

Observations

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Observations

1. Heavy Sundays
2. What Birthdays Take From Us
3. On Showing the Door
4. Why Do We Want What We Want?
5. Twenty Heart Explosions
6. Waiting for a Special Occasion
7. A Beautiful Sweaty World
8. Tarzan's Club
9. Better Them Than Me
10. The Alien in Me
11. Lady Time
12. Ten Packages of Salted Butter
13. I Am a Forty-Year-Old Robot
14. God's Broom
15. Ken's Six-Pack
16. My Honorary Doctorate
17. Superman at the Ballet
18. A Morning with Mr. Monopoly
19. Fortune Cookies Know Who's Reading Them
20. Sardine Babies on a Mission

Heavy Sundays

OBSERVATION 1

It's snowing. My kids ask me to drag them around on their sleigh. "Of course!" I tell them. Spending the weekends with my kids is a true blessing. But if it's so special, why do I feel the Sunday heaviness?

I notice that writing essays and watching Netflix take the heaviness away. Am I not getting enough dopamine on Sundays?

As I hear my kids laughing, I think of the romantic Japanese idea of *ichigo ichie*. It says there will never be a moment like this one. Ugh. Cliché.

Then I think of a snapshot: a single picture of me pulling around happy kids through dirty snow.

As I watch this picture in my mind's eye, the heaviness diminishes. Then I think: what if I collected these snapshots? What if I had one for every day of my life, and on the day before I die, I spread them all over the floor and looked at them at once?

I wonder how many heavy Sundays I'll be fortunate enough to experience.

What Birthdays Take From Us

OBSERVATION 2

Don't leave, I want to say. But the Heraclitus Snowglobe is already forming.

It's too late: her seven-year-old self is being petrified. She'll never be seven again, and there's nothing we can do. Tomorrow is her birthday, and time is generating a Heraclitus Snowglobe that contains her seven-year-old smiles, tears, tantrums, jokes. It's not a sad time, but it *is* the end of an era.

I hold the era in my hands.

A defined period of time crystallized into what I call a Heraclitus Snowglobe: a continuum of polar-opposite material I can shake. Experiences, I'm thinking, may be collected along a continuum that grows with time—that time determines the size of the experiential spectrum. The longer the time, the wider the spectrum, and the more extreme the experiences. Time allows polar opposites to stretch away from each other; this gives access to more horrifying, but also more blissful, experiences.

I speculate that a single experience may touch multiple points of the spectrum at once. When my mother died, for example, I experienced the most

intense pain and the most intense love simultaneously. Is it possible that this happens with every experience? Maybe. Could it be that experiences come already balanced?

If experiences always contain the same ratio of polar opposites, and time merely allows the spectrum to grow—while the proportion between good and bad remains constant—then perhaps this is why Marcus Aurelius said that a man of forty has seen it all. In that case—and the Stoics would agree—a one-year-old has seen it all too. Two different spectrum sizes. The same ingredients.

As I say goodbye to my seven-year-old, I welcome the older girl into my home. Seven Snowglobes I've been lucky to collect. *They are all the same*, says Marcus.

Good. I look forward to living out the same continuum with this amazing human.

On Showing the Door

OBSERVATION 3

The job of a teacher, I believe, is to convince students to find a door, enter it, and experience *the way*—their way. The teacher knows it's worth finding the door and points to where it is.

As a violin teacher, I usually have about three months to convince students that entering the door is actually worth it. I call this period *the Initial Wave of Enthusiasm*, because after about three months, they learn the truth: learning requires effort. Learning the violin is school, not a hobby. Netflix is a hobby.

Why embrace a hard hobby when you could Netflix? I like this answer: because any kind of serious training resembles life, and developing skills arms you to be better at living it.

Some will say: *But life is difficult already*. Here's my answer: learning a skill and making it your hobby is far healthier than consuming crap. If you're having a rough time, by all means, go rest. Don't take violin lessons. Don't learn anything. I'm not promoting cold showers or dumb asceticism. I believe discipline gives back. More importantly, I'm saying that you have a choice to make—let me explain.

I used to believe that the teacher's job was to inspire students. I don't anymore. Here, *inspiration* is often

used as a synonym for motivation, and I've learned that motivation is not really the teacher's job; it's the student's. As a teacher, I'm here for those who want something—anything—but you've got to want at least one thing from me, and I have to be able to give it to you. Motivation cannot be forced because it is intrinsic. Students must want to want.

I show the door. I guide those who wish to be guided and invite the hesitant to taste what is possible. I refuse to overgive where there is no receptivity. Teaching, then, is not about giving equally to all. It is the art of discernment: challenging the motivated, sparking curiosity in the ambivalent, and respecting the boundaries of the unwilling.

