http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/03/11/130311fa_fact_macfarquhar?currentPage=all

REQUIEM FOR A DREAM

Aaron Swartz was brilliant and beloved. But the people who knew him best saw a darker side.

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR MARCH 11, 2013

"This, I suppose, is the actual problem," Swartz wrote, long before his suicide. "I feel my existence is an imposition on the planet." Illustration by Michael Gillette.

HE COULD NOT deal with people talking about him. It's taken me some time since he died to get used to talking about him because I was under such strict instructions not to. But he fucked up something really major. He made a really dumb, bad decision. And it's my right now to ignore all the other things that I thought were dumb, too. Maybe if I hadn't felt I couldn't talk about him to other people this wouldn't have happened. I'm not going to let those preferences that led, in one way or another, to him killing himself guide my life anymore. I reject them.

Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman, Aaron Swartz's girlfriend

THERE IS SUICIDE as a philosophical question: does suicide make sense as an answer to suffering? No, he didn't think it did.

Alec Resnick, a friend

A DOCTOR RELATIVE last night told me that he'd had some very painful experiences with patients with ulcerative colitis committing suicide. Apparently co-morbidity with depression is common. I've been thinking about it a lot for the last twelve hours. I know during the scare in 2007 he had gotten very, very sick from his U.C. He definitely didn't seem depressed right before his death, nor for a long time previously. He wasn't doing normal depressed-people things (like withdrawing from friends and family), let alone suicidal-people things (like giving away his stuff). However, he did commit suicide, which weighs pretty heavily on the other side of the scale. My doctor relative told me that some of his ulcerative-colitis patients seemed to be doing much better until the moment when they suddenly committed suicide, and that there's some speculation that U.C. can alter liver functioning, which in turn can cause other medicine to cause impulsive behavior like suicide.

Ben Wikler, a friend

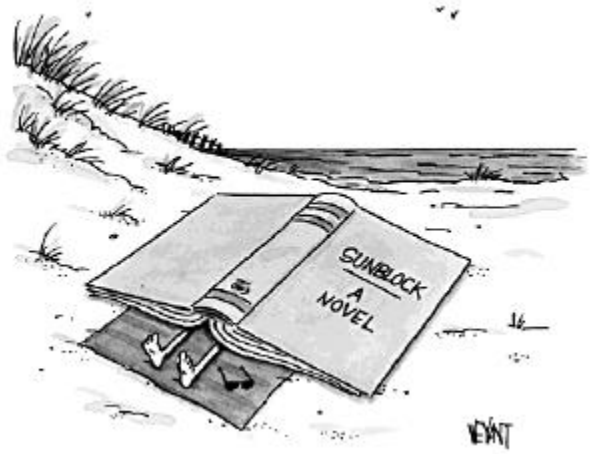
I LOOKED BACK at my e-mails and I was almost always the one who didn't continue the conversation. He would always say something nice. And most of the time I didn't respond. It made me feel like a dick.

Matt Stoller, a friend

I TOLD ALEC that Aaron was a bit too calm before Christmas. I told Alec that I thought he might try to kill himself. It was like he had one too many options. It was on the table.

Quinn Norton, an ex-girlfriend

I'LL TELL THE following story, which is perhaps the best way I can describe what may have happened. Last Wednesday, I went to say Kaddish for Aaron and I got a call from a friend of mine who wanted to come see me, so I didn't get lunch. He came and he stayed until about three-thirty, four o'clock. By that time, I didn't want anything to eat, it was too late to go out for lunch. I had to work for a while. The last few weeks have been the hardest weeks of my life, and I think I've managed poorly but O.K. But because I was so hungry I was feeling increasingly bad, and I went home and thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown, which for me never happens. I will get depressed, as we all do, and I'm certainly very depressed right now, but I can sort of manage and see my way through. I said to Susan, "I'm really not feeling well and I sort of think I'm losing it." I got something to eat and I still was feeling very crummy, and then I had dinner and I still didn't feel well at all, and then I went to sleep and woke up in the morning and started feeling better again. I seemed to have righted the ship. So part of me thinks that maybe something happened, with all the other things that were going on, that just put him in some dissociated frame of mind. There were times when Aaron would—where he would, all of a sudden, not be himself, for a short period of time. That's the best explanation I have. Whether it's correct or not I have no idea and I never will.



Robert Swartz, Aaron Swartz's father

• • •

Aaron Swartz hanged himself in his apartment in Brooklyn on January 11th. He was twenty-six, but he had been well known as a computer programmer for many years. At the age of fourteen, he helped to develop the RSS software that enables the syndication of information over the Internet. At fifteen, he e-mailed one of the leading theorists of Internet law, Lawrence Lessig, and helped to write the code for Lessig's Creative Commons, which, by writing alternatives to standard copyright licenses, allows people to share their work more freely. At nineteen, he was a developer of Reddit, one of the world's most widely used social-networking news sites.

After Reddit was sold, to Condé Nast, he turned away from money-making start-ups and became a political activist. He spoke often at technology conferences and activist gatherings, and was admired in both those worlds. Since his death, he has become a hero to programmers who have not turned away from money but wish they had, and to those who believe that governments are crushing what was once the freedom of the Internet. When Anonymous hacked the State Department Web site on February 17th, they declared, "Aaron Swartz this is for you."

Two years ago, he was indicted on multiple felony counts for downloading several million articles from the academic database JSTOR. It is not clear why he did this. He may have wanted to analyze the articles, or he may have intended to upload them onto the Web, so they could be accessed by anyone. It is clear that he did not anticipate the astonishing severity of the legal response. He did not consider his JSTOR action an act of civil disobedience for which he was prepared to sacrifice a portion of his life in prison. It was not a project that was particularly important to him. There had been a time when he cared deeply about copyright issues, but he had moved on.

Since his death, his family and closest friends have tried to hone his story into a message, in order to direct the public sadness and anger aroused by his suicide to political purposes. They have done this because it is what he would have wanted, and because it is a way to extract some good from the event. They tell people that the experience of being prosecuted is annihilatingly brutal, and that prosecutors can pursue with terrible weapons defendants who have caused little harm. One of the corollaries of this message is that Swartz did not kill himself; he was murdered by the government. But this claim is for public consumption, and the people closest to him do not really believe it. They believe that he would not have killed himself without the prosecutors, but they feel that there is something missing from this account—some further fact, a key, that will make sense of what he did.

