



**REAL LIFE**

# TRANSCENDENCE

**“Every Place at Once,” by Crystal Abidin**

**“Remote Control,” by Linda Besner**

**“Seeing Stars,” by Alex Ronan**

**“Advanced Search,” by Franceska Rouzard**

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AS A KID BORED ON A CAR RIDE or a teen stoned in afternoon class I imagined zones of psychic communion, immaterial common rooms where everyone I knew lived a second life. These spaces are now mundane, although, if anything, the internet proves that mundanity is an illusion and that everything is shot through with magic, or whatever you want to call it. Online doesn't feel new at all. It feels like the home version of a concept that used to be esoteric. Online is a layer of reality, a dimension of life. It doesn't solve or replace any great mysteries, but it turns them under the light. If the spark of an individual is the part of you that decides, your self will outlast you online, as an artifact, or a program. You can leave it there. —ALEXANDRA MOLOTKOW



# EVERY PLACE AT ONCE

Where do the dead go when they die? by CRYSTAL ABIDIN

I AM SITTING AT a memorial service in a church snug in the east end of Singapore. The master of ceremony goes up to the pulpit. He tells us that we will begin with a time of worship. “These were some of her favorite songs,” he says. A screen rolls down. The lights dim. A video plays.

She appears, strumming a mellow song on guitar on that very stage just a few Sundays ago. She was only 23. There she is, cold and silent, lying in the coffin. There she is, warm and

tangible, singing onscreen.

There she is, my sister, in two places at once.

No one in the congregation seems to flinch. As neatly as they filed into the pews, everyone stands up and sings along *tutti*. But it doesn’t take long for the white-lit screens of smartphones to emerge from the sea of heads. “Recording a recording of the deceased leading a congregation onscreen as a substitute for her failure to lead the same congregation at her own funeral,” my inner anthropologist mused internally between heavy sobs and gasps for air. “How meta.”

On the first night, I was too distraught to

tend to the hundreds of guests who attended. Nestled in the corner of the main hall, my safe space, I blocked out the rest of the service and scrolled through my sister's Facebook page.

As expected, dozens and dozens of her friends who had heard the news were posting tributes on her wall. There was the usual confessional prose, heartfelt poetry, and well-wishes embellished with crying emoji and sad Pusheen. There were also streams and streams of throwback photographs lining her page.

"This was the last time we met," one caption read.

"Remember when we came here to chill and jam? I miss you."

"This is the only group photo I have of all of us together."

Pauses. Places. Peoples.

Captions. Capsules.

Checkpoints.

Digital artifacts are new vehicles through which we can grieve. Digital traces bear witness of our proximity to the deceased. Digital capsules are encouraging us to convert mundane memories into effusive memorials. Digital, digital, digital. Do they have wi-fi in heaven?

Incessantly refreshing my sister's Facebook page, I watch as these young 20-somethings collaboratively build a repository of grief and memories around her. But to whom are they speaking, I wondered. To the public? To each other? To themselves? To my sister?

Their outpourings seem directed to everyone yet no one in particular, personal in nature yet publicly on display. Perhaps they see my sister's Facebook wall as a placeholder for her consciousness? Perhaps they are romanticizing a posthumous her?

There she is, my sister, in three places at once.

I retreat from the intangible two-dimension-

al world of text to re-enter the heavy sobs of 3-D life. Through my mental fog, I hear the pastor opening the floor for anyone who would like to share a few words. An adult from the church goes up. An adult relative goes up. An adult teacher goes up. They worm their way through the crowd, retrieve the handheld microphone from the pastor, and share solemn wisdom to an

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We are here where she lives**

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unwilling audience. It's not like any of us want to be here.

I drift between Facebook and the church sanctuary, waiting for time to wile away so all of this would go away. After a lull, the pastor calls for any "young people" who would like to come up to speak. He notes the absence of "young people" in these soliloquies.

Really? The adults don't see it, but we are here—in confessional prose, heartfelt poetry, well-wishes embellished with a crying emoji and a sad Pusheen, and emotively captioned photographs. We are here. You are there in your seats among anonymous others, attempting to breed collective effervescence while verbally establishing your social ties to the deceased in three lines or less. We are here in our playground, alone and

with each other and with my sister, where digital footprints boast of our affective ties. You are there in the hall where she lies. We are here on the internet where she lives. You are there. We are here.



ON THE SECOND NIGHT, I pull myself together to be fully present in the moment, to give my sister her great good send-off. Before the service begins, I see a 50-something-year-old lady in the dining hall. I hear her playing a video recording of the memorial service from the night before. She was precious to my sister. There are tears in her eyes but a smile on her face. “I didn’t manage to absorb anything yesterday,” she tells me. “But now that I have time I can truly experience the moment.”

“Are you going to keep the video?” I ask.

“Yeah. I will watch it every time I miss your sister. Or when I need strength. Now I realize how important all these videos are.”

There she is, my sister, in four places at once.

As I walked away, I wondered why anyone would want to watch a funeral on replay. Why collect such a somber and morbid moment? Why relive the grief over and over? Except, the lady seemed ... happy. She archived the last few moments of my sister in the box and on screen, and now she has my sister in her hand, at the click of phone button.

I pictured the lady seated at the foot of her bed with tissues in hand, watching the video night by night until she has exhausted her tears,

expended her agony, and processed her grief in full. Everyone at their own pace, perhaps. Why grieve in the fast lane when one can have self-service grieving in your pocket?

Moving through the dining hall, I passed the notice boards bearing photographs of the church youth. I take a cursory glance and spot my sister’s face. I wonder if Facebook is merely digital scrapbooks. Or if the recent resurgence of scrapbooks are merely analog Facebooks.

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Do people even print photos anymore? I guess some do.

There she is, my sister, in five places at once.

It is 10 minutes until the service begins. I return to my spot and brace myself for another long night. “That one is her sister,” a lady utters. A young man leaves her side and walks up to me. He hands me a letter. He says he is sorry. He shuffles to the front to grab a seat.

Paper. Ink. Handwritten. How artisanal.

He writes that he settled for a letter because he couldn’t yet bring himself to post on my sister’s Facebook wall. My eyes dart across the lined page. “It would feel too permanent”... “I couldn’t think fast enough”... “I wanted to be more personal”... “I still don’t have the right words to say”... “Just wanna express my condolences”...

An analog Facebook post in my hands? He seemed to suggest that himself.

The service begins, and I feel like dying all over again. I think about all the things my sister would say about the aesthetic of the ceremony. She would hate these flowers. She would love her shoes. She would hate her makeup. She would love the song list. She would hate to see us mourn.

And then I did it. I subtweeted my sister's memorial service in a WhatsApp group. I invited her closest friends from various walks of life to the group chat and subtweeted her funeral.

"Secret subtwitter. My sister would say this sermon is basically Joey at Monica and Chandler's wedding. She would say o hai so crowded so hot."

My partner who was cradling me asks if I know what I am doing. I say I need this for myself. I second guess myself for two seconds until the groupchat responses pour in:

"She would say why y'all crying"

"She rolling her eyes at y'all right now :P"

"Side note, she would find it hilarious if someone did this at the service: [YouTube link of Joey reading *Love You Forever*.]"

"Yah omg why are her brows so funny? Who drew them? I demand that we redo them!"

"The flowers damn ugly guys???"

"WHAT IS WITH THE MUSICCCCC"

"lol is this where the party is at?"

At this moment, I know that my sister made the right friends in life. All of them bore her mark. They were Horcruxes of her. They were Horcruxes for me. We spread out across the service hall, sobbing while pretending to look cool and politely begging strangers for tissue paper. But in the space of our phones, silently typing away, we are invincible, openly disseminating mutual care by co-constructing discursive thought bubbles on behalf of my sister, speaking as if she is here. This is where the party is at.

At some point in the night, one of my sister's friends sends us customized Telegram stickers of her face. He tells us that she created a set of them bearing different facial expressions. Her friends have been using her face as reaction stickers in

their text messages. My heart explodes with joy. The digital anthropologist in me is proud.

