LIVD: Issue 15.2: "Letting Go"

Portland State University. School of Art + Design

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The most beautiful and terrible moment of failure occurs when you realize, whichever direction you choose is wrong. This is the moment of humility. It's the moment you see who you really are.
LIVD is a semi/annual publication produced in the Pacific Northwest, dedicated to the intersection of art, design, culture and how these influence lived experience.

LIVD pays homage to the inspiring and idealistic efforts of the early twentieth century avant-garde, balancing the academic with the personal and experimental.

Issue 15.2 includes contributions responding to the following prompt: screwing up, messing up, vulnerability, shame... that sort of thing. Why isn’t the prompt simply failure? Because something strange happens when you ask people to talk about failure, they start talking about something else entirely.
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**A WORKING DEFINITION OF FAILURE**

Failure is the difference between what is expected and what actually occurs.
I studied under Elliott Earls and I think he's brilliant. If you spend even the smallest amount of time around him, you realize he has a very keen mind. I knew this before I studied with him and so I spent a great deal of time listening intently to what he had to say. More than once he told us that really powerful work asks questions rather than answers them. Such a statement was difficult for me to comprehend. As a practitioner, I had been trained to always solve or answer something, and here was this man asking me to withhold a deeply ingrained impulse and live in the realm of the tricky. I mulled this idea over for years. I could see it articulated clearly throughout his own work. And I found that to a large degree Elliott's right. Most of our social ills, like racism, sexism, and privilege can't be eradicated. If we've learned anything in the last few years, it's that these sorts of problems don't even seem to be improving. Beyond which, working with these themes has its inherent benefits — you already have an audience and a controversy waiting for you.

As it turns out, Elliott's perspective gave me access to all the major players of the twentieth-century art world, as well as guidance for making design work situated completely in an artistic space. This little kernel of knowledge was definitely worth knowing.

But with time, I've also found the flaws in his statement. Perhaps it's because I wish us to be in a fully non-capitalist society, or perhaps it's because the tremendous errors of industrialization feel inordinately heavy. After all, we do have a lot of garbage floating in the ocean, we've made too many things that we've arbitrarily deemed disposable, no one knows how to emotionally regulate themselves, and an angry planet is responding to us with natural disaster after natural disaster. I see all of these things as failures. For some of which, the responsibility lands squarely on the designer. My problem-solving impulses can't help but want to respond.

But... what if first, some time was taken to really examine what exactly failure is and how exactly it occurs.

This is the basic premise for Volume 15.2.

It might be relevant to tell you that I have researched (and experimented with) failure for years. Many examples land upon my desk. I would be hard pressed to find a person who hasn't been shaped in some manner by failure, but few people sit in its uncomfortable space and look around. Here are a few starters for thought, all of which come from a longer look at what failure is.

#1. Atul Gawande wrote this compelling commencement speech, reprinted by the New Yorker in 2012, titled "Failure and Rescue." In it he tells us of an 87 year old woman, a holocaust survivor, who faced a highly fatal surgical complication but due to her doctors' failure response, ended up walking away alive and recovering. In his narrative and subsequent reflection, Gawande offers one of the true gems in learning to deal with consequences: "A failure often does not have to be a failure at all. However, you have to be ready for it — will you admit when things go wrong? Will you take steps to set them right? — because the difference between triumph and defeat, you'll find, isn't about willingness to take risks. It's about mastery of rescue."

#2. Henry Murray was a college professor who developed interrogation techniques and tests related to extreme stress and mental fortitude. He brought his experiments back from WWII to Harvard, escalating them by severely manipulating and shaming his students. One student in particular had a very rough time with Murray's abuse, a young math prodigy named Ted Kaczynski.

#3. Pruitt-Igoe is one of the first subjects I introduce when I teach courses on failure. The modernist housing complex has been saddled with all sorts of accusations. It has been called an exemplar of: the failure of modernism; the arrogance of architecture to ask, attempt, and suppose that social issues can be solved through architecture itself; a failure to understand how economic policy shapes cities; and a failure of local government to empathize with the people who lived in Pruitt-Igoe. Yet, one of the most remarkable statements made about the complex, comes from listening to the people who lived there. Our perceptions of them, of their experience, of the building itself, the failure becomes ours. Who are we — who were we ever — on the outside to define or dismiss what was a significant part of anyone's life experience, condemning it as failed? Hated, loved, suffered through, complex, endearing, heart-breaking, yes. But failed? That categorization is an arrogance I can't muster.
Where there was once reason, logic, and intent behind a form, it now repeats the past as residual ornament.
Google “ant spiral of death” and you’ll find videos of thousands of ants dutifully marching in a circle for hours, even days, until they eventually die from exhaustion. Entomologists prefer to use the less melodramatic term “ant mill” to describe the strange phenomenon.

The ants aren’t committing ritual suicide en masse. Ant mills occur when blind army ants, who navigate by following the pheromone scent trails of other ants in their foraging party, cross over their own previously laid trail and begin to follow it. Now a closed circuit, the trail becomes amplified with each successive lap. The ants’ biological programming makes it nearly impossible for them to stray.

