

Shake it Off

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On August 18th, 2014, I wrote an email that changed my life. After checking to make sure the last of my vacation time had been approved, and after six years and two months of service, I wrote a resignation letter from the corporate job I landed straight after college.

The job I lined up next? A string of part-time contracts as an adjunct instructor that I cobbled together into something resembling full-time employment. I had had enough of the mindless tedium working for an enormous company on projects I didn't care about: I was committing myself to a life of the mind.

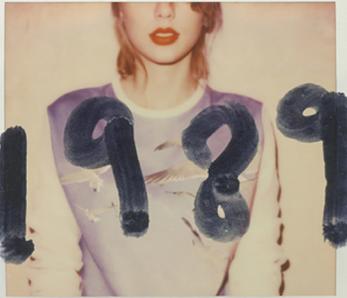
August 18th, by some strange accident, was also the day that Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" debuted.

I would be lying if I said I blasted it out my windows, twisting my hips behind the steering wheel, triumphant in my rare decisiveness on a risky choice, with this catchy tune as my personal pep rally. That did not happen that afternoon. Instead, I sat in traffic, listening to it with a sneer: *so corny, how insipid.*

As it grew deeper into the fall, I settled into my new life: no class on Fridays, sleeping in until 10 three days a week! But also, unending exhaustion: I was teaching seven courses, each with a mountain of work to review and evaluate. What I didn't foresee was that the life of the mind is also the life of the heart, poring over essays on racism and wealth inequality and poems by students reflecting on their own childhood abuse. I had already been teaching occasional courses for a few years, and knew well the emotional component that came with it—in no small part, it's what attracted me to this work—but found myself now overwhelmed by an abundance of it. To be alongside 115 (mostly) young people exploring and sharing their world with me was nothing short of profound—but was not an experience I could disrobe from and fold away for later, like editing hundred-page contracts or enduring the most contentious of conference calls. I would teach as late as 9:30 some nights, and would finally drag myself home for a dinner of reheated takeout at 10. There were moments where I would look around from the kitchen table and wonder what I had done to my life before returning my attention to a stack of portfolios, often until the clock on the microwave read one or two in the morning.

I had wanted to live my dream of a more fulfilling, meaningful life, but I seemed to have overshot the goal: days so overstuffed it was hard to have a self at all. I became a sort of backward, cowardly Sisyphus, trying to outpace a boulder of meaning chasing me down an infinite hill.

Being in the car produced the worst of this feeling, a kind of amplified version of the collective social analyses and second-hand heartaches that was inescapable, echoing back from all that safety glass. Because the campuses I worked for were well distributed from each other, it meant I was driving close to 500 miles a week. No stranger to long commutes, in the past I had relished this time spent with NPR, audiobooks, or perhaps some nice post-rock or experimental Icelandic band. But now that my entire waking world was consumed by thinking, I couldn't muster the energy for all that added stimulation. Months and months before the idea to quit my desk job, I bought tickets to see Neutral Milk Hotel—and later sold them via Facebook post, with the excuse I had to teach the next morning. "DUDE, just get a sub!" someone reasoned. But somehow a pilgrimage to



Taylor Swift D.L.X.

Taylor Swift

"Shake It Off"

1989

10/2014

Big Machine

Vermont to listen live to a musical allegory of Anne Frank's life no longer seemed worth the effort: it felt too much like work to seem like something I'd do for fun.

As I tried to find more ways to carve out space for my brain to rest, I listened to more and more Top 40 radio stations. And, as you might've guessed, they were playing a lot of Taylor Swift. Nothing could wipe my brain into Tabula Rasa for three minutes and thirty-nine seconds like "Shake It Off:" the snare-and-hihat combo tapping into something primordial, the comically bad Cassio keyboard/bent trombone sound effect in place of a real horn section, the oozing simplicity and energy of 160 bpm like any self-respecting dance hit deserves. This is the magic of pop music: the escapism it promises. As opposed to looking inward, it leads you not exactly "outward," but to some otherworldly fantasy, where the worst possible threat is a clique of people who don't like you, or seeing an ex dance with someone else. The result was like a tidy and instantaneous spell of deep drunkenness: the DJ would return with his announcements, and I would snap out of the trance, realizing I couldn't remember a single detail from the last few minutes. Did I dance, seated, from the waist up? Did I sing along, tapping in time on the steering wheel? All I could be sure was that I couldn't have been thinking about lesson planning, the handful of students I was desperately worried about, or if I'd get invited back to teach again come spring.

Soon after the full album of 1989 was released, I slinked through my local Target, acting so twitchy and weird I'm surprised no one accused me of shoplifting. I bought the expanded deluxe edition, which I stored all evidence of clandestinely in my glove box. I played that disc almost perpetually until May, when I got a different, more manageable teaching job, and the magic of blissful blankness was not so necessary. If anyone would be well-suited to making music that could serve as a lead bib to the radiation of everyday stress and pain, it of course would have to be the conventionally beautiful daughter of two highly devoted and successful financiers. I know, I can't help myself even now: tangled in analysis, letting a landslide of meaning chase me down the slope, daring it to crush me. Still, "Shake It Off" allowed me to do exactly as its title promised to all of reality, if only for a few brief moments when I needed it, to return to my senses better balanced with the space to take in the world again, and the dozens of essays stacked on my kitchen table.