It's Worth Living in the World

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"Homeostasis and Transistasis… one is a force to maintain the present status and the other is a force for constant change. Anything that lives is composed of these two conflicting forces." Ritsuko Akagi from the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* once brought this point up to explain how all living things, specifically humans, have a need for consistency in their lives and at the same time are in a constant need for change. Ultimately, these two conflicting forces drive our lives and always lead to change, but at a pace that is anything but wanted. Change is something that always happens, and it's always up to the individual to deal with that change if they want to survive. That is simply a fact of life, and my own is no exception.

"I don't understand. I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices, if everything just gets stripped away. I don't see the point…[when] the hardest thing in this world is to live in it." The character Buffy Summers from the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* said these words in the would-be final titled *The Gift.* In the end, she chose death rather than trying to live in this world; she chose to sacrifice her own life so that others could live. I believe that all people have faced a time in their lives when they feel the same way Buffy does. None of us really know how to live in this world, how to be safe and to live a good life

in a world that demands so much from us. What's more, we are almost programmed at birth to do things since we are expected to do it. As David Newman puts it in *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*,

The actions of individuals are not simply functions of personality types…they are also a reflection of shared cultural experiences…We [have had] many unwritten rules about which emotions are appropriate to feel, which are appropriate to display, and how intense the emotional display should be under specific circumstances. For instance, we're supposed to be sad at funerals, happy at weddings, and angry when insulted. (87)

Newman explains how people tend to respond to specific situations in a uniformed manner. And despite how the individual may feel, he or she must alter their own perceptions and convince himself or herself that there is a correct way to answer a situation in order to fit in with the rest of the world. In essence, society as a whole forces emotional control and values on us at birth, and despite how hard the society may try to enforce these views, in the end I feel the individual will always have to justify the world for themselves.

Let's start at my beginning. In 1984 I was given a great life at birth. I was handed an older brother and a loving mother and father who, despite the culturally found odds, have yet to part. I lived in an average suburban neighborhood for years. When I was finally old enough, I was enrolled in Holy Name of Mary elementary school. It might seem odd to go as far back as my elementary school, but it does actually play a role in the scheme of things. As David Newman puts it ,

In contemporary industrial societ-

ies the most powerful institutional agent of socialization, after the family, is education…the "personalized" instruction of the family is replaced by the "impersonalized" instruction of the school, where the…institution has such extended and consistent access to a person's social growth. (123-124).

In school, I was a below-average student to say the least. I failed, largely due to the fact that I truly didn't care and I wasn't really interested in grades, and I was put in the special education classes before I was even in the first grade. This was fine. I made many friends. I was able to sit back and avoid learning much of anything, and I was able to feel as though I belonged. This was all good, but in the second grade, Holy Name decided to cut these programs in order to save money, so I was eventually transferred to Grand Avenue Elementary School and I continued my less than stellar performance there. After less than two years, I was once again sent to the Special Education classes where I would once again be in a small group of people who would again try to learn what the other class couldn't teach. The only thing was that this time I was miserable. I hated being in this school, I hated how they put me in these classes again, and I hated how someone kept telling me how I wasn't where I should be and that I needed the help from people I never even asked to help me.

This went on through the rest of elementary school. I was with the "special" people and after a while I started to believe I was one of those people and I once again started to make friends and have a normal life. But, in the sixth grade, one of my teachers felt that I was smarter than I let anyone believe when she noticed how I managed to fit the class system into a simple drawing of the Middle Ages. As a result, she started keeping me in her sixth grade class. All I can really remember is I hated going to her class since I did twice as much work, I felt like I was forced into something against my own will, and I was alone. My Special Education teacher did not approve of her abducting me into her class day after day, refusing to let me return. I still remember being called into all sorts of meetings around this time. On a near daily basis, I saw my parents in the halls. I was constantly being told what was best for me. I was constantly being given different answers for what was best, and around this time I starting to feel like none of these people really did know what was best for me. The school system wasn't able to define what I was, and I was completely overwhelmed when it came to deciding my fate. My whole life I had been told I was 'slower' than my peers and that I should blindly do as I'm told. It was around this point that I stopped trusting adults. They sent me to one school to do good, and that school said I wasn't good enough and sent me someplace else. One place told me I wasn't smart enough and sent me to the remedial classes and then I would be sent back because that was where I belonged. Eventually Junior High came in the seventh grade, and the issue was solved by default since there were no remedial classes. And, despite what I had been told would happen all of my life, academically I started to flourish. I did my homework, I did the class work, passed the test, and everything was starting to be great in my life. However, this improvement in my life only went as far as academia. Socially my world had become smaller than ever with my former friends from Special Education being left behind in their courses. I was overwhelmed by all of these new people around me. All the teachers in my Junior High knew I was the "special" one and I was treated like it and they held my way though all of my classes.

