Dear friends and family,   January 31, 2021 - San Francisco

I decided to write an annual life update letter to send to you. I'm not very active on social media and some people have labeled me "mysterious" (looking at you, mom and dad), which I don't really think is necessarily a reputation I want. I aim to do this annually as a reflection of the year and just generally give a life update of goings-on for friends/family I may not see frequently.

Cool, let's get started. The story of my 2020 begins in New York.

Career Pivot

As some of you may know, in 2019 I was increasingly unsatisfied with the career path I had forged thus far in the world of Customer Success[1] in tech companies/startups in Washington, DC and New York. When I looked ahead at people in more senior leadership roles 5-15 years down this same career path, I was simply not excited about the prospect of being in their shoes.

A primary gripe I had is that I felt unfulfilled in not *creating* something but instead just *servicing*. It felt like a treadmill and I wanted to empower myself to be in a position to build and be creative in my career.

After shopping around a bit and considering a handful of options (grad school, looking for a new job, etc.), I decided to enroll in a 4-month full-time program called App Academy to pivot my career into a more technical direction with the goal of being a software engineer. I had done tiny coding projects here and there over the past four years or so and engaged with enough engineers/product managers in the past to know that this line of work is much more interesting to me - actually *building* something (and theoretically having the autonomy and skillset to build things on my own at some point).

The term "coding bootcamp" gets thrown around loosely, and unfortunately many of these programs have dubious track records or have not survived for more than a few years. App Academy is among those with a better reputation but the promise of "a great software engineering job" at the end of the program is of course not guaranteed. You have to put in the work (and have some luck) - so that became my primary goal for 2020: focus on getting through App Academy, learn as much as possible, and land a software engineering job somewhere I could feel proud of and excited about. I gave notice at my job and started App Academy in late November and expected to finish in mid-March 2020. (I also dyed my hair turquoise just for fun because I didn't need to look "presentable" to employers for at least half a year. Pic further below!)

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[1] For those unfamiliar with this term and intrigued to learn more, here's an overview. The function of a Customer Success team is to onboard and renew customers at the highest rate possible. Basically make happy customers and protect the company's recurring revenue.

App Academy was intense - the instructors are serious about ensuring their graduates are legitimately learning and employable. 9am-6pm of nonstop in-person learning (this is pre-Covid-19), then extensive homework each night. Then assessments every week of the previous week's learnings; if you don't pass with at least an 80% score, you are kicked out of the program. The unrelenting pressure of passing assessments translated to studying all weekend every weekend with essentially no social life. Not the end of the world (that would arrive in the form of a virus in March), but it really required me to focus to avoid the embarrassing outcome of failing out of the program, which happened to probably 25% of my cohort of 30 or so students.

Side note: I also was going to the gym to weight lift most mornings and focused on gaining muscle with a "bulking" diet[2] (shout out to my cousin Andrew M for the support on this!). I could write a whole post about this but I'll spare you here. Coding learning, the App Academy hustle, and weight lifting were basically my life for ~4 months.

Covid-19 in New York

Then Covid-19 hit. I was alarmed at the rapid spread across Europe (at that point, mainly Italy) and the apparent lack of action by local/federal governments, businesses, etc in New York and the United States at large.

I figured the virus had already arrived in New York and was spreading like wildfire and would rear its head within a few weeks as symptoms finally presented themselves. As such, on March 11 I requested to finish the last few days of App Academy from home, which was easily done given that App Academy broadcast all lectures via Zoom already in addition to doing in-person instruction.

Then Covid-19 *really* hit New York just as I finished App Academy on March 13. I was living with three roommates at the time in Williamsburg, Brooklyn so I was concerned about one of us getting infected with Covid-19 at a time when the virus wasn't well understood. For a few weeks, I consciously adopted the attitude of assuming everyone already had it, including me, to guide my actions.

For a few weeks, the streets of New York were dead. The highway near my apartment was literally empty. I could hear sirens near constantly. I watched in horror as the death count rose. One of my roommates fled to her parents' home in Montana. In order to preserve my hard-won gainz (about 10 pounds in 3 months of 2020), I adjusted my workout routine with the gym closed, which led to some creative use of bags, water cartons, and stairs. Thankfully, my apartment building had a rooftop that was rarely used by the other tenants.

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[2] "Bulking" refers to the practice of strategically eating a lot of specific foods to gain muscle (and fat) before doing a "cutting" period that focuses on just losing fat, the end result being you gained primarily muscle. More on this here if you care at all.

Needless to say, a fruitful job hunt at that point seemed out of the question -- companies were enacting hiring freezes or even wholesale laying off employees left and right. I figured it didn't even make sense to attempt a job hunt during such a tumultuous period so I decided to not send a single job application until at least May when hopefully things would settle down somewhat.

However, I also reasoned that there was a new opportunity in this exceedingly messy, chaotic situation that everyone was navigating. After finishing off a few of my final App Academy portfolio projects by the end of March, I turned my attention to finding a meaningful Covid-19-related project that I could volunteer for in some capacity as a software engineer. I figured this could be a good way to network, do some engineering that solves real problems for real people rather than self-contained portfolio projects, and ultimately to contribute in my own little way in the global fight against the pandemic.

Covid Watch

After bouncing between a few random, messy groups of Covid-19 technologists that I found online, I connected with Covid Watch, which had a clearly stated mission of creating a privacy-centric Covid-19 exposure notification smartphone app. This rag tag, global group of PhD students and startup folk had a *long* way to go to achieve their goal of releasing a smartphone app but I essentially started working with them, bouncing between part-time and full-time while balancing this with my own independent learning and job hunting activities.

