on the sidewalks that remind me of how much irrigation water is wasted. It is potable water that we toss to the curb. It runs off, misses its intended target, and causes the buildup of salts on the soil surface. Much of the sprinkler systems that I witness in operation are also spritzing their targets in the middle of the day, when the sun is highest and hottest, and the winds of the west are

swirling around drying everything wet enough to be dried.

Is it more important to have water to drink or green grass to look at? How about having a golf course or having healthy gardens that grow food? (Golf courses can't even be used by bees or other insects since clover and bugs are both equally forbidden.) Do you want a weed-free monochrome highway median full of lush vegetation that will never be touched by a human or water to wash the sweaty ass upon which you sat as you drove by said median on your way to the lawn and garden supply center to buy emitters and a computerized sprinkler control system? It is usually all the same water.

This isn't complicated. There's only so much of this water flowing around, my good people. That water comes not from a tap, but from a watershed. That watershed could be underground, fed by snowmelt, replenished by rainwater, or some other method, but there is no factory to make more of this stuff when we run out. If it don't precipitate and accumulate, you don't get no mo' water. The more we spray on things, the less we have. Doesn't it just make sense that we should probably be spraying it on the things that keep us alive, like food crops and kitchen gardens, rather than on the things we choose for purely aesthetic or recreational reasons?

On a planet with billions of people, *every year is a drought year.*

5.0: Intermission

5.1: Espresso Strip Club

Look, I like breasts as much as the next person, but who the hell wants to go see women take off their clothes while drinking alcoholic beverages? Okay, probably a whole country full of people, but I'm not one of them. I'd like some coffee with my nudity.

Imagine a place that's somewhat well-lit, where you can bring your laptop, the newspaper, and your raging libido. Instead of getting sauced, you can get buzzed on caffeine. The place would be more burlesque than brothel and the ladies/gentlemen (My club would have ladies but that's definitely not the only way this works.) would have attitude. Your barista would be partially clothed. Your coffee would taste amazing.

There really isn't any need to make it all nude, all the time. Lingerie Lunch anyone? You can come in for a quick sandwich and coffee served by women in wonderfully tantalizing outfits. The windows could be open. People could stand by and look inside and suddenly get the urge to have a cuppa. Other urges may arise.

High class beverages during the "high tea" Lingerie Lunch include espresso, Americanos, mochas, and lattes. Day turns into dusk and the drip coffee comes out. Decaf will be available. Sugar substitutes will not. The only foam you're getting at night comes from the whipped cream my dancers are wearing. All payments for beverages are collected in ones and fives. Tips are always appreciated. The dancers could even be the ones making the brew. It really doesn't matter as long as we banish the dank, open some windows once in awhile, and lose the requirement to get drunk at nudie clubs.

Want to play chess while naked people gyrate? Fine. Look at those curves while dude figures out how to counter your knight at E4. Collectible card games or tabletop miniatures your thing? We have nerdy dancers who not only know how to calculate a saving roll on your Warhawk Blademaster, but they show you cleavage after impressive tactical victories. Hell, they show you cleavage anyway. It just feels better if you feel like you did something to

deserve it. You could also just scrap the extraneous bits and just focus on a comfortable space where you can't get a handjob in the back room, but you *can* get fair trade organic bean with foam delicately shaped like a cock. Only during the day though. No foam at night.

How would the code enforcers handle this? I have no clue. That's not my problem. This is about the ideas, not their implementation. You're the one who wants to see naked people and drink coffee.

5.2: Who I'm Supposed to Be

The next time I'm in an interview and someone asks me about my job history, I would like to reply with the following:

In the '60s, I would've been a boomer. I would've been a railroad brakeman who has qualified in the skills of the craft and takes those skills from place to place. A boomer works for different railroads, in different cities, sometimes out of necessity due to the needs of the companies and sometimes just for a change of scenery. The wide breadth of my experience would have been viewed as an asset toward making a well-rounded and capable worker who can fit in anywhere, because I've already fit in everywhere.

Today my descriptor is *liability*. *Bitter* is another. Specifically, I'm bitter about being viewed as a liability. I was recently disqualified for an entry level \$11.41-per-hour job because the other candidate had a more stable work history. The company who disqualified me likes to have stability in their workforce to keep the costs of hiring and training people down. (When did it become so horrible to spend money training people? Why are employers in this country so afraid to view people as humans rather than investments? For that matter, when did HR degrees become an actual thing? Why is training so expensive?) Fair enough. But isn't broad experience in itself a qualification? Why am I being punished for being curious? Why is it held against me that I'm smart enough to leave a job when it begins to make me miserable? Look, you know what you can hire and train me to do, Mr. Employer? Anything. And I will probably learn it faster than at least fifty percent of the other candidates. I feel like I'm channeling Mr. X

here, but it's a truth that I hold with good evidence.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know who I'm supposed to be because I saw him today in a coffee shop. He was there with his friends, obviously talking business. He had tape on the temple-piece of his glasses which I'm pretty sure was ironic rather than functional, since the taping was entirely inadequate for that purpose (I have experience in that area) and because the pad-like computer he was using probably cost three times what his eyewear took out of his bank account. I don't hate this guy, but I hate the stereotype of him because I'm supposed to be this guy. I'm a brainy thirty-something with computer skills. Add it up, mix it in a blender, and you get a computer programmer. Put in a dash of entrepreneurial aspirations and suddenly I'm writing code on a freelance basis for organic spray tan businesses. I'm supposed to have a library at home that has stacks of programming language books. Add a pinch of introversion and Meyers-Briggs couldn't typecast a more perfect person for programming proficiency.

America, I can't be that guy. I can't sit in front of a computer for that long unless there's a game running on it, and even then my body craves to be picked up and moved after ninety minutes. I also don't care to start my own business. It's way too much hassle and headache for the little bit of independence people manage to squeeze out of it. How do I know this? Because I have some experience doing that too.

What I can be, however, is a guy of broad knowledge and ability. Square peg in a round hole? I'm a clay peg and I can fit in anywhere. It's just irritating that for some reason, people panic when they see that I've held more than one job in the past few years. They get cold feet because they're thinking about divorce before they've even married. We're all supposed to find a calling and stick with it for some period of time deemed to be stable. We're supposed to do this even if we know we need to change gears after six months. So I'm bitter about being passed over but at least it beats the pants off of being bitter because I'm stuck in a job I cannot stand simply because I'm trying to build a stable job history.

I realize that this is my fault. I now know that employers just can't handle certain types of information without their little heads exploding into hundreds of red dollar signs. I now know that I should have just done what the fifty percent of people who are

smarter than me would do in this situation and lied on my fucking resume.

5.3: No-Shit Electric Car

I saw a new electric car on the street and thought it looked really cool. It was small, practical, and had a name that flattered the intelligence, which is what car companies are doing now with the smaller vehicles. The marketers find names that evoke intellect and good decision-making, hallmarks of progressive change.

I then searched the Internet to learn the car's specs: \$32,000, 2,300 lbs, and up to 100 miles of range if you drive it in the city. If you use the heat, you get more like 50 miles per charge. What a complete turd. Is the idea to sell the car to people who live in nice climates, don't drive far enough to really need a car in the first place, or are so close to outlets all the time that they can just charge up everywhere? It better be. They're the ones buying. At least, they will be the only ones who find this crap useful. I recognize that there is data out there pointing to the fact that most people use their cars predominantly for short trips, but that's just a reason to stop using the car altogether. It's no reason at all to invent a \$32,000 method to get to the store. Suddenly the naming convention for these things was starting to make sense. You're going to need to flatter people to get sales, because the only place people would do it otherwise is in southern California.

So my idea is to make an electric car that isn't total crap. If I'm trying to make a car more fuel efficient, the first place I look is at the engine and all its associated components to figure out where the energy generated by the gasoline is going. In an electric car, the engine consists of a bank of batteries and motors. Battery and electric motor tech is fairly well-developed at this point so there's not much I could do there. However, the list of unnecessary pieces of jewelry this car is wearing is appalling:

1. Power steering. The car is maybe ten feet long and weighs barely over one ton. The wheels aren't that big. The power steering is being used constantly as the car is driven and it's completely useless. I had a 2000 Chevy Metro that was just as heavy, had bigger tires, and was larger. There was no power anywhere near the steering. I am not muscle-bound. It was never a problem.

2. Power everything else. My stepfather likes to call these cars “pregnant roller skates”. In this sort of size category, it’s not exactly taxing to reach around inside the cabin to do things like open the door for your passenger or roll down that window. The crappy car in question also had keyless entry. I shouldn’t even need to address how needless that is or how many electric components would be eliminated by dropping the feature.
3. Air conditioning. This has really been silly for a long time and not just in electric cars, but when the windows are rolled down in a vehicle this small it’s like driving in a convertible. While I’m not saying that there aren’t people dumb enough to have the top down on their cars with the A/C on, I am saying that people need to harden up a bit and sweat. If you must manufacture a car with this, make it optional and very expensive.
4. Power brakes with an electric pump. Hydraulic brakes are wonderful. Why an electric pump on a car this small? Again, the Metro didn’t have one. I never hit anything.
5. Tire pressure monitoring system. The car is small and has fourteen inch tires. Get your lazy ass out of the vehicle once in awhile and put a damned gauge on the rubber. Then use a bike tire pump to get them up to pressure. I know, I know. I’m so terribly innovative. That idiot light is part of a system that is constantly using a little bit of voltage to measure the tire pressure. Nobody needs this.
6. CD player. Not only will most people who buy this car use mp3 players, but can we stop with the concert-quality sound inside automobiles? Just use the radio. I’d be willing to bend on this, but the car really has no excuse for requiring one. After all, you’re just making short trips, aren’t you?
7. Electronic gauges. I’m cheating a bit here since I don’t actually know if the vehicle uses these, but there had better be nothing but analog instrumentation. Digital uses power. We don’t have any to spare.

I may be a tad Luddite, but think about this for a moment. All of these things use *electricity*. Electricity is your fuel in an electric vehicle. Therefore, all of these things are burning your fuel, every time you drive. Take away all this bogus equipment and the car will probably get another fifty to one hundred miles of range. Removing all the garbage that was required to run all of this stuff will probably shave the weight of the car to well under one ton, saving further miles.

If you're still not convinced, consider that there were electric cars one hundred years ago using nickel-iron batteries, and they were capable of equivalent range if not equivalent speeds. The difference? Less jewelry. These cars weren't monuments to the manufacturer's glaring inability to resist feature-creep.

We need to stop being so American and drop the crap if these cars are ever going to be useful. We need a no-shit electric car that doesn't insult your intelligence. Think wheeled bank of batteries with a seat and steering wheel attached instead of an electric living room. Search online for Steve Heckerth and use his electric tractors for inspiration in this regard.

Although, because nothing is ever all bad, at least for now I can judge the intelligence of people just by looking at what they drive.

6.0: A Bisectional Chapter Loosely Based on Politics

6.1: You Can Refuse to Vote, Jonathan

This year, in order to preserve my sanity and appropriately direct my anger, I will remember that:

Politicians don't work for the betterment of the country. They work because it's their job. Insofar as something allows them to keep their jobs, they will do it because unemployment is a status tantamount to leprosy in the United States. I cannot hate them for this. It is regrettable that most of us are also just punching the clock. This doesn't prevent politicians from doing occasional great things at work but the wondrous deeds are not inherent in the career. They are merely coincident with it. The politicians who are truly called to be public figures and relish the work are about as common as those who are called to do any other sort of work. Look around your office to get a rough percentage.