There she is, my sister, in six places at once.



IT IS THE MORNING of the cremation. This is it. I return to the group chat asking for strength. Her friends flood my phone with group photographs, ridiculous memes, affective emoji, and text. Some reminisce, some humor, some love, some pray.

They ask if I can maintain her Facebook account and Twitter feed. They ask if I can preserve her phone line and email accounts. They ask if I can mediate their distress by holding these digital spaces for their grief to unravel as they make sense of loss at such a young age. I promise I will. She would live in everyone's pockets.

We huddle together by the glass panel. Staff in white shirts wheel out the casket. People begin to wail. It is too much for me to bear. I start sobbing myself. My partner wraps his arm around me. I clutch my phone tighter. "She lives in my pocket," I remind myself. A man in the back starts to sing "Amazing Grace." Between sobs and sniffs, people join in. *Tutti* again. The song overwhelms me, and I can no longer see through my tears. "She lives in heaven," I convince myself.

There she is, my sister, in every place at once. •

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# REMOTE CONTROL

Stefan Molyneux's podcast empire, Freedomain Radio, has been called a cult. If it's not, why are listeners suddenly rejecting their families? by LINDA BESNER

**W**HEN COLLEEN COWGILL called Stefan Molyneux one February evening in 2008, she was crying so hard she could barely speak. "I just got really scared," Cowgill finally managed to say. "When you didn't message me back I thought maybe I had done something wrong ... and you didn't want to talk to me or something. Then I felt like I'd never be able to figure this stuff out."

Cowgill was 20, and she considered herself an anarchist-leaning libertarian. She had first become a member of Molyneux's online group, Freedomain Radio, three months earlier, when a YouTube friend pointed her to a discussion of Austrian school economics in one of Molyneux's videos. Freedomain Radio, or FDR, is where Molyneux, a "software entrepreneur" with a passion for anarcho-capitalist ideas,

disseminates videos and podcasts explaining how the world could be made better according to his lights. In recent years the site's content has veered further and further to the right: Molyneux speaks at men's rights conferences, is vocal in his support for Donald Trump, and posts videos with titles like, "Why Europe Owes the Migrants Nothing." But the Molyneux that Cowgill was getting to know seemed friendly and open. He made complex economic arguments easy to understand.

FDR doesn't make its traffic statistics public, but by 2008, when Cowgill was discovering the site, Molyneux claimed to have about 50,000 regular listeners; the website's "About" section claims that FDR is the largest and most popular philosophy show in the world, whose podcasts and videos "have been viewed/downloaded over 100 million times and counting." According to the analytics tracker SimilarWeb, the site currently seems to run to about 250,000 visitors per month—not a blockbuster in absolute terms, but a very respectable traffic range for philosophy sites. (Philosophynow.org gets about 330,000 views per month.) SimilarWeb reports that 43 percent of FDR's traffic comes from the U.S., the rest from an array of countries—at seven percent, the U.K. provides the site's second-highest number of users. Listeners are often in their late teens or early twenties. Molyneux is 50.

Over a period of several months, Cowgill became obsessed. At first, she listened to two or three hours of Molyneux's podcasts every day, eventually much more. The earlier political podcasts, which have titles like "What Is Libertarianism?" and "Chainsaw Surgery: Using the State to Help the Poor," are lectures, often more than an hour long, in which Molyneux debunks the banking system, the police system, and the voting system, and extols the efficiency of contracts between rational individuals. His delivery

is jocular yet tinged with moral exasperation, like a guidance counselor or a governess. Cowgill felt her eyes were being opened.

Cowgill was also spending a lot of time on Freedomain Radio's forums, where listeners congregated. Molyneux's site hosted open forums for listener discussion, and closed forums for more serious acolytes willing to pay for premium content in the form of extra podcasts and greater access to the man himself. (In addition to

## An online "cult" would not need to kidnap you, bring pamphlets to your door, or go to you at all. The onus is on you to indoctrinate yourself

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state currencies, you are now welcome to pay in Bitcoin, Litecoin, Dogecoin, and NXT.) Prized personal interactions with Molyneux tended to be confined only to those who had demonstrated a deeper commitment. These days, FDR's open forums are divided into categories like Libertarianism, Anarchism and Economics; Peaceful Parenting; Men's Issues, Feminism and Gender; and Atheism and Religion. They include topics ranging from, "How would an honest banking system work" to "What does it mean when someone says 'Orange is my favorite color?'"

Cowgill was used to socializing online. She had met her boyfriend at the time through her blog, and after he moved to Ohio from California to be with her, he became involved with FDR as well. On the forums, Cowgill felt surrounded by people who took an active interest in her life. Encouraged by other members, she made a transition from talking about economic theory to talking about herself, and started to question her

relationship with her family. As well as attacking formal political institutions, Molyneux's podcasts are vehicles for his theories on abusive families, which, for Molyneux, include most: Like the state, the family is powered by an engine of coercion and violence. FDR members spent a lot of time concern-trolling each other and pathologizing each other's IRL relationships with most anyone outside of FDR, providing alternative readings of each other's life histories. Cowgill came to believe that "everything I interpreted as love was manipulation and it was all a fraud." Her parents had never loved her, FDR members explained.

Freedom Radio has been described in the *Guardian* and the *Globe and Mail* as an online therapy cult (which Molyneux denies in the same pieces) with the objective of getting its adherents to deFOO—a term Molyneux invented, meaning to depart from one's Family of Origin. All adult actions and relationships should be voluntary, he told his listeners. On the February night when Cowgill called Molyneux sobbing, she had already taken steps to deFOO. Cowgill was studying aerospace engineering at Ohio State University, and said she had recently told her parents she wanted to start paying for college herself. Her parents told her they had been saving to pay for her education their whole lives, and her mother asked where the decision was coming from—did Colleen not want to be a part of the family anymore?

"So they're pretty smart, right?" Molyneux commented. Cowgill's mother divining her intentions so quickly showed "a kind of evil genius." He told Colleen that her family was refusing her right to make changes to the relationship. "We don't deFOO," he said. "We get deFOOed." Her parents were the ones de-daughtering. She wasn't leaving her family. They were throwing her out.

Cowgill was already moving into her boyfriend's place, and Molyneux asked why she was still interacting with her parents at all. She explained that she needed them to sign over the car to her. "You will never get the car," Molyneux told her. "You will only get subjugation." She mentioned that she would need her birth certificate, and he countered that she could get copies from the government. "Okay," she said quietly.

Molyneux listed off the things he and his wife lost access to when she deFOOed: a four-poster bed, books, old photographs. "Maybe we'll get it back after they're dead."

You'd be relieved, he suggested to Cowgill, if your parents got hit by a bus tomorrow and you never had to deal with them again, right? She assented. In that case, he told her, it was irrational to feel obliged to deal with them simply because they were still alive. Her relationship with her parents was over.

"I'm starting to be irritated with you," Molyneux told Cowgill. She was acting helpless and frightened when she should be happy to be ridding herself of a problem. He himself, he told Cowgill, kicked his inadequate mother out when he was 15. She drank, and had mental health issues, and abused him. He managed on his own, with roommates and several jobs, and he was better off without her.

"I'm scared," Cowgill said.

"That's not your feeling," Molyneux told her. "That's not your feeling at all."



*CULT* IS A WORD we tend to bandy around to describe anything that inspires a small and unreasonably passionate following. Wes Anderson movies are a cult, artisanal pickling is a cult, ultimate frisbee is a cult. In religious taxonomical terms, a cult is an offshoot of a sect, which is an offshoot of a denomination, which is a branch of a religion. A diagram of how the teachings of Christ resulted in the mass murder-suicides of David Koresh's Branch Davidians looks like this: Dissenters from mainstream Protestantism (itself a break with Catholicism) became Seventh Day Adventists whose dissenters became Shepherd's Rod messagists whose dissenters became Branch Davidians whose dissenters, led by David Koresh, formed their own group and, under siege by the FBI and American military, burned their compound and 76 of their members to death in 1993.



