

And, if you care to read it, a brief story of my life, sent to my first friend, from when I was 3, after meeting up with her again after 20 years.

+j

So, when I lived in Budapest for a year I had the idea of writing down my life story in as much detail as I possibly could. I got as far as general summaries, and an exhaustive account of hitting Daniel in the head with a shovel.

But I figure reconnecting with you gives me the perfect opportunity to try again. (That is, I'm using you.) I'm aiming for a story that is compact enough to be "email-length" , yet detailed enough to help you to understand what sort of creature I have developed into: my tastes, my passions, my desires, my dreams. And the trickiest part of doing something like this is to avoid digressing into raconteurism, because although anecdotes are delicious and rich, they are not very filling. (Maybe we'll meet someday, somewhere between Eindhoven, Santa Cruz, Budapest, Evanston, Santa Barbara, Culver City, Santa Monica, Berkeley, and wherever you are in Japan, and share anecdotes over dinner.)

In other words, I apologize in advance for the following. :) If you don't want to read it, that's okay. I'm writing it for myself.

* * *

In the beginning, there was Santa Monica. These were the first five years: the most carefree and religious years of my life. I started playing the piano. The most memorable aspects of this early time are: watching the glorious sunsets from my balcony, and making friendships I didn't keep.

The following seven or eight years were the most unhappy of my life, although only the last one or two could actually be considered unhappy. It was a time of change: My brother was born, our family moved to Culver City, I started at the Mirman School. The Mirman School was insufferably dull, despite the fact that it was supposed to be a haven of sorts for "gifted" children. I excelled somewhat in mathematics, and advanced somewhat in my abilities at the keyboard. Most of all I developed a good sense of social awkwardness, which was in full bloom by the end of my tenure at Mirman. I was literally not present for most of my bar-mitzvah celebration.

After leaving the Mirman School, I went to Culver City High School for a year. This year was devastating in many ways. I was dumped by my first girlfriend, was a social outcast from the first day, and was the constant butt of anti-semitic jokes and slurs. Unbelievably, I received a D+ in mathematics. But at the same time, seeds sown so long before were beginning to blossom: one night, sitting at the piano, I realized I enjoyed practicing for the first time in my life. (I called to my mother in the other room: "Mom, I'm enjoying practicing!" . In response, she put her finger in her ear so that she could hear the telephone more clearly.) From that day forward I threw myself into the piano and into music, and decided to transfer to the music academy at Hamilton High School.

One day at Hamilton sufficed to banish all the pain from the previous year at Culver High, and the year before at Mirman: I was embraced by the musical community there, and I embraced it. My English teacher introduced me to the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson --in particular, "Self-reliance" -- which ushered in a golden age of hedonism and independence.

With this sudden comfort in my social life, my attentions were drawn to my family life. I began to feel that my parents had taken no serious interest in the things that were important to me; I felt that I existed to them only as a controllable and a punishable. I demanded respect, and we clashed bitterly. It took me a few months to realize that this had been a silly way to go about things. I decided instead to just follow my own path, with firm conviction, and to invite my parents along for the journey if they wished. This improved our relationship considerably, but almost nine years later, they are still taking their first steps on that journey.

The years at Hamilton were also years of sensual and sexual development. Through a number of encounters and relationships, the notions of physical intimacy and exploration developed into passions that ranked and still rank alongside (for instance) my passions for music and mathematics; to me they are all arts of equal beauty, intricacy, and depth.

And finally, my interest in mathematics blossomed. After my junior year, I attended a summer math camp at Stanford University. This camp showed me that abstract mathematics was something I wanted to pursue in my life; but perhaps more importantly, it introduced me to a girl, Emily, and a long-distance relationship with her that without question made me the person I am today, albeit in a very long and indirect way. During my last year at Hamilton, I cheated on Emily with about seven people.

Then came college. The first year, I went to UC Santa Barbara. There, due to my advanced training in music and mathematics from high school, I was allowed to take upper-level classes in both disciplines straight away. Academically, I flourished, but the school never really engaged me. Emily had gone to Northwestern University, and in my visits there, I fell head-over-heels in love with just about every aspect of the school. I transferred to Northwestern. The next three years there were among the best in my life.

Here the story splits into two threads. The first is about the development of my approach to life; the second is about the evolution of my academic interests.

Emily and I broke up the first week of college, but stayed in close contact, and both entertained desires to get back together --though never at the same time-- . Later that year, I confessed my previous infidelities; of course, this was a devastating revelation for both of us. The summer before my first year at Northwestern, we discussed the possibility of getting back together. The sticking point for Emily was wanting to know why I had cheated on her. I had no good answer: I knew that my physical needs drove me to my particular actions, but I could not explain why I consciously chose to hurt a person I loved. Naturally, this did not suffice as explanation, and so I turned inward to try to answer the question. I am convinced that this point in my history is of unparalleled importance; it marks the moment I became self-aware, conscious of my own actions and my ability to shape them.