Harvard professor William Morton Wheeler recorded witnessing one in his laboratory: “… I have never seen a more astonishing exhibition of the limitations of instinct. For nearly two whole days these blind creatures so dependent on the contact odor sense of their antennae kept palpating their uniformly smooth odoriferous actions” (Grassé 1963, p. 26). In the case of the army ants, the ‘sign’ they leave is a pheromone scent trail which other ants follow in the hope of finding food. An actions (Grassé 1963, p. 26),…
If stigmergic mechanisms are driving so many parts of our lives and have such a profound impact on our thinking, systems, and culture, what can we do to negate — or at least offset — their control over us? The most important thing is to identify when such systems are in play. The quickest and surest way to do this is to critically examine the "givens" or fundamental assumptions we hold. What things do we think are "beyond questioning?" What seems like it has always been and will always remain the same? Then, we must test these basic assumptions and evaluate their merits and implications in light of their current context.

In designing a product from the ground up: would we choose to make it the same as it currently exists? In developing systems: are we thinking about how they can best meet their objectives? Or, are we relying too heavily on existing models and precedents?

We must resist easy answers, instead we must embrace disruptive processes. How can we do this by reintroducing chance and happenstance to the digital and analog tools that entertain and inform us. We must identify the inherent biases in our systems and devise ways of correcting for them. We must seek to expand the range and quality of inputs that shape our views and hesitate before filtering out ideas which don’t fit our current mental model.

From time to time, we must venture from well marked paths, even when they seem certain to lead to success — especially when they seem certain. It isn’t enough to tell ourselves to ‘think different.’ Cultural inertia cuts a deep rut that can’t be seen for what it is.

We can never fully escape the pull of stigmergic systems but we can mitigate their influence by making the effort to recognize them and consciously choose to reject precedent as reason.

References


Notes:

’Tiptoe Through the Tulips,’ Popular song by Al Dubin (lyrics) and Joe Burke (music), 1929

New York Times professional curmudgeons, Paul Krugman, devised the term “incestuous amplification” to describe the particular kind of stigmergic groupthink commonly found in political and financial circles.
Protagonist Smith: this is the Day I get out of here.
WE ARE NOT BETTER
but flawed
if we keep on the same old path.

WE ARE NOT BETTER
but flawed
if we keep on the same old path.
We all knew winter was coming.

The Bad Dog (Bad Dog!) gasped up, puked up a rabbit into a red lake upon the Welcome mat, made a shoe stick, overturned the trash, slunk outside all night wrapped in badger sounds, stuck a pact by dawn.

We all knew winter was coming.

Watching tech reviews on devices he'll never own, but no time for electronics, no videogames, no space age television about crystal meth; only the rent, the phone, the gasoline, lunch, and student loan.

We all knew winter was coming.

A rented car, across the country no distance she couldn't run, but the messages, the calls home, the hospitals and schools, collapsing apartment complexes and crabby cars, trees, springs, and streams carry a song she used to know.

We all knew winter was coming.

Children gather the root and make fishmen in the front yard. They stick a deed in his pocket, on his lips they set the name of a god, in his mouth a diploma written in an idea of nothing, and add two rusted shovels for arms as the snow begins to fall.

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Not-so-Final Fantasy

Be Protagonist Smith, down on your luck, getting by with odd jobs on the wrong side of the tracks (as if your world had trains) while looking at the stars instead of the rusted out sci-fi/fantasy vehicles in this pint-size town. Your town is so pathetic that only low klit-point-having slimes or other common creatures camp out in the surrounding forest because they got nowhere nice to go—and you either get the hand-me-down call to adventure from the weird old guy who lives down the road or your boyfriend or girlfriend gets captured and in any case you decide, "Protagonist Smith: this is the Day I get out of here."

And then you move on, taking your licks from bigger and badder slimes and manticores level up with gold and experience, picking up those sweet-ass 95-weapon and accessories, do the whole "The Journey is the Destination" business, and eventually meet the Big Bad at the End of Everything and keep them from breaking the World.

Or you could be lazy and grind forever in the opening world against those no-effort slimes and be at an advanced level before you tackle the first dungeon, let alone any Boss, breeze through it and be as advanced as if you were to progress normally. Your evolved attributes would compensate for your meager toils and you'd be an overpowered "End-Worlder" in rage at the beginning of the tale and rush your way through the story to surprise the Big Bad.

But what you don't know is that the Big Bad often mirrors the hero's journey. You slay monsters to save a town, he or she tramples upon innocents to fulfill an agenda, and when you periodically encounter them, they are just a few levels of experience out of reach to provide a sufficient challenge. When you're busy solving a puzzle in Weird Ice World, they're gaining their spell components in Mount Final level together to bring down the Moon and crash into the Earth. Jack around for a while doing sidequests or just farming for gold and when you do meet for the final battle, you always come upon them RIGHT before they perform the ultimate step of their ritual. Every time. Are they watching you the whole time, checking you on your progress, and instead of smashing you down, say to themselves, "Oh, they'll be at my SECREAT LAIR next Tuesday. I can go off for a little bit.

Before you decide which path to take, which path you will spend your life on, you have to ask yourself, "Is the Big Bad, being my doppelganger, as lazy at evil as I'd be lazy at good?"

