

4-23-2014

# Barely Controlled Neuroses: An Essay Collection

Jon Van Zytveld  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects>

---

## Recommended Citation

Van Zytveld, Jon, "Barely Controlled Neuroses: An Essay Collection" (2014). *Honors Projects*. 303.  
<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/303>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Barely Controlled Neuroses: An Essay Collection

Jon Van Zytveld

Honors 499

Professor Brian Deyo

April 23, 2014

## **Depression: How to Cope with Loneliness in Modern America**

*“The so-called ‘psychotically depressed’ person who tries to kill herself doesn’t do so out of quote ‘hopelessness’ or any abstract conviction that life’s assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death seems suddenly appealing. The person in whom its invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant.*

*“The variable here is the other terror, the fire’s flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It’s not desiring the fall; it’s terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling ‘Don’t!’ and ‘Hang on!’, can understand the jump. Not really. You’d have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling.” - David Foster Wallace*

As a nation, we have never been as depressed as we are now. Depression is on the rise, particularly in young people, and the effects can be seen from the increasing prevalence of violence and suicides to the rise of huge drug conglomerates that push the chemicals that help us remain sane. Yet those who suffer from “mental illness” remain stigmatized and the depressed are ostracized, which of course only exacerbates the feelings of loneliness and depression. Drawing from personal experience, it is with this in mind that I undertook the writing of this essay. My goals were that of self-reflection and analysis, both of which may help me in the future while providing others a glimpse inside my admittedly troubled and still healing mind.

### **Distractions**

When I walk or run, I listen to music. When I drive, I turn on an audiobook. When I am idle, I binge on television, books, and crosswords, all in an attempt to keep my mind distracted. I won’t take a bite of food unless I have a television show, book, or song lined up to accompany my meal. I cling to my headphones as a scuba diver to an oxygen tank, reluctantly removing them from my ears at the start of classes and reinserting them the second I am out the door. Before I go to sleep, I force myself to watch multiple episodes of inane shows so I narcotize my restless mind and fall asleep as quickly as possible. This eliminates the contemplative state that

often precedes sleep. I am in a constant state of conversation with anyone who will talk to me, whether it be my girlfriend, my roommate – or my family – all in an attempt to not feel so alone.

My roommate and friends constantly criticize me for not being able to tear myself away from my technology and entertainment, suggesting that I am less of a person because I can't sit and enjoy silence as they do. Maybe it is because I am a weaker person or even because my demons are more powerful than theirs, but I cannot bear to sit alone and just think. Whether it is a personal choice or a personality flaw, being alone and undistracted is not something I can bear to do because I am so displeased with myself as a person, in spite of appearances. I am sure that if I gave it a try, I could persevere, but it would be so uncomfortable and unpleasant that I rarely, if ever, have tried.

Comedian Louis CK addressed this issue in an interview on the Conan O'Brien show, and his cogent analysis startled me. CK was discussing the reasons for denying his young daughters cell phones, and cited that it stops people from learning “to just be yourself and not be doing something.”

Never one to shy away from personal issues, CK identified a feeling of fear which he termed “the empty, forever empty” part of the soul, defining it as the “knowledge that it is all for nothing and you're all alone.” Though he presents this in an amusing way, and receives many laughs, there is an underlying understanding in each of us that he is right. In short, we laugh because we understand, and to laugh at something is to acknowledge it, thus rendering it powerless, or at least diffused for a time.

By filling a part of one's self with technology, entertainment, and other distractions, CK posited we are denying ourselves the ability to just exist as humans did before the advent of technology. Not only that, he said we are destroying our ability to feel the vindicating pleasures

of happiness which follow a mournful moment. In a nation where feelings are constantly devalued, it is rare to experience true personal satisfaction, which can often result from exposure to powerful emotions such as sadness. We are told to feel nothing, thus the ability to feel anything seems a reason to celebrate.

I often feel my loneliest when I am driving, and turning up music can only help so much. In order to assuage this, I have been known to text as I drive, which Louis also addresses. “People are willing to take a life and ruin their own because they don’t want to be alone for a second,” CK said, and he is correct. I often make risky decisions while walking or driving just so I do not interrupt the constant flow of entertainment to my brain, because if I do, I am afraid of what I will discover about myself. Despite what I consider a fairly cheerful and happy exterior, the inside of me is plagued with doubts and worries which buzz throughout my head and make me long for the release of sleep. The last time I tried to sit alone and just exist, I began to feel a sinking feeling of self-loathing and utter aloneness, and that is what drives me to drink.

### **Destructions**

While I have recently kicked the habit with the help of psychiatrists and medication, I have struggled with substance abuse for years because I found it dulls my mind and relieves the burden of human selfhood.

I began experimenting with the numbing effects of alcohol at the age of 19, hoping to divorce myself from the emotions that were ravaging my brain as I hit the nadir of an intensely unhealthy relationship. For whatever reason, I had been given a bottle of wine, and I downed it in large swigs, coughing and spewing red between gulps. The most disconcerting part of this was that I did not enjoy the taste, but knew if I had enough that it would give me the clarity and peace

I desired so greatly. I sat in a bath of lukewarm water for the rest of the day, wondering where I would next get my fix.

I occasionally sampled drinks at parties, but the next time I returned to bingeing was the following summer, when I acquired several liters of hard liquor from a friend who was of age. I made myself a whisky on the rocks every night as I played Xbox. The benefit to me was twofold, as I layered destruction with distraction so there would be no hint of a clear thought. This continued for months as I drank myself sick, and I often showed up to work hungover and passed out before my keyboard for minutes at a time. I did not stop until I was caught by my parents, who were more concerned than angry when I revealed my cache of bottles hidden in the bottom of a cabinet drawer in the basement. Invigorated by their show of support, I abstained from alcohol for months and was relatively happy until the “forever empty” void started crawling back in.

At that point, I was 21, so my habit was complemented by an ability to purchase whatever flavor, volume, or type of alcohol I desired to obliterate my self-consciousness with on any given night, and it soon proved to be a heavy burden. I loaded up with several bottles of rum and vodka and took to mixing them in with other drinks so I wouldn't gag at the taste. I slammed back my drinks to expedite my buzz and usually settled into a nauseous, disturbed sleep. My mind is incredibly busy and I am quite given to being neurotic and self-conscious, so to remove my overactive brain from the equation greatly appealed to me, and I used alcohol for this purpose on more than a few occasions. It allowed me to step outside of my self-loathing and worries and simply experience life without the difficulties that normally plagued me. Of course, I would often become sick and lethargic, but this always seemed a small price to pay for peace of mind.

This most recent experience with destructive chemicals was certainly the most devastating, at least partially because of my introduction to cough syrup or robatussin. I had long been familiar with the narcotizing power of the product, but as I grew tired of alcohol, I sought something with a similar effect that would be easily consumable. I picked up a bottle from Meijer and my heart pounded as it set off a buzzer after I rang the item up at the self-scan. An employee came by to check that I was of age and gave me a quizzical look before clearing me for the sale. Despite the legality of the purchase, I felt so guilty about buying the medicine that I left it unheeded on my shelf for weeks until I could no longer fight the compulsion to use it.

Following a particularly lonely day at school, I popped the cap off of the bottle and poured myself two shots of the thick, viscous, cherry-flavored glop. When it did not immediately slow my thoughts, I went on a walk, frustrated and spitting the remnants of the blood red syrup into the snow. After a few blocks, I developed a throbbing headache and had to return home for a drug-addled, terrifying nap. I awoke sweating and afraid, resolving to never use syrup again, although I broke this rule several weeks later when the need to stupefy myself overpowered me.

## **Suicide**

The first time I can recall being depressed was at the age of 15, and as with many teenagers, the reason it manifested was due to social angst and unrequited affections at school. For whatever reason, I had determined myself to be inherently flawed, unlikable, and unloveable. My friends and family members were all at a loss with how to overcome my negative self-image. As a melodramatic teen, I impetuously took to acting out and essentially screaming out for attention, and I often got the intended result from friends and family. This assuaged my feelings of isolation, but did not halt them.