My classmates hadn't grown up with me since I was in Special Education and treated me as a new student to the area, and my friends from Special Education were

being taken away against my will. So, like any living thing, I tried to adapt. I tried to make new friends and live my new found life. But, life threw me a few curve balls, and this new found life just never sat well with me. I tried to grow and to be normal like everyone else. But the fact of the matter was that I never really spent enough time around one group of people to ever really know what cliché I was supposed to gravitate toward. I had spent nearly my whole life in small group settings and it was fairly overwhelming to be placed in that situation, especially since I was never even told why this was happening to me at the time. Once more, the videogames, television shows, activates, and most other aspects of my self had been left behind. I was still thinking and behaving as a child since I never knew what to grow into. And I've never been a good pretender or poser, so everything I didn't know was blatantly obvious. So, as if all these other forces overwhelming me in my own life weren't bad enough, this also happened to be the time in my life that I started to question my own sexuality and came up with the answer every teenage boy fears. And this was yet another way that I could never be "normal," that I could never do what society expected of me. I was gay and I was alone. It was also around this point that people saw me as an easy target because of it.

Junior High became a dark time for my life. I had lost my friends and I had lost the comfort zone of Special Education that I had come to rely on over the years. Once more, I didn't have "normal" feelings about sex, I didn't have friends to rely on, I didn't understand the lifestyles of my peers, and I truly didn't know what I was supposed to do anymore. And it was around this time that the fights started as well.

The constant name calling started, the random jabs in the halls, the lies to the teachers, the empty promises of acceptance and friendship, all of it just kept coming and I truly felt helpless. And I fell for it ev-

ery time. I just wanted it all to end and I just wanted to stop crying, to finally find a place and to be where I could belong. My own feelings seem to mirror Kristy Canfield's words from her article, "Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty"*:*

> Low self-esteem was a direct result of being ridiculed and shunned by numerous peer groups, who viewed my difference as weird. The devastation continued as the ongoing process of cruel comments persevered. I felt as if I was fighting to stay afloat and each cruel word was a current desperately trying to pull me under. How long would I endure this pain before someone would throw me a lifeline? (20)

I fought, I laughed, I cried, I pleaded, I hid, I screamed, I did everything I could and at some point I decided that I wasn't going to be the victim anymore. And then my parents moved me to a new town.

My parents were scared for my life. Although to this day they try to remain oblivious to the personal affairs of my life, they knew things were bad at school, that I just spent my nights dreading going back there and hating myself for always screwing it all up. I talked about suicide, I talked about revenge, and I was basically creepy and bitter about living. So they did the only thing they felt they ever do: make the problem go away. They dragged me away from the problem and moved me to a new town called Merrick to begin a new life. There was nothing wrong with this new place; it was yet another Long Island suburb, it had tons of trees, and the usual assortment of anti-social neighbors. But even so, I hated it. In my eyes, I felt like I ran away from the problem, that I failed at living my life and now I was sent someplace else to repeat the same mistakes. So, I did the only thing I could do, I withdrew from all of it. I'm far from proud of this, but I threw in the towel,

because it seemed like all the struggling was for nothing. So, this time I didn't want anyone to get close to me, I didn't want a friend and I didn't need anyone to get to know me. I believed it would just be easier to distance myself from the whole thing. And for three years it worked; I was alone, I avoided those around me, and I was ignored because of it. But, I still wasn't happy when I pushed everyone away either. As Peter Dai put it in his paper, "Why is P Afraid to Love a Woman," "…some self, some subconsciously seated demon, keeps him silent" (22). In the same way Pete could never really identify what held him back from his dreams, I could never explain why I would always feel like I didn't belong in the world and that I didn't have a place I could ever call my own. I didn't want to be hurt anymore but I couldn't find happiness on my own either. So I just sunk into a depression and kept all my pain, all my discontent, and all my anger all to myself. Eventually, I felt like I woke up:

> You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain—but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life; that there's something wrong with the world; you don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. [This is the Matrix.] The Matrix is everywhere, it is all around us. Even in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes; it is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth… that you are a slave Neo, like everyone else, you were born into bondage; born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch; a prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be

told what the Matrix is. You have to experience it for yourself.

