

Luke Chamberlin's State of Mind: Q4 2010

“As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers.”

— William Blake

Dear Friends:

This crack-up has been in the works for several years now, possibly as far back as 2005 when I first rubbed my hands against the stone-smooth surfaces of the radiated camphor trees that dot the streets of Hiroshima. Actually, there is a possibility that its roots are much older, from my time as a child playing in the damp earth of the Santa Cruz Mountains amongst the towering redwood trees as I stared up at the wisps of sunlight brave enough to penetrate the imposing canopy.

Whatever its genesis, the final straw comes as I sit here in my Brooklyn apartment the size of a shoebox staring at a piece of pumpkin pie and realize that the damn thing (the pie) is just condensed energy vibrating slowly. Yes, even the whipped cream is vibrating slowly; its energy possibly as old as the universe itself. I think of the implications of this energy and, while they do not prevent me from eating the pie, they are psychologically paralyzing.

Rather than pay for therapy, which I have heard is expensive, I have decided to put my thoughts into writing and send them to you, dear friends. I hope to do this from time to time, when the pressure of my metaphysical inquiries into the nature of knowledge and meaning build up to a point where release is needed.

Before I move on I must give proper credit to my friend Lars R., whose long, rambling Proust-esque tales (I have never read Proust but as I follow the sometimes tenuous thread that connects Lars's stories I can only imagine that Proust's 4,000+ page masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu* (translated into English as *Remembrance of Things Past*) follows roughly the same narrative format and carries a similar tone (my actual knowledge of the book is limited to its Wikipedia entry and to a very funny sketch about *Swann's Way* (the title of the first volume in the series) done by Monty Python in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*)) delivered periodically by email are a source of great joy to me. This is my pale imitation.

The other inspiration for this letter is the massive snowstorm that started this morning and is expected when all is said and done to drop more than 12" of snow on New York City, which is a lot of snow to be dropped on a city (UPDATED: *two feet* of snow). There is not a chance of me setting foot outside today or probably tomorrow, and when your apartment is the size of a shoebox there are a limited number of ways to keep yourself from going crazy, especially when faced with self-annihilating quandaries of an ontological nature brought on by a slice of pumpkin pie. For me, writing is one of them.

There is a scenario that I have been playing out over and over in my head. You are given the choice of opening one of two doors, Door A or Door B. Both doors carry with them the risk of Instant Death. Door A has a 90% chance of Instant Death, that is to say that on average for every ten people who walk through this door nine will be struck dead instantly, while Door B carries only a 10% chance of Instant Death, that is to say, one in ten. Assuming 1) You must open one of the two doors and 2) You are not trying to kill yourself, which door do you open? Door A or Door B?

(Please choose before you move on to the next paragraph).

For the purposes of this scenario, if you chose Door B you have been killed instantly. Snap of the fingers, just like that, with no time for remorse. If you chose Door A, you passed through unharmed. Which brings me to my question:

Did you choose the wrong door?

Given the information above, Door B carries a much lower chance of Instant Death and without any other information is certainly the correct choice. There is no logical reason in this scenario that you would ever choose Door A. And yet, there are people who cannot come to terms with the fact that sometimes the correct choice leads to undesirable consequences. And that sometimes the incorrect choice works out just fine. The person who chooses Door A and lives holds himself above the unfortunate soul who chose Door B and suffered Instant Death. Part of this, I believe, is that we are naturally inclined to take credit for the things in our lives that go well, and for those things that do not go so well, we slough the blame off onto Chance or Fate or

some other Power outside of our control.

Listening to much of the political discourse in America in 2010 (I promise not to make this letter too political; the truth is that politics bores me immensely) one can ascertain that either 1) the average American politician or 2) a large portion of the American public have a difficult time grasping this concept (actually I suppose that 3) both is the likely answer). There are people who desperately, desperately want to believe that if they just make the right choices everything will work out great. Conversely, they see this as proof that if someone is prospering, they must have made the correct decisions. This leads many people to justify the way that they live based solely on the fact that they are alive and prospering. Consider the Instant Death scenario above the next time you run across someone with this worldview.

On this particular winter evening, I stare at the slice of pumpkin pie on my plate and think about the decisions I have made over the past few years. Removing decisions from the imagined context of their outcomes in order to isolate and study them is very difficult but makes for an engaging mental exercise (see Case Study #1 below).

Case Study #1

In December of 2006 I began writing a novel called *Lucky Dragon Number Five* on a yellow legal pad in the glorious confines of the Mister Donut shop on Peace Boulevard in Hiroshima, Japan, not three hundred meters from the epicenter of the *a.b.*

The title is a translation of the name of a Japanese fishing vessel, the *daigo fukuryu maru*, that inadvertently became a part of history when it strayed too close to a top secret U.S. military program known as Operation Castle Bravo, an above-ground nuclear test in the Pacific Ocean whose resounding success led to the creation of the world's first hydrogen bomb. The boat was showered with nuclear ash from the fallout of the explosion and several crew members became sick with radiation poisoning. One (the radioman) died a few weeks later. This was in 1955.