Despite his public presence, he was small and frail and shy and often sick, and people wanted to protect him. He was loved intensely, as a child is loved. Because he hated people talking about him, he kept his friends apart. He was different with different people, and with the same people at different times, so his story is fractured, and some of the pieces contradict one another. This is partly because he was young, and was changing, as most people change between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six.

He kept a blog for most of his life.

So here I am. We're somewhere over a dark patch in the middle of the country and I'm in the window seat in the last row in the plane. The guy in front of me's leaning all the way back, but I'm in the last row so my seat doesn't go back, and I have to lift my legs up to stretch out a muscle that was sitting funny while I was asleep. . . . But that's not the problem. (2007)

Prose creates a strong illusion of presence—so strong that it is difficult to destroy it. It is hard to remember that you are reading and not hearing. The illusion is stronger when the prose is online, partly because you are aware that it might be altered or redacted at any moment—the writer may be online, too, as you read it—and partly because the Internet has been around for such a short time that we implicitly assume (as we do not with a book) that the writer of a blog post is alive.

No, the problem is that I am terribly, almost unbearably thirsty. . . . I am so thirsty that it's beginning to feel like there's no water around to hydrate my brain so my neocortex is shrivelling up. . . . But I guess that's not really the problem either. The problem, the real problem I suppose, is that I can't ask for anything to drink. (2007)

He did not cope well with situations of this sort. His girlfriend Taren always dealt with taxi-drivers, with waitresses. He hated feeling that he was in a position of power over someone, and he hated asking for help.

When I go to a library and I see the librarian at her desk reading, I'm afraid to interrupt her, even though she sits there specifically so that she may be interrupted, even though being interrupted for reasons like this by people like me is her very job. (2007)

This wasn't a simple matter of humility. Having power over other people made you into something he disdained. Being a boss wasn't just immoral; bosses were stupid. They were shallow and cared about dumb things and didn't understand technology. They had no idea what was going on. They thought they were important, but they were just puppets.

It was an imposing room, wood paneling and a window opening on to a picturesque view of the water. An ornate light fixture hung from the ceiling, illuminating the mahogany desk, neatly organized with boxes OUT and IN, with a stack of paper, with a pad for writing on. There was no computer. He didn't need a computer. A computer would have ruined the look. (2007)

But it was even more complicated than that, because another part of not imposing on people like waitresses or flight attendants or really any normal person was not revealing the gap between them and himself.

Most people, it seems, stretch the truth to make themselves seem more impressive. I, it seems, stretch the truth to make myself look worse. At CodeCon the other day, all sorts of people asked me what I was working on these days. I could have said "I've been put in charge of Roosevelt Labs, a center to write cool software with political implications." Or I could have said "I'm writing a book about how the world really works." But instead I say, "Oh, nothing, just focusing on schoolwork." . . . The other night, when [redacted] asked me why I switched from computer science to sociology, I said it was because Computer Science was hard and I wasn't really good at it, which really isn't true at all. The real reason is because I want to save the world. Maybe I didn't say that because it sounds sort of crazy. (2005)

He didn't think of his blog as published writing, exactly, nor was it a private journal, since it was accessible to anyone. It was something in between. He wrote about things in his blog that he didn't tell his friends—about his depressions, about his ulcerative colitis. It was not clear who he imagined his readers to be. Once, a friend of his related an anecdote that he'd published on his blog (involving a crush he'd had on a girl) to a group of people; he was horrified and asked how the friend could have revealed something so private.

This, I suppose, is the actual problem: I feel my existence is an imposition on the planet. . . . Normally, I just sit in my quiet little room and do the small things that bring me pleasures. I read my books, I answer email, I write a little bit. (2007)

He read constantly and, at the end of each year, published a list, with commentary, of the books he'd read. Many years, there were more than a hundred. He read a lot of sociology, some history, some economics; not much fiction, with the exception of George Saunders and David Foster Wallace.

I'm not such a nuisance to the world, and the kick I get out of living can, I suppose, justify the impositions I make on it. But when life isn't so fun, well, then I start to wonder. What's the point of going on if it's just trouble for us both? My friends will

miss me, I am told. . . . But even so, I feel reticent. Even among my closest friends, I still feel like something of an imposition, and the slightest shock, the slightest hint that I'm correct, sends me scurrying back into my hole. (2007)

He meant that literally. In one of the apartments he shared, he slept in a closet.

I know, I know, I'm wrong, I'm wrong to feel this way. My friends love me. . . . Indeed, at this very moment, two of my very favorite people to hang out with are actually fighting—fighting!—over the supposed privilege of having me live with them. "I just want to point out," one says, "that I have never tickled you." "I just want to point out," replies the other, "that I have never gotten you to attach clothespins to your face." (2007)

He hated people talking about him, but he liked being written about in the press, and quoted coverage in his blog.

Attention attractive people: Are you looking for someone respectable enough that they've been personally vetted by the New York *Times*, but has enough of a bad-boy streak that the vetting was because they "liberated" millions of dollars of government documents? If so, look no further than page A14 of today's New York *Times*. (2009)

It is possible to construct a path through Swartz's life to his decision, in the fall of 2010, to download the JSTOR articles; the path begins years ago, and consists of a series of experiences that may have obscured, for him, the potential for disaster.

Hypothetical: Let's say you've committed a crime and, for whatever reason, don't want to be convicted for it. (Maybe you don't believe it should be a crime, maybe the punishment is excessive, maybe you've repented. It doesn't really matter.) The law's safeguards protect you from being convicted unless the government can prove you committed the crime. The government puts you on the stand and asks you if you did it. . . . Is it immoral to plead the fifth and not answer? (2004)

Five or six years ago, at an education and democracy meet-up, he asked if anyone was going to be in Washington, D.C., and could pick up some files: he was compiling a report about the relation between candidates' wealth and their electoral success, and, while successful candidates' financial disclosure records were available on the Internet, unsuccessful candidates' records, while public, were not online. If you wanted to see them, you were supposed to make paper copies in a library, but he wanted digital files so he could analyze the data. Alec Resnick was planning to be in D.C. and volunteered for the task. Resnick spent a couple of days in a library attempting to steal the files in digital form, got caught, lied about it, and was held there for most of the night by the police. He wasn't put out by the experience—the police had been very nice about it, he said. Swartz found the story endearing and hilarious, and he and Resnick became close friends.

