

A Counterculture of Commitment

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I am sure many of you have had this experience — it's late at night and you start browsing Netflix looking for something to watch. You scroll through different titles — you even read a few reviews — but you just can't commit to watching any given movie. Suddenly it's been 30 minutes and you're still stuck in Infinite Browsing Mode, so you just give up — you're too tired to watch anything now, so you cut your losses and fall asleep.

I have come to believe that this is the defining characteristic of our generation: *Keeping our options open.*

There's this philosopher, Zygmunt Bauman — he called it “liquid modernity” — we never want to commit to any one identity or place or community... so we remain, like liquid, in a state that can adapt to fit any future shape. Liquid modernity is Infinite Browsing Mode... but for everything in our lives.

I've been thinking about this recently because leaving home and coming here is a lot like entering a long hallway — you walk out of the room in which you grew up and into this place with thousands of different doors to infinitely browse.

And throughout my time here, I've seen all the good that can come from having so many new options. I've seen the joy a person feels when they find a 'room' more fitting for their authentic self. I've seen big decisions become less painful, because you can always quit, you can always move, you can always break up... and the hallway will always be there. And mostly I've seen all the fun people have had experiencing more novelty than any generation in history ever experienced.

But as I've grown older here, I've also started seeing the downsides of having so many open doors. Nobody wants to be stuck behind a locked door, but nobody wants to *live* in a hallway either. It's great to have options when you lose interest in something, but I've learned here that the more times I do this, the less satisfied I am with *any* given option. And lately, the experiences I crave are less the rushes of novelty and more those perfect Tuesday nights when you eat dinner with the friends who you have known for a long time, who you have made a commitment to, and who will not quit you because they found someone better.

I have discovered in my time here that the people who inspire me the most are those who left the hallway, shut the door behind them and settled in. It's Fred Rogers recording Episode 895 of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* because he was committed to advancing a humane model of children's television. It's Dorothy Day sitting with the same outcast folks night after night after night because it was important that someone is committed to them. It's not just the Martin Luther King who confronted the fire hoses in 1963, but the Martin Luther King who hosted his thousandth boring planning meeting in 1967.

When Hollywood tells tales of courage, they usually take the form of "slaying the dragon" — it's all about the big, brave moments. But I've been learning from these heroes that the most menacing dragons that stand in the way of reforming the system or repairing the breach are the everyday boredom and distraction and uncertainty that can erode our ability to commit to anything for the long haul.

I love that the word *dedicate* has two meanings— first, it means to make something holy; second, it means to stick at something for a long time. I don't think this is a coincidence: We do something holy when we choose to commit to something. And, in the most dedicated people I have met here, I have witnessed how that pursuit of holiness comes with a side effect of immense joy.

We may have come here to help keep our options open, but I leave believing that the most radical act we can take is to make a commitment to a particular thing... to a place, to a profession, to a cause, to a community, to a person. To show our love for something by working at it for a long time — to close doors and forgo options for its sake.

We often assume that some acute and looming threat — be it a foreign invader or a domestic demagogue — will be our downfall. But if we *were* to end, that end is just as likely to come from something far less dramatic: *our failure to sustain the work*.

It is not only the bomb or the bully that should keep us up at night — it is also the garden untilled and the newcomer unwelcomed, the neighbor unhoused and the prisoner unheard, the voice of the public unheeded and the long-simmering calamity unhalted and the dream of equal justice unrealized.

But we need not be afraid, for we have in our possession the antidote to our dread — *our time*, free to be dedicated to the slow but necessary work of turning visions into projects, values into practices, and strangers into neighbors.

That is why, in this age of liquid modernity, we should rebel and join up with a counterculture of commitment consisting of solid people.

In this age of Infinite Browsing Mode, we should pick a damn movie and watch it all the way through... before we fall asleep.