

Countdown to Valentine's Day

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Who is counting?

– I am counting.

You are always counting.

– You have to ask me to stop.

You buried me the day after Valentine's day.

– You broke my heart.

All is forgiven.

– Nothing is forgotten.

Why are you still so angry?

– You left me again without goodbye.

Why won't you reciprocate?

– You can't have it your way all the time.

Do you ever miss me?

– I never thought you would ask.

Do you ever wonder why?

– If there is heaven, they were out of Absolut.

Why do you mock me now?

– You can't push me around anymore.

I only wanted you to laugh.

– Sometimes you hurt me.

No more running into trees.

– I am safely bored.

Will you run if I am not chasing you?

– I will be busy counting.

You are such a tedious nerd.

– Someone has to do your homework.

It is Valentine's day again soon.

– It is one day after, to be precise.

Emotional systems

This is one of my favorite clips of Despicable Me 2. It illustrates several emotional systems, rapidly cycling in wonderful animation. It brings new meaning to the phrase "affect regulation"...

Aquarium of Worries



Cabo Pulmo, Mexico

It is August of 2013 and she is in Mexico. It is only one week into the vacation, yet every possible scenario, likely or unlikely, is already circling her mind like a bunch of vultures over a dying animal. This poor animal, a banal metaphor for her happiness, tried so hard to live a happy life, but upon brief separation from the pack, it wore itself out trying to catch up, and soon collapsed out of exhaustion and laid there waiting to die. She wished that the stretches of anxiety-free happiness could just keep up with the pack and graze from pasture to pasture. If there was ever a predator waiting to pounce on the weakest animal, she always obliged. Not without a battle of course, but she wondered if giving up might instead be less exhausting. She wondered whether not keeping up with the pack was an option. Whether on land or sea, there was always danger looming in paradise. It was so tiring to stay happy.

Outside the hotel room, a beautiful full moon lit the sky and the entire bay of Costa Azul. Other than the scorching daytime heat, there was no better time to be on vacation. There were no thunderstorms. It was less humid than she expected. The water was potable everywhere. She hadn't gotten sick from 'la

turista'. She hadn't seen or heard a snake anywhere and only two people had tried to pitch a timeshare to her thus far. To any other person, a cheap vacation by the water with someone you love should be heaven on earth. It was heaven on earth. But it was also hell, because none of the big things back home were resolved and thus every little setback in heaven was a constant reminder of hell.

At night, she closed her eyes and craved to be underwater, where everything was quiet and she could explore. Yet in the shadows, even in her sleep, she saw predators and screamed quietly. Haunted by fear, she would get up and urinate, sometimes half a dozen times, wasting salt and overheating, waking up exhausted and hopeless. All of her worries from home, a trifecta of debt, work and family, disguised themselves as sharks and snuck up on her in her real and imagined snorkeling activities. At daytime, she was snorkeling in the magnificent Sea of Cortez, which Jacques Cousteau himself dubbed the "aquarium of the world". Her boyfriend held her hand when they went into the deep waters, but at the sight of deep ridges, she pulled him back. Her body shivered underwater while she wondered what might confront her on the other side. She swam back to shore swiftly after getting tired of being afraid.

Tomorrow they would drive to Cabo Pulmo, a most spectacular place for snorkeling and diving. In her sleep, she imagined what it might be like to encounter a whale shark. She imagined that moment when her boyfriend would pull her toward the deep waters in pursuit of the gentle giant. She visualized the dark shadow of facing an unknown creature the size of a small bus, hoping that it would be spotted so that she would know immediately that it is not a foe. She felt the panic that would overcome her body. She wondered if the creature would sense her overwhelming anxiety and try to save her by swallowing her whole. The odds of being swallowed by a whale shark are pretty slim. It almost happened to someone last

year. Their throat is too small however to fit a full person. If a giant fish could not save her from her lifetime anxiety, maybe she could never be saved. The Sea of Cortez was no match for her imagination, an aquarium of worries, where hundreds of species coexist and thrive with little hope for extinction.

Surviving (in) the absence of god



My grandmother would not approve of the title of my blog post. She has survived almost 94 years (give or take) believing in god and trying to find peace in this world through him. I grew up in a very religious environment that provided only superficial answers to dealing with hardship. With every loss I endured since childhood, it became more and more clear there was nobody coming to the rescue. I was lucky to have enough friends and family who provided me with love and helped me survive the absence of god. The harder times came later in life. I found myself in situations where nobody could help me survive the absence of god besides myself. If you believe that god is within us, maybe losing everything is what it takes to finding god. Maybe I have found what my godmother has been telling me for so many years.

