

HOW THE  
*SOUL*  
WORKS THE  
*BODY*

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# INTRO

I was born in the South. Arkansas.

Like they did for every southern boy, our congregation trained me to be a leader in the church. I was asked to lead songs, serve communion, pray at church events, and give lessons at youth events.

I'm not part of that church anymore, but I carry it with me--perhaps not by my own choosing. I remember preparing for my very first lesson. In the days leading up to the event, it registered as the most important event in my entire life. To a 13-year-old, what could possibly be more important than speaking to a room of other pious youths? The answer is nothing. For me, this was the first time I had spoken in public after being asked to do so. I was sought out for this, and I suspect it wasn't because I was wanted so much as it was "my turn." My nervousness over public speaking was compounded by feeling like a place-filler. I was being asked to impart something actionable, helpful, insightful. I was a child.

I had no idea what to speak about.

When asking my youth minister for advice, he said, "The best lessons are the one the speaker needs to hear." I don't remember what I ended up speaking about, but the lesson has stayed with me.

I hope that's what these essays are. These are all the things I need to hear. By speaking outward, maybe I can actually be speaking inward. I suspect that I am not alone, and the purpose of these essays is to help us all be better people by stopping the cycle of wanting to change others, and instead change ourselves.

Hemingway nailed it: "There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self."

These changes are not instant, and they are fruits of long suffering. Time and time again, we will miss the mark. But we know where we are going: to a version of ourselves that pushes goodness, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, and a groundedness into the world.

It's hard to be alive right now. I'll spare you the cookie-cutter diatribe about social media, cell phones, and the constant consumption of content and how it affects us.

I'm aware of how it affects me.

If I sit and scroll on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook too long, I become cynical. It's always the bad stuff that gets

posted. When all you see is the bullshit, you start to think everything is full of bullshit--including people you love.

It spills into your everyday life, and now the individual who did not substitute your half-and-half for soy didn't just make an honest mistake. They think they're cute and cheeky in their Christmas-green apron--it's June, buddy--serving up hot coffee and smiles to every one of us worker bees just trying to feel the effects of a liquid battery as we lug our potato sack bodies to work. They're an idiot, and that coffee shop must be run by idiots to have hired that person, so you will be taking your business elsewhere.

This cynical, quick to judge person is not at peace with themselves. They dislike themselves, knowingly or unknowingly, just as they dislike the supposed faulty espresso machine operator.

You, surely, are not this person, but you know someone who is.

Or maybe you are this person. I am sometimes.

Then what are the goods that come from ingesting all this content? There are many. And they can all help us be better people than we were yesterday, which may not be the point of life, but it better be high on the list.

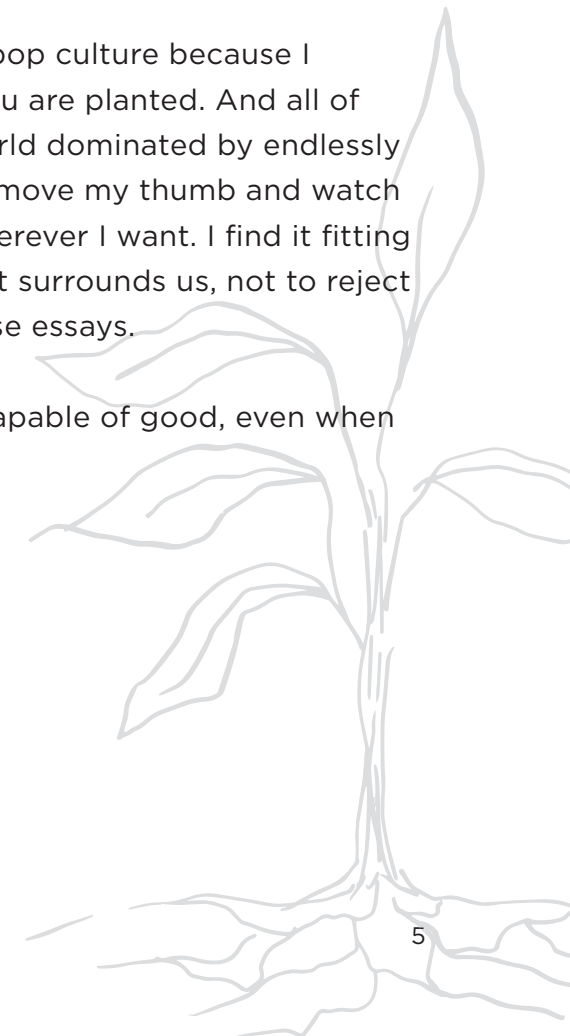
What follows are the lessons I've gleaned as I've tried to fix myself. How can we better people--more caring, empathetic, self-loving, curious, calm, lacking cynicism

and judgment--as we walk through the mirrored hallway of content, where everywhere you look, there is someone or something being promoted to you?

These essays are about bands, actors, speakers, writers, athletes and whoever or whatever else gives us these hints. The inclusion of these entities does not absolve them of their shortcomings, of course. They, like all of us, inhabit both the space of redemption and failure, good and bad, and no one is all of either. To see the good among the flaws and still recognize them as truth is wisdom.

I looked for these lessons in pop culture because I believe in blooming where you are planted. And all of us have been planted in a world dominated by endlessly accessible pop culture. I can move my thumb and watch Lady Gaga whenever and wherever I want. I find it fitting to search for meaning in what surrounds us, not to reject it. That's how I arrived at these essays.

May we all see all things as capable of good, even when it hurts.





