

State of the David

Fall 2020

Family, Friends, Fans, Future Self,

This year has broken my heart and improved my vision.

First, I am a social butterfly who brings people together. Pre-pandemic, I convened friends in SF and NY, made new friends in Buenos Aires and Santiago, and threw our best NYE party to date in Chicago -- expressions of joy granted by the vitality that comes from intentional life changes¹. I'm in good shape, sleeping extensively, playing with 9th chords, treasuring time with parents, got a dog and a car, and for the first time in many years was at my folks' place to enjoy the short seasons for both wild strawberries and black raspberries. I have mostly shown up for my friends and family and favorite restaurants during these uncertain times; they along with therapy and the view from my apartment have helped sustain me.

I am on a political journey. The events of this year have revealed to me the degree of savagery and violence embedded in the system that I profit from and reinforce through daily participation. This has prompted a deep rethinking of the world and my place in it, and I am sincerely exploring ideas that challenge foundational aspects of my life and livelihood. This has been uncomfortable and difficult to a depressive degree, and necessary to clarify my values and live accordingly.

The category of essential worker being applied to those with relatively low pay², its attending compulsion to labor in uncertain conditions (else risk the loss of employer-tied health insurance during a global pandemic), and its implication of non-essential work, support David Graeber's observation that "in our society, there seems a general rule that, the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it."³ The government's financial response will socialize losses while allowing gains to accrue to asset owners (the real "welfare queens", myself included), sidestepping our elegant corporate bankruptcy system and solidifying the moral hazard⁴ prefigured in the Great Financial Crisis. This has driven economic disparities to absurd degrees: new mortgage applications⁵ and mortgage delinquencies⁶ are simultaneously the highest since the

¹ "Every man has two lives, and the second begins when he realizes he has just one." - Confucius

² "while some of these workers earn competitive wages, many are employed in industries that pay below the national median (\$18.58 per hour), ranging from food and beverage stores to nursing care facilities." Brookings (2020), *How to protect essential workers during COVID-19*. Accessed at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-protect-essential-workers-during-covid-19/>

³ "It's as if they are being told 'but you get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?'" , both from the essay *Bullshit Jobs* accessed at <https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/>

⁴ Bailouts leave ownership with no incentive to self-insure against adverse events: "The biggest U.S. airlines spent 96% of free cash flow last decade on buying back their own shares." Bloomberg (2020). Accessed at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-16/u-s-airlines-spent-96-of-free-cash-flow-on-buybacks-chart>

⁵ "Purchase applications increased to the highest level in over 11 years and for the ninth consecutive week. The housing market continues to experience the release of unrealized pent-up demand from earlier this spring, as well as a gradual improvement in consumer confidence" Mortgage Bankers Association (2020), *Mortgage Applications Increase in Latest MBA Weekly Survey*. Accessed at <https://www.mba.org/2020-press-releases/june/mortgage-applications-increase-in-latest-mba-weekly-survey-x264417>

⁶ "The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on some homeowners' ability to make their mortgage payments could not be more apparent. The nearly 4 percentage point jump in the delinquency rate was the biggest quarterly rise in the history of MBA's survey, ... The second

GFC; the stock market is at record highs⁷ at the same time unemployment reaches levels unseen since the Great Depression⁸; only 55% of Americans own stocks⁹.

Generally, those within the working population who are more vulnerable are more exposed. The interlocking¹⁰ injustices are difficult to apprehend, but one thread is as follows: polluters are sited in poor communities¹¹, causing those in poverty to be exposed to higher levels of, say, airborne particulate matter¹², prolonged exposure to which contributes¹³ to their higher incidence of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease¹⁴, known to increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19¹⁵. At the same time, this group is overrepresented in essential work¹⁶, in roles that carry higher risk of exposure to COVID than other workers¹⁷. This is purely a class analysis; the racial implications are dire, accompanied by additional state violence and abandonment. This creates feedback loops that whatever amount of mobility is available is apparently insufficient to fully disrupt, as shown by the well documented disparities in health outcomes. These conditions are not new -- the pandemic is accelerant on long-burning fires and we are to move past surprise.

Maddeningly, even if one accepts the narrow definition of wealth and the tragically foreshortened investment horizon required to make sense of the moral and environmental bankruptcy of our political and economic systems, we are still not optimally served by them. The federal government ruled that racial segregation depressed interstate commerce¹⁸ and economists found that "violent acts account for more than 1100 missing patents ... among African American inventors"¹⁹. We are all similarly impoverished by ongoing "state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature

quarter results also mark the highest overall delinquency rate in nine years, and a survey-high delinquency rate for FHA loans." Mortgage Bankers Association (2020), *Mortgage Delinquencies Spike in the Second Quarter of 2020*. Accessed at <https://www.mba.org/2020-press-releases/august/mortgage-delinquencies-spike-in-the-second-quarter-of-2020>

⁷ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SP500>

⁸ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/UNRATE>

⁹ Gallup (2019), *What Percentage of Americans Owns Stock*. Accessed at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/266807/percentage-americans-owns-stock.aspx>

¹⁰ We recall Iris Marion Young's birdcage metaphor

¹¹ Commission for Racial Justice (1987). *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States. A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*. United Church of Christ.