To make a long story short, this was an insanely valuable experience for me to be working with other (experienced) engineers on a collaborative team that ultimately launched Covid Watch (the smartphone app) in August in Arizona with the governor's blessing. This was a wild and unique experience of coordinating with literally hundreds of volunteers around the world (though probably no more than 40 dedicated, consistent contributors) to bring a real application to fruition. I blogged about this experience here if you're interested in learning more - I was even quoted in the Wall Street Journal (article here).

The University of Arizona, with whom we worked closely, estimated recently that Covid Watch contributed to a 12% decrease in the overall spread of Covid-19 on their campus. I'm proud of that result. You may also be aware that other US states and countries have rolled out similar solutions - for the most part, these all rely on the same underlying technology from Apple and Google that Covid Watch also uses.

Back To California

Amidst the Covid Watch journey, I moved back to California in June and crashed in Santa Cruz with my parents until I could find a full-time job. Why did I move back? Well, I had been on the East Coast for ~10 years (!!!!), there was nothing really holding me back in New York (no job, apartment lease ending, pandemic eliminating many of the benefits of living in an urban center), and I had just become Uncle Jesse after my brother, Greg, and sister-in-law, Courtney, welcomed their newborn son, Johnny. It just felt like the right time, and Covid-19 was an unexpected push towards that conclusion.

Living in Santa Cruz was a significant but welcome shift from New York. After quarantining for two weeks, I was hanging out with my parents a lot more, which was nice. Home cooked meals are definitely a plus, too.

My time in Santa Cruz lasted from June to November and was a mix of a few things. First, job hunting, interviews, and little projects for software engineering learning. Second, part-time Covid Watch work, which I scaled down significantly after our successful launch in August/September. Third, volunteering for a political campaign for district supervisor that my dad was heavily involved in (read: obsessed with) for Manu Koenig. Manu ended up winning the race and is now the district supervisor for Santa Cruz.

Fourth, I enrolled in a handful of weekend sailing classes culminating in an overnight Friday-Sunday trip from Santa Cruz to nearby Moss Landing then Monterey, finally back to Santa Cruz. Each of these three separate weekend classes had an associated 100 question multiple choice test that I passed. I can now proudly declare that I am (theoretically) licensed to rent and captain a small-ish sailboat overnight anywhere in the world. I look forward to a post-covid world to do this with friends more. Fifth, I was trying to get consistent, good workouts in and even built a pull up bar in my parents' backyard to use for this purpose.

Job Hunting

Job hunting was brutal, which I expected but that doesn't make it any less frustrating. Few companies or recruiters respond to applications/outreach, the hiring market was unpredictable due to covid uncertainty, and traditional in-person networking was obviously just not possible. After plenty of false starts, failures, ghostings, disappointments, and doubts that I would never achieve my goal of landing a software engineer role I'd be proud of, I made my way through Tesla's interview process and ultimately was offered a role as Associate Software Engineer with a mid-October start date (theoretically based in Fremont, California but remote until… who knows). This was an *enormous* relief.

Now with a job offer in hand, I decided to move to San Francisco for a few reasons. First, I have plenty of friends and family there. Second, while I grew up in the Bay Area, I had never actually

lived in San Francisco and wanted to give it a shot (even if admittedly the pandemic had altered the city). Third, as I explained to my understanding mother, who wants to live with their parents as they approach 30? After a whirlwind apartment hunt in San Francisco, I found a month-to-month apartment with two solid roommates in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood.

I spent Christmas and New Years in Santa Cruz again with my parents, Greg, Courtney, and my adorable four-month old nephew, Johnny. It was a wonderful time to get to know the little guy and just spend some quality family time with everyone.

Nephew Johnny and me on Christmas!

A Concluding Note

To conclude, I just want to recognize the enormously challenging situation that Covid-19 has brought about. All things considered, I had a transformative, positive year. Many people are not so fortunate - many peers of mine are unemployed and millions more are struggling from the fallout of the pandemic and the various institutional shortcomings it exposed. I encourage you all to support your neighbors and friends. And if you're struggling yourself in any way, don't be afraid to ask for help. We'll get through this together.

I'm hopeful that the new political landscape in the United States offers some hope of more capable federal leadership in pulling us through the next months of Covid-19. I know we are all looking forward to that day when we can embrace one other and gather to remember, mourn, and celebrate the life we are blessed to have. After this pandemic, doing anything else would be insane.

Epilogue

A few other miscellaneous things that didn't fit in any particular place above:

- A friend and I started a remote book club in June that meets every Sunday morning. We've read a handful of books and it has proven to be a fantastic way to keep in touch with far flung friends. I finally made it through War and Peace and the book club is going strong after 6 months. It's been an unexpected highlight of 2020 for me. If you have any interest in joining, let me know.
- I mentioned I dyed my hair turquoise. Why? Because I've had the same forgettable white boy haircut my whole life and wanted to shake things up and try something different. Only positive things happened to me because of it -- in my experience, it attracts certain (generally cool) people and repels (generally lame) others. I'll probably do something like this again at some point. Also, hair grows back - it's not permanent so who cares? Though I'm balding ever so slightly so there is some urgency!
- In 2021, I've started setting my sights on web and network security, ethical hacking, etc. and will be pursuing at least one professional certification in this world as I aim to potentially specialize in this over time.
- If you're curious about my personal life, I have decided to deprioritize dating during the pandemic - dating without a pandemic is challenging enough. Additional complications make it still more challenging: masks, covid exposure anxiety, navigating varying covid risk comfort levels with strangers, new roommates, etc. Also, living at your parents' place for 5 months during a pandemic and job search isn't exactly fertile ground for romance, ha!

Picture from Feb 2020. YOLO, right?

Love and solidarity,
Jesse