In 2008, Carl Malamud, a freedom-of-information activist, put the word out that thePACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records) database, which normally charged eight cents a page for public documents with no copyright, was offering a free trial of its services at seventeen libraries. Malamud called on activists to go to these libraries, download the files, and post them free on the Web. Swartz went to a library in Chicago and downloaded twenty per cent of the database before he was discovered and PACER called off the trial. He was investigated by the F.B.I.: it conducted surveillance on his parents' house, near Chicago, and compiled a detailed dossier on him.

Case ID #: 288A-WF-238343 (Pending)

Synopsis: To set lead to locate Aaron Swartz.

. . . House is set on a deep lot, behind other houses on Marshman Avenue. This is a heavily wooded, dead-end street, with no

other cars parked on the road making continued surveillance difficult to conduct without severely increasing the risk of discovery.

The investigation was very frightening, but ultimately he was not charged, and by the time he obtained a copy of his F.B.I. file he had come to regard the whole episode as amusing.

A few years ago, he downloaded a significant portion of the articles on the Westlaw legal-research database in order to analyze their sources of funding, in the hope of determining whether economic interests affected their conclusions. He gave the data to a Stanford law student, and she published an article in the *Stanford Law Review*based on his findings.

At M.I.T., hacking, broadly understood, was a tradition. It was taken to be part of the culture that led to technological innovation and was rarely punished, even if it resulted in considerable annoyance and expense to the hackee. When, for instance, students stole a three-ton cannon from Caltech in 2006, showing false work orders to campus security officers, and transported it across the country to M.I.T., this was widely celebrated.

For all these reasons, when he decided to download the JSTOR articles through the network at M.I.T., it was not entirely unreasonable of him to suppose that, if he was caught, this would be regarded as a prank. He did not try very hard not to get caught—he bought the laptop he used with Quinn Norton's credit card. "We fought about this during the investigation, because I am much more careful," Norton says. "I work with hackers and I've watched their lives be destroyed." Norton is a journalist who covers Internet culture. She is thirteen years older than Swartz and dated him on and off for four years. "I said, 'If you'd told me what you were doing, I would have found you real hackers, and there would have been one smoking JSTOR server and you would have what you wanted and they would not know what happened.' He really hated when I said that. Because he was doing an M.I.T. hack, and this whole idea that if you're going to do something criminal, I'll find you real criminals to help you . . ."

He did not hack into the M.I.T. system—he didn't have to. M.I.T.'s network is open to anyone on campus, whether or not they are part of the university, so anyone on campus has access to JSTOR, too. He wrote a script that instructed his computer to download articles continuously, something that was forbidden by JSTOR's terms of service. When this violation was detected, and requests coming from his computer were denied, he spoofed the computer's address, fooling the JSTOR servers into thinking that subsequent requests were coming from somewhere else. This happened several times. M.I.T. traced the requests to his laptop, which he had hidden in an unlocked closet, and installed a hidden camera there that recorded him entering the closet, covering his face with a bike helmet. He was arrested after leaving the closet. The police took away his shoes and put him in a cell. Soon after his arrest, he returned the data he had taken, and JSTOR considered the matter settled. M.I.T., however, coöperated with the prosecution, despite many efforts, internal and external, to dissuade it.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA v. AARON SWARTZ, Defendant

Description of Offense Charged:

18 USC 1343 Wire Fraud
18 USC 1030(a)(4) Computer Fraud
18 USC 1030(a)(2) Theft of Information From a Computer
18 USC 1030(a)(5)(B) Recklessly Damaging a Computer
18 USC 981. 982, 1030 & 28 USC 2461 Forfeiture
18 USC 2 Aiding and Abetting

The prosecutor, Stephen Heymann, told Swartz's lawyer, Elliot Peters, that if Swartz pleaded guilty to all counts he would spend six months in jail; if he lost at trial, it would be much worse. "He said the value of what was taken from JSTOR was two million dollars, and under the sentencing guidelines that would equate to a sentence in the neighborhood of seven years," Peters says.

"And I said, 'What he took fromJSTOR wasn't worth anything! It was a bunch of, like, the 1942 edition of the *Journal of Botany!'* The idea that Aaron should be sentenced the same way as someone who tries to beat someone out of two million dollars in a security-fraud scam? Someone who steals money from people?"

Swartz grew up in Highland Park, a suburb of Chicago. His father designed computer software and consulted on intellectual-property issues; his mother stayed home. He taught himself to read at three and was reading novels by the time he was in kindergarten, so his parents sent him to an elementary school for gifted children. When he was very small, his family was part of a Reform congregation, but when he was six or seven his father came to feel that Reform theology didn't make sense to him, and moved the family to a Chabad Lubavitch synagogue. Swartz attended services there when he was young, but when he grew older he decided he didn't believe in God and stopped going. He hated high school, and wanted to drop out after ninth grade. His father had hated high school, too, had found it excruciatingly dull, so he wasn't going to force his son to go through it. "Aaron was very, very fragile and very sensitive, and that amplified his difficulties," his father says. So he dropped out of high school and spent his time taking classes at a local college and studying on his own.

He went to Stanford, but he thought the students were shallow. "He was a bit distressed and confused by all the high jinks that one sees as an undergraduate," his father says. "You know, people running around in the fountains. He didn't like people who did things that were just silly, that seemed to have no purpose." He didn't want to go back to college after freshman year, so he didn't. The normal rules didn't apply to him. He shook them off.

One effect of this upbringing was that he never internalized any notions about what he was supposed to be doing or not doing as a young person. (When he was thirteen, he wanted to become part of the World Wide Web Consortium but was turned down. Undaunted, he read through the rules of the consortium and found that every member was allowed to send a delegate. He looked through the lists to find somebody who hadn't sent a delegate, and he found one—the HTML Writers Guild. He e-mailed the group and asked if he could participate in a W3C work group as its delegate, and it had no objection.) He also never learned to do anything that he didn't want to do. "College is very important in that you're forced to study stuff you're not interested in," his father says. But he hated the bureaucracy of it, the dumb rules, the pointless assignments. "He just rejected that. It was like getting him to eat vegetables."

