

Agency Without Control
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Reflection on the theme by PJ

Like all people, there is more to me than meets the eye. My body is obviously small and able to move very freely and often at a brisk pace.

What is not immediately apparent is that I have a collagen difference which makes my tissues naturally more soft and flexible. That readily available flexibility I have comes with risks and costs. The inherent hypermobility of my body also means that my body is not as strong and stable as bodies who don't exhibit traits of/live with a hypermobility condition.

All of my life, folks would refer to me as 'tiny but mighty' (or some similar iteration of it). The world almost demanded I stay tough and go above and beyond what my body could do. I had to pretend to be bigger than I obviously was. I was able to do a lot of things 'like everybody else', especially with the knowledge of healthy body mechanics and leverage that I acquired in massage school. I grew up being a dancer and yoga practitioner; both environments and communities that highly value flexibility, so it never occurred to anyone that there might be an anomaly that could potentially pose health risks. Fast forward the clock to my 30's, 8 car wrecks and a few dance injuries later. My body and abilities are definitely not what they used to be. Gone are the days of lifting oak furniture and doing hard workouts like I used to when I marched drumline and color guard. My 10 year massage career ended after I sneezed and dislocated my shoulder, which required a surgical repair. And now, much like my autistic traits, I can no longer sustainably mask/hide my hypermobility without major consequences. So what would it look like for me to honor my body's nature, rather than continue to push myself to seem 'normal' and strong to the point that I repeatedly injure myself and have to ultimately miss out on important events and responsibilities? Just last weekend, I caused my shoulder to subluxate twice from rotating my arm while lifting it above 90 degrees.

I flared up old car wreck injuries when I carried my portable sewing machine and several bags up 3 flights in an elevator at the same time. My back and neck went into major spasm for the next few days, trying to stabilize my sprained ribs. I have had to admit to myself that I can't afford to keep breaking my body in the name of my own internalized ableism.

As I reflect on what I know about my nature, I know that my system it is slow to process; my body doesn't usually give me any indication in the moment that I'm doing something that I will pay for later, and if it does I know it's going to be really bad over the next couple days. But knowing I have a delayed pain onset, could I/what is keeping me from preemptively honoring my limits by asking for help when carrying heavier things or making multiple trips, instead of trying to be ultra efficient and carry everything all in one trip? It's hard to feel okay about asking for help in our hyper individualistic and ableist society. I used to knowingly push myself past my limits, with the radical acceptance that I was going to be in pain. I told myself it was worth it because I would have no life if I was constantly trying to avoid pain. I'm currently learning that I have a loving community that is willing to assist and support me so that we can keep my inevitable chronic pain managed as best as we can while avoiding bigger compounding injuries.

As I continue to work on unpacking my own sense of internalized ableism, I can still feel self conscious when I have to decline to help with physical tasks while I'm in a flare. I do my best to remember to give myself grace while I lean into my nature instead of my will. Though changing my internal habits can be a daunting task to keep facing, I found leaning into community is what allows me to keep growing.

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I've always been a person whose instinct is to live primarily in my head. Thoughts about things can sometimes feel more substantial than the things themselves - my husband teases me because I'll often forget whole plots of movies but be able to remember vividly what kinds of thoughts the movie made me think. Self reflection is much more of an instinct for me than being wholly in the present moment or attuned to things like sensations or feelings.

It turns out I come by this honestly in lots of ways. A lot of western philosophy, from Plato's through the stoics, through Descartes "I think therefore I am" — much of western intellectual heritage consistently places mind above body, reason above instinct, will above impulse. The passions are something to be managed. The body is something to be transcended. The goal, across many different thinkers and centuries, is a self that is sovereign through rationality.

Growing up American adds another layer, with its strong focus on individualism and values of productivity being a key component of worth. The idea is that this sovereign rational self is also fundamentally separate from others and responsible for its own outcomes, which can be achieved against all odds. Put those together and you get a particular mythology: that what matters most is your inner will, that you are essentially separate from your environment, and that with enough will and discipline you can override almost anything — tiredness, circumstance, limitation, the pull of your own body. The self-help industry is built on this mythology. So is the phrase "mind over matter." So is the assumption that failure is a character flaw.

