

Brandon Gets His Big Break

Chapter Eleven

By

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Brandon Speaking

"I can't believe that I was telling people that this was my big break.", I said. I was flushed...cried out.

"Your big break?", Ilana said obviously confused. We were talking via Zoom after the horrible events of that evening. It was 4 am Monday. The weekend of *The 2023 Frogtown Art Walk* just concluded.

"Um...this is going to sound self-centered...really, narcissistic."

"No...sweetie...you're dealing with something really horrible. You process it the way that you process it.", Ilana said before taking a sip of her coffee.

"I was so psyched about you hiring on me as a Staff Writer for your *Friends* reimagining. I was telling people that it was my 'big break'."

"I don't want to go off on a tangent. But...you have a solid resume and that's why I hired you. You were a Writer's Assistant on *The Mindy Project*, and you went on to be a Staff Writer on *2 Broke Girls*."

"Jesus...I sound like a real asshole. But...while a woman I love was being raped and murdered...I was all happy and psyched about my new job that was starting tomorrow...um...today. Do you need to crash? You have to go into work in a few hours."

"Fuck that. I'm the showrunner. I have people who can oversee the first day. Autopilot shit...anyway. I'm here for you, Brandon."

"God...I was so happy when...", I fell silent and started to cry but there just was no water left. I sighed loudly with an odd frustration. "It was my big break. A Writer's Assistant takes notes, does admin shit, gets coffee for the actual writers. I was a Staff Writer on 'Girls' but I was a newbie and did little creative work: that show was shit artistically, anyway. No...this was my big break. I had a bit of a reputation and was going to play a role in shaping this really bold statement. I suck."

"You need time off to grieve. I'll make sure that you get bereavement benefits.", Ilana said.

"We've been through this. Human Resources doesn't view a polyam as a family. My partners are listed as roommates. No...not even that. Some box is checked off: *Single with roommate(s)*."

"I know that is your family. I'll take care of the expense myself."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"Brandon...don't turn down my help. It's insulting. And you didn't ask...I offered."

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“Sorry...um...are you offering to pay for the funeral?”

“Yes...you have my contact information. Have the mortician text me.”

“Okay.”

“Is this too much too soon?”

“No...of course not...and thank you.”

“I’ll consult with your union rep about what the benefits are...I’ve got this.”

“Um...okay.”

“You and your surviving partners will need counseling...I’ll take care of it.”

“What...no...fuck, no...you’re very generous, Ilana, but this is getting out of control.”

“This won’t cost me. I have a friend...a qualified therapist...who will love to help. She’s very sympathetic to a situation like this. Hell...if she’s busy...I know a couple others equally good who would love to help...if they’re both busy...they’ll recommend someone...Shit, Brandon, I know a ton of people...I’ve got this.”

“Um...okay.”

“How long do you need?”

“Just a few days. I need to work. At minimum, I just need to occupy my mind.”

“I don’t want you coming back too soon. I’m concerned about your well-being.”

“I get that I need to grieve. But to be honest, this will become really painful. Jim is not a strong man. He’s a great guy...brilliant, insightful...I love him...but...And my other surviving partner...shit, I sound like a ghoul.”

“No...you don’t. I’m penciling in three days for bereavement. But...you can take as long as you need. All I ask is that you tell me if you need more than three days.”

“Text?”

“Fuck you, Brandon. Call me...anytime. Day or night. I’m here for you 24/7. Even if you just need someone to talk to.”

“Um...thank you. I can’t go into the Writer’s Room.”

“Why?”

“Several reasons. My head won’t be in a place to ‘bring the funny’. The other writers will know what happened: my presence would cast a pall...it would cripple the room. The first couple weeks are critical.

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That's when the room really puts together the ideas for the season...if not the entire run. I'd have to be brought up to speed. No, that just doesn't work."

"Yeah...you're right. I'll find you something else. Working with a Producer or Story Editor...I'd have to think about it...but I'll find you something else. Something good. In Season Two...if we're picked up...you can move to the Writer's Room. If we aren't, I promise you...pinky swear...that I'll get you something good."

"I can't..."

