

Freedumb, or something like it

Jon Johnson

Like many before me, I had parents.

Like *everyone* before me, my parents had no idea what the hell they were doing.

Yet after our flickering senses, parents are our first teachers.

My first parent (oddly the one who I came out of second) was everything you'd expect a teacher to be.

–Don't touch that.

–Why?

–Because I said so.

–Don't eat that.

–Why

–Because it'll fucking kill you.

–Don't say that.

–Why?

–Because *I'll* fucking kill you.

The other teacher, may the impotent lord have mercy on his effervescent soul, was a bit more...unorthodox.

Oh sure, he made sure I didn't fall of a bridge or set fire to a bottle of gasoline, but had I done so? Bit of natural selection, now, isn't it?

–You break that?

–...It fell.

–Hm. Go get the broom.

–You wanna try this?

–What is it?

–Wasabi. It's good, eat it.

–Hey, if you are going to jump off the slide with those cardboard "wings" you've got there, better get a running start.

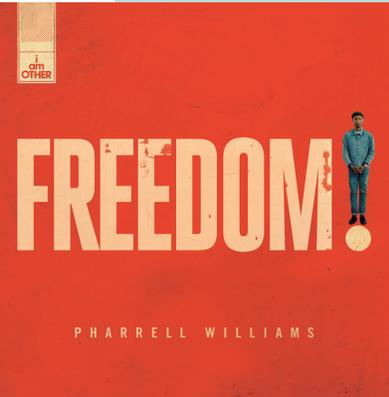
–Why?

–More air, you'll go farther. It's called lift.

He wasn't wrong.

Naturally, the first teacher trained me from a very early age to place faith in a higher source, separate and apart from myself. Everything you'd expect. Adults, teachers, managers, heads of companies, the government, police officers, doctors, but most importantly god, a big man with a happy gray beard who gave us these hierarchies to keep us safe and sorted on our trip to the gilded kingdom in the sky.

Thumbs up.



Pharrell Williams

"Freedom"

Freedom

06/2015

Columbia

The second teacher trained me from an early age to do stupid shit. Not because he hated me more than he hated himself, but because he wanted me to learn. To trust myself first, and to figure out my own limitations.

Okay.

Both very apt teachers in their respective fields. And I'm grateful for both now.

But.

My father was semi-uninvolved for much of my early childhood. Not intensely uninvolved. He just didn't know what the fuck it was (a child), so he tended to let someone else deal with it. So I was brought up by my mother. And stepmother. And sister. And two stepsisters. And female cat.

Estrogen ocean, you get it.

Coddled boy aside, my den mothers raised me to be a stand-up gentleman. Honorable. God-fearing. Faithful. Unquestioning. Yes ma'am, No, sir. Strong as an ox. Gentle as a doe. Swift as a coursing river. All the force of a great typhoon. A man.

Specifically, the man they never had (because he doesn't exist).

So at the ripe old age of ten I was barreling towards that unattainable man, using cut-outs from *Just Seventeen* magazines and lines from *You've Got Mail* to create a roadmap. I kept the toy from the box of Cap'n Crunch in my back pocket, though, just in case someone wanted to play.

Naturally, I'm grasping. I'm that baby fuckin' bird in the story book, looking like an idiot as it squawks at a big dog.

—Are you what it means to be a man?

—....woof.

I learned that if you grasp enough on the way down to the abyss, you'll probably catch something. A sign post. A vine. Anything.

Help me identify, help me belong, tell me I'm not alone and I'm yours.

School. Bands. Sports teams. T.V. Religion. Society. Country. Link me to it all and let me find identity through that so I don't have to look at this teetering edge or hear the woosh of the void or count the seconds until this vine snaps.

So I spent a chunk of years thinking in Technicolor and dreaming in red, white, and blue.

"These colors don't run!"

Ah, but they sure do fade.

One day I woke from a sweaty dream. The paths were all laid out. The college path, the Jesus Cristo path, the path to a family and dog and white picket fence and me at the head of the table thinking in 401ks and taking pills to counteract the side effects of my other pills.

And every single path led back to the same cliff, left me gripping the same vine as my shoes struggled against gravity to stay on my feet.

But if I can be honest, my arm was getting tired, and the hum of that void was rather loud. A lesser man would have let go of the vine.

So I let go of the vine.

In my mother's eyes, I had every opportunity in the world. And one by one I fucked them all up. Seduced by the devil of Eastern thought, good weed, and better sex.

But she had taught me all she could, and now her job was to release me into the loving, wafer-flavored arms of Jesus.

Naturally, I started roaming the void alone on my days off.

—Roomy isn't it?

—Come again?

—Oh, sorry. 40 on pump 4.

Whether because the drugs or the Tao, the lines started blurring. And shit got *REAL* confusing. The more I let go, the more I gained, but this made me feel emptier, and yet more complete. Feel me?

