LISTENING *to the* RAIN

A FRESH LOOK AT THE WORKS OF

Alan Watts

HONORS THESIS

PRESENTED TO THE HONORS COMMITTEE OF TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY-SAN MARCOS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION IN THE HONORS COLLEGE

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Listening to the Rain

A FRESH LOOK AT THE WORKS OF ALAN WATTS

JESSICA LOECHEL

WELCOME

"All the talk in the world doesn't get it unless you listen to it in a new way. The sound of rain needs no translation." - Alan Watts

Listening to the Rain provides a glimpse into a creative project conducted by an undergraduate student at Texas State University as part of her senior thesis. This book is one of two platforms through which she documented her research process as she studied philosopher and writer, Alan Watts. This multi-media project is an innovative blend of journalism, blogging, graphic design, and traditional ethnographic research.

This thesis utilizes the Portraiture methodology of social science research, which requires the combination of preliminary research, interviews, site visits, and personal narrative to gain a thorough understanding of Alan Watts and his message. Unlike other research methodologies, Portraiture allows for the inclusion of the diverse lived experiences of researchers and the participants of their research.

In addition to this printed piece, a digital representation of this project can be viewed online via the following link: *alanwattsproject.wordpress.com*. There you will find the blog created to store the data and personal reflections collected throughout the research process.

This project aims to expand awareness and spark curiosity in regards to Watts' legacy by revitalizing his work in a manner that is intended to target the millennial generation. This group of young adults is currently making the transition between childhood and adulthood and, for reasons described later in this project, is thus highly susceptible to Watts message.

Additionally, the author hopes that the digital documentation of her work will serve as a guide for future Watts' scholars and thesis students.

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The JESSICA Factor

Jessica Loechel is many things: student, humanitarian, world traveler, dreamer. Throughout her life, she has been driven by two factors: curiosity and creativity. As a third grader, she was accused of "asking too many questions." She grew disillusioned with authority and spent her adolescence discovering ways to expand her freedom. These skills proved useful when she faced her greatest challenge yet, becoming an adult. Jessica's first two years of college were a struggle, not academically or socially, but. She lost touch with her childhood wonder and found herself trying to fit into a box much to narrow. Faced with the decision to live uncomfortably or venture into the unknown, she chose to follow her heart. She now journeys down an unpaved path and her fear is slowly giving way to excitement.

Hello

Allow me to introduce myself. I think it'd be best if we became acquainted before you venture too far into my work. From reading the preface, I'm sure you have a bit of an idea what you might find in the upcoming pages. This book is a collection of my work. It is the story of my research process. It documents my journey.

In the upcoming pages, you'll find snippets from my personal journal, thought bubbles if you will, that capture my emotions at various moments during the creation process. Although sharing these with you makes me feel a bit vulnerable, I believe it is absolutely necessary. You see, what you don't know yet, and what I didn't realize until concluding this project, is that this thesis is more about self-discovery than anything else. I learned more about myself throughout this journey than I ever expected. It would be impossible for me to share my findings from a perspective other than my own, for the two are tightly intertwined.

So, take my hand and allow me to show you the path I took in my quest to discover Alan Watts.

Choosing a Topic

PHOTO VIA: GREERCHICAGO.COM

Choosing a topic for my thesis was the hardest part of the entire project. The following snippets from my research journal reflect my transition from uncertainty to confidence.

FEAR & INDECISION

It's two weeks before the start of the fall semester and I'm beginning to panic. I've known for about a year and a half that I was going to have to complete a thesis, but in natural Jessica style, I didn't begin really thinking about what my thesis would be until now. I'm about to start my first semester of my senior year of college. The notion that I will soon be graduating is steadily sinking in. Everyone around me seems excited about this transition, but for me the thought brings about a looming sense of doom. Graduation means it's over. It means I'm supposed to be prepared to enter the real world and become a grown up. I'm not ready for that! Everyone keeps asking me "what are you going to do after you graduate?" I despise that question. I have no idea what I'm going to do after I graduate. I have always been, and still am, a very indecisive person. I have trouble deciding which restaurant to eat at, much less what I want to do with the rest of my life.

Quite frankly, I'm terrified, and the fear is seeping into my thesis project. Even the word "thesis" scares me. It sounds so daunting. With it comes the idea that I have to do something profound, something that defines who I've become over the last four years and who I want to be in the future. I have always been good at school. It comes naturally to me. Give me a topic to discuss and instructions on how to do it and I can produce a masterpiece, but the Honors Thesis isn't like that at all. There are no guidelines. No limitations. I can do almost anything. While some might see this as a positive thing, for me it's troubling. The reason I chose the Honors minor in the first place was to explore my wide variety of interests. How can I possibly narrow myself to one specific topic?

STAYING TRUE TO MYSELF

I'm still struggling with choosing a thesis topic, but I think I figured out the problem. I'm making this harder than it needs to be. I convinced myself I had to have my project all figured out by the time I started classes, but that caused more harm than good. Creativity is not something that can be forced. Placing restrictions on myself only causes me more stress. I'm under enough pressure as it is. I need to lighten up a little bit. I began the thesis preparation course with almost no concept of what my thesis would entail. Throughout the semester I've changed my topic nearly a dozen times. My interests are all over the place. I've thought about exploring topics such as human consciousness, happiness, environmental awareness, the Beat Generation, and the counter-culture movement, to name a few. My most developed ideas include a comparison of America's emerging hipster culture to that of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s, a look at intentional living communities as a blueprint for harmonious living, and the benefits of practicing mindfulness in one's daily life. Each of these ideas has potential, but I keep running into the same problem. When I get a new idea, it starts out seeming really interesting, but somewhere along the way I loose enthusiasm. I can't seem to find an idea that will stick. I think it would help if I took a step back and answered these questions:

- What do I want to get out of this experience?
- What do I want my audience to get from it?
- What kind of impact do I want it to have?

Although I don't know for sure what my thesis will be about, I know it has to be something I would enjoy working on. For goodness sakes, if I'm going to dedicate an entire semester to this project, it better be about something I'm truly interested in. My thesis could potentially take any form, so I know I want to take advantage of the opportunity to express myself creatively. I keep toying with the idea of making it a piece of art like a film, creative writing piece, collection of photos, etc. I don't suspect I'll be proving anything statistically or scientifically. Instead, I think the project should convey an idea. My public relations background has taught me how to effectively communicate a message to a target audience through media. However, I don't feel comfortable using this skill unless I whole-heartedly believe in the message I'm sending. It just has to feel right. I want my thesis to make a positive impact. I want to share an experience. I want my project to be adaptable to each individual who perceives it. I want it to inspire change. Most importantly, I want to stay true to myself throughout the process.

FINDING THE ONE

Choosing Alan Watts as my research topic was unexpected. It didn't come about from hours of brainstorming like the other topics I've considered. In fact, it was kind of an accident. It happened after I completed an assignment for my thesis preparation course, which required me to choose a leader or scholar about whom I had to write an essay and conduct a presentation. The guidelines said to choose someone who has "inspired you to change your thinking and your actions" and has "influenced you to think more broadly and compassionately." When reading these details, Alan Watts was the first person to come to mind.

I did a bit of research on Watts and discovered facts that fueled my curiosity. Completing the assignment was a breeze. I even had fun creating a graphically appealing Prezi to supplement my presentation. When I stood before the class to present, I was confident and excited. I hardly used my note cards. The information I had obtained flowed out of me with much enthusiasm. Afterwards, I realized it was far easier for me to talk about Watts than any of the other thesis topics I was considering. So, I changed my topic for the last time.

Now I'm beginning to reconstruct my project with Watts as the focus, and I'm noticing something a bit strange. In his work, Watts discusses nearly all of the topics I'm interested in: human consciousness, happiness, and environmental awareness. Plus, he was considered an influential member of the Beat Generation and contributed to many of the ideas made famous by the counter-culture movement. I can hardly contain my excitement. Alan Watts is the cloud from which all my ideas pour!

