

The Narratives  
Keeping the Soul Alive

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For  
JoAnn  
The Mathews family  
and  
Larry Mathews, my inspiration

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## I – The Voice

Open mail...

Read mail.

Open Facebook...

Read new posts.

Open Yahoo news...

Read headlines.

~

Refresh mail...

Refresh Facebook...

Refresh the news...

I'm constantly deluged by stimuli. Coming from all directions and never stopping for just a second. The sound of parking lot traffic outside the local Starbucks where I'm sitting enjoying the last month of warm evenings before the season changes, the chirping of car alarms, the foot traffic of people coming and going – their eyes buried in the screens of their smartphones, texting or posting to Facebook, all while walking and not paying any attention to anything in their path, bombarding me at every turn.

Amazing...

Amazing how my attention span has turned to shit in about the last fifteen years. I just realized that the trash that I needed to take to the dumpster and had placed in the trunk of my car only ten minutes ago is still sitting in the trunk.

At times, I have the attention span of a gnat. And only now, after all this time has passed have I realized it. I remember back to a simpler time, about twenty years ago, before the Internet, before smartphones, hell, even before cell phones, to a time when I felt quiet and could easily be alone with my thoughts. It was a much simpler time, a time when I actually could think without distraction. I was in my early twenties and had boundless creative energy. I was a writer. I picked it up as a hobby in my teens, filling a journal with life experiences, dreams, and fantasies. I enjoyed writing so much that I began branching out, pulling the thoughts in my head together to be creative, to come up with stories and put them on paper.

I used to sit on the stoop of my parents' home in the summer, bask in the evening's warm glow and, with pen and paper, draft short stories and write in my journal. In college, I did some writing for my college literary magazine and submitted a few stories to independent comic book publishers in the hope

I'd get writing credits for a few published stories. Unfortunately, I landed only one backup story in a future issue of a book titled *Quadrant* that never went to print because the publisher went out of business. I missed my fifteen minutes of fame by one issue... Number nine. I had the backup story in issue number nine. The last book in the series was published with issue eight; heartbreaking for a twenty-year-old who wanted to get published.

Yet I persisted. I kicked around a few other ideas and began working on a story of my life growing up with my friends. It was a monster project that I finished as a draft just this past summer. I can't say I'm entirely happy with it for a number of reasons, first and foremost being the lack of character development and imagery. Looking back at my early work, I realized these two core components were always a struggle as I never seemed to hit on all cylinders. In re-reading what I'd written for my literary mag and for the comic books, I realized I'm really not all that creative. I love the horror and thriller genres but don't possess the imagination and the competence to write the next great thriller. No. It's not in the cards.

What I can say after spending lots of leisure time writing my life story is that when it comes to writing, my bread and butter is in narration. It's where I'm most comfortable, and the thoughts flow easily from mind to paper. And this brings me back to the here and now.

Whatever creativity I possessed in my formative years has been lost. The creative energy and sheer excitement of writing down what was in my head was such a rush! I miss it. This is my attempt at getting it back. It's my attempt to find my voice once more, for it has been lost in the immediacy of each day, and has been bombarded into oblivion by the endless distractions I experience in my daily life. Many nights I've lain in bed and have stared at the ceiling fan above my head in the darkness, wondering why I couldn't turn my brain off just enough to fall asleep. Plagued by insomnia, even on those nights I've been completely exhausted.

Out of balance.

Something's definitely wrong with this picture.

It took me long enough but I've finally figured it out. Instead of staring at the ceiling when I can't seem to turn off, I will write what's in my head. I have no idea where this journey will take me, nor where it will end, but if I can learn something about myself in the process and can learn how to switch my brain off, it will have been worthwhile.

So it begins...

Recapturing my voice.

## II – September

Facebook friend requests... It's what makes the world go 'round.

It's amazing the conversations you hear sitting out in front of the local Starbucks. Aside from the general craziness and chaos happening both inside the store and outside on the patio, you hear the fragments of conversations. Sometimes, it's just a word or two...

A sentence...

A partial thought...

Or an entire rehashing of the events that transpired the previous night at a local club.

But Facebook... yes Facebook! That's where it's at.

Only two minutes after I sat myself down under an umbrella on the Starbucks patio did I catch a voice nearby shout, "Hey!" from around the side of the building, then some chatting. A few moments later, I heard a car parked around that same side of the building pull out of the lot, then saw a young couple emerge from that general direction and walk towards the entrance. I caught the young woman in conversation saying, "She hasn't responded to my Facebook friend request yet! Why wouldn't she do that?" She was obviously referring to the woman in the car who had just left the scene of the crime.

I don't know why.

The young man walking with her couldn't offer up any answers either, and really, why should he even try? The expression on his face was that of a defeated man.

Poor bastard.

I wonder what other mystery-of-life questions he has to field for her.

Inanity.

We've become bogged down with the inanity of today. I sit here and watch another beautiful late summer sunset, feeling at peace and wishing I could do this year round. It calms me. It allows me to clear my mind and think about my mystery questions of life: What's my purpose in life? What goals can I accomplish? Where do I go from here? Well, I do know I'm not going back to my other Google Chrome window to check on the status of my pending friend requests.

September.

It's a transition month for me. I'm a warm-weather person by nature, and the cooling of this month is slightly depressing. I revel in the warmth of summer and enjoy the entire season, regardless of the fact that it gets hotter than the seventh level of hell here some days. Yes, I'm a little crazy to enjoy the heat as much as I do. I can only hope they serve coffee in Hades.

Give me a few weeks and I'll make the transition. I've always done my best work while sitting outside in the evenings with a warm summer breeze blowing lightly across my face and the colors of red, orange, and purple filling the western sky.

Cathartic.

It's easy to let life get in the way of this experience. It's happened to me time and time again. I take some solace in the fact that I now know when it's time to unplug and ground myself. Yet for many, it's hard to do. It takes an understanding of oneself and a willingness to make the time. Then again, how do you make the time when the mail comes in fast and furious, the status updates stack up in rapid-fire succession, and the kitchen sink is overflowing with dirty dishes? It's about making it a priority.

Priorities.

We all have them. Be they tuning into "American Idol" each week to wait for the next train-wreck performance, telling the world what flavor ice cream we are currently eating, or throwing the dishes in the dishwasher, we decide what's important.

What has become important is self-importance. After all, it's easy to feel important when you can post anything you want, whenever you want, to a wall of your own. Then you get to see how many people like what you've posted to boot. And you get this for the steep price of... \$0!

Sure I'm as guilty as anyone else at reinforcing this behavior. I've pressed the "like" button many times. However, my wall is clean. I certainly don't feel the need to tell anyone what flavor ice cream I'm eating, nor care to advertise that I'm lost in a sea of emotional turmoil at times. What I'm really wondering is how we get at the core of what we are feeling and post that in a way that allows us to get some of our questions answered. How about some self-reflection over self-importance?

It's September once more. It certainly comes around much faster these days than it did when I was younger. Another summer's end is fast approaching...

Sadness...

Well, a little.

There's still time to get my head straight and get some things done. Still time to reflect on the past year and recognize the many changes that I've gone through in the effort to find my way. Still time to put my game face on and put a plan in motion. Yet just enough time to enjoy what I came out here to enjoy.

The sun has dipped below the horizon and all that remains is a purple and black sky. It's a little cooler now but not cool enough for a jacket, sweatshirt, or hoodie.

Sunday evening.

Things have quieted...



It's nice.

This place has turned into my own little corner of the universe, where I can put the chaos of the day aside and unplug. Now I just have to remind myself to do it more often. After all, it is September. I won't have too many of these evenings left. I'd better make the most of them.

### III – My Religion

Bombings...

Killings...

All in the name of religion.

It hasn't been a good week. The U.S. ambassador to Libya was killed this week in a storming of the U.S. embassy in Benghazi. Protests and violence have been breaking out all across the Middle East because of a short film released on YouTube that portrayed the prophet Muhammad in a less than flattering manner. Of course, that's just the tip of the iceberg. We're two days out from the event and will, without a doubt, learn more about what really happened and what will happen in subsequent days. No doubt, there's more to the story than what we've been told. Yet, it brings up a question of how we coexist in a world where religious fundamentalism and extremism is a reality?

What if we had no concept or understanding of the idea of religion in this civilization?

Would it be a different world?

It seems senseless to me, as it does to many others.

Rioting...

Burning symbols of the West to the ground.

Hardee's Tripoli... Gone. The KFC right next door... Gone.

Hell, at least we have a sense of humor about it on this side of the pond. Someone started a #chickenwingjihad twitter feed and the comments are quite entertaining.

God bless the Internet.

Religion is completely maddening. I was born and raised Catholic as were most of my friends. I went to Catholic school for the first twelve years of my education and I attended church regularly as a kid. However, I did have pretty cool parents when it came to religion, unlike many of my friends.

I opted out of the Catholic faith when I was thirteen years old. That year, my parents told me that I could make my own decisions about going to church most weeks. However, I still had to attend with the family on the Catholic holidays, at least for a little while longer. Telling a thirteen-year-old he no longer has to go to church on Sunday is like letting a toddler run wild in a candy store. It was a free-for-all. Finally I could sleep late on Sunday or go out and start tossing the baseball around with one of my non-church going buddies. I took full advantage.