## **JIMI HENDRIX:** *letting go of your soul*

It becomes apparent at some point in the second minute of his rendition of “All Along the Watchtower” that Jimi Hendrix has something that others--all others, not just musicians--don’t have. Hendrix unleashes his second consecutive, phased out guitar solo, and as the song builds, crescendoing, Hendrix charges into the 3rd verse “waaahhhlllll along the watchtower...”

Even in the hundreds of times I listened to this song while writing this essay, that moment gives me chills every time. It doesn’t feel like a person. It feels like something inside him is growing too large to contain and is released in one giant loosening of the valve.

There are moments in music that feel manufactured; they are so clearly the product of a premeditated attempt to be cool. This is not one of those moments.

I suspect I’m not the only person in the world who has

this response to this exact moment in this exact song. Its power lies in its authenticity. Contrived presentations of emotion can’t touch what Hendrix does. You may not notice it when it happens, but were you to listen to any other of these emotional outbursts, few would hold the mallet-on-the-bell-of-your-soul resonance that Hendrix has in this one moment.

I envy Jimi Hendrix, not just for his guitar skills, but for his attitude. Any complete listening and reading of Hendrix makes it so clear that this is not any man. Hendrix is a soul leading a body. And that soul takes no prisoners. The gravity of Jimi Hendrix, the soul who runs a body, stems from this.

Hendrix is a timeless sledgehammer, a total and effortless force. He is the rare case of someone who found the perfect way to express themselves, and they expressed themselves totally. Because of his virtuosity on the guitar, he could do anything. If he can imagine the sound he wants to make, he knows how to make it manifest. That is power. True, pure power. It cannot be touched and it cannot be changed.

Many musicians, especially those amateur ones like me, have to work and work and work to figure out one riff or pattern from a song. Someone like Hendrix could hear it and do it. It is total command that is the canvas for total expression.

As simple as it can be put: Jimi Hendrix’s soul had no barriers to expression.

There are no speed bumps. Through work--endless, endless work--Hendrix worked until his soul stood at the start of a long, freshly paved highway. Then he let it go, no end in sight.

This type of letting go takes courage. What if people don't like who you truly are? If you begin to react in the way your soul truly feels and it is rejected, how will you feel? Provided your true expression is one of kindness, as any healthy soul is, and it is still rejected, then the problem is with those around you, not you.

Then comes the hard part: refusing to be controlled by things out of your control.

This is all very ambiguous, I know.  
Let's pour some concrete.

You're out with your friends and one of them makes a joke at your expense. Their motives are questionable. You can't tell if it's one of those jokes they don't realize is too far, or if it's one of those jokes where it's obvious they're sliding the painful truth under a lambskin to you. It hurts you. One option is to try to sting them back, even harder. Another option is to go for the Oscar and laugh along with them as nothing happened.

Both are dishonest. Both options are the speed blocks that we all ought to rid ourselves of. Honesty is the greatest and truest expression of ourselves.

The honest, true, maybe even holy reaction is having the

courage to say "Ahhh man, that hurts my feelings." You don't attack, you don't fake happiness. You're just living. What happens after isn't your concern. You did your part. It's in their hands now.

And why is it so hard to respond with what is actually felt? I suspect it is because being vulnerable--actually saying "This hurts a bit"--also hurts. Being vulnerable is like kicking yourself while you're down. How unfortunate it is that being honest almost always necessitates being vulnerable, not protecting yourself from others.

Dishonesty is the enemy of honest, real expression. This is always the case. Dishonesty is manifest in several, sly ways. We all have a small toolbox of veils to pull over ourselves.

Can't you tell when someone is being contrived? Do they constantly talk about things that will, sometimes with expert, subtle nuance, buoy their standing in your head? Do they drop names? Do they reference things they know you don't know to gain some sort of social battleground? Do they attach their identity to celebrities by monopolizing fandom of that individual unto themselves? Do they try to make a joke out of everything? Do they correct things that really don't matter? Do you do those things? I do.

I wish I didn't.

All of these things are little shields we hold up to the world so that they don't see the real us. The common

thread between all those and all the other little tics we have is that they somehow boost the ego of the person doing those things. Somehow, they let the listener know how important the speaker is.

It's a perfectly normal thing. But the other side, letting yourself be yourself without your help, is better.

It has taken me years, but I've started to catch myself being slow to correct others when they talk about things I'm passionate about. Maybe they get some of the superfluous facts wrong, things that won't change their overarching point if it's incorrect, those are things I've stopped correcting. Does their point change by getting this one detail correct? No? Then don't try to bolster your ego by correcting. It's harmless if they're wrong.

No attempt to build our identity for show is honest, and so it cannot be of the soul--the essence of who we are. The part of us that is not tied to any part of the world we can see.

These are the speed bumps. These are the barriers. These are the actions we must rid ourselves of in order to let our soul go.

### ***Dishonesties of the Soul***

How do we let go of our soul? I'm talking about letting the fullest version of you loose to live.

I don't know about you. I don't know what you struggle

with. But the more I talk with or listen to individuals, I've learned that our struggles are all so similar. Here are some things I've noticed within myself that I consider dishonesties of the soul:

**ONE:** I suppress my own thoughts based on how I assume the person I'm talking to will react. This sort of tip-toeing in conversation may not be explicit and easily nameable, but its effects are palpable. It does both a disservice to me and the person I'm talking with because no conversation with obvious withholdings builds trust or a connection. We may not know it by name, but we can smell reservations like bloodhounds. Of course, there are times when silence is simply the best answer, but many times, provided it is spoken in sincere kindness, reservation hurts more than it helps. Knowing when to be silent and when to be comfortable speaking even when you're afraid of the response is the fruit of wisdom. This is different than remaining quiet in a group discussion. This is almost exclusively between 2 individuals.