Three years ago around this time, I received a phone call that

I never thought would come. I had experienced significant grief before, but could not imagine this particular kind of grief. This was not like when you imagine what life would be like when your parents are no longer around. My first cousin and I were raised so close that I have few memories of any fun before I got to college without her. She was three years older than me. My brother was three years younger than me. We were a trio of trouble. We wore each others' clothes as hand-me downs and hated every moment of it. We loved each other and we fought each other. Our relationship was strained in later years and we drifted apart.

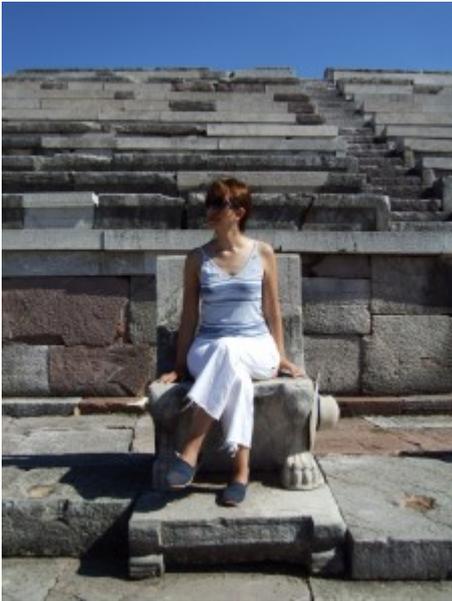
I fantasized of a future in which we would all somehow reconcile our grievances, most of which were not even ours, and just have fun together again. What a mistake that was. A fateful car accident on the coastal highway of Athens took her away in the middle of the night. I have spent the last three years learning how one can preserve their sanity faced with a mountain of regrets. I have almost convinced myself that the memories we made can stay alive even though we can't share them with each other anymore. After all, my grandmother continues to tell me stories of her brother whom she lost when she was very young. He is undeniably very much alive in her memory. Surviving the absence of god requires good storytelling, not in the form of denial, but in celebrating the truth about all that has happened, both the good and bad.

If I survive long enough, I too may find myself telling my grandchildren about the great aunt they never met, the one who confronted her fears head on and who was never afraid to live. If I believed in fate, I would tell them that somehow she knew her life would be short and that is why she lived with such a desire to try everything. But that would diminish my admiration in her passion for life. I would have to tell my grandchildren about the time the two of us confronted the tallest waves of Volos beach, her with her tube, me with my floaties. Or the time she went skydiving and regretted it the

moment she stepped out of the plane. Or the time I looked for her at Tinley Park for hours after a concert, steaming in anger after driving 80 miles to get her in a pre-cell phone era.

When the grandkids grow up some more, I may even tell them she could drink any man under the table and could dance for days, even without music. Or how I had to get a third piercing on my right ear out of guilt after wasting two hours at a parlor after midnight because she changed her mind on having her lip pierced before summer vacation. What I don't know is whether I could tell them than nobody survived the absence of god better than her. My grandmother finds comfort in believing that she will be with her brothers, sister and husband again after her death. Yet she holds onto life very dearly. She keeps telling me that she doesn't know why she is still alive. I think that if there is a god, he is not ready to give her what she wants yet. In the absence of a god here on earth and having to survive so much tragedy, we selfishly need her to hold on just a little longer. Maybe I am not ready to find god all on my own.

Past to Future



More living out of a suitcase for almost a month for much needed vacation to Greece and subsequently intense intellectual stimulation. You can find me at:

... the International Workshop on New Computationally-Enabled Theoretical Models to Support Health Behavior Change and Maintenance, October 16-17, 2012, Brussels, Belgium | <http://www.behaviorchange.be/>

... Wireless Health 2012, October 23-25, 2012, San Diego, CA, USA | <http://www.wirelesshealth2012.org/>

... Building Rehabilitation Research Capacity at the Nexus of New Technologies, Aging, and Disability, October 25- 26, 2012, Marina del Rey, CA | http://www.isi.edu/research/rerc/coming_events/

[Huacas of the Past](#)

While searching for inspiration to move forward, sometimes it helps to look back...way back. Over dinner tonight, James and I

talked about old civilizations. I remembered that I had an old tribute to a certain place of the past, a sacred place: my own [huaca](#).

Before game engines were available to mere mortals, there were things like CAVElib and Performer. I made my first CAVElib application to look like a mythical place in Peru. I would just sit in the CAVE and stare at it. It sounds dorky, but I really liked escaping in it. It was scaled to size and I felt like maybe I was lost in the fog in the Andes. Somewhere in my archives, I may have some old screen captures from IRIX. A few months ago, I even found a printout of the entire code for that application written in C and OpenGL. I was a primitive programmer, but somehow I made it happen. But it was not enough.