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Before you decide which path to take, which path you will spend your life on, you have to ask yourself, "Is the Big Bad, being my doppelganger, as lazy at evil as I'd be lazy at good?"
An interview with Caleb Misclevitz on taking risks.

keywords: childhood, intentional failure, trying, not trying, choosing your own path, conversations, art and design, growing up.
The following is a conversation about growing up, taking risks, questioning ourselves, and failing. In this interview, Caleb Miskiewicz and I talk about the blurry line between being a child and being an adult, and we consider the value of failure in relationship to responsibility. How can failure be contextualized as a positive part of life? When is failure humbling? When is it empowering? What is failure? How can it be empowering, not painful? Most importantly, why do we keep going, even when we fail?

RC: I'm interested in the topic of optimistic failure, and the potential of gaining something by failing. Let's have a conversation about failing and the future of failing in our lives and the past.

CM: That sounds really daunting — the future and history of failure in our lives.

RC: Have you ever failed at something you were trying really hard not to fail at?

CM: I have a lot of tiny, micro-failures.

RC: What's a micro-failure?

CM: Forgetting to brush my teeth twice a day, I haven't been to the dentist in six years. I haven't had any major mouth-falling apart moments. I just don't think about it. I'm also really bad at paying my bills, not because I don't have money, just because I would rather do something else. It's stupid. I know it's stupid. I think those things are failures, failing to be a member of society. I feel guilty about that.

When I was a kid, I didn't feel ashamed about failing. I took guitar lessons when I was five or six. I liked it, but I can't remember thinking, "This is something I want to do." My parents suggested that I do it, and I did it. The first song I learned on my guitar was "Brown Eyed Girl." There would be a recital every couple months at some random, re-purposed church, and I got off on not practicing or not being very good. I was playing guitar for fun, and I didn't care about being super impressive or anything. I also didn't understand how awkward it was for my parents or other people in the room when I would fuck up on stage. I thought it was funny when I messed up, but everyone else was nervous, clenching their teeth.

RC: After you did badly on stage, would you get off stage and think, "That was great!"

CM: I didn't understand being on stage in the first place. I don't even think the stage should be a pedestal. It should be more natural, where you're doing something and people start to gather around you because they're interested in what you're doing. That could happen on or off stage.

RC: Your example of performing badly brings up a question about transference of shame. You get up on stage and think "whatever happens, happens." Maybe as a kid you didn't necessarily have an awareness of the social constructions around what it means to be on stage and what it means to do badly on stage, but your parents, grandparents and siblings are all watching you, cringing as you're up there on stage failing. It's like they're experiencing the shame for you. What do you think about that?

CM: I definitely didn't try to make them feel shame on purpose. I just thought the idea of a guitar recital, to show off how much you've learned, was sort of stupid.

RC: How do you feel now about the thought of your parents feeling embarrassed about your kid failing on stage?

CM: I feel worse about it now. As you get older, you start bringing the connection between a kid and being an adult. I've realized the division between the two is not really there. There's no difference. I think, related to that, going to community college was a real eye opener for me. I saw older people coming to school, and they didn't have any power over me even though they were older. They were my peers even though there was a difference in age. I’ve realized that age doesn't matter as much as it did before. I’ve gained perspective that has helped me empathize with how my parents might have been feeling at my recital. I started to understand how bad it'd feel to support somebody a bunch, and then for the person I supported to not show off what they had learned.

I never thought of the recitals as failures because I was having a lot of fun. Just because I was playing "Brown Eyed Girl" correctly or I forgot the lyrics, I was still playing guitar. I went on to play in bands and go on tour and do things that I thought would be successes. I think failure is rigidly defined and constructed by society. You can only fail if there are certain established checkpoints for success. If you ignore those checkpoints and just do what you want to do, then you’re not really failing.

I also think there’s an obvious importance to pushing your own limits and making achievements in life. It doesn’t make sense to be a blob and have fun and not care about things. There’s a lot to be said for going to college, applying for jobs you aren’t qualified for. I’ve been lucky in those areas. All of the cool jobs I’ve gotten have been through connections with people.

RC: Your example of performing badly brings up a question about transference of shame. You get up on stage and think “whatever happens, happens.” Maybe as a kid you didn’t necessarily have an awareness of the social constructions around what it means to be on stage and what it means to do badly on stage, but your parents, grandparents and siblings are all watching you, cringing as you’re up there on stage failing. It’s like they’re experiencing the shame for you. What do you think about that?

CM: Growing up, sports were similar to guitar for me — except I wasn’t naturally good at them at the way I was with guitar. With guitar, I thought it was fun and I liked doing it, but with sports, I was more into the aesthetics and snacks at games. Between fourth and fifth grade, I tried to play soccer and basketball. In fifth grade basketball, I made one shot in the entire season, and it was on the wrong hoop. Everyone assumed that because I was a boy, I knew the rules and fundamentally understood basketball. Other than hoop and ball, I had no idea, and it was awkward to ask because everyone expected that I already knew how to play. I didn’t realize that at half-time, you switch sides of the court. I was not paying attention, and I made this baller lay-up, so stoked, and then nobody reacted the way I thought they would. I realized, "Oh, that’s the wrong hoop." That could be devastating for some people, but I thought it was really funny. I thought, “I probably shouldn’t be here, I’m bringing everybody down.” I finished the rest of that season, but then I stopped playing. I didn’t even think about that moment as a failure.