He disliked all vegetables and refused to eat them except in extremely expensive restaurants, such as Thomas Keller restaurants. He had ulcerative colitis, a serious digestive disorder similar to Crohn's disease; he also thought that he was a "supertaster," experiencing sensations of taste more intensely than regular people. Partly for these reasons, he ate only foods that were white or yellow. He ate pasta, tofu, cheese, bread, rice, eggs, and cheese pizza. He was phobic about fruit and wouldn't touch it. He rarely drank alcohol and was careful to stay hydrated. He went through four humidifiers in his apartment in Brooklyn. He said that he left San Francisco because the air-conditioning was bad. He was a supertaster in matters other than food: things always seemed much better or worse to him than they did to other people.

I recently had to sit through a performance of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. . . . At first it was simply boring, but as I listened more carefully, it grew increasingly painful, until it became excruciatingly so. I literally began tearing my hair out and trying to cut my skin with my nails (there were large red marks when the performance was finally over). (2006)

"I've hired a lot of very talented programmers, and one of the things I discovered was that the people who didn't graduate from college couldn't finish projects," his father says. "Because when you go to college, there's all sorts of stupid stuff you have to do in order to get through." "He had thousands of pages of notes about different things," Quinn Norton says. "Books he was reading, books he was writing, theories he had. He started writing a bunch of different books. One was a novel, there were books on social theory—he didn't finish any of them." "He was freed of all the disciplining experiences of life," Lawrence Lessig says. "His parents got him out of school early, which was great because it allowed him to become somebody who wasn't the product of puberty in a public school. But it was bad in the sense that it gave him a confidence about his own judgment, which is dangerous."

The summer after his freshman year at Stanford, he was given money by Y Combinator, an "incubator" firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to start a company, Infogami, and after some time he merged his company with another Y Combinator start-up, Reddit. He moved into an apartment in Cambridge with his co-founders and worked on the site. It was extremely difficult, socially, but the site was successful. After two years, Reddit was sold to Condé Nast, where it became a part of Wired Digital. On the morning after Halloween, 2006, he logged into his bank account to see whether the money from Condé Nast was there. It was: there were many more digits in his balance than there had been the day before. He ran downstairs to an A.T.M. and printed a slip with his balance.

"This whole kind of, like, 'He never did anything for the money'—he loved making money!" Quinn Norton says. "He didn't get involved with Reddit and sell it to Condé Nast because he doesn't give a shit about money. But it was never what he was going to live for, that's absolutely true. He was making plenty of money as a teen-ager—it was really fun. When Google AdWords came out, he wrote a script that let you explore what kinds of ads you would get if you were going to do Google ads. You would interact with the ads, and every time you clicked on one he would get paid."

Fun money was one thing, but this was life-changing money. After the sale of Reddit, he put up a story on his blog that he'd written the year before, titled "Mr. Millionaire."

I lean back in my chair and laugh. "Three million?" I say, turning serious. "Please, I could find three million in my fucking couch."

A homeless man asks Mr. Millionaire for change and Mr. Millionaire collapses.

"I can't take it," I sob. "I'm not cut out for this world. I don't want to be in this world. I don't want to be this person. I don't want to be me."

He moved to San Francisco to work at *Wired's* office, which was a condition of the sale. He hated San Francisco. It was too loud. The people were shallow. Walking around was terrifying.

gangs of leering indigents sitting on every streetcorner

He couldn't stand his new job.

The first day I showed up here, I simply couldn't take it. By lunch time I had literally locked myself in a bathroom stall and started crying.

He found the restrictions of corporate life intolerable—he could run only approved programs on his computer, he was outraged by the rules in the employee manual.

After a couple of months at Wired Digital, he went on a trip to Europe. Then his ulcerative colitis flared up painfully, and he hid out in Cambridge and considered suicide. He didn't tell anyone in the office why he was gone so long. Half annoyed and half worried, his boss checked his blog and found a story about a person named Aaron who got fired from his job and committed suicide. A Reddit co-founder called the Cambridge police, who tracked him down to Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square, where he was writing his blog. A few days later, he was fired. Swartz was incensed by this episode, and so was his mother. "I had to endure several phone conversations with Aaron's immediate boss . . . (your typical crawled-out-from-under-a-rock, lying-to-cover-his-ass middle manager), who expressed to me his great concern for Aaron's welfare and then turned around within minutes and fired him!" his mother wrote on her blog. "I say good riddance to bad corporate rubbish. . . . Barely 20, he has other

projects he wants to begin, books he wants to write, classes he wants to take. We wish him only the best and send him all our love."

In the last years of his life, he decided that he disliked programming, that computers were awful in many ways, and that there were things more interesting than freedom of information. He would have liked to give up computers altogether. In the summer of 2009, he spent a month offline—no computer, no phone; mostly he just sat in his apartment and read—and he always described this month as the happiest of his life. But whenever Taren suggested that he do it again, or do something else that would make him happy—go for a hike, move to Boston—he would say that he didn't care about being happy.

He became a political activist. He did not abandon his old issues entirely—he campaigned to prevent passage of the Stop Online Piracy Act, SOPA. But he never felt as strongly about any new idea as he had once felt about them. He would adopt a cause, only to become dissatisfied, deciding that it wasn't important enough, or was too unlikely to succeed, and he would move on to something else. He wanted to live an ethical life, but he was neutral about how he should do that.

"There was not a cause that was dear to his heart," Holden Karnofsky, a friend and a co-founder of the charity evaluator GiveWell, says. "There wasn't. Except for the big one: ending suffering, maximizing human empowerment, making the world an awesome place—that is what he cared about. I think any cause that you can come up with that's smaller than that, like freedom, you could find a situation in which Aaron would go against that for the broader cause." "He was disturbed by things he felt were wrong," his father says. "To the extent that he felt that the world was unjust or unfair, that bothered him. And if a font was wrong that bothered him, too."

He became absorbed by the *process* of change. How should you word a petition or design a Web site or dramatize an outrage so as to entice the most people to become involved or donate money? How does Congress work? How do you get a bill passed? (He spent some time interning in the office of Representative Alan Grayson, of Florida, because his friend Matt Stoller worked there.) How did Robert Moses acquire so much power from a position that officially had almost no power at all? He came to believe that the influence of money in American politics was so enormous a problem that possibly little else could be solved until that was. Then again, there were always other countries: in conversation with an Australian friend, he decided that it would be ridiculously easy to "take over Australia," but that since the country had only twenty million people it wasn't worth it.

