

Ben Greenberg  
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Mike's Budget

### Two Homecomings: A Relief from Suffering or its Unwelcome Cause

In 2010 I packed a single duffle bag full of clothing, a cardboard tube of cliché band posters, and a box of books I should have read into a rented white Chevy traverse and left Philadelphia for good. Windows down, music up, we lit out on 76 and watched the glass and concrete fade to cul-de-sacs and gas stations and eventually to the endless squares of green, brown, and gold. My brother drove and described his Cincinnati as I stared out the window not wanting to listen.

There was never any other option but Penn. My mother insisted I fill out all of my applications, including the safeties. Even though I was applying to Penn early decision, and, if rejected, would have jumped in front of oncoming traffic, I obliged. When the acceptance email came, there was a feeling of finality. This was it, all that I had worked for in six words: “we are delighted to inform you...” Cincinnati would be a memory, an origin story, the place I’d wax nostalgic about to my grandchildren with just a hint of condescension.

Penn was a kaleidoscope of eccentric personalities formed in a cauldron of privilege. Locust Walk cut a central path through the campus’s dreamlike buildings and manicured lawns. Frank Furness’s Venetian Gothic masterpiece mingled with brutalist concrete as Ben Franklin’s likeness kept watch over College Hall opposite a modern sculpture of a large half-broken button. Locust was a catwalk for the human mélange. Burberry scarves whipped at the wind while members of the Patrick Bateman fan club elbow rubbed their way into banking careers, and trust fund drug dealers lit furtive joints behind Van Pelt library. Every kind of charismatic weirdo and attention-drunk overachiever inhabited this landscape. Artsy types fluent in early work name

games, poker sharks with six-figure incomes, and the start-up dropouts with IPO dreams. For a time, I was taken with these larger-than-life characters who seemed to know exactly what they wanted and how to get it. But eventually I came to observe an insidiousness that tends to attend the entitled. A loudness, a roughness, a shocking contempt for humanity—a dark departure from the politeness afforded by a Midwestern upbringing. There were instances of casual bigotry that one would not expect to observe in an institution of higher learning founded by liberal quakers. Social hierarchies were everywhere, a general attitude of “who do you know at this party” pervaded. Infatuation soured to disgust.

In many ways, Philadelphia was a time of unmaking, unraveling. The ideas I pursued most energetically in the classes I gravitated to pushed a kind of unstable understanding of reality, language, the fundamental laws of physics and time. The purpose of art, or lack thereof. The purpose of life, or lack thereof. In between bouts of procrastination and trying to fit in, my academic inquiries obsessed over connections between works of every discipline and category that argued for a kind of evangelical agnosticism which could only make sense to a brain whose cannabinoid receptors were lit up like a phone tree on a snow day in the 90s. It wasn't about searching for answers, it was about dismantling questions.

Due in no small part to the constant oscillations between social ecstasy and loneliness, the intense investigations into the complex and the indefinable, and a general lack of sleep and healthy habits, June of 2010 came as an unwelcome relief—relieved to be free from the pressures and obligations I largely placed on myself, yet unprepared for and antagonistic towards a future I felt I had no right to inherit. After graduation, after that quiet ride home in the white Chevy Traverse, I traveled to Europe with my older brother and spent every dime I had and some of his.

At the end of those blissful weeks, with no job or professional prospects of any kind, I flew back to Cincinnati and much as I began this paper, stared at the mocking blank page of my life.

After a few bewildered days of denial that this was now my home, I reached out to an old acquaintance, who, at the time was one of the only people I knew living here and she invited me to a gathering at a house she was sharing with her boyfriend—a charming old clapboard ramble in a clearing on a hill in Northside. I arrived to a great bon fire. Its flames licked the starless night's early-autumn crisp. A circle of drums thudded out perfect rhythm as dancers moved in untraceable patterns around the fire's perimeter, their bodies coming in and out of focus as the smell of burning herbs, both legal and not, caught in my nostrils. I felt something stir that night, something loosened in my mind. It wasn't so much that I was shocked to find such a vibrant gathering in stolid Cincinnati, but rather, a sense of wonder and curiosity at what else could be here for me to discover.