"Oh, Jesus H. Christ, Brandon. I know that this self-effacing shit is ingrained in our culture. I'm your superior at work so you have to kowtow to me...be subservient. Bullshit, Brandon. We're just two people and I get that you – and your partners – are in a shit place. Goddam it, Brandon, I just want to help. I really find this subservience shit exhausting. Look, you're a talent. Everyone thinks so. I spoke to Josie...Aidan...Odeya...about you. And all three of those people came to me to rave about how smart you are. They were all very impressed. I'm bringing in a lot of people who are still polishing their resumes...but you're the one that left an impression with the talent. That's because you have talent. And I have an obligation to cultivate talent."

"Ok...thank you."

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It was mid-October of 2008. It was the third month of Amy's seventh grade term which lasted four months. After Amy had a momentous conversation with Linda, the two of them went to *Spencer's Gifts*. They bought two matching posters. The plan was for each of them to put one up as a reminder of their commitment.

After taking her leave from Linda, Amy returned home. She tossed the rolled-up poster on her bed. She turned to leave her room and her mom was just outside her room.

"Hi, Amy. How is everything?"

"I'm great, ma. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Really...everything is cool. But I would like to talk."

"Sure, ma."

"Come on, sweetie. Join me in the family room. We can relax and talk. Really...no big deal."

Doris turned and walked to the family room. Amy followed.

The walls of the room were cream. One of Doris' friends at church told her that that light natural colors created a calming atmosphere and made the space feel larger. At least, that is what her friend read in *Architectural Digest*. Doris felt that was ideal and was worth the extra washing. An L-shape sectional sofa was in one corner. It was covered in a fabric with a floral pattern. Doris thought about getting it in a light solid so that it would match the walls but decided that would be a pain to keep clean. She did use the same floral pattern in curtains, throw pillows and area rug on which the sectional and coffee table sat. The coffee table was

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a dark wood with a glass pane taking up most of the surface. There were two bookshelves made from a similar wood. There were only a small number books: several bibles and titles like *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer and *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. The entertainment center was opposite the sectional. There was a simple display stand made of thick wood planks. It had a rectangular shape design and rough wood grain finish. One plank was the table surface. At either end was a plank that was perpendicular to the top: it was a leg of the table. A plasma flatscreen sat on it.

Amy and her mom sat on the sectional and were at a right angle to each other.

“Are you happy?”, Doris asked.

“Of course, momma.”

“It just seems to me that you are a bit uncommunicative as of late.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...your Sunday school instructor told me that you rarely ever volunteer input anymore. You used to be so enthusiastic – always throwing your hand up – and giving these great answers. Now, Ms. Simms tells me that you just sort of sit there with a ‘hostile look’, and that was the phrase that she used. She said that when she calls on you – and at one time that was not even necessary – you seem bitter and say as little as possible.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you love Jesus? Do you accept Him – in your heart – as your Lord and Savior?”

“...Of course, ma.”

Doris could not help but notice that her daughter’s response seemed forced: it appeared to take effort. The Amy that she loved would have no difficulty affirming her love for Jesus. This horrified Doris as she suspected that her child was lying. She felt that it was best not to confront her.

Amy wanted to tell her mom that she no longer believed. She was living a lie and simply wanted to be open. While she knew that she could not come out as a lesbian, she wondered if her mom would accept her nonbelief.

Amy was about to express her utter nonbelief in her mom’s god – couched as ‘doubt’ – when her mom continued:

“I don’t place any stock in the...um...professionals at your new school...they are ultimately just servants of Satan...”

Amy braced herself. She loved James Jordan Middle School. It was an opportunity to be fully free intellectually. If not for the school, she would not have met Linda and fallen in love. If not for that, she would not have first renounced and then grow to hate her mom’s garbage church: she felt that hatred was clarifying. And she loved the hate. This, Amy knew, is what Doris feared. She did not care. The church controlled her like a puppet. She was now free of it. Attending ‘Jordan’, meeting Linda and falling in love with her merely made the inevitable happen. She flashed on the conversation that she and Linda had while they were lying in bed just hours earlier. Linda joked that she was not ready to come out to her parents – Jen and Ron – because she would be suffocated by their intense understanding and acceptance of her sexuality. This was utterly foreign to Amy.

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Linda's mom was the minister at the local Unitarian church. Linda joked about the intense acceptance that she could expect from her mom's congregation:

"Do they think I'm gay?", Amy asked.

"No."

"Do they know that you are?"

"No...I don't want to tell them...not yet."

Amy plopped her head back on the pillow.

"I get that."

Linda settled down and pulled the sheet up.

"I'm not ready for the damn support. Honestly, they can be a bit over the top."

"Support...over the top."