The irrationalities of power fascinated him, but he found the irrationalities of activism exasperating. Most activists, in his experience, would launch big campaigns about big issues and do things that they guessed would be beneficial, like running television ads or sending out direct mail, but they never did the work to figure out whether what they were doing was actually changing policy. He couldn't stand that there were so many bad, inefficient nonprofits out there, eating up donor money. When a business was based on a bad idea, it failed, but nonprofits never failed—they just kept on raising cash from people who wanted to believe in them. He imagined himself travelling around the country as judge and executioner, closing down hundreds of ineffective N.G.O.s. He imagined building one giant global organization that could replace the little ones that existed now. He warned Taren that if she went around starting new groups she should be aware that they might take the oxygen away from his future organization. It frightened her a bit when he talked like this—it felt megalomaniacal and unstable—so she tended to avoid the subject.

The trick in the short term, he thought, was to launch micro-campaigns on a local level, where you could test various strategies and see what worked and what didn't. You needed tight feedback loops that would enable you to measure concrete results, so you had to design tactics that could be subjected to controlled experiments.

From: Aaron Swartz

Date: Mon, Nov 28, 2011 at 2:17 PM

To: Ben Wikler

Here's an idea Taren and I were discussing last night. . . . Taren's mom apparently helped pass a bill that created a revolving credit fund for switching schools to geothermal in Indiana. It's a great environmental program, it saves money for the schools,

and it creates local jobs. And once you have a bill like this written you could—boom, boom, boom—make it a meta-campaign and pass it in all sorts of cities around the country. . . . Maybe we can bubble about it in person sometime! Bubble bubble bubble!

"He was trying to figure out how to maximize his lifetime impact on over-all human welfare," Wikler says. "He sent me a year before he died an essay that he didn't publish where he walked through six major strategies."

"How to Save the World, Part 1"

What's needed is not another think tank of grand policy plans, but more of a just-in-time policy development shop: a group that has its finger on the pulse of what's moving through Congress right now and can devise small amendments and little technical corrections.

The financial-regulation bill that passed in 2010, for instance, contained a provision that shareholders with five per cent of a corporation's stock could add names to the ballot for members of the board—the idea being to avoid a board that was handpicked by the C.E.O. But the White House removed a crucial "s" from the end of the word "shareholders"—thus insuring that only a single shareholder who owned at least five per cent of the stock (and many corporations have no such shareholders) could add names to the ballot, not a group of shareholders banding together. Swartz and others submitted a petition objecting to the removal of the letter "s." The final bill scrapped the five-per-cent requirement.

How could you manipulate the law's incentive structure to induce people to behave better? He and Matt Stoller worked for months on a paper evaluating every drug and alcohol policy they could find.

From: Aaron Swartz

Date: Mon, Nov 12, 2012 at 10:31 AM

To: Holden Karnofsky

You eliminate the drinking age and create a do-not-drink list, which people get added to if they're caught drinking-and-driving or whatever. Then when you buy beer or wine at a restaurant or store, they check to see if you're on the list.

He thought a lot about institutions and how they molded beliefs. He became obsessed with management theory. One of his favorite books was "Moral Mazes," by Robert Jackall, an anthropological study of several large corporations, which examined how the structure of the corporations created a corporate morality. A case he liked to cite: the tale of the General Motors plant in Fremont, California. The workers there were among the worst in the country—when they weren't going on strike or sabotaging production, they were selling drugs and sex on site. G.M. closed the plant; a few months later Toyota reopened it and rehired the very same workers. But first it took them to Japan to see the Toyota way of working: managers and workers weren't antagonists—when a problem arose, rather than punishing the worker closest to it the managers conferred with him to figure out a solution. When the workers returned to the U.S., they were one of the best workforces in the country. Lesson: if you understand management, you can design organizational machines that will yield better people.

He knew that it was crucial to understand people in order to lead and guide them. His past failures in this regard rankled. In 1999, he had started a site based on the same idea as Wikipedia, before Wikipedia existed, but, since it never attracted any contributors, nothing came of it. He created watchdog.net, which was similar to change.org, before change.org, but nothing came of that, either. Why did Wikipedia and change.org become two of the most popular Web sites in the world while his Web sites were failures? He had previously believed that if you came up with a great idea people would use it. But he realized now that you couldn't expect people to come to you; you had to pull them in.

In 2007, he and a friend went around to colleges in the Bay Area and asked students what they were doing there. Mostly, the friend asked, since he was too shy.

Just watching random conversations with random people was a thoroughly rewarding experience. I felt as if it was some essential task of humanity that I had heretofore neglected.

In the conversations that he reported in a blog post, the college students explained what they were studying and what they hoped to do afterward with their degrees.

I am not sure what to say to these people. I understand the paths their lives are on and I see the flaws in the institutions in which they reside, but I have trouble imagining how I can fix things for them, as people.

"In concert with his technocratic tendencies and ambition, I sometimes accused him of shuffling along the edge of a slippery slope at whose foot you could find a terrifying crossbreed of Robert Moses, Cass Sunstein, and Frederick Winslow Taylor," Alec Resnick says.

He wasn't an unfeeling technocrat, though. It was just that the lives of working-class people were utterly foreign to him, including as they did many situations that he would have found unbearable. He couldn't deal with waitresses because the thought of waiting on tables was to him unfathomably humiliating. "I remember him watching a video about a woman who is working at Burger King and living in a trailer and he would just watch it and cry," Quinn Norton says. "He had a tremendous and in some ways pathological capacity for compassion."

Q thinks the most important thing is how it feels to be poor. The problem isn't so much that they don't have money, but that they're made to feel bad because of it. Welfare is thus a bad idea because it just makes the poor feel worse. . . . My first reaction to this was that the poor were wrong: it wasn't their fault they were poor, they were just the losers in a rigged game. But, of course, they don't know the game is rigged and things they don't know can't make them feel better. (2009)

Norton grew up poor; her father was a drug addict who was sent to San Quentin when she was seventeen. Because she knew what it was like to be poor, Swartz found her arguments hard to counter, but they were terribly frustrating. He believed that there were objective facts about what made people's lives better, and that these were the facts that mattered. He disliked any analysis that attributed social consequence to amorphous, subjective, unmeasurable, unfixable causes.

