

Saturday, 1 January 2022

On immersion

A couple years ago, I created this list:

immersive:

- walking
- taking a shower
- sleeping
- teaching
- falling in love
- cinema
- life or death experience

I was curious about these amazing parts of life that feel so meaningful — like portals, where time and space take on a totally different, enchanted feeling.

I remember writing this list to expand on the way Jenny Odell, in her book *How to Do Nothing*, put it:

I stopped looking at my phone because I was looking at something else, something so absorbing that I couldn’t run away. That’s the other thing that happens when you fall in love. Friends complain that you’re not present or that you have your head in the clouds; companies dealing in the attention economy might say the same thing about me, with my head lost in the trees.

Lately, I’ve been writing more. I’ve been trying a daily practice with pen and paper. But sometimes it can be difficult for me to continue, to get to my goal of three pages. When this happens, I remember that I should write about what really matters to me ... a continuous excavation.

The only thing I know about how to be more prolific? Write about the thing that means the most to you, then write about the thing that means more.

Using this advice from Ava Huang, I decided to go deeper into *immersion*.

Immersion is defined as “an absorbing involvement.”

It certainly has liquid qualities. And apparently an “immerser” is someone who baptizes another person, using water.

I believe being immersed is one of the best ways to live happily today.

If I were to add anything to the beginning list, I might even add:

- writing (as excavation)

Zooming out, it might be useful to begin with a regular universal immersive experience: sleep. We need to do it; it’s totally necessary. We feel off if we don’t have our sleep.

For something so everyday, it’s amazing that sleep is so mysterious. Like outer space, like the deep ocean. The subconscious part of life, where things naturally connect and balance out again. We need this balance to live a healthy life.

Sometimes it can be difficult getting from modern life to sleep (or immersion in general). There is this weird gray area, transition time ... before falling asleep or becoming fully immersed. For it to work, the paradoxical thing is that you have to surrender. But how do you choose to go with the flow, to become powerless? It’s about controlling the environment to allow the process to happen naturally. Controlling your environment or circumstance so immersion comes easier ... maybe you put your phone on Airplane Mode, get a nice pillow, put on your white noise machine. And before you made sure to get some exercise so that you’re truly tired, needing sleep. Or maybe you do this all in one swoop and decide to live a different lifestyle, one tied to the land, the sun, and the moon.

But what about other immersions in life, ones that are more particular per person? Similar to the surrender required to sleep, I find the times I don’t have to choose much easier. I find surrendering and immersion go hand and hand. Maybe I need money, so I find a job. Maybe my friend is sick, so I make them soup. Maybe I feel disenchanted, so I research what I’m curious about. For me, immersion should come from direct needs. It’s normal to have needs, and it’s important to be self-aware about what those needs are, so that you can then go about achieving them in a way that is best for you and doesn’t harm others. Often, we can achieve multiple needs through a single immersion. And that’s one of the beautiful things about being immersed. It feels like a dream. One thing flowing seamlessly into the next.

Two years ago, I wrote:

Nowadays, I fantasize about having other jobs. What would it be like to be a boat driver? To feel the waves and current under me and be responsible for others safe journey? What about a spin class instructor? Maybe I’d have to be fit, inspiring, a good DJ, and again, caring for my participants. I wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt. I’d have to do CPR on someone if something bad happened. Or what about being a park ranger? I could give tours and introduce guests to specific medicinal plants, for example. Of course while it seems idyllic, it might be scary to be near nature too—it’s awesome in both it’s beauty and power. Again I would be caring towards any hikers, giving them the best information for a safe and fun hike.

I keep trying to define the properties of being fully immersed. One is certainly being embodied, or conscious of your body. Another aspect might be social. The occupations I mentioned above are all caring for others in some way, leading them on an embodied path. I feel most immersed when I’m on a journey with someone else, like when I’m teaching.

It is certainly more difficult to be both embodied and social during this worldwide pandemic. Which is probably why immersion is so vital now more than ever.

I like to imagine social media as a catalogue of possible immersions. (This is a mindset shift that has been helping me personally lately.)

I think humans who use social media would benefit by regularly seeing some sort of PSA about immersion, ideally pinned to the top of each social media as a gentle, humane suggestion. But since modern day platforms probably won’t do this, I need to pin it inside of my brain instead. It goes something like this:

You are here, on this social media platform. It’s actually a sandy beach.

You look out to the horizon and see wave after wave coming in. There are some surfers wading in the ocean, and a pod of dolphins jump in the distance. Is that an island far away, or maybe it’s a shipping container?

It’s true: the world is vast and abundant. There are so many things to do with so many different people! It’s an amazing world, ready to explore.

But remember: the jewels of existence are out in the sea, in the depths of experience.

I know it’s comfortable, but please don’t stay on the beach forever.

I want you to deeply explore the ocean: the waves, the other surfers, the dolphins, the island and/or shipping container. And so much more that’s not even visible!

Think about this beach (well, this social media platform!) as an catalog of possible immersions. Yes, the abundance of items in our catalog can feel overwhelming at times, but the trick is to choose just a couple things you feel drawn to, and try them out, one at a time.

(Remember too that ours is not the only catalog. There are other catalogs, some incredibly valuable ones can be unlocked through friendship with other humans. And friendship itself is a kind of immersion!)

Anyway, you can think of getting immersed like exploring the ocean. I wouldn’t bring your phone here if I were you — it’s going to get wet. Leave it on the beach, or at least put it in a water-tight container.

When you come up to the surface for oxygen, to rest, to share with others, just remember to not get too comfortable or languish here. Let your collected jewels gleam in the sun as a way to reflect and encourage others, but never forget the depths they came from.

I think it was Einstein who said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” I like to believe that’s true. It is out there, not here.

Indeed, surfing seems to be a great metaphor for the cyclical experience of going out for an experience and then reflecting back on the sandy beach, and doing it again and again.

There’s a beautiful song by Pardon Kimura whose lyrics go like this:

I keep waiting for waitlessness
The wave is life
I'm going to ride on it
Surfing is love
I'm going to wave my weakness goodbye
I don't have to be afraid of wiping out
if I don't try to catch the big one,
I'm stuck in the water anyway

It's a loop
I'm going to get out...
to wait
I'm going to wait...
to surf
I'm going to surf...
to wipe out
I'm going to wipe out...
to get out
and that's it

In other words, disillusionment is normal, and part of the process. If we are patient, we can immerse ourselves and become enchanted again.

“Enchantment is the oldest form of medicine” – Carl Jung

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