**TWO:** I assume the effects of people's actions are intentional and not circumstantial. This is the definition of cynicism, which is the greatest enemy of happiness and acceptance, both of yourself and others. Here is the classic example: someone cuts you off in traffic in a dangerous, perhaps reckless way. You get mad at them for how they are affecting you, how they could've hurt you. The humbling truth of this is that you are totally ignorant. In this instance, you are a fool. You have no idea what is going on inside that vehicle, and the very fact that you do not know should be enough to temper your

reaction to it, hopefully leaving you just a large enough slice in the tension to insert some grace. That person who cut you off in traffic may be on their way to a hospital to see a dying loved one. They may be having a panic attack because of the traffic and they're desperate to get out. What if their husband or wife has been seriously injured and they're racing home to take them to get help? What if their wife is in labor and during all the chaos of going to the hospital, the driver didn't turn on his hazard lights?

What hurts even more is to apply this to our political evaluations. Both the far right and the far left evaluate by assuming intent and not circumstance. The vast majority of politicians are doing what they think is right, not actively trying to hurt people. Disagreeing with their method, not demonizing them is the answer.

**THREE:** I respond to tragedy with anger and not sadness. This is the natural extension of number 2. When we evaluate the result of action by intention and not by circumstance, responding with anger is easy. It feels natural. There are rare instances that merit true, just anger. The more honest answer is a deep, profound sadness. Of course, sadness is the most vulnerable of all emotions. Admitting you're sad or displaying your sadness leaves you exposed. Anger is sadness that can't take off its armor.

For me, these are the speed bumps. These are some of the things I do that act like a gate-without-key to my soul. By practicing each of these individually, I begin to build scaffolding over the gate, maybe even a ladder or

two, and eventually I'm crossing over so much that the gate cannot stand the repeated weight, and it crumbles.

The above paragraph is me in the hopeful future, not me in the now. Maybe one day.

Seeing videos of Jimi and hearing him wail did something to me. It made me realize that we all have something inside of us--a better something than we expect to find.

We all know what a well-adjusted person looks like. Few of us actually try to become that person, with good reason. It is hard, painful work. Once arrived, it is often more difficult. Life is especially difficult for those with a pure heart, even for those who are trying to have a pure heart.

The process of arriving there is also painful. We've caked layer upon layer of falsities over ourselves that both deny our own uniqueness but also our own goodness. By constantly being the repairman for my public persona (reminding people who and what my favorite things are or finding clever ways to make conversations about me and subtly educate others about myself), always ready with my paint and spackle, fixing the way I want others to see me, I forget to go deep inside myself and fix the pillars of the temple, which will crumble without maintenance, and when those crumble, I die.

I don't know what Jimi Hendrix was like away from his guitar. When he was with it, it is total expression, and when fully comprehended, the gravity of it is crushing.

When he occupies that space, his authenticity and power make me wonder where that is inside myself. What brings out my true, best self (for they are surely one in the same)? What small improvements can I make that set me on the road to it?

Bloom where you were planted.

I was planted in 1993, experiencing the last sliver of a non-digital world. Most of my formative experiences happened with phones and internet. Why is that bad? It's the world we live in. What would be bad is to unilaterally deny any sort of value that comes from pop culture consumption. This dualistic, black-and-white thinking is small. There is value everywhere, and to not go grab it is a shame.

Let's go get it.



## **PAM BEESLY:**

*honesty, or at least trying*

Pam Beesly is part of The Office core 4: Jim, Dwight, Michael, and obviously Pam.

The Office seems to be a ubiquitous part of American culture, already earmarked as an all-time sitcom, so I don't feel like much of a character introduction is in order.

However, for those who have never ventured into the halls of Dunder Mifflin: Pam Beesly is the receptionist at the Office. As the show began, Pam was known for being meek, shy, and understated, and perhaps a bit unhappy and insecure. Pam comes into her own as the show goes on, and it's such a joy to watch it unfold. She gets married, has children and pursues her passions, regardless of any sort of chance of failure.

I've watched the Office start to finish around 8 or 9 times now. That isn't a cool piece of trivia about me, it's just



what happened.

The more I watched it, the more I noticed Pam's honesty. Even in the early seasons of the show when she is portrayed as so hesitant and unsure of herself, there is an honesty to Pam.

Pam is no moral exemplar, to be sure. She cheated on her fiancée.

But her honesty in so many other facets of her life is exemplary. They do not cancel the other out. Her good actions do not overpower her bad actions, just as her bad actions do not overpower her good actions.

In this essay, we focus on Pam's goodness.

### **Coal Walk - Honesty with Grace**

In "Beach Games" (season 3), Pam walks across a pit of burning coals that no other office member musters the courage to do. She does this without an audience, as they've all congregated elsewhere.

When Pam has done the coal walk, she returns to the group and begins talking.

*"Hey! I wanna say something. I've been trying to be more honest lately, and I just wanna say a few things.*

*I did the coal walk! Just, I did it. Michael, you couldn't even do that. Maybe I should be your boss. Wow, I feel*

*really good right now.*

*Why didn't any of you come to my art show? I invited all of you. That really sucked. It's like sometimes some of you act like I don't even exist.*

*Jim, I called off my wedding because of you. And now we're not even friends. And things are just like weird between us. And that sucks. And I miss you. You were my best friend before you went to Stamford. And I really miss you. I shouldn't have been with Roy, and there were a lot of reasons to call off my wedding. But the truth is, I didn't care about any of those reasons until I met you. And now you're with someone else. And that's fine. It's, whatever, it's not what I'm- I'm not-*

*Okay, my feet really hurt. The thing that I'm just trying to say to you Jim, and to everyone else in the circle, I guess, is that I miss having fun with you. Just you, not everyone in the circle. Okay. I am gonna go walk in the water now. Yep. It's a good day."*

This short speech has staying power for its honesty alone, but it should be noted that this is an excellent form of honesty without the intent to hurt others.

