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The Potential of Nothing Is Everything

“Stopping or refusing to do something only gains [humorous or legendary] status if everyone else is doing what is expected of them and have never allowed that anyone would deviate. A crowded sidewalk is a good example: everyone is expected to continue moving forward.”

—Jenny Odell, “How to Unsettle People by Doing Nothing”

THE REFUSAL STARTED BEFORE I realized what was happening. Now, it’s become a rebellion. This is the rebellion’s manifesto.

More than a manifesto, it’s a Declaration of Independence, a shout of rebellion, a cry for FREEDOM. It begins by declaring independence from others’ expectations.

What started the rebellion?

Two seemingly innocent requests to meet for coffee from acquaintances I suspect wanted something more than a coffee date.

Time for my priorities evaporates in dribs and drabs. The noonday sun of those clamoring for attention contracts time. Time for what matters evaporates under the demanding desert sun of other’s needs. Why do I

assume that if the only thing on my calendar is time for myself or creative pursuit, it means I’m available? And does availability or capacity equal obligation?

I wriggle and shrug my shoulders, trying to free myself from the clutch of OBLIGATION and RESENTMENT.

Obligation—she’s such a drama queen. And resentment leaves a smoke trail of irritation.

Obligation and resentment—twins who transitioned from sometime visitors to permanent and unwelcome house guests.

I head for the garden to get away from these two. I find peace and freedom in the garden in fresh air and wide-open space.



MAYBE THE SNAKE DOESN'T SO MUCH SHED ITS SKIN AS THE NATURE OF GROWTH PULLS IT FROM HIM.

OR

Earlier this spring, as I cut last summer’s spent stalks, I discovered a snakeskin. I marvel at how snakes slither out of confining skin as quickly as we remove a shoe. This shed snakeskin looked like freedom’s path. Shed the old and transform it into a new, thriving creation.

Snakeskin shedding looks easy. And more than that—neat. No loose ends.

A shed skin promises a clean exit, no mess or hurt feelings. There’s no coming to terms with one’s failures. One moment this, the next that—such ease. We shed our skin, too; scraps that go down the shower drain. Bits of us left on our pillow. But never this wholesale remaking of ourselves. Unless we skip town.

When I was younger, I moved every few years. I mourned losing friends. I dreaded loneliness. But I embraced the clean slate of obligations obliterated, committee work dodged, conflicts blown away like dust.

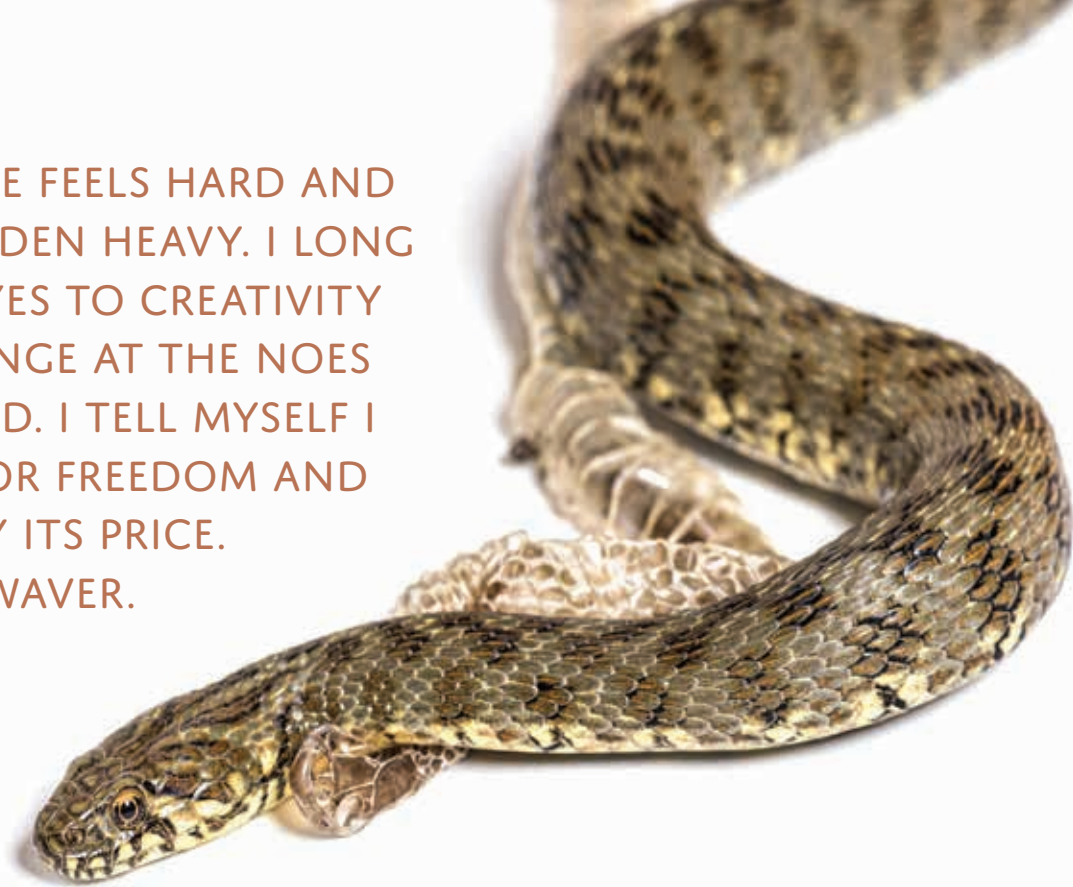
An isolated atom, I floated in the cosmos of possibility.