Anthropological studies suggest that people who break away from mainstream religions are generally seeking the same thing: a pure, ecstatic experience of transcendent meaning. It's what makes people sing and dance while handling live rattlesnakes; it's what makes people writhe on the floor speaking in tongues, or engage in ritualized sex or ritualized isolation. Religions tend to be born in a burst of visionary fervor, promising that the known world is about to be swept aside by a new world order in which only a small circle of the elect will survive. Revolution is in the air and the messiah is expected daily. Naturally, this rolling boil of emotion is hard to sustain. After a dozen or a thousand years, revelatory zeal tends to cool off and crystallize into bureaucracy. Those members of a congregation who feel most acutely the desire for a direct relationship with the divine strike out on their own. Cults are what happen when a mainstream religion's promised utopia fails to materialize.

It seems odd to refer to FDR as a cult. Molyneux is an atheist and spends hours of his podcast time arguing against religious belief. But in psychology, the cult designation is based on group structure and behavior rather than on the type of doctrine being spread. In the 1961 handbook *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, psychologist Robert Lifton suggests that cults can be identified by, among others, the following traits: the creation of neologisms designed to reshape the adherent's outlook, separation from family and friends, fostering cognitive dissonance, confessional pressure, and a charismatic leader. In other words, cults are about control.

Molyneux has denied that FDR is a cult. In a 2008 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, he said, "I'm sure a few marriages broke up because of feminism, it doesn't make feminism a cult." The

article reports his claim that only some 20 of his young followers had left their families. Noting that four percent of the population was considered sociopathic, he wrote, "If we assume that separating from a truly sociopathic parent would be emotionally advantageous, then we are far below the average." Not intervening in his listeners' lives would be "like stepping over someone on the sidewalk who's collapsed and saying, 'I don't want to get involved.'"

## Listening to Molyneux's podcasts is allowing oneself to dissolve into a surreal universe where everyone is so much safer standing on the ceiling

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Barbara Weed, a British municipal councilor whose 18-year-old son left in 2008 as a result of his involvement with FDR, tracked the forums obsessively after her son's departure; by 2009 she had recorded posts by almost 100 users who had deFOOed or were considering deFOOing. In 2012, Molyneux's wife, a therapist named Christina Papadopoulos, was found guilty of professional misconduct by Ontario's College of Psychologists for appearing as a guest on Molyneux's podcast to recommend deFOOing. In 2014, a Texan woman who went by the screen name Tru Shibes filed a complaint against Molyneux for getting her YouTube channel, in which she featured clips from his videos in order to rebut his arguments, shut down for copyright violation. She also provided the *Globe and Mail* with audio of one of Molyneux's podcasts in which he describes listening in to his wife's therapy sessions with patients in her home office. It's

a bit hard to tell if he's kidding; according to the *Globe's* transcript of the audio (which is no longer available on Molyneux's site), he says: "I'm in the vent system, listening, and I'm—she calls it heckling, but I don't really call it heckling, I just call it providing suggestions about how things should go and that the people should donate to Freedomain Radio."

Idealism can be brutal; if you truly believe you can change the world for the better, you can justify telling other people what to do. Paradoxically, while FDR espouses libertarian philosophy and claims to be ushering its adherents into a place of greater self-reliance and freedom, ex-members like Cowgill describe an atmosphere of strongly enforced conformity. Those who choose to leave the community are sometimes targeted for doxxing and harassment. In their attempt to break with mainstream society's worldview, which they have come to see as corrupt, acolytes can lose themselves in a morass of anxiety about what constitutes right thinking by Molyneux's standards. In the course of her 2008 phone call, Cowgill mentions her attempt to use RTR with her mother—another of Molyneux's neologisms, it stands for Real Time Relationships. He responds by telling her she hasn't quite grasped the meaning of the technique, "but that's okay." It's not hard to see how this type of guidance—the kind that makes you feel stupid and unworthy—can be addictive. It plays to our fears.

Stefan Molyneux lives in Mississauga, Ontario, within Toronto's ring of urban sprawl, and in the early days of FDR, he held an annual barbecue at his house for listeners. There seem to be occasional in-person meet-ups between adherents living in the same region. But for the most part, FDR followers meet on the forums. Becoming a follower of FDR might well mean giving up IRL connections and transferring one's emotional, spiritual, and intellectual life online.

In some ways, an online "cult" would be even more effective than an IRL one. Marshall Applewhite, the leader of Heaven's Gate, told his followers that he was a "walk-in"—an alien soul that had entered a human body. Alan John Miller, leader of Australia's active Divine Truth

cult, claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus. Molyneux for his part makes no such claims and, in his podcasts, at times explicitly poo-hoops the idea that he is anyone special. But the digital platform may, almost accidentally, make them for him. If the game is transcendence, the nature of his messages already confers certain spooky metaphysical abilities. Molyneux is not one but many; you could imagine a choir of his thousands of podcasts all speaking at once with equal authority. As a digital guide, he is not constrained by a mortal's calendar, but is available to would-be followers 24/7. Molyneux's disembodied voice can be started and stopped, raised and lowered. Time and space are simply constructs that, like the income tax, can be abolished or rearranged.



IF INDIVIDUALISM IS THE dominant religion of the West, being physically alone is quickly becoming a denomination. Modern values have come to lean heavily in favor of self-actualization and self-determination, with less moral stigma associated with prioritizing individual goals over family bonds. There are more single-person households in North America now than ever before; co-dependence and over-involvement are pathologies. If there is an ecstatic experience that combines both radical individualism and a messianic call to a new kind of society, deFOOing—leaving one's immediate bonds for a remote community—may be it. Virtual communities at their best offer a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too form of communalism. You can belong and still luxuriate in solitude in your underwear.

As a business, Freedomain Radio has the virtues of a well-marketed self-help empire. Plenty of people are writing books like *The Secret*; not many are marrying anarchic market theory to a therapy regimen leading to secession from your family. Considered as a cult, Molyneux's digital cloister has some significant advantages over bricks-and-mortar outfits. For

movements like “the Moonies,” who started recruiting fresh-faced youth from bus stations and airports in the 1970s, a success meant another mouth to feed. While gently coercing adherents into donating their savings to the group in exchange for the honor of doing long days of farm labor in between prayer sessions is not a bad way to come up with seed money (in 2010, *Forbes* estimated the group assets of Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s business/religion at \$1.5 billion), it is even better to coax people to pay money for spiritual advice without having to take on any responsibility for their physical well-being. Adherents who depend on FDR for the lion’s share of their human contact are loyal to Molyneux without showing up on his doorstep expecting to be taken care of.

In 2008 the *Globe and Mail* estimated Molyneux’s annual income from FDR at \$59,640, a sum based on the price points for different levels of access to his podcasts. The bitcoin tracking site Blockchain Info states that since its creation, Freedomain Radio’s website has received 653.62376497 bitcoin—the equivalent of \$381,056. It’s not much for nearly 10 years (bitcoin was invented in 2008), although bitcoin is only one of the currencies FDR receives. Of course, there are plenty of people online soliciting donations for their work, some of whom make a living off the support they receive. But donating to a podcast whose work you enjoy seems different than donating to a podcast whose adherents sometimes tune in for hours or days at a time, and sometimes cut off contact with their families afterward.

The digital marketplace of ideas can also be more friendly to recruitment than bricks-and-mortar organizations. In the newest edition of their book *The Devil’s Long Tail: Religious and Other Radicals in the Internet Marketplace*, British academics David Stevens and Kieron O’Hara remark that the Moonies had to hang around bus stations all day to pick out the few souls who were willing to spend a long weekend at a farm talking spirituality with a bunch of strangers. Online, however, people who are already seeking spiritual answers can come to Google with their questions. People at prime recruitment age are look-

ing around for new experiences, new influences. If they find Rush Limbaugh or Alex Jones, they may get hooked, but the result may be only that they offend family and friends at Thanksgiving dinner. Those who find Molyneux may not be at Thanksgiving at all.