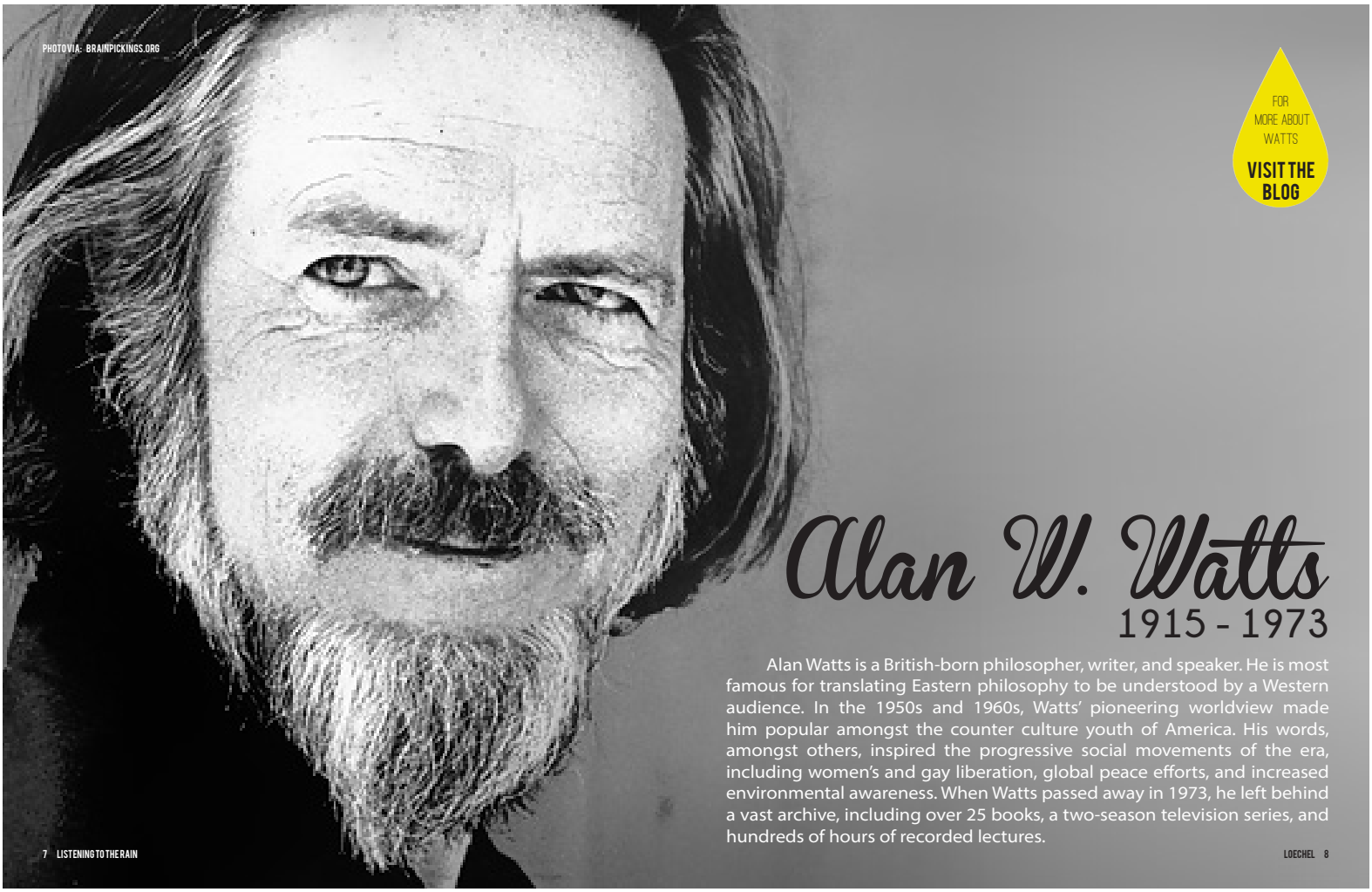

PHOTO VIA: BRAINPICKINGS.ORG

FOR MORE ABOUT WATTS

VISIT THE BLOG

Alan W. Watts

1915 - 1973

Alan Watts is a British-born philosopher, writer, and speaker. He is most famous for translating Eastern philosophy to be understood by a Western audience. In the 1950s and 1960s, Watts' pioneering worldview made him popular amongst the counter culture youth of America. His words, amongst others, inspired the progressive social movements of the era, including women's and gay liberation, global peace efforts, and increased environmental awareness. When Watts passed away in 1973, he left behind a vast archive, including over 25 books, a two-season television series, and hundreds of hours of recorded lectures.

Preliminary Research

BOOK REVIEW

***Alan Watts - Here and Now* serves as a guide for this project.**

I began this project by trying to find some background information on Alan Watts. I searched the library databases looking for books and articles on Watts, but was disappointed in the paucity of results. I later took this as a sign that my project was innovative and became more motivated to expand Watts' legacy.

I did, however, come across one book that seemed perfect, almost too perfect. *Alan Watts – Here and Now*, published in 2012, is a compilation of several essays written by scholars who are familiar with Watts' work and were asked to consider the life and works of Alan Watts "in the context of twenty-first-century scholarship."

When reading the book's abstract, I was at first excited that I had finally found something worth reading. However, after further investigation, my joy turned to distress. I feared that this book had done exactly what I was hoping to do, reevaluate the current relevance of Watts' message. Although the book does do this in a sense, its focus is more on the academic contributions of Watts' work and serves to justify his recognition in the scholarly arena.

I decided to use the book as a guide to Watts' work. When studying a man who has written over 25 books and has countless hours of recorded footage, figuring out where to start can be a bit overwhelming. *Alan Watts – Here and Now* neatly complied all of the background information I needed to begin this project. The introduction alone was stuffed full of useful content. It briefly outlined Watts' life story and included specific names and titles of publications and organizations I later used as resources when trying to decide who to contact for interviews and what locations to visit.

In addition to functioning as a starting point for further research, the introduction also helped me mentally prepare for this project. The authors urged researchers to look at Watts through a clear lens, defogged of idolization. They warned of the problems associated with Watts' celebrity status and linkage to the Beat Generation. They even mentioned several reasons people commonly discredit Watts. Although I didn't like hearing it, I appreciated the addition of this information. It made me realize I had been blind to Watts' faults as a result of my adoration and prepared me for counter arguments I might encounter in my research.

Watts' work is extensive and spans a number of fields. While his interdisciplinary approach is common today, it was not popular at the time. His contributions benefit a wide variety of academic disciplines. However, this makes his defining his role a bit. As one scholar wrote, "Watts is not a man on whom it is easy to deliver an easy verdict – he escapes labels." In the introduction to *Alan Watts – Here and Now*, the authors list several of his roles, including; theologian, mystic, zennist, philosopher, psychologist, and cultural symptom.

The book is organized by themes of Watts' work addressed in each essay. These include philosophy and psychology, psychedelics, embodied consciousness, and psycho-spiritual transformation. In the beginning stages of this project, I intended to read or listen to pieces of Watts' work addressing each of these topics, but later changed my mind. Just looking at these subjects was a bit intimidating. I was interested in each of these areas of study, but was not confident enough in my knowledge about any of them to dive in too deeply.

While I would still like to expand my knowledge in these areas and explore more of Watts' work, that will have to be project for another time. Besides, analyzing Watts' work in relation to these fields of study had been done in the book. My interest in Watts was personal. I had benefited greatly from the little bit of his work I had been exposed to, and I wanted to share that experience with others. *Alan Watts – Here and Now* is the most recent book published on Watts. The authors reaffirmed my belief that Watts' work is relevant today. The focus of this project then became a mission to figure out how Watts' message could be used by millenials like me.

LECTURE NOTES

In the video, *What is Wrong with Our Culture*, Watts addresses many society-based issues still relevant today, including over-consumption, hostility, and unhappiness.

Watts begins the lecture by asking the following questions:

- "Why is it that we don't seem to be able to adjust ourselves to the physical environment without destroying it?"
- "Why is it that, in a way, this culture represents in a unique fashion the law of diminishing returns?"

I had to look up the "law of diminishing returns" to fully understand his inquiry. It turns out this phrase refers to a point at which benefits gained are less than energy invested. This is an interesting concept. When asking these questions, Watts seems to assume that it is a commonly known fact that humanity is destroying the environment. Considering he gave this speech many years ago, I find this particularly interesting; especially since today there are still people who debate this fact. Personally, I believe humanity is responsible for the degradation of the environment, but I wonder if my peers will feel the same way.