Neither Republicans nor Democrats serve my interests. They don't even serve different interests. They both serve money. Money is required to maintain a political presence in this country and is also a mark of success. If a political party does not serve the interests of money, then it will not win any elections. Hence the Green Party. The only difference between the Big Two is one of strategy. To help me visualize this, I simply envision Republicans representing Walmart and Democrats representing Target, corporate colors notwithstanding. The Green Party represents Whole Foods, and this is probably why they have no money. They spent it all buying good eggs.

Politicians frame reality. I was going to type that they lie but that isn't precisely true and it's certainly not universal. They tell us what they think we want to hear. Think of them as military recruiters. They answer questions to the best of their abilities and try to fill in blanks, all the while carefully censoring themselves lest they say something that would tip us off to the reality that they don't think we can handle. (We usually can't.) Americans enjoy this

even if they whine about how so-and-so is a liar every long, tedious day of the political season. If a candidate actually stood up and told the truth, that person would never be elected. Those people are *routinely* neither elected nor nominated. The truth hurts and Americans can't handle it. So we end up with people who paint over dirt and somehow we're always surprised when it turns out that there's actually, you know, dirt under all that paint. *Gullible* is an appropriate word here. Essentially, politicians "lie" because Americans want them to.

But relating this to the first consideration on my list, they're just trying to make themselves look good so that they pass the job interview. Have you ever bent the truth or deliberately smoothed over some details on your resume? Then you are exactly as guilty as a politician who maybe omitted that day in his life with a hooker and a fifth when he was asked about his criminal history.

One vote doesn't make a difference. It's a pool of many individual votes that creates changes. One vote is absolutely worthless and any system where one vote has the power to make a difference is called something else: a monarchy. This is a mind game that political parties play on citizens to entice them to vote because of my first point. In fact the only time I ever hear this tactic rolled out is when it is imploring me to cast a vote at all. A vote not cast is still a vote and it sends a message, though the message is often misinterpreted as laziness or stupidity.

An interesting side story here. I once debated the definition of the word *any* as it was used in a set of gaming rules. The rule told me I could choose *any distance* and I chose zero. My opponent didn't think that was legal under the rules, though it's very clear that had the game designers wanted me to choose any distance other than zero, they would have said *any distance other than zero*. This was completely lost on the guy across the table and I could see that this was going to descend into a huge, petty fight over my actually knowing what *any* means and his not actually knowing. I relented, gave up the dispute, and we kept playing.

Now notice that people in political circles do the same thing when they claim that you must vote. They're screaming at you from across the table that deciding not to vote isn't an actual decision. Except that the only reason to vote is to express an

opinion which will effect action. By not voting, you're still expressing an opinion that frequently spurs political parties into action when they implore you to vote. They scramble around trying to figure out why you think the way you do. Normally, politicians roll out an opinion, you cast your ballot, and then the governing body is supposed to take that ballot into consideration when it acts. When you don't vote, you're the one rolling out your opinion. Then the politicians are forced to cater to your needs and you take their catering into consideration when you choose to act. It reverses the normal flow of action in politics. This is probably why political parties hate non-voters and try to tell you, illogically, that not voting isn't a valid response to having fecal choices. *Not acting* is still always a valid option.

Furthermore, how many elections have ever been won by one vote? Of those that were, consider the import. It effectively means that every vote until the deciding vote was cast might as well have been placed in a shoebox, set alight, and floated down the Potomac. It means that half (rounding up) of the people got railroaded by one person. Any rational society would have given the victory to both candidates and told them to collaborate. We, on the other hand, like to rub people's noses in our victory. This despite my second point. This also despite most elections in this country being decided by a few percentage points of population and an electoral vote system that allows candidates to receive a majority of the votes cast by the people and still lose. The 1952 presidential election was considered a landslide victory for Eisenhower, despite the fact that the losing side still managed to get *twenty-seven million* votes. That was around 44% of the popular vote. It's not a majority, but that's twenty-seven million people agreeing on something and still not finding any traction. How is this a sensible way to choose a figurehead?

If I were somehow able to block out all news of political races including the newspapers I must handle on a daily basis and idle chitchat at work including all of the informational assault I get when I log on to my computer, I wouldn't be able to tell you who was in office. This is true partially because of the second point, but also because

the president's vote doesn't really make a difference either. The president gets veto power, but that's really only the power to say *No*. As I sat and watched the Congress neuter Obama, I realized that one man does not a government make. The commander-in-chief does far less commanding than chiefing. He is as much a leader as Denver's City Librarian is a librarian. Both exist to serve as figureheads for their respective organizations, mouthpieces of the collaborative efforts of those who work beneath them. Their strategies still require the logistics planning of their subordinates to be anything more than wispy dreams in their admittedly brilliant minds.

However, the president and the Congress are both roughly guided by what most of the people who pay them want to see happening. Being a government job, most of the pay comes from the citizens. In a really awful twist, there is also much money to be made from malignant lobbyists. So while it's nice to have a Congress and president who think like I do, it's how the other citizens and lobbyists think that will determine what actually happens.

A vote for Ralph Nader is NOT a wasted vote. It is, rather tautologically, a vote for Ralph Nader. Insert whatever third-party name you wish if Nader's not running this year. A wasted vote is one that's cast for someone other than the person I want to vote for. Otherwise, why vote at all? I'm aware of the "spoiler" candidate and douche-or-turd arguments and both are examples of the false dichotomy fallacy in practice.

If you actually believe that your choice is between a giant douche or a turd sandwich, then why in the world would you care if either of them wins? Unless you actually don't believe that one of them is as turdy or douchey as you say, in which case you give that candidate your vote. If none of the candidates, promising or otherwise, are people that you want running this country then don't vote for any of them. I know that people say "If you don't vote, you can't bitch!" but that is manifestly untrue. You simply can't whine that you were never given the chance to vote if you were, in fact, given the chance. However, not voting and bitching about politics are not mutually exclusive things.

We love to read into an un-cast vote. Stupid. Lazy. Misinformed. Misguided. Misanthropic. Deluded. All you can actually say about a vote not cast is that a particular person didn't vote this year. Without asking them why, you cannot say.

But diverting my vote to the Republican candidate, just because I think that by voting for the Green party I will be handing victory to the Democrats? Well, it's a nice thought but it doesn't work that way. It means that you've shown measurable support for the Republican party, and that doesn't hurt the Democrats. It *does* hurt the Greens, who will see one less vote when they're looking at their results. There's a difference between losing an election while still getting half a million votes and losing with only fifty thousand. That difference then becomes a choice to run next election or not.

You can refuse to vote, Jonathan. Really. Roll the dice. Burn your ballot to keep warm on that November night and see if it makes a difference in how you feel the country's being run. See if you can feel the black blood of treasonous scum enter the chambers of your heart and slime its way behind your eyes. Try to understand what it feels like to be completely unrepresented in the halls of American politics and declare to yourself that the games of the politicians aren't worth playing anymore.

6.2: Foul

Why are we still surprised by foul play? I'm going to step out on a limb and suggest that it is because we expect to find virtue in the winner of any competitive venture. If we find virtue in the victor then we are satisfied. Not finding it, we usually invent it via happy endings, sweet lemons and all that. Finding vice is almost continuously met with shock: steroid use and surveillance (cheating) in professional sports; evidence of back-room deals and dirty money in politics; corners cut by industries in their pursuits of maximum profits. Listening to people talk, I might begin to believe that it was the very first time any of these dastardly deeds has ever been committed. Merely finding *suspicion* of vice has ruined careers and candidacies.

However, foul play is virtually prescribed by competition. A competitive situation is one in which the means have been sacrificed to the end. In a competition, winning or losing is

everything. The manner of play is nothing. If how we played the game was important, then sports teams would share tactics in the hope of a better match, corporations would trade all their secrets in order to facilitate better products, and politicians would highlight the strengths of their opponents to encourage the best decisions. Placing the emphasis on the manner of play rather than the outcome is not competition but a species of cooperative fun.

I will add that following the rules is important insofar as they are enforced, but that following the "it's only wrong if you get caught" credo is as effective a strategy as playing well by the rules. In the end our victors are often simply those who are willing to make more sacrifices for the win. Many of them are willing to sacrifice virtues in order to get that win. If they can conceal the sacrifices and put on a virtuous mask, we are not offended. Somehow we still expect the most tenacious and determined fighter to always fight fair. We still become surprised when we learn that a politician just said something on the basis that it would get her more votes, and not because she actually intended to make good on the promise.

Recognize that competition does this. Understand that in many situations, winning has absolutely trumped sportsmanship. Realize that sometimes the most virtuous of actions in a competitive situation is to concede victory to your opponent at the outset, play for enjoyment, and destroy the very desires that keep competition alive.

7.0: The Garden of Aite

7.1: En Garde!

Having just built and thereby been forced to indefinitely maintain a fence, I can confidently say that I can't stand fences. My reasons for building one in the first place were primarily political, having to do with home value and buyer appeal. The house I'm living in is currently up for sale, so naturally I needed to sell out by putting in some features that I personally would never want. It seems the American buying public and I differ on a few things. Go figure. (The house later sold. A post-sale scouting mission has revealed that the buyer not only tore down the fence I constructed, but built a different one and removed all the landscaping I had installed specifically for the sale. It took me shoveling two tons of rock and many hours of labor to learn my lesson, but I think I got it now.)

I chalk up my dislike to the fact that a fence is a physical manifestation of separation. Separation and division typically result in all kinds of arbitrary wank making its way into a worldview. Putting up actual walls and obstacles just makes these worldviews manifest. Not that I'm against all forms of delineating and shelter. Separating yourself from the rain and cold can help you live more comfortably.

A fence is usually not that sort of obstacle. A fence is a staked claim, an obstacle of possession. I don't live behind or underneath a fence. I enclose those things which are deemed mine with one. It's a statement to all passers-by that declares, "I am here and this is my stuff. No you may not touch it."

Anthropomorphically speaking, fencing is just a pair of human arms encircling toys on the playground. A fence shouts, "MINE!"

This is all coming from a guy who has just built one. Naturally I understand that sometimes you need to keep the dogs out. Or in. Sometimes the chickens need protection from predators so we can collect their eggs. Even bean sprouts will become prey to hungry bunnies if you don't figure out a way to separate the two. Most animals don't really understand property and ownership, and why would they?

There is something missing from our culture that would allow us to dispense with fences. Further, it would allow us to dispense with the ideas of property and ownership altogether. That certain something is a well-developed sense of respect and care for our fellow people.

When building the gates for this fence, I built them to a standard which would allow *me* to use them practically forever with minor repairs and tweaking. You might be envisioning heavy-duty pickets with slabs of wood and robust hardware but you'd not be envisioning the fence that I built. It's quite lightweight and spare, with just enough strength to do what it needs to do. So the gates are not built to be slammed, manhandled, or blundered with. If I use the gates myself they're never subjected to this treatment.

Later, after having prospective buyers walk through the gates and use them, I noticed that they were incurring damage. I had used the gates for months without the amount of distress they'd shown after only a few uses by other people. Now you're thinking that I built crappy gates. What's actually happening is that people aren't treating my gates with the same care that I do. They slam, manhandle, and blunder through them and expect them to be bomb-proof. If something breaks or doesn't work the way it used to, it's because the thing wasn't built properly and never because it's being used improperly. It's as if someone were digging a well with a telephone and then couldn't understand why the phone stopped working.