An online “cult” would not need to kidnap you, or bring pamphlets to your door, or go to you at all; instead, you would go to them. Perhaps the greatest difference is how much of a self-starter the average follower needs to be. The onus is on you to indoctrinate yourself.



THE GURU HIMSELF IS, on first impression, delightful. His many videos show a chatty, balding man with a smackable forehead, comically wiggling his eyebrows as he debunks the silly nonsense we’ve been fed by silly governments, parents, and teachers. Born in Ireland, his voice retains a tinge of a lilt, despite his having come to Canada when he was just 11 years old. In his youth, he showed skill as a programmer but wanted to be an actor, and attended Montreal’s National Theatre School before pursuing a master’s degree in history at the University of Toronto. He founded a software company with his brother in the late 1990s, which they sold in 2000. Molyneux started Freedomain Radio in 2005 as a hobby—in early podcasts, recorded in the car on his way to work at another software job, you can hear him sipping his morning coffee.

Recently, I took a day to listen to a tiny fraction of Molyneux’s podcasts, which now number more than 5,000. (His conversation with Cowgill was released, with her permission, as podcast 991.) It was an oddly pleasant experience, like taking a mild sedative and watching *Polka Dot Door*. Molyneux’s friendly voice ranged freely from topic to topic, circling the benefits of small government before touching on gun violence and flitting from there to peaceful parenting tactics and then to the moral ill of single motherhood—women, he said, are at fault when fathers

are absent, because women are the ones who chose unreliable men. The effect is of allowing oneself to dissolve into a surreal universe where the laws of gravity are reversed and everyone is so much safer standing on the ceiling.

My favorite was an early one—number 38, recorded in 2006 and entitled “The Death Cult of Narnia.” It’s nominally a review of Disney’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but Molyneux’s quarrel is with the basic premise of C.S. Lewis’s story. “Of course you can’t get a portal to another world through the back of a closet!” he snorts. The family should have taken Lucy aside and explained to her that having tea with a faun in a wardrobe is impossible, and then taken her for psychiatric evaluation. Perhaps, Molyneux muses, Lucy’s hallucinations are an early indication of brain tumor—in which case, the fantasy world Lewis imagines around this symptom is tantamount to authorial child abuse. “A concerned writer who cared about children and their health would write about this and make it so that you don’t just believe the crazy person, you write it so that the child gets help.”

I see the appeal—it’s oddly soothing to be told why I’ve been wrong about everything my whole life. Molyneux’s certainty is the negative image of my own tentatively held beliefs, and capitulation is tempting. Molyneux seems to hold out the promise that I will soon be able to stand on my own two feet—but first he will need to re-educate me about what legs are. I can imagine that, for the young people who come to FDR, the promise of self-sufficiency paired with the safety of long apprenticeship speaks to both their desires at once.

The feeling the call-in shows gave me, however, was not so soothing. Barbara Weed, the British councilor whose son, Tom, deFOOed in 2008, sent me links to two podcasts, one featuring Tom and Candice (his girlfriend at the time), and one in which Tom called in alone. “You like me, right?” Stefan asks. “I like you! I love you!” this 18-year-old boy says to a man he met online six months earlier. “Welcome to the desert island of truth,” Molyneux tells Tom and Candice. Candice describes legitimately abusive behavior—her father slamming her older broth-

er against a wall—and calls this a “rubbish” way to raise children. Molyneux tells her she is going to have to start watching her language. “You used words like ‘crap’ and ‘rubbish’ and so on,” he tells her, “but frankly, it’s evil.”

Tom describes his father breaking a window in a temper and yelling at the family cats. Molyneux calls this “staggeringly evil”—“this guy’s psychotic rage laid waste to significant aspects of your childhood and your soul,” he says. He refers to Tom’s home as a gulag, and tells him that his mother is just as much (if not more so) the author of the situation as his father. Whatever they may say to the contrary, Molyneux says, women always know immediately that a man will be abusive. His mother’s thought process, Molyneux explains, went like this: “This sick son of a bitch, who’s a bully, who’s psychotic, who’s insane, who’s violent, who’s terrifying, who’s destructive, who screams at cats! I’m going to have sex with him, I’m going to carry his children, I’m going to have his children, and I’m going to give him the children. It’s not that she failed to protect you from the devil, she created you for the devil.”



“IT’S SO HARD TO explain,” Colleen Cowgill told me recently, “because it’s really just the craziest thing.” Cowgill was sitting on her bed at her parents’ house in Ohio, where she was visiting, talking with me over Skype. She is now 29 and in her third year of Ph.D. studies in psychology, specializing in social psychology. Soon after leaving FDR a few years ago, Cowgill read everything she could get her hands on that discussed cult dynamics. She’s still trying to understand what happened to her.

Shortly after the 2008 phone call with Molyneux (who did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this article), Cowgill left Ohio and moved to Atlanta with her boyfriend, telling her family only that she wanted no further contact with them. She believed she would never see

or speak to them again. “I found out later that they hired a private investigator to find out my address so they could send birthday cards,” she said. She had become socially isolated to the point of agoraphobia, convinced that people who did not belong to FDR were dangerous. “I looked at everyone else as being damaged, unpredictable, can’t be trusted.”

Cowgill’s membership in the group lasted for two years, time in which Cowgill became totally reliant on Molyneux and the FDR forum. She spent thousands of dollars on membership in the group’s upper tiers, and she modified both her inner and outer life to conform with its ideals. Her description makes it sound like a particularly pernicious high school clique. “It wasn’t this very explicit top-down control but it was much more insidious—people were judged for what they wore, how they presented themselves, what kind of movies they liked, what kind of music they liked.” Members policed each other’s behavior, and anything could be pathologized as evidence of dysfunction or childhood trauma. All under the guise of concern for each other’s mental well-being. “I think some of it was genuine,” Cowgill said, “but also we all wanted to be seen as the people who had made the most progress on ourselves.” The best way to show one’s loyalty is to tattle on one’s neighbors. During her time as a member, Cowgill also saw the hierarchy of levels of closeness to Molyneux intensifying—by the time she left in 2009, in addition to the publicly advertised rungs of Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Philosopher King, there were invite-only levels of commitment known only to those Molyneux considered worthy.

The self-indoctrination aspect of her experience was what Cowgill said differentiated FDR most sharply from an IRL cult. “Here I’m voluntarily listening to podcasts for six hours,” she said. “No one’s making me.” As she invested more time and energy both in the philosophical ideas and in the authority of the person delivering them, it got progressively harder to question them. On the forums, Cowgill shared details of her childhood, friendships, relationships, and personal tastes, all of which she came to reject or adapt in response

to praise or admonishment from the group.

Eventually, the group turned their attention on Cowgill’s romantic life. Molyneux’s marriage was seen as the model relationship—a perfect balance of intimacy and independence. Cowgill was given to understand that she and her boyfriend were in a co-dependent entanglement that failed to meet Molyneux’s standards. She broke it off, and ended up alone in a dangerous part of the city with no job and no plan. It was the beginning of the end for Cowgill’s involvement with FDR. “It wasn’t like a lightbulb went off or anything,” she says. “More like a slow and painful realization that I had become reliant on this group for approval—it was the opposite of the independence I wanted.” Cowgill’s commitment to libertarian ideals had paradoxically led her to invest all of her identity in a group that placed strict limits on what to wear, how to act, who to associate with, and what to think.

In 2010, two years after she had cut off all contact with her family, Cowgill went home for a visit. It was extremely disorienting. “I felt—almost amnesia about the house I grew up in, the town I was from. My family was overjoyed to see me. It took me a lot more time to get back in touch with what I felt.” Her parents had been to see a counselor who specialized in cults. They had books for her to read to help with her transition.