However, it's become increasingly clear that mythology is what it is. The more I've learned about what it is to be human, the more niggling truths I have come across about just how influenced we each are by everything around us, not to mention our bodies, intrinsically.

I think for me the first hints that my worldview was out of whack came from snippets of science news. I'm going to share a few studies that made me feel a mix of fascination and kind of affronted when I learned of them. Apparently hot weather correlates to increases in violence. And moving backwards in space improves memory and recall of the past. Different hormone balances in our blood change how we make decisions. Hearing the same milkshake described as "indulgent" or "sensible" changes how your body actually digests it and whether you feel full. The placebo effect can work even if you are told you are receiving a placebo. Solar storm activity correlates with an increase in heart attacks. On the one hand, all of these speak to a level of permeability, of interrelatedness between ourselves and the world around us that reoriented things for me, a world where we're not just the influencers but the influenced and constantly interrelated with everything around us./ And also that a lot of what we're deciding and how we act is below our conscious awareness. And on the other hand, it freaked me out

to feel like my very thoughts and inner experience, the backbone of my conscious existence and a thing that felt subjectively like it was wholly my own wasn't up to me. I honestly felt kind of resentful. I wanted to feel like there was such a thing as "me" that was inviolate in some way, that the thing that was me had things like freedom and control over at least my inner world, if nothing else.

It didn't help that the more that these kinds of studies were coming out and becoming widely known, the more corporations and institutions started using these insights intentionally to create new kinds of coercion and control. The idea that people were influenced to be more law abiding by orderly environments led to a wave in police crackdowns on minor offenses, with some disastrous and racist consequences. Breakthroughs in behavioral economics and persuasion research led to products and stores being redesigned to make people more likely to purchase things they wouldn't otherwise have bought. Optimization for engagement metrics — often deliberately drawing on behavioral psychology — led to things like social media and infinite scroll, designed to keep us engaged and stimulated for as long as possible.

And yet - even as these avenues of influence are all over the place and frequently talked about, the way we talk about it generally seems to suggest that the solution is to willpower through it./ To be aware of our biases and our weaknesses and the external forces that impact us so strongly, and just Resist Harder. / But our very susceptibility to the influence in the first place also contains the explanation for why that approach is doomed to fail if that's all we have. Thinking of ourselves as fully independent operators is an illusion that ignores how much we are intrinsically part of an ecosystem, of environments, of each other, of influences, and even that our brains are just one piece of the ecosystems that are our bodies.

For me, a major shift happened about a decade ago. I was both a new mom and my family's breadwinner in a job that was much less intrinsically motivating than my previous career in theatre and opera had been, and that set of circumstances led me to realize just how huge of an impact my environment had on my ability to function well. The me who got little sleep and who was working remotely on tasks without much buy in was much less functional than the me who had a fun, collaborative, creative job that was mostly in the afternoons and evenings, with no parenting responsibilities. Suddenly the theoretical idea that I wasn't the sole driver of my own choices became viscerally

clear, because as hard as I tried to choose what to do and get it done, more often than not it seemed I was completely unable and floundering. When I sought out help, I ended up with an ADHD diagnosis.

Having a lens of ADHD gave me a new way of looking at what was happening. ADHD affects executive function — the brain's capacity to initiate, organize, and follow through — and what became clear pretty quickly is that no amount of wanting to do something was going to reliably produce the doing of it/. So I started asking what structures and conditions made it easier or harder. The strategies that actually helped weren't about trying harder — they were about designing around the problem. Adding friction to things I wanted to avoid. /Removing friction from things I wanted to move toward./ Making the environment do work that I'd been exhausting myself trying to do with my will. I started forming habits of looking for and creating structures around myself to integrate into.

Through this kind of approach, without even meaning to, I think I gradually got reconciled to the idea that I wasn't a sovereign cognitive self that did all of the deciding and experiencing, just bringing my body along for the ride. But instead, I started thinking of my cognitive capacities as the parts of me I use to strategize around what ecosystems I want to be a part of and how. I started acknowledging just how impactful things like my environment and my mood and my relationships and the systems I'm a part of are to how things play out in the moment.