Now, I'll add a "yada yada yada" here for brevity and to not be one of those white guys with dreads telling you about their acid trip while you are dramatically sober. So, yada yada yada, who pops up but fuckin' teacher number two!

Hey pop! Oh yea let's go to iHop nice to see you you aloof cunt where have you been I coulda used your help back there it's cool I'm figuring it out by myself—oh by the way I'm pretty lost and hooked on Norco if you care you ball of—

—Wait you're hooked on Norco?

—Yea

—Son, no. That's the shit that had me looking off the edge of a cliff.

—Well...yea?

He paused long enough for me to wipe the red from my eyes. I spilled milk on the table and my pants.

—Son, have you tried weed?

Wait, the fuck he say?

The lady next to us was pouring far too much syrup on her pancakes, waiting for my response.

I let out a nervous laugh and told him about the 75 plants in our backyard—a humble operation, at best.

—Wow, that's...I mean, think you have enough, or what?

—I wanna get off the Norco...I figure 75 plants ought to do it.

We exchanged a glance.

—You smartass.

Pancake lady was explaining to the waiter how the syrup lid must have come off and she'd like some new pancakes please.

So now we're in the back of an iHop, rolling a joint. As you do.

Now don't get me wrong, my father has always protected, loved, and otherwise cherished me as one can only love something that has leapt from one's own balls.

But in a way I never saw before, I saw this man care.

It was hard to explain then, but I was watching my father die in front of me. More, I was watching the expectations both he and I had built up over the last 19ish years shatter.

He wasn't father, infallible ruler of the universe, vast and almighty! That dude was gone.

Here was Bob, a man.

There was no pretense to it. He stood in front of me as broken and alone as I stood in front of him. And it was refreshing as all hell.

He admitted his insecurities in that cloudy car between the ringing in his ears.

–I never knew how to be a father, I never had one.

–If it helps, I had never been a son.

–I'm serious, smartass. I was just so afraid I would fuck you up permanently that I kinda...sat there and let life go by. I made sure you didn't die, I knew that much, but I wanted you to be your own man. I wanted you to think for yourself. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop you from fucking up, and that you would be the only one that could pick yourself back up when you did.

–I mean you could have told me that pop.

–...yea I know.

He fiddled with the radio, clicked it on and back off.

–I guess just...knowing your mother and the kind of kid she would want to raise, I was afraid you'd come out brainwashed, and I didn't want that to be partly my fault.

–...

–I was so afraid of fucking up that I fucked up by doing nothing. I'm sorry, boy.

Whether from the weight of the words or the weed, the car sat silently as I fiddled with a spot of spilt milk on my pants.

We spent the rest of the evening comparing notes on life, and admiring the conclusions we had separately reached together. We talked about aliens and the Matrix, compared Alan Watts and George Carlin, and shared a hushed giggle at the notion that people thought Democrat and Republican meant anything.

By the time the heavy wore off and the high came on, I had a new friend.

I remember a phone call years later.

–Hey boy you see the new one from Pharrell?

–Nah, is it good?

–Goosebumps buddy. Power. I'm telling you, he's got it. Him and who's the other guy? Bruno Mars. He's got it.

–Yea Bruno is good.

–It’s starting to feel like it did back then. People are realizing. Finding themselves. All we need is some mud and some acid and we’re gonna have Woodstock 2015.

–Ha. Well It would probably be a small mud pit now, the way everyone walks around trying to hate everyone else.

–Oh shut up. You worry about yourself, and let the world spin around you. Gotta go, break’s over. Love you boy.

Every time I hear this song I remember that sentence. It was a serious yet tossaway line, and yet shit sticks to me like oatmeal to yesterday’s bowl.

Last time I checked the definition, I was a Millennial. I was brought up on the lie that I could be, do, or accomplish anything and everything I wanted to. That all I had to do was reach out, and the world was mine for the taking. That If I knocked, that door would surely open. That I was from a special place so that I, too, was special.

I’m not special.

If you are anything like me, you read that last line and the gears kicked in “No, Jon, you are special, see you have these fingerprints and you were born at this special time with this special combination of talents and you will do such good in the world.”

It’s okay. I’m not special. I’m average at *best*, and mediocre most days. And by your standards I’m probably a monster.

But I spent my entire life expecting to be Jim Carrey. Richard Pryor. Chris Tucker. George Carlin.

I knocked, and the door knocked back, expecting me to open it.

I reached out, and the world swirled just out of reach. An ornament on a Christmas tree I never wanted to decorate in the first place cuz *Monday Night Raw* is on and I just want the tree to be ready and tinsel and full of presents every single day of my life thanks.

And as disappointed as I was at first to find out that the world was not waiting for me to burst from my chrysalis and flip it on its poles, it’s a great relief.

There is so much freedom here.