Free at last!

After all those Sundays sitting in church and after all the schooling, I did learn a thing or two. And it didn't make all that much sense. First, I got pretty used to seeing those collection baskets make

their way down the pews twice each mass, and seeing people tossing their church envelopes, bills, or coins in there with each pass. The ones who didn't contribute were always given dirty looks by the ushers.

And the readings... They just bored the hell out of me. I did catch on the fact that I was to swear off all other gods and I was a servant of the Lord and all that stuff. Still, at this age, did I really care about being a servant of the Lord? I was already a servant in my own house! I had chores to do! Oh, and that pesky little rape issue, which has turned this country on its head over the past of month – that whole “women can't get pregnant if they are forcibly raped because the woman's body shuts fertilization down” thing? They taught us that in 11th-grade religion class in Catholic high school.

Uh oh, I just opened up another can of worms...

No, aside from all the failed indoctrination efforts, what really made my day was the fact I no longer had to go to confession. That was the ticket. After all, I found it a little unnerving that whacking off was a sin and I needed to confess it to a priest while sitting in a darkened confessional and trying to come off as being very sorry for what I did. I knew I was coming back the following week to confess it again, so it sort of defeated the purpose of going in the first place. Freeing myself of that nonsense was a relief, particularly because my two favorite pastimes at fourteen years of age were whacking off and watching porn in a friend's house, which just led to more whacking off.

But as I got older, more of the religion didn't make sense. I read more. I questioned more. I came into my own. I'm a logical person by nature and I have to see hard evidence to believe something. Yeah, we hear about “miracles” all the time, but what qualifies as a miracle? Is it really God or is it the fact that some things may just be beyond our realm of comprehension as human beings? To think we are the most advanced civilization in the entire universe is a bit arrogant, is it not?

I get it that people need faith to get through their lives. I get it that the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow may be what we call “Heaven.” I get it. It works for some, doesn't work for others.

I hesitate to discuss the topic because it stirs up a swath of emotion on many levels. To ask questions and possibly shake someone's foundation to the core can set off some serious nastiness. I've seen it. Yet I've been told “I'm praying for you.” That and \$2.10 will get you a Grande coffee at some Starbucks locations.

I believe in the power of me. I'm in control of my own destiny. I make my own breaks. It's easy to throw your hands up in the air and say “It's God's plan. I just have to have faith.” But I can't go there. As one without faith, I can't even think about playing the faith card.

For me, it's about living my life to the fullest of my potential. It's about examining who I am at my core to find my shortcomings and to make changes for the better. It's about making mistakes and learning from them. It's about being a decent, moral human being, caring about my fellow man and doing right by them. It's about being non-judgmental, respecting others' opinions, and taking away a different perspective from each person who lets his or her thoughts be known.

The hardest thing to do is to respect a difference of opinion and try to see things from another's point of view. That's where the problem comes in. Most cannot reach that stage of "enlightenment."

I'm not sure what happens in the afterlife, or if there even is one. If there is a hell and I'm going there, then that's my bad for not heeding the warnings, but you can't save me. I am who I am and logically, I can't wrap my brain around it. For the true believer, I get it. It takes faith. If you've got that, then it's tangible and I can certainly understand your philosophy. For the rest of us, that leaves just us. All I can do is try to leave something behind that makes a tiny piece of this world a better place than it was before I arrived. If I can make a difference in a positive way, then I will have fully reached my potential.

That's my religion.

## IV – We're All Assholes

So I'm sitting out in front of my favorite hangout wracking my brain trying to come up with something to write about and getting aggravated. I know this is exactly the thing I shouldn't be doing right now. When I came up with the idea for this project, I told myself that I was to write only when I was hit with an idea or when I was having one of those insomniac moments, not make an attempt to force it. Yet for the past thirty minutes, that's exactly what I've been trying to do.

Asshole.

I knew it. I knew this was going to happen, and now I'm pissed off. If I leave here without making one bit of progress it's going to ruin the rest of my night. Damn, it's the friggin' Taurus in me.

No more than two seconds have gone by when a monster SUV pulls up in the lot and parks in the space directly in front of where I'm sitting, HID headlamps brighter than the sun itself beaming right onto my face. A man gets out of the passenger seat and walks into the coffee shop while his wife remains seated at the wheel playing with her iPhone. I drop my head down to the point of touching my neck with my chin as I try to focus on my laptop screen while half squinting to prevent from going blind. I'm too lazy to move to another table. It'll all be over in a few minutes.

Well, ten minutes.

Unfortunately, there was a line in the store at this particular moment in time. Damn, the lines seem to come out of nowhere at this place.

So I'm wondering where this guy is at and when he's coming back, and on a personal front, it's getting worse. Most of the time, my aggravation is self-induced. Not this time.

Meanwhile, I take another look up and see the woman now taking photos of her child strapped into a safety seat in the back of this monstrosity. Hell, from where I'm sitting, I can practically see everything going on in there considering the passenger cabin is about five feet off the ground. Well, I can't look for long, considering this is like looking directly into the sun. HID headlamps are great, except if you looking down the barrel of them.

Finally, after a bunch of squirming in my seat, the guy comes out. Two seconds later, he walks over to me and apologizes for his wife's total disregard of my plight. I certainly understand how it's easy to be totally oblivious to anything and everything going on around you at times. I'm definitely guilty of that myself. But hey, at least I know when my HIDs are causing a disturbance. I tell him, "No problem... I'm working around it."

He gets back in the car and I look again. I see the two of them in conversation. No doubt, he's explaining the situation to his wife, who is no longer playing with the phone. She powers the driver side window down, leans her head out, and says to me, "I'm really sorry. I'm such an asshole." I smile back and nod my head out of courtesy and with that, they're outta Dodge.

Common courtesy, decency, or however you want to describe it. Where'd it go?

Ok, so yeah, she admitted she was an asshole in that moment and for that, I applaud her. Nowadays, most people would never even think of admitting this, let alone believe they are guilty of asshole-ish behavior. It's now ingrained in us as a society that we have the right, or "personal freedom," to be as big an asshole as we want, and everyone just has to accept it. Hell, all of us have the right to be assholes and damned if we shouldn't celebrate it!

But really, don't we need to ask ourselves the question of what this means for our society? We live in a society, and as such we are forced to tolerate each other. Tolerance is a topic unto itself so we'll leave the heavy lifting on that one for another day. Do we all want to live in a society where we have to accept that we are all assholes and that's just the way it is? Today, being courteous, kind, and generally good-natured towards our fellow man is seen as soft personal characteristics; as being "a wuss." We're living in an age where showing any sign of weakness is considered a character flaw and is open to mockery. When did this become who we are?

Over periods of years and decades there are changes within a society, and a tracing of recent history supplies the answer to this question. Sure, I know why we are the way we are but my question is, what do we do from this point forward?

Is this who we want to be?

Is this how we identify ourselves?

Are we really proud of what we've become? I certainly am not.

"If you don't like it, get out!" I've heard a few people spout off on social media using that favorite 'go-to' tag line when trading jabs with the pacifists. It's a simple solution to a complex problem.

I take a look at our society and see many good qualities. People do care. They do come together in times of crisis. They still have a sense of community and band together when the going gets rough. But recently, it's taken a crisis to see these qualities emerge.

I hope that one day this will be a kinder, gentler, more caring society. When we realize that we're all in this together, whether we want to believe it or not, we might start acting like we're all in this together. We've come to a point where it's become every man for himself and as such, we've become a meaner, nastier people.

The first step in fixing the problem is admitting that we actually have a problem. But it seems we are a long way from making progress on that one.

We see it everywhere and we celebrate it. Radio and television are exhibits A and B. I've never watched *Bridezillas* but I've seen the trailers. I've heard some of the rants while listening to political talk radio... Nastiness is strewn throughout our discourse.

Stand Your Ground laws, road rage, and of course, the Black Friday midnight blitz, among others, are good examples of what I'm talking about.

Yes, in some way, shape, or form we are all assholes. From letting a phone call go to voicemail because we'd rather text to shooting a man dead because of a property-line dispute, we are a society full of assholes. But seriously, is that really our God-given right, and why do we so proudly celebrate it?

## V – Fear

The other night, I went to a speed dating event here in the area. Being a single guy, I take a bunch of different avenues to meet new people and speed dating is always a good time, so I figured I'd give this one a go. This night was no different, except there was one little snag at the end of the evening that was somewhat alarming.

For those who don't know how speed dating works, there are an equal number of men and women at the event. All the women sit at individual tables while all the guys rotate from one table to the next until they have met all the women. You get five minutes to speak with each person, and at the end of the night you mark down on your match sheet those you found interesting enough to want to see again. At the end of the evening, everyone turns in their match sheets and the next day, the results are sent to you in an email. Both parties have to circle each other on the match sheet to achieve a match. Pretty simple. If you get a match, you get that person's email address and can follow up from that point.

Although this was a long evening due to the turnout at this event, the night went pretty quickly. It always seems to do that when you're getting up every five minutes to speak with someone new.