We often use the word 'honesty' as a cover-up for delivering a message with the purpose to hurt someone. We carry the sigil of pseudo-honesty into battle, clinging to it regardless of outcome. We may have lost, and I may have hurt everyone, but hey, I was just being honest. When we feel the walls press in, we sometimes lash out

and say things that, even if they are true, they hurt people.

Presentation and nuance matter.

How you say things is almost as important as what you actually say.

Pam hits the sweet spot. It is at this moment where she walks the line between honesty and humility so perfectly. She tells Michael maybe she should have his job, but that isn't in any way trying to hurt Michael so much as it is evaluating her own worth.

This is the ultimate test. When you are feeling wronged and angry at other people, and the pot has boiled over, do you have the resilience to say "I will not cause harm."? Most of us do not. We walk and scuttle our feet like whipped dogs, begging for someone to say something to us so that we can show them who the real big dog is. We love exercising and displaying our power in the form of cutting remarks. Pam has every opportunity in the world to do this and refuses.

- She is belittled in the Office by a boss who seems barely competent to be employed, much less her supervisor.
- She went through the humiliating process of calling off a wedding and a honeymoon, all of which her peers watched unfold.
- The person she had feelings for and was the ultimate reason she wasn't comfortable marrying someone else

has begun dating someone else in the same office now.

- She invited her entire office to come see her art show, which took much courage on her part, and only one of them came.

Pam has every reason in the world to have a pot boiling over. Instead of turning the water over onto all of her coworkers, ensuring they feel the same low she feels, she takes the pot off the burner.

The water, the pain, is still there, and it must get out.

Here is where the hard part comes in: she still drains the pot. And she does it with grace.

Whatever pot of water you have, drain it, don't boil it over, and don't let it fill up.

How do we do this? When we are full of anger and resentment, what does it look like to express ourselves honestly without desiring pain for those to whom we speak (for this is assuredly what we want when we speak this way, though we'd never admit it):

**ONE:** Admit your own fault. Rarely are disagreements one-sided, where one person has done no wrong. It's easy to paint yourself as the victim. We're very, very good at this. The wisdom lies within being able to step outside yourself and view the disagreement or tension as a 3rd part. I try to ask myself "Could I have treated this individual better in the recent past?" and that is where I sometimes find my fault. Assume you have fault, and

it will be easier to find. It is sometimes impossible to find if you go searching assuming your own perfection. In the heat of the moment, this feels like a gargantuan task, and I have found that my own inability to view situations objectively makes my present frustration even greater. We must learn to approach conversations with a “together forward” approach, not a “you away” approach. We must remember that the two people in our conversation are just humans, out here going at, trying to be as good as we can. Ram Dass has a beautiful quote:

*“The way I work at seeing others (like the politician), as the beloved is to remind myself, ‘This is another soul, just like me, who has taken a complicated incarnation, just as I have. I don’t want to be in this incarnation any more than he wants to be in mine. But since I want to rest in my soul and not in my ego, I would like to give everybody the opportunity to do the same.’”*

**TWO:** Say what happened in context. I have a real problem with slightly mischaracterizing my grievance with the other person. Here is where words and the exactness of communication matter deeply. There is a large difference between “you did this” and “you always do this.” Both can be true, of course, but we often reach for the latter so that our own argument has more gravity. We slip these little adjustments into what the conversation is about hoping our pile of evidence grows stronger. The best approach is to talk about the current incident and truly ask yourself if this is a pattern or not. Pam easily could’ve suggested that the office doesn’t care about her for not attending her art show,

and this would be an untrue extension of her point, that they simply didn’t attend her art show. Stretching the tension in question makes the person you’re speaking to rightfully defensive because you’ve mischaracterized them. The temptation to exaggerate and take the situation out of context is great, but we must be greater.

**THREE:** Speak against the idea or action, not the person. Speaking, and eventually (as it often ends this way) attacking the person you have tension with does more harm than good. This is an extension of the idea of viewing the consequences of action as intentional or circumstantial. Ask yourself “Was this person trying to hurt me?” Very often, they are not. But again, we tell ourselves that they were so that our emotions are more justified. More often than not, they are trying to add something meaningful, do something right, or help, and what you’re actually having a problem with is their presentation or execution of their idea, not them as a person. You’re likely not upset at their status as a person, you’re upset with how they acted. This difference is crucial. Noting the difference sounds like “Being spoken to like that makes me feel so small” instead of “You have an attitude problem.” To say the latter is dishonesty. It is terribly, unfortunately easy to be dishonest under stress. Such are the cards we were dealt.

### ***Roy - The Price of Honesty***

In the first few seasons of the show, Pam is engaged (to be married) to a character named Roy.

Roy is, to say it simply, your average (not “average” meaning like the majority of males, “average” meaning of an average quality human) guy. He has a bit of a temper, he shows the tendency to focus on the physical element of love too much, and he rarely treats Pam the way we’d all want to be treated.

Pam tells a story about how Roy once forgot her at a sporting event.

Roy and Pam are engaged when the show begins, and they remain so until the 3rd season.

How this happens is unique.

Jim, another character in the show and Pam’s eventual husband, professes his love for Pam at an office party. Pam responds with the line “What do you want me to say?”