"I think the essential fight of his life was to never be satisfied that he'd figured out the fight of his life," Ben Wikler says. "He was constantly trying to figure out how to be more effective and what he should be working on. He had a beautiful willingness to change his mind completely." It is a vertiginous thing to have so much freedom—to be always self-skeptical, always testing the reasons for your beliefs, always prepared to abandon them for something better. If you can do anything you want, then every day becomes an existential problem—an empty space of possibility that has no ceiling but also no walls and no floor.

"Much more than any particular thing he did, the self-reflection and self-doubt," Alec Resnick says. "Being willing to say, 'All of these things are bad, but we can work on making something better.' To be preoccupied by the ethical ramifications of your actions, and to strip away most of the limits on how, ethically, you can behave." To think continuously about changing the world is to spend your life looking at what is bad in it. To be attached to the world is to be attached to the world as it is, and not for any reason, because reasons can always be countered. To consider the world from first principles, to think about how well it would work if everything were different, is to be ready to throw away everything you know. Radical idealism and a sense of limitless possibility are the brighter facets of absolute rejection.

In 2004, a software developer named Nick Bradbury wrote a post about how much money he was losing because people were pirating his software. People justified stealing software on the ground that they were stealing from rich corporations, he wrote, but most of the time they were stealing from people like him. Swartz thought this was stupid.

"On Piracy, or, Nick Bradbury Is an Amazing Idiot"
Nick has no innate right to have people pay for his software, just as I have no right to ask people to pay for use of my name. Even if he did, most people who pirate his software probably would never use it anyway, so they aren't costing him any money and they're providing him with free advertising. . . . Yes, piracy probably does take some sales away from Nick, but I doubt it's very many.

The next day he wrote a follow-up post.

Stealing is wrong. But downloading isn't stealing. If I shoplift an album from my local record store, no one else can buy it. But when I download a song, no one loses it and another person gets it. There's no ethical problem. The evidence that downloading hurts sales is weak, but even if downloading did hurt sales, that doesn't make it unethical. Libraries, video rental places, and used book stores (none of which pay the artist) hurt sales too. Is it unethical to use them?

In 2008, he and a few others wrote a screed that they posted online: the "Guerrilla Open Access Manifesto." The prosecution planned to use this as evidence of his intent to distribute the JSTOR articles.

Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves. The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations. . . . Providing scientific articles to those at elite universities in the First World, but not to children in the Global South? It's outrageous and unacceptable. . . . We can fight back. Those with access to these resources—students, librarians, scientists—you have been given a privilege. You get to feed at this banquet of knowledge while the rest of the world is locked out. But you need not—indeed, morally, you cannot—keep this privilege for yourselves. You have a duty to share it with the world.

It is commonly assumed that the debate over what Swartz did, and, more generally, the debate over whether information does or does not want to be free, is between hacker culture and copyright culture, young people and old people, but this is not true. On the Hacker News site in the fall of 2012, many commenters disagreed with what he'd done, and argued with his supporters on the site that in a nation ruled by laws it was not O.K. for one person to just go and break a law he felt was unjust.

encoderer
Ok, so he's like Gandhi.
Gandhi spent several years in prison. He believed in his cause and made that sacrifice. Man up, aaronsw.

shmulkey18
Exactly. Mr. "Demand Progress" needs to understand that we are a nation of laws, and that those who knowingly break those laws will be—and should be—punished. And no, this is not a case of civil disobedience. If it was, Swartz would have publicly

violated the law (rather than attempting to conceal the crime) in order to draw attention to its putative unfairness. Aaron Swartz is a spoiled brat. I hope that they throw the book at him.

Shortly after Swartz was arrested, the prosecutors subpoenaed Quinn Norton, his then girlfriend. They thought she would know his plans. In those first weeks, both of them were more worried about her going to jail than him, because if the prosecutors asked her for her laptop's password she would have to refuse. She wrote about hackers, criminal and otherwise, and her laptop contained confidential source material going back years. She also had a seven-year-old daughter whom Swartz loved very much. When prosecutors first offered a plea bargain, he told her that if she wanted him to take it he would, and she almost said yes.

His family was horrified. There was concern that he would commit suicide if he went to prison. His first lawyer told the prosecutors he felt that Swartz was a suicide risk; the prosecutors told him that he'd be safe in jail. His father, though he thought that his son could survive prison, couldn't abide the idea of the felony conviction. "It was so foreign to me that a son of mine should be branded a felon," he says. "I mean, do you have a brother? Can you imagine your brother going to jail and being a convicted*felon*? It's just so completely out of our—out of our whole conception, and you know, maybe, if I can imagine someone in your family does something really terrible and you can see that there is no way out, but he wasn't guilty."

"He wanted to make the world better from inside the system, and they don't let felons work in the White House," Quinn Norton says. "He said those exact words to me. My dad didn't last very long with his felony conviction. It's like being a fucking leper, and for somebody who wanted to move in the circles of American political power it was the end of all those dreams. I knew it was a really dangerous period, I knew this was all going through his head."

• • •

THERE WAS WHAT happened with Quinn, which I think had to be very devastating to him. Quinn got her own attorney, who told her to coöperate with the prosecutor. There are interviews which I've now read with the Secret Service where they say she coöperated fully with them; she signed a proffer saying that she would tell them everything she knew in return for immunity. And we were going out of our minds. We were trying to tell her to stop, and she wouldn't. Her attorney was a former federal prosecutor, and that's what he recommended. But, to me, I—I don't know. To me, that's not an acceptable answer. She described her grand-jury testimony as being (which it was) largely not helpful to the prosecutor. But her betrayal of Aaron, in my mind, had to be devastating—was, was really quite something, even though she came around and Aaron said—you know, Aaron defended her.

Robert Swartz

YOU GET A lawyer and your lawyer says you can't take any notes or talk to anybody about what's happening. You don't know how much you're being watched. You could be arrested at any point. You know they can do any trick, they can lie to you, they are perfectly allowed. They can show up at your door for no reason. I did not understand what was going on at all. I think I made some really poor choices about how to deal with that at the time, but I had no idea. I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone.