But as the event was coming to a close, as we were all on our last table of the evening, one of the ladies freaked out. Apparently, her final speed date of the night was one too many.

No more than a minute after this new guy sat down at her table did the woman get up in a panic, turn her match sheet in to the organizer, and high-tail it outta there. Apparently, she got such a bad vibe from the man sitting across the table from her that she lost it. She began crying right there on the spot and seemed to be shaken to her core.

Later, I found out some of the gory details of what happened, but the short of it was that she reacted on a visceral level – and her fight-or-flight response kicked in.

The man who was on the receiving end of this unfortunate outburst seemed quite taken aback by it. I really don't blame him considering he appeared and acted pretty normal to me. Still, this shocked everyone participating in the event. I mean, to become overwhelmed by such an upsetting feeling that it can't be contained and requires you to get away is something I've never felt before. Then again, I'm not a woman and I've heard that some women experience these types of overwhelming feelings in similar social situations. But still, to get up and run out of sheer panic? What did she think this guy was going to do, pull out a shiv and slit her throat right there on the spot, with thirty other bystanders around?

What causes such sheer feeling of fear and terror? Why are we so afraid of each other?

It never used to be this way. I remember the days of my youth when my friends and I would destroy each other in Big Wheel pile ups around "Dead Man's Curve" on our block. We'd be wearing nothing but shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers when jumping ramps over cinderblocks on our dirt bikes. Yeah, lots of times we crashed and burned but never did any of us wind up permanent maimed or dead. We



ran across the avenue half way down the block from the crosswalk and dodged onrushing traffic. No one ever got hit by a car.

Nowadays, you can't even tell what these kids look like under all the damn padding. Helmets, elbow pads, knee pads, shin guards...just to get on a bicycle and peddle through an empty cul-de-sac. Jump ramps are nowhere to be found. Hell, other kids are nowhere to be found. Most of them are playing video games or texting from their own personal cell phone inside the safety of their own home and under the watchful eye of a helicopter parent.

What the hell happened to us and why are we so damn afraid? We're afraid of everything these days. Afraid of all the horrors the world is just waiting to bestow on all of us.

Oh boy, now I've done it!

I'm scanning the Starbucks patio and parking lot, keeping an eye out for seedy characters who might be getting ready to blow the establishment to smithereens! That big burly guy that just got out of his car and walking toward me might be getting ready to mug me. The only thing of value I'm carrying is my laptop. But that's fine... It's encrypted. I'll file an insurance claim later. Why are there so many people just sitting in their cars in this parking lot? Are they plotting an attack? Are they going to follow me home?

What in the hell is the matter with us?

We've been conditioned to be afraid. 9/11 saw to that. Threat levels at red, doling out potassium iodide pills in the event of a dirty bomb detonation, keeping a close eye on the neighbor two doors down who might be up to something. Call the authorities.

We're all afraid of something no matter how ridiculous the fear may be. But can we overcome?

Getting blown to bits while sitting out here writing this entry isn't very high on the list of what I'm afraid of. No. Not even close. Ok, so I'm afraid of heights but that's not all that substantive either.

In a former life, before my 31st birthday, I was afraid of not being good enough. Not good enough in the eye of any who would judge me. It took some soul-searching and the help of an unbelievable bowling coach, of all people, to allow me to conquer that fear. It's a long story for another day.

Today, years out from my coming of age, I recognize my two biggest, and likely my only two, fears.

The first is a fear that I won't live up to my potential. Being handed life gifts, we are responsible for making the most of them. I have an idea of what my gifts are and have an idea of my potential, but have no real insight as to how I best utilize them and do so in such a way that it benefits not only me, but society in general. I've always operated under the premise that I'm here for a purpose. I want to leave something behind for those who remain once I'm gone. I'm not sure what that is just yet but I

believe that when I realize my true potential, I will see a clear path forward. To feel that I've wasted some gift is, for me, terrifying. What would that say about me? And what would that say about my ability to understand myself? The answers are in there and, although buried deep inside, are becoming subtly tangible.

I'm starting to unravel the mystery.

My second, and truly the bigger fear of the two, is the thought that I will clock out before I fulfill and achieve my goals.

Yes, I have a list...

My own personal bucket list.

No, it's not that I want to sky dive, zip-line, or base-jump off the Seattle Space Needle. My bucket list contains a set of long-term personal goals that require lots of work and tons of perseverance. For me it's about stretching myself, going beyond what I thought my capabilities were and achieving something greater. We all have our limitations, but I haven't figured out exactly where mine lie. Well, I do know I'll never be able to write the next great thriller. At least I figured that one out already. Feather in my cap.

Limitations.

For me, the hardest part of realizing a limitation is accepting it. I've been there before and have always found a way to push past it. But what if I find one that I can't overcome? The goals I've created for myself require me to push past any limitation I may encounter, for I know there are a few. I certainly have not made my peace with this one. It's just not in my personality.

I know I will never truly be finished in my quest to go beyond but someday, I may look back and be pleasantly satisfied with what I've been able to do. If the suicide bomber is two seconds away from detonating the C4 he wrapped around his chest, I will not have achieved all I set out to accomplish. It will be up to those left behind to pass judgment on my life and decide if it was enough. At least I can say that in this respect, I am not afraid of being held under the microscope. I've definitely conquered that fear.

One down, two to go.

## VI – Drive

Drive.

My one true demon.

The one that supersedes all others.

It has the power to pull me away from any moment in time. It takes me away from my fun; takes me away from my life. It's a real pain in the ass.

Somewhere, at some point in my life, something went very wrong with me. The ability to just exist and live in the current moment went bye-bye. Sure, I have my moments but they are fleeting. The little voice inside my head is always there; tugging at my brain, pulling me back to a world where shit needs to get done and get done pronto. It's been this way for quite some time now and I don't see it changing any time soon. It is my one true demon that I've yet to excise.

It wasn't always this way. No, life passes, at first, at what seems like a snail's pace. I was always waiting for some future point in time. As a kid, it was the waiting for summer vacation from school. As a teen, it was the waiting for being of age to drive a car. And as a young adult, it was the waiting to move out of my parents' place and start a life of my very own. For the first twenty-plus years, it was all about waiting and being patient.

But that time has come and gone. I'm over twenty years out from the long and drawn-out period of waiting for shit to happen. And yes, like most everyone else at this age, the last twenty have seemed like a blur.

In looking back through this time, I realize things have changed drastically. I'm no longer the same person I was at twenty-one years of age. Some of us come into our own and find ourselves while others remain the same. I see myself now as a very different person. I can regurgitate the differences ad nauseam, but the one true difference I see, and which has relevance here, is the underlying drive and motivation to really get my shit together and start knocking things out.

I know exactly where this comes from. Well, I can certainly say that with confidence as I sit here and write this entry. In reality, I'm really not as smart as I think I am at times but what the hell, I'm going with it.

This drive comes from a complete wasting of approximately ten years of my life. What did I do in those ten? Not much. Granted, I was married for most of those years, but I didn't have kids of my own, so it wasn't as if I spent my formative years rearing children. I had plenty of free time and plenty of things I could have been doing. But most of that time was spent wasting away in a failed relationship and sitting in front of the television watching sports, movies, or Seinfeld. Well, ok, Seinfeld was pretty damn important so I can't throw that one in there. Worst part of this story is that those were my twenties, the years that are considered the prime 'fun' years for many.

Yes, I missed out on the whole twenties experience.

So that's where my problem started.

After a divorce, and having even more free time on my hands, I piddled around for a little while and reintroduced myself to 'fun.' It had been sorely missed. But time starting moving quickly, much more so than in recent years past. Around the time I hit thirty-five, I had a revelation. All right, let's not dance around it, let's call it what it really was; a midlife crisis.

Ah the ol' midlife crisis. Never thought it would happen to me but it did. For me, it wasn't about buying a Porsche and filling the passenger seats with as many hot, bubbly, blonde young ladies as I could squeeze into it. It was something entirely different. It was the realization that I had shit to do and I'd better get off my ass and start doing it. Thirty-five may be considered young for a midlife crisis, but in reality, for me, it had been bubbling caldron simmering deep within me for at least fifteen years. It was time to get started.

Drive.

My demon.

Right now, I have no idea how to stop it in its tracks, or at least hold it at bay. I do everything in my power to keep it happy; keep it off my back... But it always wants more. When I feel I have nothing left to feed it, I find it another scrap.

This is what I'm fighting on a daily basis. I'm not aware of anyone in my circle of family or friends who fights this battle, so I have no point of reference to help make sense of it. No, in my mind, I've wasted enough time and can't afford to waste anymore. No doubt this will chase me through time, until I can find the magic bullet to stop it dead in its tracks. Yet I wonder if that bullet really exists?

It's a curse, no doubt. There are many who live their lives totally free of this type of burden, and just exist. I know a few who are living each day to the fullest and are truly enjoying their lives. They are the enlightened. But then there are others who remain quite content just going through the motions on a weekly basis; their lives spent working for the man to pay the bills and entertaining themselves in a variety of ways to fill the downtime. Both of these groups of people are the lucky ones. For those caught somewhere in between, it's maddening.

"Enjoy the moment."