¹² "Persons in the poverty category had exposures 3.0% higher than those above the poverty line for PM2.5" Bell ML, Ebisu K. Environmental inequality in exposures to airborne particulate matter components in the United States. *Environ Health Perspect*. 2012;120(12):1699-1704. doi:10.1289/ehp.1205201

¹³ Zhao J, Li M, Wang Z, et al. Role of PM2.5 in the development and progression of COPD and its mechanisms. *Respir Res*. 2019;20(1):120. Published 2019 Jun 13. doi:10.1186/s12931-019-1081-3

¹⁴ "Both individual socioeconomic status and community poverty were associated with COPD prevalence. At the individual level, a one-unit decrease in the household income-to-poverty ratio was associated with an 8% increase in the odds of having COPD (P < 0.001)" Raju S, Keet CA, Paulin LM, et al. Rural residence and poverty are independent risk factors for COPD in the United States [published online November 2, 2018]. *Am J Respir Crit Care Med*. doi:10.1164/rccm.201807-1374OC

¹⁵ CDC, Accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html>

¹⁶ "Overall, almost one-quarter of frontline workers (23 percent) live in low income families (income below 200 percent of poverty)." Center for Economic and Policy Research (2020). *A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries*. Accessed at <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf>

¹⁷ "Nearly two-thirds of workers earning wages below the national median must be in close physical proximity to others in order to perform their jobs. By comparison, only 45% of workers earning wages above the national median must be in close physical proximity to others. Disease exposure also tends to be higher for lower-wage workers." Brookings, Op. cit.

¹⁸ *Katzenbach v. McClung*, 379 U.S. 294 (1964)

¹⁹ Cook (2013), *Violence and Economic Activity: Evidence from African American Patents, 1870 to 1940*.

death”²⁰. We have not just a distribution problem, but inefficiency; not only are we bereft²¹, we don’t know what we’ve lost.

With all this in mind, my egalitarian and libertarian principles have led me to the left-libertarian²² quadrant of the political compass. I recognize abolition of the prison industrial complex to be the logical conclusion of the thought process that led me to oppose the war on drugs²³, and am aligning myself in support of this movement. This quadrant and movement are anti-capitalist, which has created significant dissonance for me by indicting my day-to-day work and “passive” income. Even as I condemn the above, I do not imagine private wealth creation to be a zero-sum game between labor, land, and capital, necessarily exploitative or extractive.

I am influenced by a brief but deep romance with a radical hottie who moved me from the center, to my center, and left me feeling insufficient. I tried, again, to “fix [my] inner issues with a bad bitch”²⁴, but you “can’t keep running from the things you summon”²⁵ -- I need to clarify my own purpose. Romantic relationships or lack thereof continue to have an outsized effect on my mental state and inner world. I have been drawn to dynamic, independent women who are not ready, willing, and able to co-create the focused and stable partnership I seek.

I have taken important steps through dizzying freedom towards my purpose, moving from a morally sterile occupation to one with real implications and pluripotency and learning from my father, who is a brilliant technician of the present machinery. Acknowledging such progress, I continue to seek something worthwhile to do with whatever time, talent, and treasure I’ve been given. A rough vision emerges, involving environmental investing to help build useful things, speaking Spanish to expand the scope of this work, and a south-side greystone with a grand piano to host and ground me in a community. Presently, I am to root out contradictions between my life and my values, name them, and then resolve or intentionally let them stand. I will evaluate success by my curiosity and courage in doing so.

²⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism.

²¹ “Don’t you understand that the people who do this thing, who practice racism, are bereft? There is something distorted about the psyche. If you can only be tall because somebody is on their knees, then you have a serious problem ... My feeling is that white people have a very, very serious problem. And they should start thinking about what they can do about it. Take me out of it.” - Toni Morrison

²² “Liberalism—the Enlightenment philosophy, not the American left—starts with the assertion that all human beings have equal moral worth. From that stem equal rights for all. Libertarians see those principles as paramount. For left-leaning liberals, equal moral worth also brings an entitlement to the resources necessary for an individual to flourish.” - The Economist (2020), *Enlightenment liberalism is losing ground in the debate about race*.

²³ State of the David 2018

²⁴ Rihanna (2016), *Needed Me*

²⁵ Marlowe (2018), *Things We Summon*