After proposing the above-mentioned questions, Watts goes on to detail what he believes is the root of the problem. He begins by saying we are fed empty promises. He gives the example of a civilization built on technology which seems to fulfill wishes, but it actually doesn't as it produces ephemeral products (or products designed to last only a short period of time). Is he saying that technology is the problem?

In my own life, I have become aware of my reliance on technology and often make efforts to limit my use of technology or "go off the grid" from time to time. However, I know many people who would fiercely disagree with this concept, as they firmly believe technological advancement is the path to a better future.

Watts goes on to say that our unmet desires results in an underlying sense of frustration and a yearning for more. He discusses the "war on time" we have found ourselves in, through which we are trying to turn work into cash so that we can buy happiness. The problem with this, he says, is that we end up too exhausted in our free time to actually enjoy ourselves. Watts makes the statement that "the real business of life is to enjoy ourselves."

This quote caught my attention. I have a giant painting of Audrey Hepburn hanging in my living room on which I painted the words "The most important thing is to enjoy your life…" I whole-heartedly believe in this idea of the meaning of life, but does everyone share this view?

Watts specifically calls attention to the habit of watching television and refers to it as an "electronic reproduction of life" which we watch in "passive contemplation."

> "THE REAL BUSINESS OF LIFE IS TO ENJOY OURSELVES."
> - ALAN WATTS

I love the phrasing he uses here. I agree that watching television is a wasteful pastime, although I am guilty of doing it myself. I wonder though, do we do this intentionally to numb our minds from the pain resulting from the "war on time" and the frustration of unmet desires Watts mentioned previously? Is it easier to just ignore these issues instead of trying to do something about them?

According to Watts, watching too much television puts a person in a "mindless state." This habit results in detachment from society and forces individuals to live in isolation with no real communion with the outside world. This makes me think about my generation. Today's youth much prefer to text than talk on the phone as we are losing our social skills and fear human interaction.

Another problem with television Watts mentions is the unbalanced ratio between the display of violence and love. He talks about how common it is to see public expressions of hostility and anger while expressions of love are often restrained and restricted. He asks why we as a society are more comfortable with hate than love.

I wonder if the overflow of hostility is a result of the frustration he mentioned before. Do we restrain our displays of affection because we don't know how to be affectionate or because it makes us feel awkward? Mistreatement of gay and interracial couples comes to mind. Has society resented expressions of love between certain individuals due to misunderstanding?

Watts ends with a strong accusation, blaming our fear of love over hate for the resulting "crazy culture devoted… not intentionally… to the destruction of life." Many things about this statement bother me, particularly the "not intentionally" part. Did we not make the choices that have led us to this point? Is free will not stronger than cultural influence? Can we not make a change?

The fighter in me wants to believe we can produce change, but I have to wonder: what if destruction is our purpose? What if humanity's role on Earth is to destroy it and ourselves? I don't want to believe this, but the possibility can't be denied.

The video ends with the words "Be the change you wish to see in the world" displayed on the screen. This quote was clearly added by the makers of the clip, and is not a part of Watts' original lecture. I must then believe that the producers of the film think we can make a change. I wonder if others will agree with this, and if so, how? If not, why?

PHOTO BY: JAMES LOPEZ

COMBINDING TRAVEL AND RESEARCH

Ever since I studied abroad, I've been overcome with wanderlust. As someone with uncontainable curiosity, I benefit greatly from traveling. Each journey reveals new insights, yet simultaneously raises new questions. I am mystified by the power of adventure and yearn for its touch. Thus, my longing to weave travel into my thesis project is no surprise. After researching Alan Watts in depth, I think I've discovered the key to fulfilling my desire.

The Bay Area in California seems to be hub of all things Watts. It's where he lived and worked. It's the base from which his following blossomed. Watts moved to San Francisco in 1950. Soon after he began volunteering for KPFA, a publically funded radio station based in Berkeley. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Bay Area was swarming with artsy young Americans dreaming of an alternate society. Watts and his friends, including Timothy Leary, Alan Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, and many more, became the spokesmen of a counter-culture movement that consumed the Beat Generation. Such a memorable time period did not fade without leaving its mark.

Like windows into another time, remnants of Watts' legacy remain today, allowing me to take a glimpse into the past. A journey to California would put me face to face with valuable resources including Watts' two homes, the Alan Watts Mountain Center, his personal library, and much more. I can hardly contain my excitement and can feel my determination building. I will do whatever it takes to get there.

My boyfriend, James, was overly supportive of my idea to travel to California for research. We decided to utilize our Spring Break and began planning a West Coast research adventure.

FINDING FUNDING

Making the trip to California a reality has been a lot more stressful than I expected. Like most college students, I basically live in poverty. Therefore, I am well aware there is no way I'll be able to afford this trip alone. I've been looking into the Student Undergraduate Research Fund Grant (SURF Grant) offered by my university. The grant serves to financially assist students working on "independent creative research projects." Wonderful. I fit the criteria perfectly.

Applications are reviewed once a month and the next deadline is about a week away. I considered applying for this grant last semester and remembered the application process to be lengthy but rather simple. As a result, I began working on this application with a great deal of confidence, but that is quickly fading. I feel so overwhelmed. The application questions are all so similar. I'm struggling to find ways to say the same thing a number of different ways. I am constantly second-guessing myself. I don't think I have a strong enough grasp on my thesis idea to answer these questions. Perhaps I'm just over thinking it. Perhaps I'm just letting the pressure get to me. I regret waiting so long to start this. I'm planning on leaving for California in about two weeks. I'm going to be cutting it really close. Why didn't I apply for the earlier deadline?

One week later…

Well its done. I submitted my SURF Grant application. Now all I can do is wait. I just received an email stating I would find out if I was awarded the grant next Friday, but I'm planning on leaving for California next Wednesday. I'm so nervous. Laura, my thesis supervisor, has been nothing but supportive. She even talked to the chairman of the grant committee on my behalf. "There is money somewhere we can give her right?" she asked. Of course, he couldn't give her a solid answer, but the outlook seems positive. She's suggested that I go ahead and purchase my tickets.

At this point I don't really have a choice. It looks like I'm going to have to just go for it. Dive in headfirst and not look back. My grandparents have graciously agreed to loan me the money in advance. I've worked out the numbers and it looks like we'll have just the right amount to make it happen. It always seems to work out like this. Planning trips is stressful and hasty, but oh so worth it in the end. Ready, set, go…

RESEARCH PERMISSION

Well its Tuesday, I leave for California tomorrow. I leaped over the first hurdle and ironed out all the financial issues, but of course it's never that easy. I've been confronted with yet another obstacle. In order to do research at the undergraduate level, I applied for exemption from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I'd done this last semester for a different project and yet again assumed it would be just as easy this time around. Boy, was I wrong. I just got word that my project doesn't qualify for exemption, which means I will need to submit the full application. Unlike the exemption form, this process is much more intricate and lengthy. I already have a full day planned of travel preparations. I need to wash clothes, pack, do some quick shopping, and find a puppy-sitter. Now I also have to answer a dozen in-depth questions about my project. I feel like the universe is really testing me, making me prove that I'm truly dedicated to this project. Well universe, I am about to show you just how strong this girl is. Bring it on.

Two days later…

I'm on my way to California. Somewhere deep inside I'm really excited, but it's hard to muster that kind of emotion right now. It's been a rough day, to say the least. I haven't had any sleep. I was up all night last night packing, planning, and trying to finish my IRB application. I just spent the 2-hour layover in LAX doing the same. I can't even remember what the airport looked like. I was glued to my laptop the whole time, writing, editing, and emailing as fast as possible in an effort to get my IRB application submitted in time for tomorrow's committee meeting.

I'm so glad I had James there to help. Before I realized he had walked away, he was offering me a slice of pizza. He even carried my bags onto the plane while I followed behind him totally lost in thought. You won't believe how ridiculous this situation is… so the deal with the IRB is that they meet once a month to review applications. Lucky for me, this month's committee meeting happens to be tomorrow. Laura has been in contact with the head of the committee and he has agreed to review my application first thing tomorrow morning. He even let me send him my draft to review before officially submitting it. This all thanks to Laura, mind you. She's so amazing. I couldn't have done this without her.