That's a difficult proposition for me. The wheels are always spinning; the brain is always turned on. No doubt it's the reason for those many bouts of insomnia I deal with on what now seems like a weekly basis. It's a race against time, possibly classified somewhere in the obsessive/compulsive realm. But there's certainly a method to this madness. It's my way of righting a wrong, my way of making up for lost time. When we get right down to it, time is all we have. Once it's gone, it's gone forever. I'm just trying to slow it down once more.

## VII – Loss: Part I

It's really a nice evening tonight. The official end of summer was yesterday but it's felt like fall for a couple of weeks now. Today was a pleasant change of pace – warm, breezy, and not a cloud in the sky. I've been waiting for one of these for what seemed like forever, and I'm doing my darnedest to enjoy it. I'll be able to sit out here for the remainder of the night without having to break out the long-sleeved shirt. Sunset will occur in about five minutes and already the sky is a collage of pinks, purples, and orange.

Tranquility.

It's the perfect evening in my world.

But as I sit quietly and wait for the sky to add some new colors, I can't help but feel a little somber about the news I received earlier in the day of the passing of a person who had influenced my life greatly.

For the sake of this discussion, he will remain nameless. I know he would certainly want it this way. In his later years, anonymity was where he was most comfortable. He was the type of guy who wanted to be everything to those closest to him, and the rest of the world be damned. He didn't care what anyone else thought, but to those closest to him, he valued and cherished their love.

I can honestly say that he is the person who made me the man I am today. Before our chance meeting, I was a whiner with a serious martyr complex and an ego to match. Looking back now, I realized I was, at that point in my life, a lost soul. I blamed the world and unfortunate circumstances for all my problems, never taking responsibility for my less than desirable life, and never following through on anything. I wanted to make my mark; do something great. But conceding defeat when the going got tough was the one thing I was great at. He changed all of me over the course of two years.

Looking back on it now, the differences are as plain as night and day. We all have our demons, and the biggest one plaguing me at the time was my fear. I was afraid of not being good enough in the eyes of anyone who might judge me, and I was afraid of pushing myself outside of my comfort zone. These two aspects of my life were my unknowns and I was deathly afraid of both. Every time I bumped up against them, I backed away and went home with my tail between my legs. I felt the world owed me something regardless of the fact I didn't deserve it because I never put in the time, the effort and the work. Walking around with a chip on my shoulder and a scowl on my face was what I was good at.

He righted me in every way possible.

Initially, I sought his help for an athletic endeavor. It took me a while to figure it out, but I learned later on that not only was he giving me the help I desired in order to compete in my sport, he was giving me a blueprint for succeeding in life.

He was a task-master, no doubt. He pushed me harder than anyone had ever done. There were lots of screaming matches, which I always lost and lots of blustery, obscenity-laced tirades that I was forced to endure. He kicked the shit out of me routinely, even when I was making small strides, and

made me feel like crap in times when I thought I was worthy of a pat on the back. He gave me out after out and allowed me to walk away from the misery any time I chose. But I became a true believer in what he could do for me based on the strides I'd made during the initial phase of our working relationship, so I pressed onward. Not once did I take the easy way out by just quitting; what that showed him was my true underlying toughness and sheer will to succeed. In return for these efforts, I knew he always had my back.

There was one episode in particular that I can use as Exhibit A to accentuate this point.

I was set to participate with a team in a national tournament in 2004, filling in for a guy who couldn't make the trip. Although I was still working on increasing my skill and realized it wasn't the best time to take on such a challenge, I was encouraged to do it. Once there and in competition, things went horribly wrong. After the first block of qualifying ended, I was ridiculed by a teammate for my poor performance and was told the team was better off without me on the roster. The rest of my teammates got a big kick out of those comments, and that just made it worse. I went back to my room and immediately called my coach. After blubbering through the sordid details of what went wrong in competition and enduring a five-minute patented coaching tirade, we both calmed down. He settled me down, told me we would right the ship, and put a plan of attack in place for me for the following day's competition. He apologized for putting me in this situation for which I was not prepared, and finished up with me by offering encouragement and support. The kinder, gentler side came out right then and there. It was only the second time I'd ever seen it.

The next day didn't go much better, but at one point did take an unexpected turn. While in competition, I'd done something truly amazing for a person in my position and when I heard the applause coming from the stands and realized that applause was for me, I almost broken down right there.

Later I told my coach what I'd experienced and it was at this point at which he let me in on a little secret. He had a master plan in place for me, and he realized how beneficial these few days were going to be in my development. The long and short of it was that I wasn't prepared. He knew that. I was going to fail. He knew that as well. But most importantly, I was going to be placed in a situation where I was forced to confront my fear, whether I wanted to or not. It was how I'd handle that fear that would dictate how worthy I was going to be as his only student, and how effective his own coaching method would be at cranking out a success story or just another failure. He was hoping for that one final success story as a testament to his vast knowledge of the inner self.

He got his wish.

The 2004 tournament was, without a doubt, the defining moment of my life. When I returned home, I was a changed person, for the better by far. I was confident, no longer afraid of being judged, became focused, took responsibility for my life, took up whatever challenge came my way, and worked hard to push my limits; to go beyond what I ever thought was within my capacity. What I learned during the course of my two-year relationship with my coach and, in particular, those few days of hell at the

national tournament, will serve me well for the rest of my life. It has already paid dividends in more ways than one and will continue to do so until my end.

In looking back, I realized my coach was one unique and special individual. This is the type of person you rarely meet in passing, yet ever have the chance from whom to learn. Once I got through the gruff and grating exterior, I realized there stood a man who wanted just one more chance to prove himself and pass on his gifts to just one more individual who he hoped could use those gifts to make the world a better place. I started this process thinking I was going to be given a lesson in sport, but as it turned out, I was being given a lesson in life.

He was giving me a life.

Only now in learning of his passing do I look back and realize how far I've come, how much I have grown, and how all of this became possible. He was just looking to make a difference and that much he has done.

I am a living testament to this man's character, kindness, compassion, and unbelievably huge heart. He went to the wall for me and did so out of sheer determination to set me on the path to enlightenment. The least I can do to return the favor is dedicate this entry to him. By no means does it do him justice, but hopefully through my character and in the future, my legacy, will his legacy live on.

## VIII – Calm

I've spent just enough time at my favorite hangout to get a read on the environment surrounding my little corner of the world. I've been out here enough times to know when things seem to slow down, and I think I've picked up on the pattern.

Sunday evening.

Quiet.

For a busy location, it sure is quiet this evening. Quiet enough that I can hear a few of the crickets stirring in the grass and a couple of birds chirping in one of the trees near the corner of the building. The air is still but I can see some of the pollens dancing in a grassy area silhouetted against the ever-changing western sky.

Calm.

Very calm.

There's certainly less surface traffic, less noise, and fewer distractions out here than I am used to. This is one of those nights I could really get something done. Yet nothing is coming to mind...

...Except the calm.

Sometimes we all forget what it really feels like. I know I do. Even those restless late nights or early morning bouts with insomnia never seem to have this feel. No, when the brain is turned on, there's nothing resembling calm in my head. It's a collection of to-dos, what-ifs, and what's nexts.

It's been quite a while since I felt this calm.

To relax and just be does wonders. I don't feel the need to be running from task through task or planning my next move. It's a nice change of pace. I can take in my surroundings and become one with them. I slow down. My heart rate drops, my breathing quiets, and I feel fabulous.

So this is what's meant by stopping to smell the roses. I agree, it really works. I have friends who say we should all stop and take a few moments out to quiet ourselves, calm ourselves down, and truly relax in order to promote a sense of well-being. Ok, I buy that. But it's awfully hard to do. I am Exhibit A. I rarely slow down. The wheels rarely stop spinning in my head. Even if I give it the old college try, when those wheels spin, there's nothing that can grind them to a halt.

So this raises a question. What if all of us subscribed to this theory and could take a few moments out for calm? Would we be a nicer society? Would we be more pleasant to each other and act more civilized? Would we need as much ADHD medication?

What would things really look like through the eye of a calmer, gentler world?



We'll never find out, that much is certain. Heck, I'm as guilty as the next guy. I may be enjoying my moment at this point in time but soon enough, I'll be back at it, driving myself bat-shit crazy in an effort to clear out the to-dos, what-ifs, and what's nexts. I guess I need to make more of an effort.

Taking some time out to enjoy a few quiet moments is worth its weight in gold. We don't seem to do enough of that here. Although I've never been to Europe, I've read that some entire European countries go on siesta at the tail end of the work week. It's ingrained in their culture. It leaves time for winding down, connecting with family and friends, enjoying hobbies, learning something new, relaxing, and in general, for rebalancing oneself. It leaves time for quiet, and calm. This can't be a terrible thing.

I'm lucky that I have the time to take a siesta. But more importantly, for me, it's about what I do with that time that counts.

This evening, I made it a point to just be. I tried to look for things to occupy myself, for I should be doing something, right? But for the first time in a long while, I drew a blank. Maybe that means I am all caught up? Nah. Not true.

I'll never get caught up. It's just not in my nature to feel otherwise. What was sorely needed was a rebalancing of self. Subconsciously, I believe my brain knew this and was telling me it was time to make that happen.