"Yeah, they'd probably trot me up in front of the congregation and go on about how proud they are of me."

"In front of the congregation? Proud of you? Now...you're playing with my head."

Linda realized her mistake.

"No...I was being a bit sarcastic...But, yeah, they wouldn't have a problem."

"You were being sarcastic when you said that they would be 'proud' of you. Right?"

"No...no, sweetie. Not for being gay but for standing up for my authentic self."

As the day wore on, Amy reflected on the phrase 'authentic self'. It was her sexual nature to be a lesbian. More than that, it was nature to *not be controlled*. Amy could not articulate why this was her 'authentic self' or even defend that concept intellectually. But she knew it was true. Her mom wanted to be controlled and, in turn, control others. Her Pastor...her Shepherd was a controlling SOB. But he was a controlling SOB because that was an expression of his desire to be controlled. Amy – despite being raised in a culture that was predicated on control – did not want to be controlled. This control was grounded in the nonsensical idea that the church's teachings were the *inerrant Word of God*. She came to realize that anything to do with a god was subjective. While subjective, she came to embrace the notion of Love being the driving force behind the Universe. She simply did not doubt the truth of that. Still, that was just her read of things. And she came to realize that it was evil to try to enforce that view on another.

This mania for control is why her church turned her out as Jesus' whore at the age of nine. She fully believed what she said to those hapless strangers. Even then, however, she felt like she was being used by those who wanted her to control others. At that time, she could not articulate that feeling. Her mind touched on a specific bit of testifying that she did when she was that age. She corralled a skinny boy who looked to be fifteen. It was Christmas week and the boy had just come out of *Bloomingtondale's* with his dad. The father split, for some reason, and Amy tried to save the boy's soul:

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“Hi, man! How’s it going!”, She said to the boy.

He turned to face her voice. And she smiled (as she was trained).

“Yeah. Hi. Can I help you?”, He said.

“Well, I was wondering if you knew about Jesus Christ?”

“Um, yeah. My dad and I go to church.”

“Cool...which one? I’m sorry...my name’s Amy.”

He told her his name and continued:

“Um...yeah...”

And he her told her the name of the church. It was Catholic. This fact made her double down on her desire to convert him. In Sunday school once, her Pastor...her Shepherd told the class that he liked to think that Catholics were ‘pre-sold’ on Jesus. They did not fully embrace the Word – and were being misled – but were so close to being saved. A Catholic just needed to be encouraged to accept the full truth. He told her to remember that when she was street preaching.

“Okay.”, she said. *“At my church, ‘East Valley Pentecostal Church’, we hear the true Word of God...”*

“Have a nice day.”, the boy said and then walked away. *As he left her, the look of pity in his eyes was unmistakable.*

He got it: she was being controlled. She was kept from being her authentic self.

She could not intellectually defend the concept. And she was thirteen and thought in those terms. She was a kid who was concerned with ideas. This concern reflected her authentic self, the idea that she could not defend. While she came from a community that denigrated the free exercise of the intellect, she valued it. This proved to her that the authentic self did exist.

She braced herself for her mom’s stupid assault on the things that she came to love. But her mom went in a different direction:

“I couldn’t have less respect for these people. Still, I spoke to a Dr. Greene – this counselor at your new school – he got reports from your sixth grade teachers that you were sullen and withdrawn. While these people are evil, I suspect that those observations are real. Because I’ve made similar observations. Are you unhappy?”

“Mom...I have doubts.”, Amy said.

“That’s understandable. In one’s walk with Jesus, a person has doubts. But she works through them. I did. That’s how your faith grows.”

“Yeah...”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Um...I don’t know, momma. I don’t want to make you mad.”

“Don’t be absurd, sweetie. Now, I might not be able to answer something fully. I’ll have the Pastor speak to you about those concerns. But try me.”

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“We believe that the Bible is the *Inerrant Word of God*?”

“Sweetie...of, course!”

“Um...Okay. What about [Matthew 2:9](#) ?

Doris looked the verse up on her smart phone:

When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

“What about it, sweetie?”

“Well...a star is a massive object that’s a great distance away. I mean the nearest star is [25 trillion miles away](#). [It would take light over four years to reach it](#). And the verse clearly states that it is hovering right above the Earth. That’s...well...can’t be true, momma.”

“So...you have those ‘facts’ right at your fingertips.”, Doris said, putting a contemptuous emphasis on the word ‘facts’. “Where did you get them?”