For four years, I worked at the grocery store near my high school. One day, a kid came in that I didn’t recognize, and he asked me, "Did we play basketball together?" I didn’t remember him at all, and he said, "You made a hoop on the wrong basket." He’s a college basketball player now.

The biggest failures I’ve had are in design and art when my peers and friends don’t understand something that I’ve made. I’m involved in the DIY punk music community that clashes a lot with the "Helvetic as sacred" graphic design community. People that are making ‘zines and screenprinting stuff about veganism or doing other important socio-political work sometimes feel alienated by graphic design agencies, like the ethics are somehow opposite. I struggle between these two worlds. There are aesthetic qualities about certain agencies that I love, but sometimes those agencies are producing work that I don’t ethically agree with. When that tension is seen in my work and gets pointed out to me by friends is when I’ve felt like I’ve failed, like I’m doing something kind of icky. I’ve also felt like I failed when someone makes the DIY, feminist, punk, anti-capitalist eco-system feel like a tiny, unimportant little speck in the world. This can...
be really discouraging for making things. Sometimes I ask myself, “Why am I making this nicely typed poster if it doesn’t matter.”

This relates to the struggle I have with being proud of myself and owning my identity as a person who makes stuff. If you have a talent to make art and be paid for it, I think it’s wasteful to neglect it so you can be a “better person.” If there’s something you can do that will change your life about it and can pay your bills, do it! You also have to be responsible about it. I’m on the fence…would the extra time earned by making a lot of money at an agency that was causing generativity developing and making garbage collateral be worth it?

RC: In life, it seems important to try to make your list of val- ues and your list of actions match. Reflecting on whether or not your current actions are mirroring your current values is a nice way to talk about failure. Are you failing your own val- ues? What do you think when I say the phrase optimistic fail- ure?

CM: I’m really optimistic about everything, almost to a fault. People always point that out. In my personal life, I have a re-a lly hard time getting passionately critical or negative about things. I think that is associated with a certain amount of privilege that I have. I haven’t experienced anything super devastating that would give me the backbone to have pas- sionate, critical reactions to things. I tend to be very passive, like nothing matters. Obviously, there are things that do mat- ter, but I am really optimistic about failure because I’ve al- ways been able to climb out of it.

RC: It sounds like you’ve had safety nets and not a lot of strug- gle. My life has been similar in that way. I’m really comfort- able with failure because I’ve never had to actually deal with the consequences of failing. This lack of experience gives me a place out of where I can talk about the exciting qualities of optimistic failure, but a more interesting topic of conversa- tion might be, “Who has the opportunity and privilege to re- ally have that conversation?”

CM: There’s the Wiiden-Henney installation that says, “Fail Harder.” I can imagine a lot of people who are really failing or being failed by the system saying, “Fuck that.”

RC: What do you think “Fail Harder” means?

CM: This kind of phrase easily loses its meaning. You can learn a lot from failing. So it’s good to fail, but maybe you shouldn’t aspire to fail.

RC: What should you aspire to do?

CM: My biggest goal is to have enough money to live pseudo comfortably and responsibility without having to punch in and directly work for forty hours, play for ten hours. This year I’m working towards finding a way to fit something together. For me that is such a broad aspiration that failing at it is not rea- lly possible.

RC: You are defining your aspirations through money. When you really think about what you aspire to and how could you fail at that, does it go beyond money? What do you really want in the long run?

CM: My real thing is that I just want free time. I think every- one wants that — to spend with family, friends. I want to feel productive and proud of things I’m making.

RC: I want to be able to teach experiential learning, and I don’t want to be required to sit in a classroom as a teacher. I like the notion of being able to ask questions as a teacher, and for the students to also be asking questions. I want to create an educational environment where we’re all learning from each other and we’re doing experiential activities. That’s one of my aspirations. Another would be to have an equal amount of time to spend on my artistic projects. Clearly, there is a relationship to finance, but not necessarily. There’s lots of ways to think about achieving those goals. Maybe it is that I’m moving from residency to residency where there’s a housing component that allows me to not pay for housing. That frees up money and time.

I also want fulfilling relationships and friendships. I think it’s so important, and often not part of the equation when I’m talking with people about success and failure. Personally, I have failed most at having friendships. I have lost a lot of friends because of my career ambitions.

CM: I wouldn’t say that I’ve lost friends, but sometimes I’m not a good friend. I get wrapped up in whatever I’m doing.

RC: Failing at being a friend is not something I want to fail harder at. There’s a difference in how I feel about failing in my art where I might say, “I want to optimistically fail in my art so that it’s better,” and failing with friends. I’m the kind of person who is working on seven projects at once, so that at least one of them turns out okay. The rest of them can fail, and I’m not dependent on the failed ones as self-esteem motivators because one of them was okay. At least one out of seven will probably be fine, and I’ll feel proud of it. With friends, it’s not the same because it’s people! Sometimes I do fail into the same kind of mindset where I’m feeling like it’s okay that I just have one friend, but more recently, I’ve been thinking a lot about how to not fail at friendships. What does it require? It requires optimism in a totally different way. It requires me to believe that people are good and that they are there for me.