The tension here that Pam obviously feels is strangely admirable. Pam, though she clearly has feelings for Jim, is committed to Roy. Her integrity is more important to her than her feelings for Jim. When Pam and Jim go their separate ways, we hear her call her mom. There Pam is explaining the difficulty of the situation when Jim walks in and kisses her abruptly. There is a pause, then they do it again, this time a totally consensual act.

This is obviously wrong.

Later, Pam tells Roy her and Jim kissed. Roy becomes enraged and destroys the entire end of a local bar, and

Pam tells him it’s over.

There have been less messy breakups in the world.

This whole saga is a part of Pam’s character that I don’t believe is harped on enough: she broke off an engagement.

We often hear people recite maxims such as “Do whatever you want so long as it doesn’t hurt someone,” or something else equalling that sentiment. Live your life, just don’t harm others.

This philosophy falls apart quickly and is never, ever applied to relationships. They seem to be the one exception to this. The realm of dating seems to be the only place in the world where most everyone advocates for action that only regards the self when discussing the start or end of relationships. This must be the natural extension of the emphasis placed on marriage.

Breaking up with someone is hurting someone, and we allow this version of hurting someone totally permissible in a romantic context.

Pam stands up for herself, even though it hurts someone else.

I know of people who have broken off engagements. Many people love to throw harsh criticism and judgments toward the initiator of the breakup about how they did not honor their promise, thus hurting the other. It is

regrettable and unfortunate, you'd never want anyone to feel that depth of emotional rejection, but what would likely hurt much more is being married to a partner who has been questioning the validity of the relationship for a long time. That sort of questioning can be made manifest in a number of ways that a quality marriage and family therapist could expound upon.

For those who have broken off engagements, I applaud you for being honest even when it is difficult. I hate that someone was hurt by what you did, and I'm sure you hate it too. This breaking off of an engagement is a true lesser of two evils: hurt now versus however many years of an unfulfilling marriage.

The honesty required to call off an engagement, and now we must expand the definition of that word to any engagement or commitment, is a different type of honesty. It is honesty that is motivated by a necessary self-preservation. Some forms of self-preservation are not necessary. Those forms are fighting for something more like "more comfort" than actually preserving the integrity of oneself.

What Pam is doing here is necessary self-preservation. By not acting, she loses her integrity as a person. These predicaments are unfortunate as they are the rare moments when putting yourself ahead of someone else is the right choice.

Perhaps the only reason it is permissible to cause harm to someone is indirectly--only through the consequences of

truly necessary self-preservation.

Discerning when these moments arise is difficult and require wisdom I do not have. But as we know, being aware of their existence is the first step.

Yourself is all you have. If you are not happy, you have no chance of making anyone else happy.

### ***Michael - Honesty As Vulnerability***

One of Pam's most endearing abilities is her resilience when it comes to dealing with Michael Scott's antics.

Michael is a perpetual ferris wheel of emotion, where his excitement, enthusiasm, and playfulness propel him into thematic parties, "big ideas", and line-edging activities, only to be followed by bouts of overcooked sadness, pity, and isolation.

The majority of the office eye-rolls their way through the daily adventures of Michael, but Pam has a different approach. More often than everyone except Dwight, who is loyal to Michael to a fault, Pam often volunteers to serve as Michael's center of emotional gravity, frequently coaxing him back to normalcy, while still allowing his playful joy (when it is harmless) to happen. Though she often checks him, Pam seems to be the only character in the entire Office universe who is capable of taking Michael seriously on a consistent basis.

I write people off all the time, and once it's done, there

is rarely a going back. This is easy to do. Once you have made the decision that someone is a certain way, you become a powerful, self-proving machine. You will see exactly what you want to see in someone. This behavior plagues me more than anything else. It takes many perceived offenses against me, but I eventually put people in boxes of totality, and I rarely confront myself to remove those boxes.

I decide that someone is silly and then I miss every time they are serious. I decide that someone is a serious prude, and I miss every time they are clever and funny, only to watch myself write it off as a fluke. I have to work my hardest to interact with everyone with zero preconceived notions of who they are. I see what I want to see out of someone once I had deemed them a certain way. I rob myself the chance to be surprised or impressed by them.

I am ashamed of that tendency.

Pam treats many interactions with Michael as if he has never made mistakes before. Each time he has a new idea, with Pam, he is given the benefit of the doubt. Michael lives on a clean slate in Pam's mind. At all times, he is equally capable of redemption or failure, and the freedom she gives him builds a profound trust in their relationship.

The result is Pam always treating Michael's actions with respect. She does not write him off and push herself to a preemptive annoyance. She judges his actions as if the past does not exist.

Pam treating Michael, a continual hazard, with respect is Pam speaking truth to the lie that her ego, her knowledge, and her instincts are always correct. She suppresses them each time so that Michael always gets a fair shake with her. She knows, and is well within reason to assume, that Michael is a constant social risk. She has more evidence than would be needed to prove this, and she still handles his antics with respect. She shuts down the defense mechanisms we all employ--assumption, projecting, and predicting--so that Michael can be his truest, expressed self.

I must confess I cannot do this. Yet. One day, I hope this will be second nature.

There is a small bird who flies into the office door and instantly dies. Michael is crushed. He frantically runs down to save the bird, and when he returns, he is even more saddened when the Office does not seem to understand the gravity of the recent tragedy.

It is only Pam who takes Michael seriously. She is able to recognize the event as irrational, but still show Michael a deep level of empathy. Pam recognizes that what we all feel does not reside on the same plane. What hurts Pam will not hurt Michael always. There is no rubric to feelings, and the hardest thing to remember is: you do not get to tell anyone the merit of their feelings. It's easy to spot someone who is overreacting for show, or creating drama for the sake of drama. When we see someone who is genuinely hurt, we see it. It's palpable: a thickness in the air that can almost be touched. It is instantly

recognizable and different from phony emotion, and when you see it, you do not have sway over it. You do not get to look at that person and say “What you feel isn’t accurate.” If they say it is, what you think doesn’t matter.