I FOUND COWGILL THROUGH a video she made shortly after leaving FDR. The video is featured on a site called FDR Liberated, which proclaims itself “the second most-read forum by Freedom Radio members!” Liberating oneself from Stefan Molyneux’s influence can become an obsession, and people gather on the forum to post videos like “Dealing With Brainwashed Family Members” and comment on threads like “Stef’s manipulative language.” In the site’s “About” section, the unnamed creator traces their own experience with FDR—after reading Ayn Rand, they became interested in market anarchy and

came upon Molyneux's podcasts. They couldn't, however, get on board with the deFOOing philosophy. "The idea that there are vast subterranean forces at work in my mind, brought on by parental abuse I never recognized ... no, just not feelin' it. To this day, I'm fascinated by the typical first-posters at FDR. Their posts run something like this: 'Hi! I just realized my family is evil. So I'm here to learn about the philosophy of market anarchy! 'Sup, everyone?'"

In Cowgill's video, she seems to be neither the sobbing, emotionally distraught acolyte from her phone call with Molyneux nor the composed, slightly formal Ph.D. student I talked with on Skype. She's performative, like a theater student. "Hello! Hi everyone!" she starts, leaning confidently toward her webcam. "I'm positively giddy today!" Detailing her involvement with FDR, she says, "You could not have told me that I was susceptible to any type of indoctrination."

In *The Devil's Long Tail*, Stevens and O'Hara remark that radical groups online are subject to the same algorithmic pressures as books on Amazon. "Generally," they write, "in the larger religious marketplace, moderate ideas draw the most consumers." The history of religion shows a continual cresting and breaking of religious movements known as the church-sect cycle. Groups that start out isolationist and radical either peter out with the death of their founder, or—like Mormonism—they discard practices and beliefs that are out of step with the greater social environment, and their members be-

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## The pursuit of anarchic liberty has meant a loss of privacy even greater than the digital era's norm

come re-integrated into society. Since she left FDR, Cowgill stresses, the group has drifted far from the kumbaya, let's-save-the-world-together group she joined in 2008. Cowgill sees Molyneux's most recent teachings as hate speech—which is arguably a more dominant strain in the wider culture. The utopic vision of compassionate anarchy that attracted Cowgill and other early adherents seems to be giving way to a more conventional ideological position: espousal of right-wing politics and hatred of minorities. Loving Donald Trump and hating your parents may be an easier sell than establishing a free society based on mutual respect for contracts.

Actually, it's not quite correct to say that I found Cowgill through her video. I found her because after she left FDR and posted the video, an anonymous user created a profile page about her on the site DeFoo.org. "Colleen gave up on FDR because the community didn't support the wearing of makeup," the anonymous user reports. After she broke up with her boyfriend, "she needed to attract a new male and was having trouble without her precious face paint. She admits to struggling with acne and feels insecure if people can see it. Colleen now applies a thick layer of foundation, nearly as thick as her false self." The site has similar profiles for a number of other former members, often including their phone numbers, addresses, criminal records, and the full names of their parents, siblings, and friends.

"I have no idea who it is," Cowgill says resignedly of the page's creator. Her family called the police after they started receiving harassing phone calls, but there wasn't much they could do. "Sometimes I wish I could shuck off the stigma, it's a weird life thing to have been through." But Cowgill has largely made her peace with the fact that anyone googling her name is likely to come across references to her past involvement with an organization often referred to as a cult. Her pursuit of anarchic liberty has meant a loss of privacy even greater than the digital era's norm. The effects of membership, even when the group is online, are felt in the immediate world.



THE ACHIEVEMENT OF TRUE free choice, true individual liberation, eludes us in part because very few of us would actually want it. Free choice is exhausting, and doing as we're told is comforting. Making moral decisions is difficult, and moral absolutes are easy. Most of us abdicate at least some responsibility for our beliefs, taking our cues from people we trust. And for most of us, the desire for self-determination is easily bested by the desire to belong. A major misconception about cults is that only certain types of people join them. In a world where everyone is supposed to want to be a leader, we suppose that any sort of radical community centered on a dominant personality would be peopled by followers—the duped, the damaged, the ignorant, those who aren't strong enough or smart enough to think for themselves. It's the same way we think about abusive relationships in general. But the manipulative tools that foster cognitive dissonance and self-doubt work on all kinds of individuals.

One phrase recurs when former members try to explain what makes people join cults: No one joins a cult. It's the opening sentence of Deborah Layton's 1998 memoir *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the People's Temple*. Layton, who escaped right before the mass murder/suicide in the Guyana compound, explains that people believe themselves to be joining churches, political organizations, charities, or community groups. People aren't looking to be controlled. They're looking to be connected.

For those left behind, the effect of a loved one's disappearance into the internet is profoundly odd. In our conversation, Barbara Weed recounted recent details of her son's life as she had gleaned them from LinkedIn, Facebook, or by lurking on FDR's own forums under a false name. She was happy when he found a job fundraising for a charity, and she had the impression that he was living about 10 miles outside Brighton. "I think he cycles in," she told me. "For a really good cyclist like him 10 miles is no distance." Her vivid

imaginings of her son's adult life reminded me of a sequence from Roald Dahl's 1983 novel *The Witches*. In the book, witches invent various ways of getting rid of children, whom they despise. In one strange case, a little girl arrives home from school eating an apple that she says a nice lady had given her. The next morning, the child is not in her bed. The distraught family searches everywhere for their daughter and finally finds her—in an oil painting hanging on the wall. "There she is! That's Solveg feeding the ducks!" the father shouted." Over the years, Solveg moved around inside the oil painting—one day she would be inside the farmhouse looking out the window, the next she would be outside with a duck in her arms. Over the years, the parents watched the figure age inside the frame.

If this description foreshadowed the digital trace, the irony Cowgill discovered—that an organization promoting individual liberty can, when run in a certain way, reduce individuals to dependency—feels like a lesson for the digital age. More freedom is one of the digital world's main promises: Online, you can access anything, go anywhere, be anyone. Molyneux's utopic vision of a world in which we can simply delete everyone we don't like feels like a cross between Facebook, Photoshop, and *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. If a person doesn't spark joy, we should simply throw them away. But a virtual community that promises to free us from the emotional complexity of our proximate lives can only offer to replace it with the emotional complexity of our digital lives. If we reached utopia, would it stay utopian? Or would our sufferings replicate themselves so quickly that the new world would be indistinguishable from the old? •

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*Linda Besner's nonfiction has been featured in the Walrus, Hazlitt, and Reader's Digest, and her radio work has aired on CBC's Definitely Not the Opera and The Next Chapter. Her first book, The Id Kid, was named as one of the National Post's Best Poetry Books of the Year. Her second collection, Feel Happier in Nine Seconds, will be published by Coach House Books in 2017.*

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[reallifemag.com/remote-control](http://reallifemag.com/remote-control)



# SEEING STARS

When you're grieving, a phone can become an optical instrument, turning magical thinking to magical realism  
by ALEX RONAN

**W**HEN MY BROTHER Mark died I didn't feel like being alive anymore, but sleep was as close as I was willing to put myself to death. So I slept endlessly. When I woke up, at 2 p.m., at 4 a.m., again at 7 a.m., I'd scroll through social media until I could will myself back to sleep. Kanye would tweet something. When I woke again, people were sharing photos of his tweet printed out and hung in their office cubi-

cles. The next time I woke up, the tweet was on cakes and T-shirts.

Celebrities and countries were fighting; the wifi at my mom's apartment ran so slowly that things took absurdly long to load. I watched a 30-second TMZ clip of a model on a beach posing seductively before being knocked down by a wave as it slowly buffered over 10 minutes. A week later, someone finally restarted the router.



When I left the apartment, the world felt too harsh—fast and bright and no longer mine. People reached out but I spent most of my time alone, wearing Mark’s clothes, sleeping in the room that had been mine and then his and was now mine again.