When I was recently asked whether I had ever attempted suicide, I had no idea how to respond. On one hand, I have done risky things that could certainly be deemed suicidal. Last year, I slept with a knife under my pillow in case I woke up with the resolve to finally do the deed, but I never went through with it. I bought razor blades and kept them near my bed for the same purpose, but never used them. I cannot explain why, but having an escape method nearby comforted me, even though it was a particularly depressing idea. For that reason, I would feel compelled to answer no, because I have never made an honest attempt, like jumping off of a building or overdosing on prescription pills. But to deny the fact that I've had suicidal thoughts or contemplated suicidal actions would be dishonest.

While the prozac has gradually done away with my suicidal thoughts, they used to be both prevalent and fairly constant. For the most part, the thoughts were driven by a feeling of complete inferiority in relation to everyone else, mixed with a sense of identity crisis. I often feel as if I have missed out on something intrinsically linked to the human experience, something essential to take in, namely fun, friends, and adventures. For this reason, I feel as if continuing to live is a waste of time because I have already ruined this opportunity and I can't go back. Better to give up and stop fighting for a better life, I thought. This was combined with a sense of loneliness and self-loathing that was a constant throbbing pressure in my head, from which I sought to escape through death.

Similarly, I constructed a romantic image of death, as many suicidal people do. I would spend hours at a time thinking about who would miss me and who would not, and about how life would be different without me. However, this was often counterproductive, as I began to think about the ways in which life would continue undisturbed despite me being gone. In either case, I amused myself while thinking about tearful eulogies and how I would take on a second life after

my passing. People would wish they had known me better, vindicating my personality and hoping the best for me in whatever afterlife they chose to ascribe to. This was deeply narcissistic, but I needed to feel cared for, even if in a purely imaginary way.

After medication, I rarely have such urges, although I have identified several self-destructive tendencies that remain. When I drink casually or socially, I still long for the feeling that compulsive drinking brings to me, the looseness and carefree feeling of one unburdened myself from the labors of selfhood. I am able to halt before this becomes a reality, but I still find it somewhat alarming that I am not completely able to separate myself from these urges. Similarly, I often engage in risky behaviors, like driving too fast on the highway, because I still don't place a high enough value on my own life. I think the world of others and want the best for everyone, but I am regretfully unable to extend this goodwill towards myself. In any case, I have come a long way since the early days of my depression, and I am thankful for whatever small amount of progress I can claim as my own at this time in my life.

### **Depression in the Cultural Climate**

In the United States, those that are mentally unwell are stigmatized or otherwise ostracized in ways that those suffering from physical injuries are not. Because the illness cannot be seen, or even understood, it is devalued and construed as more of a personal problem or weakness, rather than a malady. This creates a vicious circle because one cannot even take comfort in how one is feeling because their status is constantly devalued and shrugged off by the majority of the population.

Common advice to depressed people includes such sage wisdom as "cheer up" or "everything will be ok," which is not a helpful thing to hear. Many reason that if one is depressed, it is something one can snap out of as easy as a bad mood, but this is far from the

truth. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes depression.

Depression is not lessened by sheer force of will, but rather by a combination of compassion, community, and in many cases, medication. It is not something that can be fixed on its own, try as one might. While the problem is mental, the solution is not.

Our culture seems to place value on rather shallow notions of happiness, most of which revolve around superficialities and consumerism. We fear intimacy, so we shun that which is not easily resolved. Dealing with depression takes a great deal of self-reflection and is certainly not fixed overnight. In fact, I am not sure it can ever be fixed, but rather addressed to the point where it can be dealt with at best, or at worst, ignored. I have found that people become uncomfortable when I mention my depression, as if it was something embarrassing or overly personal. One does not speak to others about depression without feeling a large measure of anxiety. I generally have taken to hiding my feelings so they are not devalued and because I dislike making others feel awkward. I do not want to be lumped in the group with the “problem people,” although I certainly belong within those hallowed ranks. Some of the best men and women in history have dealt with depression, but this does not lessen its individual burden on me.

The general consensus is that young people are consistently being diagnosed with depression more frequently than before. To some extent, this must be related to the way we live, particularly in modern America. Feelings and personal information are rarely shared, particularly by men, who are expected to be stoic and tough, despite the fact that we feel emotions just like anyone else. This is especially true of sad or otherwise melancholy feelings, which are not discussed in any context by either gender, as we seem to fear looking weak in front of each other. Instead, we share unnecessary trivialities on Facebook, hoping to slow the approach of the “forever empty.” If we can reach out to even one person, we can fight the feelings of social

alienation that likely engender depression in the first place, even if it is just delaying the inevitable loneliness inherent in being a human being.

In modern America, we set goals we can never reach, and this contributes to our depression in no small way. We pursue dreams that were not created with the potential for fulfillment. As admirable a goal as it is, it is impossible for us to be as happy and complete as we believe we can be. As Americans, we dream of greater and grander things, losing interest in possessions as soon as they become ours. Old technology is phased out daily, and functional, useful models become shunned or are discarded, simply because they are not “the newest one.” This demonstrates that it is the wanting that is inherent in us, and once that is satisfied, we find a way to want something else, forgetting everything that came before. With a little introspection, one can see that we are searching for something to fill the hole in us that can never be filled, the emptiness that is so fundamentally human that we all feel it, by degrees.

At the same time, we have begun to engage in largely emotionless digital relationships, at the expense of compassion and genuine feeling. Physical interactions are draining and emotions are stigmatized, so we retreat into the internet in an attempt to withdraw to a safe distance from the world. Instead of atoning with the source of the emptiness, we can send out another Facebook message to all of our friends, and often receive instant gratification and the validation that comes with online relationships. The illusion appears that we are always here for each other, but the truth of the matter is that we never are. In a world where friends, real or imagined, are a click away, what cause is there for getting out and meeting others? We economize our time and maximize the amount of people we can reach out to online so that we can feel vindicated and once more stave off the utter distress that comes with being human.

There is the possibility that depression has always existed in as many people as it does now, but self-reporting was stigmatized so much that older generations labored under depression in silence. If this is the case, depression may be becoming more acceptable, which is certainly good news. As cliché as it may seem, widespread acceptance and understanding would be beneficial to any depressed individual because it helps to dull the acute sense of loneliness that we all feel in our various ways.

### **Depression Today**

After many months of debating with friends and family, I agreed to talk to a therapist and begin taking medication. This was despite my qualms, which were many. For one thing, I didn't like the idea of talking to someone about my problems because I don't like sharing my problems with others. To do so is to spread my issues around, and I would prefer to suffer in silence. I realize this is flawed logic, but it has always been difficult for me to share personal things with others.

Similarly, I was greatly distrustful of medication, and it took much persuasion to make me consent. In my mind, chemicals being introduced into the body cannot help but change the natural rhythms therein, and I was worried about the side effects. Would I stop being myself? Would I become a zombie, devoid of both highs and lows?

These thoughts were deeply concerning to me, so I went into the therapist's office with many apprehensions but ended up having my worries alleviated. The medical practitioner at the GVSU counseling office was extremely compassionate and made me feel as if my problems were valid. She seemed very concerned about my health, which was something I was unprepared for. Similarly, while I initially felt an odd buzzing in my head when I first took prozac, it gradually faded away. It has become a daily routine to take my pill upon waking up, though I

don't feel any different afterwards. I was told that it would rework my brain's chemistry, and that is likely the case. I no longer feel the abysmal lows I had become accustomed to, and yet I can still feel happiness. Even though I may get sad, I rarely hit the depressing emptiness I used to feel. In short, the "forever empty" is still there, but I don't have to worry about it rearing its head on a daily basis. It feels as if a mental beast has been kept at bay, and I hope I never run out of medication, lest it be let loose anew.

While depression has long been something I have struggled with, the constant ebb and flow of work and school have exacerbated my feelings to the point where I don't eat, sleep, or think the way I should. Simply put, I just don't have the time to be depressed. Sadness is an indulgence I do not have time for, and if I barely find the time to eat each day, it is an understatement to say that I rarely find the time to indulge my depression. I have compartmentalized my feelings because if I indulge each and every one, I will never finish anything. Combined with the medication and my increased network of care, I have reduced my depression to a reasonable amount.