If our culture had a greater sense of respect and care for other people, everything would be treated as though it were delicate. The blundering cable guy wouldn't lumber through your vegetable patch on his way to cut a wire that is clearly accessible by another route. They would ensure that their presence didn't degrade the places through which they traveled. There would be no need to delineate what is mine because everyone else would already know it as shared property. It would command the same respect as anything of theirs. In the event that something of mine was used by another, it would be used with the same care that I myself take when using it.

What is the point of property and ownership if people already have the utmost respect for everything? Who cares if it's mine if the only thing others would do is improve it? Materialism,

division, separation...these things have all replaced respect and care. A hammer is fifteen dollars and common as grass. Taking care of my fifteen-dollar hammer seems like unnecessary bother. My neighbors don't have price tags. There are many reasons to take care of them.

7.2: The Myth of Agriculture's Necessity

I just got done reading *Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World* (2012), one of a list of Joel Salatin's books, and I must say that I wasn't impressed. My favorite on that list is *Everything I Want To Do Is Illegal: War Stories From the Local Food Front* (2009), and while it's much more fun to read it's also poorly edited. *Ain't Normal* features better editing but also rolls out an incredibly annoying self-help-styled bullet summary with take-home points at the end of each chapter. These are my petty mechanical gripes.

My less-petty philosophical gripes include his obvious relish for agriculture and the entrepreneurial spirit. The good news is that his methods of farming are a cut or three above organic agriculture. He is to organic what organic is to conventional. He practices a more regenerative brand of farming that is definitely a step in the right direction. His use of animals is also appreciated since many people in this area tend to be vegetarian or vegan, or at least so wrapped up by animal politics that they forget to realize how our health benefits from animals and theirs from us. I, like many others, have followed him since Michael Pollan blew the doors to his farm wide open with *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2007).

However, the man has stated repeatedly that what we need is a whole slew of young, intelligent farmers. I believe the phrase that he's used is the "best and brightest". He has also used "the flower of American masculinity" more than once in his speeches. The perpetuation of a food system that relies upon the specialization of labor, and the division of people into those who eat food and those who produce it is probably not his goal, but in calling for more farmers that might just be what he gets.

Salatin has anthropocentrically declared that in order for the natural world to achieve its peak productive capacity - its full realization - it needs people to be stewards of the land. It is

certainly true that in order for Earth to support *as many people as possible*, people will need to continually tweak their surroundings, as we see. As for the implicit assertion that the Best Earth Possible is a planet that is as effective as possible at supporting human life, well, I'm not buying it. Students of Masanobu Fukuoka ought to be tilting at the thought that the world is incomplete without human meddling. I suppose this probably stems from Salatin's Christian beliefs, which provide him with the humans-at-the-top-of-the-food-chain, patriarchal philosophy of stewardship. Sheep are worthless without a shepherd and such. This runs counter to the more Taoist bent of Fukuoka, who is more inspired by a sort of shamanistic anarchy. It's more of a we're-all-kind-of-stupid-so-don't-get-so-riled-up philosophy.

Joel Salatin's obvious love affair with the entrepreneur and small business is odd to me, but completely in context. His belief is that rather than going out and starting our own businesses, "the flower of American masculinity" is at home doing other stuff like playing video games. He beats video games to death with some good reasons, but fails to see the benefits of the hobby in the process. Apparently, to be noble and good I need to sell things to my neighbors. This gets very sticky, but if I'm a businessman then I need to be taking in more money from my customers than I'm using to produce my goods, or else I will go bankrupt. This is the only way I can end up with a surplus of money for myself, so that I can pay somebody else to take care of whatever needs I can't provide on my own. The money that I "make" comes from someone else's pocket. I end up with more money than when I started and my neighbor ends up with less money plus the thing that I sold to him. It is absolutely impossible for that thing to have value equal to or greater than the amount of money my neighbor has paid because I need a surplus of money in order to maintain the business. I need to be paid for my time. This ends up going down a very complex path through our value attributions. My efforts as a producer and those of my customer's as she works to earn the money she spends must be accounted for when determining value. My take is that the scale doesn't quite balance. You're free to disagree, as always.

People don't choose to go into business unless there's a profit to be made. So-called nonprofit business still lines the pockets of its employees with money that came from the sale of its

goods. Payroll is a type of profit, even if current accounting practices view employees as an expense. It is always the case that the act of making money involves giving people less than what they paid for. Surplus money doesn't come out of thin air. This is one of the root causes of inflation. Lending at interest is another, just letting people use money to buy money (or more specifically, to buy *time*) but still giving them less in return than what they paid. Completely parallel. This is the single largest flaw in any monetary system and also why they're total horse excrement. It's not as if we can just slip out into a better trade system tomorrow, so we play with this shit for awhile until we can wash our hands of it. We do the best we can with what we've got.

What Mr. Salatin and farmers everywhere ought to be doing is seeking to rid the world of the need for farmers. We don't need more people to produce food for us. We need more people who are able to provide food *for themselves*. No, Mr. Salatin, we don't need the best and brightest of us to become farmers. What we need is the whole of humanity involved in producing its own food. We need everyone, not merely the best and brightest, to become gardeners, foragers, and hunters. The specialized agricultural system of divided labor isn't totally broken, since producing things like grains, flours, and oils at the farm scale makes sense. However, it's clear that agriculture has helped produce a surplus of humans, exacerbating a population problem that would be impossible to conceive of without such agricultural stimulation.

In any case, our current level of dependence upon agriculture won't continue, since that dependence has jacked up our land base beyond repair. By all means prove me wrong, but the world cannot handle this many people without becoming a place where far fewer people are able to live. Regenerative agriculture as practiced by Joel Salatin is a step in the right direction, since it is a fully respectful system which makes liars out of the practitioners of conventional and factory organic agriculture. By his account, his practices tend to improve what they touch. It's up to you to evaluate his definition of "improve" and I mostly agree with him. Regrettably, it is also a bandage. The wound itself will only begin to heal once people begin to provide for themselves, instead of relying upon money to buy the services that they are unable to provide by constantly being in the employ of businesses that supply

the currency they spend.

People need to start somewhere and Mr. Salatin provides a jumping-off point for people to begin thinking about food differently. We're not just going to step into a world where everyone is foraging, hunting, and gardening. There will probably a phase in the adjustment process that looks like Salatin's Polyface Farms. Still, his suggestion that this type of agriculture is the acme of human ingenuity applied to food is misleading. I love the fact that he is gaining popularity and raising awareness for a better way to feed people. He is right in his niche, evangelically proclaiming the Gospel According to Salatin, which is just where he belongs. The rest of us would do well to listen to what the man has to offer, learn from what we can, then ignore the rest of it and move on to something better. You know, just the way we should read the Bible.

7.3: Window Well-Being

A couple of years ago, I planted a garden in a window well at the house I was living in. The window was in the basement where I'd play guitar in a small sitting area. The glass was right at eye level for me, so every time I looked out and saw the barren wood-chip mulch I wanted to plant something in it. Johnny jump-ups won the contest and I put one or two in the dirt so that there would be something beautiful to look at for anyone passing by that window.

I did not water, re-plant, nor care much for the window well after then except for the garlic cloves I planted the following year. The little flowers I'd sown were reliably re-seeding themselves but even if they hadn't, the microclimate in that window well was such that they overwintered. The sub-zero Colorado cold as well as regular ice bombings from the eaves above weren't enough to turn these little flowers brown. The heat of dry August days out on the south side of the house they inhabit didn't even subdue them.

They were some of the most reliably eye-catching growth on the property, and the garlic plants by their sides were also the largest among several dozen others planted everywhere from backyard to tree lawn. How the hell does this happen? My neglectful style of gardening appeared to be the most beneficial thing for that particular spot. I can't chalk it up to excellent

planning, but I did get my inspiration for the little violas from a landscape of river rock nearby that filled up with the flowers every spring, very clearly through no effort of the landowners. Calling it a “landscape” is probably a bit too charitable.

That window well represented everything I wanted the rest of my garden plots to be. It was beautiful, functional, edible, low-to-zero maintenance, and intelligent. It also contained a definite message. It's a reminder that the best gardens dispense almost entirely with the gardener. If I can find that magic blend of inputs from my hands and natural logic on the parts of the living things I'm trying to cultivate, I can grow a garden that makes it feel as though I'm barely doing anything at all. Certain plants will grow well in certain places, and if I'm willing to pay attention my work is reduced.

Tomatoes, for instance, do not grow very well where I live. If I want them, I need to do a fair bit of gardening to ensure that they will not only survive but also produce some of their delicious fruits. On the other hand, sage can practically be forgotten about and still provide a delicious herbal harvest all year long, even when I need to dig it out of the snow to eat it. The vast majority of everything else that I'll eat is somewhere between these two. Potatoes need to be dug in and dug back out unless I let them go to seed, which I intend to try this year. Brussels sprouts will be attacked by aphids if I site them improperly. Raspberry canes will erupt from every square foot of soil if I don't keep them in check. I love the berries but I do also want to grow other things and I regrettably don't have enough land to just let them do what they do best.

It's the give-and-take of discovering which plants are good at what things and then working with that to the benefit of both plant and gardener. Forcing a plant to do something it just cannot do alone is automatically dedicating your services to its assistance. Many people take an approach that attempts to impose an artificial standard of order and beauty upon a world which has absolutely no need for or recognition of such a standard. Our work and frustration increase proportionally to our desire to cling to our views of what is beautiful and orderly precisely because such desires are against the nature of the world. The proof of this was right there in that window well.

7.4: Zero Worship

As I write, Columbus Day is upon us and my thoughts turn to ethnic tension and intolerance. Specifically, the various celebrations of Columbus the Explorer and protests of Columbus the Exterminator which tend to converge in time and place during this season. Both sides suffer from hero-worshiping bigotry that only serves to reinforce ethnocentric views on behalf of either Europeans or Native Americans.

And why in the world can't we just start calling them *Americans*? If it's because the United States has co-opted the term for its citizens, then we'll just call ourselves *Statists* or something and be done with it. North, South, or Middle Americans would work, as these are all names that convey geographical location rather than prior ownership or national identity. Saying *Native* just implies an unwarranted priority or superiority. So for the rest of this essay at least, Americans is who they will be. Take *that*, society.

But there's the rub, really. There's the belief in ownership, or the idea that because the Americans were here for a very long time that this place is *theirs*. It's a mixture of American legend, of an eternal belonging to a place with the European sense of private property. Something isn't mine just because I say it is, or if I have a piece of paper that says it belongs to me, or because legend has it that way. In order for ownership to mean anything there needs to be an agreement between everyone involved. No agreement, no ownership. I don't own something if everyone else treats it as if it were theirs. Europeans are natives of this planet just as Americans are, even if someone believes the methods of either to be deceptive, brutal, primitive, or backward.

Christopher Columbus wasn't so much representative of a nationality as he was of a philosophy, washing awkwardly ashore. It turns out that Columbian philosophy and the beliefs of the Americans were about as different as they could've been, resulting in domination for one side and near extinction for the other. He's no hero, but Columbus might have been a vector.

