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A Supraterranean Manifesto

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Feature

teaser:

Perhaps it hit me when *Time Magazine* named their 2006 Person of the Year. *You*. It was so simple, so obvious. The decision must have been based largely on the runaway success of YouTube. Much else was changing about the ways we communicate and spend our free time and energy. But even that simple switch from passive to active media consumption was one that, I felt sure, would forever transform our society.

"Roads? Where we're going *we don't need roads.*" – Doc Brown, *Back to the Future*

Perhaps it hit me when *Time Magazine* named their 2006 Person of the Year. *You*. It was so simple, so obvious. The decision must have been based largely on the runaway success of YouTube. By that time, many considered a night of watching "viral videos" and bootleg concert footage to be more rewarding than flipping channels on TV. Much else was changing about the ways we communicate and spend our free time and energy. But even that simple switch from passive to active media consumption was one that, I felt sure, would forever transform our society.

Since first getting an AOL account around 1995, I had – without conscious planning – been using computers to do an increasing amount of my interpersonal communication. Society generally lamented this phenomenon. "They won't develop normal social skills," we were told. "I used to just pick up the phone and call someone – or even go over to their house – if I wanted to talk to them."

My personal favorites expressed concern about escapism. "How are they going to get by in the *real world* if they're always avoiding *reality*." In fact, if my generation shared anything collectively, it was a reluctance to embrace the version of reality presented to us by institutions, marketers, advertisers and editors. We couldn't quite see the irony forest for the sarcasm trees when we were younger (e.g., "*Beavis and Butt-head* was making fun of *us*?"). But we knew something irreversible had happened when our comfy, cozy '90s world passed into a dismal post-9/11 era. We knew suddenly what before we had only felt vaguely: that there's a horrible flaw with a human "reality" that can create such suffering

and disaster. In short, we wanted to know *why* – all the whys: why 9/11 really happened, why we'd been brought up in a fabricated reality, why those who came before us were content to let their hearts turn to coal, etc.

Many of us began looking for answers and connections on the World Wide Web. While at first Facebook was designed only to unite students at the same college (groups and events were among the first features offered), MySpace's main strengths were its blogging platform, music pages for bands, and the ability to search for people by geography and keywords. This allowed for all sorts of unprecedented connections, from pen pal-like friendships based on similar tastes in movies or music, to meet-ups with semi-strangers for casual sex (well... not all the connections were *advances* in human communication).

Meanwhile, back at the MySpace blog forum, people were pouring themselves out to total strangers. A certain amount of anonymity remained, but the openness and honesty in much of the writing was astonishing. During a difficult personal time, I found myself keeping a sort of journal on my MySpace blog and receiving regular support (via comments and messages) from people I had never met in "reality."

That was in 2005, and then by 2006 we had entered the lo-fi world of chocolate rain and candy mountains. The media hailed it as the year of "You," but that wasn't the whole story. *We had begun to discard "I" and "Me" for "You" and "We."*

Just before then, a site appeared under the name We Feel Fine. It searched the Web for recent use of the word "feel" in an attempt to gauge the current emotional state of the world (at least, the portion of the world with Internet access). Little colorful dots bounce around the flash application; click one and it brings up the sentence that contained "feel," after which you can link to the original article. This led to a sort of epiphany for me. Whereas Descartes posed, "I think, therefore I am," perhaps our generation would embrace a new definition of existence: *I feel, therefore I am not alone.*

However embarrassing it sounds now, I'll never deny that my MySpace blog contributed to my self-realization as a writer. It wasn't the same as typing in a Word doc, clicking save, and filing it away on my hard drive, not knowing if it would ever be seen by other eyes. It felt good to let people know what I was experiencing. It also felt good to read about *their* lives. I felt...less alone...and, maybe, more human. Because of technology. Because of computers and the Internet. Because the "real world" kept letting me down.

A personal milestone came in 2006, when I realized that a large portion of our culture had been totally invisible to me. I now know that it was due mostly to the aforementioned advertisers, marketers and editors, who hoped to keep the public reality tunnel pointed directly at buyable goods. I didn't completely understand my gut feeling about it at the time. I just needed a career change, and, therefore, a second degree. After some career counseling, I decided to get a masters of journalism, return to Detroit and start an online music publication. Though before I finished my MA in 2008, ad revenue dropped so much that online entrepreneurship seemed nearly impossible.