In the film *The Matrix*, the character Morpheus gives this speech to the un-awakened protagonist Neo. This speech illustrates that there is always a nagging feeling in our lives that there is more to life than meets the eye as symbolized by the Matrix itself, and how people are given the choice of whether or not they are willing to step into the world they have been denied up to that point in their lives. However, unlike in the film, no single pill is the immediate release into living the world. Rather, a series of events is always responsible for any type of meaningful awakening to take place in our lives. For me, that was in the Merrick library. Jobs weren't anything new to me but this time a job had led to my meeting a small group of friends, and from that I expanded and joined clubs in my school and made yet more small groups of friends there. And as I gradually moved ahead, as I stopped feeling apathetic towards the world around me, I was finally closer to people than I had ever been before. In a sense, it was when I finally started to accept myself that I had finally learned to be a person, I stopped trying to fit in and do as I was told and finally I learned to stand on my own two feet.

"You're focusing on the problem. If you focus on the problem, you can't see the solution. Never focus on the problem!" Arthur Mendelson was able to do more for Hunter 'Patch' Adams's life than any other doctor when he explained this point of view to him in the film *Patch Adams*. By living his life in the dynamic way Arthur wanted to, Patch was able to help out his fellow men and women more than any doctor, any agent, any weekend retreat—more than any other institutionalized method of healing—was able to accomplish for Patch. As an individual, my life was no different from Patch's in the sense that I was finally able to find happiness when I stopped look-

ing in the traditional places I was recommended to by the people in my life. My life is something I wouldn't trade for anything in the world nowadays. And as the preceding few pages indicate, I didn't feel that way in the past. I feel Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's theory of the five stages, as presented in her classic *On Death and Dying,* helps one to deal with acceptance and death and how that applies to the patterns of my own life and to the acceptance of who I really am in the end.

STAGE ONE: DENIAL/ISOLATION

> Homer: Kids, Kids! I'm not gonna die! That only happens to bad people!
>
> Bart: What about Abraham Lincoln?
>
> Homer: Err... He sold poisoned milk to school children.

The character Homer Simpson from *The Simpson's* has a history of living in denial about the facts of life and I have done the same with my life in many ways. I feel that my problems really began when I was taken away from Holy Name of Mary elementary in the second grade. I didn't want my life to change, so I simply refused to accept that it had. I didn't try to fit in and I didn't try to make anyone happy. I was alone there and I wanted to go back to the way my life used to be. And when I was refused, I hid from those around me and isolated myself by pretending that I couldn't handle work and that I needed to be treated differently if any good was going to come to me. So, I was treated differently, and for a while everything was good.

STAGE TWO: ANGER

"Somebody out there just doesn't want me to be happy," as said Max in the series *Dark Angel* and it sums up how I felt at this time in my life. This was about the time of Junior High when I stopped trusting those around me. I felt like they just kept screwing my life every time I let them control it, so I was going to prove them all wrong by doing what they felt I never could do, as in doing well in school. However, it was rage and anger that fueled my academics and not my own desire. And eventually, being alone and angry will cause anyone to burn out which led to my next stage.

