

Who Pays When We Look Away?

Someone Was Supposed to Show Up

A HUMAN CONTINUITY ESSAY

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Presence should not become extraordinary enough to feel miraculous.

PERSONAL RECORD



October 31, 2023. The last time I saw my youngest son. He was dressed as a firefighter.

I did not know that night would become one of my last photographs with him.

I saw a video today that hurt me more than I expected.

A mother had prepared a birthday party for her three-year-old son. The people she expected largely did not come. Eventually, firefighters showed up for him. They brought the truck, got down on his level, gave him their attention, and made him feel seen.

It was beautiful, and it made me angry.

Not at the firefighters. They deserve every bit of praise they received.

What angered me was the question underneath the story:

What does it say about a society when extraordinary institutional kindness becomes necessary to replace ordinary human presence?

A child should not need an emergency-services department to become the village. And yet there he was, three years old, waiting for people to come.

I watched him and saw myself. Not metaphorically. I saw myself as a child, and I saw myself today.

Then the fire truck hit another place in me.

The last time I saw my youngest son was October 31, 2023. Halloween.

He was dressed as a firefighter. He had this little fire truck costume around him, and he was smiling. That is one of the last images I have of him.

That night, I deliberately cut my own Halloween time with him shorter so that his mother could have the majority of the other half of the evening. I wanted him to experience both of us. I did not want Halloween to become a competition over who possessed more of his time. I wanted my son to have his father, his mother, his costume, his candy, and his night.

A child should not have to carry the mathematics of adult relationships.

So I gave up some of my time because I thought there would be more.

The following weekend, I went to pick him up. He was gone. His mother had taken him across the country.

I did not know that Halloween would become the last time I saw him.

So when I watched firefighters walking toward that little boy in this video, I was not only watching firefighters. I saw a little boy in a fire truck, and somewhere inside that image was my son, smiling on October 31, 2023.

I miss him. I miss him so much.

That matters to what I am writing here because when I talk about children absorbing the consequences of adult conflict, I am not analyzing some distant social phenomenon from a comfortable intellectual perch.

I know what it feels like to be the child inside those systems. Now I also know what it feels like to be the father standing outside one.

THE HUMAN EQUATION

Someone was supposed to show up.

It is Labor Day as I write this, and I am alone.

I am not afraid to admit that I would have liked someone to reach out and say, “Happy Labor Day. Want me to swing by for ninety seconds?”

That is not a grand request. Ninety seconds.

A knock on a door. A handshake. A hug. Sitting down at a table long enough to eat something. Someone saying, “Shit sounds hard right now,” without immediately beginning an investigation into whether I have sufficiently earned the right to feel hurt.

And this is not unique to Labor Day.

I know what birthdays feel like when nothing comes. I know holidays spent alone. I know the strange experience of being valuable enough for people to want my labor, my mind, my strength, my body, my ideas, my perspective, or some particular collection of traits while somehow remaining easy to forget when there is nothing immediately wanted in return.

To me, these things stopped sounding small because I learned what it was to live without them.

Continuous human contact is one of those forms of wealth people rarely recognize while they possess it: someone to call, someone who notices, someone who comes by, someone with whom disagreement does not automatically mean disappearance.

Someone who can absorb the fact that I am complicated without reducing me to whichever version of me is most convenient to remember.

People who grow up surrounded by that kind of continuity can easily mistake it for the natural condition of human existence. It is not.

I learned that early.

Even before foster care, I was often the child expected to become the adult in the room. I absorbed other people's emotions, watched them, managed around them, and adjusted myself to them.

What I rarely experienced was one of the most ordinary things a human child is supposed to receive: a secure attachment to a parent.

Then came foster care.

When I say that I lived in group homes that were locked, I do not mean “locked” figuratively. I mean metal doors, institutional containment, places that sometimes felt closer to detention than childhood.

Some contained good people doing difficult work. Others contained people who should never have been given access to vulnerable children.

I learned young that evil does not always announce itself. It does not always wear the costume people expect.

Sometimes it is charismatic, respectable, credentialed, or helpful in public. Sometimes it is simply the person everyone assumes must be trustworthy because questioning them would make the room uncomfortable.

I have looked into the eyes of people who came frighteningly close to what I would call evil.

That experience changed the way I understand human systems. It also changed the way I understand looking away.

Because looking away is rarely dramatic.

Most of the time, nobody announces, “I have decided not to care.”

People get busy. They stay inside their routines and social circles. They defer to the prevailing narrative. They assume someone else will call, someone else will check, someone else will ask, someone else will intervene. Someone else will show up.

Then suddenly nobody does.