I came to answer Emily's question, but this was of insignificant importance compared to the shift in awareness I had undertaken. Once I realized the power of introspection, I became obsessed with it, and worked hard to carve out a personal morality. I have developed the power to shape myself in this way ever since; now, five years later, I have come to wield this power with such precision that "who I am" evolves more or less concurrently with "what I want to be" .

Once I had discovered what I expected of myself, I felt that the same should be expected of others. That was a bit overzealous; consequently, I was a bit of a moralistic prick for a few months. Help in shedding the desire to judge others came from a most unlikely source: My junior year of college, there was a period of a few weeks in which I met about ten girls who had boyfriends. They had all been very intriguing, but, because they were in monogamous relationships, held themselves back from developing friendships with me. Naturally, I began to suspect something was very dangerous about the influence of monogamy.

The next year, while studying mathematics and Hungarian language in Budapest, I started cataloging all the reasons I felt monogamy was meaningless, and a danger to its participants and their relationships. As I did this, it dawned on me that many of the observations I was making had nothing to do with monogamy specifically, but with human interaction with general. My greatest realization was the utter subjectivity of all: Each person has unique values, and no set of values can be shown to be objectively better than any other. So the goal of life simply becomes the discovery, design, and implementation of my own values --- and I had already done that. The need to rally against "immorality" vanishes into thin air: Rather than pushing them away, I simply let the people I am incompatible with slip away. And similarly, by being completely honest and open about my values, I am able to draw in people who I am incredibly compatible with.

You might call this view of life "calm hedonism" . I attained this state of enlightenment in mid-late 2002, and I do not think it is too much of an exaggeration to say that for the past three years I have been completely satisfied with, and usually overjoyed by, my interactions with other people. I can even remember the last time I was upset with another human being: February 25th, 2002 . (I can "remember" , because I checked my logs from AOL Instant Messenger .) Oddly enough, that was the evening before my 20th birthday! That's pure coincidence of course. I had a beautiful birthday that year; from that day onward I have been free from being affected by what other people think.

So much for the development of my approach to life. My story concludes with the evolution of my academic interests.

In my junior year of college, my five-year love affair with mathematics started to unravel. I was faced for the first time with mathematical problems that pushed me to the limits of my abilities, and I began to wonder how long I could stay on top. The problem was that I had no idea what I was doing when I did mathematics. As far as I knew, I sat around thinking about a theorem until the proof "came to me" . I had done well so far, but I knew that sometimes the proofs hadn't come as easily as I would have liked, and sometimes they hadn't come at all. Not being completely in control of my abilities to solve mathematical problems became more and more of a frustration, until finally I decided I needed to distance myself from math and pursue some other discipline in depth.

So I turned to linguistics. Threw myself into it. Not much more to say, except that two years later, I still liked linguistics so much I applied to graduate school in it. I was accepted at UCSC and MIT, and chose the better school, UCSC, though I doubt my parents will ever forgive me for my choice.

Although I was doing mostly linguistics by the end of my junior year, I still went to Budapest the following year to study mathematics. One final hurrah, I figured. But in the middle of my year there, I came across a very peculiar thesis on my housemate's bookshelf. It was titled "On the shape of mathematical arguments", and made the claim that proofs didn't have to be intuited: they could be designed! The basic idea was this: when we have some "givens" and a "demonstrandum" ("theorem to be proved"), we write all these in formal notation, and then by simply comparing the syntactic shapes of the formulas, symbol by symbol, we are led to design the sort of manipulative steps that lead us from the givens to the demonstrandum. An advantage to this approach is that mathematics becomes completely formal, so that its methods can be explicitly taught to students; the intuitive methods of the traditional mathematician can at best be absorbed by osmosis. The thesis and, later, some related writings I found online suggested constructive tools for this hands-on method, phrased as "rules of the game".

Very slowly this mathematical style started to sink in. By the time I returned to Northwestern in the fall, I could already quite competently argue why certain traditional ways of doing mathematics were lousy, and I could often suggest better ways. But it took me until April 2004 --a full year and a half after my first encounter with the style-- to design my first proof. I remember the day so vividly: I was sitting in my bed, upset that all the proofs I had seen of a certain theorem were so ugly. So I sat down and made a conscious effort to construct a proof according to the "rules of the game". In about a minute, the proof was complete. I still have never found a proof of this theorem which rivals mine in elegance. And that makes sense, because my proof was not intuited, but carefully crafted, designed specifically for the purpose of establishing the theorem.

Even as I began my linguistics PhD at UCSC, I continued to work on mathematics, applying for and receiving a Fulbright grant to work with some of the inventors of this style here in the Netherlands. I stayed at UCSC for only a year, and then I came here. I've been here for almost exactly two months, and each day has been just about the most perfect day of my life so far.

So, a perfect life, with perfect social interactions... I couldn't really ask for more. I consider all these blessings to be the well-deserved reward for putting so much conscious effort into structuring and improving my life.

* * *

Well, that was not exactly "email-length", but writing it was a very good exercise for me. I hope you didn't mind me using you.

The plan to give you a feeling for my tastes and passions ended up being quite limited.

+j