However, there seems to be one kink we might not be able to get over. It was my intention to video-record the interviews I conduct during my trip. I think this would be way better than just audio recording them, especially for the purpose of my blog. Apparently, this raises legal questions, though. It has something to do with the location of my research. Since I will be off campus and out of state, I must have signed waivers from the establishments where I will be conducting research allowing me to do so. Did I mention I was already in California? Gaining that kind of permission would have required planning at least a month in advance. Honestly, I'm still a bit confused about the situation and I have no idea what is going to happen at this point. All I can do now is wait for the verdict.

PHOTO BY: JAMES LOPEZ

CRASH LANDING

The struggle continued when we arrived in California, but the victory was worth the battle.

Mentally and physically exhausted, we stumbled off the plane in San Francisco yesterday afternoon. I was relieved to have submitted my IRB application and to have arrived at our destination, but that peace of mind quickly vanished when the universe threw me yet another curve ball. James had taken care of the car rental by pre-booking a vehicle for the week. It seemed simple enough, but when we arrived at the rental counter, things got complicated. In order to purchase our plane tickets, I had transferred all of our money to my bank account. I did not foresee the mess that unraveled when we arrived.

The car was reserved in James's name, so that we could get a cheaper rate, but they wouldn't let us pay for the rental with my card. "The names have to match," said the salesman. I couldn't help but laugh. "Of course," I thought, "it couldn't be that easy." We could make a new reservation in my name, but because of my age, the cost would double. There was no way we could afford to pay that much. This was the last straw for James. After much debate, he simply gave up and stood silent and motionless, frozen by exhaustion and frustration. I decided the best option was to rent a car in my name for just one day. After that, we would get the money moved over and could pay for the remaining days in James' name. Three hours after landing in San Francisco, we pulled out of the parking garage in what else but a shiny silver Fiat. Our spirits lifted as we merged onto the open road. Here we were at last, a well-earned triumph.

TOES IN THE SAND

Today is already looking better than yesterday! We exchanged the Fiat for an SUV with a sunroof free of charge! James seems pretty pleased. I must admit I adored the little clown car, but it's nice to have the extra room. We're currently on our way north via Highway 1. We've stopped on the side of the road for James to take pictures (again). I'm barefoot, so I decided to stay in the car, but I did want to capture the scenery. I'm actually standing out of the sunroof right now using the roof as my writing surface. There is a cool breeze blowing my hair around and seeping through the pores of my sweater. I know we're getting close to the beach. I can smell the salty sea air. For the first time since we arrived, I feel peaceful, content, and optimistic. I still haven't heard anything about my SURF Grant or IRB applications, so I can't start doing any research. Not to mention, I just emailed potential interviewees yesterday, so I don't even have anything set up yet. I was panicking a bit this morning, but James made me realize how silly that was. "It's all going to work out," he said. "In the mean time, let's enjoy ourselves."

So here we are. Surrounded by the beautiful California hillside. Driving aimlessly, with no destination, no worries, just admiring the beauty around us. I wish I could live in this moment forever.

30 Minutes Later...

We've stopped… again. This time we're at Muir Beach walking along the sand. James is taking photos of the waves as they crash against the rocks. Just behind me there is a man sitting cross-legged on a large rock about 30 yards from the water. He is dressed rather fashionably in jeans, a button-up, vest and a fedora. His gaze is focused on the water and it seems as if he's staring far into the distance. I wonder if he's meditating. He looks so peaceful. I'm not sure why, but he inspires me. Seeing him makes me feel like I'm in the right place, on the right track.

ROADSIDE FATE

I can't believe what just happened! So we were driving along Highway 1 behind a little sliver Subaru with two stickers on either side of his back windshield advertising "KPFA 94.1 Free Speech Radio". There is a hand stretched out the driver side window catching the breeze. "You see that car in front of us?" James asks. "The driver is an old man." I smiled thinking how nice it was to see an older person enjoying himself in such a simple way. Suddenly the car pulls off into a turnout and to my surprise James follows. "What are you doing?" I ask. "Well, if he's stopping there has to be a reason," James replies. We get out and wander towards the edge of the cliff to be greeted by a half-mile stretch of sand covered in sunbathing sea lions. The man from the Subaru begins speaking to us from a distance. As he walks closer I notice his curly grey hair poking out from under a brown and tan hand-knit beanie. Before I know it I'm telling him about my research on Alan Watts. "Oh well then you have to talk to Mitch Jeserich at KPFA," he says. I was flabbergasted. I'd been trying to get a hold of someone at KPFA for days and here was this man we met on the side of the road telling me the exact name and phone number of the perfect person to contact. I ran back to our rental car and grabbed my notebook and pen to jot down the info. We continued talking with him for quite a while. I was impressed by his intelligence and vast knowledge of the wildlife around us. He was very passionate about environmental issues. He was also fairly familiar with Alan Watts' work and described him as "heady." I'm not sure that is even a word, but I think it's an adequate description of what it sometimes feels like to read/listen to Watts' work. It can really make you think, sometimes to the point where your brain feels a little dizzy. When we got in the car to leave, James and I were speechless. We stared at each other for a few seconds before bursting into laughter. Can you believe it? What a coincidence!

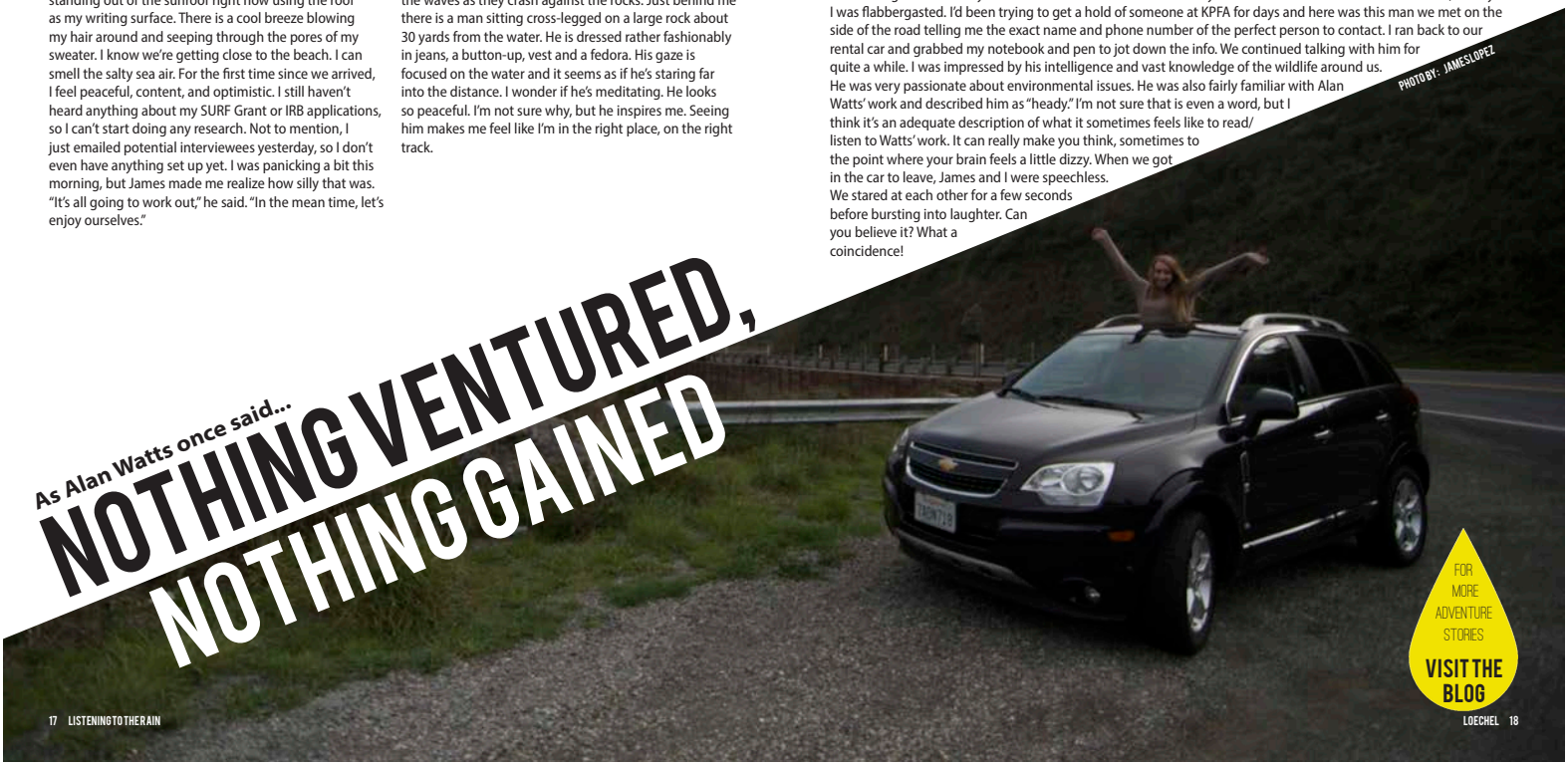

PHOTO BY: JAMES LOPEZ

As Alan Watts once said...

NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED

FOR MORE ADVENTURE STORIES

VISIT THE BLOG

TO HEAR THE RECORDED INTERVIEW

VISIT THE BLOG

PHOTO BY: JAMES LOPEZ

MITCH JESERICH

KPFA RADIO HOST

Pacifica Radio host Mitch Jeserich follows in Alan Watts' footsteps. Jeserich hosts a segment on Berkeley-based station KPFA 94.1, the same station Watts began volunteering for in 1953. Today, Pacifica Radio owns the rights to nearly 28 hours of Watts' recorded broadcasts. Jeserich discussed his work at KPFA, the station's efforts to preserve Watts' legacy, and his personal experience with Watts' work during our interview.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

I'm sitting in Awaken Café in Oakland, California… waiting. In an hour and a half I will meet with my first interviewee, Mitch Jeserich, radio host for KPFA. I can't help but laugh at myself. I was so nervous this morning. I woke up really early and began preparing for my interview. I went to great lengths to make sure everything was perfect. I'd dropped my cell phone in water two days before I left for California and was forced to travel phoneless. This morning I made a trip to Best Buy and purchased an audio recorder. "No one uses those anymore," said the salesman as he directed me to the very back corner of the store. They had only 3 recorders in stock. Even with such limited selection, I took 15 minutes deciding which one to buy. I felt like such an amateur. I'd conducted interviews before, but not on this scale and not with anyone this important. Although I was terrified on the inside, I refused to let my to inexperience show. In my packing fury, I had forgotten to pack an appropriate bag. I only had my hot pink Victoria's Secret laptop bag. How was I supposed to look professional carrying that? This just wouldn't do. I made a stop at Ross to purchase a brown leather satchel to hold my notebooks, laptop, and recorder. Even with all the pit stops, I managed to arrive 1 ½ hours early. It's funny what nerves will do to you. So now I'm just sitting here waiting. I've reviewed and rewritten my interview questions three times. I just received an email from Mitch saying he'll be "recognizable as the guy in the wheelchair." I wasn't expecting this. I have to say it kind of threw me off. Yet somehow this makes me feel more comfortable. I'm excited and nervous. I'm glad Mitch is my first interviewee. I think it will be good prep for tomorrow. Now if only I can get rid of these jitters before he arrives.

INSIGHTS GAINED

Mitch was very friendly and easy to talk to. He provided me with details about the relationship between Alan Watts and KPFA that I was unaware of before, including how the station uses their collection of Watts' recorded broadcasts as gifts for listeners who support the station during fund drives. Mitch also spoke about his introduction to Watts, which I found very interesting. Just like me, Mitch stumbled upon Watts by accident during his twenties when he was in college. Mitch explained his attraction to Watts in a number of ways. He mentioned liking the soothing tone of Watts' voice as well as his comical approach. He admired Watts' despite his flaws, saying, "That is exactly why I like him." Mitch believes Watts' message is still relevant because "he's talking about a philosophy that is over 2000 years old." According to Mitch, Watts "addresses some of the very conditions of what it means to be human."

TO HEAR THE RECORDED INTERVIEW

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PHOTO VIA: STANLEYKRIPPNER.WEEBLY.COM

DR. STANLEY KRIPPNER

FRIEND OF ALAN WATTS

Dr. Stanley Krippner and I took a walk down memory lane over lunch. The award-winning professor currently holds the title of Alan Watts Professorship at Saybrook University in San Francisco. Dr. Krippner met Watts when they both volunteered for Timothy Leary's LSD trials at Harvard and the two developed a close relationship. Dr. Krippner brings Watts back to life through the telling of humorous tales.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Ahhh!!! I can hardly contain my emotions right now. This trip keeps getting more and more exciting. Let me catch you up. I emailed Dr. Stanley Krippner, who holds the Alan Watts Professorship at Saybrook University, a few days ago, completely on a whim. I knew very little about Dr. Krippner, but I had only heard back from one other interviewee at that point, so I was getting pretty nervous. Dr. Krippner's response expressed both delight and frustration. He was pleased to hear of my interest in Alan Watts, but was not amused by my last minute request. He informed me that his schedule was rather full, but made me a deal I couldn't resist. He would give me his lunch hour so long as I promised to pay for his meal. This seemed a bit strange, but I was in no position to argue. So, I made the reservation at a little French restaurant within walking distance from the university.

During our correspondence, Dr. Krippner suggested I read his chapter on Watts in the book *Alan Watts – Here and Now*. I couldn't believe it. This was the one book on Watts I had brought with me. How could I not have noticed Dr. Krippner had authored one of its chapters? I decided to wake up early and read the chapter the morning of our interview so that the information would be fresh on my mind. I settled in front of the sliding glass doors of our rental apartment. I couldn't resist the view. The early morning sun seemed to tiptoe across the bay, softly touching the faces of the houses on the tree covered hill. Slicing through the landscape was the wide stretch of red and white striped highway, already filled with city comers and goers. Together, the two created a symphony. The gentle sway of nature harmonized with the fast paced rhythm of the traffic in peaceful melody. I sat cross-legged on the carpet, took a deep breath, and began reading. I was quickly captivated. As I continued reading, my excitement escalated. I felt so many things at once. Bewilderment. Ecstasy. Intimidation. Before long I was kneeling. Then standing. I paced around the room with the book in my hand. Then it hit me. I lay on my stomach in the middle of the living room floor. Today I'm having lunch with a man who was close friends with Alan Watts and the craziest part is, I didn't even realize it until just now, 4 hours before we meet. I'm giddy with excitement, but I'm also far more nervous than I was before.

INSIGHTS GAINED

I barely got a word in during my interview with Dr. Krippner. He spent nearly two hours telling me stories about Alan Watts and their time together. The information I obtained from Dr. Krippner is invaluable. He gave me a sneak peak into the real Alan Watts, who he was as a friend, as opposed to what he was like from a celebrity standpoint. From Dr. Krippner, I learned about Watts' struggle with money and alcohol. He gave me insight into Watts' opinion of LSD, his appreciation for food, and his clever way of thinking. He explained how Watts rationalized his drinking problem and told me stories of his teaching laughing meditation. Through Dr. Krippner's storytelling, I was able to see Watts as a normal person for the first time. Dr. Krippner told me exactly how Saybrook University ended up with the Alan Watts Scholarship, Professorship, and Course. Dr. Krippner's strong admiration for Watts was evident in his heartfelt tales. According to Dr. Krippner, Watts is responsible for "providing the rational for ecology and, more than anybody else… introducing Eastern thought to the United States." In unison with Mitch Jeserich, Dr. Krippner also spoke of Watts' message as timeless due to its historical roots in ancient Eastern wisdom.

