

Michael Holler

Disperation (sic)

Show me your glory, I pray.

In American culture, the four words you can expect to hear at any social gathering or mixer are, “What do you do?”. Usually the answer is simple, which is precisely *why* it's used as a social icebreaker. You can tell a lot from a person from their occupation. “I'm a student,” I'll answer. Any self respecting American can see where this conversation is going: “Oh, what do you study?”. Usually another simple answer. “Computer Science and English.” Uh-oh. It's about this time in the conversation that the conversant will become confused with me—I draw *whys* and *hows* everywhere I go—but it's not like I don't notice how disparate my two loves are. But why do I enjoy both?

Many people wrongly assume their likes and pleasures are different from all other likes, in some sort of important foundational way. Man has made a science of this fallacy. Physics majors are somehow philologically different from art history majors, and cashiers are intrinsically different from foundry workers—or so society says. Society likes to believe that people “fit” in certain places; without people “fitting”, the whole superstructure of society will collapse. We find it helpful to categorize people and concepts into different groups unconcerned with one another and dealing with altogether different questions and answers. Everybody does one thing, fits into one of these groups, and benefits society and themselves in one way. More importantly, individual satisfaction and pleasure—transcendence—is limited to which category the individual is placed under.

And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but

my face shall not be seen”

When I was born I gravitated towards books and computers. My mother would read to me nightly, tens of hardback children's books from the library just six apartments North of ours. Both my grandparents were involved with computers, and one was involved in a company started by his son (my uncle). Grandma (my father's mother) was a passionate English teacher. Both ran in the family, but the answer is not so simple. I chose not one, but two of my family's passions, decided subconsciously before I even knew what either really *were*, before I could remember.

Memory. “Remember the flag only halfway up the pole? Booboo, there are two ways to lower a flag to half-mast. One way to lower the flag to half mast is just to lower the flag. There’s another way though. You can also just raise the pole. You can raise the pole to like twice its original height. You get me? You understand what I mean, Mario?” I remember things. Things I've seen or heard. This is one of my favorite literary moments of all time, and it stays with me. Out of context it's merely an excerpt, but in context... I read *Infinite Jest* last Summer—it's Spring now—and still I remember nearly everything. There are some things that stay with you, some things your read that you never forget. This is one of mine. This scene comes after we learn about James Incandenza's suicide, and after a scene introducing newly widowed Avril, who took over James' Tennis Academy after his death and puts every breath of her life into the improvement and administration of said Academy. The time is late, and the scene is Hal and Mario's bedroom. They are her sons, and this is their analogy to describe how their mom is coping. Memory. When I first read this, I was floored. Such a beautiful way to describe the two polar-opposite ways humans have of coping with loss—a flagpole. After reading, I read again. And again. I hung on every word and projected a single syllable from my throat after the sixth read: “Wow.” We all have moments like this, I feel, about anything. I just happened to be caught by *Infinite Jest*; I found more beauty and emotion in a single paragraph than in a whole movie.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white”

One of the fantastic things about these moments is you don't have to agree with the thing you find stunning, if you maintain an open enough mind. “You’re a profoundly religious man, Mr. Roark—in your own way. I can see that in your buildings.” Ayn Rand was about as atheistic as you can get, and yet this line was the most impacting for me in the whole book. It was her philosophy, distilled into a single clause. Howard Roark is an architect, the main character in *The Fountainhead*. Roark is Rand's example of why her philosophy worked; the man worshiped not God, but his work. This is in the middle of the book, the whole first half leads hinges on this very point. It takes a certain dedication and courage to allow the first 400 pages of your novel to lead into a single moment, but Rand accomplishes this. Rand's philosophy—she calls it Objectivism—involves rational egoism, the idea that the selfishness of men and women ought to be embraced. If everyone became self-serving, Rand believed, the world would become a better place for everybody. She worshiped man and capitalism like the Pope worships God. Many people hold her philosophy as idealistic at best, satanic at worst. When you read those two sentences though, the ideas of love and hate vanish, replaced only by awe at the beauty of an argument and its presentation. Words are difficult things, and the nature of language often prevents us from getting our point across—we are always searching for the best word, it's always on the tip of our tongue, but we seldom find it. It is no surprise then, when we encounter something saying exactly what the writer wants it to in exactly the way he or she intends that we pause for a moment, reflect on its beauty. For that one fleeting moment—everything perfect, everything in order, everything in place—we forget about the outside, lost in a reverie of a beautiful mind's leavings. Our hearts care not whether we disagree, and we have a chance to pause for just a moment and *experience*. Then the moment ends.