The Americans were simply minding their own business in a place they themselves probably moved to from somewhere else. These people were definitely mobile but very doubtfully native. Some tribes have legends claiming that they've always been here, but I believe that about as much as I believe the one about

Columbus bringing Progress to the New World. I'm not sure what's so heroic, noble, and defensible about just doing what your ancestors have done for millenia, especially when I consider that Columbus had a few ancestors of his own, with very different views of the world. I may not agree with the views of one or the other, but this doesn't discredit the actions of either. Go back far enough and we're all refugees.

This land didn't belong to Columbus or the Americans any more than it belongs to you or me. We have always been and always will be tenants here, responsible for keeping house during our lease. Think of your birth certificate as a contract between yourself and the landlord, who or whatever that means to you. Like many rental properties, this one is falling into disrepair. That much would be difficult to dispute.

I'm a native American like anyone else who found themselves born into a place called *America*. I originated here. I am indigenous. I wasn't given a choice about it, and I'm certain I would've chosen differently. This is the only world we have, where cultures are born and die, good and bad things happen, and the rest of existence just keeps going. All I can do is try to understand my own story and allow others the space to do the same. Maybe we'll share a detail or two. They may all be silly stories, irredeemable and illogical, but they're all human stories that deserve telling.

7.5: The Mind of Goldilocks

I'm starting to think that the story of Goldilocks was a tale about a universal human trait.

I see this all the time at places of work:

- Because organizations of all types are constantly trying to make more money and people are usually viewed as the most expensive part of an organization, understaffing is rampant.
- Being understaffed, most people have slightly more than one person's worth of work to do on a daily basis.
- Whining about this excess work and lack of personnel is a favorite water cooler topic.

- When extra help is hired and the workloads decrease (I know, I know, but *does* actually happen.) all of a sudden people find themselves with downtime. They are able to accomplish their daily tasks in less than a day. They now have one lousy employee's worth of work to do on a daily basis.
- There is then the inexplicable, absolutely flabbergasting wave of people who vocally complain about being bored and without enough work to do. Rather than taking some initiative to find some task to which they can devote their obviously capacious reserves of can-do, they loudly discuss how slow the work is and actually begin to verbalize their suspicions of overstaffing.

What these people appear to want is some level of work that is neither too much, nor too little. They want a Goldilocks workplace. Somehow, they want the amount of work to be done by the whole served up in perfectly person-sized increments, so that they can avoid the discomfort of overwork and the awkward position of having to make work. Never mind that the levels of work they will accept are variable. Each person always wants a different amount to do, and that amount even varies with the day.

What actually ends up happening is that the boss tends to notice. Too little work, eh? Well, some staffing adjustments can be made to solve that problem.

I've noticed that military people are particularly aware of the dangers of appearing idle. We aren't the only ones, but if a co-worker of yours has served there's a good chance that there will never be a time when lack of work will be an issue for that person. We will invent things to do, keep our heads down and our mouths shut, and yes, if called to do something actually important we will go. We know how to disappear when we need to and if you ask most supervisors, they prefer that you come equipped with this ability. Under no circumstances will we begin to bad-mouth a situation in which we are all caught up.

It's not only in workplaces. The humans I know seem perpetually addicted to finding the sweet spot between too much and not enough. Consider the following:

- Temperature. Indoors and out: is it ever acceptable?
- Political policy.

- Environmental policy.
- Money. Even rich people seem to get bored and unhappy despite wanting for nothing. This doesn't seem to keep people from wanting to be rich.
- Free time. This is related to the workplace issue, but people always seem to need just the right amount of activities in their day or they begin to get vexed.
- Let's not forget porridge temperature.

The interesting part is that it always seems as though our constant pursuit of the sweet spot is the very thing that irritates us. If we could just shut up and appreciate what we have more often, the problems and dissatisfactions of our lives wouldn't be so damned dissatisfying.

Here's a dirty joke that I first heard while working as a railroader, but you can adjust it to your profession:

Two ladies are walking down the street at night, talking and enjoying the evening. They approach a bar where there are a bunch of men standing outside smoking and joking.

Beth: *Oh, hell. We need to cross the street.*

Susan: *Why? What's up?*

Those guys are construction workers!

So?

So?! If we walk by them, they're going to try to fuck us. I really don't have the patience for that right now. C'mon. We're crossing.

They cross and keep walking without incident. A few blocks later, another bar, more men, more smoking and joking.

Beth: *Damn it all!*

Susan: *Let me guess...more construction workers?*

Worse. Deckhands. I've never seen men more ready to fuck than that lot. This is getting ridiculous.

To the other side of the street, then.

They cross again and get a catcall or two, but mostly the gentlemen keep to themselves and all is well. After a few more blocks on this busy night, Beth and Susan find a pair of bars and a gaggle of guys outside. Many of them are in bib overalls.

With pinstripes. Susan starts walking across the street.

Beth: *Where are you going?*

Susan: *I'm crossing to get around that group of guys. With those clown uniforms they have on, I don't want to stick around to see what they have to offer.*

Them? Oh don't worry about those railroaders. They're too busy fucking themselves.

7.6: Sensejacking

We rented a car this weekend. As of this writing, we've been car-free for a couple of years now, and while I manage to be hypocritical with respect to my simultaneous criticisms and usage of modern technology, my lady and I have successfully banished the car-ownership demon for now at least. For as little as we actually need one it is far cheaper and more sensible to just rent an automobile if we'd like to drive somewhere, as we did this past weekend.

I noticed something about this car that I've observed before and that many of you probably don't even think about anymore: the doors of the car automatically locked. I don't know what the trigger was, (probably speed) but if a door was unlocked and we began driving, at some point all of the doors locked with an electric thunk. I don't know why they did this, but I suspect it's because people are afraid of someone opening their door, presumably to carjack them. I really can't think of any other plausible reasons, so that's what I'm going with.

American paranoia at its finest:

- People are worried about carjacking, so they lock the doors whenever they get inside their cars. This is such a common act that car manufacturers just program the car to lock them for you. Let us all try to forget that carjacking isn't that common, that giving up the car (gasp) is a good way to avoid any harm in such a situation, that I don't know of anyone who has ever been carjacked, and that I'm betting most of you don't either. Stolen, maybe. Carjacked? Probably not.

- If the window is down, the door might as well be unlocked. This realization might account for the large numbers of people who seem to never have touched the window button except to patronize the drive-through coffee hut. Enter standard air conditioning on everything and tinted windows.
- Now, whenever I get out of the car, I need to unlock the damned doors first. This does nothing but frustrate me with extra, unnecessary button-pushing and lever-flipping. You'd think that the brilliant minds who developed the automatic door-locker would also have been brilliant enough to think about an unlocker, and no doubt some cars have this. This one did not. Total bullshit.
- Apparently, people have forgotten that not only are you far more likely to need to get out of your own car than to need to keep bad people out of it, but there's also a much better chance that *good* people will need to get into your car to save your ass after you're slapped unconscious in one of the all-too-common wrecks that occur on our roadways. I'd be willing to bet that many of you actually *do* know a few people who've been in that situation.

Someone presented me with a counter-argument that went into the whole child-safety arena. The doors lock so your youngens don't wriggle out of their seat belts, open the door, and careen onto the highway at sixty-per. Fine, except that cars have already had a manual switch that can be toggled, usually inside the door frame, that activates a child safety lock on that door. This has been in place for decades. Also, are kids flying out of moving vehicles at such a rate that the TOTAL ELECTRIC LOCKDOWN mode needs to be invented? You'd think that would have shown up on YouTube more often. Cynicism aside, (Not far aside, I assure you.) the above list should be enough to condemn the idea that such a feature is worse than worthless. It reduces the functionality of something that already worked.

I'm going to gloss over a few things like the fact that we install home security systems and lock the doors to our homes with much the same results, that carjacking is a far more difficult way to get your hands on a car than just stealing it when no driver is

present, (Ever just leave the car running to warm it up?) and that electric door locks are unnecessarily complicated devices that perform a task that is still done just fine by human fingers. I'm sorry folks, but if someone wants to get into something that's locked, they're coming in. No amount of locked doors will stop thieves. Not having what thieves want? Now *there's* a battle-tested strategy for theft prevention.

8.0: Building and Finitude

8.1: Are you sure you want to do this?

There once was a petition circulating online, calling for an amendment to state zoning codes, allowing for the permitting and construction of smaller houses. Those of you familiar with the tiny house movement might be smiling a bit at the thought. I, however, didn't sign the silly thing and I'm a lover of all things tiny. And all things silly.

The zoning requirement in question specifies a minimum size for home construction. The claim of the petition was that such zoning requirements are unconstitutional, and it is not my intent to debate the constitutionality of something that is a bad idea for a very different reason. As it stands, building small is in a sort of underground, quasi-legal gray area in many states. Some municipalities won't grant an occupancy permit (the thing that allows you to legally live in a structure) unless a certain minimum size requirement is met. Consider it a way of discriminating between *shed* and *house*. This petition takes issue with the one thousand square foot minimum dictated by many municipalities.

One thousand square feet is definitely far too large for most families. A family of four can comfortably live in such a space as long as they don't have too many toys. However, if you're looking for something under five hundred square feet, where many tiny-house people build, then you need to be creative to stay on the legal side. People have done this in many ways, like building houses as trailers, squatting on the property of an acquaintance, squatting on the neglected property of a stranger, or just building the thing without telling anyone. Building something classified as a “garage” and then never building the rest of the house has also been done. There are loopholes to be exploited in various cities and the trailer option is quite popular for this. Putting wheels on something rolls it right into another category of shelter. Tiny homes are off-the-radar, creative endeavors that can get away with skirting many superfluous ordinances because they haven't been written, and often because existing rules become unneeded at the tiny scale.

If it hasn't already, fast-forward to a day when the above petition is passed, and a federal review mandates that state governments require permits for tiny homes. In effect, they will have become mainstream. Instead of making a few concessions to please the zoning department and being able to build whatever you need, you will need to make the entire house into something permissible rather than habitable. It's the same process that killed the owner-builder of larger homes.

There are already so many permits and ordinances, building code standards and environmental regulations, many of which don't make homes much safer or any more livable, and so now instead of building your own home you must contract an expensive specialist to do it for you. For instance, in many places it is written into the code that you must have an electrical outlet for every six linear feet of wall space. Who needs that many outlets? Why should I be forced to build and maintain one thousand square feet of space if I need less than half of that? Being forced to build a structure that will withstand the forces it is likely to be subjected to is one thing, but telling me how many outlets or square feet I need is absurd.

People don't build their own places because it's so very intimidating. The advantage of a tiny house is that it is so small and so out-of-sight of the authorities that a person can jump right in and make some mistakes without threatening the lives and limbs of herself or her neighbors.

Set up a permitting and zoning structure that allows for the categorization of these small dwellings and we will be forcing every small dwelling to fit into said structure. The process will become cumbersome and intolerable, and specialists will be the only people building homes again. Going from barely legal to barely approachable and surrendering the construction of houses to the developers is a step backward. If you think it's hard to get a tiny house built now, wait until the building inspector comes trudging onto your 4'x8' porch to hand you a fistful of paperwork outlining all the sections of the building code that your 150 square-footer has violated.