Yet even now we are witnessing exponential growth in experimental publishing ventures, mostly of a journalistic nature. *Reality Sandwich* is just one example. The original social networks have either vanished or been ravaged by media conglomerates hoping to make the sites "profitable." The newer publishing projects have trouble taking off unless they have significant funding or unusual luck in the URL lotto game of Digg, Reddit and

StumbleUpon. And journalism experiments have faced the most attacks. Since the Year of You, every effort has been made to spin "civic journalism" and "citizen reporter" into dirty words. The journalism industry couldn't diagnose its own cancer, and instead of getting innovative, they put on their editor caps and started pointing fingers.

In other words, the Ron Burgundys of the world rang their warning bells. "But... who's gonna read the news if there are no professional journalists?! It is *anchorman*, not *anchorblogger*, and that is a scientific fact!" It didn't stop there. Editors suggested that nothing short of mass chaos would ensue if their long-standing take on fact-based, "objective" journalism were to fail as a business model. Not one of them admitted or understood that a conflict of interest is inherent in a for-profit journalism organization – one that is automatically more committed to publishers, advertisers and stockholders than to the audience, the citizens who need information in order to uphold a democracy (never mind that the U.S. is barely a semi-democracy). And their goal *to this day* has been to find a way to make us pay for content using traditional consumerist hierarchies, despite the glaring fact that our entire economic system must now endure a complete overhaul.

Information does have to be synthesized into "truth," so the editors tried to convince us that they were the only ones capable of presenting the *real* truth. But blogs and journalism start-ups continued to flourish, sometimes gaining bigger online audiences than traditional media groups. After all, an independent website costs little to host, and contributors can still work a day job. The editors, running out of options, kept repeating that without newspapers there would be no watchdog to keep a public record of daily occurrences. "We know what information you need. We know how to get it to you. Trust us. You are safe in our hands." Something about it seemed eerily familiar to *government propaganda*, which Bill Hicks used to mock in similar terms: "Go back to bed, America. Your government is in control again."

We didn't fall for the scam, and by 2008 it was obvious that Twitter alone could spread news updates worldwide without the help of professional reporters and editors. Though even by the end of 2006, thanks in part to an internship at a lifestyle magazine in Chicago, I had started to wonder, "Who the fuck are these editors, and why are we letting them control our cultural discourse? Is there a way we can eliminate them from the process altogether – not just in journalism, but in all of publishing?"

On the other side of the publishing fence, the book industry reps hid in the cellar while the storm tore through the journalists' camp. And book publishers were running similar spin cycles at full capacity. "Self-published books will never be as *good* as those endorsed by a publishing house," they said. "Trust us to present you with the *best* writing out there." That is, the best writing that can be sold for a profit – using payola to get visible bookstore placement and high profile book reviews – by authors who are willing to wear a monkey suit and bang cymbals on Oprah's stage.

A diminishing budget allowed book publishers to sign much fewer writers for expensive or long-term deals. And those struggling to publish a book started to wonder if it was worth the fight, given the bleak odds and generally stale nature of contemporary literature (not to mention all the paper resources wasted in their distribution model). In modern times, public recognition and artistic credibility have generally become mutually exclusive. Now the book industry is mobilizing to control the way e-readers are used. Kindle and iPad are both wet dreams for publishers who want to tyrannize digital distribution and pricing, despite the fact that certain peer-to-peer networks have appeared that feature e-book

trading alone, and that these torrent networks are usually more comprehensive and efficient than any established commercial distribution system in history.

Periodically I've even submitted material to literary journals to be considered for publication. But admittedly, I can't discern a purpose for those publications other than to dam up the river of human creativity. They are little more than MFA nurseries, intent on playing border guard for the land of literary respect. Every time I get a form letter rejection, I have to quell the urge inside me to locate the editors and choke the arrogance out of them. My sense is that hordes of other budding writers feel the same. We're all wondering who admitted these bastards into the Editorial Knighthood and told them they could judge creative work with so little tact or transparency. Why would the opinion of one editor be more valuable than feedback from a group of peers? Has literature *ever* been so static that it could be weighed based on established criteria? (No, of course not!)