The Japanese were both outraged and horrified that ten years after the war and the nightmare of nuclear fire were behind them the Americans could still manage to kill Japanese citizens with the power of the *a.b.* (even if accidentally). This outrage was soon overshadowed however by

the fact that before anyone realized what had happened to the vessel, the catch of tuna in its cargo bay had already been unloaded and shipped off across Japan. When this came to light it set off a wave of panic across the country that led to headlines like “Radiated Tuna!” and had the Japanese Self-Defense Forces digging mass graves across the country into which were rolled thousands of pounds of yellow-fin. Everyone forgot about the radioman. In the end, the United States paid for the tuna and made the Japanese government sign a statement guaranteeing future indemnity against any and all tuna-related damages.

Two things draw me strongly to this story. The first is the horror of the *a.b.* reaching out from the past to claim more lives ten years later in a *near perfect* metaphor for the way that radiation sickness and cancer and birth defects were still killing Hiroshimans and Nagasakians decades after the blast. In my mind this theme also works as a metaphor for the way that the long ghostly arm of culture-wide trauma - genocide, slavery - reaches out from the past and continues to destroy lives. There is something in the destructive power of the *a.b.* that mirrors the most intractable wounds of humanity in deep and powerful ways.

The second is the darkly comedic shift in the story away from the horror of nuclear war to the public outcry over radioactive sushi. In the end, humans are humans. We can only take tragedy for so long before we have to distract ourselves with the mundane.

I believed that these two themes would be an excellent basis for a novel. Somehow, I have managed to avoid both themes completely and write only a few hundred rambling pages about a translator who discovers a previously undiscovered country and becomes lost in the jungle during a pilgrimage in a manner that mirrors his own epistemological inquiries into the nature of language and meaning.

I have a difficult time believing that I have been working on this novel for over four years now, and what’s more, it’s not even close to finished. Granted, my writing efforts have not been what one would call *concerted*. At one point, I set the book aside for almost a year. But four years now represents a not insignificant fraction of my life (approx. 4/29ths or 14%) and I have no demonstrable results.

I say *demonstrable* because of the strange way that I write. In several hundred pages and over

twenty chapters I have only one chapter that could even conceivably be called completed. I do not mean “publication ready,” I mean to say that there is a beginning, middle and end, or even just a beginning and an end, or any sort of narrative that would make sense to anyone who were to read it.

When people ask me what I like to do with my spare time I sometimes, depending on my mood, tell them that I like to write. This is problematic, because when you tell a certain number of people that you like to write a certain percentage will inevitably ask to see something that you have written. And in almost a decade now of “liking to write” I have absolutely nothing to show anyone.

I recently went through a folder that contains some of my writing and found no fewer than forty-three incomplete short stories. Stories that are in such an unfinished state they would be pointless to show to anyone. Usually, these stories are based around a single image in my head. They have a great opening line or a great closing line but never both at the same time. They are comprised of random strings of half-finished paragraphs and ill-formed sentences floating disconnected and lonely over mostly blank pages, like bacteria on a petri dish.

As an example: I have another story called “The Perfect Revolution” about a journalist who is taken hostage by a group of rebels in South America. The rebels are trying to overthrow the government via a bloodless coup by writing the perfect propaganda tract, so perfect that anyone who reads it will be instantly and passionately converted to their cause. To this end, they camp out in the jungle and read philosophy and literature (Heidegger, Marx, Cicero, Derrida, St. Augustine, Nietzsche, Kant, etc) and hold impassioned debates over the tiniest of edits to their document, all the while dodging government patrols. In the end, the journalist escapes and leaves the rebels to their endless rewrites and revisions in the middle of the dark jungle.

I did a fair amount of research for this story: brushed up on my philosophy (particularly Jacques Derrida and his work on semiotics), read the Lonely Planet’s *South America on a Shoestring* travel guide and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Despite all of this, the story exists only as the above outline, a few paragraphs I wrote describing the South American jungle, and a comedic campfire repartee about capitalism and Henry Ford. I still think it could be a good story.

I have known for some time that I have difficulty finishing what I start. This has always been a problem for me. My mind is all over the place. I blame the fecundity of my interests; they spawn new interests when I am not looking. But today, the energy in this pie (or rather, the concept of pie-as-energy) has me reexamining this problem in the context of linearity.

This is because the traditional pie narrative is very linear: mother buys some ingredients, mixes them together, puts them in an oven, out comes a pie, the pie is consumed (there is a linearity to the digestion and ordure as well, but I will bite my tongue). When the pie is consumed, it no longer exists. When I eat the last slice, everyone else is out of luck. This is the end of the story.