Some days, I worked frantically on making a memorial service that would feel true to someone who wore flip-flops everywhere and died only a few months after turning 21. Some days I couldn’t do more than order Seamless from Mark’s account. “Hi, Mark,” Seamless said. Often I missed daylight entirely, catching up later on my phone. Each year-end roundup made me furious. I didn’t want the last year Mark was alive to end and I definitely didn’t want a new one to start without him.

In January, a few days after the memorial, David Bowie died. I scrolled through hundreds of tweets and Instagram posts. *What about Mark?* I thought, stewing in my bed. *Why didn’t the whole entire world stop when he died?* Then Snape died. Then Céline Dion’s husband. Everyone kept calling it tragic; *he was 73!* I wanted to shout. People were tweeting and penning Facebook posts; everyone was “devastated” and “heartbroken.” But I knew that after clicking tweet or post or share most people carried right along with their days. They’d listen to Bowie on the subway home from work. But when they turned the key in the lock, they left their grief behind.

Grief was my entire world—it crowded my thoughts and clouded everything I did. But I clung to it too. A friend of Mark’s, who had lost her mother, told me grief is like a wound. Slowly, it’ll heal. You’ll still have the scar, but it won’t hurt as much. She meant this as a comfort; I took it as a threat. I didn’t want the pain to go away because it would take me further from Mark. I’d lost him and I wasn’t willing to give up anything else. What would I be left with if I could overcome the loss of my brother?

Grieving is knowing something to be true without fully accepting it. My phone proved a necessary distraction. I played endless rounds of solitaire, placing a jack on a queen, moving a six here, putting an ace up, unfurling new cards. Shockingly soon, a trophy popped up on my

screen. I’d played 1,000 games.

On one of these endlessly long days, someone retweeted a photo of stars beneath a series of coordinates. The image was crowded with pinpricks of light and I clicked to @AndromedaBot. Some guy named Joe had created it to explore Hubble’s largest photo “a little bit at a time.” The full photo offers the clearest picture of the Andromeda galaxy. Apparently, you’d need 600 HD TVs to display the entire thing. There are over 100 million stars visible, but no indication at what point someone stopped counting.

Between tweets covering the most mundane details of celebrities’ lives, the celestial began to appear regularly in my feed. Each photo segment was dramatically different from the one that preceded it. Sometimes, it looked like spilled glitter. Sometimes there was only blackness with a smattering of planets and stars, one much bigger than the rest. The photos varied from purplish to puce to a speckled black. A little bit at a time made a lot of sense.



“ALEX SAW AN ASTRONOMER!” my mom said to my brother Robert after I’d told her. “Astrologer,” I corrected her, wincing. Robert is many things and one of them is someone who studied astronomy in college. He rolled his eyes and grabbed a seltzer. “That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” he said. “It’s just a way of looking at things,” I responded, defensively, before adding, “You can get something out of it even if you don’t believe in it.” He rifled through the fancy baked goods people were still sending us, mostly ignoring me. “I can learn something about Mark from a novel, even if I know it’s not real,” I said, but by then he was already gone, down the hall.

I’d agreed to go to my friend Grace’s astrologer even though I did not want to be one of those people who look for something in nothing. After Mark’s death, I was wary of anything that promised comfort, afraid I might slide uncontrollably into becoming the kind of person who finds messages in burnt toast. On the day of my

appointment, I almost feigned a migraine, but I knew everyone would know I was lying. Instead, I put a coat over the sweatpants I'd been wearing for days, and went to see Jeane, to whom I'd already given the date, location, and time of my birth, plus Mark's.

Jeane opened the door wearing a bright orange baseball cap with nothing on it. It looked absurd, but in a good way. *Okay*, I thought. *I can do this*. We sat across from each other at her dining room table and she offered me snacks. Since I don't know anything about astrology, she would point to something on the chart, say what it was, and then tell me what that told her.

It was comforting to hear a stranger echo back minor details of Mark's life. "His [something] is in the [something]," she said, "and to me, that indicates a reluctant interest in fashion." I laughed and told her that Mark had been model scouted on the subway, walking twice in New York Fashion Week. He'd been nonchalant about it, but he was clearly proud, especially when they asked him to return for a second show. "Mark," she said, jovially, "Mark! If you're here, we know you loved it."

I thought of helping him cut his jeans into jorts. I thought of all the times he'd knocked on my door to show me a weird sweatshirt he'd bought at a thrift store with Caroline. I thought of the summer before, when his shirt and shorts clashed so much someone asked if it was laundry day with a knowing smile and we had laughed because it wasn't.

Something rising somewhere indicated an interest in the arts, visual maybe. Mark had kept a list of all the movies he wanted to watch, crossing out those he'd seen. He took beautiful portraits of his friends and family; he loved photography so deeply.

Jeane showed me a line on his chart that indicated the pain he'd experienced. Another line crossed that one, there was a moon rising somewhere, and this meant he'd been a leader. "There are two types of leaders," Jeane said. "There are those that come down from the mountain insisting they know the answers and then there's the kind of quiet leadership that comes from within." Mark, she said, was the latter. "The people that most received his message were his peers."

I thought of Mark's friends and the night they came over after he died. We were in the kitchen and they all trooped in, the dogs barking, the boys ever taller than before, the girls following behind. Usually, they'd come in laughing and joking, usually Mark would be somewhere in the bunch. My eyes had traveled over all of them until the last one entered, because I wanted to see Mark there, Mark here, Mark pulling open the fridge door and grabbing a seltzer.

"It's strange," I said, "He was in immense pain, he struggled so much, but he wasn't really the picture of a depressed person. He was joyful and funny and so much fun to be around. Sometimes it was really confusing."

Then Jeane said something I still carry with me. "Think about what photography is—it's about turning darkness into light. That's not a metaphor, that's literally what it is. Sometimes you see that in people too. There's something really beautiful about a person who can turn their own pain and their own darkness into light for others."

I found Jeane's method hard to believe in, but what she said I knew to be true. Mark was a leader, a light, a person whose life was marked by suffering and profound happiness, isolatingly untranslatable pain and also the warmth of community. But his death by suicide raised endless questions about responsibility, inevitability, and choice that I wrestled with constantly.

The stars and planets don't stop just because someone's life does, Jeane said; she could continue to read his chart even though he had died. There would be, according to Jeane, a period of nearness for several years, based on the alignment of astronomical things I can't remember. Then, Jeane said, there would be a change. "I don't want you to take that to mean that in seven years Mark is coming back," she said. "Maybe it just means you guys find a new way of living with his loss, a new way of remembering him."

Jeane clearly had wisdom, but she didn't pretend to have all the answers. I wanted to know how Mark could possibly be here if he was no longer living, I needed to know where to find him and what to look for. I was grateful that Jeane didn't offer certainty she didn't have, but I also wanted it so badly.

“He’s in your heart,” people would say, but that was not enough. I wanted him alive, and if not alive, I wanted him here still in some real, quantifiable way. I wanted an explanation that I could have relayed to Mark without him raising his eyes suggestively while making the exaggeratedly spooky noises from Scooby Doo and then cracking up.



WE DO NOT COME from a religious household, even though my dad was once a Catholic altar boy. Growing up, religion was largely the domain of our grandmothers, who’d wear crosses around their necks (one Catholic, one Protestant) and go to church on Sundays. They believed in things like heaven and angels but never tried to push that on us, except for the time my great aunt got so worried that my older brother Andrew and I might die and rot in purgatory that she led our little selves into the bathroom, locked the door, and performed her own baptism in the bathtub.

The idea of the spirit or the soul felt false; instead, I clung to the idea of energy, which seemed more rigorously provable. *He’s dead, but he is not gone*, I’d insist to myself. *The energy he was made of is still here. He’s not turning into a tree, that’s fine, but there’s probably some of him in this room. That’s just science.* I didn’t really know much about energy beyond the whole “can neither be created nor destroyed” thing, but I thought maybe the body let go of any unused energy at death. I liked to picture him around us. Mostly I imagined that energy just loosely close and there when we needed it, Mark nearby but not watching us pee or anything like that.