Now, living in the same town for nearly two decades, I’ve rooted. No longer stardust, I’m in orbit in a smaller, cellular cosmos.

A place long-lived envelopes you in a web of mutuality; a vast, underground, tangled web of roots. The web offers a richness to life but after a while constricts new growth and possibility. Our roots are both a blessing and a curse, both irritating and sustaining. I plant flowers cheek by jowl in the garden because healthy, mature plants crowd out weeds, denying them sunshine, water, and nutrients. In the same way, the community crowds out new interests with old obligations.

I’m not moving. I love my home and the people in it. But how to transplant me to open ground? How do I shed my old skin without causing irreparable injury?

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The yoke feels hard and the burden heavy. I long to say yes to creativity but cringe at the noes required. I tell myself I long for freedom and will pay its price. Still, I waver. I dodge answering emails by ignoring them. How long can I hover here between yes and no?

Creative work craves solitude—hours upon hours of what the world longs to count as its own and consume. Or is it more accurate to say I've let my heart and soul be captured by capitalism? A capitalism that measures the utility of everything in dollars?

Time, the marketplace tells us, is money. I no longer wish to make that trade. I am freed from the need for work but never freed from other's needs.

The phone rings and a knock at the door interrupts. If we wish to be part of the world, shouldn't we roll up our sleeves and care for the world? Bake the cake, take cookies, answer phones, serve on committees?

When I tell a committee colleague I'm thinking of stepping away from the committee, he tells me, "The world will still go round whether you stay or go. You should do what serves you best."

I don't know whether to be insulted or rejoice. I had no idea I thought of myself as the beating heart at the center of the universe. But clearly, I inflated my importance. The meetings will happen, stuff will get done—or not—whether or not I attend the meetings.

Often when I wake in the middle of the night, the thoughts of yesterday's leftovers, the missteps and undone tasks haunt me, Scroogelike, as they shake their chains of obligation and remind me of the ways I grasp and cling to time and projects. I'm living as a present-day Ebenezer Scrooge, so miserly with my time that I live joylessly.

This joyless living might be the root cause of my search for freedom. What if it's not so much other's demands as my own ruthlessness I'm trying to escape?

I ask myself what kind of "boss" I am. The words that spring to mind are miserly, condemning, never satisfied. So what if instead of making public declarations, I quietly nurture a little rest, trim back the burdens, refresh myself with a lighter load?

Maybe the snake doesn't so much shed its skin as the nature of growth pulls it from him.



And where is growth taking me? If I'm no longer serving my community, who am I?

An artist—as though that is an answer. I don't make a living as an artist. Can you be something if you don't live off it?

No one, except myself, acknowledges me as a working artist. Others cannot yet see my new skin. I am less snake and more caterpillar cocooned here at my writing table, becoming—something.