I prefer the tiny houses in their current build-at-your-own-risk niche. Let's not get the inspectors accustomed to seeking out tiny homes and finding all their flaws. There's minimal investment

and minimal risk when building a small place, but if the authorities get involved both things increase. The most popular counter-argument says, "Yes, but this is better than nothing. There must be *some* step taken otherwise things will never change." Fine, except this would actually be worse than nothing. At least in the current scenario, people have more freedom to do what they want and they learn not to depend so heavily on the government to supply them with oversight. (Damn, that sounds Republican.) There is also the belief that a permitted, zoned, inspected structure is automatically better than one that hasn't received such attention, which is a dangerous assumption that once again puts the responsibility on federal authority to determine what "safe" and "well-built" actually means. Learning what techniques bestow which qualities to a structure is a valuable skill that is currently only possessed by certain builders. (Although certainly not all of them.) It should be up to each one of us to determine what makes a suitable home, and ideally we should all know someone with the necessary skill to make that home a reality. Although if you've ever built a tree house, you're well on your own way to understanding.

I suspect that what is actually behind this petition is the American consumer who wants to visit her favorite real estate website and find an array of tiny houses for sale, right there at her fingertips. Indeed, this is beginning to happen already. She wants the bank to recognize the legitimacy of a mortgage taken out on such a property and she wants the assessor to be able to apply a value to the place which will increase with time. What the tiny house movement actually represents is the understanding that real estate as we know it is borked, banks should not be entrusted with our shelter, mortgages are exploitative and usurious, property never was and never will be an investment without stealing from somebody else, and that the structure of the modern city is in desperate need of a new design philosophy.

8.2: No App

Earth is a finite place. I'm not sure if that can even be disputed at this point, but many people are acting as though this planet contains an infinite supply of the stuff of civilization. That is, their actions dispute Earth's finitude even if their words do not. I'm referring specifically to that subset of the population who put

their faith in technology to save us from ourselves, although civilization has done a thorough job of inculcating *all* of the civilized world with the idea that any problem can be solved by the judicious application of technology.

Since Earth is finite, there can be nothing contained within it that is infinite. Anything infinitely large is too big to be contained by the most enormous finite thing. The technology that we worship requires that we feed an industrial system with some of Earth's finite materials, so that they may be processed to produce the products that civilization deems useful. It's not enough to build with stone or soil anymore. We must run these things through an industrial process to make concrete and steel, for example. The natural world, which we view as separate from ourselves, is nothing but a pool of resources to supply production. It is waste if it cannot be processed.

Of course, the foundations of human life are food, water, and air. Without any of these three a human will die. Shelter and clothing are needed in more harsh environments. Industrial-scale activities have always made food more dangerous to eat, water more dangerous to drink, and air more dangerous to breathe. What is not polluted by the wastes of industry is fouled by its products, many of which are supposed to be helping, not poisoning us. Because this is so, we can expect that they will continue to do this as long as industrial methods are practiced. I'm not claiming that everything is lethally toxic in the presence of industry. Rather, industrial activity automatically degrades the quality of land, water, and air just by being itself.

So therefore we have a civilization that believes its problems can be solved by applying technology, but the industrialized production of the technology is itself a problem that undermines the very foundations of human life. It really doesn't matter what is being produced, because as long as the activities of industrial production aren't actually making us immortal, then we're trading an industrial widget for human life, which is incredibly turd-brained. Not only are we using up the world's limited supply of materials pursuing solutions to problems that don't actually need solving (You don't actually believe anyone needs an mp3 player, do you?) but we are pissing away the things that support our own lives.

The techno-positivist answer to this conundrum is that we shouldn't worry, because humans have the ingenuity to discover methods for replacing the land, water, and air that is fouled by the very activities that are supported by the techno-positivist. Ignoring the catch-22, these people are also apparently under the impression that not only are the resources of Earth inexhaustible, but so too is the creativity of humanity.

Being a finite creature on a finite planet, humans are "doubly finite", if you will. Earth cannot contain anything infinite and humans can only be as finite as the planet allows. An omniscient, omnipotent human, the destination of the techno-positivist path, is impossible in a finite creature. Where does the questioning stop? At what point will all the problems be solved? How many forests, rivers, mountains, oceans, fields, and skies must be made poisonous so that we can get there?

Enough already. The problem isn't with the world, it's with *us*. It's in our desire to know everything. It's in our desire to solve all the problems that we think we find when we look at the world. We see, we develop a human construct to explain what we see, and then we go crazy as we imagine all the things that we need to change in the world in order to build the construct. We endlessly construct tools in our attempts to correct the problems because we desperately need a technological fix for *every* problem. There needs to be a downloadable solution to every obstacle, a product for every need, no matter how contrived.

But humans will *always* need food from the land, water to drink, and air to breathe. There's no app for that.

8.3: Hypocritical Oaths

I read a wonderful comic strip online which was dripping with satirical truths about the realities of idealistic city people who have dreams of raising chickens. You know, people like me. If you're at all interested in backyard chicken-keeping, things like this should be required reading. As an urbanite who's considered the option myself, the strip carried the sting that only comes when you get called out by intelligent criticism.

There was also a moment of *deja vu*, when I saw the frame in which a conveyor feeds the male chicks into a grinder to be turned into chicken feed. Ignoring the obvious similarity to the

cause of the mad cow epidemic, the implication is that by supporting businesses that sell laying hens, you're indirectly participating in the slaughter of male chicks. This argument was first presented to me by a vegan acquaintance as we were driving home. We might have been out buying vegan organic donuts or some such nonsense. We were discussing my aforementioned consideration of the options I had in keeping some poultry in the backyard. At the time, his seemed like a fairly reasonable argument. Though after some thought, it's quite porous. Both the comic strip and he presented me with a logical fallacy called a false dilemma, which essentially dictates that there are only two choices and I must pick one. In this case, either you can be a peace-loving vegan who doesn't harm animals, or you can keep a small flock of hens in your backyard and enjoy their eggs, you goddamned murderer.

The key, however, is in realizing that we were riding in my acquaintance's *car*. He also owned a cellular phone and a tablet computer, the possession of any one of which indirectly contributes to the degradation of habitats for thousands of species, and the impact of which overshadows any roosters that don't have a chance at life because I harvest my own backyard eggs. The food that this person eats to substitute for the taboo animal products is almost always packaged in oil-based plastics and manufactured in a factory.

So why get on the soapbox for the cocks? It seems like we're always picking our battles, choosing just how much hypocrisy we can live with. In this case, while I admire this man's ethics and dedication to ideals, he failed to understand that in order for humans to live, some other things are going to need to die. It can be a plant, millions of bacteria, a rooster, or some fish, but humans need to eat things that are alive. Sometimes those things have a central nervous system and sometimes not. The only way for a vegan to be logically consistent and indeed, for the word *vegan* to mean anything at all, is to draw a line in the sand somewhere saying, "Everything on this side is alive, feels pain, and I cannot eat it without transgression. Everything on the other side is dinner."

Frustratingly, we're all constantly doing this when we become activists, and this tendency also reveals itself in the things that come with adjectives like "green" and "sustainable" attached.

We don't use plastic bags because they last forever in a garbage dump and require oil to manufacture, but we happily use computers which don't last nearly as long and require even more oil and other precious commodities. We'll switch all our light bulbs to mercury-laden compact fluorescents. We buy frozen, additive-enriched food and carry it home in a hybrid car, which contains tons of heavy metals and petrochemicals.

We are forced into hypocrisy by a value system that leads us to believe that the world can ever match our ideals. There is a baseline amount of death and destruction that is inherent in the world. It can never be eliminated. Without it, the world just fills up with stuff and chokes every inch of space with the living. The Greeks have a saying for this: *geneseos kai phthoras* (I'll leave you to the pronunciation.) which translates to *generation and corruption/destruction*, or *coming to be and passing away*. It's an old acknowledgment that there are two sides to every coin. The living need death as much as death needs the living. Picture a yin-yang if that's easier.

The hypocrisy arises when we decide to stand for causes while simultaneously ignoring analogous causes. I've noticed that I have the ability to talk myself into or out of almost anything. I can find good reasons for people to act in almost any way, and there's a reason for this. The values ascribed to things don't come from the things themselves, but from us. In other words, if a good deed is done and no one is around to judge it, it isn't good. It's just a done deed. The values placed on veganism, environmental activism, and all our petty disputes over what is green and sustainable are all subjective opinions based on preference.

Not that there's any harm in this, as long as people recognize that what they believe about the world doesn't need to correspond with what their neighbor believes. I reiterate that we're always picking our battles. But why fight at all? Inside every righteous thing is a lurking nugget of evil, and shining inside every evil thing is a nugget of righteousness. And inside every chicken, is a nugget.

8.4: Something Soon to Be Gone

I'm going to save you a bit of reading and put my cards on the table in this first sentence: the only “sustainable” transportation option is walking. For more details, read on.

I just got done with *A Fog of Mendacity*, a James Howard Kunstler piece on the bicker-fest that surrounds energy speculation. Specifically, the debate that rages about how much of this or that fuel source we do or don't have left is leaving him as exhausted as it leaves many of us. I'm going to express my frustration by saying that I don't care how much or how little is left. The civilized world as we've implemented it requires a petroleum-based infrastructure whose weakness is becoming apparent, and people are manipulating the information about that weakness to show whatever they want it to show. I can skew the information to appear as though we have very little petroleum left to entice people into new channels of thought. I can also skew it to appear as though we have plenty left to maintain the status quo. I'm done with it all.

After extraction, the percentage of this stuff that is used for transportation is something much greater than fifty, again depending on where you get your information. I would wager that these estimates don't take into consideration all the plastics, rubber, and chemicals that also get used everywhere in the supply chains of transportation devices, from headlight lenses to the asphalt streets on which you drive, petroleum products all. Trains and boats use diesel and bunker fuel, respectively. Electric cars are plastic buckets filled with pieces of plastic and rubber. Worse than all of these are the precious and dangerous metals found in the batteries, which everybody seems content to totally ignore. When we run out of oil, bikes that require oil-based tires and replacement parts will enjoy a brief period of popularity, (not to mention desirability, and therefore insane rates of theft) after which they are going to be as useless as the cars. At some point, bicycles will probably become prohibitively expensive to use because of the premium placed on anything in high demand, especially something made from increasingly scarce materials. That's if you can avoid having yours stolen, of course.

Very well. It's reasonable to desire cuts to the oil used in the transportation sector, and to that end people are fighting for higher fuel-efficiency standards, alternative fuels, and so on. However, efficiency upgrades such as these never solve the problem. This is known as the Jevons paradox. All you need to know to understand this paradox is a little bit about car culture in the United States, although I'm sure it happens elsewhere.

Have you ever needed to drive down a really crowded highway? A highway so crowded that extremely costly capacity-improvement projects are undertaken to alleviate the congestion? Have you then come back after all the construction is completed (because who wants to drive through all that crap) only to find that for two blissful weeks the traffic is light, but then everyone figures out the secret and congestion is just as maddening as it was before anything was done? *That* is the Jevons paradox. Efficiency upgrades always end up increasing overall energy usage, and by extension capacity upgrades, being a type of efficiency improvement, always end up increasing overall capacity requirements. Those energy-efficient light bulbs you're using are actually helping to increase the amount of electricity that's used. Increased fuel efficiency only serves to increase total fuel consumption. More lanes just bring more cars. Obviously this can't continue forever, the world being finite and all. Human nature being what it is, when people know something is more efficient, they believe that leaving the lights on is okay since they're being sustainable and burning less electricity. All this instead of just, you know, turning off the fucking lights.