I certainly am glad I unplugged for a little while. Even while sitting here writing this entry and realizing there's not a whole lot going on with it right now, I feel fine with it. Yeah, this has been a boring write and without question, is most certainly a boring read. But after the past couple of entries which took things to a deeper, more emotional, and highly personal level, sitting here with nothing to say has been a welcome exercise.

This has been my exercise in calm. Amazing how I almost forgot how to do this.

## IX – Living the Dream

This afternoon, I received a newspaper clipping from my parents in the mail. The clipping contained a story about of a man I once knew who was a very influential figure in my formative years. He had been a lifeguard at one of the New Jersey beaches for thirty years, and this summer was his final season as part of the lifeguard corps. The story was done nicely and was a fitting tribute to a man who served his community for such a long period of time.

Back in my youth, one of my hobbies was setting up and toppling dominoes. I remember spending hours setting them up in elaborate designs and patterns in my parents' basement and garage. I would bring my friends into the house to watch the domino toppling show and was always thrilled at the reaction I received while the dominos were falling. It was so cool to watch them sit in awe until the last one went over, usually in some sort of grand fashion.

Around that same time I watched a show on television in which this man broke the world record for domino toppling. I was so enthralled by the elaborate designs, colors, patterns, and tricks that were in his repertoire that I had to reach out to him. Doing so took a while. This was an age when all we had were newspapers, Yellow Pages, and rotary phones. With the help of my mother, we managed to track down a number and make a phone call. Yes, I'd found him!

For some time we traded letters and in each, he revealed one of his domino toppling secrets. Using that information, I was able to build a few of his tricks into my designs and before I knew it, I was getting pretty good in this art. I wrote more letters letting him know how I'd excelled, and he always wrote back with encouraging words. In a subsequent letter, I found out he was coming back East for a summer and was going to be spending his time at the beach as a lifeguard. It was the chance I'd hope to get –to meet my idol!

I remember meeting him in person that summer after he had come back from living on the Pacific coast. My parents were taking the family to the Jersey shore for vacation, so we made a stop to visit him in his beach community. I believe I was around ten or eleven years old at the time, and the only thing I can remember from that meeting was how I was so awestruck that I couldn't muster any words other than 'yes' or 'no' answers to his questions.

My parents did all the talking for me back then. After all, I was a really shy kid. They spent about thirty minutes speaking with him as he kept one eye on his part of the shoreline the entire time. A few times, I heard him blow his whistle to signal in a few people who had ventured too far out into the water. It was really cool! He had such a presence about him and I felt really lucky to be meeting him in person. Before we left the beach, he offered me a few words of encouragement, told me to do well in school, and told me to keep working on getting better at setting up my dominos, my true passion at the time.

For the purpose of this story our passion for domino toppling, the hobby that brought us together, is insignificant. What was significant was the fact that I reached out to him, and he, out of the

goodness of his heart, took the time to pass on his knowledge and encourage me to pursue my interest, even when things weren't working out the way I wanted them to. He was a really nice man.

The story in the paper brought back so many memories from a time long past. Thirty years is a long time. It's amazing the things we remember. Aside from his summer lifeguarding, he worked full time as a teacher. I didn't know this until I read the article, but in thinking about it, I realized that it certainly made sense. He'd spent the last thirty years of his life doing and caring for others fifty-two weeks a year. It was his passion to have a positive influence on the community as a whole as well as on the lives of our children. To shape young minds in such a way they would, in turn, have a positive influence on the generation that came after them is truly a noble endeavor within the realm of public service.

Although it had been many years since I set up and toppled my dominos, only now can I truly understand, thirty-plus years later, what all of this means.

Today, it's rare to find a person who gives so much to his community and can be such a role model to the younger generation. It's rare to find the person who wants to give so much of himself for the betterment of society yet expect nothing in return.

I am certainly appreciative for what he has done for me. He was the first person who told me to continue doing what I loved to do. Thirty-some years ago, I can still remember him climbing down from his lifeguard stand and, leaning down next to me, telling me to keep trying because it's what I love to do.

He is ten years my senior, and to be offering up such advice back then when he himself was in his early twenties is an example of a man who had a maturity and wisdom well beyond his years.

Remarkable.

As I read through the article, I learned he would continue to teach his students but would now be taking his summers off so he could travel with his wife. Although there was a touch of sadness to his retirement from the beach, there was also an eager anticipation for how he would spend his future summer vacations.

I sat there for a moment after finishing the article and immediately thought to myself that there's a man truly living his dream. He was a teacher and a guarder of lives and these were the things that made him most happy. They were his passion. He lived a modest life but is one of the most fulfilled people I've ever known. He led by example, and as such I wonder how few of us can follow this example in today's world. It takes a commitment, a dedication, and a strong desire to be an agent of change, regardless of how insignificant the contribution may be.

Throughout the years that have since passed, I'm sure he has forgotten about that meeting on the beach with my family. But I can say that as insignificant as that was for him, it had a profound impact on my life. That in itself is an accomplishment that can never be taken away.

Yes, he is living his dream, and in imparting his wisdom on an impressionable young mind, he gave me the blueprint for living mine.

## X – Ivory Tower

Each workday morning upon waking, I flip on the local news, which leads directly into *Good Morning, America*. This morning, while I shuffled around the house trying to get myself out the door, I happened to catch the headlines on GMA and learned one of the big stories of the day was the fact that there were rumors going around that two of our favorite vampires, Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, may be getting back together! Isn't that so sweet?

Ok, after processing this information for a moment, then experiencing a real warm and fuzzy feeling coming from within, I re-gathered myself and continued going about my business. A few minutes later, after some of the more important headline stories were summarized, it was now time for details! Oh, boy, was I pumped! I didn't even have to wait for Pop News this morning to get my fix. It was right there as the number-three headline of the morning. Five minutes into the show and we were rockin' and rollin'.

Of course while little tidbits of the latest and greatest in this unprecedented development were being spoon-fed to the vast GMA audience, I continued getting things in order, paying no real attention to what was being said. However, the long and short of it was that the famous young Hollywood pair may be getting back together soon.

Fabulous.

None of this held my interest for more than a fraction of a second, but what did pique my curiosity was that immediately following the story, GMA went right to some of the latest viewer tweets, and many of the comments were scathing. Many vehemently aligned themselves with one side or the other and had done a remarkable job of exhibiting such a wonderful display of personal nastiness in 140 characters or less that I had to snicker under my breath. Ok, so yeah, I get it... Everyone has an opinion. But when touching on a subject such as this one, things get pretty heated pretty quickly.

It was out of control. According to a few of the tweets, poor Robert Pattinson needed to "get a spine" or "man up," and Kristen Stewart deserved to be raked over hot coals. "Once a cheater, always a cheater."

I actually felt bad for both of them. When it comes to infidelity, everyone has an opinion, and a strong one as such. We all preach from the ivory tower at times but still, in reading some of the tweets, I recognize we've reached a new level of sticking our noses in other people's business, and in passing judgment. If we peel back the layers and look deep enough, I'm pretty certain we can find skeletons in every one of those tweeters' closets.

Yes, both Kristen and Robert are celebrities.

Yes, they are squarely the public eye.

However, they are still in their twenties; still kids.

Hell, I made lots of mistakes and lots of bad decisions in my twenties. If I were being held to a higher standard at that age, I probably would have committed myself to a mental institution or built myself a cabin in the Montana wilderness.

I feel for both of them because I am one who had the unique experience of being on both sides of that fence. I've been the culprit and I've also been the victim. Neither role is an easy one.

The bottom line is that each situation is unique. There are hundreds of reasons why people make the choices they make. Some may be justified while others may be looked upon with disdain. But that's not for us to decide. Yes, our culture does have a moral code but for the life of me, I cannot figure out all the paradoxes. No, you can't cheat, but sure, you can take a bunch of wives as long as it's permitted by your religion.

Situations like the one these two kids are in right now are highly personal and require lots of personal reflection. Who are we to decide what constitutes right versus wrong?

What are we to feel for the person who has been trapped in a loveless marriage for decades but finds happiness, love, and contentment through having an affair?

What are we to feel for the person who, though no fault of his or her own, experiences a life-altering event that changes the dynamic of his or her relationship on a level that could never be imagined?

What are we to feel for the person who has recognized that he or she has made a mistake, and simply looks for one chance to make things right again?

It's very easy for others to express opinions and assign blame from afar. We all have a unique moral compass that guides each of us in how we live our lives, and as such, we are more than happy to promulgate our principles to anyone who may listen, particularly in situations such as these. It's easy to preach a course of action based on the principle; the black and white of it. But the reality is that when it happens to you, all of a sudden, there are fifty different shades of gray.

As I am writing while scanning the latest news, I see that Kristen and Robert are in fact getting back together. I pulled this new information off of Yahoo News, so who knows if it's true or not. Sensationalism of the news is a topic for another day. But if the rumor is true, then good for them. They obviously have a connection with each other that far exceeds allowing one transgression to torpedo the path that they have carved out for themselves together. I'm certain there will be a whole new bunch of tweets out there in a few minutes judging this decision as well.

