

“It’s Only Scary if It Matters”

“What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?” My artist friend Trey Speegle posted that on Facebook.

Seduce Adam Lambert. Obviously.

After I’d finished blowing Adam’s mind with the delights of heterosexuality, I could turn my attention to war, global warming, intolerance, domestic violence and the sins of the Catholic Church. I could lower the price of organic food, clawfoot bathtubs, and Christian Louboutins. I’d write a classic rock song and a great novel. And I’d be a kickass singer.

You know, though, don’t you, that the karma judge won’t allow that many answers. If you don’t limit them, they have no power. In the world or in you.

My dad, the film director John Huston, liked to advance the theory that everybody should be allowed three murders. He thought that would make for a demandingly tight choice, and that in the end most people wouldn’t use them up. I argued back, even though he didn’t really like people arguing with him. I could imagine Dad spending quality time weighing up the pros and cons of offing this person or that, but I knew most people are more--shall we say--spontaneous.

The first two murders would go quick. An ex-BFF; an ex-anything. Anyone with perfect teeth, long legs, and a high metabolism. The waiter who shares his life story, or declaims about the drizzled au jus. The owner of more than three poodles. Maybe you’d be stingy with your last murder; maybe you wouldn’t. Does the person who invented that thick plastic thermaweld packaging deserve to live?

No. It has to be one. Just one murder, so you don't get trigger-happy. Just one failsafe enterprise that defines who you are.

Why is it so hard to answer the question? Trey says it's supposed to inspire you and keep you focused on what's really important to you, but all it makes me want to do is take a nap.

I used to envy those kids who knew what they wanted to be when they grew up. My grandmother trained me to answer "lawyer," but I didn't want to be a lawyer; I just wanted to shut people up, including my grandmother. How wonderful, I thought, to be an artist, a writer, an athlete: something you just *were*, that didn't require a choice. If you were that brilliant at something, surely it must have been obvious from the cradle. It didn't occur to me that pursuing an identity is a choice too; that you might spend your entire life terrified that you couldn't do it well enough, even if the rest of the world said you could. I didn't think about those girls who came fifth in the Olympic trials, who never became the one thing they wanted to be and had to choose something else.

"A man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one could find fault." That's another Facebook post, by my deejay friend Rumana Haque Zahn, coincidentally about a week after Trey's post. (They don't know each other.) But Cardinal Newman left out the crucial point: whatever it is that this man thinks of doing matters deeply to him.

There are many things I do imperfectly and happily. A few days ago, on my birthday, I failed to climb Wheeler Peak (but I did make it to 12,500 feet). I don't care if someone finds fault with my ironing or my tennis game. But if they find fault with my book, it's me--who I am--that's being put on trial.

I don't really have to write another book, do I? I was brave enough to do it once. Can't I just play stupid computer games and pretend I'm working? Yes, I'm scared I'll fail. Having published LOVE CHILD, I have an identity at stake; and fear is the mother of

laziness. It is also the Octomom of time-consuming errands. If I don't keep writing, I can't honestly call myself a writer. I don't want to be someone who once did something, in the daily-increasing past.

It's only scary if it matters; and focusing on what matters makes it even scarier. So thanks, Trey, but I don't think I will answer your question seriously. I'll take a nap. And when I wake up, what will I do knowing I can't fail? The next thing--whatever it is.

(And by the way, Adam: your father's outrée knows where I live.)