For the next five or six years, I did just that. I discovered what had always been here: generous and kind people curious about the world, hungry for experience and improvement; people with vision making and remaking places and things with a kind of wild fascination and an imperfect obsession with the past. I don't have to convince this room of our city's deserved place in history, nor of the part it will surely play in the shaping of our future, just that to me, then, it felt both new and old, familiar and strange, flawed of course, yet self-aware and willing to slowly change. Over-the-Rhine felt like what I fell in love with in Philadelphia—a sense of place and time, a rough-hewn urbanity brimming and at times overflowing with promise, problems, beauty, and yes, beer. Kentucky called and I answered, reveling in its charm and character, its gregarious hills and limestone spirit.

Transitions of the physical—the movement of a person from one place across the threshold of another, often precedes, or even precipitates transitions of the spiritual. Something else began to shift during this time, something vaguely spiritual which eludes me still. The God I believed in when I was young was a grey-bearded oil painting who created the universe. I believed that the universe and everything in it has a purpose and that purpose is to be good. I was also convinced that the rabbi at my synagogue had a direct line to this omnipotent force. My rabbi had a presence. He had that gift that made people stop and pay attention. He had that rabbinical lilt and cadence that bordered on parody, but he pulled it off. He would break into song, quote poetry, spend hours meandering through subjects and offering metaphors. Before my Bar Mitzvah, I told him I too wanted to be a rabbi and he treated me like a rabbinical student, which made me feel special. I became interested in everything about Judaism—the history, the culture, the music, the food, the garb, the iconography. I read about Gematria and Kabala, about Yiddish theater and the Baal Shem Tov. But as all things do, I evolved.

I can still remember the first day I started questioning. I was jumping on a trampoline in my neighbors backyard on fall day and she asked me if I believed in God and I said yes and she said the words that we've probably all said to ourselves no matter how fervently we believe in whatever we believe in. She said, "but how can you prove that something exists when you can't see it, or hear it or anything?" I didn't have a response. I said something vague about faith, but at the time, I loved science and math and knowledge. I knew she had a point, I had never heard someone so clearly express logical skepticism. Other things happened too. I found out things that disappointed me. Slowly, over the course of five or ten years, I concluded that my rabbi, who I cherished and believed was deeply intertwined with my own Jewish identity, was merely a performer on a stage. He was not talking to God and God probably didn't exist and Judaism had

been, for me, a kind of phase like comic books or guitar lessons. I spent my teens and early twenties feeling a kind of antagonism towards religion, especially my own. I was “Jewish” when it was cool and convenient; when it was something I had in common with someone, or something I could flex like a muscle to prove I was unique. I stopped going to high holiday services with my family or went reluctantly and not without protest or even a modicum of ridicule at what I thought was an outdated mode of expression holding humanity back from uniting under a common cause I couldn’t really define.

I wish I had a moment I could point to when these views began to evolve—a fire’s spark or a planted seed, but this has been a slow healing of old wounds, a melting of ice caps, a shifting of tectonic plates. If I look at it closely, my movement back to an embrace of my Jewish community coincided with the evolution of my feelings for Cincinnati and that makes sense to me, now, given the deep intertwinement of their trajectories.

Midwestern Jewry is its own kind of thing. The Jewish communities of smaller cities and towns are keepers of a kind of flame. We are reverent to a past we protect, and duty bound to strive for this place and its people, no matter their creed. Larger coastal populations enjoy a different kind identity defined more so by the strength of their numbers, the magnifications of their manifestations. Here, we celebrate our togetherness, our survival, our success despite our relative wilderness.

But none of this really answers the question of why I felt a subtle pull back towards the community that defined me as a child almost as dramatically as my rejection of it defined me as an adolescent. During this year’s high holidays, I did two things I haven’t done in many years: I took days off for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and I fasted. After spending the morning in services with my family, we went hiking in Mt. Airy forest. We didn’t discuss anything

philosophical or religious, we just walked in the light-dappled woods and told stories and laughed and tried not to think about food, which is pretty much all we thought about. When I returned home, I thought about my grandparents. I thought about my mother and father and the responsibilities they've shouldered both in our home and in our community. Memories painful and joyous, successes and failures, mistakes and accomplishments passed through the mind like a ticker tape. I let hunger be my guide, thoughts my sustenance.

From Cincinnati to Philadelphia and back again. From a shtetel in eastern Europe to a city on a river and back again. We are the circles we draw in blood, the efforts and accidents of ancestors, all of the things we've ever known and rejected, loved and loathed.

So, what of my question? Was "here" the nourishment for which I hungered? Did the familiarity of ritual stave off the anxiety of chaos? Or did I come to accept my link in a great chain that stretches continents and millennia? I cannot say for sure. But at least I know that I'm home, and that's a very good place to start.