It turns out that the only sensible solution is to circumvent the need for the fuel. Modern shoes require petroleum to produce, but footwear hasn't always been made from oil and feet are standard equipment on humans. I'm going to de-complicate the matter by ignoring the fact that most civilized humans are raised on diets that require petroleum-based food industries, since this is already hard enough. Truly sensible options to the oil issue will all rely on completely eliminating its use, because sooner or later it's going to be gone or inaccessible. You will most certainly be walking soon anyway, so get used to it. People who dispute me on this don't really understand what the word *finite* means. Of course if you want to be laughed out of a board room, try suggesting to

your local Department of Transportation that they need to begin taking steps to get people away from their transportation devices *completely* and depending upon their feet. Any other philosophy shoots wide of the mark.

Since there is no way that the DOT or any other official agency would undertake such a publicly unpopular endeavor, it's ultimately going to fall on individuals to do it. After all, there's money to be made by using oil and there is no intention to stop. I'm also skipping over all the other considerations that hamper efforts to go completely pedestrian, like urban sprawl, commuting, and zoning ordinances that have compartmentalized our towns. It could be argued that putting people back on their feet is another form of efficiency upgrade which will just bring others back to the roads and solve nothing. However, there is the distinct difference that those who learn to live with their feet now will already be prepared when everyone is eventually forced into the same position. At this point, it's not an efficiency thing. It's a survival thing. And you know all that exercise we keep hearing about? Yeah, walking is good for that.

8.5: Communities and Tolerance

Community-building is hot these days. The underlying theme appears to be that there is a lack of community, or that the community is lacking a certain *something*. So organizations like Portland, Oregon's City Repair begin trying to build community through empowerment. They take a group of people and put them together to transform public spaces like city intersections into something nicer than just a four-way stop sign with crosswalks. They've had some neat ideas along the way. Rob Hopkins' ambitious Transition Movement is heavily dependent upon a value set that includes community construction, and the fostering of community spirit where it is otherwise deficient.

These are but two examples in what seems to be a flood of attempts to restore a more connected social environment in modern societies. The connection is phrased in a certain way, and typically glosses over the fact that many people have much lower requirements for social interaction, but I digress. Transition in particular is focused on the fact that we're running out of oil, which is going to change the way we deal with our neighbors.

Specifically, that we will actually need to deal with them in person instead of just ignoring them until they piss us off. I agree with this assessment.

However, at the risk of sounding like a semantic asshole, community cannot be built. It is *grown*. It is a wild, organic thing that simply arises when people find themselves surrounded by others in similar situations. I can provide favorable conditions for its growth, but I cannot do the growing for it. Most of the approaches to commu-culture seem to rely on legislating cooperation among people whose primary interest in the activity is that they are a part of a community. Insofar as they get to wear that badge, they continue to participate in the activities dictated by whatever governing body, if any, is present. My experience with people suggests that the more rules and requirements are set up, the more rules and requirements *need* to be present in order to keep people from acting in ways that run counter to the intended purpose of the group. The guidelines begin to be defensive positions.

Why didn't you do the dishes this week?

Because there was no rule that said I needed to.

Thus, the chore chart is born. Sooner or later, you're just not going to want to do the damned dishes and you learn to resent your community's laws, and your community by extension. The rulebook never gets any smaller. The creation of the cryptic building and zoning codes used worldwide are born of a similar approach to the world.

All this legislation and codification means nothing without the promise that people make to each other when they find their own lives enriched by the others around them. This promise does spring up in many eco-villages and intentional communities but is not predicated by their existence. It need not even be explicit. I like to use the example of the group of kids on my block when I was growing up. We weren't given a contract to sign or chores to do for the group and all participation was voluntary. There was no passive-aggressive shunning mechanism for slackers. If I wanted to do something with Matt, my other friends were welcome to come along. If Andy and Brad didn't want to go, no big deal. We were a community of youngsters who found ourselves in the same place during similar stages in our lives. When those conditions eventually disintegrated, so did the community. We all now find ourselves in

our own new communities that never needed to be built and don't need bylaws to maintain. Unless one of them happens to live in an intentional community today.

I bristle a little bit at the term *intentional community*. (Bristle.) It's an oxymoron by my definition of *community*. The definition that movements like Transition use is actually the definition of a *club* or a *cult*. A member pays dues or performs rituals with the expectation of inclusion, sooner or later. There are rules for maintaining that inclusion.

Compare this to a true community, in which people who don't play by the rules are still included. The guy in your group who thinks the morning drum circle is stupid can't be kicked out. This is the healthiest thing about communities because without it, they just coalesce into masses of like-minded people without any reason to change or adapt. They may also bend so easily to fit the various tastes of different members that they become -shock and horror- exactly like the world around them that they try to escape. It turns out that the world is this way for a reason.

It takes a special mindset to tolerate the unwillingness of others to see things your way. *This* is the key thing that needs to be re-learned in our society. Without tolerant minds, people just clump together in homogenous masses committed to the aggrandizement of how excellent they are and how much less excellent everyone else is.

It takes the mental flexibility to envision the world from another's perspective and the strength to accept that others may never understand yours. You must be contrary but humble. Communities grow from nothing more or less than this, and though this trait may appear in intentionally created communities (Bristle.) it is merely coincident with them. The cause is contained within the will of the people to bend, defer, or stand firm with tact, to express opinions without insisting upon them, and in their recognition of some common state of existence among them. Groups under any other conditions are inherently unstable, unreliable systems of human social interaction.

9.0: The Purge

9.1: Collection

I can't collect things. Over the years, this has evolved into a hybrid of personal preference and life experiment that has come to define many of the things that I do. I suspect that some people will be able to identify this trait in themselves and also that far more of them will just find it interesting. Or bizarre.

One Adam Savage collects things. He's one of the co-hosts of *Mythbusters*, a television series devoted to debunking commonly-held beliefs and trying out ideas. While the show is interesting, it's Mr. Savage's enormous collection of things that interests me here.

A long-time worker in the special effects industry, he has amassed a diversity of props and costumes, many of which he has made for himself. These things populate the spaces inside his home and workshop. They are everywhere: costumes adorning the walls, ceilings, and mannequins; props laid out over workspaces, in cases, and hanging from the rafters; specially treasured trinkets on custom made display shelves in his home office. Not only does he collect and make these things, but they are an inseparable part of his craft. He has stated in numerous interviews that the visual chaos created by all this stuff is feeding his creativity and ability to make new stuff. It's his muse.

But one man's treasure is another's feng shui nightmare. I was inspired by this essay to go through my humble box of tools to see if there was anything in there I could part with. Typical of my adventures in this realm, I did find some things that could be taken out and there are a few more that are on my watch list of tools that haven't been used in ages. Those on the list are on the chopping block for donation to the local bicycle repair nonprofit. Not that the bike repair people are my go-to choice for getting rid of old tools. The tools in question were specialized wrenches that I used for particular bikes that are now no longer a part of the family. This is purging *with a purpose*.

Now, I love to work on stuff and build things. I love tearing things down even more. There's a big, heavy utility bar taking up

lots of space in my toolbox so I can deconstruct to my heart's content. You wouldn't believe how much fireplace fuel has been scavenged from the dumpsters using just that u-bar and a hacksaw. Despite my enjoyment of such useful things, I'm always careful that my toolbox isn't filling up with oddities that mostly just make it harder to find the other tools in the box. My little handyman's companion has enough useful things in it that I can take care of most problems with the home, vehicles, and the intermittent demolition session. Thank goodness it's not as bad as my uncle's boxes of photos.

My cousin Tori said something to me several years ago that didn't turn me into an anticollection weirdo, but it definitely did get me thinking. We were talking about all the pictures of trains that I had gathered over the years when trains were something I took pictures of. She said, "I hope you're not going to be like my dad, with all these boxes and boxes of pictures that he never looks at..."

Holy shit, Tori, I am becoming that guy. Well, I *was* heading toward a future that looked like my uncle Donald's. At least in the picture-taking-and-hoarding sense. Not long after we talked, I went through all my pictures and culled the herd. If it didn't fit into one of my photo albums, then it got recycled. I ended up with a really great cross section of my best and most-loved pictures, all in nice books that I could pull out and read while eating breakfast, for instance.

Then something started happening. If I didn't look at the albums for a little while, I began to feel a mild tugging sensation in my chest.

You'd better pull out that album and thumb through those pictures, Jon.

You don't want to be the dude with all the pictures that never get seen.

How psychotic is this? Sure it was nice to have all the photos out in the open, readily available for reminiscing about my exploits, but I did not foresee the nagging sense of urgency, of *obligation* that was to follow.

Immediately following the recognition of my budding mental disorder, my other fully-fledged disorder that compels me to get rid of crap took over. I make it sound like this was some uncontrolled, barbaric night of ritual destruction, naked and

sweating, demonic and awake with the satisfaction of the purge. Quite to the contrary, I thought about what happened next for some time before doing it.

It was totally unacceptable that I felt coerced into action by a photo album. *The things you own* and all that. I definitely felt owned. I'm also no stranger to the occasional life experiment, whereby trying something odd leads to some strange compromises in one's habits, possessions, or what-have-you. Then I started noticing that most of the things I had taken pictures of were things I could easily remember without visual aids. Many things that I could remember vividly, some of my most cherished memories, never had pictures taken of them.

Pictures have fuck-all to do with what I can remember and why.

The recycling bin came out and all my pictures went into it. If this was something real, not just some delusion I pulled in front of my own eyes, then it was worth trying. I can't tell you how angry it makes me to not just *suspect*, but to *feel* the pull of some inanimate object (or a collection of them, as it were) on my life. So to pull out all of those pictures, to get rid of the albums altogether was the very definition of catharsis. I was Thoreau, heaving stones through his window upon discovering that they needed arranging and dusting when kept on a table in his cabin. I wasn't naked or demonic but it felt damn good. If I would one day feel regret at having wiped out years of photographic mementos, then I'd start to take more pictures, keep them in boxes, and never show those to anyone.

It's probably been ten years since I combed through my pictures and assembled the photo albums. Perhaps five years have passed since I got rid of them all. I don't miss any of them. My memories are all still there. The pictures that were taken of days that I've since forgotten have passed into oblivion with no one to mourn them. I don't need to remember it all. I'm not afraid of age and senility destroying what's left of those remembrances that I do have. Another of my life experiments is trying to prove that using your mind to remember, not a book full of pictures, is what will keep you remembering long after your picture-hoarding contemporaries have slipped into dementia. I'll get back to you on that one if I can remember to.

Two Allow me to offer a revision: the things I own end up controlling my thoughts. This would all be so much easier to explain if it were simply my attempt at voluntary simplicity, an odd result of a heavily consumerist society reading too much Thoreau and Lao Tzu. If I instead need to bring up the psychological weight of things, let the head-tilting begin!

When this was still a new feeling to me, I had no way of describing why I couldn't hold on to things. I want to preface this example by saying that it is, in fact, only *things* and not *people* that I am loathe to hold onto. With people, I have a quite different reaction, almost opposite that of my reaction to things. It is very difficult for people to work their way into my inner circle, but once there, I really don't like to let them go. In a sense, I get the screening process done up front. As you'll see, my process for things is beginning to mimic my process for people in that way.