My mission is to prove that active creation is worthier than consuming crap. That all you need to bring is a bit of willingness, so a teacher can guide you somewhere worth your time. And that by going through that door, you'll likely learn far more than the price of admission.

Why Do We Want What We Want?

OBSERVATION 4

The pigeon doesn't stand a chance—or so he thinks.

Closer, closer...closer.

Yeah right! The pigeon knows better.

The boy doesn't give up and charges after it joyfully. I smile and think of my own kids.

It's always loud here in the plaza—buses arriving, people speaking all kinds of languages, kids running after pigeons. On my breaks, I like to walk and go get a snack in the city. That boy is making me think about what I chase.

Why do I want what I want?

Why do I want specifically those things and not others?

And exactly what part of me decides what I want? Is it my brain, or my past, or my genes? It would be so nice to call a divine being and get a response like: "Hey man, in this life you have to struggle with art because you didn't do much of that in your past life."

Or a scientist who tells me: "Hey man, you want what you want because your parents combined in precisely

the right bizarre way. That's why you make music.
Come here, let me explain."

But the monk and the scientist never show up. No one can explain to me why I want what I want. I start speculating. I start philosophizing—and by the time I'm done, I'm right where I started: with no concrete answers.

Now I have to go back to work. Go back to work without answers.

The kid wants the pigeon and I want to know why I want what I want.

Neither of us catches what we think we want.

But the chase...the chase...there's something about it.

Twenty Heart Explosions

OBSERVATION 5

For 26 years I've been a musician.

Over the years, I've played alongside exquisite soloists.

I've witnessed some incredible performances.

But I've only had about 20 heart explosions.

Less than 20, actually.

My blood turns colors, and then...tears.

It started in my thirties.

I'm 40 now. So roughly 2 explosions a year.

Is it euphoria?

Or have I simply grown old and stupid?

My daughter noticed one day.

We were at a concert.

She's 8, and found it very peculiar.

Now, she stares at me when we go to concerts.

Waiting.

Is dad's heart exploding today?

I feel her gaze.

We've talked about it. I catch her watching me.

She smiles timidly knowing that I know she knows.

Do you know how many performances I play each year?

How many concerts I go see?

It's almost not worth it.

But it is.

I don't chase the explosion.

One cannot do that.

It's like a beautiful big bang.

Spontaneous. Explosive. Colorful. Perfect.

Is it euphoria?

Who knows.

Is this what you get when you are a musician and turn 40?

I don't know.

But I can't wait for the next one.

Waiting for a Special Occasion

OBSERVATION 6

Saving money.

A bottle of wine.

Saving a favorite shirt for a “special” occasion.

Future special is dangerous.

Only now can you use that thing.

Only now can you drink that special bottle of wine.

Now is doable and thus always special.

I heard that life was a marathon.

But that you don’t get to cross the finish line.

You’ll die somewhere before arriving.

And yet, we believe that the finish line is special.

But it’s non-existent.

The line is not real if you can’t reach it.

If that’s true, then now is the only special.

Use it now.

Buy it now.

Risk it now.

Before you can't use it at all.

I'm not saying be reckless.

I'm saying don't wait.

Share the special bottle with loved ones.

Laugh.

Run the marathon until it's time to disappear.

Hopefully when you disappear,

you'll have used it...

You'll have drunk it.

You'll have bought it.

Enjoyed it.

Now is never the finish line.

Now is the only special.

A Beautiful Sweaty World

OBSERVATION 7

I am burning.

It's hard to breathe.

Extreme temperatures hurt my skin.

Is it a mind trick?

I'm alright.

We're alright.

Although my neighbor's skin hurts.

He thinks he cannot bear the heat.

The Goldilocks zone makes sure he can.

I think about the temperature of the Sun.

Of Pluto.

The Moon, even Mars.

Am I really going to complain?

About my survivable weather?

I go out again.

And I want to complain.

I'm hot. Sweaty.

I'm not having an easy time.

Air conditioning!

I need it. Really?

I am alive because of it.

Here, it's not too hot.

Although my neighbor would disagree.

And honestly, I feel like taking his side.

I think again about the imaginary circle surrounding
the Sun.

The space where life can happen.

I'm not so hot now.

I smile.

I see a sweaty world.

A beautiful, sweaty world.

At least for now.

Tarzan's Club

OBSERVATION 8

One click.

My new underwear comes tomorrow.

I remember reading they mistreat their employees.

One click. I'm supporting them.

And in a few years my underwear will end up in the ocean.

But I need underwear!

I need clothes.

