

Untethering: An Always-On Project

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It was a Friday afternoon in 1995, and I was going down the elevator in the Charles Schwab (a major financial firm) headquarters building after a day of work as a computer programmer, contracting through a small consulting agency. I was living with my beloved late sister Inbal in an apartment in Oakland, and this gig was part of my overall effort to work as little as possible and keep my consumption as low as possible. I was able to work 2-3 days a week while going to graduate school to study sociology. It was painful to sell myself, which I knew I was doing. In that pain and alienation, there was also satisfaction in imagining that no one in the office would know that I wanted to dismantle their business even while working within it.

Someone inevitably spoke the near-obligatory TGIF statement (in case you don't know, it means "thank god it's Friday" which is designed to capture that work is hateful, only there to finance the measly two days off that we get.) True to form, I mentioned that I hadn't worked full time in more than 10 years. I saw the longing, the bodies stretching towards that imaginary possibility, the ache for more freedom. Then I added that the only way that worked was that I lived a very simple life. And I saw the bodies contracting again, accepting, I imagined, the deal they made to get all the goodies of comfort and convenience that come with the full time, well-paid work, paying the price of the deadening work that came with it.

As I came to write this piece, that memory floated to the top as an example of what I mean by untethering, as well as what makes it so difficult to embark on consciously disentangling from the dominant culture. Although this story is 25 years old, the vagabonding life I am currently living is shedding more light on that experience.

My sister Arnina has affectionately referred to Emma and me, the vagabonders, as a vacuum cleaner: it's as if everywhere we go, we pull people, with us, in the direction of the luminous vision we are moving towards. And as this pull moves us, the strength of the counter-pull reveals itself. The cost of liberation is enormous. Early on, it means releasing the attachment to the goodies that come with modern, capitalist patriarchy, and, further along, it means standing naked in front of social mores and those who enforce them. It takes increasing our willingness to accept judgments from others, which requires strengthening our own muscles of self-acceptance. Here, we are taking the particular risk of making public a statement about what we call our "purpose partnership." The further we walk towards vision, the more of the tethers of patriarchy we undo, the higher the cost. By exacting such high cost, patriarchal societies reproduce and sustain themselves. And we keep walking.

Long ago, I heard from someone that internalization of any kind of oppression is like being in a cage where we have the key that could open the door, and we don't use it. Through the complex, rich, sometimes painful and always enlightening encounters with people along the way, I have now come to understand why we don't use the key. An image came to me in which the keys are wrapped (intertwined) in our trauma; the very trauma that got us to agree to enter the cage in the first place. In order to unwrap the key and open the cage, we need to be willing to re-experience the trauma. For most of us, most of the time, the vision is too elusive and the prospect of experiencing and releasing the fears is too daunting: there is no path to the vision that doesn't involve facing the challenges along the way, and there isn't enough support available to face the challenges. It's still the case that when we try to free ourselves, if we even try, it is on our own, not as part of a community. Simultaneously, when

building communities we bring all the ways we are in the cage into our community building efforts.

This is one way of making sense of why visionary communities and organizations, including any that I've been part of and the two that I brought into life, become rife with conflict. I now see that understanding the ways that conflict is an expression of patriarchal legacy is a key endeavor as we imagine a new life. It's definitely a key question for our vagabonding, directly aligned with our purpose. Our vagabonding is, explicitly, designed to find people, places, forms, principles, practices, and other resources for building an eventual live-in community. We are exploring the levels of conflict that our experiments generate to discover a level within our collective capacity to navigate. At such an early phase of community-building, when the agreements we have are still embryonic, the purpose and values only barely integrated, and the pull of our patriarchal patterning still so strong, the question of capacity is front and center in our minds.

Since the last newsletter, where I celebrated my recovery from the illusion that vagabonding could be done incidentally rather than it itself becoming central to purpose, life has been a series of breakthroughs. I wrote then: "the instability of vagabonding makes our patriarchal conditioning more visible and allows for more learning to happen. Reorienting in this way helps me see that this is part of my work rather than interference: I am learning more about the ravages of patriarchy and about how we can work with vision and agreements to create islands within and around us in which the commitment to transformation holds us more steady." This is precisely what has been happening.

At one of our recent experiments, staying for two nights with a dear Zoom friend whom I met in person for the very first time, he described what we do as the "always-on project." After initially laughing, I felt the truth of it land, and it made it into the title of this piece. After all, once we have tasted the glory of restoring (even partially) choice, togetherness, and flow, why would we ever want to take a break? What would it even mean to take a break other than choosing, consciously, to re-embrace patriarchal living? I can't imagine how that could ever serve my purpose.

As always, I have no answers to my own questions. I only know to keep going. In some ways, I have been walking away from patriarchy my entire life, even before I knew an alternative exists. Walking and falling, sometimes being dragged back to patriarchy, sometimes even getting so demoralized that I walked back part of the way myself. Always, I have lifted myself up and continued forward, and I still do, less and less alone as I go. And, all I said before notwithstanding, there are moments of exquisite rest in an experience that comes more and more often: reverence for life itself, savoring the moments of feeling, again, aligned with life. This work, this minute experimentation, the details of what it takes, on the small scale, and even before getting on a piece of land and reengaging with a form of rooted life, feels vital to the prospect of bringing to the world what has been given to me and what I am learning. With the world in its current state ravaged by patriarchal norms and practices, it may be too late to turn things around collectively, and continuing to envision and walk towards that possibility is the only thing I know to do.