When someone dismisses your sadness, despair, anxiety, hopelessness, or struggle by comparing it to someone who “objectively” struggled more, ignore them. We all feel differently, and no feeling has more weight than any other.

Conversely, when someone tells you that you sincerely hurt them, you don’t have the luxury of saying you didn’t. You did, and that’s enough to apologize. This is what it means to take others’ emotions seriously. Your thoughts are of no value in assessing someone else’s true emotions.

When the bird is killed, Pam suppressed her own ego--the ego that is no doubt sounding the alarm once it sees Michael’s reaction--and handles Michael’s feelings with gentleness. She is not concerned with the opinions of her coworkers. She is dealing with a moment that is heavy for someone else, and that is enough.

## ***Conclusion***

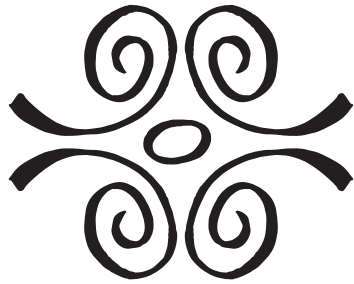
I envy Pam’s ability to respect others in a way that does not dishonor herself or show superficial acceptance toward others. From a fictional character, it seems like an effortless byproduct of existing, but for us real people, this takes work--a conscious effort that sometimes

knocks us unconscious from the effort and strain it takes to do it right.

Pam’s tenderness and empathy are not without cost. Let us make this very clear: life is immeasurably more difficult for people with big, soft hearts. This is partially why most people come across so indignant, pedantic, small, and vitriolic, especially online. There is an element of self-sacrifice that is necessitated by choosing to be open, vulnerable, and exposed. Empathy demands action outside of your shell. This is hard. Being an asshole is easy. That’s why there’s so many.

When I watch Pam, I see a human with fewer filters. Those filters keep us from the moment of graceful honesty, making the leap, and being authentic.





## **PETE HOLMES:**

### *perspective*

Pete Holmes, the famous comedian from the Pete Holmes show and HBO's *Crashing* is the host of a beautiful podcast, *You Made It Weird*. Here, Pete sits down for unguided conversations with musicians, comedians, actors, or other famous people.

These conversations reveal sides of celebrity we rarely encounter. There is little to no talk about the "current project" of the person speaking. The conversation, due to Pete's self-diagnosed "obsession" with enlightenment, always, and usually quickly steer toward the mystical, unknown, "heart" of life.

Pete has a real heart for the holiness and sanctity of all we see.

To him, the absurdity of the human condition demands a reframing of our current perspective. He will often speak of how ridiculous we believe our problems to be,

given that we are one of the many billions and billions of people on earth, the generation currently in place after the billions that came before, who didn't show up until 14+ billion years after the world began, all of us sitting on a speck of dust hurling in outer space, and we think \_\_\_\_\_ matters. When framed this way, of course, some of the things we worry about seem paltry.

And were we to adopt this ideology, we must accept that this is all a mystery.

How are we here? Why are we here?

God-believing or not, this is all a miracle. The chances of what happened to get us here are such a small number, we could never even understand it.

The recognition of this requires that we not take things so seriously, and that the real fruits of the world do not lie in small trivialities, but lie in the moments of Truth.

Laughter, music, community, sex. These are the special, holy moments. It is in these situations that we lose our conscious understanding of where we are. Even if we don't totally lose it, we are not the most important thing in those moments.

Deep into the rollicking of a tear-inducing, unstoppable, painful spout of laughter, is a chunk of sweet relief. For once in our daily lives, our soul meets the soul of the person we are laughing with outside both of us, and just for a sweet, sweet moment, nothing else in the entire



world matters. There is no ego in laughter. All things are stripped away, just for a second.

I suspect this is part of why Pete, during every episode, asks every guest the question “When was the time you laughed the hardest?”

Why is a sense of humor so important to relationships? We like to laugh, and laughing more is always good. Laughing is an escape.

### ***Absurdity***

The absurdity of the human condition, that we are 1 of a current 7 billion, and 1 of a total 105 billion people ever, absolutely demands that we not take all of this so seriously.

To our ego and our arrogance, we must be able to say ‘maybe’ and ‘I don’t know,’ acknowledging that there is something so much larger going on, that what you say and do cannot be total truth or always correct. We’re all tiny, microscopic, and insignificant in the grand scheme of things. And that is release.

In the throws of emotion, it is hard to keep this frame into perspective.

Are we ever aware of the arrogance that is required to worry? When we encounter moments that are not life-threatening and no one will be hurt, but we treat them as if someone will be, what are we doing?

We are running, a hamster removing spokes from its own wheel.

We love to dramatize and turn our worries into the largest problems anyone has ever faced. We fear difficult conversations, changing jobs, awkward encounters, taking on commitments, and we act as if our situation is unique to us, when really, there have been millions of people who have done the exact same things, and they mostly ended up totally fine.

When we dramatize and exaggerate and inflate the situation, we are usually doing this because we think we are more important than we really are, that our suffering is unique. We aren’t, and it isn’t. And that rocks.

In the same way, how can we take our thoughts and opinions so seriously? Do we truly believe we are the first to think deeply on a subject before? Have we no idea how not unique we are? That there is very likely someone living a life you know nothing of that feels the same as you on topics. If we were to let this sink in, would we place less of an importance on our opinions? By sheer volume alone, our uniqueness crumbles. Surely the opinions of crumbled uniqueness can’t hold too much water.

