

## LIFELONG LEARNING

BRIAN FULLER

Ultimately, we are all responsible for our own education or lack thereof. I've always been secretly jealous of people who make academics look easy. Most of us struggle. Yet, it is in that struggle where we reach common ground and attain transcendence. Because after all, if we are willing to invest the effort, we will realize the possibilities.

Never in a million years would I have thought I'd be doing this again. You see, I'm one of the thousands upon thousands who fell through the cracks in the "system." Back when this nightmare first began, I knew I couldn't continue making decisions based on emotional reactions. So very early, I set my sights upon education and outreach. They imprisoned the body... not the mind.

When we get locked up, something happens with our memories. Instead of forgetting them, they go into hyperdrive, permeating our thoughts at will. It's as if someone else has grabbed the remote. The screens inside our heads changes and all we can do is smile in sweet surrender while we bask in the splendor of days gone by.

I was working at a foundry before I got arrested. It was hot, hard, dangerous work. I loved every second of it. When molten metal is poured from the crucible into the mold, it looks like hot lava flowing from a volcano. I'm immediately shot back through space and time to that inquisitive five-year-old sitting on the floor flipping through pages of National Geographic. Dad walks in and I point to the caption. "Etna is Grandnana's name!" He smiles and says, "Close enough. Maybe Etna is how they spell Edna in Italy." I keep turning pages and don't look up when I speak. "Itlee is where they make peetsa and skettee."

Autistics are visual learners. I wouldn't even find out I was on the spectrum until much later in life. Everybody always told me I was a smart boy. I was a good boy. All I knew was that the other kids picked on me. I was a little weirdo and they hated me. I didn't dare tell the grown ups what was really going on in my brain. Those were the days when children were expected to be seen and not heard. To deviate from the norm would let everybody down.

Our public school system was considered top-notch. Nowadays, kids can't imagine a time without computers. I simply loved those old books. The weight of them. The smell of them. Beautiful illustrations and brilliant photography. Before I could even spell words like "biology," "architecture," and "geography," I'd already been absorbing them subconsciously. Those sneaky teachers had duped me into study time. All the while, I thought I was doing my own thing.

The streets would bring a different kind of training. Navigating social awkwardness and shrewd business negotiations. Staying aware of my surroundings. Reading faces and body language. Skepticism means survival when so many people are trying to swindle you. Don't ever let anyone tell you you're just being paranoid. Follow your instincts. Trust your intuition.

I entered the workforce early in life. Mentally ill does not mean mentally deficient. Compensation is a poor measure of intelligence. I've worked for some

complete imbeciles. All I could do was watch silently in horror as they ran perfectly good businesses into the ground. I had the willingness to work hard. I just lacked the confidence to speak up.

Moving from job to job broadened my skill set. Regardless of the task, I always struggled with concentration and attention span. My mind would detach from my body; I would daydream, working out pressing problems or projects that really interested me.

I've done almost every job there is to do in this place. I'm at the age now where they don't make me work if I don't want to. However, I can still work circles around these youngsters. Our "50's" really are the new "30's." Somehow I still feel like a teenager in my head. I'm the oldest student in both of my college courses. I'm even older than one of my professors.

We're locked down at the moment. While everybody is trying to figure out how to get their contraband through "shake-down," I'm preoccupied with when we are going to attend class again. This is the first time in roughly two years that our renowned professor has been allowed to come and give lectures in person. I truly enjoy his enthusiasm, focus, and energy.

Out of all the things they could have confiscated, I'll miss magazine subscriptions the most. For whatever reason, our captors seem to have such a perverse disdain for knowledge that it borders on fear and loathing. When I noticed the cart for the library, I asked the sergeant, "can you please donate those to education?" Art, history, and literature must be preserved at all costs.

Although their relentless foolishness still makes me angry, I'm learning to channel that energy into fuel. It becomes the catalyst for change. Who knows? Maybe another renaissance will explode out of the kinetic forces locked inside of our own potential.