“Um...school.”

“I knew it. They’re misleading you...sweetie.”

“It’s...well...mom...a fact.”

“The Bible is all the fact that you need.”

Amy was nervous initially but that gave way to anger...anger that had been her companion for at least a month.

“Mom...my class took a field trip to [Griffith Observatory](#) last year. I looked at it through the main telescope...it’s trillions of miles away! That’s a fact!”, Amy said exasperated.

“Amy! Don’t be insolent!”

“I’m not. You offered to answer a question.”

“Well...maybe the Pastor has an answer!”

“There’s no question. The nearest star is trillions of miles away. That’s simply a fact.”

Doris was getting worked up. She took a clarifying breath and attempted to regain her calm.

“It was something else. A comet.”

“Comets don’t float.”

“Sure...it’ll float if God needs it to.”

“But...mom...a comet travels some distance from Earth. I think the closet one passed, like, 400 thousand miles from Earth...I mean...at tremendous speed. It didn’t hover over the planet.”

“Well...if you cherry pick you’ll find something that’s...”, Doris trailed off.

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“Mom, I picked that verse at random. There’s a ton of stuff in the Bible that’s bogus!”

“You just have to believe.”

“No...I don’t.”

“WHAT!”

“I mean...let’s stick with the stars. In [Revelation 6:13](#), they just ‘fall to the ground’. The only person who would write that had to think that the stars were just a short distance above the Earth...and that they’re small things. They aren’t. They’re these massive things that are trillions of miles away from us. It’s bullshit!”

“Bullshit! Bullshit! It’s a metaphor!”

“I’ve read Revelation...that’s literal. The verse says that the stars fall like figs from a tree that is shook by the wind. It’s literal. And if it isn’t then the concept that the Bible is the *Inerrant Word of God* is bullshit. The meaning of a metaphor is determined by human interpretation. A metaphor has no fixed meaning. The Bible can’t be Absolute Truth because different people would view a metaphor differently. If I got into it, there’s a lot in the Bible that isn’t valid...and can only be explained as metaphor. But, if my immortal soul is dependent on believing in the Bible, why would it be full of metaphors that don’t have a clear meaning? ...That can create doubt?”

Amy had thought much about what she considered the absurdity of the Bible. Finally expressing just a single thought to Doris produced an orgasmic sensation.

“Amy...”

And what about [Revelation 1:1](#) ? It says the book is description of ‘things which must shortly come to pass’. Why would they use metaphors when the first freaking verse says that it’s a description of coming events? Using metaphors trashes that purpose. A description must use clear and precise language. That was written 2,000 years ago...not exactly ‘shortly’.”

“Amy...”

“Oh...then there’s [Revelation 22:18](#).It says that God will bring plagues to anyone who adds to the book. If God wrote it in metaphor, then he is encouraging later interpretation. That’s adding onto the book...ma. “

Amy's mind touched on ‘Catch-22’, satirical war novel by American author Joseph Heller: it was first published in 1961. It was widely felt to be one of the most significant novels of the twentieth century, She wrote her midterm paper for her seventh grade ‘American Lit’ class on it. Linda recommended it. Even though she wasn't in Amy's class, she loved it & knew Amy would as well.

Amy realized that this is why her mom, her Pastor...her Shepherd and the others at her church hated public education. Her 13-year old self could not adequately articulate the tension. A decade later, Jane would explain the situation. In an enlightened society - or, at least one aiming for enlightenment - a range of ideas are discussed. And these ideas would lie outside of - and be in conflict with - the restrictive strictures of dominant religions - Christianity, Islam, and a traditional read of Judaism.

A public education system would be based on two core principles.

The goal was to provide a free education to every child.

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At the same time, however, the institution would be based the notion of a separation of church and state. Ideas hostile to the theological restraints of a repressive religion – like the traditional form of Christianity that defined the United States - would be presented by this institution that was dedicated to teaching everything to everyone.

Jane would explain to future Amy that this created an anti-intellectual opposition to enlightenment.

Jane would explain to future Amy that this tension was the fulcrum that supported the lever that made the potential for the rise of Fascism possible. Fascism was organized anti-intellectualism. Jane would then explain that she feared this. She would express her view that Trumpism was the clear beginning of her and her fellow Jews - along with other despised groups (like the disabled and the LGBT) – being rounded up and slaughtered.

2008 Amy did not know Jane: the girl facing off against her mom in the living room was simply a completely different person.