TO HEAR THE RECORDED INTERVIEW

VISIT THE BLOG

PHOTO VIA: ALANWATTS.ORG

MARK WATTS

SON OF ALAN WATTS

There is no one better to speak to about Alan Watts' legacy than his own flesh and blood. Mark Watts, son of Alan Watts, is not only related to the philosopher, but he has spent the last 40 years archiving his father's work. Mark shared with me his experience as Watts' son and discussed his efforts to keep his father's legacy alive.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

I'm currently sitting on a bench in the middle of a shopping center. It's about 4:00 and the weather is beautiful. Mark told me to "meet him by the wood/tree structures." I was nervous I wouldn't know where to find him since his description was rather abstract, but once I turned the corner and saw this place, I knew it was exactly what he was talking about. I've chosen a seat in the shade amongst a circle of wooden benches. Before me lies a cobblestone path, which frames a vibrant green patch of grass. Placed ever so strategically on this platter of grass are three large petrified tree trunks. I can only assume by their size that they are redwoods. I've never seen anything quite like this. Such a simple idea, yet it creates a wonderful, natural playground, a great contrast to the industrialized shopping mall surrounding it.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Soft, gentle music plays from somewhere behind me. Adults stroll by casually, some toting children and puppies. I've never felt so at peace in a location like this. Shopping malls in Texas, at least the ones I've been too, are typically crowded and noisy. This one is quaint, relaxing, and serene. It's mostly quiet with the occasional giggle or muffled conversation.

I'm glad I arrived earlier than Mark so that I had time to sit and relax a bit before our interview. Being in this place is really helping me calm my nerves. Mark told me "he'd be the man in the blue plaid shirt." So far I've seen three men in blue plaid shirts. Each time one walks by one my heart begins to race. I must look a bit creepy just staring at them as the pass. Here comes another. This one has to be him.

INSIGHTS GAINED

No one is more familiar with Alan Watts' legacy than his own son, Mark Watts. My meeting with Mark was casual and exciting. Conversing with him was like talking to a good friend. He was more than willing to tell me all about his memories of his father and his work to preserve his legacy. Similar to my interview with Dr. Krippner, my conversation with Mark was full of irreplaceable stories that could only be told by Mark himself. He gave me a deeper look at Watts from a personal perspective, making him even more human than before. Mark provided insight into how Watts became such an admirable speaker and described his father's struggle with writing. Mark worked very closely with his dad to record his work and he has continued doing so even after his death. Mark described first hand what it was like living on the houseboat in Sausalito with his father and even had a hand in building his father's cabin in Druid Heights. Mark helped explain why members of the millennial generation are attracted to Watts' message, and gave details on work he and others are currently doing to share that message.

Q&A WITH Dr. Jeannine Davies

FOR MORE ABOUT SAYBROOK
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What is your role at Saybrook University?

I am faculty at Saybrook University within the School of Clinical Psychology where I co-lead the Complex Trauma and Healing Processes Certificate Program, and within the School of Interdisciplinary Inquiry where I teach the course covering Alan Watts' life and work (The Life and Contributions of Alan Watts). As well, I serve on the Alan Watts Scholarship committee.

Explain the relationship between Alan Watts and Saybrook University.

When Alan Watts passed away, the Society for Comparative Psychology wanted to support a course on Alan Watts' life and work. Since Saybrook University has its roots in various areas of Watts' work and life, it crossed paths. The university was a perfect foundation in preserving and supporting Watts' legacy.

How did you obtain the position teaching the course, The Life and Contributions of Alan Watts?

I have been involved in developing several components of Watts' work with the course at Saybrook, in addition to my own relationship to his works. In the past, Eugene Taylor, a foundational professor to Saybrook, was key in developing and teaching this course. Given my connection to Saybrook and interest in Watts' life and work, I was fortunate and honored to carry on the teaching of this course after the unfortunate loss of Eugene.

How did you prepare for teaching this course?

Initially, I began by re-immersing in Watts' writings, videos and talks, and translating it through the lens of my own expression and experience of living. I also engaged in discussions with friends and colleagues who share a connection and appreciation of Watts. Ultimately, preparation is about familiarity and resonance with Watts' contribution and vision, and how the course is to support students' inquiry of his works in service of catalyzing their own vision and interests.

What do you enjoy about teaching this course?

Seeing students engage in a process of active inquiry with their intellectual, creative, and spiritual passions. Supporting them in the emergence of their own visionary energies, as inspired through Watts' life and expression, and helping them shape their ideas and insight into forms and expressions that extend into their work with the world.

What is the goal/ purpose of the course? What do you hope students will gain from taking this course?

The course considers the life and work of Alan Watts. Students explore Watts' ideas in the context of his chronological biography by reading In My Own Way, his autobiographical statement, while at the same time reading and discussing some of Watts's major writings during different periods of his career. Attention is given to Watts' contribution to the development of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, to his contribution to East/West psychology, and to an assessment of his influence on the fields of religious studies, philosophy, on psychology at large, on the practice of psychotherapy, and to his place in the psychotherapeutic counter-culture.

From here, the course really allows students to explore key areas of Watts' work and life in relationship to their own inquiry – that is, what in particular draws them to his work and to supporting a path for further discovery in relationship to their interests.

Describe the typical students who enroll in this course. What are their interests? How do they relate to Alan Watts' work?

They are highly intelligent, creative, revolutionary, original thinkers. They feel unmet by the standard status quo and current teachings of Western spirituality (i.e., "West Coast Buddhism," "American Dharma"). They care deeply about truth and the nature of freedom – what safeguards it and what it means to live in accord with it. They are a part of the next wave of pioneers, active in evolving consciousness for the purpose of future generations. They are interested in new forms, new structures, that will serve to liberate the mind from forms of restriction and suffering. They sense in Watts the embodiment of 'radical rebel', a 'truthsayer', a 'dharma savant'. They are moved by Watts' commitment to inquiry over results, his lack of interest in ego driven wisdom. They are interested in the discovery of their own humanity as it meets timeless teachings.

How did you discover Alan Watts? What was your first experience with his work?

I was first introduced to Watts in my late 20s. I had recently left a successful career in the stock market – as a stock trader, and running a publically traded, Canadian-based diamond exploration company – to embark on a spiritual path and pursue my interests in Buddhism and the study of consciousness. It was during this provocative period that my dear friend and partner at the time, Alan Clements (a former Buddhist monk), introduced me to the ideas of Alan Watts. He gave me several of his books to read. Immediately, I felt Watts to be a kindred spirit. He spoke to my heart.

How has Alan Watts' work impacted you both personally and professionally?

Watts' draw toward a "natural philosophy" connected deeply and personally at the time of my discovery of him, with my own relationship to a "natural dharma", that we could have a direct relationship to freedom – beyond ideas and preconceptions. I resonated with Watts' claim that the "aim of religion is mystical experience of unity with the active creative energy of the cosmos."

Watts' translations and insights into the lived expression of Buddhist teachings spoke deeply to me and became an influence in the emergence of my own work, "Relational Dharma," an intersubjective path of liberation, which is inspired by the Buddhist principle of mutual interdependence, and invites the realization of the dharma of "higher human relatedness" (HHR) through insight into inseparable nature within our relationships.

Discuss the Alan Watts Scholarship Fund. What sorts of projects have been funded by this scholarship?

The Alan Watts Scholarship Fund has supported students' work through financial scholarships awarded via essay evaluation by the scholarship committee. In the case of a tie, the award is divided. The scholarships are awarded to students at Saybrook who propose scholarly research, writing of publishable quality, or some other innovative, but comparable project on a subject related to the life and work of Alan Watts. Examples in the past have included articles for publication, plays, and video projects – the more innovative the better. They have covered diverse topics and themes from Watts' writings such as wisdom found in traditional cultures, Eastern philosophy and meditative disciplines to the interdependence of human beings and the natural world, the social construction of the "ego," and the paradoxical nature of such dualities as good/ evil, female/male, and the present/eternity.

In your opinion, why is Alan Watts worth studying?

Watts was a provocateur of the heart. He inspired a feeling relationship to a dharma of human belonging, of universal wonder, intellectual curiosity, spiritual inquiry, and a radical relationship to openness.

His invitation was to question assumptions and to challenge any structures that claim hierarchy over our own nature. If one is receptive, Watts' presence and work offer the opportunity to incite revolution – an interruption in one's habits, of orthodoxy, conformity and belonging to the cult of mediocrity and fear.

His work and vision remind us that what is important is to discover what is real and true, to move in accord with nature, to see between, beneath and through the appearance of "things"... to aspire to breathe truth, beauty and discovery as the reason to "be".

