Finding A New Instrument / One-Trick Pony

Many of the most difficult questions in life are simple.

“What’s it like to surf a wave?” A young boy looked up at me with eager eyes.

As someone who has spent over twenty years of his life pursuing waves, I feel like I should be able to respond. I have been asked enough times that my logical mind tells me I should have a ready reply. Yet the answer remains elusive, no matter how hard I push. All my efforts have been as effective as grabbing water with my hands – momentarily something is there, then just as quickly it is gone.

At this point I generally compare it to the best roller-coaster ever, hoping to impress the young person with my answer. Talk of simultaneous acceleration in all three dimensions would be lost on him. As would the curious state of mind that accompanies riding a wave, one that generates memories that feel more like dreams than normal reality. Further, adding more words does not grant more understanding. The impact of each additional sentence drops off exponentially when there is little shared experience with the listener. He walks away thinking briefly of a roller coaster, then asks his dad about something else and the moment is over.

The magic of surfing cannot be captured by a single sentence. To be fair, explaining any activity to someone that has never done that activity poses unique challenges. Comparison is often the most effective way to convey meaning, however I struggled to find another pursuit similar enough to offer a shared frame of reference. The answer came from an unexpected direction.

I have spent enough time singing and playing guitar to know that is not where my gifts lie. I have only a passing acquaintance with the concept of ‘being on key’. I briefly performed as lead singer in a garage-quality band in my youth, and would memorize the proper keys by feel, not by sound. Yet even with these shortcomings I was able to experience the magic of being lost in the music. I had glimpses of being played, rather than being the player. Looking back, I see the same state of mind as riding a wave. Ask a musician what they were thinking during a given moment on stage and you are likely to get the same answer as what a surfer thinks on a wave: I don’t know, I was busy doing it.

It’s about not thinking, it’s about doing. In certain eastern philosophies this is referred to as ‘doing without doing,’ which sounds like double talk. However, if you have been there you know the feeling. My brain expands that phrase into ‘doing without consciously doing,’ since my regular conscious mind is standing aside. I have since learned this state can be called ecstatic, which means literally ‘to be beside one’s self.’ This phenomenon has been studied scientifically and has been dubbed ‘flow.’ [1]

Continuing this analogy, waves occur when nature plays music in water. Interestingly, this is not mere hyperbole. Wave trains often join together, interfere, speed up or stretch out, much like sound waves do in air. When I surf, water is my instrument. A good ride could be described as being in harmony with the wave. There are simultaneously the sensations of being in the grip of forces beyond my control, and that of being where I am supposed to be.

A decade after moving away from easily accessible surf I realized I did not have a reliable way to get into that state of mind. This loss weighed heavily on my overall happiness. Perhaps not coincidentally, the timing aligned with the worst of my drinking. Slowly the conclusion dawned on me that if the only time I could be truly happy is when balanced atop a wave, then I am in for a long haul. I need a way to be content without the rare, perfect mix of forces that culminate in a twenty second ride. Alcohol masqueraded as a solution for a handful of years, successfully convincing me I did not want anything else. The perfect buzz replaced flow. Then it stopped working.

For the record, I did not join the program to find flow, happiness, nor a sense of joy from the little things in life. I joined simply because I did not want to die alcoholically. In hindsight I can say the most important decision I made was to embrace the program fully. I finished my first pass through the steps within four months, and began raising my hand to sponsor others.

What has transpired exceeds anything I thought I would find here. Somewhere in my second year of sobriety I found myself walking down a hiking path in the mountains, and was utterly lost in the sensation of the trail beneath my feet. The same moment occurred later on a mountain bike. The more I let go of expectations the more I can experience flow during everyday occurrences. There are many synonyms for this concept. In the rooms I generally hear it described as ‘being present,’ which I initially dismissed as a hokey slogan. Today I see it as a declaration of joy, and of hope. I increasingly am aware of people that can harness this joy, this flow, independently of their physical environment.

Seeing this in others forged a link between progress in the program and deeper happiness. This blew my mind. For the first time in my life, I saw a means to be happy that did not require me to arrange my external surroundings in a certain way.

After all this, I still cannot give a succinct answer to the question about riding a wave. Instead, I found that I am no longer dependent upon a single instrument to be happy.