I feel this way most often when I see people send food back at restaurants. There it seems easy for me to marvel at the arrogance of others.

If your food is inedible or unsafe, politely ask for it to be returned.

There is a special breed of people who send food back over the most minor of errors. I marvel at those people's ability to put themselves in the middle of everything, all the planets, people, and objects revolving around them.

The absurdity of the human condition forces us to make our perspective much larger. How much does the spreadsheet we're staring at really matter? I've never worked on a spreadsheet that mattered more to me than getting beer with a friend. Not one.

Living in light of the vastness of creation is what Father Richard Rohr refers to as "living in deep time." Rohr says:

*"Now, I think that's what the tradition means by the word 'contemplation,' that to be a contemplative is to learn to trust deep time and to learn how to rest there and not be wrapped up in chronological time. Because what you've learned, especially by my age, is that all of it passes away. The things that you're so impassioned about when you're 22 or 42 don't even mean anything anymore, and yet, you got so angry about it or so invested in it."*

When we consider all that came before us and all that will surely come after, we must throw some lead into our shoes, stop and say "In the end, does this matter?"

In these moments, when it seems so hard, and I am in such a twit over whatever issue plagues me that day, I

remember the words of Ram Dass: "The degree to which we resist is the degree to which we struggle."

## ***Smallness***

I sometimes wonder how bored we are as a species.

At one point, we were all running around and doing exactly what we needed to survive: hunting and gathering. We met all our needs, and we wanted not. At some point, we got tired of all that, and over thousands of years, we wanted more and more and more and more until we made professional sports leagues, hairstyles, spray paint, cymbals, coffee mug warmers, pens with 5 ink colors, and trundle beds. How bored have we been for so long?

The excess we swim in is the cause of so many of our problems. We have more than we were built for. How beautiful it is that now, for just the most recent speck of human history, we are able to actually gain some idea of how small we are.

The grandiosity of where we are squeezes our ego down to an atom whizzing around in outer space. Realizing this has made my life feel many times more important because I realize that I am free from an imaginary burden to matter. We must learn to look at our lives for what it is: radically unimportant. Of course, it cannot end there, lest we slip into self-deprecation and feelings of worthlessness.

Our lives are not important in the “history of the world” sense, and aiming for them to be is foolish. The smallness of my life has brought me gratitude, not despair.

I cannot let myself believe the burden to change the mind of everyone around me rests on my shoulders. When I realize I am not responsible for the thoughts or behaviors of people outside of myself, which is what I tend to believe when I creep upon self-classifying as “important, I can actually live a normal life.

I still want to be good, I still want to make an impact, but my expectations must be tempered. When what I hope to be or hope to do is scaled down, it becomes attainable.

Things like being a good neighbor, happily serving others, giving time and money without condition, telling people you love them must be the focus.

The great Carl Sagan wrote this, and reading it branded its consequential impression into my mind:

*“Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every*

*“superstar,” every “supreme leader,” every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.*

*The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.*

*Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”*

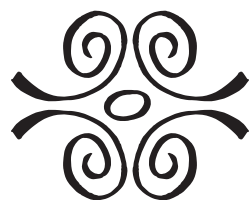
I would differ with Sagan on that last little tidbit. There is a hint that help will come, taking the form of self-evaluation and the never-ending cycle of internal death and resurrection. Let us build the ability to kill our darlings--the parts of us that do not put faith, hope, or love into the world and resurrect them into something new, brighter, and better.

All of our hopes, desires, aspirations, histories, dreams, worries, fears, preoccupations, annoyances, passions,

regrets, strengths, weaknesses, and all other flotsam and jetsam of the mind must be understood in relation to knowing that there is so much more than us, a great unknowable mystery that demands we knock ourselves off our pedestal. The Great Mystery, God, the Endlessly Knowable--were we to understand how little we are, maybe then we can begin to do our part.

Pete Holmes says it best: “We are dogs trying to understand the internet.”

In light of the grandiosity of the human situation, that in all likelihood, you will not change the world, we must resolve to do the next best thing: change ourselves, knowing full well that if we do so, we can change others.



## **Arya Stark:** *out is through*

I would advise anyone who hasn't watched through season 7 of Game of Thrones to not read this essay.

For those who are familiar with Game of Thrones, or don't care about spoilers, or aren't familiar with Game of Thrones and just want to read: Arya is the 3rd child of Ned and Catelyn Stark. She's just a year older than her brother, Bran, and two years younger than her sister, Sansa. The Starks are a historic family, ruling the Northern half of the fictional continent of Westeros.

From almost the very beginning of the show, Arya shows she is not going the way of a typical lady-in-training. In season 1, she sneaks away to practice archery after leaving her sewing lessons. Arya has no interest in politics or the life of a high-born girl.

At the ripe age of 11, Arya is sent to the capital city of King's Landing with her father and older sister Sansa.

Her father was named the Hand of the King. There, after much begging, Arya convinces her father to let her train in swordsmanship once her father learns she owns a sword, given to her by her brother Jon. Years of resisting gave way when Ned Stark saw his daughter was serious about learning to fight, and so he hires a famed swordsman to teach Arya to use a sword. Her teacher, Syrio Forel, teaches Arya the ways of water dancing, a form of sword fighting that puts the advantage in the hands of the smaller fighter through means of agility and finesse.

Through a series of events, Arya's father is arrested for knowing too much, and his captors, the Lannisters, send guards to abduct Arya and her sister Sansa. Their father was a smart man, and he gave them a route to escape the city. Their escape route is compromised and Arya resorts to hiding in the slums of the city, disguised as a beggar boy.