Quinn Norton

WE NEVER LIKED her. I'll say that, too. Other people can perhaps give you a clearer picture of her, but I'm not dispassionate in this regard. I feel comfortable explaining the facts, but my feelings—my feelings are sufficiently—are sufficient that I don't think I want to go into it.

Robert Swartz

HE WAS AN intensely private person, and they compelled me to hand over our chat logs. The degree to which he hated me the day that I had to hand over our chat logs. . . . It wasn't my fault, and I tried to—I redacted a lot of stuff, but Steve Heymann got to go through years of our personal life together. I don't know if he was ever going to be able to forgive me for that. I was the one who turned over our lives to these people. He also didn't want me to go to jail. There's no point at which this is a clean story.

Quinn Norton

While all this was happening, for several months in the first half of 2012, his mother was desperately ill. His father stopped working on the case completely to take care of her.

Then, in late fall, two things changed. First, Swartz realized that his money was gone and he was going to have to start asking people he knew to help him pay his lawyers. This was something he dreaded. Second, while he had previously tried to keep the case quiet, in order to give M.I.T. a chance to reverse its stance without embarrassment, now he and others recognized that this strategy had failed. Their new strategy entailed hiring a P.R. firm to stir up public outrage before the trial. For two years after his arrest, he had managed to get on with his work, avoiding the crushing weight of imposition and dependency—his father had spent more time on the case than he had. But now the case was his life.

WE WERE TALKING about the money and about how much debt it was reasonable for him to go into around the case. I was saying, "You can get a half-million salary a year as a C.T.O. for some tech company." And he said, "I would rather sleep on friends' couches for the rest of my life than take a job I don't want."

Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman

JANUARY 11TH WAS a Friday. I spent from noon to five-thirty sitting in my office in front of my computer scrolling through these documents. We had really powerful evidence, we were really going to be able to go after these guys. I printed it all out, a big pile of stuff, I shoved it in my briefcase, I leave my office, I get into my car, I drive home, I'm almost at home, and I get an e-mail from Bob which said "Aaron committed suicide." And I pull over, and I call Bob, and he is completely destroyed, and trying to get an airplane reservation to go to New York, and he says "Aaron hung himself this afternoon, I'm trying to get to New York, I'll call you later." And so I just sat there, in the car.

Elliot Peters

I'M AARON'S DEFENSE lawyer, so I'm not going to sit here and say that he was a thief, because I don't think he was a thief, and I was prepared to defend him with all my heart, but I also, you know, being a lawyer-advocate doesn't mean that I can't see the other side of this issue, so I'm not—

Elliot Peters

I THINK IT WAS just recognizing he was going to need other people, and that was too hard for him to accept. He couldn't become dependent. To end it was the only way.

Lawrence Lessig

ON FRIDAY MORNING, he wasn't interested in moving. I asked him what was wrong and he again said, "I'm still alive." I said, "Love, I know this is really hard. But we're going to win the case, and you're going to be able to work on your project." He said, "Stop lying to me." I said, "I'm not lying to you. I really believe that. You said it yourself, just a few days ago—it's going to be a great year." I opened the blinds. I got my laptop and turned on Pomplamoose—probably "If You Think You Need Some Lovin'." He took the laptop and changed the song, without speaking, to "Fond Farewell." I listened for a few minutes. I wondered whether he was trying to tell me that he was suicidal, but didn't ask or say anything. I said, instead, maybe halfway through the song, "Enough of that." I turned the music off.

I got a cup of water and came over to throw it on him. He picked up my laptop and held it in front of him as a shield. I kneeled next to him and tried a tickling strategy. He started kicking, lashing out with his legs, hard. I dodged most of them, but he caught me a couple of times. They were hard kicks, pretty violent. I got the cup of water again and threw it on him. He jumped up and filled a cup himself, and threw it on me.

Then he ran over to the bathroom and started to close the door. I was afraid of what he would do in there alone, so I held the handle down, the door wouldn't lock while the handle was down. We battled for a few minutes, him from the inside and me from the outside. Eventually he started winning, and I was scared. So I begged, "Please don't lock the door. I'm afraid you're going to hurt yourself." He said, "But you'll throw water on me!" I said, "I promise not to. Plus, I need to take a shower. Please let me in." Then he gave up immediately and let me in.

At that point I felt like I should actually take a shower, so I did. Suddenly he started getting dressed. He did it quickly, and he put on his favorite outfit—a V-neck black T-shirt and the tan corduroy pants we'd bought together a few weeks before, so that he'd have something nice to wear for the trial. Then he put on his coat. I thought he was in a rush to head to the office so I got ready as quickly as I could. He said, I'm not coming. I said, really? Why did you put your coat on. He shrugged. I said, "O.K., I'll stay here with you. I'll take the day off. We can go for a hike or something." He shook his head. "No, you go to the office. I need to be alone." "If I leave you here, you won't eat anything." He thought about that for a second and said, "I'll make some pasta." "O.K., I'll go, but only if you promise me two things: that you'll eat something and that you won't hurt yourself." "I promise." And then I left.

When I got to the office I looked up the song "Fond Farewell." It wasn't about suicide, it was about heroin addiction. I used that to reassure myself. I set up dinner for that evening with Ben, and tried texting Aaron about it. I noticed that the texts were showing up in the color they show up in when they're not being received. That worried me a little bit but not overly—I thought maybe he was just sleeping or felt like he needed the day off.

Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman

There is a moment, immediately before life becomes no longer worth living, when the world appears to slow down and all its myriad details suddenly become brightly, achingly apparent. (2007)

In the evening, she went home.

I WAS WORRIED enough about Aaron that when I arrived at the building and while I was in the elevator, I got my phone out and plugged in my password and put it on the call screen so that if I needed to call 911 I'd be able to immediately. I felt silly doing so. It seemed like a crazy precaution to take. But I felt like it didn't cost me anything to do it, I didn't have anything else to do while in the elevator.

The room was dark. I looked for him in the bed, and then I saw him hanging from the window by his belt. I screamed and ran over to him. He was wearing the same clothes and still had his coat on. I called 911 and couldn't remember our address. I was

screaming, they thought I was saying Sterling Place instead of Sullivan Place. Finally they got it. I hung up and ran out into the hallway screaming. I hadn't tried to get him down or even really touched him yet.