I googled it. “Quick note: If you’re presently grieving, don’t read this,” said the first result. Of course, I ignored the warning. A lot of energy, it turns out, goes toward decomposition and is then expelled as heat. It’s true that the waves and particles and protons that made him my living, breathing brother are still here ... somewhere. But as I read more, I realized that I’d only fo-

cused on the second half of the energy law. All that energy passed through him, but it didn’t really come from him.

And so energy wasn’t the answer, but maybe light could give me some comfort. I thought about the light that illuminated our lives—the days and weeks and months and years in which all four of us were alive. I imagined that light radiating endlessly outward into the universe. It was comforting to think that when we look into the sky we’re seeing the past, since that’s where I wanted to be. After some googling, I determined that if you traveled two light years away from earth, you’d see the planet as it was when me and my three brothers all lived. You’d have to go 12 trillion miles.

If you went further, so far I can’t even understand what the number of miles is, you could turn and you’d see the planet as it was when I only had two brothers, but Mark wouldn’t be dead, he just wouldn’t be born yet. Further still and I’d ruin Andrew’s only-child status. Back further and the Ronan kids would mean my dad and his siblings, not me and mine.

Mark was dead, but that light of our lives wouldn’t stop traveling. *What we had together isn’t over; it’s just moving away*, I told myself. Then it occurred to me that the earth is a planet, not a star. I asked my boyfriend Greg how you could see the earth from light years away if it wasn’t producing light. When he explained, I burst into tears. To double check, I emailed my friend Raillan, who knows more than anyone else about how these things work. I didn’t tell him why I needed to know. Raillan wrote back quickly and didn’t ask why I was suddenly interested in exosolar planets. He talked about interstellar smog smothering luminosity. He acknowledged that the earth is emitting light, but only a little, and mostly from reflected sunlight. Atmospheric dust and interstellar smog did not fit into what I’d imagined. I was devastated.



SOMETIMES I TRIED TO take part in my own life. I saw friends; I started working again. I knew I

seemed okay for a girl whose brother died, but I also knew I was irreparably broken and I didn't want to be fixed. I still used my phone whenever I needed to not think about anything. I got up to level 82 in TwoDots before deleting it entirely.

I continued collecting memories and stories and details about Mark. I came across a song called "I Love You, But Goodbye" that made me sob uncontrollably for an hour. If not directly from him, the words felt of him. I sent it to Caroline and she wrote back to say that Mark loved the band. I had no idea. It felt like the most precious gift.

I wish I believed that Mark was watching from somewhere, offering me this comfort from afar. I don't exactly believe all that, but he did live and love and share his life with a lot of people, so it's also true in a way, that these comforts come from him. His energy, or what's left of it, may not surround us, but his influence does, and that was born of the days and nights he spent here, all the energy he put into being alive.

I wonder what it was like to be him, to live with a brain that works constantly against you. I wish that something could have helped him. Some things did, but not enough and now he's gone.

I keep the star charts Jeane drew in a drawer—Mark's, mine, the one we shared. Every day, as soon as I get home, I crawl back into bed. The world still moves too fast for me, and celebrity minutiae feels more like my speed. A tabloid tells me that Selena Gomez got a coffee. Then, later: How to get Selena's coffee casual look. Later still, I click one that went something like "Sipping Coffee and Sending Texts: Ten Theories On Who Selena Is Talking To (Hint: It's Not Justin)."

Between those, the Andromeda bot appears in my feed, spitting out stars. The bot offers a look at the physical universe, something that is, no matter what meaning we ascribe to it. The expansiveness that each tweet communicates makes me feel tiny. Even though the pain of losing Mark feels bigger than anything else, the photos remind me that something bigger is everywhere around. The stars shine for no one at all and the bot tweets endlessly to an unknown audience. We look to the stars for meaning, we make the bots that go on and on without us.

Grieving or not, we place ourselves and try to find our place.

I signed up for the Hubble press newsletter and now the stars come to my inbox. I get an embargoed photo of what I agree looks like "a gigantic cosmic soap bubble" and learn that the Hubble telescope now has two million Facebook friends. They're always finding new things. A few weeks ago it was three potentially habitable worlds near some dwarf star. Before that, a comet with fragments from Earth's formation returned after billions of years in something called cold storage. It may offer clues about the beginning of our solar system. It may not. I'm sure they'll let me know.

These days, I don't take much comfort in ideas about energy. I don't entirely know how light works, except that it doesn't work in the way I want it to. I don't look at the stars and imagine the heavens; when I look at the stars, I think of what Mark's friend Lizzy said: "He could find the Big Dipper even if the sky was cloudy." I think of the things Mark taught me and I wonder what he knew about the sky.

When people ask how we are, I usually say, "Every day seems impossible, but then it is over." I mean that I don't know how to live without him. I mean that I don't want to have to figure it out, but that I will, largely because the days keep coming, but also because I know Mark wouldn't want it another way.

I carry him in my heart, of course, and he's alive in our memories. Sometimes I even see Mark in my dreams. It's so painful to be here without him, but when I look up at the stars, when I'm feeling too sad to do anything but refresh my Twitter feed, and the @AndromedaBot pops up, I just feel lucky. Mark isn't here, but he was. Of all the galaxies, we both ended up in this one, right on this planet, at the same time. We were here together, and that's not nothing. •

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*Alex Ronan is a writer living in Berlin, mostly. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, New York magazine, Dwell, and elsewhere.*

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# ADVANCED SEARCH

What does spiritual mindfulness mean in a medium defined by other people? by **FRANCESKA ROUZARD**

I WAS BORN IN 1990, the year the first web browser was published, a leap forward in the evolution of communication unseen since the invention of the telephone. In 1995, my mother died. I was sent to live with my father, an ambitious, working class Haitian immigrant. We owned a Compaq Presario, complete with dial-up internet service courtesy of the free trial disk from America Online that we received in the

mail. It sat on a broken desk in the dining room, whose only other furnishing was a brown, corduroy recliner. While my father married several times and fathered more children, he was never sentimental about birthdays or holidays or childhood memories. I was lonely without my mother. The convenient ability to connect across physical boundaries came at an opportune time in my life.

By the time AOL Instant Messenger was released in 1997, I could read and write. I do not remember the exact sequence of events but I imagine I exchanged usernames with one of my mother's nieces or nephews during one of the visits my father rarely permitted. Communication

came easier. The summers I spent away from my mother's family were spent in front of the computer. I ate meals over its keyboard. During the school years, I did my homework by the glow of its screen. My cousins and I talked about cartoons and cursed often, a freedom our parents didn't allow. They told me stories from when I was a baby, when my mother was alive. From them, I learned she was an amazing cook. My favorite was the story of my aunt's neighbors who built a fence after I gave all of their children chickenpox. Another aunt, my mother's younger sister, used to say during my stretches of absence that we would always find each other. She did not know the unbreakable bond between us, which transcended time and distance, would be embodied through chatrooms and instant messages, first on AOL, then on MSN, where we played Uno like we did after dinner during the holidays.



WHEN THE COMPAQ DIED in 2002 I was without a computer for two years. It was the longest I had gone without speaking to my family since I left them as a toddler. In 2004, my father connected a used Dell Tower to our old monitor, but while I regained access to the internet, I had forgotten all my usernames and passwords. My family found me by chance after I joined Myspace. Every person I lost came back to me: We were reconnected as we had been in my early childhood. I was thrilled by each friend request and every comment on my profile. Each cousin held a distinguished spot in my "top eight." It was not a hard decision: My circle of IRL friends was small. When I was bored, I spent my time perusing my cousins' profiles. I learned the faces of their best friends. When my older cousins, away at college, transitioned to Facebook, I followed suit. I wanted to see myself classified as family on their profiles. I tagged myself in their albums of family vacations, weddings, and Thanksgiving dinners. Facebook was a digital representation of my belonging to

people. It marked the end of my solitary life.