And inevitably, that conclusion included another one - that the environments we all are already in, from our cultures to our communities to our homes and spaces through which we move are not neutral, but always already shaping our characters and our behavior day to day, and we may not always be very aware of what the implications are. Every single day we are being nudged and prompted and doing reps of behaviors and thought patterns because we are already part of systems and ecosystems and relationships, even the ones that feel like default states.

So if the self-centered, top-down explanation isn't true, what can replace it? Because it isn't about giving up on agency or will, it's about locating it more honestly. We are always acting, always choosing, always shaping what's around us. But we're not doing it from a position outside and above the many forces that shape us - we're

becoming more skilled participants within them. For me a metaphor helped: different approaches to agriculture. There's the monoculture approach, where you focus on top down control - clearing the land, picking a single crop, optimizing for efficiency, and then correcting for the inevitable results - pests, uninvited plants, disease, and depleted soil. Or there's indigenous land tending, where you're in relationship with the ecosystem - observing what already wants to grow, what the relationships are between species, and being strategic about what you encourage and where you add friction. In "Braiding Sweetgrass", for example, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes how wild rice harvesters were criticized as inefficient because their harvest method led to half the rice being left behind, and they responded, "Yes, we could get more ... But it's got to seed itself for next year. And what we leave behind is not wasted. You know, we're not the only ones who like rice. Do you think the ducks would stop here if we took it all?" Productivity culture is a lot like monoculture, and it isn't without consequence - burnout, shame, workaholism to name a few. But if instead we can observe our own ecosystems, what they encourage, what they deter, what grows well and what really struggles to thrive, we can much more sustainably tend ourselves and the systems in which we live. As we heard in the reading, "We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone." Not to mention, our actions ripple outwards and influence the system around us as much as ourselves. The harvest method that looks inefficient is actually tending a system that benefits everyone in it — including next year's harvesters, and the ducks, and the rice itself.

There's this one more study I want to share that has stuck with me since I first learned of it. A researcher with a prosthetic baby bump entered a subway car in Milan, and the team was measuring how often she was offered a seat. In the control condition, she was offered a seat 38% of the time. The other condition was that someone dressed as Batman entered the car, through another door, and didn't interact with her in any way, but seat offers nearly doubled, up to 67%. And 44% of the people offering seats didn't remember they saw Batman at all. There's a lot of things we could take from a study like this, but the piece that is the most interesting to me is how impactful we can be to one another, too. Often without even realizing it. Something as simple as disrupting expectations in a routine interaction, or being a visible reminder of a prosocial archetype, can shift the whole system a few notches kinder.

PJ's reflection illustrated beautifully how the ableist individualist culture we are swimming in leads to exerting will over our natures, even to our own detriment. It also makes me wonder, concretely, what could a different ecosystem look like - where we're actively looking for ways to know and support one another in everyday ways could be part of the current we're riding and not the one we're swimming against?

I think about this a lot in my work, because as an ADHD coach, I'm usually working with folks at the individual level, and generally they come in wanting to find the routine or the mindset or the tool that will finally let them become the version of themselves they believe they should be and the level of productivity they are being asked to achieve. And sometimes tools and mindsets and routines are part of it, but more often than not, we find ourselves doing something different. We end up asking: what is your life actually trying to be? What does your particular brain, in your particular circumstances, with your particular relationships and responsibilities and sources of meaning — what does that ecosystem make genuinely possible? Not the life you think you should want, but the one you might actually be able to tend and flourish within.

But that question can't stop at the individual level. It can start there, but it has ripples into all the systems that surround us, too. Knowing that often little things can make a big difference, even - maybe especially - the things we don't notice, how can we each be cultivators of the communities and systems in which we live? What seeds can we plant for ourselves and one another? We are all always both the influencers and the influenced, and reflecting on what kind of influences those are can help us move through them more honestly and sustainably.