After all, there is great value in the personal creative struggle that constitutes the path of self-realization. But it seemed to me that the individual should have more control over that path, instead of falling victim to the powerful leaders of yet another institution. For too long the creative instinct has been bottled up to make human beings into consumer robots. I see now that *I wanted to break the mold*, while helping existing robots (myself included) regain the optimal path.

* * *

All of these subjects – social networking, creative expression, journalism, the search for truth, advertising, marketing, book publishing, literary journals, e-readers, etc – stirred in my mind during grad school. I reflected on the reasons that I started writing. Some strange balance of Freud and Kerouac had convinced me that writing was self-therapy and a way to better understand myself and the world. It followed that heightened understanding would result in a happier, more fulfilling life, which – if practiced on a wide scale – might increase the probability that the human race would achieve its full potential (i.e., would not self-terminate through atomic warfare or some less intentional means). So I took Freud's suggestion to explore my subconscious mind. I studied Kerouac's dedication to writing in a way that is simultaneously confessional, improvisational and musical. And I knew vaguely that I'd have to revive the concepts of honesty, openness and humility.

I drew from other visionary minds when building my personal philosophy. Hunter S. Thompson was largely responsible for breaking down the barrier between journalism and fiction. He demonstrated that truth is subjective, that this is the reason why we've always valued fiction, and that the writer is inextricably tied to the story being written. Even though I had essentially learned in Physics class that truth is relative to the perspective of observation (i.e., why Newtonian physics works at human scale, but not on the scale of the universe or an atom, which both require quantum mechanics), it took a while for me to understand the truly universal application of that concept. What I mean is, *everything is relative* – all truth, morals, ethics, etc – and that's the primary reason why human society can be so hypocritical and paradoxical. Furthermore, it turned out that mass and energy are interchangeable. It seemed to me that we needed to make these truths part of our living philosophy, and not just a lesson in school.

A moment of providence came in early 2008 when I found a Henry Miller quote that solidified my resolve. In his 1959 Freudian study *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown quotes Miller (from his book *Sunday After the War*):

“The peoples of the earth will no longer be shut off from one another within states but will flow freely over the surface of the earth and intermingle. [...] Man will be forced to realize that power must be kept open, fluid and free. His aim will be not to possess power but to radiate it.” (1)

Suddenly Nietzsche’s concept of the Will to Power seemed a bit more clear. I wondered if that really was the only guiding principle in human history, the effort to dominate and subdue. I immediately applied this to my goal of online publishing and wondered if it would be possible for a magazine to function without any editors. (The United States was even founded with the goal of providing checks and balances on power, in order to prevent tyranny. Apparently the founders didn't see that tyranny springs forth from the individual, with or without a government to enable it.)

I immediately read Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and learned that his goal had been to attain ultimate freedom of expression. That seemed crucial to me, because the concentration of power was antithetical to the pursuit of expression. I also took from Miller (and partly from Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*) the concept of rising above our terrestrial existence through a species-wide creative evolution. Soon I decided on a final project to complete my masters program. I would create an experimental online magazine for people to self-publish any type of creative work. I decided on the name Supraterranean to convey the idea of meeting on a metaphysical platform *above the earth*, and I created a starry website banner to reinforce the symbolism.

I launched Supraterranean.com ^[1] on June 23, 2008 in Traverse City, Michigan, where I was spending the summer for an internship. A month later I devised the slogan “Freedom Is Expression” by twisting the First Amendment of the U.S. I hoped to arouse some speculation in the audience – e.g., “*Is freedom really expression? What is freedom? What, for that matter, is expression?*”

The site only had one absolute condition. Instead of using an editorial selection process, all submissions that met basic guidelines would be published. I knew from the start that the website would use a Creative Commons license, to protect the intellectual property of contributors while promoting creativity and rebuilding the public domain. At first I used a five-star rating system to feature “top rated” content on the home page. Now it’s a “recommend” button that generates a similar list in the sidebar, since I stopped feeling comfortable with the casual judging of creative work (even YouTube has made a similar switch now).