We have normalized absence so thoroughly that presence sometimes becomes newsworthy.

A firefighter attending a child's birthday becomes viral content. A stranger checking on someone becomes inspirational. A teacher buying food for a student becomes a story. A neighbor sitting beside someone in crisis becomes exceptional.

These things should be noticed. Kindness should be celebrated. But they should not feel miraculous.

There is something deeply wrong with a social architecture in which basic human continuity has become extraordinary enough to produce millions of views.

Clicking “like” is not continuity. Sharing the video is not continuity. Writing “this restored my faith in humanity” beneath it is not continuity.

Those things may express emotion, and there is nothing inherently wrong with them.

But I keep wondering what would happen if we took even a fraction of the energy we spend reacting to visible suffering and converted it into one clean move toward somebody whose suffering is not visible enough to go viral.

One phone call. One meal. One question. One ninety-second visit. One ride. One message that does not require anything in return. One moment of curiosity before judgment.

One clean move.

Small acts matter because human systems are often determined at their smallest points of failure.

A bridge can collapse because of one connection. A supply chain can fail because of one missing handoff. A family can fracture because nobody asks the next question.

A child can internalize an entire worldview from what adults repeatedly fail to explain.

And this is where my anger becomes less personal and more structural.

I am tired of children being used as trophies and pawns.

Children are not evidence that one parent won. They are not leverage in a breakup, extensions of adult ego, messengers, therapists, or reputational weapons. They are children.

Yet in relational conflict, the child frequently absorbs costs generated by adults who will never personally pay the full invoice.

A narrative hardens. One parent becomes the villain. Questions stop being asked. Ambiguity becomes certainty. Anger becomes identity.

Then that interpretation is transmitted to the child.

The adults may believe they are merely describing events. The child experiences something entirely different: attachment uncertainty, shame, fear, guilt, confusion, the feeling that loving one person betrays another, the feeling that asking questions is dangerous, the feeling that belonging is conditional.

Those messages do not simply remain thoughts. They become architecture.

They settle into the nervous system and influence which relationships feel safe later. They shape whom that child trusts and whether conflict means conversation or abandonment, whether love means security or surveillance, whether disagreement means repair or exile.

Years later, everybody marvels at the adult behavior without examining the childhood economics that financed it.

Somebody always pays.

Whenever we look away, whenever we stop asking questions, whenever we accept a narrative because examining it would be inconvenient, I believe we should ask:

Who is actually paying the consequences?

Not who is angriest. Not who tells the most convincing story. Not who has the largest audience. Who pays? And how long will they pay?

Then there is the next question, the one that reaches beyond the immediate conflict:

What kind of future will the people paying those consequences eventually build?

Because human consequences compound.

Today's neglected child becomes tomorrow's partner, parent, manager, teacher, voter, neighbor, artist, police officer, nurse, politician, or stranger sitting beside someone on a bus.

CONTINUITY ACROSS GENERATIONS

**We do not merely leave children a world.
We build the people who will inhabit it.**

That means every generation is constantly shaping the nervous systems of the generation that follows.

What kind of society are we building when children repeatedly learn that people disappear?

What kind of adulthood emerges when belonging becomes conditional?

What kind of political culture emerges from millions of people carrying unresolved shame, abandonment, humiliation, and fear?

What happens when loneliness becomes normal enough that nobody recognizes it as infrastructure failure anymore?

Those are not sentimental questions. They are systems questions.

I have spent enough of my life being wanted conditionally to recognize the pattern.

People sometimes appear when they desire something from me: a skill, a trait, an idea, a body, a performance, a solution, or a version of me that fits comfortably inside whatever role they have assigned.

Then circumstances change. Conflict happens. Complexity appears. A narrative forms.

And hocus-pocus, motherfuckers disappear.

I am angry about that today.

I have also done things wrong in my life. Those statements can coexist.

I can acknowledge my failures without accepting responsibility for every story anyone has ever constructed about me. I can recognize places where I hurt people while also recognizing places where I became the container into which everybody else's discomfort was poured.

I am not claiming that I have been scapegoated in every conflict of my life.

I am saying that I have been scapegoated enough times to recognize the pattern.

Those patterns matter.

Sometimes a group, family, institution, or relationship simplifies a complicated system by concentrating its discomfort into one person. Once that happens, contradictory information becomes inconvenient. Curiosity begins to look like disloyalty. The designated explanation becomes more important than the truth.

That does not absolve the scapegoated person of whatever responsibility genuinely belongs to them. It means responsibility should be measured rather than assigned by narrative convenience.

Accountability without objectivity is merely punishment wearing respectable clothing.