RC: That is so hard. You always read things in zines or on the internet about how if your friends aren’t supportive of you putting yourself first, then they’re not your friend. Where is the person that is going to be chill with me if not talk- ing to them for two weeks? I’m busy! Where is the person who is going to be not totally upset and break up with me if I decide I want to move to a different city?

RC: Those people are far and few between. What really mat- ters is the quality of our friendships and making that a prior- ity. Yes, I have people in my life who care for me. Even if you go about it in untraditional ways. Maybe it’s about not think- ing of relationships in terms of time because sometimes you don’t have time, and you have to figure out other ways to show your affection. I’m only now starting to think about this because I have so many friends who aren’t in my life any- more.

This brings up the spectrum of failure and success. I wonder if losing touch with a friend is actually something we would put in a failure category on a spectrum or maybe it would be in the “just something that happened” category.

CM: I want to go back to the idea of defining failure under a certain construction. If you stop hanging out with some- one or they’re mad at you and don’t want to hang out with you, you could consider that a failure, but it’s only a failure if friendship is defined by a specific set of rules. You would have to ask yourself, “What is friendship?” Maybe if ending that relationship means that you can focus on something else or it’s a weight off your chest, maybe that isn’t failure, maybe it’s just what was supposed to happen. That could be a way to be optimistic about that failure.

RC: It’s not religious, I’m not spiritul, and I wasn’t raised with a particular overlay of ideals or values. I often think, “Is every- thing supposed to happen for a reason?” I remember my mom saying that a lot, “It’s just supposed to happen. Every- thing has a reason.” Remembering that is how I get through many of my experiences. That’s the mindset that has really helped me because I don’t think of those events in a nega- tive way. I see them as part of a larger chain of events that I don’t have control over but do. It’s a funny kind of relief.

CM: I think that you’ve probably taken more risks than me. I’m accomplishing things, but I also feel like there are a lot of things I haven’t done. I’ve always lived here in Portland. I’ve only been in two long-term relationships. I don’t take a lot of risks. I let things come to me. I don’t ever aspire to things in a way that risks failure. That’s the part of why I don’t have many failure stories. At some point, I’m going to get bored and unfulfilled by not having tried to do something out of my comfort zone.

RC: Would you say you don’t do anything out of your comfort zone?

CM: (So, but it’s always somewhat begrudgingly and by ac- cident. I think I have a lot of social anxiety, but other people tell me I’m really good at navigating social situations. Right now I’m an intern at a high-profile ad agency. I got the intern- ship because of my connections. It’s a weird map of stuff that got me to that point. I’m faking a lot of things. I don’t think I would be a very attractive candidate for that intern- ship if I just came out of the woodwork.

RC: I have never gotten a job that I applied for. Most of the opportunities I’ve had do come from personal connections I made by simply showing up. I actually haven’t taken a lot of risks, either. The only risks I’ve taken are not doing things. I had this strange opportunity to go to grad school, and so I did it. It feels like it’s just happening, not like I’m taking a big risk. Looking back on it, it is a risk because I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into with grad school, and I had no idea where it would take me. I had no plan at all.

Do you think it’s possible to teach people how to take oppo- tunities without feeling like they’re taking a risk? I think that would be a great skill to teach.

CM: I definitely do think it’s possible. I’ve always wanted to be a person who does that and I didn’t realize I was until right now. I try not to be too self-confident. I try to purposely be grounded because I don’t want to be an asshole. I learn a lot by watching people I admire. A lot of people I know in the graphic design community are good at hacking the system of jobs and careers. I’m not interested in working at a place that is very structured and ladder-climbing oriented.

RC: Could you talk about “scraping it together?” Maybe this is sort of an alternative approach to having a traditional ca- reer path. Scraping-it-together might mean you are mixing things together until you work. I think a lot of artists work that way because there’s no other way. Whatever normal na- ceer trajectory has been laid out doesn’t make sense for an artist. They have to invent their own way. It’s possible that some people consider the “doing it your own way” to be a type of failure. This path is full of moments of failure.

CM: I do think some people see the “doing it your own way” as a form of failure. Whenever I go back to the grocery store where I used to work, it becomes really clear that my old coworkers see what I’m doing as failure. I quit my job af- ter working there for four years, and they asked, “Did you get a new job?” I didn’t have a new job. I just didn’t want to have that job any more. When I told them, “I just do whatever hap- pens,” it seemed as if they saw it as a decadent, morbid lifestyle. Sometimes I work at the newspaper, or sometimes I do really boring freelance jobs. My old coworkers see that as not hav- ing a job. I’m making the same amount of money that I made at the grocery store, but I work less and it’s more fun.

RC: Sometimes I feel like non-freelancers project onto free- lance people some idea that we are lazy or that we are doing something wrong. Sometimes I wish everyone could be a free- lance person, to experience the freedom of following your own path. I know the world doesn’t work that way because of
the structures and systems that run it. Somebody has to fill in the jobs that maintain the system.

