



## **The Great Gatsby: Some Way Beyond Self**

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A well-known spiritual teacher was once leading a yoga and meditation retreat. The retreat involved some sitting postures, some movement, some work on the mat. Throughout the first couple days of the retreat there was one woman who, during all the different practices, stayed rooted in her seat.

After a couple days they had a group check-in about how the retreat was going. And this woman shot up her hand and was called on by the facilitator, by the teacher and she said, "I'm just really upset I can't get out of this chair to do the practices; I can't get onto the floor; I can't get onto the mat; I can't stand up easily. I can't."

And the spiritual teacher said, "How do you know what you can't do?"

Everyone in the room was aghast. because this was a compassionate spiritual teacher, and they expected him to say, "It's okay! Whatever you want to do, you can go at your own pace. It's all right." Instead it was "How do you know what you can't do?"

But the next set of practices that woman got out of her chair and onto the floor and engaged in the yoga, and engaged in the walking meditation, and went back to sit. The next day during the check-in she raised her hand, and she said "When you asked me that question, 'How do you know what you can do? How do you know what you can't do?' I was taken aback, I expected sympathy, I expected compassion. But that question was just what I needed to hear because I didn't know yet what I could or could not do. So thank you. Thank you so much, thank you. And fuck you."

Today we are gonna explore the intersection of *thank* and *fuck* you. Because really it's about what happens at those edge moments, those moments in which our sense of self, of who we are, of our boundaries in this life expand, enlarge, or maybe contract.

There's so many things to talk about in *The Great Gatsby*. So this is the one I wanna focus on; this is my lens here today.

Now I gotta tell you, I didn't like particularly the movie version. I don't like anything that Baz Luhrmann does. It's too big; it's too garish; it's too stylized. Don't like his stuff. But what it did encourage me to do is go back and reread the book, which I recognized from the price tag I had *not* read since 1988, my first year of college.

What I found there didn't totally surprise me, but I think I found it more clearly because it's a focus of my life now. Woven throughout the entire narrative are images of identity, persona, identity protection. Oh, but also impermanence. Shifting sands upon which we sometimes stand in our lives. And in the most obvious metaphor that I think I've ever read in any book, there's the Valley of the Ashes. For those of you that read *Gatsby* or saw the movie, the ashes stand between the affluent communities of East and West Egg on Long Island in the 1920s in the booming jazz age in New York City. And right between them, the ashes that are literally all of the industrial waste and spiritually are the symbol of all the human waste of people's lives that are not flourishing.

I gotta tell you when I watching this movie, this movie version of *The Great Gatsby*, it was too garish, it was too big. And the fact that Leonardo DiCaprio dies again in water.... I felt like, "This is *Titanic* on Long Island." But then again, I'm not a 14-year-old girl who likes to cry when Leonardo DiCaprio dies, so maybe I was not the target audience.

So that said, there were some good performances in this movie. I thought a couple people were personified quite well from the book: Tom and Daisy Buchanan. Daisy Buchanan, who was the object of Jay Gatsby's great love, whom he builds his vast fortune for and spends his nights staring out across the water towards East Egg at her life, on her dock. Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Tom a vicious, violent racist. A man who has existed his entire life in privilege. They are described thus at the, at the end of the novel:

Tom and Daisy, they were careless people. They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness [...] and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

Reading about Tom and Daisy, seeing them on the screen, made me think of another movie: *The Smartest Guys in the Room*. It's a documentary about Enron. I remembered a particular scene in which Alex Gibney, the filmmaker, was taking apart all the ways in which Enron caused those rolling blackouts back in the early 2000s that summer in California. There's about a two and a half minute clip, an audio clip between two traders joking about how Grandma Millie's power's gonna go out. Laughing. Yucking it up.

I thought of these two traders when I thought of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, people who take their privilege for granted and abuse their power. So it's in this context, this social context back in the book and in the movie in which Tom and Daisy Buchanan are held up as important figures.

Jay Gatsby — mysterious man, self-made man — is seen as a hero. He has a gift of hope. A gift of connection. A gift of seeing the world in different ways. However, the problem is that he hopes in the wrong things. He has built this entire fortune for Daisy, the girl who got away five years before, because he did not think he had enough money to be with her.

For we learned he becomes a bootlegger, or as we might like to say in this day and age, a drug dealer. That's what Jay Gatsby is. He builds his entire fortune hoping for this moment in which he'll get to see Daisy again.

This is one scene that I think the film did incredibly well, one scene in which Gatsby and Daisy are reunited and they rekindle their love for each other. Daisy says, "Yes, I love you too. Let's run away together." It's everything Jay Gatsby has been working towards, right? And he says, No. We have to inhabit this life's lifestyle; your husband has to know that we were in love before you were with him. It has to be this way.