By 2009 I was a sophomore at Temple University. I lost scholarships, partly due to bad grades, partly to loss of funding. I commuted four hours each day to and from my aunt's home in Willingboro, New Jersey to alleviate some of the financial burden. On days I didn't have class, I worked part time at Bath and Body Works in Philadelphia. Class. Home. Work. Home. This pattern repeated for a year. According to my profile, I joined Twitter in November 2010. My handle was pardonmyfrenchx. My 20-year-old self was pleased with the unoriginal use of my childhood nickname, the extra letter added because pardonmyfrench, pardonmyfrench\_, pardonmyfrench0, and pardonmyfrenchy were all spoken for. Twitter, like college, was then a miscellaneous and experimental environment, optimal for fostering self-construction. Unlike Facebook, Twitter's layout was ideal to proliferate beyond my familial fences. Twitter was informal. Its users wrote what they pleased. Posts about making dinner stacked between posts about wanting to die and a meme of crying Michael Jordan superimposed on a wedding cake. There was no order or rhyme or reason. Interactions were open and simple, unless your profile was private. Statements were digestible at 140 characters. This was important, because the feed moved fast.

Through the interests of people I opted to follow, and the people they followed, the well of knowledge was bottomless. I learned about skincare regimens for oily, eczema-prone skin, Caribbean inspired vegan recipes, and Amigurumi, the Japanese art of doll making. In Philadelphia, where I live, there are a handful of black women writers. We were needles in a white male dominated haystack. Twitter connected us. Through them, I learned about writing classes and fellowships. Twitter was a form of communication and a resource.



ON TWITTER AND OTHER social media platforms, as many critics have argued, users volunteer to be bombarded with the consciousnesses

of hundreds of thousands of other people. What naysayers fail to realize is that this unique characteristic is what makes social media inherently mystical.

As a first generation Haitian-American, spirituality has always been embedded in my world. My mother's father was a Christian minister. Her mother's, my grande's, every breath is a prayer. Her connection to God is her protection against *diabs*, devils, and evil spirits, as well as Voodoo priests who knew my grandfather. My mother was a youth minister. My aunts told me stories of her deep voice that filled the modest church house and inspired worshippers when she was 16. For a brief period in my adolescence, I was encouraged to be a minister like my mother.

I was skeptical of Christianity due to Manichean and sexist interpretations of the Bible. However, I believed in God, the Source, due entirely to my grande's influence. She survived child slavery in Haiti in the early 1900s, and journeyed with ten children from Haiti to the U.S., where she survived the death of her husband and a daughter. I had no doubt that through her prayer and belief, she tapped into a strength and wisdom beyond her petite frame.

My ideas on spirituality were fragmented: I knew what did not resonate with me, but I did not know what I was looking for until I found holistic practitioners and intuitive guides on Twitter. Francheska Medina, known best as @HeyFranHey, shares tips for holistic health and mental wellness on Twitter and Tumblr, as well as DIY videos on YouTube. She was unlike others in her field, who I thought could not understand my experiences. She reminded me of Denise from *The Cosby Show*, except health conscious. Her hair was long, wide, curly. She wore vibrant sweatshirts and sweaters. Fifteen-minute videos about self-compassion, DIY body butter and almond milk, and non-toxic cosmetics. On my early morning trips to Philadelphia, the glow of my phone became like the willow leaves hanging from the Tree of Souls in *Avatar*, transporting wisdom from my timeline, my personal Eywa.

Andrew Sullivan, in a recent *New York* mag-

azine essay, wrote of forfeiting his smartphone at a temple for meditation. He argues that social media compels us to fill silence with content. But it was through Twitter that I came to understand meditation itself, after reading a thread by Maryam Hasnaa, who tweets as @thatgirlhas. "With meditation the thing is not trying to get your mind free of all thought but, just to be the witness of it all," she posted at 10:45pm, on an ordinary weeknight. "A thought pops up and you simply notice, I'm having a thought. Repeat this step over and over. Then, when your monkey mind has calmed down, notice your breathing." I watched the tweets appear from the comfort of my pillow while still dressed in clothes from work. On the timeline was the latest in the slew of deaths of black people by law enforcement caught on video. I was feeling a combination of sadness and paranoia. I had tried meditating before, using one of Deepak Chopra and Oprah's "21-Day Meditation" challenges, but I'd assumed that distraction meant failure, and stopped for frustration of meditating incorrectly. What Hasnaa's tweets helped me understand is that the practice of meditation is about observing the mind and refocusing on the breath, consequently the present moment. Her tweets instructed on how to operate in the discord of the feed that surrounded them.



MARYAM HASNAA IS THE daughter of Amina Wadud, a scholar of Islam, and mother of an adorable, chess-playing son, or Sun as she affectionately calls him. She uses her Twitter and Instagram to share spiritual texts, and her blog on Medium, *Vibrational Medicine*, for longer ruminations. To her 32,000-plus followers, her timeline is a comprehensive gateway to understanding the spiritual realm. She discusses love and energetic self-mastery, and posts links to lectures on YouTube about spirituality. She shares her monthly audio newsletter and meditations from Soundcloud and facilitates one-on-

one therapy sessions. I inquired about Hasnaa's intuitive guidance over the summer. I was meditating and embodying love by pouring love into myself. I felt good. I could only benefit from personalized insight. Each session is held over the phone or Skype audio, which offers the clearest connection. The conversation begins with the client's emotional, mental, physical and spiritual state. Hasnaa asks the client some questions to be discussed during the call: *Why did you decide to contact an intuitive guide? What is your intention for the session? Are there any areas in your body that hurt, feel uncomfortable, need more love?*

Hasnaa feels that social media can be used as an entry point to inspire people to explore deeper spiritual work. "People can use social media as a way to connect to other people who are doing the work and to be reminded to stay on the path," she explains. "That is a blessing because at times one can feel disconnected from those around them when they truly commit to this path." She asserts that true spiritual work is an inner journey and would really require someone to step away from all distractions, not only the internet. Hasnaa uses Twitter to remind her followers to learn how to turn within, and commune with the silence. She believes there are infinite possibilities for spirituality through social media. "I take long breaks when needed to get reconnected to my spirit," she explains. "I have learned how to become more resilient with my practice through being on social media. For my own future I see me not being available through these mediums at some point. In the meantime, I'm excited to connect with others who value and benefit from my work." Social media, which allows communication across physical boundaries, is a spiritual evolution, taking us a little closer to a collective consciousness.



TWITTER HAS ITS LIMITATIONS. It is two-dimensional; conversations are short and sometimes one-sided; it is vulnerable to trolling and

harassment. "The mania of our online lives reveals this: We keep swiping and swiping because we are never fully satisfied," Andrew Sullivan writes. He describes his, and our, use of social media as an addiction. As escapists, addicts use their fixations to distract themselves from what haunts them— anxiety from lack of control, or mortality, or loneliness. The sickness is within the individual; the remedy is not forfeiting the smartphone on a digital Sabbath, but a consistent, conscious effort to understand the self, and define its purpose.

Dalai Lama, who joined Twitter in February 2009, has a following of 12.9 million. Deepak Chopra, since adopting Twitter in July 2008, has accumulated a following of nearly 3 million, myself included. "Interconnectivity of the mind isn't good or bad; it's neutral," he explained in a 2012 Mashable interview. "We can cause devastation worse than any war through making diabolical use of the social networks, or we could bring the world together in the direction of peace, harmony, sustainability and social justice. It's up to us." Rather than hindering humanity, as Sullivan believes, Chopra believes social media, by transcending ethnic, racial, and geographic boundaries, has the potential to bring people into humanity.

Christina Puchalski, MD, director of the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health, contends that "spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred." In trying to define spirituality for myself, I realize there's no action more pretentious than defining spirituality. It focuses on the soul. Spirituality is a malleable practice. It is to appreciate life for the marvel that it is. To recognize what connects you to the Source, to and others, and to connect to your purpose and your boundlessness. •

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