

## A Ritual of Failure

I have learned in my life thus far, that the scope through which I may perceive of the world is measured in depth, by the creativity of the questions that I may know to ask. To question something is not to diminish its presence in reality, but rather to reach out and touch its pulse, to shake its branches, and to see who remains. To question is to say ‘I see your shape, but I want to feel your form’. A question has the power to disassemble the framework by which we see the world. It is the very questioning of the truths by which one lives, that one may be led to new corners of the consciousness, expanding the mind through cycles of knowing and unknowing—for in this world of constant revolving and dissolving—curiosity undulates belief. Today there’s a need to ask the hard questions, the ones pointed back at ourselves, turning over the rocks we might have preferred to leave alone. This essay is about that process, of asking some of my own difficult questions, and ultimately about coming to terms with the ugly answers, the call to let go of old ways of seeing the world, and in some deeper sense, learning anew the wisdom of failure.

Questions draw us forward, into ourselves and beyond ourselves. The right question is like a good friend, who despite the pain, wants to see us grow, is committed us. When I ask the right question, I can feel their eyes on me, watching me from some hidden vantage, soft one moment, sharp the next. They often have a good sense of humor, and will laugh at me through the voice of a raven, or tease me through the scolding of a grey squirrel. The right question isn’t like us humans, doesn’t have much time for manners or common decency. They’ll show up at the worst of times, often in the midst of night, falling asleep, they’ll walk right in, sit down at the end of the bed and just start talking, talking, talking. They want to tell jokes, gossip, trade stories, they want to know about me. More than that, they want me to know about me. A good question can stay with us for some time—lifetimes even. Often though, they’ll step out when the

moment's right. They're not big for goodbyes, and you might not realize they've gone until a ways down the road, suddenly you notice that they're no longer walking beside you—that you're just not asking that question anymore. You also might not notice that you've changed. That you've grown older, bigger, fuller. Your eyes—a little deeper, your voice—a little steadier. That's when they know they've done their work, and they tend to know better than we do. Eventually, the moment comes; there's a release and they're gone, back to the clouds, or soil, or dumpster, or garden shed, or pot of tamales, or bed of coals, or acorn flour, or mushrooms, or blackhole, or wherever it is that good questions come from.

Some questions are more like rituals. They're the ones we ask when we already know the answer, but need to initiate our knowing through prayer—through a question. These are the questions we ask when we're afraid of the answer and need support to know what we know. It's good to speak these questions to the people you love, to the ones who can hold you when you meet the grief of recognition; the very particular form of grief that comes when you know something is true, and in its truth, something you love must die. Here's a time to move slowly, to pay attention to the space between things, to notice the edges and transitions and depths. Arne Naess depicts in his 'deep ecology,' that the deep question is rooted in deep experience, through which one is eventually lead to deep commitment, and cycles back again (Harding n.d.). The triangulation is designed as a spiral, not as a linearity; and so in the sovereignty of spirals, may we enter the cycle through the doorway of the question, as preluding the experience:

Today in class, a university teacher asked, "is it okay for me to expose my students to the ways of knowing that will lead to their eventual failure in the system we live in?" By ways of knowing, she means exposure to the truths about the world to which one cannot reconcile further unconscious complicity. To begin to touch this question, I believe we must first recognize on whose terms we are defining failure. Given that anyone who is non-white, 'poor,' queer,

uninsured, unemployed, ‘insane,’ incarcerated, or inebriated is failing at the system, and given that this demographic makes up most of the world’s population, and given that this very system is responsible for the destruction of the earth—then perhaps it’s time we can say: the system has failed. So really what we’re talking about preparing students for is ‘failing the failure,’ which is perhaps in its own twisted way, a form of success. One of my teachers, Stephan Harding, describes this process as follows:

In questioning society, one understands its underlying assumptions from an ecological point of view. One looks at the collective psychological origins of the ecological crisis, and the related crises of peace and social justice. One also looks deeply into the history of the West to find the roots of our pernicious anthropocentrism as it has manifested in our science, philosophy and economics. One tries to understand how the current drive for globalisation of Western culture and of free trade leads to the devastation of both human culture and nature.