*Christianity Today* is an evangelical magazine with which I disagree about 98 percent of the time. But they had a really great analysis of this part of the movie. They said that it really wasn't all about Daisy for Jay Gatsby. It was all about himself. Because he hated himself. He hated the destitution in which he was born. He hated the poverty in which he was born. So, finally and fundamentally, it was about his own self-image that he had to maintain even in the moment in which he finally got the girl that he had been pining for for years. His self contracts and he says, "If I don't get it my way, we're not going to be able to be together."

This I think is why, in Judaism and Islam especially, idolatry is taught of as a sin. Now in the immature understanding of idolatry, it's all about someone else's idols. It's all about someone else's images of the divine that are somehow not as true or not as real as your own religion's understanding. That is an immature understanding of idolatry. The mature understanding of idolatry is this: that the biggest image or idol that any of us will ever struggle with (it is certainly true in my life) is self-image. Understanding that beyond the image there is a depth there, if we would move beyond how we would wish to explain ourselves to ourselves.

It's like that opening story. This is someone right on the edge. That's where the gratitude and that's where the epithet came from — someone exploring that place beyond their self-image.

Now if you've been around for a while you know that I have a daily sitting practice, a daily meditation practice. And most days it's just watching the breath and seeing what arises. Sometimes serenity, sometimes deep calm, sometimes deep peace. Most often it's this: the Seven Dwarves. This is not for kids by the way, except for Doc. I don't understand why the hell Doc is in there. Everyone else is an emotional type. All of the other six dwarves are all emotional types: Grumpy, Sleepy, Lazy — I don't know what, anyway, whoever they are. Bashful, Annoyed, Horny. You know what I mean. All of the emotional stuff that's within us, Happy is there too.

That's why I say this: Get in touch with those basic states.

A few weeks ago I had an experience during my sit that happens every once and a while and it doesn't just happen to me. It's an experience that's known as *samadhi* within the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. And it is essentially this (although it's very hard to describe, it really can only be experienced). It was a state in which I ceased wanting anything and I became completely joyful. It followed me off my meditation cushion, about 20 minutes after until the dwarves kept calling again and knocking on my door. And it was not because I had any object that I wanted but rather that I wanted *no* object. It doesn't mean I didn't do anything; I ate lunch, started to read a book. It was just this intense, beautiful, clear experience of being united with whatever I was doing. That's *samadhi*. It is not only for spiritual practice that we can experience that; we can experience it through art, through creativity, through sex, through sports, all kinds of different ways to experience this unification of life with life.

I believe that the most important and sustainable way to do that is through a cultivated, regular spiritual life. Or else the experience of *samadhi*, of unification with our experience through art, through sex, through sports, we might just keep wanting to go back to that perfect moment or chasing the next perfect moment. I think this is the exact reason why so many sports stars and so many musicians being idolized by others experiencing unification, being as you may have heard some say before, "in the zone." But eventually we get off stage. By the way, ministers struggle with this as well too.

That's where an unhealthy way we can look for that unifying peak experience again. Why do I think that spiritual practice and living an honest spiritual life is the most important, meaningful, sustainable way to experience that unification with life? Because all those other personas, all those other images, eventually they'll change and they'll pass away.

This is what the Zen teacher Dogen said many centuries ago. He said, "To study the self is to forget the self." And not like "study" like you write down every little thing you think, every little thing that you feel — but just paying attention to what you're feeling as you're feeling it. To study the self is to forget the self. That's another expression of *samadhi*.

Einstein put it this way. He said it's "a kind of optical illusion of consciousness" to think that somehow we are a separate self, that the world is out there and we are off by ourselves. It is "an optical illusion of consciousness." There is some way that we can touch and taste reality beyond simply ourselves. It's not that the self is sinful. It's not that the self is evil, and it's not that the self is wrong — none of that nonsense. It's just that very often we define ourselves as a self that is separate and partial. Not evil, not wrong, but just partial.

Whereas there are ways that we can cultivate that deeper sense of connection. It's not a somewhere, and it's not a something. It's just a way, more verb than noun. This is what makes Gatsby both noble and intriguing and tragic and flawed — he has a gift for imagination and connection. But ultimately the love that he banked his heart on for years still wasn't enough for his ego under the conditions in which his ego required it. That's the tragedy. I wonder if it might have been different if Gatsby had read, let's say, some Rumi, the Rumi who wrote:

Only when I quit believing in myself did I come into this beauty. Day and night I had guarded the pearl of my soul, but now in this current of pearly waves, I've lost track of which pearl was mine.

This is, by the way, is a commencement speech I want to hear. Most commencement speeches are reduced to “Believe in yourself.” I want to hear a commencement speech that begins “*Don’t* believe in yourself.” Not, again, because the self is wrong or evil or sinful. But we might start to question what this thing, this ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my-ing’ of so much of our experience, this thing we call ‘myself.’ Maybe recognize that it has connections far deeper than sometimes our own limited understanding of our personal identity would encourage us to think that we are.