CM I have a really limited worldview in that regard. If I had two kids all of the sudden and I had to support a family, it really wouldn’t work to not know what my job is next week. I can live on $2,000 of savings and make sure I refill that every once in awhile, and that works for me now because my rent is so cheap in a house with seven people. I have a specific set of parameters that allow this lifestyle to work for me. I can’t talk about that being the right direction. If I did have a situation that required more stability, this probably would be a failure.

RC: What is the purpose of having a word like failure? What does it do?

CM In school, I didn’t care if I failed. I literally failed, especially in middle school. I had an awful teacher who was an evil person. He was obsessed with Marvin the Martian, he had a lot of Marvin the Martian garb in his classroom. He was abusive. He would kick chairs and stuff. He told me that grades don’t matter at all until you’re finishing high school because of the way standardized testing works. I took his words to heart. His words freed me, and I was able to just learn things without the pressure of thinking about grades. I would not do the assignments, and I would invent my own assignments and do those. I think I did them really well. Then I would fail because it wasn’t the right set of parameters. Everyone always told me this wouldn’t work in college, they’d say, “You need to jump through hoops, do things you don’t want to do.” Obviously, I realize now that it would have been better if I had followed the rules more closely. I would have been further ahead in my life. I could have graduated two years earlier if I would have just jumped through the hoops.

I was kind of on to something to think, “It’s stupid to measure everyone by the same standards.” But I think failure does exist; and it might be necessary. Unfortunately, sometimes the concept of failure is abused to assign value to people who might not deserve it.

RC: I want to talk more about building your own assignments and making your own parameters at a really young age. Disregarding the system and doing your own thing, being anti-establishment. Maybe if you had done the assignments you would have somehow become better; you wouldn’t have failed in those moments, but maybe you were actually doing yourself a favor, setting yourself up to make your own decisions and make your own parameters as an adult. It’s important to have the skills to know how to navigate the system and make your own path even though people might make you feel like you’re cheating the system. People frequently make me feel like I’m doing something wrong when I’m just following my own path. “Why do you care what I’m doing? It’s my life.”

RC: What makes you keep going? Why did you quit your job at the grocery store to become a graphic designer?

CM Because I have to keep going. For me, the life of graphic designer was the more attractive path to follow. There were parts of that job that I really liked, like being forced to talk to people I would never talk to on my own volition, but for me, I could see myself getting trapped in that job and feeling stuck. There was not going to be a better time to try something else. If it was five years later, I might have obligations that would keep me from taking a risk to be a freelancer. It was less about having an aspiration to “be something,” and more about not being the other thing.

RC: That seems like a pretty big risk.

CM I think it is, but I knew I could come back if it didn’t work out. I had a safety net. That’s a big thing to remember. For a lot of people, it’s possible to just put something on pause and come back to it if you need to.

RC: That’s a nice way to think about it.

Life is tenuous and short. Because of that, it is scary.
Introduction: Nimi and Tamar have never met in person. Nimi is currently a student at Portland State University, Tamar is a professional designer and creative director based in Los Angeles. Nimi created the piece you see on the facing page, entitled "Release." After which, Tamar wrote Nimi an elegant and endearing letter, "An Answer, A Plan." Nimi's statement of intent and Tamar's response are included below.

keywords: xenophobia, israeli-palestinian conflict, call and response, honesty, global citizens, shame, fear, acceptance, release

and I'm working on it.
Fear is such a primitive emotion. In the end, it is the thing that may keep us alive. This hate would keep you safe. Sadly, these prejudices, narratives of fear and caution, connect us.

Fear resides in that most primitive part of our brain, right in the center, well-positioned to protect against most head injuries. It is this Old Brain that houses the fight or flight response necessary for our survival. My Mother had a stroke eight years before she died and was left with this primitive brain intact. She was left without humor (destroyed by the stroke) and without the cerebral tissue of emotion and empathy that was our connective bond. She was left without knowing how to feel about anything. It was a nightmare filled with unending anxiety for her. A Mother lost in a stream of incessant fear. (Which direction are we going? Where is my purse? Where are your children? Why are you crying about me? Should I be sad? What can I do? She would ask.)

Fear is natural. Survival is a biological imperative. There is survival of the species but then there is also survival of the Tribe. It is easy to slip into the comfort of Narratives that have been passed down from our particular parents. They wanted us to understand that people, throughout history, have hated Jews. They needed us to know there are real dangers to our existence because of that hate. Our families wanted us to stay safe, to see the warning signs before it was too late. They didn’t/don’t know how to secure our safety. No one does. And so I feel a protective cloak of fear was instituted. It happens everywhere when the Tribe is threatened. Fear and hate become more powerful than love and meaning. It is happening in America and Europe as we write.

Our parents just need to keep us safe. When one becomes a parent, it is understandably paramount.

In my Jewish family, it was the Holocaust and the German people. I couldn’t stand to hear German spoken. I wouldn’t even think of buying a German car. I wouldn’t ever visit Germany. For you, it was Arabs. Through both media and your parents, the Arab language was sculpted to seem angry and anti-Semitic, even primitive and irrational. The mere sound of it became a symbol, able to strike fear in your heart so you would hate Them, see Them as Other, keep Them at bay. Maybe this hate would keep you safe. Sadly, these prejudices, narratives of fear and caution, connect us. Fear is such a primitive emotion. In the end, it is the thing that may keep us alive.