As my time in college comes to an end, I realize I will have much more time on my hands, and while I think it might be a positive thing for me, I cannot help but think it might also be detrimental to my health. My mind would certainly benefit from a prolonged break and extra sleep, but I am somewhat nervous about what might happen if I allow myself to be idle. My fear is that, with more time, I will have more time to be alone and think, giving the "forever empty" feeling more time to set in. It is in this way that my busy schedule of school and work has been a great burden, but perhaps also a gift.

### **Social Media: How the Things That Bring Us Together Actually Separate Us**

*“It is my firm belief, and I say this as a dictum, that all these tools now at our disposal, these things part of of this explosive evolution of means of communication, mean we are now heading for an era of solitude. Along with this rapid growth of forms of communication at our disposal— be it fax, phone, email, internet or whatever— human solitude will increase in direct proportion.” - Werner Herzog*

While many have made the case that social media has united us all through the World Wide Web, I have found the opposite to be true. Rather than bringing us together, it seems that social media actually drives us apart; but as it does so, it appears to do the former, an insidious prospect at best. Because of social media, we communicate often, but not well; share everything about ourselves while paradoxically sharing nothing at all.

Social media powerhouses such as Facebook and Twitter inadvertently promote and reinforce a superficial culture in which everyone knows everything about everyone, and yet so few interactions seem to be meaningful. I would like to argue social media has a negative effect on communication in modern society, as evinced by trends easily visible across the web.

#### ***Facebook***

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has spread across the globe, connecting friends and acquaintances through the mutual sharing of information, pictures, and links. With social media, even friends on opposite ends of the earth can remain in each other’s lives due to the simple interface and the interactivity of the program. However, it must be said that in making everything shareable, the impulse is to share more information, but not necessarily of a high quality.

The disturbing trend can be seen across the nation. Lines are particularly indicative of the change in our culture; one has but to look at a queue of people waiting for service at an on-campus dining facility to be struck by the prevalence of people on phones. Aside from texting, browsing the web, or listening to music, it seems to me that Facebook is most often the cause of

distraction. The average college student appears to wait for less than a minute before seeking entertainment on the mobile Facebook app, eliminating conversation and trivializing interpersonal interactions.

However, this is done at a cost, as it has reduced the capacity for people to imagine just as it has limited our time for therapeutic introspection. Our passive dependence on technology and social media has created a world where we ignore the beauties of the things around us as we settle down to read the latest celebrity gossip or video chat with a friend across the room. We miss things that are going on around us and do not take the time to form meaningful relationships. Skills that were once invaluable and hard-wired into humans, such as imagination, social observation, or even the capacity for engaging physical conversation, have now been reduced to their basal components. What we strive for on social media isn't an extension or innovation of relationships, as it markets, but rather a return to that which we have lost, namely the ability to truly engage with each other on any meaningful level.

In saying so, I do not mean to imply that I am somehow above this. I am one of the most afflicted by mobile Facebook, and I often take every opportunity to check my feed to see if anyone has interacted with me online, even as people pass me by in real life. I primarily use the technology as a barrier to avoid boredom or awkwardness. If I feel a wait time is too long, my phone comes out as I become eager to do something other than stand. Being idle gives me time to think about the injustices and hardships of life, and as a highly optimistic person, despite my depression, I find it preferable to don the veneer of happiness. It certainly helps me sleep at night.

A friend once remarked that I am "tethered" to my phone, as I rarely set it down, regardless of setting. If by some miracle I lose track of my phone, I go into panic mode,

overturning furniture and digging through pockets to find the elusive item. If I discover my battery is low, I frantically scour the room for a plug and pull out one of my four chargers, which I keep in my school bag, my work bag, my car, and my bedroom. To call me a Facebook junkie would be an understatement. I am addicted to my news feed, where I can interact with others by viewing the updates they provide about their lives, even though this tends to alienate me from the pleasures of more immediate social experience. To be cut off from the world is to be forced to retreat into myself, and this has always been met with disastrous results.

By their very nature, status updates encourage users to share small details of their lives with their friends, and in sharing everything, we somehow seem to share nothing. It is indisputable that we now have more access to each other and every detail of our lives, but with this information and the increasingly repetitive photos of food, babies, and selfies, how is one to sift through to find the meaningful or relevant content? In this way, by sharing so much of ourselves, we devalue that which is important: the actually meaningful knowledge, as well as physical interaction itself.

The problem can be seen with serious statuses, or those attempting to impart something important. I have often seen statuses mourning the loss of a loved one to cancer or even something so trivial as being stood up for a date. In such events, how is one to respond? It is impossible to comfort someone through Facebook, as the only options are to “like” the status or to comment on it. Because “liking” something has the connotation of approval, it is often uncomfortable to “like” something tragic. Similarly, comments can only say so much, and though they may help in preventing us from feeling alone, a comment from a friend can never mean as much as an actual visit or having a shoulder to cry on. Despite our reliance on

technology, nothing will ever replace the physical contact and compassion we try to replicate via text on social media.

Similarly, the very nature of sharing major news through social media distances us from each other in ways that may not be immediately apparent. It seems to me that any news shared between friends exclusively through social media devalues not only the news being communicated, but also the friendship itself. When we are only engaged in the lives of friends in a digital setting, can we in fact call ourselves friends at all? The news still carries weight when delivered on Facebook, but by rights the information cannot be as meaningful when spread in such a trivial way. When a news feed can contain a “LOL”-filled rant next to a status about the death of a spouse or friend, everything becomes less meaningful as we struggle to differentiate between the two.

In many cases, the people with which we associate and “friend” on Facebook is rarely indicative of people with whom we would like to spend time. As I write this, I have 234 friends on Facebook, and while this is a far cry from the highest amount of friends people can have, and probably lower than average, I have always wondered why I have so many. A quarter of my friends are old classmates with whom I have not spoken in years. Another quarter is devoted to acquaintances with whom I share mutual friends; in short, there is no reason for us not to be friends, but it is rare if we contact each other in any way. The final half of my friends are those that I wish to keep in contact with, only a few of which I see on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis.

With such an extensive list of friends with such a tenuous grasp on my day-to-day life, it is difficult to place high value on that which is produced via Facebook. In fact, I would argue that social media gives the appearance of sharing, but very little of worth can be produced.

Simply put, Facebook is changing the way we communicate, and certainly not for the better. Gone are the days of sifting through old letters from a family member or former lover. It strikes me as somewhat improbable that we will one day go back through the plethora of inane and trivial posts in order to find ones that are meaningful to us. In the case that we do, what happens when content is deleted, filed away, or not similarly stored? In an age where everything is digital, it has become increasingly difficult to hold on to communication that matters.

With all these social problems inherent in the very structure of Facebook, why is it, then, that we rely on it to such a great extent? Perhaps the best part of the physical experience is not only taking in others as they are, but also allowing ourselves to be taken in. There is an openness to personal interaction, a cathartic vulnerability that can often be unnerving and which drives us to the internet, where we can hide behind a keyboard and screen. But even as it frees us, Facebook also limits us, making us construct ideal images of who we are while hiding the supposedly negative qualities that make us human. Breaking free to impart who we are in a deeper sense than social media allows requires a measure of courage and fluency which is not easily acquired, but nothing could be more important. Intimacy with others can be achieved only through intimacy with one's very self, one of the only things that cannot be found online.

### *Twitter*

Twitter, to me, has always had its strengths as an aggregator of content, allowing news outlets to share lengthy stories to as wide an audience as possible, often using a catchy blurb to draw readers in. In this way, it allows us to curate knowledge and information that is of worth, making it far more useful and meaningful than what is thought of as traditional social media. While its ability to spread news and information readily, and even virally, is second to none, it has always been my opinion that little of worth can be imparted in Twitter's 142 characters or

fewer. I would go as far as to say that nothing of lasting or sustained worth can be offered by tweets because of the medium.

Just as with all social media, it is as limiting as it is freeing. Writing in snippets of text, which appear in reverse chronological order, is no way make an argument, tell a story, or do anything that isn't based on consumption of entertainment or news. With Twitter, headlines stand out in bold. "Man escapes forest, fends off bear attacks" appeals to us superficially, but what of introspective, contemplative stories? As Twitter users, we are searching for our latest infusion of sensationalist tripe, which means genuinely meaningful content is left unnoticed. When we find it, we share it with all of our friends, which contributes towards the viral spreading of worthless content. In the world of Twitter, information is a popularity contest, and if information isn't easily consumable, it is discarded.

