Just because you think something, doesn’t make it true.

I recently submitted some of my shots to a photography competition. This, in and of itself, is not something deserving of praise, an attaboy, or any notice at all; there was no barrier to entry, it was open to all.

Still, it gave rise to a thought that really made me smile. It was the realization that the things I've been doing these past few years are quite out of character for who I thought I was. Who I used to be. It's hard to explain.

Looking over your shoulder to take in, with sweet vindication all the things you have overcome in the past, is a lovely balm for bruises received while navigating the rough trail life is composed of. It's a great feeling, being able to say "If only childhood me could see me now!" but that is not exactly what I felt, nor is it what I want to meditate on with this soliloquy.

The balm I hope to bring attention to is harder to grasp, but just as substantial in its own way. To me, it brings to mind something more along the lines of a desire-path. One I hope to illuminate, so that you could perhaps avoid similar detours I meandered through, taking the better part of 3 decades before I felt comfortable in my skin.

The thoughts I stumbled upon, while I was working on entering the photography competition were surprising. Before I go on, please allow me this digression.

I've been shooting film photography since I was 17 years old. It was the first hobby that I had which truly was my own. Growing up, for all intents and purposes, all my interests were hand-me-downs. I was a younger brother and we shared a large group of friends. The concept of liking things of my own accord felt like a non sequitur. That is until I chose Photography as my elective in junior year. After hearing about this, my fantastic uncle gifted me his Canon AV-1. Which remains the best gift I've ever received. I still shoot with that, 18 years later.

I love being able to capture moments that would be overlooked, the ability to share my perspective through photography was the first time I had a voice. It was something I could call my own. My first aspiration, I remember, was to publish a book of photography. I thought about that for years.

What I realized while struggling to find my way through these unbidden thoughts, was how greedily I had taken for granted a blindingly obvious fact. That being the prerogative of, and my ability to, actually work towards a goal.

Out of a malformed sense of self-preservation which I believed to be some weird virtue, I would not allow myself the thought of reaching beyond myself. It was not fear of failure, as that would imply I regarded myself a person even capable of trying.

Like the blind spot from your optic nerve that your brain doesn't let you notice, I refused to notice entire aspects of my personality. In addition to this, I believed that the paralyzing fear and other unsavory emotions I was defending against were normal. So my reactions simply reinforced the belief that I was a coward, incapable of being as good as anyone else. Living was always something other people did.

Allow me to renege on my earlier statement and, in fact, wax poetic for a moment! If younger me was told what he would be doing at 35, I think he would believe it, it would totally resonate with him, my interests are largely the same as they have been for as long as I remember. He would smile, and be excited! He would think something along the lines of "neat! Things will work out!"

The joy I would feel would be real, but it would be a vapid understanding of the idea, and not something that would actually affect or encourage me. It would simply be a story about somebody else. The comprehension would have been utterly lost in translation. Why? Because I had hatefully annihilated the very concepts of impetus and development from the scope of my understanding.

I would be embarrassed if asked to explain the book I would be reading, or caught watching music videos, singing, liking things of my own accord. I was living life and could enjoy things, but only because I didn't let myself think about being an individual. I realize this is not uncommon, I'm writing about this not to bring attention to myself, but with hope that another may find solace in the similarities found in suffering despite the chasm caused by our irrefutable individuality we all possess.

With all that being said, I am forever grateful, because a quiet understanding that things could be okay remained and refused to play my games. I remember talking with my mom around the age of 19 during a time of lethargic inaction. Not having a job, and recently flunking out of community college, already drinking and doing drugs, I expressed with certainty, an understanding of possibilities and a hope of change. I told her something along the lines of "I understand it seems like I'm a screw up, but I know that this won't be forever, and that I will be okay someday. I just need time."

Recently I spoke with my oldest friend, who I had not spoken to for over a decade. It was with great joy that we both realized that our fellowship remained intact. It was as if no time had passed. He reminded me of the shared joy we had in our conversations over the years. Which reminded me that I did have some outlets, unbeholden to the pall I enveloped myself with. I believe that these moments of unconscious inhibition were boons. Footholds that kept me from utterly tumbling into the chasms that divide all persons, where I would lay broken, without hope of recovery.

This sounds contrary to the claim of my inconsequence, but I would disagree. This is a distinction I hope to illuminate, and one of the feelings that I hoped to touch on with this essay. While knowing that I was capable of things, and wanted to not fail at life, this desire stopped at work, duty and friendship.

I moved to China at 21, and worked there for the better part of a decade. And for many years I believed myself to have gotten over the rough patches in the trail behind me, and made it. In some ways I did, I had many good years, well-paying jobs, friends, I met my wife there! But through all this there was awful amounts of self-destructive behavior, including one half hearted suicide attempt, and another, much more earnest attempt 2 years later, which was waylaid by my drunken ineptitude. The mental anguish from my warped idea of selflessness was becoming unbearable. Maybe I had never found that path I was looking for. Uh, oh.

I understood that things needed to change, and they did! About 4 years later.

Can you guess what prompted this change?

My Canon AV-1.

I would often wish I had brought it with me to China, but it had stopped working about a year before the move. I had tried to repair it then, but I was afraid of mistakes, so I wrote it off as a loss, and quite frankly forgot about it by the time I left for China.

So imagine my surprise, when I walked into my family home years later, there it was, untouched among my old things! After getting my hands on it, I simply knew I had to try and fix it. Over the course of several days I took it apart to find the problem. The issue, once found, was a simple fix. I put everything back where it should be and could hardly believe it. For the first time ever, in my 30s, I tasted this new fruit from a novel labor, a task undertaken of my own volition, and completed with my own hands and for its own sake.

There was no life changing moment of clarity or any discernible change in my life. But unbeknownst to me, things were different. Over time, I found less and less reasons to need my tried and true methods of rationalizations for my ultimate unhappiness. Not only had I repaired an object, I had done something that proved my old understanding of myself to be false. There was more than one way to think about my life. Without knowing it, I created a desire path for my life.

The more I walked it, the easier it became to see. Submitting my photography to a competition, made me stop, think, and turn around. What came to mind was not validation, satisfaction, or something arising from impetus. But rather the understanding that no matter what is going on in my life, or how commonplace things seem, there will always be ways to have novel experiences. As I looked back, Instead of seeing all the hardships I overcame to get where I am now, I saw the ways I let myself make things better.