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Fear is an Old Brain. Our hate defines us as much as our love. To not feel fear is to risk losing our lives.

How do we stay connected to our Tribe but also rewrite our Narrative? How do we let new in— how to rewrite our Tribe? Yes, it is that bloody thing to rewrite them; yes, it is that bloody thing to rewrite them. To change our beliefs that then perhaps will belle the beliefs of our parents? Can we be inclusive of Others while staying in the comforting bosom of our Tribe? If we are to make that journey and venture out, will we pull back the curtain — like in the Wizard of Oz — to find that our parents lied to us? How will we survive that? Maybe we won’t.

Our hate defines us as much as our love. Venturing out alone is really scary. Luckily my daughter has decided to take me with her. Barely out of her teens, she has chosen to study the Holocaust. This came out of both hate and love: my hate of Germany and her love of me. When it was suggested by a Professor her freshman year of college to study something that she didn’t understand, the first thing that popped into her mind was me. Her Mother. Ouch. She didn’t understand me; why a kind, generous, caring mother could hate an entire nation, an entire people. What scared me so much about Germany and Germans that someone who rarely hated anyone, hated them so strongly?

Thus began her journey. She has been my teacher. Her student. She has taught me things I never knew about the Holocaust. She has taught me how the ability to do evil lurks in most people. The Germans are sadly not special in that regard. My hatred of them doesn’t keep me any safer than I would be otherwise. People all over the world do horrible things to each other. The Holocaust was one of the worst, but certainly not one of the last. Fear rarely keeps us safe. It mostly keeps us either trapped in the past or petrified of the future, robbing us of our present and leaving us without the ability to be in our “Now.” I am going to visit Germany with my daughter. She will hold my hand and weep with me at Auschwitz. Weep not because of what Germany did. But because of what the human race is capable of.

Your actions can transform fear into understanding.

I leave you with this, Nimi. Being afraid of Arabs will not keep you safe. Arabic hatred of Jews has not kept them safe either. So, start somewhere. Take an action. Take an Arabic language class at your local University. Take an Arabic Studies class. Go to visit an Arab Mosque. Befriend someone in a hijab. It will be hard. Painful even. There may be tears of fear and even tears of loss. Losing a long-held prejudice still leaves a hole that needs to be filled with something. Maybe take someone with you on your journey. The road won’t be so steep if you have someone by your side. It won’t make it less scary, but it might make you more brave.

You were given this legacy burden of hate by the accident of your birth. You can reject it by the purposefulness of your actions. It is your choice and yours alone.

Life is tenuous and short. Because of that it is scary. At its worst it is cruel and devoid of hope. At its best it is meaningful and full of love. I’ve got your back.

From Strength to Strength, Tamar

Nimi’s Abstract: Exploring the power of written language and graphic format as mediums of direct communication to force us, as global citizens, to look directly at the things we hide due to shame and fear.

Dearest Nimi,

Thank you for being brave like this in the hope that you can grow beyond what your family narrative has passed on to you. You are not alone in this burden of bigotry. The presence of hate and prejudice and suffering is as common as it is horrible. Popular stories are rife with the handed-down legacies of hate that even find their ways into popular culture, i.e.: The Italians and the Puerto Ricans in West Side Story; The Montagues and the Capulets in Romeo & Juliet. No culture is a stranger to inherited hate. Nor how love can overcome it. It is what wars are made of. Our Tribe vs Their Tribe. There is comfort in numbers. Someone has your back. If you drown, you will not drown alone.

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Fear resides in that most primitive part of our brain, right in the center, well-positioned to protect against most head injuries. It is this Old Brain that houses the fight or flight response necessary for our survival. My Mother had a stroke eight years before she died and was left with this primitive brain intact. She was left without humor (destroyed by the stroke) and without the cerebral tissue of emotion and empathy that was our connective bond. She was left without knowing how to feel about anything. It was a nightmare filled with unending anxiety for her. A Mother lost in a stream of incessant fear. (Which direction are we going? Where is my purse? Where are your children? Why are you crying about me? Should I be sad? What can I do? She would ask.)

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Xenophobia could have served some purpose when humans couldn’t find out what the Other Tribe was up to. Perhaps there wasn’t even spoken language and thus defending territory meant the difference between a place to hunt and no food for the Tribe. But we live in such an entirely different world now. It is even significantly different than what our parents lived in. I can Google “Why do Jews and Arabs hate each other?” and get back 594,000 results in 0.62 seconds. We can choose a different path than what we were taught.

How do we stay connected to our Tribe but also rewrite our Narrative? How do we let new information and new experiences seep in when our Tribe tells us to keep them out? How can we change our beliefs that then perhaps will belle the beliefs of our parents? Can we be inclusive of Others while staying in the comforting bosom of our Tribe? If we are to make that journey and venture out, will we pull back the curtain — like in the Wizard of Oz — to find that our parents lied to us? How will we survive that? Maybe we won’t.

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From Strength to Strength, Tamar
Game Over, Insert Credit to Continue

Doing work, winding your way through cutscenes,
Tripped to call my gun, but it wouldn't be found.
Tripped to remote into my gun, but it wasn't found.

You're an old folder of fantastic stories on the computer
next to the videos they made of a happier time,
tossed off, not even backed up to the Cloud.