But really, are we all so pompous as to feel that we have a right to preach from that ivory tower just because we can? And do we have to get so nasty about it in a public forum?

I have no idea what that says about our society, but I do know that more often than not, the ivory tower can certainly be a very lonely place.

## XI – The Dead Spot

It doesn't happen to me very often but when it does, I get pretty pissed off. Recently, I'd found myself lacking motivation and harboring an inherent disinterest for doing anything useful. I'd hit a point where I found myself void of ideas and inspiration. I was just sort of floating through time with nothing to pull me back into the active world in which I'm usually submersed.

I had hit a dead spot in time and had no way to force it off me.

It certainly sucked, that much I knew. No motivation, nothing to do, no ideas in my head, wandering aimlessly, staring at the four walls and feeling a sense of malaise come over me. How the hell do I get myself out of this?

For me, hitting this type of wall is upsetting. I'm used to moving, lots of times at a very fast pace. I'm sort of the Mr. Wolf of organized crime within my circle of friends and acquaintances. If you didn't get the reference, watch the last thirty minutes of the movie *Pulp Fiction*, buster.

I'm always juggling things, keeping as many balls in the air as possible without ever dropping one. So naturally, this little situation came as a bit of an unwelcome surprise.

What did I do about it? Well, after scouring my brain for about an hour and still coming up empty, I just decided to go with it; just to see how long it would last. As it turned out, it lasted about a day, which is an eternity in my world. That was a long time for me to feel so out of sorts. However, it turned out to be a good thing because it got me thinking, and the thinking part is what pulled me out of my funk.

What constitutes a dead spot in time? We're all familiar with the concept but it means something different to each of us, I'm sure. For me, it's a lack of productivity and a lack of "doing," whatever that "doing" may be. I spent enough time in my life sitting idly by, letting the days tick forward without caring how many passed before me. These days, it's rare I say to myself, "Today I'm going to do nothing."

However, in examining that statement, I recognize that this is exactly how lots of us live our lives – with substantial dead spots strewn between significant life events and accomplishments.

How do we pass the time? I've heard it over and over, that life is short and we need to make the most of every day. Nah, that's bullshit. Life in most instances is quite long. It becomes short when we recognize that our lives have passed before us and we look back on what we have accomplished. If the answer to that personal question is "Not much," it is at that point we fully recognize how short life is. And that's the part that really sucks.

In previous years, I imagine I passed the time in a manner similar to many other folks. I went to work each day, used television to entertain myself each evening, ran a household, occasionally went out with friends, and vacationed. I led a life of merely existing most of the time, and in looking back, damned if that time didn't go quickly.

I suspect this is how it happens. This is how life catches up on everyone. Before we know it, it's moved faster and faster and we see the train wreck coming. Only then do we throw the lever on the switch track. Unfortunately, sometimes, we throw it too late.

How do we really pass time? And are we just passing time or are we actually achieving anything? What else could we be doing instead of entertaining ourselves watching *Dancing with the Stars*? We can certainly ask ourselves if there is more to life than what we understand it to be. We can ponder that question and go back to doing what we normally do to pass time, or we can step into the unknown and see what's there for the taking.

Life can be exhausting. Our free time is severely limited in this day and age so I get it. People need to unwind. If that means just plopping down after a hard day's work to decompress, that's cool, and it's what's sorely needed. Raising a family is tough work. Keeping a household going can be brutal. For many, raising well-adapted, decent children to adulthood and placing them on the proper path with solid footing is a notable accomplishment. I use this as an example only because I've heard this from many as being the accomplishment they are most proud of. There really aren't many dead spots in time for this group. At the end of that long haul, they cherish the dead spot and the wide smile that comes with it. It is something in which to revel.

My experience with the dead spot is unique. It's maddening, frustrating, upsetting, and frankly, just all-around uncomfortable. It's more or less a curse that I recognize I should never try to lift, although I do my best to do just that before unmercifully submitting. But sometimes, out of accepting it for what it is and not fighting it, the light bulb comes on and I experience a moment of sheer brilliance. Without it, I'd certainly get mauled by the pace of my life and may never experience that which plays a significant role in propelling me forward.



## XII – Boxed In

Finally.

It's been over a week since I've been able to unplug and recycle and I certainly have needed it. I'm sitting out in unusually warm weather for this time of year and it couldn't have come at a better time. I just came off a period of having zero downtime in eight days and, at this time yesterday, I was at the end of my rope.

Talk about having an out-of-body experience.

I certainly haven't felt like myself, and yesterday was the tipping point. I learned late last evening, from a friend who is used to putting up with a lot of my bullshit, that I had a really short fuse earlier in the afternoon. In suffering through another late-evening bout of insomnia, and while tossing and turning, I replayed much of the day in my head. Every interaction with my friend, my coworkers, and even my interaction with guy at the convenience store ringing up my pack of gum, was questionable. Hell, everyone was in my cross-hairs yesterday. Only after spending much time reflecting on the day's events did I realize how crazy I'd become.

I could feel my blood boiling over in my veins. Everything seemed to hit all at once; emails, texts, scheduling conflicts, issues, and additional to-dos landing on me in rapid-fire succession... It was total chaos. I'd been boxed into a corner and there was no way out. It was only natural that I flipped.

Finally.

I've made it through and have only a couple of small battle scars to show for it. Yes, I did feel a bit angry at myself for letting some frustration out on an unlucky few but also felt I could have done a better job handling my stress. Sure, I overextended myself a touch, but I also had to work through a couple of unforeseen issues. Rolling with the punches would have been a much better way to handle this. Too bad I didn't figure that out until last night.

Today is a very different day. I'm rested now and have given myself a couple days off from the insanity that is my life. But in reflecting, I'm wondering if my situation was really all that bad. Sure, this happens to me from time to time, but what about those who have to deal with this type of situation every day of their lives? How do they handle it?

I am very lucky in that I don't have the stressors and time constraints many others do.

Job? Not really. It has its days but c'mon now, I'm not working sixty-hour weeks.

Kids? Nope. Never had any.

Keeping a roof over my head? Not a problem. I live in an apartment.

Financial and credit difficulties? Not since I was nineteen years old.

These are common problems that lots of people have to deal with on an almost perpetual basis. How do they prevent themselves from going insane, or marching up a bell tower with a rifle?

We've become a society that has been forced to handle more and more of these pressures with an ever-dwindling set of resources for coping with them. I guess it's not all that surprising that I'm hearing that suicides are up. Did I really expect that number to drop in today's economic and social climate?

I have one friend who is currently dealing with this exact situation, and most days he's beside himself. With each passing day, he gets further boxed in by life. That look of helplessness in his eyes becomes more pronounced every time I see him, and I can only imagine what's going through his head at any moment. He has a defeated look about him and although, most days, he tries to put on a happy face and manages to find some humor in life, I know he's clinically depressed. He has no path forward and it's killing him...

Literally.

And he knows it.

We weren't designed to handle this level of chaos. We shouldn't have to push our coping skills to the limit and beyond. We shouldn't have to overextend just to keep food on the table, a roof over our heads, and our children safe. The further the boundaries are pushed, the worse it will get, not only for my friend, but for everyone in this mess of a society.

We all have different survival skills and coping mechanisms for handling those times when stress rears its ugly head. But still, after my week of insanity, I have to wonder how many of those walking among us are actually ticking time bombs? Who among us is the next Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold? And why do we just dismiss the problem by chalking it up to our way of life?

It's not supposed to be this way. It's certainly not like this in other societies across the pond. It's us. We are the problem and we continue to perpetuate it by believing that our way is the right way and everyone else be damned. There is merit in the values we espouse when it comes to hard work, determination, and picking ourselves up by our bootstraps. But it's easy to overlook the problems, such as the one facing my friend, and therefore blow off looking for solutions. The first step in fixing the problem is admitting we have a problem.

Yeah, yesterday wasn't my finest day by a long shot. But I'm one of the lucky ones. I can rebalance and refocus because it's within my control. I can't say that for others, in particular, my friend. Watching him suffer pains me greatly, and my heart goes out to him.

Our society is fast closing in on a point where we are going to implode. Nowadays, it's just too easy to get boxed in.

### XIII – Zombie Nation

After coming off this insane week and finally winding down, I realized I haven't fully been righted. The wheels have been turning in my mind for what seems like an eternity as I've been unable to get a full night's sleep since this time last week. In my world, this certainly spells trouble. Yet I continue to press forward, pushing my physical self to the limit. It's only a matter of time before I crash and burn.

It'll happen. I'll wipe myself out. Then I'll recover. Most likely, it'll require a full ten-hour night of uninterrupted sleep in order to feel like my old self again. At that point, I'm sure the cycle will start over once more. It's not ideal nor is something I look forward to. Right now, it is just the way it is.

Of course, I've been asked by the doc if I need something for sleep; a magic pill to right me and to allow my body to recover. But as always, I refuse. I'm sure part of it is my stubborn nature, my willingness to tough it out without ever medicating, but the other part is that I fear dumping excess chemicals into my system, particularly for something as natural as sleep.

No, I'll continue to spin through the cycle and suffer until I can find a suitable resolution. When I can quiet myself, I can sleep. This isn't rocket science by any means. It's the quieting part that has been issue.