Do you believe Alan Watts' message is relevant today? If yes, explain.

Watts is a cultural icon whose message is timeless. His provocation was to live life on the terms of one's own integrity – to keep living, not pretending – and to embody an active relationship to awakening, from any forms of compromise.

Watts dared to live. He dared to live his humanity and was fearless in his genius. [1] call that an equation for radical authenticity, driven by the liberation from fear and the highest aspiration of the confluence of Eastern/Western, lived experience. Watts message, in my view, is simple and profound when lived– dare to be true to your own humanity – look, question, explore, see, and finally, be who you are.

Embrace the end of "story" and the beginning of living.

NINE QUESTIONS

After talking to professionals who are familiar with Alan Watts and who share my admiration for his work, I feel inspired and motivated to continue my quest. However, if I truly believe his message is relevant now and could positively impact today's society, I need to test my theory. It's time to introduce Watts to my generation, the millennial generation, and see what kind of feedback I receive.

After hours of searching through Watts' archived work, I've chosen the YouTube video *What is Wrong with Our Culture* to serve as my sample. It's short, only about five minutes long, yet manages to capture much of Watts' core philosophy. I emailed the clip to a few of my friends, none of whom had heard of Alan Watts before. I asked each of them to watch the video, and then answer a few questions. Here's what they had to say:

WINTER

MIKE

ELISSA

JAMIE

1

In a few sentences, briefly describe your immediate reaction to/thoughts about Alan Watts and the ideas he presents in this video.

Winter: He is talking in a very general/broad way about a very complicated topic. He's taking a philosophical approach to critiquing neo-liberal capitalism, which is (at least now) so common in the humanities, but overall I was thinking he's correct in his points.

Mike: At first I wanted to argue with the ideas by saying that as a society we've somewhat started focusing on sustainability and green thinking, but after a second thought I came to the conclusion that those ideas are money driven, thus coinciding with Watts' idea. When it came to the idea of a lost connection, I agree completely.

Elissa: It was certainly depressing, but struck me as mostly true.

Jamie: A lot of his thoughts on how we disconnect ourselves from each other and devote ourselves to material objects is very true. Every moment we are reaching for the next best thing, not caring about what it's doing to the world around us.

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

What did you like about the video?

Winter: I liked that his arguments used key words that kept invoking imagery on each argument: Waste, rush, skills to cash, isolated-private, mindless, frustrating. I also like that they showed the factory and supermarket revealing how detached we are as a society from our own consumption.

Mike: I enjoyed the honesty and plain speech; it shows that he is trying to connect to a wide audience and not trying to bog down people's thoughts with complicated words and syntax.

Elissa: I like that the video juxtaposes images of modern problems with his words so that one can see how his ideas might be considered even more relevant than they used to be.

Jamie: The visuals used were not only from the United States. It showed third world countries dealing with our discards, people creating the things we throw aside as well as us playing. It also traveled through time while talking about our dependence on TV.

What did you dislike about the video?

Winter: I feel like he was taking a postmodernist standpoint critiquing global capitalism but didn't actually have the terminologies to make his arguments very precise. I also found the romanticized imagery of the stereotypical "American hippy" somewhat annoying. Not all liberal "hippies" are freethinking, eco-friendly, and humanitarians. You do not need to be a yoga farm commune participant to have a healthy and happy life that is also sustainable for the planet as I found the video seemed to suggest.

Mike: Although it was purely aesthetic, I thought the background music was a bit dramatic. The thoughts that were portrayed were heavy enough without the music.

Elissa: I would like to learn more about the original context of his lectures. The only thing I disliked about the video was that it didn't tell me much about that context.

Jamie: I disliked his entire dismissal of guns by way of protection.

Did any part of the video stand out to you? If so, what part? Why?

Winter: Since I study globalization I was already familiar with a lot of these ideas but I did find his statements about wanting to rush home to actually enjoy yourself to only end up in front of a detached object poignant. Also he seemed to argue that our life styles breeds frustration/violence. This is an intriguing point.

Mike: Since I am a very health conscious person, the part of the video that showed all of the meat stood out to me because they brought upon ideas of all the bad things we allow into our bodies.

Elissa: The part with the people buying meat stood out to me, because I think a lot about animal rights and I think it is a real problem that most people don't know much about this issue, or if so don't think much about it.

Jamie: The part that stood out to me was watching people sort through broken electronics. It just highlighted how we see everything as disposable even though we work so hard for it.

Did you resonate with anything Watts said in the video? If so, please explain.

Winter: While he didn't use these exact words, he does bring up a good point of the dangers of the commoditization of skills to cash. I don't necessarily think it's inherently bad but the problem is people have made a commodity out of everything: Water, dirt, labor, organs, people, etc. Over commoditization by the first world/global north is a serious global problem. It debilitates the global south and destroys the planet.

Mike: The part about the television really hit home with me because I am not a big fan of mindlessly watching other people live their lives.

Elissa: I thought that his idea about how you would think people would engage in more active activities, rather than watching TV, after their workdays are over was interesting. This resonates with me because I don't have any free time, but if I did, I would probably spend it doing something active like exercising.

Jamie: His claim that when we stare at the TV and disconnect ourselves we are just watching a fake version of life. Even reality TV is orchestrated.

Do you agree or disagree with Watts' message in this video? Please explain.

Winter: I agree.

Mike: I agree with Watts' findings and message, however sad it may be.

Elissa: I do agree with him for the most part. I think that our generation especially has become absorbed in the struggle for more and more material goods and that it has caused us to oppress large groups of people who make our clothes, coffee, etc. This is not to mention the animals we eat in excessive quantities, and the ways we ruin the environment. I think this is mostly because people know very little about such issues, or choose to be ignorant about them.

Jamie: I agree with the majority of the video. His claims at the end about a culture that promotes violence over love, though partially true, I don't feel it is as extreme as he made it seem.

Did Watts make you think about anything differently? If so, please explain.

Winter: It made me think a lot about how much I waste my limited free time watching TV and start putting limits on myself in that regard.

Mike: Although I agree with Watts' findings, he seems to think that we are somewhat doomed. I do not think that our advances have to be a negative achievement, but rather if we use all of our technology properly, we can move to an automated society which in turn can give us more time to have real fun and more importantly, more time to reevaluate existential questions such as: why are we here?

Elissa: The parts about what people do when they come home from work did make me think differently. The idea that people spend most of their lives at work always seemed a little sad to me, but I had never considered the idea that even when they are not at work, they are often not pursuing activities that provide deep, meaningful pleasure.

Jamie: No

After watching this video, what is your perception of Watts?

Winter: That he is philosophical and has genuine concern for continuation and sustainability of humanity. I have not Googled anything on him so that my answers to these questions are not affected by outside knowledge but I am assuming this interview was done quite a while ago as arguments like this have been greatly since expanded. So I would argue his speech is outdated but then again on this subject I am more of a materialist than postmodernist.

Mike: Like many great thinkers Watts' ideas propose a problem that should be more known to the world, but he (at least in this particular video) lacks proposing a solution, which is a bit unsettling.

Elissa: My perception of him is that he is right about many things.

Jamie: He has very interesting insights on widely relative concepts. He was very good about integrating time and geography into his ideas.

After watching this video, how likely are you to explore more of Watts' work?

Winter: Honestly not very likely

Mike: I am very interested in checking out more of Watts' work. Not to hear more of why our world is destined for failure, but to actually offer a solution to help us change.

Elissa: I would like to know more about his work. For instance, I would like to know if he put lectures like these out via a medium that average people could access, or if he was more concerned with the intelligentsia. I think if he was more of a public intellectual, then his work could perhaps provide a model for today's academics.

Jamie: Moderately likely

A Conversation with Friends

FOR MORE ABOUT MY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
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Although I received some great feedback from my email surveys, I wanted to try something a little more personal. So, I invited four friends to my apartment, showed them the same video I sent in the email survey, and then opened up the floor for discussion.

PREPARATION

I just finished preparing for my focus group session. I was feeling really nervous about it this morning. I even took off work so that I could have the entire day to clean my apartment and prepare for the session. However, after reviewing the video I plan to show and taking thorough notes, I feel more confident. I'm excited and a bit anxious.