So what does this look like in life? That’s why we choose the song today — [“What Light” by Wilco](#). The first verse is all about freedom with are freer, fear. Freedom with that moment in which we create and we don’t know if we’re good at it yet; freedom in that moment when like the person at the start of this message had to move off the chair to understand what their capacities were ‘cause they were existing and “This is absolute what I can do; this is what I can’t do.” And she was sure of it until someone asked a question that made her angry. You don’t know what you can do.

Explore, try, find out. “*It’s all right to be frightened*,” the song says. I have experienced this so many times in my life whenever I’ve tried anything new. If I would’ve stayed in my previous identity (which is changing all the time if I admit it), if I had stayed in my previous identity, my previous sense of *can* and *can’t*, I never would have explored the next thing.

Resistance to our fear when we are trying normally guarantees just one thing alone: just more fear. How often don’t we create, how often don’t we take a risk because we’re trying to placate a fearful ego?

Martin Luther said many years ago, “If you’re gonna sin, sin boldly.”

I wanna tweak that just a little bit: “If you’re gonna suck at something, suck boldly.” Don’t play it safe or close to the vest.

Suck boldly, give it a try. See how you might expand that understanding of your connection with your life, because we might realize in this moment is that this permission to create and to be an ongoing creation of our lives is always here. Because as Einstein said, we are not outside of creation. We are not alone in the universe. We are an expression of the universe. We are an expression of creation creating itself. We already belong.

Let’s say we have some success. Let’s say we create creation and we love what we’ve done and we’re starting to feel really good about ourselves. Well, that’s what this second verse in this song is for. It’s about freedom from success. “*What was yours*,” the song says, “*is everyone’s from now on*.” That’s the moment that Gatsby denies. All this wealth that he had built up, this whole self-image that he had built up, to finally fall in love again and he did — and he all wanted it under his terms.

I love what the song says: “*You can struggle with this all you like, you’ll only get uptight*.” And by the way who are intellectual property, I’m not talking, this is an argument for piracy online. What I’m saying is at the deepest level our stuff, our stuff isn’t finally our stuff. It doesn’t mean that we’re not here. They’re like these little Zen koans that someone says — If the self is illusory, then who is eating his frozen yogurt?

I mean, obviously we’re here. And our bodies go through motions. We have thoughts and we think. But that’s not all of who we are. There is so much more to who we are. Creation is not control because ultimately even the most famous of us, no matter how secure we are in our identities, eventually it goes away. Even the most famous names now are names, they’re not identities anymore. Rockefeller, Carnegie, some day Trump, even Gatsby.

For some people, this scares us and that’s the point of awakening. That’s the point at which we have to get up off the chair of our identity, our “This is what I can do; this is what I can’t do, and I’m gonna stay rooted here,” and move into the place that we do not know yet. That’s the beginning of an awakening to connection.

If this sounds too esoteric for you, let me tell you, it absolutely makes a difference. So many of us this past week have paid attention to that horrible accident in Center City. Four people, was it five people, six people? Six crushed to death, because it appears the people who were in charge of the demolition next door were doing their jobs carelessly. Carelessly. Perhaps even in a criminal way. Imagine if they had done their jobs knowing that they were already connected. Imagine if in the act of taking that building down, they knew it was not about destruction, it was about creation, which is going on all around us and all the time. And ultimately it's what all of us will face in our lives and what some of us are facing right now.

I put [this from Obit magazine](#) on my Facebook page this past week. That's a picture of the same person. One alive, and one after her death. She said this: "I was given my life; I had my life to live. And now I am giving it back." I think I'm going to have that tattooed on my body because that's the kind of equanimity that I want to have. (Now my wife is telling the people seated next to her about the tattoos I do have, no doubt.)

Because when we recognize birth and death and change and identity fluctuation is going on all around us all the time, it may liberate us to recognize that — not waiting for the end of our lives, but right here and right now. The poet Philip Larkin said that, in the end, at our end, "What will survive of us is love." This is the alpha and the omega of our lives. Not a firm, fast, tight, noun identity but fluidity and flow. And when we can live in that way, not just loving it in children, and not just grieving it in those who are dying or those who are dead, but right now in the midst of our lives, we will see that it is the connection that is love that is the "some way beyond" this separate, small sense of self.

Finally, love loves. Light shines. And at the end of ourselves, we don't find a blank. Maybe that's what scares us. At the end of ourselves, what we find is simply this: life. Big, scary, perplexing, beautiful, sacred life. It's here within us right now, in this very moment. If maybe we would choose. Those of us who are feeling really firmly rooted in our chair saying, "I don't want to move." When we get up off that chair, maybe we can say to life, "Fuck you. And thank you that we are here." Amen. And may you live in blessing. Let's pray together.

Boundless love and being, may we recognize the connection that we already are. May we know the way that flows through us and back to us and all around us. May we recognize that our lives are already charged full. May we reach out for connection, may we allow others to connect us, and may we know that here, this day — this is life. May we be grateful. Amen.