At the behest of a journalism professor, I joined the Twitter community in the fall of 2011, and I was immediately taken with the amount of information that was available to me in the easily readable, and even palatable, forum. The website cuts out all of the extraneous details, dumbing down information to summaries of a sentence or two. While this is beneficial in that we can now experience more news than ever before, and at vastly accelerated rates, personal touches and intricacies are often cut out. This not only reduces the quality of the information, but also the connection we feel to stories, and by extension, to each other.

As a result, I immediately subscribed to the Twitter feeds of all the major news outlets, among these The New York Times, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, and so on. I particularly liked getting updates on breaking news stories, although the deluge of news was somewhat alarming and difficult to assimilate. Soon, I was able to follow the major news stories of the day, which as I

recall included the events surrounding Penn State's Jerry Sandusky and his alleged acts of misconduct with children. Through Twitter, I kept abreast of the news, and I enjoyed this greatly.

However, in noting this, it is important to mention that the content of value is not based on Twitter, but rather on the links provided on the website. In short, Twitter serves primarily as an aggregator, and would be essentially worthless if not for its value in this area. I agree that I have been exposed to many informative and fascinating stories because of Twitter, but as I do so I cannot condone the medium itself. I feel confined by the character limits and often long for content of substance, something that is notably lacking on the website.

The other primary function of Twitter, in my opinion, is comedy and other genre-expanding areas. Because of the somewhat revolutionary nature of the Twitter community and the new ability to virally share amusing anecdotes, wordplay, and even inter-personal banter, many have pushed the borders of comedy. Notable entertainers such as Stephen Colbert, Jim Gaffigan, and Sarah Silverman have become especially prolific in the new medium, amusing their followers with daily, easily consumable jokes that have pushed the boundaries of Twitter, in many cases. But while these prove to be entertaining, it is not content of significant value. Tweets continue to scroll downward, becoming lost in the thousands of posts. By the very nature of Twitter, meaningful content could be pushed down the page by breaking news items of tenuous worth and may be difficult to rediscover.

For these reasons, it is clear that Twitter does have some measure of value, but only with regard to particular areas of subject matter, and even then only if used correctly. However, in and of itself, Twitter cannot produce anything of true value and, like the other avenues of social media, isolates us even as it seems to bring us together. Though we may share a funny story or pictures with our thousands of followers, we cannot find a decent human interaction anywhere.

### *The Appeal of Social Media*

Given the detrimental effects I have noted as being inherent in the usage of social media, we must ask ourselves what the appeal of communication like this may be. I would argue that, as a culture, we are moving away from sharing a few deep, meaningful messages in exchange for the release of many superficial ones. It is clear that both are cathartic, and I believe that the volume of inane messages may be an attempt to compensate for the lack of meaningful content. In order to feel close to others without risking sharing too much, we have moved towards communication that says a whole lot of nothing, and often.

Communicating via social media functions as a barrier that can make us seem more informed, better put-together, and even more attractive. It is clear that physical interactions can often be exhausting as we search for a response on the spot during a conversation. Depending on the conversational partner, one may experience a fair amount of stress while talking, which can weigh on one cognitively. It takes time and effort to develop talking points and opinions, and this can be particularly disarming when confronted with conversation. At the same time, we must pay close attention to our physical reaction, lest we seem disinterested or over-interested. It is immediately apparent whether someone cares or not because of often inadvertent nonverbal communication. This is not so on social media, where we can hide behind a screen, posting only what we desire after carefully considering our message and even researching the subject matter.

Similarly, the persona that we construct via social media is, in many cases, not indicative of our true personality. The personas are often archetypal, relying on stereotypes of how we desire to be perceived, rather than who we actually are. This begs one to ask whether we truly know each other at all, or if we are becoming increasingly enamored with what we perceive to be the truth about a person's life, qualities, and attributes. When one can pick and choose what is

posted and what is withheld, there is a danger that we share only the positive or admirable aspects of ourselves. In many cases, we may even share attributes we do not actually embody.

I know that, in my experience, I post only information that makes me seem credible and professional because everything I say online reflects on my place of work. Because I work in a high-profile job, it is key that all of my content is appropriate and presents me in a positive light. But in doing so, I have neglected aspects of myself that are important to me and refrained from positing views that are polarizing. In sharing only that which is palatable, perhaps I have lost the ability to freely communicate my views and opinions.

It could be argued that, in constructing this social media persona, we often become that which we pretend to be. The danger in this is that, looking back, we may wonder whether we took the time to truly cultivate an actual personality, complete with unique likes, dislikes, interests, and opinions. Rather, we may discover that the totality of our being is that which social media facilitates, namely trivialities, superficialities, and pop culture references.

While the prevalence of social media interactions is not strictly limited to one age group or another, it is clear that younger audiences are increasingly turning to Facebook or Twitter in order to interact with each other. I would argue that this is due less to a generational difference and more about the prevalence of technology available at early developmental states, which make it easy and quick to develop a social media presence.

### ***Conclusions***

While social media is far from worthless, and actually has many positive effects and qualities, it can also be seen as detrimental to our communication and our ability to physically interact with each other. As we grow closer together online, our interpersonal relationships in

real life suffer, and we may see less of each other as time passes. When people are just a mouse click away, why should we labor to transport ourselves to another home, state, or even country?

It is in facilitating this ease of communication that social media like Facebook and Twitter make it simple for us to share nothing of worth, but in great numbers, devaluing both that which is being shared, and those with whom it is being passed along. In our desire to be liked, we have constructed identities that show off our best qualities, even those we do not possess. It is in this way that we have been hollowed out, become utterly conventional, changed everything about ourselves so as to seem appealing to strangers a thousand miles away.

## Consumerism, Humanity in Travel

*“We no longer live life. We consume it.” - Vicki Robin*

**03/02/2014/ 0800h**

As I stand in line at the Southwest Airlines check-in counter, I witness the first of what I am sure will be many acts of anger as a family disputes an unforeseen charge with the representative. A young woman holding a child yells openly at the representative, who struggles to maintain what I have heard described as the “rictus of commerce,” an obsequious grin displayed to affect the mistaken notion that the customer is always right.

“This is ridiculous,” the woman states, enunciating each word clearly. “400 dollars for a plane ticket for a kid?”

The representative starts to speak, but is cut off by an older woman, ostensibly the grandmother of the child, which hangs limply, eyes glazed, on the hip of her elder progenitor.

“And she ain’t even sitting in the seat!” the grandmother screeches.

“Well now she has one,” the representative says, seemingly inches away from losing her cool.

“But she ain’t even going to sit in the seat,” the mother echoes.

The representative apologizes and makes some minor concession to allay the group’s anger. Pacified, at least for the time being, the women stalk away, indignation displayed on all but the child’s face.

I approach the counter and make an attempt at exceptional friendliness, even by my standards, in order to make up for the previous customers. She seems appreciative, albeit understandably shell-shocked by the gross display of aggressive consumerism, and I file her apathy away as a conditioned response.

**03/02/2014/ 0830h**

The line for security screening wraps up a hallway, snaking around the bend and out of sight. I mentally thank myself for leaving my cumbersome jacket in the car prior to departure as I settle in to my place in the queue, behind a group of high school girls eagerly chatting about their trip.

A middle-aged man with a salt and pepper beard follows me in the line with his wife, and he seems immediately displeased as he anticipates a long wait. I watch him saunter up and down the line, likely trying to find a more expedient manner of travel. Defeated, he returns to his place behind me, bickering with his wife, who has the sense to ignore him.

I insert my earbuds and drown out their words with music, played quietly so I can hear any pressing announcements. The overhead speakers echo with the familiar warnings against leaving your luggage unattended or transporting a package for someone you do not know. I tap my fingers on my thigh to the beat of my music, but quickly stop after I accidentally make eye contact with a security guard. I do not want to seem suspicious; I do not want to seem overeager. To do so would result in increased scrutiny, and I do not want to give the guards a reason to stop me. I am on a tight schedule, and a strip search was not factored into my plans for the day.

