

What we owe each other



The writer Jun Chou reflects on what artists can do in a society that increasingly rewards those who believe they do not owe anyone anything.

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As told to Jun Chou, 1664 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Inspiration](#), [Politics](#).

It has always seemed obvious to me that no one owes anyone anything. This belief has felt, at times, like armor.

It reflects my nihilism, ingrained by my immigrant parents who I watched struggle against the frigid structures built upon America's fetish for rugged individualism. This nihilism—which paints humans as self-serving and meaning as meaningless—casts dark clouds of despair on any fickle flickers of hope.

Perhaps it is easy—even lazy—to default to despair: Mother Nature is on her deathbed as her parasitic children carelessly suckle from her atrophied bosom, violence in our schools so ubiquitous that elementary school children practice active shooter drills between games of tag on the playground, a police state composed of not just a few bad apples but a whole rotted tree.

We are bearing witness to a society that increasingly rewards those who believe they do not owe anyone anything.

Our inner worlds are not purely private. Rather, our thoughts are baked into our actions, the everyday moments that make up a life. That I may share a worldview with fascism's foot soldiers terrifies me. When will my lack of obligation curdle into callousness? If I accept fatalism, do I also forego agency? What's to keep me from capitulating to the dark gravitational pull of my nihilism and descending into the *nothing matters* of it all, and fighting hatred by becoming hatred myself? How to reconcile the two wolves—the one that whimpers *there is nothing I can do* and the other one that howls *if not me, then who?*

On January 7, ICE officers in Minnesota murdered Renée Good in broad daylight. Of her wife, Becca Good memorialized: "Renée lived by an overarching belief: there is kindness in the world and we need to do everything we can to find it where it resides and nurture it where it needs to grow." A fellow Minnesotan, Jaylani Hussein, said at her vigil: "She died because she loved her neighbors."

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In both of these eulogies, one can surmise Renée Good did not believe we do not owe each other anything. The opposite, in fact. Renée Good died *because she loved her neighbors*. She loved her neighbors, and thus she died for them.

Of course, this statement implies a lofty sacrifice often forced upon those who did not consent to their martyrdom. The truth is, we do not know what Good's last moments were like. We do not know what she was thinking,

whether she feared her death, if her last flash of emotion was danger or compassion or anger. We do know that in 2020, Good penned a [poem](#) about preserving wonder in a world bent on dissecting everything into abstraction. We must hold true that the ones who love her miss her. That the world would be more good had Good lived.

The day after Renée Good's death, I visited [Chiharu Shiota's first solo show at the Japan Society](#). I saw organs crafted from glass, bulging against intricate red thread—a glorified depiction of Shiota's fragile organs during her battle with ovarian cancer. In another piece, a video shows the artist curled in a fetal position, clear tubes emerging from her naked body coiling and pulsating with blood. With these two pieces, Shiota seemed to be saying, *Even in the broken, one can choose to see beauty.*



[Chiharu Shiota's Cell]

Octavia Butler once said to a despairing young student: "There's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."

If nothing is owed, then everything we offer becomes a choice. That choice is the closest thing we have to meaning. It exposes the architecture of who we are: what we notice, what we ignore, what we are willing to do for one another—especially when we don't have to.

No matter how hard my brain tries to logic me into a prophylactic depression, it is, in fact, necessary to *choose to be good*. And thus to *do* good. We show who we are by what we do. Sometimes, we show who we would *like* to be by what we do. Just because life lacks objective meaning does not mean I have to find it meaningless. The abyss can remain a desolate void, or it can be a space in which to fill in with my values of community, love, care.



兔兒神
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let me stay tender-hearted, despite despite despite

12:15 AM · Aug 10, 2020

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As Brooklyn got coated with white in a major snowstorm this past winter, I heard the sound of my neighbors' shovels on the sidewalk. Not because they had to, but because it is nicer to live in a world where your neighbors look out for each other, and it's a lie to think we're alone. My phone buzzed and it was my best friend asking how my snow day was going. Every reminder of the people I love, the people who love me, was a constant revelation. I received a postcard from my friend who is Oceans away, just saying hi. I made popcorn in the collapsible bowl my roommate gifted me because she knows popcorn is its own tier on my food pyramid. I went outside to feel the snowflakes, warmed by the hat my mom knit.

Every reminder of the people I love, the people who love me, was a constant revelation. None of it was borne from obligation. That was what made it feel like a gift. They choose to give good. I choose to give good.

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Of course, sometimes I still succumb to the shadowy seats of futility. Glum days when grief is a weighted blanket, pinning me to bed as I enumerate every grievance with the world. There is a dog that barks incessantly across the street from my apartment. On my more generous days, I interpret his cries as pleas against his isolation, the injustice of watching pedestrians flaunt their freedom as they cross his line of sight. Other days I wish to march across the street with a muzzle. I wander from room to room, sleeping on every surface, just like that dog. I grit my teeth, bark into the void.

On those glum days, I stubbornly pray I could comfort myself with the false promise of deferred justice—the God of it all. I meditate instead on the tangible words of writers, activists, and foremothers like Toni Morrison, who said after the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush: "There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."

I revisit [Sarah Thankam Matthews' essay, building the cathedral](#), which exalts the future as a vision we build together: "It is necessary to dream the cathedral. It will not come from some politician—and certainly not the current bench of multimillionaire Democratic old heads. It will come, if it does, from activists, workers, policy designers, ordinary people, artists, thinkers, all speaking together across time and space." Matthews' words remind me: In despairing the possibility of a better future, we burn the blueprint before we are even able to [design it](#).



[Octavia St. Laurent in Paris is Burning, 1990]

One of my happiest memories from last year was the wedding banquet I hosted to commemorate my 30th birthday. "I'm not marrying myself," I explained, "I'm marrying all of you—my friends, my community." There were three cakes, sentimental speeches, and a surprise homage to the Pen15 opening—assembled by my best friend—featuring awkward Digicam-era selfies of my friends. At some point, a seam on my dress ripped and a friend pulled out a needle and

thread to sew me back on the spot.

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The main event was an auction and a raffle. I crowdsourced my talented guests for skills and crafts, fueled by a secret mission for my disparate friends to connect over shared activity and a desire for the celebration to expand beyond the confines of a single restaurant, a single night. On a mic with way too much reverb, a tipsy birthday girl (me) moderated heated bidding wars over tattoo vouchers, embroidered goodies, a photoshoot, legal advice, and more. Together we raised over \$2,000 for The Sameer Project and the Middle East Children's Alliance—money that provided real blankets and shoes and tarps, which then provided warmth to real Gazans last winter. I say this to remind myself: In order for light to pass through the dark clouds of despair, we must reclaim our agency. To find the people, the organizations that align with our values. To join the fray.



[Me at my birthday banquet]

If no one owes anyone anything, how wonderful when we choose to do good anyway? And if I accept *nothing matters* in the long term, my focus shifts to *this moment*. There is a freedom to this insignificance. A beauty to the dark sky's indifference. In spite of entropy, artists toil over temporary beauties. Lovers embrace in crumbling buildings, under napalm-soaked skies. We speak. We write. We do language.

In this train throttling towards an unknown destination, I cannot admire the majestic sunset while cowering in the dark. So I drag myself out of despair. I look out the window. I choose a life led by kindness. Because if nothing

matters, then doesn't that mean everything does?



Name

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