

A confession

By Anthony Carnovale

I have a confession to make: I'm confused. Like, really. I mean, I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired. Actually, its more than that ? I think. Or maybe not? Well, who knows? Does anybody? Anybody else feeling this way as of late? Anybody else having a difficult time making sense of all the nonsense that is going on: last week, the leader of the free world mocked a victim of sexual assault; women, everywhere, are fearful of losing their right to safe abortions; hate groups are increasingly legitimized; nuclear war is a threat ? climate change, even more so; the high costs of living are costing lives; before we have a chance to mourn a tragedy, another one strikes. It seems that everybody I speak to is anxious about something, and taking pills for something else. For the purpose of this piece, I looked up the word 'anxiety' on Google; I got 237, 000, 000 hits.

I see a lot of people dazed, confused. I mean, in life, we're all looking to be useful, to have a purpose; we're all looking for company; and, we thought we built the tools to help us achieve all three of those objectives. Social media was supposed to be the game-changer, the great equalizer. For the first time in history, everybody had a platform, their own personal soapbox. The internet and social vehicles like Twitter and Facebook were supposed to taxi us into the future. There was talk of revolutions, new movements, a shift in the world order. So where did all of that go? Now, all I see is too many people running around with too many tabs open inside their heads. They're constantly toggling between screens, checking social media, multi-tasking and not worried enough about their personal data, privacy, and security. I mean, we used to search the internet; now the internet searches us.

Look where we're at: plenty of people think personal fulfillment can be found by scrolling from top to bottom, swiping left, right, liking, sharing, downloading, uploading. We've reduced our thoughts and lived experiences to content, pieces of a narrative that tell one hell of a story: Mark Zuckerberg is worth \$16 billion. My mother told me that since she joined FB her anxiety has gotten worse; the evidence suggests that she is not alone. I think my mother is admitting to something more discerning. She's acknowledging that feeling, that subtle tremor beneath it all, that maybe, we sense the reality what we're doing- that its all for naught. We're connected more than ever; yet we're disconnected like never before. Some people get anxious; some get really rich.

Recently, I taught a lesson on theme to my grade 11 students. I asked them to think about what the author was trying to say about the world via their writing. As an extension, I asked my students to think about the meaning of life. After a minute or so, I saw a student pick up his phone and start typing. When I asked him to show me his phone, I could see that he had googled: 'What is the meaning of life?' I laughed; so did he. He told me he didn't know where to start in answering that question. I stopped laughing. I said, 'Welcome to the club, Daniel.'

And yet, there are moments. This week, one of my favorite singers, Cat Power, released her new album. Her rasp voice is sweet, addictive; there was my son's masterful drawing of a Thanksgiving turkey; my daughter running around the house in her Hallowe'en costume; the profound lessons my students taught me.

I remember an afternoon with Jimmy, a Rastafarian friend of mine, when I lived in the Junction in Toronto. I told him about how disappointed I was with some people in my life, how nobody ever asked about how things were going with my writing. He told me I had to lower my expectations of people. It was the saddest thing I had ever heard; it was the most liberating thing I had ever heard. It made sense ? I think.

Lower expectations? Really?

At this point of time in my life, I've come to realize that the key to happiness and success is realizing that the things most people want actually, kind of, suck: the rich get depressed; being in love is a lot of work; that the prettiest person in the world also farts, burps and sneezes. You see where I'm going with this?

I think the Roman Emperor Aurelius got it right. He wrote of sitting down to a feast. It was a decadent spread, but he didn't look out and see fancy wine or food. Instead, what he saw was: 'a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig?' this noble vintage is grape juice, and the purple robes are sheep wool dyed with shellfish blood.

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Do you?