I was sad that I couldn't go to that place, neither physically nor virtually. VRML offered a glimpse of what the future may be. It was a way to bring real-time graphics to the web. It was a dream. It sucked. Because programming for VRML sucked. In 2001, I made a virtual *Chavin De Huantar*. Today, you would call it level design for a game. There is even a dangerous *easter egg* hidden somewhere in the levels. I wrote my first published student paper about it. I was terrified to present it. I met some nice people. But it went nowhere. Too far ahead of its time, for better or worse. Cosmoplayer, the VRML player died, but thankfully it can be downloaded and installed even on Firefox. I downloaded and installed it today. And much to my surprise, most of the world works. Maybe one day, I can get to Chavin, shoot high rez pictures and make a real video game out of it in Unity.

For now, all that remains can be viewed below—a virtual ruin of my past ☐



<http://www.evl.uic.edu/gotsis/huacas/>
(requires VRML Player download from [here](#))

Birthday Cake



It has been hard to think about myself turning 34 without thinking you not turning 37 two months later. You were there for at least 20 of my birthdays. Maybe more. And you loved cake and milk.

Resilience Through Numbers

It has been a slow and steady year full of changes for me. After a series of major emotional losses, I have emerged in a slow and steady pace trying to maintain my cool during times of crisis. Work has been especially fulfilling this year, although the financial climate is not for the weak of heart. I seemed to have transitioned to becoming research faculty during the worst period for fund-raising in a long time. I see leaner budgets, cuts across programs, more projects for less salary replacement. It will probably get worse. But for once in my life, I am getting over things much faster than before. I have learned how being legitimately angry, even for short periods is extremely constructive.

Besides having a very supportive social network, I have the privilege of working with an amazing group of people from all walks of life and I have never felt more inspired to solve problems. Failure has struck me many times, but I have never been afraid of it. Boredom is what I am always most afraid of, followed closely by the fear of squandering talent, not just mine but that of others. In recent years, I have learned that a healthy amount of narcissism can lead to resilience. Even thinking that I can actually help with something is rather narcissistic. Yet, the thought of wasting a mind that can contribute to this world in small or big ways is a terrifying one. Until I had students, I didn't know why narcissism was valuable. Removing insecurity and replacing it with confidence for others was transformational for me.

My students taught me that I had the ability to help them somehow discover what they like and want and they let me push their boundaries and experiment. In this process, I became comfortable with my own skills. For years I hated the "jack of all trades master of none" line because of my own insecurities. Now, I strive to be a master of none because I prefer working with other people. In reality, we all have

mastery over several areas. Learning to raise your hand and say “I can do this” with beaming confidence is incredible. Even more incredible is the ability to find the people who can do what you can’t do and at times, convince them that they can do this, whatever it is that is necessary. There is also the “I can’t do this” moment and it is best to be working with people who also know their limits. The more people you let into your world, the more likely you can find those who can and can’t at the right time.

Resilience is a word bouncing in my head for over a year now. It has become a meditation. For me, resilience has been about numbers. The number of people who have contributed to my well changes all the time. Some transference has persistence, while other exchanges are fleeting—perhaps a spark—but not a lasting imprint. Shifting into positive opportunities for transference is hard yet possible. Recognizing positive and constructive models is not a widely taught skill. If the mirror you hold up to yourself and others is broken, it is hard to see. Coming from a mixed bag of positive and negative role models, the path is not always clear because we tend to follow what our early emotional experiences find familiar, no matter how terrible these are. Therefore, resilience lies in numbers: how many people can you meet in a lifetime who can transform your emotional and intellectual world?

[Standing Still While Moving](#)



February 11 marks the one-year anniversary of the passing of my first cousin, Kelly 'Kali' Doukas. Up to a month ago, I hadn't even realized that she passed away in February. I was pretty sure it was in April. While trying to work on my annual activity report, I noticed that there were two months I barely remembered anything about. Our brains are rather remarkable in their ability to suppress. I remember telling myself that I had neither time nor room for mourning. Apparently, I was pretty convincing.

I am learning how to mourn again. For Kelly and for others lost the past two years. For 21 years, Kelly defended me against my premature adulthood. We had both lost a lot, but she always knew how to keep on living. She was responsible for

almost every first-time experience I had to have in my life that my parents would have objected to. None of it hurt me. Most of it helped me. I always resented her for trying to make me have fun. I never thanked her for it. Our last encounter was harsh. Both of us would rather pretend it never happened. Unfortunately, it is burned in my memory like an ugly photograph.

Kelly was a gifted photographer. For someone who moved at the speed of light, I was amazed at how quickly she could capture images of profound beauty and inspiration without blurring. How could she notice anything while moving so fast? Her piercing blue eyes could stop traffic. In fact, they did so many times when we would go out for a night in the town. What was the last thing she saw when the lights went out? I wish I could have looked at those eyes one last time. She could stop time while staring at you, yet she moved so fast while the world stood still.

I wish I could stand still while moving to see what she saw. I wish I could see her see me one more time.