Like the site itself, I expect that the mission statement will be in a constant state of flux. But the list of goals I posted at the beginning remains basically unchanged to this day:

- To explore the artistic potential allowed by the Internet and associated technologies.
- To provide a “writers circle” type environment where aspiring and established artists of many disciplines can get constructive feedback on their work.
- To break down categorical barriers between journalism, literature, poetry, music, film and art.
- To emphasize the importance of personal experience and expression in all of these media.

- To showcase the artistic and cultural advancements taking place all over — from Michigan to California, from Germany to Australia — and transfer online interaction into real world networking.
- To connect creative minds around the world who were meant to live, work and play together, but who have been prevented by geography, language and other barriers.
- To encourage the excessive use of material in the public domain or partially protected under Creative Commons licenses.
- To promote fair use of copyrighted material to the extent that is legally allowed.
- To transform, remix and recreate culture in a way that suits the expressive needs and desires of modern society.
- To evade the pretentious nature of existing literary journals.
- To lessen the selective editor role in publishing (for journalism, literature, etc), and return control to those who create and consume culture.
- To undermine the power of major content corporations who distribute most of the media to which people are exposed.
- To fight the disease of anti-intellectualism rampant in the U.S. and around the world.

I admit that there's a certain soapbox tone to the list. But I knew what I hoped to build would seem alien and confusing to many people, since I didn't fully understand it myself. I could think of no other way to communicate my intentions.

* * *

Over the last two years, I've worked an average of about 30 hours a month to keep Supraterranean running, while paying for the web hosting costs myself and simultaneously working a part- or full-time job. I've also continued reading and learning to clarify the fuzzy notions in my head.

I set Freud aside when I found his veritable successor, Carl Jung, whose concept of the collective unconscious posed a valid argument for the underlying connection of all human beings. I felt that my own alienation from society must be related to mankind's alienation from the collective unconscious. I began to see this after consuming psilocybin mushrooms in August of 2006. But later I turned to science and evolutionary psychology to avoid relying on a mystical viewpoint. I needed a functioning arsenal, not a new belief system. In short, I realized that forces hidden below the conscious level direct the human race to the same extent that the personal unconscious directs the individual.

A massive reintegration will be required to move beyond this state of mass schizophrenia. But Jung proposed that this all depends on the individual, who must doggedly explore the unconscious to reveal his or her own creative nature and true human potential. The quest is made more difficult because we've all been programmed to fear psychology. After all, psychological awareness is a direct threat to the current power construct of the "real

world." The entire fields of public relations, advertising and marketing were developed by using psychological awareness against us, and we now live in the most *unreal* world that has ever existed.

Reading Jung helped to explain my motivations in creating Supraterranean. I had envisioned a website – part magazine, part community – where contributors would leave a record of their creative path for others to study and learn from. If the experiment worked, editors would no longer be able to bleach out the true nature of existence and creative evolution. For so long we have been manipulated into playing the consumer role, to keep us kneeling submissively at the bottom of the power pyramid. Soon we will have to assume the roles of creator and self-editor, opting to reveal our true nature instead of hiding within injured (and injurious) social roles.

You can imagine my sense of glee, then, upon finding the following Timothy Leary quote – which speaks directly to the purpose of Supraterranean – after a few excruciating years of truth-seeking:

“Secrecy is the original sin. Fig leaf in the Garden of Eden. The basic crime against love... The purpose of life is to receive, synthesize and transmit energy. Communication fusion is the goal of life. Any star can tell you that. Communication is love. Secrecy, withholding the signal, hoarding, covering up the light is motivated by shame and fear” (2)

Despite the window of anonymity permitted by the Internet, people are generally still afraid to open themselves up. We remain convinced that human beings are absolutely incapable of relating their personal experiences or feelings through words, written or spoken. And thus we shy away from awareness of any kind, opting for a shallower kind of existence.

For society to move forward, we're going to have to build better safeguards into our organizations to protect against authoritarianism, secrecy and decay. Otherwise even a somewhat progressive website like Supraterranean would eventually become a restrictive, conservative force. To me that means never denying anyone the ability to present creative work to the world, and preventing power from accumulating in any one position or person's hands. I want to eradicate the entire tendency towards top-down, hierarchical control. Then the system will evolve at a natural (and ever-quickening) pace, instead of getting constipated in the tradition of all oligarchies.