I advance slowly through the line, following a set of erected barriers meant to institute order but largely failing in this goal, the people less a line and more a roiling crowd forced into ramshackle formation. Despite our close proximity, the line appears to be an exercise in avoiding eye contact with strangers. Our gazes are averted either downward or out the window at the tarmac. We see, but we avoid seeing each other in order to obviate the burden of conversation or the uncomfortable feeling of being surrounded by strangers.

One sparsely-populated, quickly-moving line is designated for the handicapped and infirm, and I see several customers glaring enviously at the man in the wheelchair, the elderly woman with the seeing eye dog, the man on aluminum crutches; disability, of course, being vastly preferable to waiting more than 10 minutes in line.

**03/02/2014/ 0900h**

I eventually arrive at the security checkpoint, and a tiny brunette woman cross references my face with my driver's license.

"Different haircut, same face," she says, stamping my boarding pass with her seal.

I smile and wait until instructed to advance to the conveyer belt of belongings. Here, I remove my belt and shoes, placing them carefully in a bin. My pockets are checked thrice in order to eliminate any accidental deception and I remove my laptop from my bag and place it in its own bin, as requested. I begin to remove my wristwatch, but a chubby guard tells me I can keep it on. I nod fiercely in thanks and walk to the scanner.

A line of people waits on sets of yellow foot prints, waiting for their turn to be violated. When it comes to me, I enter the chamber, turn right and face the wall, placing my hands in the air in the instructed way, which seems to say "you caught me!" A revolving scanner circles me and determines me to be harmless as I exit the machine.

As always, I struggle to quickly compose myself, putting on shoes, belt, and returning the items to my bag. In their infinite wisdom, the airport administration did not see fit to provide a single bench for customer use, so I hop around on one foot, attempting to put my shoes on while passengers stream by on either side of me. As they pass, they occasionally jostle me and send irate glances my way, vindicating my view of the average American consumer, who will readily sacrifice compassion for the relative comforts of expediency.

In my haste, I pull my shoelace too hard and it snaps. One might chalk it up to shoddy material, but I prefer to think that I was simply too strong for the laces, which is more flattering. I straighten up, tucking the severed lace into my shoe and nervously glancing around to make sure my mishap went unnoticed.

**03/02/2014/ 0950h**

I find myself sitting adjacent to a trendy older woman with dark hair and a tentative smile. We exchange pleasantries and I eventually return to my book, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. I find myself inspired in no small way, though distracted by the whining of a nearby baby.

One has to admire parents' commitment to traveling, as I have yet to take a flight that did not include a crying child to the point that I am beginning to consider it some kind of marketing ploy.

"For your convenience," the advertisement would read, "children have been supplied in order to prevent against a more peaceful sleep that may cause you to miss a connecting flight. Thank you for Flying SouthWest Airlines."

I settle back in my seat as we begin to taxi towards the end of the runway, and I attempt to feel the exact moment we enter the air, but find myself unable as ever to do so. As we rise, I look down at the cars, which patriotically are all red, white, or blue, aside from one bright yellow SUV.

**03/02/2014/ 1100h**

During my layover in Baltimore, I attend to my primary needs, namely food and drink. I browse the extensive choices for restaurants and very nearly settle on a fresh market but think better of it when I notice the woman from my row has approached the counter there. Neurotic as

it is, I can't bring myself to go to the same restaurant because she might consider I had followed her.

I buy an individually wrapped ham and Swiss sandwich and a strawberry parfait from a woman with multiple crude, elegiac tattoos on her forearms. Despite her appearance, she is quite friendly, although the food is grossly overpriced. When she notices me cringing visibly at the cost of my purchase, and offers a reassuring smile. It is possible she is intent on making the sale, though I prefer to think she understands my discomfort, so I pay my bill and walk on, thinking about the price of my skimpy lunch. Along with theme parks and other areas catering to largely captive audiences, airports seem to gouge the customer for every cent, knowing the value of a quick meal to a mobile populace. It is a decidedly smart business practice, but as is often the case, the profits are made at the expense of common decency.

I find a sequestered seat alone in the concourse near my gate and sit down to eat my meager meal. The sandwich is of the same quality as all airport food, the lettuce soggy, the tomato anemic. The parfait is subsequently devoured and I walk on to find something else to satiate my bizarrely insatiable appetite.

At a Jamba Juice near the A concourse, I purchase a protein smoothie from a large, terse woman comically named Juliet. I drink as I walk leisurely to my gate, knowing the two-hour wait would more than allow for my pace.

At the terminal, an elderly man seated near me stares at my new shoes and compliments them.

“What brand are those,” he asks me. “They remind me of how they used to make them.”

I neither know the brand nor understand what he means, but I can take a compliment so I agree with him fervently and thank him as I board the plane.

**03/02/2014/ 1250h**

I am seated next to a studious-looking man with rimless glasses and a plaid shirt, red criss-crossing with blue, green, and yellow. In my head, I name him Robert, but not Bob, because the way he holds his neck conveys a worldly elegance, and he would likely find the nickname demeaning. He eyes me with circumspection and strikes up a conversation with the woman to his left.

When the stewardess comes around for drink orders, Robert-Not-Bob demands a Sprite and settles in for a nap. I order an orange juice and man ahead of me orders a Budweiser, his choice confusing me to no end. I'm a craft beer snob, and I can hardly imagine drinking such plebian swill were it the only beverage provided, let alone requesting one on an airline at additional expense.

Robert-Not-Bob is drowsing when his drinks and snacks arrive and is subsequently deprived of the airline's largess. I silently mourn his loss and sip my orange juice thoughtfully.

**03/02/2014/ 2100h**

Upon arrival, I get dinner with my family on the outside deck of the Phillipi Creek Oyster Bar. My uncle complains about the cold and we are moved inside, under a cold air duct. After an additional move to solve this new temperature crisis, I can see the smoke streaming out of our waitress' ears. We eat alligator, grouper, and various sea mollusks, but our tip is surely not good enough to indemnify our boorish behavior.

**03/04/2014/ 2000h**

I am taken out by my aunt Heloise and cousin Ian for my first-ever round of golf at the Sun Coast Golf Center, under bright spotlights and a heavy wind. We purchase several balls,

three cans of Michelob Ultra, and steal additional balls from the driving range, ignoring the signs that warn explicitly against doing so.

I miss 90 percent of my swings on the first three holes and chug my beer for the dual purposes of eliminating the vile, watery brew and appearing nonchalant. I dispose of the can in a garbage can and silently mourn the absence of a recycling bin. I like the idea of my waste being repurposed into something useful; a trendy notion, of late, and I fume at being forced to contribute to what I perceive as the degradation of the ecosystem. I consider stuffing the empty can in my pocket, but that would be uncomfortable and might throw off my swing. Like others, I will participate in recycling only when it serves my convenience.

My performance improves noticeably, though not drastically, under the tutelage of my aunt. I make 3 pars on par-3 holes and lose only three balls to sand and water traps.

**03/04/2014/ 2100h**

Upon arrival at Marina Jack, a pier-side bar in downtown Sarasota, Heloise discovers she has lost an undisclosed amount of cash and insists upon returning to the golf course. After a half hour of searching with flashlights in the dark with the assistance of a kind employee, she retrieves two 100 dollar bills from the greens near hole 3. They were miraculously not blown away by the forceful wind, and I celebrate with a rum punch.

**03/05/2014/ 0800h - 2000h**

I nap and attempt to recover from the burns that cover my forearms, neck, and face. I again regret my personal boycott of all things sun-protectant, but the decision is mine. I choose to tan – which is to say, fry.

**03/06/2014/ 1300h**

I travel to Sarasota Jungle Gardens with my grandparents and aunt, where a woman wraps a python around her neck for children to touch. I turn down her generous offer and stay a considerable length away.

I feed a flock of flamingos from my palm, waiting patiently for them as they periodically stand upright in unison, squawking at some unforeseen threat in the tree line. I find myself amused by the way they scoop at the feed in my hand with the sides of their beaks in order to maximize food intake and I envy their economy.