In her book *Upstream*, Mary Oliver suggests, "Working artists are not trying to help the world go round, but forward." Freedom's struggle forward leaves bloody knuckles, bruised feelings, and disappointments (mine and others) in its wake. Like rebels everywhere, I demand freedom from the world's assault.

What do my demands for freedom mean? Freedom from interference? Do I crave self-mastery's freedom? The ability to say yes when I mean yes and no when I mean no, accepting the consequences of both answers? Or is it the freedom to express my highest value? Even if only I value what others count as wasted time or empty space?

Is it freedom or retreat?

I long to retreat to my inner fortress. A place where I can think, write, garden, and paint free from interference or demands. I wish to be the master of a kingdom of one.

But a kingdom of one is a lonely place. It requires giving up a friend to be rid of the foe, often as not the same person. An escape from society and public opinion condemns me to my own uncertain temperament, which I'll face alone and isolated. For a sometime *bon vivant*, freedom looks less idyllic or even practical.

In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Isaiah Berlin, a brilliant philosopher and *bon vivant*, writes of stoics, Buddhists, and monks who've retreated to private kingdoms: "I eliminate the obstacles in my path by abandoning the path."

I consider bushwhacking off life's beaten path. I'm not the first to believe in a utopian promise of freedom in nature's wilderness. Except I'm afraid of the wilderness, both my interior wilderness and nature's. I fear dangers—real and imagined.

Psychologists tell us we are born with three basic emotional needs: love, security, and control. Berlin helps me understand that path-leaving is a sublime attempt at control. I reject the world's idea of correct living and substitute my own. Unable to cope with the world's demands, I make myself safe from society's yoke by refusing all claims.

I've tried small forays into this wilderness. On weekdays for the past decade-plus, I sit for twenty minutes alone in my inner fortress. I began this practice to find twenty safe minutes



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away from others' judgments and needs. Instead, I found twenty minutes of chaos and disorder—my own, interrupted once a year or so by a momentary sublime peace.

Those flashes of peace encourage a belief in a kingdom bathed in love's serene light and goodwill, even if my interior domain harbors demons and dark forests.

I download apps, read books, and even attended a two-day silent retreat, trying to discern why I keep bringing the self I long to shed with me. If I can't escape society's yoke, I yearn to escape passion, greed, and pettiness—my own and humanity's sins. I wish to be somebody, a doer. As I conceive it, a doer does the deciding, is self-directed, and is no prisoner of society's expectations. But what are society's expectations, and what are my own? Meditation never gave me keys to a secure inner sanctum. I was trying to turn a good thing, meditation, into a useful something: freedom.



Rebels seeking freedom, I discover, are dreamers. But dreamers with visions can wake with an alert gaze, curiosity, and courage to create new realities. I'm learning to face my responsibilities, which include acknowledging my insecurity, anxiety, cowardice, madcap lack of control, and desire for comfort and esteem. This living awake in the paradox of life's yoke might be freedom's kiss. I can't know yet, but I can give it a try.

FREEDOM MEANS
MOVING BEYOND
YES OR NO ANSWERS
INTO PARADOX.
INTO YES AND NO.

Walt Whitman dreamed a similar vision:

*The moth and fish eggs are in their place.
The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place
The palpable is in its place, and the impalpable is in its place.*

I want permission, not freedom, to change from palpable to impalpable. I want permission to stop stirring cooking pots and start mixing soul cosmos. Permission denied. Not because anyone is being mean or authoritarian or peevish. Instead, there is no permission to give. As my colleague said, "The world will still go round." Freedom means moving beyond yes or no answers into paradox. Into yes and no.

So I stake out fresh, open ground. For what? Flowers or weeds? I've not left the path, but discovered the path is an inner wilderness, not a tidy, well-trod road. Wilderness is always unpredictable, and the weather is sometimes inclement. Freedom's path may swallow me and my half-formed epiphanies, producing nothing that endures. It will lead to dead ends and wrong-way hustles. This freedom to explore is an invitation to adventure, with all the richness, hazard, and excitement that adventure implies.

This is freedom. A tightrope walks across life's chasms. The outcome is unassured—everything hangs in the balance. I didn't expect the rawness, the tenderness of new skin. I didn't count on being a sun no one sees. 