

Essay 1: Connect the dots

When viewed in the resolution of years, my life can be segregated into distinct periods, each of which is comprised of different values, opinions, and priorities. Less well defined are the boundaries of these life stages, and instead represent periods of metamorphosis, where bad decisions, good decisions, information gained through inquiry and experience all accumulate like a slow moving coup, until finally your old self is overthrown and in its place is someone wiser, more thoughtful, more knowledgeable, and with a better sense of what's important.

As a child of nine, an event with most definite influential impact was the death of my father. He taught me how to touch-type, play chess, make my bed everyday, and to treat my mom and sister with respect. His discipline was stern but his nature was flexible, and I was free to be a kid. He was uneducated, but a self-taught auto-mechanic, computer programmer, maker of robots, and transformed wood into beautiful furniture. I inherited many of these qualities from him, his curious nature and problem solving abilities, but they had to be rediscovered; until my twenties they were suppressed.

An island I can see but not to swim to represents the first 'dot' of my memory. I can't connect this dot. How my life would have been if he lived...I have no idea. The residues he left on my developing mind surely exist...but have no way to be quantified. I can only suspect he would have focused my innate curiosity and served as a valuable role model....but without him I had none.

But I can connect a dot to my childhood days, of which I look back on fondly. In a unique niche on the outskirts of San Diego is a town with an occupancy of about 1000. One store, a park, a few houses, and a bar were the only establishments added since the town's founding by Mr. Harbison, a man who owned bee boxes and sold honey. As a child I grew up catching frogs, falling from trees, getting poison oak, and waiting for the dinner bell to ring so we knew we could finally come home. It was here where my first explorations began, finding treasures in the illegal junkyard, coming across interesting bugs, and playing with the neighborhood kids with nothing more than sticks, stones, and our

imaginations. Something, I am sad to say, seems lost for children today, even in the town I'm speaking of. But the child like wonder of what interesting thing lies underneath the next stone unturned is still a large part of my character today, and I believe I owe it to these times of freedom.

Small towns are not without charm but they can suffer from one affliction... ignorance. Alcoholics, drug addicts, sometimes racist and dogmatically religious people were the members of my community. And they were happy to share their "wisdom" with me, some of which I took in whole heartedly. I had no outside scope of things. No knowledge of world problems. No knowledge of science. No appetite for intellectual endeavors at all.

But I did know how to have fun. And at 20 with less than two days notice, and to the great despair of my mother, a friend and I hitch hiked with \$40 dollars in our pocket, making it all the way to British Columbia, to Halifax, and finally down to Boston. Perhaps it was the innocence of a myopic life, but I had no fear of the world. I had a great time. I learned where to safely sleep and how to stay groomed for the occasional times I cared. It was on this journey that I started meeting my first openly gay people. We got a ride from a family of Iraqis who were insistent on feeding us dinner and sending us on our way with some small pocket money. I'm happy to say I accepted these people and could acknowledge their decent character immediately, despite the rhetoric I was used to hearing from the cruder folks back home. It is also where I found a network of "street kids", living the same rowdy kinds of lives as us. It was through this "family" -as I naively thought of any young homeless runaway at the time - that I first heard personal stories that left my jaw to the floor at just how horrible life can be.

The trip lasted approximately 6 months. And ended with me coming home because my mothers breast tissue had become cancerous, an episode of our lives that was terrifying, but short lived, as optimal as could be, and long since past, may she be here forever. But, my poor mother and all she's been through, was soon to face another "growing opportunity of life" when the wild fires of 2003 swept through large parts of San Diego County. The fire devastated my town, and my mothers house was reduced to ash and rubble representing things that existed no more. I'll say only two things about the aftermath of this fire. As the weeks

past, I observed big, beautiful bugs. Bugs I've never seen before. It didn't mean much at the time, but I held on to the memory and drew on it at a later stage of life. The second observation was just how familial and how sacrificial people can be in times of disaster. When you have nothing left, the value of unity rises to its proper price. As the decades move forward, and increased wild fires, natural disasters, and displaced refugees start to fit the predictions, the solidarity that roots itself in vulnerability should be an opportunity for local organizers to connect the community to beneficial policies. From my experience this window is not indefinite.

My travels, my mothers illness, and the wild fires all serve as boundaries where a straight line can be crossed through my continuous development. Traveling opened me to new people, places, and ideas, and I learned not all lives are as fortunate as my own. My mothers illness that life is delicate and too easily focused on things of little importance, and the fire that when we're collectively vulnerable the best of human nature can emerge. These all added insight to how I viewed the world. But another series of events would slowly and casually take place and it did not add to my perspective, but amended it completely.

Through a series of poor choices and a little bad luck, I found myself in a place needing answers and drew upon my quasi-religious upbringings to find them. I went to church, made some new friends, read the bible from front to back, met a girl, moved in with girl, enrolled in community college, broke up with girl, and thought I should change directions and join a missionary.

And then one day, rather randomly I suppose, I came across a debate about the origins of life, God, science, and evolution and within ten minutes of listening to the critics I felt my faith slip from me forever. It was the first time that a strong belief I held so central was challenged. And I wasn't upset. I was elated. It was the nascency of an epistemological framework I now hold as close to my center as I ever did my faith (I say this fully aware that someone reading this may have their own faith, and I have no contempt or hostility for those who do).

But a thirst was awakened and I read a lot of books and listened to more scientific scholars on topics like evolution and astrophysics. I was enamored by the prose of this kind of discourse, and I never knew one person could know so

much. It inspired me immensely, and the beautiful bugs that emerged after the black ashes of my freshly scarred town came to my head, and I wondered if anyone ever studied the evolution of insects after fires? Perhaps I can be the first? A completely stupid idea, considering evolution doesn't work on scales of weeks or months. But a motivating idea and before I knew better I changed my academic focus to the sciences.

I have since learned many more things about the world and have great concern for our country and indeed our species. I've been studying plants at the Salk Institute and food security, loss of wild crop relatives, and rapid changes of ecosystems are at the forefront of my mind and where I feel my energy could best be spent. So I stand today, looking now not to the past but forward in time, to utilize science and connect it to real world change. I feel it as the highest priority, as I'm fully aware that not all horror stories are told by homeless teenage runaways.