We are made to enter and exit through the gift shop, paying a great deal for the honor of bringing home mass-produced knickknacks.

**03/06/2014/ 1500h**

At Le Ahns Vietnamese Restaurant, I order an eel with mixed vegetables in curry, underestimating the authenticity of the food, which emerges with spine intact. I sever the bone and eat around the ribs, which I leave in a small dish. I find the seasoning quite delicious, but picking spine from between my teeth takes a toll on my appetite and I am forced to admit defeat prior to finishing the dish.

**03/07/2014/ 2000h**

Ian requests we go see a new action movie and I oblige, mentally committing to getting suitably drunk before the show in order to bear it. However, despite drinking an overpriced Jager Bomb and two Long Island Iced Teas, I find myself only slightly buzzed and silently curse my unintentional sobriety.

The movie is as mind-numbing as expected, and I fell asleep during several pivotal battle scenes, awaking to find the violence by some turn of events renewed. Despite my reservations, I

have to admire the artistry of the gore as blood shoots out in orgasmic spurts, draining villains and heroes alike at a disturbing rate. There is a beauty in the barbarity that must be respected.

**03/08/2014/ 1800h**

On the return flight, a man gives up his seat in my row so a middle aged couple can sit together. It is a small gesture, but among the kindest acts I've yet seen on an airline. I soon learn the woman is Laurie and the man is Mark. They offer me a plastic bag filled of jumbo-sized candy bars, but I decline.

As we take off, I bid Florida farewell and watch the cars shrink, again red, white, and blue, except for a yellow taxi.

**03/08/2014/ 2000h**

The pilot announces our approach to Michigan and I look up from my book and turn off the overhead light to get a better look outside. Below me, the Great Lakes are iced over and seem to glow iridescently from below. It is by the snowdrifts and the cold as I exit the plane that I know I am home.

### **My Time in Journalism**

*“If a person is not talented enough to be a novelist, not smart enough to be a lawyer, and his hands are too shaky to perform operations, he becomes a journalist.” - Norman Mailer*

Because of my lack of formal training and relative youth compared to the rest of my colleagues, I have always considered myself something of an interloper in the field of journalism. The convoluted way in which I found myself here is one I rarely spend a lot of time considering, but when I do, it seems I am lucky to have any job, let alone the one which I essentially stumbled upon by accident. When I tell people how I acquired my current position at the Grand Rapids Press, I tend to get lost in the improbable details, and I often find myself doubting my right to my job.

For the entirety of my first year of college, I remained undeclared with regard to a major due to the stigma attached my ideal degree, namely English. I have always enjoyed writing and reading, and having few other marketable skills, I made the choice to pursue a degree in that department. I felt confident about my decision, despite the laughs of my friends, and I took great pleasure in signing up for the required and supplemental courses in the curriculum. I swooned at the thought of classes about Victorian, postcolonial, which in hindsight should have indicated my aptitude for the field. Even then, I heard the condescension in the voices of the people I talked to about my choice.

“English? So you want to be a teacher?” they asked, shaking their heads in pity when I told them I did not. To them, I was already doomed to a career of mediocrity, working odd jobs in retail while moonlighting as a writer and yet somehow still fancying myself a person of considerable intelligence as I slaved away at another unpublished story. While this occasionally fazed me, I often found myself somewhat intrigued by the trope of the struggling writer, pounding at the keys of a typewriter with a cigarette dangling haphazardly from his furrowed

lips, crumpling up and discarding page after page. This is a glorified vision of the circumstances, but one that always seemed in some way romantic and admirable to me.

In an attempt to establish myself as a reputable writer, I applied to the GVSU Lanthorn in the spring of 2011. The application called for three examples of articles, and, having none, I set out to write a few of my own based on occurrences I noticed around campus. I sent a tentative message out to all my friends on Facebook, asking whether one of them would consent to an interview and fearing responses of anger, condescension, or even worse, apathy. I did not receive even one message in return, vindicating my neurosis and sending me into a fit of nerves. How could I expect to be a journalist if I could not approach people? Moreover, what good is a person who cannot approach even a few friends to ask their opinions? I took the easiest route out of my predicament, fabricating quotes and names because I was too shy to approach my peers for an actual interview.

One article I constructed concerned a rash of graffiti I had noticed springing up around campus, and I'm sure read it inspired a chuckle or two because of the tone, which was overly-serious and dramatic to the point of parody.

"It makes me feel unsafe going to class," I quoted a friend as saying. "If graffiti can't be discouraged, how can violence be prevented?" I later told him about his unwilling participation in my article, and he yelled at me for making appear to be "a pussy," in his words. I told him that there was no harm done, as any self-respecting journalist would toss my woefully inept writing samples straight into the recycling bin and my friend let me off with a mere warning. I'm glad I never told him about the other two articles, which quoted him in similarly compromising ways and involved quotes which have surely seemed like "pussy" talk to him.

Regardless, three months later, I received a phone call requesting my presence at an interview, and I readily accepted. The editor at that time was a fairly imposing-looking man, a senior who told me my writing was creative and funny, and that I would be best suited to writing as a columnist. My smile grew as I began to consider all the fascinating topics and opinion pieces I could write about, and I was gladdened by the fact that columnists rarely have to do interviews or public appearances. I could hide in my room and write about my opinions all day, as long as I didn't have to speak to anyone, I told myself, and began to reach for a handshake indicating my acceptance of the job.

“But we don't have any openings, so you're going to cover sports,” he informed me.

If someone had asked me what areas I could credibly report upon based on my knowledge and skill set, I would have confidently rattled off any number of items: politics, crime, entertainment, technology, education, even science. All of these areas are of at least passing interest to me and I believe I would excel at any assignment or project that came before me. However, if that same person then asked what I was least suited to report on, they would receive a one word answer: sports. While I enjoy running around outdoors as much as anyone, and perhaps more so than many, I have never understood the passion with which people follow sports. Millions of people wait all year for a team's season to begin, spending thousands of dollars on tickets so they can yell at the referees and fixate on a man running around with a ball. At best, I can commit only a modicum of my attention to most sports, and even then I rarely know enough to stay engaged. When I join friends for a SuperBowl celebration, I carefully follow the movements and statements of the others, copying them in an attempt to hide my status as the black sheep of the group. I have yet to be called out on my mimicry, which must mean I do a passable job at appearing to be a sports fan, and my closest friends are the only ones

allowed to have knowledge to the contrary. Simply put, it just isn't masculine to prefer reading over football.

Regardless, I was too polite, or perhaps too shy, to say no, so I accepted the position and returned to my room, despondent. My career as a columnist had ended just as it began, and I resigned myself to being a sports reporter, a job I was sure would be short-lived due to my ignorance of the subject matter. I purchased a digital recorder and a Moleskine notebook and tried to brush up on my knowledge of sports, with little success. Sports websites confused me more than they helped, and I spent many hours trying to figure out the meaning of RBIs, TDs, and FGs. I relied on my father for knowledge, as he was the only one I could speak to in confidence regarding my naivety in the sports department. Though he tried, I always knew that I could not hope to contend with other sports writers because I was far from a native speaker in the world of athletic verbiage. It was with this inauspicious start that I began my career in sports journalism, which to date remains my longest-held profession.

On my first day, I was asked to cover a scrimmage game for the varsity girl's soccer team, and I waited in the bleachers for a chance to talk to the coach after the game. I considered speaking to the athletes, as well, but I was far too nervous to approach them as they sat on the turf, stretching and laughing with each other. One juggled a ball with her feet, knees, and head, never letting it touch the ground. Another practiced passing with a friend, her kicks fluid and sinuous. The way they moved and the way they talked bespoke a deeply-held confidence and vivacity, one which I did not share as I struggled to put one foot in front of the other and remain upright. Fearing judgment, I instead settled for the coach and his assistance, tensing my hand in a firm handshake in attempts to reassert my masculinity, which in my mind had been undermined due to my fear of speaking to women. After the interview, I ran home to write the story and sent

it to my editor, eagerly awaiting his judgement. It was hours later that I got his reply informing me that one source was not enough, and that my inaugural work was inadequate. However, without another article to publish, the editor ran my work in the paper the following day, a clipping of which remains at the back of my journalistic portfolio to this day, a shameful reminder of my first foray into published writing.