In 2019, Jane would tell Amy somethings about the Spanish Inquisition. Amy would be shamed – quite literally – by the fact that she knew nothing about it. Future Amy would wonder how that was possible. While she had a challenging time as a kid – a repressive home life that was balanced against first her romance with Linda and then the long lasting D/s situation with Roz – she studied hard and took academics seriously. 2019 Amy would wonder if all the stress in her young life caused her to overlook major blocks of knowledge. An alternative explanation – and this would disturbed her more – was that she did learn but the stressors caused her to forget it. Did her upbringing cause her to feel shame and embarrassment over possessing this forbidden knowledge?

They were feted to talk about this at their first ‘bull session’. Jane would challenge Amy to talk about it and she couldn’t. She would have to promise Jane to study up on it and talk to her later about it. Her future relationship with Jane would be unlike anything else that went before it. Besides unfolding in such a strange way, it was defined by Jane’s committed relationship to Jim. While as emotionally profound as anything that went before it, it was seemingly destined to be platonic. The whole thing coalesced in a tight time frame: a matter of months.

In 2019, Jane would begin to reacquaint Amy with her authentic self when she spoke to her about the Spanish Inquisition.

While lacking the sophistication of Jane’s analysis, Amy argued in her 2008 midterm paper for her seventh grade ‘American Lit’ that ‘Catch 22’ could be viewed as allegory for religion and theocracy.

The bureaucracy described in the novel enforced destructive and irrational controls on the military, with the support of the rank and file. While possibly not the intent of the author, his novel was a metaphor for a repressive theocratic state – like Islamic Fundamentalism which came to power on February 1, 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran after 15 years of exile - that placed insane controls on the people with their enthusiastic support. The book – Amy argued – was a condemnation of Western Religion.

Ms. Eames – the teacher for the class – was most impressed: she was too impressed. Amy was a brilliant kid. Her past work was stellar: her classroom participation amazing. But the paper was too good to be written by a thirteen year old.

She had Amy stay after class to discuss her paper. The child was petrified. She was certain that the teacher was going to call in her mom and report that her daughter blasphemed Christ in writing. The child was tormented by her upbringing. Still, she obviously wrote the paper. While Amy was never vetted by a battery of

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tests – like Weschler or Stanford-Binet – that would have been proctored by a trained specialist to determine her IQ., Eames concluded that she was a genius.

Prior to the talk, Eames pulled Amy's folder. She read the powerful statements of support that the child received from her sixth grade teachers. She read Dr. Greene's analysis of the mother: anything remotely perceived as secular – or as intellectual - was opposed with a xenophobic zeal. The child should be fast tracked – she should skip a grade and take AP coursework – but her mom would fight it tooth and nail. This infuriated the teacher.

'Revelation 22:18-19' was central to the paper's theme.

'For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.'

Amy argued that verse was emblematic of a system that was designed to control. If you question or change anything, God will deny you his promised largesse.

Amy went on to argue that the age of enlightenment set up a 'Catch-22' in modern Christianity. In the novel, the term referred to a paradoxical situation in which an individual is unable to escape an insane situation due to contradictory rules or limitations.

The story – set during World War II – concerns Captain John Yossarian, a U.S. Army Air Forces B-25 bombardier. The novel examines the absurdity of war and military life through the experiences of Yossarian and his cohorts, who attempt to maintain their sanity while fulfilling their service requirements so that they may return home.

Command keeps increasing the required number of bombing missions before Yossarian could be sent home. He goes to Doc Daneeka, an army psychiatrist, and tells him that he is having a breakdown. He requests a mental evaluation to determine his sanity. Daneeka explains the 'Catch-22' regulation to Yossarian. He says that any pilot who requests a mental evaluation for insanity, hoping to be found not sane enough to fly and thereby escape dangerous missions, demonstrates his own sanity in creating the request and thus cannot be declared insane. This means that if a pilot is sane enough to request a mental evaluation, he is automatically deemed sane enough to fly, and therefore cannot be excused from duty.

The term "Catch-22" is used to describe this paradoxical situation, where an individual is unable to escape due to contradictory rules or limitations.

Amy argued that Modern Christianity was defined by a type of 'Catch-22'. Enlightenment – and science – created profound questions about the faith. To answer those questions, apologists had to consider them so that they could formulate answers. Scripture – like 'Revelation 22:18-19' – argued that a true Christian cannot even seriously entertain those questions. So, the Christians that were trying to defend the faith were not Christian. This led Christians to avoid difficult questions. They instead dealt with criticism with xenophobic hostility.