Analyzing the video was easier than I expected. In fact, I really enjoyed it. I came up with a lot of great questions to ask and thoughts of my own regarding the video content. I hope my friends share my enthusiasm. I'm excited to see what kind of thoughts they have after viewing the clip.

Planning this focus group has been kind of like what I would expect planning a lecture for an Honors class would be like. I would love to create an Honors class focused on Alan Watts and his work. Maybe that can be my next project.

If this evening goes well, I'd love to try doing something similar online. I could post the video and my thoughts and questions about it and have readers respond, like a virtual discussion. That would be so cool.

BRANDON

BRITTANY

DAVID

JAMES

THE DIALOUGE

The conversation went really well. It lasted about an hour and everyone was enthusiastic and engaged. We jumped from topic to topic rather quickly, but there was a good mix of questions and discussion of ideas.

Everyone agreed with Watts' claim that we, as a society, have a problem and are causing the destruction of our environment as we know it. We discussed a wide variety of topics related to the issues at hand. We very typically related what we were discussing to an historical or current event that supported our claim.

For exaple, we agreed that technology leads to materialism. We recognized the mindlessness Watts addressed in the video and the overall acceptance of displays of hatred over displays of love. We all seemed to be searching for some sort of solution and recognized a feeling of emptiness. Whether we believed the solution had to come from nature or humanity was a much-debated topic.

We alternated between moments of hope and feelings of defeat. We discussed the usefulness of competition versus cooperation, and debated which was more powerful, free will or cultural coercion. We discussed the faultiness of linking happiness to power, becoming consumed with individualization, and sinking into mindlessness. In the end we concluded that fear was the root to all our problems and that we must learn to live fearlessly and allow ourselves to be vulnerable in order to reconnect with ourselves, with nature, and with each other.

FINDING THE RIGHT ANGLE

I think one thing I'm learning through this process is how I work best. It's weird saying that because I'm a senior in college. I've spent the last 15 or so years of my life in school. You'd think by now I'd know how I worked most effectively, but this process has actually taught me more about myself than I expected. This project is different than anything I've ever done. It was an assignment I had to complete, like a goal I had to accomplish in order to get to the next level, but that was its only similarity. Unlike all the other tasks I've been given, this one had no instructions, only a deadline. There were no guidelines, no map. I was set free in an empty room and told to find the exit, but there was no neon sign pointing the way; there weren't even walls. It was just an empty abyss, like a blank page that seems to extend endlessly in all directions. So, I did what I knew, what I'd been trained to do. I chose a topic. I built my idea from scratch. I was given no tools, only what I had in my mind. I was granted an advisor to help keep me on track, but I created the "track." She helped me stay true to myself.

At this point I'm looking around and I feel like I've put together several parts and pieces. I have the pieces to a giant puzzle laid out in front of me, a puzzle I've designed myself. Now I have to figure out how to put it all together to make a unified image. It's a strange feeling. If I designed each piece of this puzzle, why do I feel so overwhelmed when I step back and look at them scattered before me? Perhaps the sound of the ticking clock growing louder and louder is making me nervous, but I usually work well under pressure. I've always enjoyed a challenge and racing against time is sort of a hobby of mine, one I've been meaning to give up, but can't seem to let go of.

I think the problem is that I don't know what the picture looks like. I created the pieces. They didn't come from a box. I don't have the image to reference when putting them all together. Instead, I must also craft the portrait, but this, too, is a curious concept. I know I designed these pieces and when doing so I had a larger image in mind, so why am I scared? Just because I can't seem to visualize the final image on command doesn't mean it doesn't exist. The box is somewhere inside of me. Subconsciously, I know what the final pieces will look like all together. That's the fun of it. This is kind of like life. We don't know where our final destination is, yet we must follow a path that leads us there. That's why it's so important to follow a path that you've created for yourself. That's the only way to know for sure that the endpoint, the destination, is somewhere you truly want to be.

I sat down this evening to start working on my thesis. I've been putting it off way too much lately and I'm not exactly sure why. Fear likely has a lot to do with it, but right after I sat down, my friend Bethany called. I missed her call, but called her back, which I don't usually do. She wanted to go grab a drink and I said yes even though I was broke and way behind on my thesis. I said I'd have one drink and give her an hour. I really enjoyed talking/catching up with her and I got to talk about my research trip to California. I left feeling so inspired and excited to start working on my project. This is wonderful! I'm now sitting at James's desk with the lights dimmed and I've written 5 journal pages of good, useable material. I'm feeling pretty pumped! Time to tackle this puzzle!

THE WORDS OF ALAN WATTS

Cycle THROUGH TIME

A GENERATION IN TRANSITION

The millennial generation is in a state of transition. Like raindrops beginning to fall from a cloud, members of my generation are entering adulthood. From our vantage point, we are able to see the world from a distance and are faced with the dilemma of choosing a place to land in world we do not quite understand. We are full of questions, disillusionment, and fear. Our delicate and unique perspective allows us to be perceptive to the ideas presented by Alan Watts.

"There is a whole generation of people that are disillusioned in the system and they're looking for alternate answers… reward structure is to them quite meaningless… they just don't get it and they're going crazy." – Mark Watts

"We're all looking for a voice, a direction, a beam, something saying go here. We have to make that up ourselves, but we need a communal goal." -Brandon Illig

"The question of identity is central to adolescent development, and Watts described his work as a "lowdown on life and existence," which parents might discretely offer to their sons and daughters on the verge of maturity." – P. Columbus

WATTS' SOOTHING MESSAGE

Alan Watts aims to ease the suffering of those in freefall by prompting his audience to listen to the sound of the rain. He encourages inquiry and exploration. He says that we must alter our perception so that we see ourselves as a part of nature. We must let go of our fears and trust nature, trust ourselves. Give in to the wind as it guides our paths.

"Alan Watts presented to me… a way of life… a way of just of being and of being in the world. To me the things he says… are profound ways of how to navigate, go along with the current." – Mitch Jeserich

His work and vision remind us that what is important is to discover what is real and true, to move in accord with nature, to see between, beneath, and through the appearance of "things"… to aspire to breathe through, beauty and discovery as the reason to "be". " – Dr. Davies

Watts challenges us "to observe things simply as they are without imposing layers of interpretation and judgment, to cultivate an embodied awareness, a persistent mindfulness," like listening to the rain. – P. Columbus and D. Rice

REFLECTIONS ON THE WATER

The wisdom of Alan Watts' message can be seen in those who embraced his ideas and have since found their place amongst the waters of the Earth. They say his words are timeless and will remain relevant. Watts' work addresses the wonder and mystery of the human condition.

PHOTO BY: JAMES LOPEZ

"What he spoke about is sort of timeless wisdom because its written in the writings of people who literally lived thousands of years ago." – Dr. Krippner

"Watts is a cultural icon whose message is timeless. His provocation was to live life on the terms of one's own integrity – to keep living, not pretending – and to embody an active relationship to awakening, from any forms of compromise." – Dr. Davies

"The things he talks about [address] some of the very conditions of what it means to be human... he taps into the wonder of it all." - Mitch Jeserich

AND THE STORM BREAKS

"All the talk in the world doesn't get it unless you listen to it in a new way. The sound of rain needs no translation." - Alan Watts

When I began this project, I wasn't entirely sure what the outcome would look like, but I am certainly pleased with the results. I learned more through this process than I ever expected. What began as a quest to discover Alan Watts ended up being more of a discovery of myself. Creating a project from nothing is a difficult task and this journey was certainly challenging. However, the insights I gained through this process will no doubt benefit me greatly as I embark on the adventure of adulthood.

I have mixed feelings about concluding this project. There is so much more I wanted to do, to research, and to learn that I wasn't able to accomplish in the short time span allotted for this endeavor.

Do not, however, mistake my reflections for regret. If anything, this project has motivated me to do more and be more, to live life to the fullest. For me, this project is proof that I can do it, that I can forge my own path, pave my own trail. I hope that it will serve as a guide to others as they embark on a similar journey all their own. I hope it inspires others to take their own adventure, to listen to the rain, and to follow their hearts, because that is what being human is all about, after all.

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