Illustrious Odysseus, flower of Achean chivalry, and bring your ship to rest so that you may hear our voices. No seaman ever sailed his black ship past this spot without listening to the sweet tones that flow from our lips, and none that listened has not been delighted and gone on a wiser man.

Books were important, but computers were my first love. I was introduced to video games at an early age, and they fueled my passion until I realized a closer relationship with them, through programming. At first I tried to integrate these two similar pastimes to the logical conclusion of a career in game development, but as time passed I slowly grew away from games. Today my passion is in algorithms and problem solving. Learning to code was like learning how to live. Many ways to accomplish the same thing, the choices only limited by the coder's imagination. With these tools, these possibilities, man can create beauty. Put aside your fears about programming while I give you an example. Try to consider its purpose before I tell you:

```
require 'net/http'  
Net::HTTP.start( 'www.en.wikipedia.org', 80 ) do |http|  
  print( http.get( '/wiki/List_of_bagpipe_books' ).body )  
end
```

This is real working code, written in a programming language called Ruby. This is beautiful code. Read it left to right, top to bottom, like any other English text, and you'll begin to understand. To run this program, it requires the contents of `net/http`. It then starts HTTP with the Wikipedia's URL and tells it to use HTTP to ask `wikipedia.org` for the body of a certain page—in this case an enlightening article on bagpipe books—and print it out. Simple, readable, beautiful. I can tell you now, with absolute certainty, not all code is this wonderful. The feeling I got when I originally came across this was transcendent, a feeling akin to that gleaned from a good song, well written book, or perfectly executed football play. I choose to study programming for the same reason I study English. Beauty is as rare in the computer programming as

in computer science.

Conway's *Game of Life* is a complex algorithm designed to explain an complex topic presented by Von Neumann, the purview of which is not important here. What is important is this:

life←{↑1 ωV.Λ3 4=+/,¯1 0 1°.Θ¯1 0 1°.φCω}

This is the solution to the game, in one line.¹ The beauty here, as in everywhere else, is in the structure of the argument. APL is a highly-difficult-to-understand program language, and it would take multiple hours for even an experience APL programmer to understand this line in totality. But onlookers such as ourselves can appreciate its complexity. We—I think I'm safe in assuming—are perfectly fine not understanding *how* this works, but we can still feel awe while we take in the solution. It just goes to show understanding is not needed to experience transcendence.

If the light of a thousand suns were suddenly to arise in heaven—as at the dawn of a new age—that would be like the radiance of this great soul! There Arjuna saw the entire world, the whole world in all of its infinite manifestations, drawn together as one, in the body of the god of gods.

I took a class recently about ancient history. It's a discussion-based classroom where we all discuss what we read together and what it means. Several weeks ago, we read Plato, and began discussing what it means to have a religious experience. Classmates suggested that it could come in the form of song, reading, art, storytelling, even dance. Different churches, creeds, and masses exist to cater to the loves of different beauty and forms. Everybody ultimately decided these experiences come from different places for different people. I say “classmates” and “everybody” because I was not actually involved. Instead, I spent the whole class period listening, and deeply considering whether coding is a religious experience. I decided—for me at least—it is. Religious experience does not have to be limited to the church or the synagogue,

¹ “Game”, if you haven't discovered, is actually a sick joke.

the temple or the mosque. Religious experience is as you make it.

The reason people find God so powerful is the beauty and simplicity of His argument: everything is here because I created it. If you believe this—truly believe—nothing can be more powerful. The thought of the sublime organization and structure of life as created by one *being*. Why, that's falling in love with a portion of a book, a snippet of code, on a grand scale. A universal one. A non-believer is not left out. He can find the same solace in the small things, so perfect and memorable. Everybody is profoundly religious, in their own way; everyone finds their own buildings. My mom, reading book after book in blissful wonder at the small being she created; Avril Incandenza making a god of her job to cope with her husband's loss; Howard Roark with his architecture; the programmer with his code. Part of the beauty of life is how diverse our collective passions are, and across so many disparate, desperate subjects. Desperate in that all of them are searching for the same thing: to achieve transcendence, to be hypnotized by supreme beauty of simplicity. We all are connoisseurs of something, however small. And what does the connoisseur find joy in except the appreciation for a job well done, a beautiful structure and flavor, a passionate sip from the chalice of the blood of life.