In his book *Prometheus Rising*, Robert Anton Wilson helped explain these ideas through the work of Dr. Ilya Prigogine, who won the Nobel Prize in 1977 for physical chemistry:

“Any organized system, according to Prigogine, exists in dynamic tension between entropy and negentropy, between chaos and information. The more complex a system, the greater its instability. [...] *...the more unstable, the more likely it is to change – to evolve. “All dissipative structures are teetering, perpetually, between self-destruction and re-organization on a higher level of information (coherence).”* (3)

I admit that, until early 2010, I could see only chaos in the universe, with “order” and “disorder” being no more than illusory labels that humans applied to the chaos. Now I’m convinced by this concept of negentropy. As Wilson explained earlier in the book: “In living systems...negentropy (information) steadily increases [...] *Life is an ordering, selecting, coherence-making process.*” (4)

I've started to feel like most human energy is currently spent in a way that is contradictory to evolution – to *actively prevent* evolution. *Negentropy happens*, and human beings try to stop it with all their power. It's not really their fault though. They're still dominated by more ancient evolutionary circuits that mistakenly see progress as a danger. They're still entrenched in the materialism of Newtonian physics, even though relativity and quantum mechanics should have made that paradigm obsolete many decades ago.

There's a related notion I keep coming across lately, which Wilson put this way: "*Mind and its contents are functionally identical. ...there is no division between 'me' and 'my experience.'*" (5) In other words, reality is not limited to or dictated by our physical bodies. It never has been; it just seemed that way. In fact, we can extend our reality beyond our bodies. It follows naturally that *there is no division between 'me' and 'my creative work.'* My attempts at creative expression are extensions of my mind propelled into the universe. Then the work exists just as much in the observer's mind as in my own.

This lends another dimension to Supraterranean, and really any creative portal on the Internet. The Web allows people to project their mind in endless directions, at an unprecedented speed and distance. It's a collective out-of-body experience that lets us share in each other's daydreams – a new map of time-space to help to navigate the inner and outer cosmos. On Supraterranean, we are all connected by the creations that people share with the community.

According to Wilson, Alfred Korzybski suggested that "the passing of signals from generation to generation...was what distinguished us from the other primates" (6). It occurred to me recently that we've been trying to perfect that signaling function for all recorded history. That's why Henry Miller's dedication to perfect expression seemed so captivating to me. That's what I myself am seeking as I work out my own creative drive and progress towards self-realization. But there's a difference between the passing of *facts* and the passing of *truth* – a difference between work we do for money (bio-survival) and work we do because of an irrepressible urge to create and share.

Thus far in the human story, I don't think we've done a satisfactory job of passing on information, let alone creative signals. There's no way to embark on an open and free future when the basic details of the past are still imprisoned, malleable, or open to argument. Computers and the Internet will allow us to collect information in a way that cannot be distorted by future agendas. It's agonizing to be patient, or to consider the possibility that the human race still isn't ready.

And regardless of what system we aim to build, it'll always come back to the individual. Evolution doesn't happen at the individual level, but it does depend on individual adaptation or mutation. The adaptation required now could involve a transformation from a preternatural howl to a superb elucidation of thought and feeling. The last hurdle may be the self-sacrifice required in true expression – the fact that the ego must be symbolically crucified, or at least reintegrated with the vast invisible realms of the human psyche, before we can collectively move on to the next stage of our evolution, propelled into a higher state of existence.

It seems immense and immeasurable, I'm aware. But above all else, that's what I hope Supraterranean will foster for the world.

* * *

NOTES

1. Brown, Norman O. *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959. p. 305
2. Wilson, Robert Anton. *Prometheus Rising*. 2007. Tempe, AZ: New Falcon, 1983. p. 243.
3. Wilson, R.A. *Ibid.* p. 258.
4. Wilson, R.A. *Ibid.* p. 112.
5. Wilson, R.A. *Ibid.* p. 219. 6. Wilson, R.A. *Ibid.* p. 110.

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