My example comes from my love of games and gaming. The earliest strong example is the time I spent playing a popular trading card game. The format of a trading card game stems from the two main facets of such a thing. There is the actual game-playing and then there is the collecting and trading. Decks of cards used to play the game are built by buying cards either singly or in packs, and the utility of the cards comes partially from their rarity and partially from the combinations that the deck builder can come up with. Being somewhat of a purist in such (many) things, I can't build a deck by just figuring out what the best cards are and then buying them from the card shop one by one. It feels like cheating. I like to build by purchasing the booster packs and taking my chances. This is, of course, just what people who sell cards depend on. Rare, valuable cards appear in the packs with a predictable frequency, but most of the rest are common and somewhat worthless cards. There is actually a type of tournament for these types of card games that requires the participants to buy a few packs of cards, open them up, and then do the best they can with what they've been given. I really enjoy that spirit of gaming. It feels less cheaty than just poring over the card catalogs and selecting the cards that are obviously the best.

As you might imagine, such a hobby results in a collection of cards. My collection of cards wasn't huge, maybe five hundred or so. However, there were quite a few left over cards that spent

most of their lives just sitting in the box waiting for me to find some use for them. A typical deck in this game is sixty cards, that's it. Sometimes I could trade them to friends for things I could use. Other times I would invent new decks specifically to make use of the idled cards. Mostly it just bothered me that there were all these pieces of cardstock sitting in a box, none of which was particularly valuable to me or anyone else, but all of which I had paid for.

A parallel example lies in my past love of tabletop miniatures games. These feature the same two dimensions as trading card games, but with the added third dimension of model-making. There is also a hybrid of the two called collectible miniatures games, where the models usually come completely or mostly assembled and painted, leaving nothing but the playing and collecting.

I've built my fair share of models and I enjoy that. The part of model building that bothers me is the equipment it takes to do it. There are the knives, files, drills, and adhesives. Then there are the paints, finishes, and the devices used to apply them. Finally, there can be a significant amount of resources dedicated to creating dioramas, or in the case of tabletop miniatures games, battlefields. Scenery materials, buildings, and other effects must be collected to provide a simulated world for the models to occupy. Soon there's another desk in your house with all your modeling garbage on it.

Collectible miniatures games allow you to skip the model building and all the associated gear. You can jump right into the game itself, which is the part I enjoy most. Though still, as with the trading card game most of the models end up occupying a shelf, collecting dust. Thoreau keeps coming up and I will try not to mention him again, but my frustration at having to dust a shelf full of miniature war machines that rarely get used was comically similar to his rocks. Shame that the models were a little too valuable to just toss out the window.

The theme is that for me, there's just not enough time spent playing the game, and far too much time spent dealing with all the other crap. Every time I walk by the shelf, box, display case or whatever, the models are just sitting there reminding me that I'm not using them. They are the pictures that don't get looked at. They are the tools in my house that never get used. They carry a certain attention requirement with them, a certain *psychological weight*

that presses gently on my mind whenever I am near them.

I have the strength for a certain amount of this weight and some things seem to weigh very lightly on my mind. My collection of digital music falls squarely in this category. I've just counted the number of folders in my digital archives. There are twenty-one artists in my computer and I can tell you that this is right about where I start getting antsy, since it's been a frequent thought in my mind that I should really pore over these folders with a ready finger on the Delete key. There would have been about sixty or seventy CDs in my collection by now.

I can hear the groans of music snobs who are probably wondering what kind of narrow-minded person only listens to twenty-one different artists. Hey, I'm a lyrics guy. If I can't memorize the words or sing along, I really don't have any business with the album. I already have more lyrics than I can keep up with and I'm still finding gems buried in my files.

These examples are the manifestations of my malfunction. I joke about it being a disorder, but in a true act of denial I don't find it to be disorderly at all. Objects affect people. Adam Savage needs his “visual cacophony”. Children need security blankets. This is just the way objects affect me and people think it's bat-shit crazy. Those closest to me realize that it's how I'm wired and they carry a sense of humor about it if they don't indulge it outright.

Take notice of how things affect you. I don't want this to be a preachy self-help essay about how you can simplify your life, but just take some time to see it. Because I've been thinking about this for years and engineering little experiments around it, I'm aware of these effects. They can be very subtle if you're accustomed to acquisition or determined to be recognized for the things that you own. After reading that sentence aloud, I recognize that it carries a certain self-righteousness that I would like to avoid, and I don't mean it to. However, when many people buy certain things, it's not because those things work better or do what they do in a more suitable way. It's to be noticed for having purchased them. It's nothing more than bling. This condition is just as disorderly as my own.

Three This idea of psychological weight will resonate with people interested in the practice of feng shui. I know, it really *is* beginning to sound like my attempt at some sort of Eastern philosophical revival, though this is less feng shui and more classical Japan. While feng shui has as its aim the harmonization of people and their surroundings, with particular arrangements of physical space bringing positive results to the people who occupy that space, my sense of psychological weight is much more primitive. It's simply an awareness of my own awareness. I notice *stuff*, and I notice quantities of that stuff. When I notice these things it's either a positive or negative experience. The arrangement of my physical space simply follows from that and those arrangements are almost always as spare, practical, and lovingly kept as an Edo period homestead.

Let's walk down that Eastern philosophical path for a stretch. I can't lie about (or pretend to hide) my affinity for Taoism, and Lao Tzu has (allegedly) written some of the most poignant passages that influence my life. Sure, a vase is nice, but the thing that makes the vase useful isn't the vase. It's the empty space inside it. You know, things like that. Being part of a family that has moved around quite a bit this type of predilection has been incredibly useful. We once fit all of our possessions, enough for two adults and one teenager, into a six-by-seven-by-eight foot shipping container. That's 336 cubic feet of space. It was full, but it is also an incredible feat for modern Americans. Many of our possessions were chosen not merely for their aesthetic merits but because they could withstand packing, moving, and unpacking without the need for sheets upon sheets of bubble wrap.

All too often we just fill up whatever space we're put into. 750 square foot apartment? Fill it up. 2500 square feet of suburban home? Fill it up. Fill up the garage too. Rent a storage unit. 125 square foot tiny house? Be careful what you fill it up with, since you're rapidly running out of space. People who go camping frequently have a tent full of shit to shuffle when it's time to find the sleeping bag. The Taoist appreciation for empty space is missing most of the time. There's something unsettling about emptiness for many people, who will work very hard to fill those spaces. The emptiness of the void is utterly terrifying to people. Think about how that relates to the development of religions and

their attempts to fill up the afterlife with places, beings, stuff to do.

Filling other people's spaces is also hardwired into many humans. I'm afraid that I've ruined gift-giving in my family as a result. My mother, after having given me some lovingly-chosen gifts as housewarming presents, was visibly crestfallen when I told her that the ultimate destination of these things would probably be a donation center. After explaining to her essentially everything you're reading in this essay, she softened a bit and understood. I don't want you to fill my house with stuff. If you care about me, you'll understand that these things cause me distress. Just give me the gift of a letter, a call, or a visit. I don't need anything else to know that you care, and if you truly care those things will all be easier for you to produce anyway.

And oh, the discussions we've had with people about this.

Why don't you want this?

We have no room for it.

Half of your apartment is empty!

That's the half we're happy with.

Blank stares and odd feelings of insult result. Then we just roll out the truth for them. If you give us this stuff we're going to donate it. We don't want it. We don't need it. It has absolutely nothing to do with how we feel about you. You are not stuff. Your emotions are not stuff. You could burn our apartment to ash and I'd be a little pissed because passports are a pain in the ass to get. Let me tell you that finding a partner who respects and even seems to enjoy some of this has been like uncovering gold in the backyard.

We are a quasi-nomadic family unit and I'm inspired by accounts of tribal people who have an essential understanding of the ruthless attitude toward acquisition that is needed to be mobile. You have what you need and a few things you love. You can leave things behind and not suffer the destruction of other things. What you absolutely cannot do is become afraid of empty space. Empty space is lighter than anything else, and when you're packing everything contained in your many spaces into a wagon, a backpack, or a shipping container, the lighter the better. More psychological weight is more work and at some point you won't be able to bear it. This is not just a consideration for the rootless.

Four Oh my, do people *hate* hypocrisy. So let's talk about the potential hypocrite in me, just in case someone was starting to warm up to my neuroses.

It's striking that when I reflect on this tendency toward purging and anticollection, I can also note that I have absolutely no problem with a collection that isn't mine but that I nonetheless use. The library is the most prominent example of this collection-by-proxy. I am very happy that I can walk down to the stacks and grab whatever books tickle my fancy, and then carry them back for someone else to maintain when I'm done with them.

I'm not sure if this makes me hypocritical or a socialist. There are some in the political circles who would probably just call me a socialist hypocrite. The same goes for people like Adam Savage and organizations like museums and clubs, the sole purpose of which is to collect and amass. I am thrilled that there are folks out there who can do this stuff and I wouldn't want to live in a world where everyone is like me, no matter how many times I tell myself otherwise. I love the library and its mission, and I've done lots of work for them over the years. I love clubs and museums, having been a member of a model railroad club and a frequent visitor to many museums.

I can't quite put a finger on why the library downtown is okay but the one in my living room is a time bomb. Why thousands of dollars worth of model trains running in circles is something to behold at a club display but also something I could never look at in my own basement without hating myself. Perhaps its my Pennsylvania German background.

Today, Wikipedia's definition of Amish includes the following:

The Amish...AH-mish; (Pennsylvania Dutch: Amisch, German: Amische) are a group of traditionalist Christian church fellowships that form a subgroup of the Mennonite churches. The Amish are known for simple living, plain dress, and reluctance to adopt many conveniences of modern technology...

Oh no. It's in my blood.

This whole essay is about simple living, I have about four or five colors in my wardrobe, all of which are shades of brown,

black, grey, and blue, and if you've not read my other writings on technology, well, let's just say there are a few doubts that I have. I am definitely not a traditionalist Christian, so there's a schism there...

The history of the Amish church began with a schism in Switzerland within a group of Swiss and Alsatian Anabaptists in 1693 led by Jakob Ammann.

Goddammit.

Fine, but this still doesn't explain why it's okay that someone else does my collecting for me. I think it's just the idea that there is no possible way I can use a collection like a populace uses a collection. One hundred books would be wasted on me, who can only read a few of them. Ten thousand people can make much better use of those books and wear the covers off of them in short order. What is a book for, if not to be read? Every book secretly wishes to have been read enough that the spine splits and the stained, ragged pages fall out. Model trains want to be run until their wheels fall off and the motors fail beneath a wisp of smoke and the smell of ozone. What good is the collector's car that never gets driven?

Collections exist and I'm okay with that. But if they're going to exist there had better be a bunch of people around to enjoy it. After all, you're going to need many shoulders to carry that much psychological weight.

Five After realizing that objects have this effect, where's the life experiment in all this? It's in cutting off the urge to acquire in the first place.

Since I began this experiment, I've learned the fine art of refusing free stuff. Promotional offers, giveaways, rewards programs...all of them can be really fun and you may even end up with something useful. What they're *really* good at is filling your space with crap. Most promotional offers and rewards programs require some sort of sign-up process that leaves you knee-deep in junk mail or awash in a sea of spam.

This part of the experiment is not only the most difficult but also the most rewarding, since it can involve a visceral, face-to-face interaction with people who try to give you things and are completely thrown by your refusal to take them. As discussed in the section about gift-giving, it can also be a heartbreaking experience for those who just want to give something. You begin to discover just how much of our culture is tied up in *things*, for better or worse.