Amy further argued that the development of science caused this inherent 'Catch 22' to metastasize. The Church leadership would become ever more extreme and sadistic. It gave rise to things like the Inquisition. In the intervening years, the chaos of her life caused her to forget this knowledge...to block it out...in 2019.

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Eames noted the historical analysis was very sloppy. But this was a seventh grade literature class. The assigned topic sentence was 'How is the novel an allegory?'

Control. Everyone controlled everyone.

Eames could not believe that a child wrote that (yet she did) – and circumstance, her mom's xenophobic hostility – barred her from helping the girl to realize her potential. After Amy left the classroom, the teacher cried.

While Amy did not consciously think it through, she steered the conversation to *Revelation* to underscore that she believed the faith to be absurd and that the absurdity was used to keep the follower from realizing the absurdity. Doris didn't get it.

You don't believe in God!", Doris screamed.

They were both on their feet.

"Yes! Yes! I do believe in God! I don't believe in your God!

Doris slapped her hard...knocking her to the ground.

"Go to your room!"

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Jane was always proud of her photographic memory. This pride was tempered by her inherent personal restraint. Hubris was a weakness. More than a weakness, it was dangerous. An excess of pride gives rise to arrogance. Arrogance gives rise to cruelty and what some would refer to as 'evil'.

She was not above using words like 'evil' but did not care for them. They were imprecise and precision was something that she valued. Human history was drenched in blood. She felt that there would have been much less of it if humanity was intellectually disciplined. She found Buddhism valuable but felt that it was incomplete.

Jane understood that Buddhism regarded emotions as aspects of a person's personality and that the philosophy felt that they interfered with spiritual development. Emotions were unwholesome states. This is because they were barriers to the road to reason. She agreed with that wholeheartedly. For much of her adult life she felt that a person had to consider the long-term impact of her emotions on her well-being. This meant that differentiating between positive and negative emotions was not solely based on immediate feelings of happiness or discomfort. A wise person would evaluate the long term benefit of an emotion and decide if that emotion was to be cultivated or curtailed. This is where she deviated from Buddhism. It was – at best – the starting point for her.

Ever since the savage murder – the irrational execution – of her parents in 1999, she struggled with developing an understanding of the nature of emotion. It was August. Her parents and her were at the North Valley Jewish Community Center in LA. She was six. Her mom and pop were there to attend some activity. As an adult, she seemed to remember that it was a lecture on Spinoza. They were going to have her go to the playground area. That never happened. Instead, a lunatic opened fire with an Uzi. They

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took cover behind the kiosk where the receptionist would sit. They were somewhat safe. She suddenly bolted away from the cover that the structure provided. When her parents tried to retrieve her, they were hit. Her mom was shot through the head and her dad was hit in the throat. They both died.

While she had a photographic memory – skilled at reading something and then recalling it later perfectly – her recall of the incident was flawed. Her memory was very confusing. Like the survivor of traumatic brain injury, her recall of the event was better on some days than others. As an adult, her counselor – Elaine Gonzalas – would tell her that it would take time to remember the details in a consistent way. Gonzalas emphasized that the inconsistency of her recall of the trauma would prove to be confusing for her. Just like Swiss cheese, there were a lot of holes in her memory of that traumatic day. And – from day to day – holes would disappear and reappear. Gonzalas helped her put together a regimen of activities that were designed to both improve the recall of that day and allow her to look on those memories with greater dispassion.

This included Vipassana Meditation, commonly known as ‘insight meditation’. This ancient technique rooted in Buddhist tradition. A Pali word, the ancient language of Buddhism, the term *Vipassana* translated to ‘seeing things as they really are’.

This put Buddhism on her radar. And she did like the focus on the destructive nature of emotion. Beyond that, she did disagree with the deeper message.

Buddhist teachings emphasized the transient nature of experiences, people, and objects. Emotions, too, are fleeting. By examining our reactions and recognizing that emotions arise and pass away, we can prevent them from overwhelming us. Whether it's happiness or hatred, the key lies in not letting emotions control us. She liked [S.N. Goenka](#) (30 January 1924 – 29 September 2013) – an Indian teacher of the technique – said:

Every sensation shares the same characteristic: it arises and passes away. We must experience sensation's nature, understand its flux, and learn not to react to it.