During my fall semester, I began attending journalism courses to expand my base of knowledge. I briefly considered a journalism degree, which would be a more specific choice than English, but that was precisely the reason I decided to refrain. To this day, I detest the idea of being lumped in one category or another, and I feared a journalism degree would not be found suitable in any other career. Due to the fluctuating nature of the field and the decline of printed media, I decided not to tie myself to what seemed somewhat of a sinking ship and kept on my path as an English major.

Towards the end of the semester, I was assigned a final project which required me to go out and shadow someone in the media in order to better understand the daily ins and outs of a career in journalism. While I was intrigued to see a glimpse of what my future career might one day entail, my shyness again stymied me, and I spent weeks debating how I could get out of the assignment. I was too neurotic to pretend to be sick, too compassionate to lie about the death of a family member, and too young to fake my own, so I resolved myself to the awkwardness of the situation. In my mind, a failing grade was perhaps worse than death, so I sent an email inquiring about an opportunity to follow an editor around a typical day at the Grand Rapids Press. I was informed none were available, but that I would be welcome to shadow a sports journalist on the following Friday evening. This marked my second time being forced to indulge a pastime which held no interest for me, but seeing no other options, I consented.

The following week, I arrived at the soccer stadium of the Grand Rapids NorthPointe Christian Mustangs at 6 p.m. and met up with Steve Kaminski, a Press veteran of many years. He seemed a friendly sort of man, though quite passionate about sports, which somewhat devalued him, in my mind. We walked through the gate and past the ticket counters with only a short delay as Steve whipped out his Press ID, which got us in for free. While there are few cases that I would ever desire to attend a sports event, I am a Dutchman, and as such, a connoisseur of practical frugality, so I could see the value in getting in free.

Feeling like a celebrity, I followed Steve up to the stadium's press box, where we were offered seats, drinks, and food as the game began to unfold below us. My nerves were somewhat assuaged by the hospitality, and I helped myself to hotdogs and potato chips, occasionally glancing back at the game which was unfolding far below us. While I am decidedly ambivalent towards sports, I still enjoy the back and forth flow of a good soccer game. As I finished my meal, I began watching as attentively as I could, taking notes and inquiring with Steve about unknown rules. He was patient and understanding, and did not mock me for not understanding the ins and outs of the offsides rules or the correct box formation when blocking a corner kick.

After a not uninteresting game, Steve and I were parting ways in the parking lot when he asked me about my plans for employment. As a sports reporter of several months, he considered me qualified for part-time employment as a nighttime sports clerk at the Press, and told me that I seemed both passionate and knowledgeable about athletics. I did not correct him, but jumped at the opportunity, astonished at the possibility of working at the paper that I had read since birth. This has always seemed a selfish decision on my part, as I knew I had very little to offer in any sports department and a huge backlog of work which would surely divert my attention. Nevertheless, I was enamored by the idea of working as a professional journalist, which

somewhat altered my idealized version of a writer. I now pictured myself hard at work, the television on as I followed a football game while I slapped away at a laptop balanced precariously on my cubicle desk. It was, again, an unrealistic expectation, but I held on to it throughout the application process which followed.

So it was that, despite an overabundance of sports assignments at GVSU and a growing pile of unfinished schoolwork, that I accepted a position at the Grand Rapids Press. The duties of the job soon proved to be very informal, and the standards fairly lax, though I was far from a natural. A typical night was spent logged into a phone, answering calls and taking scores from high school sports games in Grand Rapids. Occasionally we would be asked to write short articles, but this was often left to others, as I was new and not sport-oriented enough to understand what seemed to me like incredibly esoteric jargon. My colleagues soon learned to do the work themselves, as they could rely only upon my ineptitude when asked to complete any given assignment. I soon found myself reading for class all night, ignoring phone calls, which were subsequently passed off to my peers. It is no small wonder that I was not fired, but the lack of oversight enabled my slacking and allowed me to collect a tidy paycheck with a minimum of work.

Often, I would dart away to the other end of the largely deserted building to contact GVSU coaches following games. I still had to balance my job there, and the only way to do so was to either quit the Lanthorn or the Press, and I was unwilling to do either. I soon drew the ire of the GVSU club hockey coach who told me in no uncertain terms, that I was inept at my job. He tried to maintain a professional dialogue, but I could sense his rage.

“We have built up a relationship with the Lanthorn over many years, and this has been a big disappointment,” he said, with regard to my perennial absence at games. “Correct me if I am

wrong, but it is your job to attend games, not to call me after them in hopes that I will do your job for you.”

I apologized profusely and tried to pacify him, trying to get him off the phone so I could return to my Press workstation before my absence was noted. He hung up in a huff and I ran back to my cubicle, where I ignored yet another ringing phone. I briefly considered becoming mad at the coach, but this soon passed. I am never one to externalize anger; rather, I internalize it, which has always been a detriment to my wellbeing, but something I have yet been helpless to change. I also know to take my lashes when they are well deserved, and I made a mental note to attend every hockey game from that point onward.

After that, I struggled even more, skipping classes and sleeping through the day to make it to games, while at night attempting to catch up on my studies while ignoring phone calls from Grand Rapids coaches. At the risk of seeming dramatic, I would describe that time in my life as “hellish,” though there was only so much I could blame on the situation. I still had the option to quit one or both jobs, and yet I stayed the course out of a combination of complacency and egotism.

It was after three months of employment at the Grand Rapids Press that the termination of our employment was announced. The Press, as it existed, was no longer financially viable under current leadership, and so it was to be sold off to MLive Media Group, joining the seven other papers under its corporate auspices. All staff were laid off, but with the option to reapply. I was dismayed by the end of a fairly comfortable job, but given my lack of ambition, as well as my status as a student already stretched too thin between coursework and another job, I paid it no mind and prepared to collect my severance package. Ever a short-term thinker, I greedily anticipated my windfall, even though it came at the expense of my weekly wage.

At the behest of my coworkers, who somehow enjoyed me despite my chronic laziness and absenteeism, I applied to MLive for a laugh, seeking a position in the newly-formed High School Sports Department call center, which was to receive phone calls from all over the state in an effort to centralize and standardize the reporting process. At the last possible moment, I showed up to an interview with Joe Walker, an imposing man and former minor-league baseball star. I threw on a collared shirt and khakis and appeared at the interview, disheveled and bleary-eyed in the early hours of the morning. I do not remember what questions he asked me, but I do remember bringing my portfolio of article clippings, which he never opened, which was all for the best due to my egregious ignorance of sports. Again, I turned in my application, shaking hands and departing without any doubt that I would not receive a call back.

In any case, something about me must have made an impression on Joe, and I was asked to come back in on the inaugural day of the department, which was scheduled for the first day of the high school basketball season. I remember showing up and seeing all the new faces, none of which seemed particularly friendly, though it is more likely that I misread their nervousness as unpleasantness. I hid myself in a secluded corner desk and opened my business textbook to read, my nightly tradition at the Press prior to the company going bankrupt.

Half way through the shift, as others answered phone calls, Joe came over and sat on my desk.

“What are you reading,” he asked, and I mistook his sternness for interest. Emboldened by a shared knowledge of business, I walked him through the basics of my business class, and he nodded slowly before walking away. It wasn’t until a year later that Joe told me the largely negative impression he formed of me on that occasion.

“I really thought I made a mistake by taking a chance on you,” he told me at an otherwise positive employee review session. “It’s a damn good thing you straightened up.”

And straighten up I did, as we began to accept an increasingly large number of sports calls. Joe knew better than to allow calls from all eight papers on the first night, so additions were staggered but we became increasingly busy as the nights went on. This forced me to start picking up phones, although I was far from devoted to the job. Whether this was laziness or sheer weariness on my part is open for debate, though I would choose the second as a vanity.

As the weeks passed, I found myself increasingly stretched between assignments for both jobs and schoolwork, sleeping very little and rarely attending extracurricular events or parties. That remains, to this day, my greatest regret in college, but with not one, but two, stable jobs and placement in the honors college, there was no room to slow down. I had built up enough inertia, and I was adamant that I would continue working at both jobs despite the concern of my parents, who were worried about my burgeoning work schedule.