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The grief of recognition comes in the knowing that to do what is necessary, the privileged must teach the next generation knowledge that will ultimately fail them in thriving within and benefiting from the society that they’ve been born into; a society that has been able to develop and grow for hundreds of years through the passing of knowledge and self-interest from one generation to the next. This is a great challenge, as we typically love our children and want them to live vibrantly, easefully. My initial answer to the teacher’s question is simple, and one that I believe she already knows, which is first yes, the only way to let the system dissolve is by teaching the future generations to fail in perpetuating it. However, failure alone is not enough, what are we offering them in substitution? In other words, what would it take to create the framework by which we can choose to fail, without condemning ourselves and our children to lives of struggle and degradation? How might this ‘deep failure’ act as a threshold, through which we may step into a new way of navigating the order of things? Some questions only manage to breed more questions.

In the case of the marginalized and oppressed, the stakes are even higher, in that the knowledge passed down and practiced is not about benefit, but about survival. That while business as usual is responsible for the ceaseless desecration and subjugation of oppressed populations, stepping out of that norm is exposing oneself to the gaze of a system built upon their continued subjugation. For example, being black in the U.S. is inherently dangerous; being black differently than the system is used to however, is immensely more dangerous. It distinguishes the people who hope to change things, and exposes them to the regulations of the system itself. This can be seen clearly by the example of the U.S. government's targeted deportation of immigrant rights leaders, most recently the failed attempt of deporting immigrant rights leader, Ravi Ragbir ('Ravi Ragbir wins stay of deportation after filing free speech suit over being targeted for activism' 2018). The distinction in responding to the teacher's question between the privileged and oppressed is essential, in that it complicates the answer based on social-location, and forces ethics to remain in fluidity.

To speak personally, I would locate myself as someone with many facets of privilege; I'm 'white-enough' (i.e. half-Mexican but with white skin), cisgendered, heterosexual, male, upper-middle class, with U.S. citizenship and two parents who still love each other and never abused me as a child.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the socio-economic system has been designed to provide me many services, which I inherently did not have to work for to be given. This is not to say that anyone with privilege can't still work hard, it's just to say that the world is greatly fitted in their favor. It is in this sense that they have the most to lose superficially by the decay of the system they benefit from. I use the word superficial here because while I believe the benefit happens on a material, fiscal, and even on a 'quality of life' level, I still believe that those with privilege suffer on a deeper level by the trauma done by the system they benefit from. It may be hidden by the

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<sup>1</sup> Cisgendered refers to when someone's self-identified gender (i.e. man/woman/queer/other) is the same as the sex (male/female) they were assigned at birth.

invisibility cloak of societal concepts of success, however in the collective and entangled self underneath it all, we all still swim together in the same psychic pool of dreams and traumas.

Because whiteness and other forms of privilege have the most to lose in the big fail, so must they lead the way. This is where one meets the demon-face of comfort. Yes, it's true, the demon-face. By this, I am referring to the complex of cultural concepts, traumas, and over-individuated notions of self that has come to constrict around the bodies of the privileged, disallowing for the relinquishment of power. I believe this has something to do not with evolution, but with the social translation of what we think evolution is—via the widespread over-infatuation with the concept of 'survival-of-the-fittest' (which just as a phrase in itself, fills me with paranoia and anxiety). I believe that we as a society have breathed this phrase into our lungs, drawn it into our spines and the depths of our stomachs. So that even when one knows they must make a sacrifice for the good of the whole, they don't. Even when one knows that the comfort they receive is at the expense of another human, or of the Earth, some hidden self-protective force holds them in the paralysis of comfort. I'm speaking about the quiet voice, in the unseen of our minds, who says 'I want the world to change, so long as I may stay just as I am.' A Paiute friend of mine by the name of Allen Bacock, once said that 'the greatest thing that lay between us and the changes that must be made, is comfort.' At the time of saying this, Allen and others (myself included) were walking 400 miles from the Eastern Sierra to the streets of L.A., to speak with Los Angeles officials to get back some of the water being stolen from his ancestral land.

