

Over that last six months I've entirely changed the way I think and talk to people. Here are some notable differences:

1. Writing

Before, everything I'd written, every English paper in high school and SLE was torture. I have good grammar and I can put together an excellent sentence. But I had nothing to say. No insight to share. Between 2010 and 2017 I probably wrote about 70 papers, and I didn't believe a single one of the claims I made. I wrote whatever seemed like it would get an A. I was always barely above the minimum the word count. Now, I have too much to say. I'm curious about myself and culture, and often find words inadequate for the insights I'm having almost daily. In fact, for the first time in my life, I wrote an essay for fun, immediately after reading *This is Water*. (I thought about sending it to you but chickened out.) Here's the first bit:

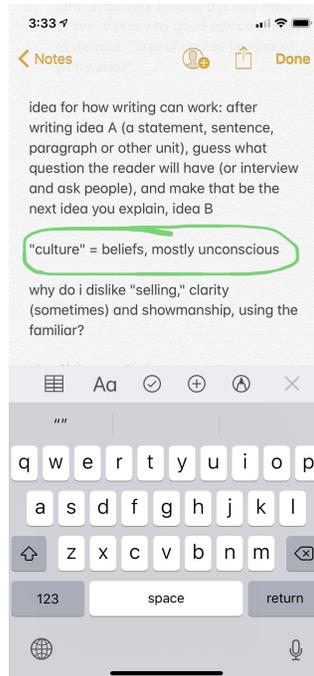
"Holy shit, I have never felt this validated. This speech confirms all of the personal work I've been doing for the past six months to one year, depending on how you count it. I feel like, were I more practiced at writing down and presenting my ideas, I could have written most of this speech.

One frustrating thing that happens to me is every time I feel as if I've had an epiphany, and I try to share what wisdom I've gained, the wisdom is thrown back in my face with, 'I mean, yeah. That's obvious.' My assumption until now was that I was somehow underdeveloped and was merely coming to realizations that everyone else had already had. Wallace, just now, has shown me otherwise."

In retrospect, I think that in fact I was coming to insights that (some) others already had. I was catching up.

2. Thinking

This class has given me a few powerful vocabulary words: culture, insight, and empathy. Of course I already knew these words, but my understanding of them was extremely poor. Now they're primitives that I refer to constantly in my thoughts. "Insight" is a refining of the word I'd been using, "epiphany." "Epiphany" or maybe "little epiphany" captures what it feels like, but "insight" allows you to talk about it without sounding grandiose. About "culture," I have a very long note in my phone titled TO REMEMBER. Here's something I wrote in it after reading *Clash!*



This was a little Rosetta stone, a translation from my old language to the language that I now use in my head. I see culture everywhere. I don't think I could have arrived at "culture" without help from *Clash!* because I was thinking alone. I was studying myself, and realizing how unconscious beliefs, many of them foolish, shaped my behavior. But it would have taken me forever to have a good way of understanding how those beliefs travelled between people. Of the four elements (I's, interactions, institutions, and ideas), I was stuck with one particular "I": me. And my ideas. This leads me to the third vocabulary word.

3. People

Empathy was a big deal for me. Before this class, I had a personal distaste for the word empathy. When I heard "empathy," always thought of people reciting certain condescending cultural scripts.¹ They made the same distinction, over and over, between "sympathy" and "empathy." "Sympathy is feeling bad for someone, empathy is *feeling* their pain." This never did it for me. The other thing you hear about empathy is that it's "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" or "seeing the situation from another's point of view." This *is* actually a useful statement, but it lacks the thing I really needed to hear: "...and it is the foundation of all human interaction, so without it you are completely fucked."

I also got some help from "How to Win Friends & Influence People." Depending on how you use that book, it can either be subtitled "A Field Guide to Compassion" or

¹ Of course, I didn't call them "cultural scripts" back then. I called them frustrating.

“A Psychopath’s Manipulation Manual.” I used it in the former way; I wonder what you guys think of it.

Jesus. I sat down to write a brief justification of why I chose [my topic on the final exam], and this came pouring out of me. I suspect that in my heart, *this* is the final reflection I wanted to write for you guys. I wanted to express my gratitude for what I learned, and also take a snapshot of my soul right now, for later reference.