And what continues to strike me is how rarely people ask.

Not accuse, infer, diagnose, or gossip. Ask.

“What happened?” “What did you experience?” “What am I missing?” “What part of this might I have wrong?” “What would the other person say?” “What does the child believe happened?” “What will this decision cost someone five years from now?”

Curiosity is one of the cheapest interventions available to humanity. We seem determined to ration it.

Maybe that is what disturbed me so deeply about the birthday video.

I could see the little boy, his mother, and the firefighters arriving. Beneath all of it I could see an invisible equation that has followed me throughout my life: someone was supposed to show up.

Sometimes they did. Too often they did not.

There is another line I have seen circulating online:

“Look at you, comforting others with the words you wished someone had said to you.”

I do not know who originally wrote it. I do know why it hurts.

There are people walking around this world who became extraordinarily skilled at giving something precisely because they know the cost of its absence.

That does not mean suffering is noble. I reject that idea.

Children should not have to be traumatized into becoming compassionate adults. People should not have to experience abandonment to learn loyalty. Nobody should have to experience cruelty to understand kindness.

Sometimes suffering creates wisdom. Sometimes it simply creates suffering.

THE LESSON WE ALREADY KNOW

Our responsibility should be to reduce how much tuition humanity keeps paying for lessons we already fucking know.

A FUTURE-FACING COMMITMENT

So I am making a vow. Actually, five.



As long as I breathe on this planet, as long as I continue building stability beneath my own feet, and as long as I survive, I will keep asking what survival is for.

FIVE VOWS

My answer is increasingly clear. Survival should become protection. Pain should become understanding. Experience should become architecture. Whatever strength I have fought to build should not terminate at the boundary of my own life.

I

I vow to transmute survival into protection of the collective.

I have survived things I would never wish upon another human being. Survival alone is not enough for me anymore.

I want what I learned in darkness to become something useful in daylight.

Through my writing, advocacy, voice, systems work, art, and whatever influence I am fortunate enough to accumulate, I want fewer people to encounter a broken human system with absolutely nothing standing between them and the consequences.

Not zero suffering, and not some ridiculous promise of utopia. Less.

Fewer people falling through. Fewer people becoming invisible. Fewer people wondering whether anybody noticed.

Less preventable suffering than there would have been if I had simply survived and done nothing with it.

II

I vow that fewer children, fewer people, fewer animals, and fewer vulnerable beings will be abandoned inside experiences that the rest of us merely turn into inspirational content.

We say that we care about children. We post about animals. We share stories about strangers and circulate quotations about compassion.

We cry at videos showing kindness arriving just in time. Then the video ends, and we scroll. The algorithm serves us dinner.

Meanwhile, somebody three blocks away is eating alone. Some child is wondering why nobody came. Some animal is waiting behind a door. Some elderly person has gone three days without meaningful conversation. Some parent is drowning quietly because asking for help has become more humiliating than suffering without it.

Somebody whose story will never become viral content is disappearing in plain sight.

I cannot reach all of them. No one person can. But perhaps that was never the standard.

Maybe the standard is whether we reached the one who was actually within reach.

III

I vow to resist the boxes we build around vulnerable people and to insist that complexity and vulnerability can coexist.

We have developed a dangerous cultural habit of deciding that someone must be simple before they are worthy of compassion.

The innocent victim. The perfect child. The blameless parent. The spotless survivor. The obedient patient. The sympathetic poor person. The easy-to-understand human being.

But people are complicated. So am I. So are all of us.

Complexity does not erase vulnerability.

A person can make mistakes and still be exploited. A parent can be imperfect and still be alienated from a child. Someone can be angry and still be afraid. Someone can be strong and still need help.

Someone can be extraordinarily capable and still become structurally vulnerable. Someone can contribute to one problem while being genuinely harmed in another.

If our compassion requires simplicity, then eventually our compassion becomes useless in the real world, because real human beings are not simple.

More people also need to understand how few degrees can separate stability from vulnerability.

A job disappears. A relationship ends. A medical crisis begins. A car breaks down. A landlord sells a building. A family fractures. A phone gets disconnected.

A person who once appeared completely secure can suddenly discover that nearly every protection they assumed was permanent was conditional.

Many of us are only a few degrees away from the person we currently find easiest to judge.

A few missed paychecks. A diagnosis. A death. A custody dispute. A nervous-system collapse. A broken support network. A succession of small failures that individually look survivable until they compound.

By the time we finally recognize ourselves in the person we ignored, the patterns that harmed them may already have become normal. And by then, it may be too late to prevent some of the consequences.