But how does my consumption of pumpkin pie affect the total world supply? Does my pumpkin pie exist in a specific time and place, or are slices of pumpkin pie like electrons, flickering out of existence as I eat my piece and flickering into existence in another part of the world as someone pulls a fresh baked pie from the oven? What if all energy in the universe was converted to matter in the form of pumpkin pie? How would this affect the perpetual motion machine of the universe? Does energy diminish? Is anything truly infinite? Etc?

The traditional pumpkin pie narrative does not address any of these questions. As I sit here and contemplate this I realize that I have become skeptical of anything that purports to be linear (aside: for an exploration of linearity as masculine fantasy please c.f. Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River"). I do not believe that the end justifies the means because I do not believe in the end. The end is a false construction wrought by mortal men. To judge the universe by the yardstick of our own lifespans is hubris. All narratives, then, are contrived, because they suppose beginning and end.

That might make a good story. A writer who never finishes anything because he rejects the very concept of The End.

Case Study #2

One of the looming worries in my life right now is the specter of graduate school. For the past five years, ever since being sent off to Japan on a Fulbright scholarship, I have figured graduate school into my life equation. Prior to Japan, I would never have considered graduate school. I

barely considered college. Now, I feel that anything less would be failure. This was hammered home two weeks ago when I sat down to brunch with four friends and realized I was the only one without a graduate degree (to make things worse one of these people was my wife, who outranks me now in the middle class pantheon).

The tone of the above paragraph is a touch negative. I do not wish to give the wrong impression. At the moment, two to six years of reading books and group health insurance sound like heaven. But I just cannot make up my mind when it comes to the direction in which to exert myself. Some background for the unfamiliar: perhaps related to the curious opposition to linearity mentioned in CS #1 above, I have gone through a ridiculous (I intend the original literary meaning here i.e. "worthy of ridicule") number of professional objectives. I provide an abridged timeline here:

1986 - Paleontologist

1990 - Video Game Developer

1998 - Musician

2000 - Filmmaker

2005 - PhD English or PhD Comparative Literature

2006 - PhD East Asian Languages and Literatures

2007- Law School

2008 - Still law school, but also maybe business or MPP (Master of Public Policy)

2009 - Business school (MBA), Architect, Economist, Real Estate Developer

First half of 2010 - Business School (MBA), PhD Comparative Literature

Second half of 2010 - Software Engineer, Creative Director, Commercial Photographer, Artist

December 2010 - Philosopher? Unpaid magazine intern?

Five-year-old Luke was right: I should have stuck to dinosaurs (as it turns out, five-year-old Luke was right about most things, but that is a topic for another letter). I would be happy engaged in any of these pursuits, although some of them do pay considerably better than others, and a few are most likely unsustainable financially, or at least not without a pinch of luck.

There are people who say that life is too short. Too short for what purpose? That is like saying a 12" ruler is too short. Too short for what? A 12" ruler was designed to be exactly 12" long. If you

are trying to measure something longer than 12” you’ve grabbed the wrong tool. Objects function relative to their purpose. The length of life determines its function, not the other way around.

With a dozen lifetimes, I might become all of the things on my list. But what is more likely is that I would add more and more items to my list to the point that even a dozen lifetimes would not be enough to accomplish the goals I had set out for myself. Someone who consistently pours too much water into a vase and spills water onto the floor does not need a bigger vase. They need to learn how to pour.

One of my favorite opening scenes in film is from Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo*. The movie opens with a shot of a wandering ronin (played by Toshiro Mifune) climbing a tranquil hill and surveying the bucolic mountains of rural Japan. He pauses and looks around as if he is lost, and then picks a stick up off the ground and throws it into the air. The stick lands, and he heads off in the direction that the stick is pointing. In a few seconds and with no dialogue we have a fantastic portrait of a truly directionless wanderer.

In my current state of mind, I believe that 2011 will be a good stick-throwing year. I used to think that direction and purpose were synonymous. Now I believe that they are not. Directionless and aimless are not the same. One can have purpose with no direction, applying that purpose wherever one may find oneself (in the film, the nameless protagonist saves a village from two gangs of bandits, but the village he stumbles across is unimportant; all villages require salvation). Likewise, one can have direction but no real purpose, climbing ladder after ladder simply because someone has arranged the rungs in that order.

If you’ve made it this far I am grateful; formatted and printed you are closing in on 10 pages. These are the thoughts that unraveled in my head with synapse-like speed as I contemplated the true nature of my pumpkin pie. Only now, by writing them out, can I hope to catch up with the implications.

If none of this makes any sense, you can be assured that the fault is mine. In that case, disregard everything I’ve written and just know that my greatest hope is to someday have the chance to sit down with each of you over a slice of pie (or aged cheddar on rye toast or fresh

scones with orange marmalade), drink hot black coffee and discuss literature or the nature of the universe or swap recipes or maybe just sit and listen as the howling blizzard winds make their presence known against the foggy glass window panes.

Luke Chamberlin

Brooklyn, NY

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