After a minute, I said, I have to help him! What if he's still alive! I didn't really believe that he was, but the analytical portion of my brain was saying, if there's even the remotest chance that he's savable now but won't be in three minutes you have to do something now. I ran in and touched his face. He didn't feel cold to the touch, he was probably warmer than room temperature, but he clearly wasn't body temperature, either. I gave up and went back outside. I didn't try to cut him down or anything, though I'm not sure why.

Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman

TAREN CALLED ON Friday night, but I don't answer the phone on Friday night. And Susan's cell phone was ringing and that was very strange because she doesn't get calls on her cell phone.

Robert Swartz

• • •

Aron,

I do not know you in person. I am just an year older than you. We have something in common which unites us—THE INTERNET. We belong here. This is our world where boundaries are torn apart. I cried. Literally cried reading about you. A part of mine wants to believe and write this—"Well staged Dark Knight!"

Shri Vignesh

21 Jan 2013

The response to his death was immediate and astonishing. It was not just because he was young and he had killed himself. He represented many things to people. "If you look at 2011 to the present, there's an incredible emotional rollercoaster about Internet freedom and the Arab revolutions," Quinn Norton says. "The Internet was going to change everything, and at the end of 2011 you had Occupy. And then everything just got destroyed. 2012 was the year, globally, for the heightening of censorship and the heightening of surveillance, and then Aaron killed himself. Aaron was so much the Internet's boy, and that so much exemplified this machine crushing our hopes."

Right after he died, he started trending on Twitter in Bangalore. Someone painted a mural of him in Brooklyn, on a wall above a painting of Bradley Manning. At a conference in Europe, there was installation art of his face. His friends put up a Web site, Remember Aaron Swartz, and people posted on it from all over the world—from Germany, Bangladesh, Brazil, France, India, China, the Philippines, Venezuela, the Netherlands, Spain, Ireland, Australia, Portugal. Very few of the people who posted had known him personally, or even heard his name before his death.

I read about Aaron from the News in China. . . . Hereby I translate my words: I have no words to express how deeply sorry I am to hear about the pass-away of a hero on our Internet: Aaron Swartz. One of his great work is RSS. He also did a lot of work to ensure fairly and freely sharing/using info online. May him rest in peace and find his freedom and happiness in heaven.

Mei Zhao

15 Jan 2013

A man named John Atkinson wrote a blog post titled “Why Am I So Upset About Aaron Swartz’s Suicide?” in which he asked himself why the death of someone he didn’t know, and had never heard of until his arrest, had affected him so profoundly, when most tragedies in the news—wars, natural disasters, school shootings—left him cold. “Aaron Swartz is what I wish I was,” he wrote. “I am a bright technologist, but I’ve never built anything of note. I have strong opinions about how to improve this world, but I’ve never acted to bring them to pass. I have thoughts every day that I would share with the world, but I allow my fears to convince me to keep them to myself. If I were able to stop being afraid of what the world would think of me, I could see myself making every decision that Aaron made that ultimately led to his untimely death. This upsets me immensely. I am upset that we have a justice system that would persecute me the way it did Aaron. I am upset that I have spent 27 years of my life having made no discernible difference to the world around me.”

• • •

HE WAS NOT a saint. He could be as petty as anyone. But the thing that makes a good life isn’t constantly being saintly—it’s just continuing to do shit. We spend so much time waiting to start to live. He always went big—he never looked for permission to go big. He assumed that he could talk to anyone he wanted, and he was right, and it wasn’t because he was super-special-genius-boy, it was because he tried.

Quinn Norton

I CAN’T HELP but think that until I put the type of skin in the game that he did that maybe I shouldn’t mourn him, that maybe it’s even a little vulgar and self-serving.

Alec Resnick

YOU KNOW, A lot of people who knew him have nightmares. It’s very strange, I’ve never had a friend kill himself before and I’ve had a lot of nightmares.

Matt Stoller

I FELL IN LOVE with him because I fell in love with the way his existence suggested that I, too, could be Good. It felt like being grateful for a certain kind of faith. And, ultimately, when I feel low about Aaron’s death it feels a lot more like a crisis of faith than a breakup. I know many other folks who are my friends whom I deeply respect whose lives, at my most selfish, I would gladly trade to have Aaron back.

Alec Resnick

I HAD A nightmare. Aaron and I were living in a house together and someone started coming after us. I didn’t know who it was. It seemed if we could just fortify the house we’d be safe. We started blockading the doors with furniture, we were nailing two-by-fours over the windows. I paused in my dream to make breakfast, and when I turned around to take it to him, Aaron was dead.

Taren Stinebrickner-Kauffman

I DON'T WANT to be here. It's like he jumps off a bridge and he pulls me over with him. I can't go back. I don't know what I can do. Nothing ever has come close to this, in its effect. I am never lost. I've never been so lost. I don't know what to do.

Lawrence Lessig

THERE'S THIS passage in Gemara about whether the angel of death can make a mistake. Gemara is part of the Talmud, and so the—I think about that. You know, it just doesn't seem to make sense to me. But I don't know, I—I just think it's not a question I'll ever answer.

Robert Swartz

• • •

Rabbi Joseph, when he came to the following verse, wept: But there is that is swept away without judgment. He said: Is there anyone who passes away before one's allotted time?[1]—Yes, as in the story heard by Rabbi Bibi bar Abaye, who was frequently visited by the Angel of death. Once the latter said to his messenger: Go, bring me Miriam, the women's hairdresser! He went and brought him Miriam, the children's nurse. Said he to him:[2] I told thee Miriam, the women's hairdresser. He answered: If so, I will take her back. Said he to him: Since thou hast brought her, let her be added.[3] But how were you able to get her?[4]—She was holding a shovel in her hand and was heating and raking the oven. She took it and put it on her foot and burnt herself; thus her luck was impaired and I brought her. Said Rabbi Bibi bar Abaye to him: Have ye permission to act thus? He answered him: Is it not written: "There is that is swept away without judgment"?

[1] I.e., although the person has committed no sin to merit shortening of life.

[2] I.e., the Angel of death to his messenger.

[3] I.e., to the dead.

[4] Since it was not yet her time to die. ♦