I run hot, toes and turn, kick the blankets off,
stretches out with sick my toenails on a cold, brass bed frame,
waiting to the alien glow of my phone: #24 AM
SLEEP CANNOT BE FOUND

And all you have to do is press
/// boxing glove Heart crammed in a tub of crunchy peanut butter
SQUASH to call out
/// scared of a mosquito, packed in a couch on a schoolbus
SQUEEZE for name
/// neither a warrior nor a newspaper
SQUASH for beer bottle
/// raining stones raining bones
SQUEEZE to breathe ---

The House's dandruff dances through the bluene, the Hollywood sign of a leading scenar over your bed finishes, and the killer who didn't even get a chance to work goes home.

"All of the movies available on celluloid never made it to VHS. All of the movies available on VHS never made it to DVD and not all of the movies available on DVD are streaming ---

It's not even close."

---

National Treasure

The President's daughter says she's on the dark side, close to the frozen borderline.

"You're drunk. Enjoy it." The playboy smiles and settles back into an amphibian chair.

"You're not sick. This is how you're supposed to feel."

Her green eyes listen to the music. "I'm going to go to the washroom put some water on my face."

The President's daughter craves a postcard of the mountains' shadow under a murder of crows writing their light bleeding intestine paragraphs with duct tape flashbacks.

"Molly, she come out? Are there people back there?"

The detail rushes in checks every stall himself. Molly doesn't respond; he notices an exit. He keeps asking Molly if she came out back. Molly still doesn't respond. He runs through the alley and there's Molly'd body in a pool of blood ---

the map of the world.

"Bookbag's been taken, I repeat: Shredded been taken."
A short, critical essay on ethics in design.

Keywords: social media, graphic design, ethics, sustainability, code of conduct, context, critique.
The question of ethics in graphic design isn't quite as clear as it is in other professions. How do we decide which projects to take on? How do we decide how much a project is worth? What happens when we are hired to make something that is in conflict with our values? These are questions that designers face every day. Our work has an impact on others, and we need to be aware of that impact. We must consider the ethical implications of our decisions, and we must be accountable for our actions.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of ethical practice in graphic design. The AIGA has published a number of ethical guidelines, and many designers have taken these guidelines to heart. This has resulted in a more ethical and responsible approach to design. We have become more aware of the potential consequences of our work, and we are more likely to consider these consequences before we proceed. This is a good thing, but it is not enough. We must continually ask ourselves, "Is this the right thing to do?"

There are many reasons why designers might choose to engage in unethical practices. Sometimes, the pressure to meet deadlines or to please clients can lead to unethical decisions. Other times, designers may be unaware of the ethical implications of their work. In any case, we must be vigilant and proactive in our approach to ethics. We must be willing to question our own assumptions, and we must be willing to challenge ourselves to do better.

In conclusion, ethical practice in graphic design is essential. It is not enough to simply follow a set of guidelines. We must be aware of the potential consequences of our work, and we must be willing to question our own assumptions. We must be willing to challenge ourselves to do better.
Material ethics are much harder to identify and implement. Non-material ethics incorporate research, ideas, information, communication, motivation, and emotion. Everything from our proficiency in a given topic to choices behind the scenes in our design and development processes. For example, the decision to use a certain type of font, the choice of a color palette, or the selection of a specific material for a product. These decisions are being made by designers across an entire spectrum of professions, from graphic design to product design. Design decisions are being made by designers in a way that can only be drastically altered by behavior.

For us, these ethics matter. When we sit down to work, we must consider the ethical implications of our decisions. We must ask ourselves: What is the intended function of our work? What do we want to achieve with our design? Are we acting in a way that is aligned with our values and principles? Are we acting in a way that is beneficial to the people we are designing for?

In identifying the various functions of design, there is also an implicit ascertainment of responsibilities. If a designer chooses to take on the role of assistance, the consequent responsibility is to assist. If a designer chooses to take on the role of inaction, then the responsibility is to inform, meaning the quality of the information matters. When a given designer chooses to work within the function of assistance / informing / social betterment, then we better hold their toes to the fire. In identifying responsibilities, we are being asked to consider what our role in society is and what ethical consequences our actions have on others.

Ethical Dimensions
As far as I can identify, there are essentially three dimensions of graphic design ethics we must consider:

1. Material
2. Non-material
3. Ethical

Material ethics are obvious. Working with cradle-to-cradle awareness and design that addresses everything from using eco-friendly trees to ending environmental destruction. At a deeper level, the material practices still lead us to more consciousness practices - flowing in direction of the future instead of the change in direction of the earth. At a startlingly and sustainably clearly ethical, it’s obvious. But it doesn’t fulfill consumption volumes are too extreme. Sustainable design is exposed by consuming unsustainable materials.

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Just Because Bigger

And Badder Doesn't Mean You Aren't Allowed A Good Cry Every Now And Then

<< Aksi Dottor Kobra
Failure is only success waiting to happen.

The biggest influences in my life have been my failures.
If someone ever says this to you, tell them to put the shut to the up.

Failure is humiliating, painful, often public, and can alter or damage a life permanently.

In reality, this thing started in 2014. Just another #failure.