A long list of atrocities fall on Arya. She: falls into being detained and exiled to the most desolate part of the country, evades torturing, is removed from being detained and employed as a servant to the man who ordered her father's execution, hires an assassin to free her from servitude, wanders the countryside, is kidnapped by a psychopath, arrives to a city just after her mother and brother were killed there and watches her brother's body paraded amongst soldiers, discovers she has a taste for killing and revenge, stows away on a ship, arrives at the training ground of the previously mentioned assassin, is beaten, blinded, trained in the

ways of the assassins, and evades multiple attempts on her life.

Now. This is her story up to Season 7.

Arya was subjected to this horrible way of existing, but finally, she arrives at this assassin training ground in the city of Braavos. It is there, for the first time since her earliest days, she can rest in a sense of order. There are rules. The place itself is called The House of Black and White, which I've no doubt is a symbol for dualistic thinking, boundaries, and them vs. us mentalities.

This sense of order is no doubt comforting to her after years spent wandering, stripped of her autonomy, and without a family or community. She arrives at a place where she no longer wanders, can make her own choices, and is surrounded by a community. Her community has rules, structure, and ceremonies that dictate their life. Their way of living is being a part of the assassin group.

Arya soon learns it is not good for her and begins to rebel, and question the teachings of the group, so much so that they try to kill her before she escapes. She sets out to reunite with the living members of her family.

### ***Order, Disorder, Reorder***

Franciscan friar Richard Rohr is a hero of mine. I read his teaching of Order, Disorder, and Reorder a few years ago and wanted more. Directly quoted from his website, it is as follows:

*"I have been calling the developmental stages Order > Disorder > Reorder. In short, I see this pattern in the Bible and in human lives:*

- 1. Order: We begin with almost entirely tribal thinking, mirroring the individual journey, which starts with an egocentric need for "order" and "self." Only gradually do we move toward inclusive love.*
- 2. Disorder: We slowly recognize the invitation to a "face to face" love affair through the biblical dialogue of election, failure, sin, and grace, which matures the soul. This is where we need wisdom teachers to guide us through our "disorder."*
- 3. Reorder: Among a symbolic few, there is a breakthrough to unitive consciousness (for example, figures like Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, the Psalmists, many of the prophets, Job, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, and Paul). This is also what some call enlightenment or salvation."*

I believe many of us go through this.

I see it in my own life. I grew up in a church that told me what all was bad, all the things I cannot do. What to stay away from, how to avoid temptation and sin, and how to be "not of the world." That phrase was stretched to its furthest extent, to the point of perversion, where only a few things are of God, creations of God, part of the great togetherness. Only select items could ever be holy, when really, in all their unique ways, a great number of things are holy. Of course, by drawing lines and walls around what we could not take part in, it made some of us want it more.

You make cookies and you tell your child "Do not eat these cookies before dinner." We all know that now the child will want the cookies even more.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote,

*"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful."*

This environment was one of order. This order yielded to disorder by way of yielding to my temptations. The walls protecting the forbidden fell, and everything was open to my own yes or no, instead of the choice being made for me, as it was for the first 17 years of my life.

I grew up in Order. I fell into Disorder, which is not chaos, but a dismantling of the Order, whatever form it inhabits. Interestingly enough, Rohr mentions that most conservative people don't move out of Order, and most progressive or liberal people get stuck in disorder. And very few reach Reorder.

*"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*

## **Through**

Arya leaves her guild, the metaphorical housing of her Order. The rules were placed upon her, she slowly took

them apart, and then she left the guild, putting the pieces back together in their correct way.

Arya's most compelling story arc element is that when she goes through this reorder, she does not leave it behind. She recognizes that even though she went through something that she does not agree with now, it is still a part of her that must be carried with her.

In her case, she uses what she learned with the assassins to further a greater cause. She is not a part of them, but they are a part of her. Instead of throwing it out, she picks it up and includes it in the next chapter of her story.

One of the biggest struggles of my life is staring in the face of who I was, what I did, or what I said from years or even months ago, and squirming my way into an attitude of rejection toward it. I tell myself that I'm better than that now. That wasn't me. That's not who I am.

And knocking on the door, taking his time, is a little voice who says "No, that is who you are."

Father Rohr calls this Transcend and Include.

When we move on theologically, philosophically, emotionally, physically, socially, we are tempted to reject whatever form of ourselves we left behind, but we cannot. It is all a part of us. Whatever road we walk down, we cannot toss what carry to the roadside. We must continue to carry it.

My past life's incorrect notions inform, not mitigate, my current life's correct notions. They only exist in conjunction with each other. And though it feels like I cannot, I know there are good things to be learned from my ignorance. I do not shed my skin, I keep it. It is me.

This is largely a product of two things: perspective and accepting yourself.

The perspective aspect teaches us to look for the good in all things. The things worthy of keeping, which is everything. For me, my conservative upbringing taught me what's inside the Bible pretty damn well. And though I vehemently disagree with how it's contents were applied, I know the Bible well.

Acceptance and self-love are not, however amazing it is, pouring an extra glass of wine and watching Parks and Rec. That's just relaxing. Self-love is saying to yourself: all that I wish to be rid of about myself, I will keep with me because I cannot be understood without it.

For those who are seeking to improve and grow, as you go through disorder and begin to reorder, true reorder is transcending and including all you took apart. It is as much of you as your hands, heart, and eyes. The only way to the other side is to go through it all.

***"You say: everything in my life, the highs and the lows, are all grist for the mill of going home. I will eat it all."  
- Ram Dass***