The obsession with 'survival-of-the-fittest' has been further integrated into the minds of people through its establishment within Western social structures and intercultural relations. Some might refer to this as Social Darwinism, though I believe this term may be an oversimplification in referring to the vast complexities of why exactly Western culture has

arrived at the point that we find it. I would describe social Darwinism as a radical belief prescribed to by fascists as a means to justify the selection of one group of people over another, and that the ensuing subjugation or annihilation of the oppressed group thereafter is a natural phenomenon of the human race finding its optimum and most advanced form. Many, such as Daniel Gasman, would blame the father of western ecology, Ernst Haeckel, for introducing this concept to the nazis, and establishing the birth of fascism (Griffin 2001). I would however offer that this belief system has been an aspect of the human psyche for much longer, that fascism cannot be traced to one specific origin or concept, and that all of these concepts are still at large in the world today through the subtle guises of hyper-individualist culture; for example, through the illusion of the American Dream (i.e. that everyone has equal opportunity to be successful in the U.S. if they simply work hard enough).

Given the problematic nature of our internalized resistance to sacrificing comfort, I would venture to say that some of the most necessary work we have to do today is in getting to know our own shadows. Perhaps the most universal shadow-complex among white people is known as ‘white fragility’. As written by Dr. Robin Diangelo:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

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The aspect of this phenomenon that feels most critical to recognize is the function of white fragility as a means to “. . . reinstate white racial equilibrium” (Diangelo 2018). I find this to be of profound importance, in that illuminates the parasympathetic (or unintentional) aspect of our self-preservational impulses. That we may speak out against racism, out against sexism, out against any form of oppression, but that within the depths of those who benefit from that

oppression, there are established psychological defense-systems in place to maintain control and protection even within a system that they disagree with ethically. One could say that we are in this sense, always working as a double-agent; on one hand fighting for justice, and on the other hand, still deeply invested in our own position of power and safety. For myself, the best way that I've come to work (endlessly) at liberating myself from my own internalized state of white supremacy, has been to ask not 'am I experiencing white fragility,' but rather, 'what is my white fragility doing right now?' The nature of white fragility is to sneak, to remain in the unconscious, hidden from my critical, ethical mind. It is a means to keep the organism that I am, in the most protected and resourced position available. And so I believe one of the primary goals of a person of privilege is to become skilled at the unearthing of these systems, and with all the self-love available to them, explore new ways for the nervous system to find rest in the trust of collective well-being.

The self is full of mystery, and so we must approach ourselves with the curiosity that we are each due. Let the questions we ask be offerings to the power and sacrament of mystery; simple and humble gifts we give each day to our own becoming. Adrienne Maree Brown, the author of *Emergent Strategy*, recently wrote in a letter to the late Ursula K. Le Guin, "there are questions you asked that changed the way I could think" (2018). We can offer this to each other, we can trick the conversations and the ways we think into something new. We can ask weird questions and shake the branches of our own knowing, that the falling leaves may lend their bodies to grace of living soil—the vast inter-collection of beliefs, born and released, so that what needs to grow will grow. Most of all, failure is a team sport, not to be done alone. And while the failure itself seems inevitable, in all of its pain, its delusions, its crises and unravelings, may it still at the very least be beautiful—so that before all is said and done, perhaps something new and entirely unexpected will be among us.

***learning how to sit***

*there are times,  
sitting alone on a bench,  
the song of birds spiraling,  
their movement flashing against the slow stance of a lucombe oak,  
where i can just for a moment,  
let go of understanding.*

*strange moments these are,  
when the wind catches a fern in such a way;  
they begin to dance a rhythm  
without semblance to the physics of expectation.*

*eventually,  
if i'm lucky,  
my breath will slow.  
some say this is when to close the eyes, to go inward.  
but i keep my eyes open,  
the silhouette of a tree, emblazoned upon my mind.*

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