A laptop.

How can I know if I'm contributing to evil?

What's fair? Should I join Tarzan's club?

I hear about microplastics.

I hear about the minimalism movement.

And about a million other things I should be doing.

I'm overwhelmed.

How can I be perfect?

It would take more than 24 hours a day.

How much plastic can I buy without remorse?

Amazon Prime is awesome.

But what about their employees?

Am I taking showers longer than ten minutes?

How many gallons of water should I use?

I look at my neighbor.

He consumes without caring.

I want that freedom.

But... I care about the world.

And what about global warming?

Some say global warming isn't real.

Ok, now I'm screwed. I have to do research.

I need more hours.

My other neighbor cares even less.

In fact, everyone I know just buys freely.

But what about Earth?

I imagine millions of Amazon packages moving around the world.

I imagine the oceans full of used underwear.

Not Tarzan's underwear. The other kind.

The kind that takes decades to disappear.

How to proceed?

What may I consume?

I want to know the exact amount I should consume to be considered a good guy.

Is the only way out to join Tarzan's club?

Where is he?

"Hey, Tarzan, where are you?"

"Ugh... Tarzan, please!"

"Help me understand what's right!"

"Do I join Amazon Prime?"

And then Tarzan appears behind some trees and says:

"What's that?"

Better Them Than Me

OBSERVATION 9

I look out the window.

Cars look like ants.

They follow the rules and avoid collision.

One guy just honked. He's annoyed by something.

But after a while he, too, follows the order.

From up here I see order in the streets.

I see it in the way houses are built around the city.

From up here, order seems to work.

Ha! Someone just broke the order.

This driver should have calculated better.

He's now blocking cars with a green light.

And so the innocent pays for the faults of the guilty.

Why couldn't the guilty man wait?

Maybe he was distracted.

Or he didn't realize traffic was stuck on the other side.

This makes me wonder...

Could it be that making the innocent pay a small price
is sometimes better?

Hey! Someone else is breaking the rules.

There's a really loud car.

The music...

He probably wants to share it with others.

How nice of him.

He likely thinks that everyone shares his taste.

Now I hear an ambulance.

People make space for it. Oh wait!

It's not an ambulance. It's a fire truck.

Order was broken, and fire broke out.

These brave men will restore order.

Is order always good?

Do rules really benefit everyone?

Should we follow them blindly?

The rule says I have to go work for money now.

Break's over.

The Alien in Me

OBSERVATION 10

I step out of my saucer.

I landed on Earth.

But who made all this?

Why am I even here?

And why am I even asking these questions?

Why can't I just know everything?

I wonder whether that's by design.

But why would they give me this urge to know?

I ask around what's going on.

Some say a god did all this to amuse himself.

Others say we are just atoms.

Others believe we are at school.

Earth is a school!?

I like that.

But what happens after graduation?

You can't know.

It's hard to accept that.

So I start imagining different scenarios.

Then I stop daydreaming.

If the truth was concealed by design...

Why waste time imagining the unimaginable?

Is life on Earth really a learning experience?

To learn what?

Lessons.

What sort of lessons?

Tough ones.

Why?

You can't know.

What now?

Pay attention to the teacher.

Where is the teacher?

Right there.

Lady Time

OBSERVATION 11

She told us to shut up.

My instinct was to protect my kids.

But the old lady was right.

We were at a classical music concert.

My kids were making too much noise.

I apologized.

They obediently stayed quiet until the end.

I glanced a few times at the old lady.

She was totally immersed in the music.

We had arrived late at the concert because of train delays.

The old lady arrived late too.

And so we were not allowed into the main hall until intermission.

So they put us in a different room, and we all watched the concert on a huge screen.

I decided to pull out some snacks from my backpack.

My kids loved it!

Servers were preparing drinks noisily.

And the music was barely audible through the speakers.

Still... the old lady never left the music.

At the end of the first half, the old lady came out of her trance.

She turned to my kids and thanked them for staying quiet.

And then she explained herself.

"You know," she said.

"I'm old, and I needed to take it all in because I don't know how much time I have left."

"I promise you I'm not an evil witch."

At that point, my kids and I started laughing.

Even though I cannot imagine what it feels like to be that old...

I can understand her reasoning.

She was protecting something. Her time. Her attention.

A unique experience she would never get back.

What if I did the same?

What if I lived like that—respecting time, experience,
and attention.

Now, at the age of 40.

Because time is not guaranteed.

What a wonderful visit from Lady Time.

Ten Packages of Salted Butter

OBSERVATION 12

“You’re only allowed to buy four,” said the cashier.

She exploded. “Why?”

“Because there’s a limit of four per customer.”