For reasons unknown to me, I was eventually promoted to the position of Assistant Sports Editor at the *Lanthorn*.

“You’re the only writer I can really trust to check in with me,” my supervisor said, and I knew enough to take the compliment. I also silently resolved to quit at the end of the semester, knowing that I could not handle being Sports Editor in addition to working at MLive, following his graduation that spring. As the school year drew to a close, so did my duties there, and I parted ways with the *Lanthorn*. Though I had enjoyed my time there, I was quite glad to be balancing only one career with a full roster of academics, which might allow me to get some modicum of sleep for the first time in months.

Perhaps as a result, my productivity and performance at MLive improved drastically, and several of my friends noticed the change. I had been sitting next to Joe, at his request, but upon seeing my improvement, he allowed me to stray to a more comfortable seat and I soon became one of the leaders of the group. I routinely led a group in handling phone calls from Muskegon, which were of low-priority, but they were mine and I worked hard.

I even allowed myself to take a certain pleasure in my work, even though I was a glorified phone jockey, answering 50 to 60 calls a night and writing articles to match, none of high quality. The work was mind-numbing, and I silently schemed about better careers as I spoke to drunk coaches complaining about their latest loss. After a few months, I could have written a screenplay about the interactions between journalists and coaches because I became so aware of the tropes and jargon.

“It was a total team effort,” they urged, despite the fact that one player scored 23 points and the rest of the team scored 11 combined.

“We’re really young this year,” they insisted after being slaughtered by a cross-town rival. “This is a building year, we’ll be much better next season.”

Throughout it all, I couldn’t care less. The distaste that I felt for reporting sports was exacerbated by the knowledge that it was high school sports. Aside from the athletes themselves, the readers of my writing probably included family members, alumni, and probably the occasional pedophile, for the cheerleading competitions. My work never made the paper, and was doomed to languish, unread, on the internet. Regardless, the work was my own, and I began putting more effort into improvement.

While I felt relatively secure and well-compensated there, I soon began to understand the lack of opportunities for advancement, which was, to me, the greatest reason to seek other job

opportunities. Joe led us daily, and I served as a captain, but with no benefit to me aside from the experience. A two dollar raise was offered each year, but employees would never be promoted or given additional titles, which bothered me as I became increasingly motivated and ambitious. I had seen my name in print at the Lanthorn, and I yearned to be recognized for the skills I considered ample, despite my knowledge to the contrary.

So it was with excitement that I accepted a temporary position back at the Grand Rapids Press, designed to keep me busy during the slow summer months. I remained employed at MLive, collecting my same pay check, but my duties, attire, and outlook changed drastically.

Suddenly, I was asked to dress up for work, and I donned khakis and a collared shirt each day. I went through my daily tasks of helping the three managing producers, Kate, Tanda, and Nate, doing whatever could best help them. While there was quite a learning curve to learning a new operating system and entirely new tasks, I dove into my duties, enjoying the new challenges and the opportunity to work in the news room alongside reporters I had read throughout my entire life. It took some time to get used to the hustle and bustle of a functioning news room, and many people did not initially welcome me. Several of the old staffers were reluctant to welcome in the new blood, which they probably considered a threat to their job security. Others probably left me alone because of my shyness, which I'm told manifests as condescending and occasionally rude.

To my chagrin, I was eventually assigned to cover Grand Rapids sports, although this was much more enjoyable due to my opportunities to actually attend events. I went to a skateboard competition, a race at a local ball park, and even a bike race, and I found myself quite enjoying the change.

When I had proven myself adept at this, I began taking up larger projects, many of which soon became some of my favorite memories in my time of employment. One assignment brought me to a football player who struggled with drugs and addiction, nearly dying before turning his life around and taking up his sport anew. His hand enveloped mine as I shook it after listening to his story about heroin dependency and I looked for track marks on his arm, but did not see any. I don't know what happened to him, but I like to think that sharing his story helped him turn his life around, although I'm sure my interview was just a small blip on his radar. Another assignment tasked me to drive out to Holland to tour an adult care home for those suffering from developmental disabilities. There, I met Calvin, a 21-year-old man with autism who gave me many double-handed high-fives until he was pulled away by a caregiver. I also met a young girl, Jennifer, who took me by the hand and showed off her posters of musician Bill Gaither, the namesake of the home's newest alpaca. Again, I fancied my writing a contribution towards their mission, and I took a great deal of pride in being involved. Both articles made the front page of the paper, and my grandparents framed these and presented me with this gift, which still hangs on my wall.

But soon, the summer came to a close and I became increasingly resentful as I thought about returning to the sports department. It was not a sense of unhappiness there that motivated me, but rather a passion for meeting people and writing high-profile stories that actually made the paper that excited me, and I was loth to give it up. I sulked and grew complacent, showing up to work and listening to music as I browsed the internet and pretended to work. If they could not be bothered to employ me, I could not be bothered to work, I thought. I was struck with an intense sense of worthlessness, because I valued the job so much but did not feel valued in

return. I inquired about a position with my manager, Julie, but was told that I would have to seek employment at another one of the MLive-affiliated papers.

The day before I was to return to the sports department, Julie finally extended an offer for me to stay on as the news intern at the Press. My wages would be cut, as well as my benefits and paid time off, but there was never a doubt in my mind that I would remain. In addition to the experience, I greatly enjoyed interacting with new people and building the relationships that come with the trade. As an intern, I reported on crime, sports, entertainment, and business, and I was more excited than ever to go to work. It was the versatility that really inspired me. While it was nerve-wracking, I could never anticipate what a day in the office could turn into. I could sit at my desk one minute, bored, and the next be headed off to a flooded dam which had begun to displace thousands or a ball park fire causing thousands of dollars in damage.

Seeing the example of the other intern, I took to wearing a dress suit and a tie along with slacks, despite the looks of incredulity that this brought me. Every morning, I pull on my slacks, either black or grey, pull on my thigh-high dress socks, and tighten the laces of my shiny black shoes. I don my dress shirt, usually some shade of blue or green, and tie my skinny tie into a half-windsor. As a young person in a field dominated by older professionals, I felt the need to set myself apart and make up for my youth, though I think I have elicited more scorn than respect with my clothes. In any case, I like the feeling of dressing professionally, which I continue to do now.

Days were never typical, and I reported on such breaking stories as an inmate escape at a prison, a shooting over a misplaced order at a McDonald's, and most recently the repeal of Michigan's gay marriage ban. I enjoyed the unique nature of each assignment, despite the discomfort I occasionally felt because of the fluidity of plans. I could never predict where I

would be on any day, which made me nervous because I am very much a creature of habit.

Regardless, my phone soon became full with contacts, connections, and sources, even as my writing improved, and I checked the paper daily to see my articles in print.

But, as with all things, my time at the Press will come to an end in May, and I currently have no plans for other employment. I have been extended an offer to return to the sports hub, and I may do so, if nothing better presents itself. I have considered working in public relations, writing press releases and marketing campaigns, since this would allow me to utilize the experience I have gained with writing, but I don't feel passionate about it. I think some part of me still hopes Julie will contact me on my last day of employment and offer for me to stay.

### Works Cited

- "Conan: Thursday, Sept. 19." Ross, Jeff. *Conan*. TBS. 19 Sept. 2013. Web. Transcript.
- Gerard, Phil. *Writing Creative Nonfiction*. 1st Ed. Cincinnati: Story Press, 2001. Print.
- Gutkind, Lee. *The Best Creative Nonfiction, Volume 1*. 1st Ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. Print.
- Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction - from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. 1st Ed. Boston: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2012. Print.
- Moore, Dinty W. *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*. 1st Ed. London: Longman, 2006. Print.
- Rigby, Donna. "Narrative, Creative Nonfiction and the Personal Essay: Housing the Text.." *Weber Studies*. 22.3 (2006): 18. Web. 12 Oct. 2013.
- Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Back Bay paperback Ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 2001. Print.
- Sedaris, David. *When You Are Engulfed in Flames*. Back Bay paperback Ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 2009. Print.
- Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Back Bay Reprint Ed. New York: Back Bay Books, 1997. Print.