It's not just about freebies, though. It starts creeping into your thinking about the next thing you want to buy, the next thing you think you want to have. You begin to imagine yourself not just unwrapping the package and having the shiny new thing, but having the well-worn and used thing. You envision taking care of the thing and repairing it when it breaks. Storing it. Cleaning it. Making time and space for it. Getting rid of it. It's like cradle-to-grave thinking without all the Earth-saving thrown in.

You also start to notice advertising and marketing, which for me means they become almost completely ineffectual. In fact, the more aware I am that I'm being advertised to, the less likely I am to respect the company or purchase its product. Commercials and magazine spreads become much more transparent and, frankly, insulting to the intelligence. It's true that this isn't a great way to sell people on the idea that they should begin to notice the effects that physical objects have on them. You're giving up the blissful experience of being completely unaware that people are *constantly* trying to sell you something, and in exchange you're getting the aggravating experience of being completely aware that people are *constantly* trying to sell you something. I would never be a good marketer.

Still, there is something liberating about having the veil lifted. Sure, there are awkward moments with people. There are also wonderful moments when I'm cleaning the house and I realize that I know where everything is. Once the awkward moments pass with people you find that (miracle of miracles) folks really don't mind that they never need to worry about what to buy for you. You'll still receive gifts, but it's usually because someone saw something and thought of you and not because you registered for it. You will also thank yourself endlessly come moving day. Or cleaning day. Or just on any day when you're walking around your

house and not stumbling into piles of stuff.

I'm not idealistic enough to believe that this kind of thing is going to be a positive change for everyone who tries it. Some people are just not at all comfortable with living life this way. If I went through Adam Savage's workshop and arranged it the way I would want my workshop, he would not produce anything of value there. If I tried to work in Mr. Savage's shop, all I would think about is purging the place of all the unclean detritus. I *do* believe that there are many people who have never considered doing something like this. They're not even aware it's an option. Consider yourself aware. It can be fun to try, if only for a little while. It can turn into a long while in a big hurry.

9.2: My Idealistic Experiment

The key to a proper revolution isn't the amount of support or fervor behind its principles. Revolution requires waiting and watching. One must wait and watch for the established, undesired order to begin collapsing. Upon realizing what is happening, support and fervor is whipped up and many hands reach up to topple something that was already falling. Then, atop the corpse: banners are held high, fists to the sky, one foot on the wreckage, pictures, speeches, congratulations all around.

My foray into idealistic thinking and action was undertaken without this realization. I believed that given enough help/votes/actions/whatever true change could occur. Furthermore, I believed that these changes were not only necessary, but good, just, and beneficial. What I discovered is that whatever change is sought, no matter whose idea, no matter what kind of support or evidence, there is always another side to the story. The positive changes and progressive actions end up with a long list of unintended consequences.

At the end of the day, I wound up exhausted. It's just too damned hard to swim upstream all the time. Do you have any idea what it's like to make purchasing decisions for everyday items based on their packaging or country of origin? Do you have any clue as to how ridiculously costly it is to make "green" and "eco-friendly" decisions in many cases? How do I know what the "eco" choice is in the first place? How many people can truly say they understand how hard it is to watch as bus passes get more

expensive while service is cut, and trips that take me forty-five minutes are made by every normal person with a car in ten?

Yesterday, I returned a compact fluorescent light bulb to a hardware store because it had burned out and I wanted to dispose of it properly. Like their full-size counterparts, CFLs are hazardous waste. I paid just under one dollar to do this for a single bulb. I can't stand the light emitted by CFLs and LED lights and I have good reason to suspect that they trigger some of my migraines. I will not be buying them ever again, which I'm sure paints me as some sort of backward heathen in environmentalist camps. I'm not sure how the environmentalists got on the side of a mercury-filled lighting device, but there you go. Every other sane person in the world just throws their CFLs into the trash and the world goes on spinning, heavy metals and all.

I am so tired of fighting and I don't want to do it anymore. I'm not defeated or down on my luck here. I'm simply at the point where I realize how utterly pointless and stupid it is to make a choice like getting rid of your car because you believe you will help the planet. I like to think of this as maturity, actually. If you hate your car and can't stand driving, by all means get rid of the thing. But making all these decisions with the assumption that your carbon footprint is getting smaller is deceptive at best. I still don't have a TV because it just wasn't worth it anymore. I still buy organic-or-better food because genetically modified stuff suffers from the aforementioned risk of unintentional consequences and the organic produce usually tastes better than conventional. I have reusable shopping bags because they can be used for all sorts of things in addition to shopping. Leaf blowers still piss me off.

What I no longer do is predicate my actions on the belief that they are making the world a better place. I now simply do what I enjoy and what makes sense to me. It makes *my* world a better place. I am one man and a very small circle of friends. There is only so much we can do.

9.3: It's humble pie. Have a slice.

If you haven't already suspected, I get rid of things. Some people are hoarders, but I am definitely a *purger*. It's an impulse that must be controlled sometimes or I will pass something along that I'll actually need later. Only twice have I done this and actually

needed to buy something again, but both times the "need" was actually a "want" and I only spent about one hundred extra dollars in the fiasco.

It is probably because I'm a purger that I notice how much stuff Americans hang onto. Walking into most people's homes is like being air-dropped into a junkyard. The first thing I find myself doing when I get situated in a new job is organizing something or cleaning up. For the most part, Americans are hoarders with their homes and workplaces both in shining evidence of this.

Houses rarely come with *subtractions*, only *additions*. Extra storage space has become a virtue in everything from your kitchen cupboard (Although they're much more substantial than boards for storing cups. They're more like pantrywalls, etymology be damned.) to cargo pants that have pockets on every available square inch of fabric. When was the last time you listened to someone wax ecstatic about tearing down their garage or removing unneeded space from their home? Has the lack of closet space ever been viewed as a good thing?

I'll admit that most of this is probably cultural (even I like closets), but it seems as though humans are programmed to collect and amass. Rare is the society that prides itself on a life lived with less, that has the fortitude to say "We've had enough, thank you." A larger house seems nice when you're accustomed to a studio apartment, until you look around the living room four years (or four weeks) later and wonder where all the clutter came from.

It is with this in mind that I start thinking about the human population of Earth. If it's even remotely true that we fill whatever space we're given by virtue of some innate compulsion to acquire and collect, then we're rapidly approaching the time when this planet will need an addition. I'll breeze right past the obvious reality that such an addition will never be built and move right into suggesting that we need to collectively control our impulse to expand, hoard, accumulate, acquire, fill, and grow. That is, we need to control it if we want to avoid the nasty parts of overshooting the carrying capacity of Earth.

The tragically comic reality of human life may be that we are incapable of preventing such an overshoot. Humans may be filling a niche that requires an organism to rapidly grow, seed the world with artifice, and then just as rapidly die out, leaving the

globe prepared for whatever will come next. We are inclined to think of ourselves as being at the pinnacle of evolution but the reality might be that we are simply a transitional species that blazes the trail for another evolutionary purpose. Perhaps the world was just beginning to get cluttered with all those deposits of fossil fuels and needed a species that could extract, transform, and disperse them. Remember that every species was once at the pinnacle of evolution. The process never stopped.

It's brain-mulching to consider that in all our efforts to "save" the planet and avoid global calamity we're actually fighting against the tsunami of an inevitable conclusion, approaching low and silent across the ocean of time. When it breaks on the shore, there will have been nothing we could have done to stop it, but dammit we tried, I suppose. We built levees and put a warning siren in place but the water has its way with you in the end.

When I talk to people about this, they play the "fatalism" card, or present some version of the "you're just lazy", "giving up", or refusing to "take responsibility" arguments. Modern people have a very difficult time with acceptance and resignation and I take this as evidence in support of my belief that people are innate developers, expanders, and acquirers. If we weren't always so aggressive and proactive it would be difficult to do each of these three things. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a world with so much development, expansion, and acquisition.

Just entertain, for a moment, my explanation for why we are this way. Put aside the powerless feelings inspired by fatalism, the worthless-slacker feelings engendered by our Puritanical culture, the urge to take responsibility brought on by people who feel themselves privileged and superior, and the idea that doing nothing is equivalent to giving up. Entertain also the idea that attempting to direct the flow of existence for an entire planet might be just a little out of humanity's capability, and that we are very capable of getting ourselves into a situation from which we are incapable of escaping.

It's humbling, even a little humiliating but probably true. It puts the lie to the activist's belief in his ability to change things for the better. It makes human civilization look like a quaint, trivial endeavor. It makes us all look a little silly, but it also makes me think that it really couldn't be any other way.

We do, in fact, live in a world where silly little trivial things exist.

9.4: On Isolation

Very simply, a hermitage is a place to get away from everything. At the very least it is a place to escape those things that trouble you.

Humans love to imitate. We learn many things simply by doing what other people are doing. The exchange of knowledge could be viewed as simply mimicry of thought patterns and ideas. Judging from what I experience personally, this imitation need not be conscious or deliberate in order to occur. So if I want to eliminate or reduce the influence of the outside world on my thoughts, actions, and ideas, I need to get out of Dodge. Hence, a hermitage. Meditation shares this isolationist practice as a method of purification.

There are times when I can detect snippets and pieces of the ideas of others in my own work. There are probably many more occasions when these things escape detection. I don't mean to suggest that all imitation is bad or that we can ever be completely freed of having iterative ideas. The concept of an original thought is probably an ethereal ideal. However when faced with the task of trying to imagine the world differently, it helps to clear out what everyone else is saying as much as possible. When faced with any creative task for that matter, it helps if the creativity of others is not in your path, giving you a predetermined course to follow should you get flummoxed. If what you sought were along the trail blazed by another then there would be no need for you to seek any other way.

I stopped (temporarily?) my intensive reading of philosophical and theoretical works for just this reason. At some point they all begin to seem as if they are dancing around an important idea that has yet to be given a name and a voice. The academics never tire of studying the philosophies of others. They dissect and interpret, hoping to lay bare that which most people can only hope to understand at the most basic level. I am not an academic. I don't mean to cast out the "Those who can't, teach" credo, but it certainly looks as though there isn't much hope for charting new paths by retracing old footsteps.

10.0: Ten

10.1: Where They Go, and Why They Come Back

Some islands were once connected to land.

Here, a bridge destroyed by some hell-spawned storm, its footings spalling and crumbling in the surf. There, another felled by disuse and neglect. You can see what was once a well traveled isthmus, now two slowly separating peninsular strips of rock, an old victim of the frothing sea.

There was a ferry service once, note the rotting pier, but a ferry service with few riders is doomed to fail.

So now view the island. It is a proud fortification buttressed by jagged rocks and surrounded by a moat of warm, dangerous sea. Far from inaccessible, the trip is often remembered fondly by visitors, but is frequently impossible due to weather and season. If anything, the island has perhaps gained allure and mystique for its new-found isolation. A newly built bridge would certainly see traffic.

There's something to be said for planning a journey to its shores. After all, the island does have inhabitants. Those who live there know that it will always be a rare bird that flocks to its promontories, if only for the unique views of the mainland.

And inevitably, given time, some will stay. Whether because of the peculiarity of the island itself or an enchantment bestowed by it upon the residents, it doesn't really matter. Those who stay are perhaps called. They are universally enriched, few though they may be.