Right now, I'm feeling wiped. Yes, my week of chaos has ended, but I've yet to get back to normal. I can now think clearly and have quieted my mind. Sleep will most certainly come, just not yet.

In looking back, I realized that physically, I was able to push the limit. Although I felt miserable doing so, I managed to meet all my commitments and knock all the to-dos out. Only now do I realize this was no small task. In fact, at this moment, I can't even remember most of my week. I have no idea how I bounced from one task to the next nor can remember, to any extent, my interaction with most of the people I'd dealt with during this time. I seemed to be operating on autopilot for seven days straight. It's a miracle I didn't launch my car into an embankment off the highway, although I do remember a close call while attempting a merge last Monday morning.

Yes, this entire week, I felt like a zombie, functioning only on some subconscious level to get through all seven days of it. I lost all concepts of time and space; the only active thought in my head was working through my ordered task list. No wonder this felt like an out-of-body experience.

It wasn't fun, as if I had to mention that. I couldn't put two thoughts together, I routinely dropped all sorts of items around the house – including my smart phone for about the tenth time – it took forever to get out the door each morning, I spaced out in meetings, and yet I couldn't get to sleep no matter how tired I was getting. It mushroomed way out of control and left me incoherent. Not the best way to live.

Is it just me, I wonder? Or are we all fast becoming a nation of zombies – running on autopilot most of our lives – going through the motions.

A while back, I met a woman at a social event who was bringing up two young children on her own. In chatting, I learned that she was routinely getting four hours sleep a night. Between raising the

kids and working long hours, it didn't leave much time for anything other than short cycles of sleep. I have no idea how she did it. Granted, some people need only a few hours of sleep a night. I knew one guy back in high school who required two hours per night, which was something that I could in no way fathom. But for most of us, four hours a night is insane. I asked her how she managed to keep herself going with this type of schedule, and she told me that if you do it long enough, your body adapts.

Really?

That can't be good. I'm certainly not looking forward to my body adapting to my rapidly decreasing and shallow sleep cycles. And I refuse to push through to the point where my body finally gives in and accepts it. Hell, I can't even grasp the concept, although in thinking about this long and hard following the week that was, I'm sort of gaining an understanding of what she meant.

It's happening to more people than we'd think. Up until about a year ago, I'd never heard of the sleep drug Lunesta. Then, I started seeing commercials for it on television during prime time each evening. There's a pill for this and a pill for that. Although this isn't a new phenomenon, apparently plenty of us need a little extra help for something as natural as sleep.

I wonder, is it just me? Can't be. Being as tired as I am at times yet being unable to sleep is a paradox. But hey, I can get Lunesta and my problem is solved!

There's something to this but I can't put my finger on it just yet. Something on a subconscious level kept me from switching off and in the process, turned me into a zombie for the entire week.

We are fast on track to becoming a full-fledged zombie nation. We're walking around on autopilot, not remembering what we did five minutes ago, let alone what we did last week. We're going through the motions, barely getting through each day and having nothing left for the next. And we're forced to do it over and over again. We're medicated, malnourished, and sleep-deprived. It's a wonder we have yet to develop an appetite for brains, but I'm sure that day is coming. Heck, we've already got people biting the faces off other people on our streets, so I'm sure it's not far behind.

Since I'm still not ready to sleep, I think I'll go to my 24-hour Walmart across the street to load up on firearms and ammo in preparation for the zombie apocalypse.

On second thought, why bother? I'm fast on my way to becoming one of the undead.

## XIV – The Dark

Something's eating at me.

And I'm not sure why.

The week from hell ended more than a few days ago and today, all was right with the world. I basked in the warmth of this early October day and felt lucky to be experiencing it one more time before the fall chill sets in. I'm still too far north for summer to last forever. So I made the most of it.

Fast forward to now.

It's early.

It's late.

The weather has turned.

A slight chill rustled in late this evening, and although I knew it was coming, I didn't want to accept it. Weather changes quickly around here at times; similar to my moods. I live my life trying not to get too high or too low, always monitoring my internal state. A flood of emotion rarely rushes over me, for it is the logical side of me that keeps it at bay.

But at this moment, it's different.

Something's in there that I cannot make sense of nor cannot fully draw out.

It's dark.

When I first began thinking about this little writing exercise, I figured that there would be plenty of entries written during the sleepless nights I'd become accustomed to experiencing in recent times. But up until this point, there had been not a single one...

Until now.

As a child, I was always afraid of the dark. I routinely woke from nightmares crying and making a beeline down the hall for my parents' bedroom, never wanting to be placed back in my bed to experience the dark all over again. Once mom and dad figured out it was my fear of the dark that gave me those nightmares, they purchased a few night lights and stationed them in all four corners of my room. Although that helped, it didn't solve my problem entirely. Only after leaving both lamps on in my room each night did I feel safe – safe enough to sleep through the night.

The lights stayed on through my pre-teen years, providing the necessary comfort and security to get me through each night. Soon thereafter, they were no longer necessary. I was, without question, a late bloomer.

I'm very used to the dark now. It has become a friend. To an insomniac, what else could it be?

It envelops me, encircles me, and I welcome its presence. I look to it for answers yet it gives me none. It just sits there, waiting for me to make a move, waiting to clutch me tighter, until it has me immobilized, leaving me no option but to truly acknowledge its presence and submit to it.

Dark.

On this night, it's rearing its ugly head.

Why?

I ask this question repeatedly, yet receive no answer.

Something is eating at me. The dark tells me as much.

But that's all it does.

It offers no insight into what's going on at the core, what's causing this emotional imbalance. It feeds on itself and before I know it, I'm swimming in it. I don't resist, for that does no good, but I try to make sense of it. And in this respect, I come up short.

A cold rain has set in. I can hear it pelting my windows.

It's typical.

The weather gets worse and takes me further down with it. I have no idea when it will end.

The dark came out of nowhere this evening. I just found myself right smack in the middle of it and have no clue how to send it on its way. It just sits there, mocking me; laughing at my every attempt to rationalize it, to explain it away via logic, knowing full well that this will be just another failed attempt at challenging its power. I stare back at it, no longer afraid of what it can do to me, and make my stand.

Pointless.

In the act of wrestling with it for at least a full hour, I finally see it for what it truly is – a part of me.

It's the part of me that I cannot fully explain. This goes way beyond "glass half empty" stuff. This is the part that every now and again brings me down. It's the low beyond low; a feeling of despair or sadness from very deep within that ever so slightly creeps forward and rears up, that lets me know there is something unfinished, unresolved, that hasn't been fully put out of its misery.

Turbulence.

Most likely manifesting in the insomnia of which I frequently wrestle. Inner turbulence on such a subtle level, it's difficult to recognize until after it has already come over me. It's there. Of that much I am certain. But in time, I will make sense of it. For my own sanity, I must.

Some day.

Just not today.

For today, the dark wins. It's got me by the throat and it will do with me what it pleases. It can certainly have its fun, but it can never achieve its end goal of swallowing me whole as it once did in my youth. I won't let it.

I have battled the dark before but this time, it's different. This time, I am no longer afraid.

## XV – Loss: Part II

Moments of clarity.

I've experienced a few of those since I began this journey a little less than two months ago. The most recent moment came last week, the morning after my latest bout with the dark.

I did manage to get a few hours' sleep before starting the new day, and although I was physically beat, I realized it was my emotional state that had totally wiped me out. Through every waking moment of that morning, that feeling of malaise followed me around. Something still wasn't quite right. Only after a few hours did I realize the crash was coming.

While in the grocery store, it happened. I became completely overwhelmed by the dark once more. Obviously, this was a continuation of what I'd experienced less than eight hours previously but this time, it was much more intense.

I held it at bay long enough to finish up my shopping and high-tail it home. Once there, in solitude, I broke down. Little did I know that this would be the final battle with the current manifestation of the dark that had burrowed inside me and had caused me such inner turmoil.

Running.

That's what I had been used to doing – running as fast as I could in my attempt to slow down time. The pace had been quickened in recent months and I honestly didn't know why.

It all became clear while sitting on my deck in solitude, as frozen perishables in shopping bags began thawing on my kitchen countertop.

In January of this year, a little less than ten months ago, in a tragic turn of events, I lost my significant other of two and a half years. No doubt, I'd yet to put this to rest.

Suicide.

It's the type of thing you hear about all the time but never expect will happen to you. But when it does, it's both shocking and completely incomprehensible.

The event leading up to this tragedy occurred four months earlier when she lost her youngest son in an accident. I never imagined that on that tragic day, I'd also be losing forever the person I'd known for the past two-and-one-half years.

It was clear right off the jump that this was going to be the toughest challenge of both our lives. She had the loss to deal with and I, as her partner, took on the primary support role. For me, it seemed overwhelming at first. I've always been the "glass half empty" type and she was always the "glass half full" type. Now the roles had been reversed. I had no idea how I was going to do this. Me? Of all people... Glass half full? It was a completely foreign concept.