She appreciated that Buddhism encouraged one to observe her emotions mindfully, recognizing their impermanence, and cultivating a balanced response to life's experiences.

But she was bothered by the concept of ‘nonattachment’, which was central to the philosophy. This argued the need to let go of attachment to material possessions, relationships, and even one’s own thoughts and emotions. It encouraged a person to release her fixation on external things and to cultivate inner freedom.

Jane, while seeing the appeal of that view, came to embrace the idea of reflective engagement. A person is, indeed, impermanent. As a cosmopolitan Jew, who took her People’s teachings seriously, she was informed by the Jewish conception of the afterlife but not interested in hard beliefs.

According to Jewish belief, life doesn't end with death; it continues in a different form. It was an eternal journey: life never truly ends. Things ascend higher and higher. When a person passes away, their soul is liberated from the physical body and returns closer to its divine source than ever before.

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The Torah often described death as going to rest with one's ancestors. Classic Jewish texts, such as [Maavor Yabok](#), elaborated on the soul's journey. If the soul was attached to material pleasures during life, it experiences the pain of leaving them behind to bask in the infinitely higher pleasure of divine light. Good deeds and wisdom acquired during life protect the soul during this ascent.

The commonality between the traditional Jewish view and Buddhism has obvious to Jane.

But she was a rational woman and loved the Reconstructionist Jewish philosophy which was based on the 20th century writings of its founder. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan.

The Reconstructionist approach was to view that Judaism as a religious civilization. Its religious elements are the human and naturalistic expression the Jewish culture. While not focusing on supernatural concepts, it emphasized the cultural foundation of Jewish peoplehood. In Kaplan's book *Judaism as a Civilization*, published in 1934, he elaborated on his program for American Jews. He emphasized reunification as one civilization, emphasizing cultural continuity and ethical living.

She felt that Buddhism complimented a view of cultural unity. Emotions got in the way of everything, including bonding with one's People. She jettisoned the severe notion of 'nonattachment' – and that tied into Buddhist metaphysics (which was interesting but meant nothing to her) – and focused on the notion of mitigating her emotions so that they did not get the way. She was drawn to Buddhism initially to temper her strong emotions – a mix of survivor's guilt and a fear over the rise of Fascism – so that she would function more efficiently. And, while sterile, she viewed herself as a machine. In fact, she believed each person was a mechanistic entity. This was the essence of her spirituality. A person achieves greater spiritual growth by connecting with others and coming to terms with her 'personal demons'. Spirituality was fully realized when the machine was running well. And the machine could always run better. She found the Buddhist concept of transcending – or, possibly, negating – emotions to be ugly. Emotions, if understood, were a source of pleasure. As a sexual person, she embraced pleasure but knew that an unbalanced relationship to pleasure caused pain.

In Judaism, there wasn't a traditional concept of heaven or hell: it was all about the ongoing journey toward greater spiritual awareness and closeness to the divine. That was true of this life. And, as a Reconstructionist, she dismissed the concept of a next life. After all, the Reconstructionist view of the afterlife focused on this world: it emphasized human agency, cultural identity, and ethical behavior.

Ethics was the province of this life. The quality of life – for a People or an individual – was dependent on the ethics of each person. Ethics is about improving the physical realm. The Nazis of the Third Reich viewed themselves to be ethical, to be godly, and justified mass human slaughter with those ethics. From her Reconstructionist perspective, she rejected both authoritarianism and supernaturalism. Both gave rise to ethical systems that are not about the betterment of both one *and* one's brothers & sisters. If a person limits her ethics to this world, then there is a likelihood of it simply becoming a justification to fuck people over. If based on the supernatural, ethics are simply an expression of the desire of the dead to kill. She felt that ethics was best grounded in a sense of religious naturalism. This meant the perpetual emphasis on the connection between the divine and the natural. And this was religious humanism. By doing good – improving human character and conscience (of both one and others) – as an

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affirmation of that connection, she would realize an ever deeper sense of meaning. This would include coming to terms with the slaughter of her parents.

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Brandon Speaking

Jim and I were at the funeral home. After we made the arrangements, I said to the mortician:

“As I mentioned earlier, a friend of will pay for this. Here’s her contact info. She wants you to text her. Her name is Ilana.”

I held my smartphone so that the screen faced him.

The mortician nodded. He took his phone out and texted her.

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