“But I didn’t read that anywhere...”

“I want to speak with your supervisor!”

The woman in front of me wanted to buy ten packages of salted butter.

And I had a front-row seat for the show.

The supervisor arrived.

Indeed, the lady was not allowed to buy more than four packages.

“So you’re telling me that if I go out of the store and come back again, *then* I can buy four more?”

“That is correct,” said the supervisor.

“Well, I’m doing that!”

She stormed out of the store.

The lady could have bought a hundred packages of salted butter.

All she needed was time.

Time to go out and come back.

Time to stand in line once again.

Should the supervisor have simply let her buy the butter?

She was going to buy the butter no matter what.

This reminds me of Heraclitus.

He said that you can't enter the same river twice.

That's true in my store.

Walk back in.

No one can tell who you were before.

I Am a Forty-Year-Old Robot

OBSERVATION 13

I was eleven when it happened.

My first chord changed everything.

The A minor chord.

Soon, I learned all the chords.

And joined a couple of music groups.

And then, at fourteen, I met the violin.

She was different.

I joined the school orchestra.

But there you can't jam.

Classical musicians don't jam.

They train. They audition.

They build mathematical precision.

Jamming loosens you up.

Auditions tighten you up.

But the symphony orchestra kept calling me.

And I started building serious technique at age 17.

Eventually I got to play alongside classical superstars.

So it was worth it, in a way.

However, I lost something.

Joy.

The joy for music.

Music became mathematics.

Metrics.

Technique. Pyrotechnics.

How could I enjoy music if all I heard was equations?

Concerts became mathematical seminars.

All of them.

I went to analyze metrics.

To admire perfect formulas.

To see fireworks live.

Numbers tell the truth.

They tell you where you are.

They tell you how to improve.

Want to become better?

Count.

Then beat the number next week.

Getting better can be addictive.
I fell into that trap.
Don't get me wrong...
Humans should want to get better.
But a life full of equations is not a human life.
It's the life of a robot.
You can't feel a written equation.
You see it.
But music... music you can feel!
You can feel it in your bones.
Adults optimize.
Kids play.
But adults can play, too.
Otherwise, they slowly become robots.
I am a robot.
A forty-year-old robot.
Today I sat with my eleven-year-old self.
We played the A minor chord that started it all.
We were both smiling.

God's Broom

OBSERVATION 14

Is the world small?

Not to an ant.

Not to me.

It looks huge from my window.

I see my kids playing in the garden.

To the Milky Way galaxy they are just dust.

But they mean the world to me.

They are my world.

Perhaps everything is big and small.

Maybe even actions and things.

A letter may seem like a meaningless rant.

But it could also provide vital information.

And for the writer, a source of relief.

Am I small?

Yes. And big too, and very strong.

Ask my kids.

A light-year is a long way.

But even the universe may be a speck of dust.
It depends on who's sweeping.

Ken's Six-Pack

OBSERVATION 15

I saw Ken and Barbie the other day.

Ken had a six-pack.

Barbie was fit too.

I was out for a walk in the woods.

And they were jogging toward me.

Ken didn't wear a shirt.

It's summer.

His six-pack was on full display.

A student of mine has been working on his six-pack
for a year.

He got tired of being chubby, so a year ago he made
a decision.

This summer he's ready to show it off.

I see my student once a week.

I watched him transform.

Diet. Exercise.

He's achieved his goal, and now looks like Ken.

His motivation was always to show off his six-pack by summer.

I wonder if that's why Ken didn't wear his shirt.

Would I want a six-pack?

Of course!

Would I want to work hard for a six-pack?

Nope.

Why not?

I don't need one to be strong and healthy.

Being admired costs energy.

Energy to make money and buy something impressive.

Energy to exercise and build a six-pack.

But energy is finite and precious.

Is it worth spending it on admiration?

You know what else costs energy?

Hugs.

Kisses.

Their return on investment is hard to beat.

I see Ken again.

He smiles his perfect smile and winks at me.

Ken says nothing.

Almost as if he were made of plastic.

My Honorary Doctorate

OBSERVATION 16

I just received an honorary doctorate.

It took me fourteen years.

I guess that doesn't make it very honorary.

I also completed several minors.

During the ceremony they even awarded me a bachelor's degree.

Welcome to Earth University.

Where degrees are invisible and no one ever leaves campus.

Don't worry.

You can take as long as you want to finish your degree.

Some people take eighty years.

Others take even longer.

What happens after graduation?

You enroll in another program.

But I don't want to keep learning.

You have to. Otherwise, you leave campus.

Where would I go?

Perhaps nowhere.