That should frighten us. Not because vulnerability makes us lesser. Because vulnerability makes us human.

IV

I vow to practice fatherhood as stewardship and to oppose the transfer of adult conflict into the nervous systems of children.

Children should not inherit our unfinished wars.

They should not be drafted into relational conflict they did not create. They should not be forced to carry narratives they are developmentally incapable of evaluating. They should not have to choose which parent they are permitted to love.

And they should never become the cheapest available battlefield for adult ego.

Fatherhood, to me, cannot merely mean biological relationship. It means stewardship.

It means asking not only what I want today, but what another human being will carry tomorrow because of what I do today.

I think about Halloween 2023 when I consider that responsibility.

I gave up part of my time with my son because I believed his relationship with both parents mattered more than maximizing my own share of a holiday.

I would make that decision again.

The fact that I did not know it would be our last night together does not make the principle wrong. It makes the cost more visible.

Children deserve access to love without being forced to understand the politics surrounding it.

They eventually become adults who build families, institutions, neighborhoods, and civilizations of their own.

When we protect their attachment, curiosity, and ability to love without fear, we are not merely protecting childhood. We are protecting the future.

V

I vow that when I leave this earth, I will leave behind evidence that I tried to make it better than it was when I arrived.

I do not need history to remember my name. I would rather history contain fewer wounds.

If something I write gives one person language for what happened to them, that matters. If something I build helps one institution recognize a preventable failure, that matters.

If one parent stops before transferring adult rage into a child, that matters.

If one person decides to knock on a door instead of merely liking a post, that matters.

If one vulnerable person is seen in their full complexity rather than placed conveniently into somebody else's box, that matters.

If one animal suffers less because somebody finally noticed, that matters.

If one person asks the next question, stays another ninety seconds, makes one phone call, provides one meal, challenges one false narrative, repairs one relationship, interrupts one institutional failure, or performs one clean move when looking away would have been easier, that matters.

Maybe nobody notices. Maybe somebody does.

Good actions should be noticed. They should be modeled, remembered, and sometimes celebrated. The firefighters who showed up for that little boy deserve to be celebrated.

But recognition cannot become the condition upon which we decide whether another living being is worth showing up for.

Continuity has to survive even when there is no audience, no camera, no viral post, no applause, and no one standing nearby to tell us that what we did mattered.

Sometimes the person receiving it will know. That may have to be enough.

THE WORLD I WANT TO HELP BUILD

A wider margin of error for being human.

I dream of a world where vulnerability does not automatically mean disposability.

Where complexity does not disqualify someone from compassion. Where strength does not prevent someone from receiving care. Where children are not collateral damage. Where animals are not invisible because they cannot explain their suffering.

Where institutions remember that systems exist to serve living beings rather than requiring living beings to contort themselves around systems.

Where we stop waiting for suffering to become spectacular before deciding it deserves attention. Where showing up becomes ordinary again.

Because that is ultimately what I want.

Not sainthood. Not applause. Not a world scrubbed clean of conflict and human failure.

A wider margin of error for being human.

More continuity. More curiosity. More people willing to cross the small distance between noticing and acting.

Less fucking abandonment.

When future generations look backward at ours and ask what we did while loneliness, fragmentation, and disconnection were becoming increasingly visible, I want my answer to exist in more than words.

I want it visible in what I built, what I protected, how I fathered, how I advocated, the people I tried to see clearly, and the times I refused to look away.

As long as I breathe on this planet, as long as I continue to build stability, as long as I survive, I intend to keep making one clean move after another.

I intend to transmute survival into protection of the collective.

And when I eventually leave this earth, I hope fewer beings will have experienced the particular kind of pain that comes from wondering whether anybody was coming.

Fewer children. Fewer people. Fewer animals. Fewer living beings that we claim to care about in speeches, inspirational quotations, social-media posts, and stories we share because they briefly move us.

I want there to be less of this phenomenon because I was here.

Not because I saved everybody. I cannot. Because I used what I had.

My writing. My advocacy. My voice. My art. My experience. My fatherhood. My stewardship. My ability to recognize patterns. My willingness to ask uncomfortable questions.

And whatever stability I am able to build for myself, I want some portion of it converted into greater stability for others.

Because somebody should come. Somebody should ask. Somebody should notice. Somebody should stay long enough to matter.

We owe continuity to those around us.

We just fucking do.

And this is the promise I intend to carry with me for as long as I am here:

A PERSONAL DOCTRINE



“I came through darkness, but I refused to become chaotic. I will turn consequences into structure; pain into language; survival into doctrine; doctrine into community impact; and community impact into legacy.”

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