In the days following the tragedy, I spent lots of time in thought. How the heck was I going to do this? Am I cut out for the job? What if I don't come through? Regardless of the many questions whirling around in my head, I decided that I could and I would do this. It would be a tough road, but I was certain I wasn't going to let her down, and I'd see it through to the end. Failing in this role was not going to be an option.

After her son's funeral, things had settled enough for her to start a routine. She began using the resources that had been put in place to help her cope, and we attended our first meeting with a local support group for people who have lost children. Family and friends were always in contact, asking to be called on for anything that would make her transition a little easier. The support system was good to go. Now, it was just a matter of her utilizing it.

My primary role was to keep her going on a daily basis. To make sure she was attending appointments, doing her workshop exercises, taking care of the things she needed to take care of at home while also being there to comfort her and be her rock. I was handling it well, never missing a beat. I thought it would make the difference. Many times, she told me it was, and that gave me hope for the future. We would get through this.

Based on what I'd been told by the experts, the initial shock phase lasts about a month. Then the grieving phase begins. The amount of time it takes for one to grieve is highly personal and highly subjective, but essentially, it's at least a full year. It's when all the "first"s stare you right in the face; first Thanksgiving, first Christmas, first birthday, without your loved one. The first year is critical and then, only then, do things get easier. But, according to the professionals, although that process takes a full year, there should still be some signs of improvement after that first month. However, in this case, I wasn't seeing any.

What I saw was quite alarming; a depressive cycle that seemed to take her down further and further with each passing day. She withdrew from everything and everyone including, at times, me. Calls from family and friends went unreturned; knocks at her front door went unanswered. To my mind, something didn't seem quite right about this. I kept looking for positives – just some small little indicators that would let me know she was improving. But for the first three months, I couldn't find any.

It wasn't until I came back from a family visit up north did I see what I recognized to be the first real positive step forward. On the day of my return, she was thrilled to see me. She smiled, was happy, was affectionate, and a part of the silly side of her personality returned, all of which left me thrilled. I felt at that moment that she was starting to turn the corner. This was a very good sign. I could now see a clear path forward and that gave me hope. But those few hours we spent together before nodding off to sleep were just a mirage.

The next day, her malaise and grief returned with a vengeance. In fact, it was the worst I'd ever seen. I had no idea how things changed so drastically in less than eight hours' time. I held out hope that this was just a temporary setback, but it was far from that. It became the norm.

Through the early part of December, things got even worse. Christmas lights were going up in every neighborhood and about half the commercials on television were Christmas ads.

'Tis the season.

It's always terrible around the holidays for any person who is touched by this type of tragedy. That much I knew. Maybe, I thought, if we could get through Christmas and New Year's, things would start to get better.

One suggestion to deal with holidays is to plan something different to do as not to remind the person grieving of family traditions – traditions that will make the reminder of the loss even worse. So I took the suggestion and planned a Christmas brunch for just the two of us. The idea was a good one in that it changed the dynamic of Christmas Day. She was in good spirits during our time at brunch and looked forward to seeing her oldest son and grandson later that afternoon to exchange Christmas gifts. In fact, Christmas Day was the happiest I'd seen her since the day of my return from up north in November. Again, I thought this might be a turning point... Not a chance.

From the next day forward, the grief was constant. There was not one bright spot to be found. She sank lower and lower until she'd hit bottom.

Eight days later, she was gone.

It's a very sad story but happens more frequently than we'd ever expect. There is no point of reference for those who are left behind and have lived through it. Only through time does it start making sense.

The fact is, the foundation was laid for this a long time ago. We are all unique personalities yet products of our environment. In her case, the touch-point was the death of her youngest son. Had his death not occurred, she would surely be here today.

Each of us has a different capacity for coping with the tragedies that life throws our way and sometimes, we are forced to sink or swim, whether we like it or not. It sucks that sometimes those are our two choices but in reality, what other options are there?

My method of swimming was running. I ran myself into oblivion, focusing on task after task until the crash happened last week. Yes, my drive, determination, and my nature all force me to run at a brisk pace. But what caused the meltdown was the constant running. I never slowed enough in order to open myself to experiencing the entirety of the grieving process. I could never fully let it in, but it found its way in anyhow. Once I acknowledged it and allowed myself to fully experience the hurt, the weight had been lifted.

A moment of clarity.

It's what saved me.

Since the breakthrough, I've slept through each of the past seven nights. I feel rested for the first time in almost a full year. I have pushed myself recently, but have never felt as wiped out as I had in previous weeks. I made it through the most difficult period of my life and I'm still here to talk about it. I've finally put this behind me and all is right with the world.

Feather in my cap.

In looking back at this tragedy in its entirety, I've learned a number of things that will serve me well in the future, most importantly that I do have the inner strength and courage to face any situation life throws my way. I will find my way through the most difficult situations, take something positive away from each, and learn something from them. Only fear can stunt the growth process.

I recently had a friend say to me, "I have no idea how you got through this and can be ok and it's not even a year! I'd be messed up for years on end if I experienced what you did." I told her that I just did my best to put things in perspective and take my moments when I needed them. Granted, this conversation took place before my meltdown, and that was a big piece of the process, so I'll have to make mention of it next time we talk. But the other piece of this, which I've yet to discuss, revolves around the concept of forgiveness.

One has to be able to forgive to truly heal. It's easy to get upset and angry with a suicide victim, and there's nothing abnormal in feeling as such. I cannot say whether or not I ever harbored animosity with my partner for leaving this world, but if I did, it was for a fleeting moment in time. Although I didn't know exactly what she was feeling, I knew enough to know that she wanted more than anything to be with her youngest. She couldn't bring him back so she decided to go to him. As warped a thought as that is, for her to give up her life for her child is something I cannot truly fathom. She made the ultimate sacrifice for him, and in that respect I can in no way feel an ounce of anger towards her. It was her way of fixing things; of righting a terrible wrong. And for those of us who were lucky enough to know her, it is a constant reminder of the truly selfless and beautiful soul that graced our presence and touched our lives in more ways than we will ever know.

## XVI – Unfinished

One word.

It's what I'd want on my tombstone if I was going to be buried. Since I'm thinking cremation, I'll settle for having it inscribed on my urn.

Unfinished.

I know that I will truly be a perpetual work in progress.

Always looking for the next challenge...

Always looking for a way to better myself...

Always asking questions of myself and the world surrounding me...

It's who I am and who I will always be.

Much work remains to be done in order to fully understand who I am, but through this exercise, I've been able to touch on some of it. Under the surface, there's more to explore.

The last two months of my life have been entirely about the process of self-discovery. Every word written here was written with a purpose. I had no idea where this journey would take me, nor what conclusions I would reach at the end of it, but what I did know was that the process would be worthwhile. In some way, shape or form, I'd take something away from it that I could be proud of.

For some time, I wondered how I could make a difference. The question gnawed at me for what seemed like forever, at least for the past ten years. After all, in my mind, time had grown short. I'd think about it from time to time, wracking my brain to come up with the one thing I could do to leave my mark on society; to leave a legacy. But for the longest time, that question remained unanswered....

Until today.

This work, irrespective of its significance, is what I leave behind.

Without question, it will be critiqued. But however it is perceived, one thing I can positively say about it, is that it is honest. It provides a window, albeit a narrow one, into my soul. I'm pretty certain I'm a little unbalanced, a little psychotic, a little dysfunctional, and certainly a bit obsessive-compulsive. I know for a fact that I certainly have my moments and can be a real pain in the ass. But I also know that I'm not finished. I can always try harder and always do better. It's about never saying to myself, "I'm done."

I've wrapped up this current phase of my life and in doing so have learned that I'm really not as smart as I think I am. Life has a funny way of snapping me back to reality every so often, and surprising me with something new. I've certainly learned to pay more attention to it, and when I'm looking for answers, I need only look to my inner self for guidance.

The other thing I've learned is that my creativity and its associated energy is still in there. It had lain dormant for a long time, but now that I've been able to draw it out, I can call upon it when necessary to assist me in my continuous journey.

At this moment, I feel fulfilled. The road travelled was littered with hazards and was quite lengthy. But finally, I've reached my destination. I will forever be unfinished, but before I start on the next phase of that journey of self-discovery, I think I'll just kick my feet back and enjoy the rest of the evening out here on the patio of my favorite hangout.

Right now, it's time for some long overdue rest.

## About the Author

Vince Guaglione writes in the personal transformation, short fiction, and dark poetry genres. His *Narratives* collection of works can best be described as his unique brand of personal journaling focusing on humanism, consciousness and thought, philosophy, and self-discovery.

[The Narratives: Keeping the Soul Alive](#)

[The Narratives II: Dusk Or Dawn](#)

[The Narratives III: Fanning The Flames](#)

[The Narratives: Evolution](#)

[The Narratives: Anthology](#)

[The Narratives: Transformation](#)

Vince's other works include:

[Chasing Angels](#)

[Eva](#)

[In The Dark Recesses...](#)

[From Thoughts To Written Words: Learn To Journal From The Soul](#)

When he's not at his real job, you can find Vince at his local Starbucks sucking down venti-sized coffees at a brisk pace, think up new writing projects, or pondering his mystery questions of life. Originally from Philadelphia PA, Vince now resides in Raleigh NC.

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