Perhaps to an even harder university.

What's the point of earning all of these degrees?

To learn.

Learn what?

The things that make up your experience.

Why do I need experience?

Because being enrolled *is* the experience.

I'm lost. Can't I just take the pleasant classes?

No. That isn't the whole curriculum.

Experience includes the entire spectrum, not just your favorite subjects.

But some classes hurt.

Yes. They're part of the experience too.

What if I refuse to learn?

Then perhaps you're ready to leave.

Wait...

I never asked to come here.

Are you sure?

Superman at the Ballet

OBSERVATION 17

Superman sat next to me.

Behind us lurked evil forces.

He held his phone tightly with both hands.

We waited for the show to start.

His phone case read, “Best father in the world.”

It had a picture of him and a kid.

Superman’s leg bounced impatiently.

Then the ballet started.

Our daughters went on stage.

Superman had a miserable face.

He had a tough time staying awake.

I saw him fighting Boredom.

I wanted to join him.

But do I really need to fight Boredom?

Isn’t there another option?

My daughter caught my eye.

She found me in the audience.

She looked for my reaction.

I smiled approvingly.

No. I was not faking it.

I was tired, but I was glad to be there.

Don't get me wrong.

I wanted to join Superman in his fight with Boredom.

But there was another way.

I thought about how my daughter practiced for weeks.

I'd seen those moves many, many times.

But this was a sort of graduation.

And I chose to be present.

And so did Superman.

We both wrestled with love and duty that day.

In the end, we both stayed awake.

And even enjoyed some of it.

Duty. What is duty?

Perhaps it's defeating Boredom and Tiredness.

Perhaps it is being present.

For the people who matter.

Perhaps it's all about turning into Superman.

And wearing a badge of honor.

Something like a cellphone cover.

"Best father in the world."

Damn, he is.

A Morning with Mr. Monopoly

OBSERVATION 18

I wake up. It's Sunday.

No pings.

Actually, my kids woke me up.

They were laughing so loudly.

No pings.

I move one leg. Then the other.

Then head to the bathroom.

I brush my teeth.

My wife prepares breakfast.

We gather at the table.

We eat. We chat.

I do the dishes.

No pings.

We spend the morning playing monopoly.

Then Uno cards.

We talk about the summer.

Then we have lunch.

No pings.

Not a single ping.

I win.

They spend millions to get my attention.

I am no match for that kind of power.

Yet sometimes I win.

With willpower alone.

It's a tough fight.

And I often lose.

I lose because I entered the game without a plan.

They got me.

I just hope they don't get my kids.

Not yet, anyway.

I want my kids to enter that world with a plan.

No one is a match for that kind of power.

Still, today we defeated the mighty pings.

We also fought during Monopoly.

But that's something else.

Fortune Cookies Know Who's Reading Them

OBSERVATION 19

The wrapper crackles.

She holds a fortune cookie.

I watch.

She struggles to pull out the message.

Her strategy is to bite the cookie.

I can't wait to read it myself.

But it's hard to read it from my seat.

We're on a moving train.

I'm behind her.

I lean in.

I...just... can't get the right angle.

I catch the word *mistake*.

Then she flips the paper over to read the German translation.

And again she flips it back to read the English version.

Okay, I can't take it any longer.

I'm risking it.

If she catches me, well...

I'm too curious.

And I won't go to jail for this, would I?

I make my move.

"Mistakes are forgiven if you have the courage to admit them."

Did I just violate the secrecy of correspondence?

I've never understood that anyway.

I've never received a piece of mail that my family couldn't open.

Did I just make a mistake?

Was the cookie talking to me?

In that case, all I have to do is admit my mistake.

Just like that, it's forgiven.

Sardine Babies on a Mission

OBSERVATION 20

Two hundred sardines in a can.

I'm next to a baby sardine.

She's on a mission to rip my eardrum out.

Am I deaf yet?

The stranger next to me seems to need more space

He presses his elbow against me.

At least baby sardine is quiet now.

We taxi onto the runway.

We're about to go airborne.

I hate this part.

My seatmate's arm hairs tickle my arm.

Gross! And my cute little neighbor starts crying again.

More problems...

There's another baby sardine in front of me.

She's joined the mission.

They both cry now.

Ha-ha. What a circus.

A circus in a can.

Okay, we're airborne.

Still climbing.

I hate this sensation.

But the babies are quiet now.

Damn it! One of them started crying again.

She's really going to rip my eardrum out this time.

I bet during severe turbulence I wouldn't care.

I prefer arm hairs and loud crying to turbulence.

I'll enjoy the circus.

Sardine life is a privilege.

Mozart would have thought it magical.

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