STAGE THREE: BARGAINING

> Sean: Do you have a soul mate?
>
> Will: Define that.
>
> Sean: Someone you can relate to, someone who opens things up for you.
>
> Will: Sure, I got plenty.
>
> Sean: Well, name them.
>
> Will: Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Frost, O'Conner...
>
> Sean: Well that's great. They're all dead.
>
> Will: Not to me, they're not.
>
> Sean: You can't have a lot of dialogue with them.
>
> *Will: Not without a heater and some serious smelling salts.*

In the film *Good Will Hunting,* Sean Maguire points out this rather clear inability of Will Hunting to accept his loneliness in the world by pointing out that Will uses the works of the dead to superficially fill

the holes in his life. Will wants to live oblivious to his intellectual gifts and he wants to just let his life behind, or at least that is what he convinces himself of. But, just as Will says one thing, but secretly wants another, the same could be said of my own life and how I chose to be with people. I felt I could still hold people in disdain and become friends with them. I was still mad about all the changes and screw ups that happened in my life but I also wanted to fit in, to be part of the group and live my life as happily as everyone on TV. So I tried to do both, I tried to be angry with those around me but I also wanted them to like me and treat me as one of their own. Obviously, there is a rather large flaw in this arrangement. Ultimately, this stage really didn't last for long and soon led to the next stage.

FOURTH STAGE: DEPRESSION

"Inochi nante yasui mon sa… toku ni ore no wa na (Life is cheap… especially mine)" said Heero Yuy in the anime series "Gundam Wing." This was the longest stage. In my depression, the anger I once felt for all those around me started to turn inward; I started to hate myself for being different and failing to be just like everyone else. Toward the end of Junior High, people harassed me more than ever and the anger I once felt was now being inflicted on me. The combined hatred broke me. I just stopped trying to win and just accepted that I would never be much of anything and I just wanted all the pain to stop. It was around this time that I moved to Merrick to begin my new life, but I spent it feeling bad for myself and trying to just feel like I would never belong and that I could never be as good as those around me. I still faced my fear of being alone. Samara Cohen expresses similar views in her paper, "I Only Thought I Knew It All," when she said "One of my biggest excitements, and big-

gest fears… was the idea that I was going to be completely independent" (15). I always wanted to belong, but I never could because I feared being alone. But I also feared what people could do to me. However, it was in the act of stopping that fear that I finally was able to start to come to terms with myself. I started to learn that while I was alone, I could deal with that and that no one could ever tell me how to live my life and that I could be myself even if no one would like it. In a way I had to lose everything in order to gain anything.

ACCEPTANCE: FINAL STAGE

Finally, Whistler from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" most clearly represents this time in my life when he says,

Bottom line is, even if you see 'em coming, you're not ready for the big moments. No one asks for their life to change, not really. But it does. So what are we, helpless? Puppets? No. The big moments are gonna come. You can't help that. It's what you do afterwards that counts. That's when you find out who you are. You'll see what I mean.

In my life, the moment came toward the end of my junior year in High School. I stopped eating alone and I stopped spending my days in my room feeling sorry for myself. It was now that I could finally see that I had myself and that I didn't need to measure myself up to everyone around me to be a good person. In reality, I had to completely abandon society in order to gain society. I had to stop trying to be something and actually be something in order to have self-worth.

"I still don't know where my happiness lies. I'll still think about why I am here and whether or not it was good to come back.

But that's just stating the obvious over and over again. I am myself." The character Shinji Ikari said these words near the end of the film *The End of Evangelion* and I feel that these words also express how I feel at this stage in my life. In the scheme of things, the problems I faced in my life amount to very little. I never lived in the gutters, I always had food, and I always had good health. But it's my philosophy that it isn't the problems you face that make you, it's how you handle the problems that make you. Everyone is allowed to make a better life for themselves as long as they continue breathing, but the only way that can happen is if you are willing to accept that you have nothing but yourself in the scheme of things. That is the best way to be a part of society if you want to be something more than the cultural norms lap dog. You must be yourself in order to be a member of society; it's that contradiction that makes life worth living.

To leave off, the character Lester Burnham sums up life in this world in the end of the feature film *American Beauty* after he is killed.

> I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me. But it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once... and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst. And then I remember... to relax, and not try to hold on to it. And then it flows through me like rain. And I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. Don't worry... you will someday.

Lester was just one of countless discontented people in the world, but in the end he was able to do what so many people have been unable to do with their entire lives, and in the end he looked back and smiled. The hardest thing in this world is to live in it, but it's also one of the most rewarding things to do in this world. The important thing is that you live for yourself, no one has the right to make you live for anyone but yourself, and you don't have the right to give up on the life you've received.

When you can look in the mirror and smile, that's when you've won the right to call yourself 'I.'

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