

FOR THE LOVE OF PAPER

A Snapshot of My Particular Brand of Nerdiosity

I know the concept of an addictive personality is a scientifically dubious notion, but I definitely have a pattern of amassing too much of a thing I find enjoyable. My closet space is largely occupied by plastic storage tubs filled with toys that, at some point in my twenties, I was convinced I absolutely had to have. There are far too many to display and I can't bring myself to part with them quite yet.

I actually have purged a lot of them. On Christmas Eve at my mother-in-law's each year, we do this Bingo game gift exchange, where dozens of small, inexpensive gifts are unwrapped and traded among a house literally filled with people. It's chaotic and fun and delightful, and I end up preparing for it throughout the year.

In 2023, I put together several boxes of my toys, grouped by theme. I called one box the "Blonde Guy Box." It had a Steve Rogers Captain America, a Burger King Captain Phoebe from The Hunchback of Notre Dame and... Who was my third blonde guy toy?... OH! I remember. It was Mr. Incredible! By pleasant happenstance, the Blonde Guy Box was unwrapped by a man with blonde hair and a beard. He was totally thrilled. Seeing him with that box was one of the highlights of the holidays for me.

When I finish reading a book that I bought, I typically wrap it for Bingo. I like the idea of books being passed along and shared. (This year, among other things, someone will be getting a copy of THE HOLY OR THE BROKEN, the book about Leonard Cohen's song HALLELUJAH which I finished reading yesterday morning... But don't tell anyone I said so.)

Last year, my mother-in-law opened up a book called I, JEDI, a Star Wars story published in 1998. One scene in the book described a character walking into his apartment and pushing a button on the wall to receive a hologram message. 1998 and the writer thought the Star Wars future would have a landline and answering machine instead of a cell phone or personal communicator. I am not sure if my mother-in-law found this as fascinating or amusing as I did.

In the closet, beside the tubs of toys I've not yet given away, is my collection of neckties. I believe it was 2019 when I first got a job in which I could dress in formal clothes to speak in front of an audience. I immediately set out to build a reputation as Necktie-Guy and it has been fun to hear my coworkers say things like "You always

have the coolest ties," or "Which one do you have today? Oh wow!" But I... still went overboard.

I have like.... sixty or so? I wear a tie maybe twenty or thirty days a year, give or take. I certainly don't NEED as many as I own... even if they are awesome.

The thing I have collected the most of, at least in the last few years, is notebooks. I like to write. It's what makes me happy. I fill my notebooks with stories, journal entries, essays, goal lists, and half formed ideas that may or may not grow into something bigger later.

I love to write.

My wife and I have had the privilege of being able to travel fairly often. When we visit a new city and we have a little free time, our first priority is to look for a used bookstore. I often go straight to the section of notebooks if there are any. My favorite stores that I've gotten to traverse in the past year were Half Price Books in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma where I found Lloyd Alexander's THE ARKADIANS and a blue, soft-covered journal with gold edges to the pages, and Russell Books in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, where I found one notebook with an orca whale, one notebook which includes the entire text of J. M. Barrie's PETER PAN forming the lines one can write on, and my copy of J. R. R. Tolkien's LORD OF THE RINGS. All three books in one volume printed in 1995 before the Peter Jackson films.

Even if it's not a bookstore specifically, I'm likely to be looking at notebooks any time I'm shopping somewhere. I picked up an architecture-themed pocket book in the gift shop of Pasadena's famous Gamble House. Kelsey and I got to see where elephants are kept in Animal Kingdom in Florida and I was very excited to purchase a notebook made from paper recycled from actual elephant waste. No, I'm not kidding and YES, it is absolutely awesome. Plus, I manage to find a notebook with an interesting design almost every time I visit DAISO, the Japanese discount store.

Even when I'm at home or on a break at work, I too often find myself using my phone to shop online and notebooks are the thing I search for the most. I have one with a leather cover engraved with a silhouette of Simba from the Lion King above the words, "You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think." That's a quote from A. A. Milne's WINNIE THE POOH, and it was very amusing to me when I found the franchises combined on one cover. I've a few notebooks that look like the packages of VHS tapes, notably The Empire Strikes Back, and some that look like pirate travel logs.

In fact, if I open up my online shopping cart right now... YEP! There's a notebook with sketches of the creatures from Jim Henson's Dark Crystal, and one made with black paper that would need a white gel pen to write on it if I decide to actually buy it. Because most of the notebooks I look at are not very expensive, I tend to include them when I'm purchasing something I actually need. A trivial add-on by itself, but my apartment of over-filled bookshelves goes to show that these add-ons do add up.

Now, as I said before, I do use my notebooks on a daily basis. I've got a Pirates of the Caribbean spiral-bound in my bag for note I need to jot down throughout the day, one with pencil sketches based upon THE HOBBIT that I use as a reflection journal, and even these thoughts were first put down to paper in a notebook with American National Parks posters in a collage on the cover.

I like writing on paper, but I genuinely don't need to keep amassing more of these notebooks...

And yet... my collection continues to grow.

Today, as a fact, I was at my desk at work and I had a stray thought that I wanted to put down between phone calls with guests. I looked in the recycling basket to see if there was a half-blank piece of paper I could write on then fold and shove in my vest pocket to review later. (Ironically, I got distracted and never ended up writing down the significant thought I had... which has now predictably disappeared from my mind.) What I found instead was an entire stack of fresh paper.

Turns out, our printer was having some sort of issue and it printed A TON of paper, like 40 or 50 pages worth of largely blank space except for a few lines of weird computer symbols. There's no guest information or anything that would be a problem for me to have. (I mean there's not even a single complete word on any of these pages.)

I immediately claimed this discarded paper as mine. I spent about half an hour folding pages in half (while still taking guests' calls like I'm supposed to.) And this stack of pages is going to become an awesome notebook when I bind the pages together. I'm kind of excited to get to write on these pages with the strange and cool mis-printed computer symbols.

And this is not the first time recently I've made a notebook out of recycled and reclaimed paper. Sometimes, I order something online and it arrives in an oversized cardboard box with a roll of light brown paper crumpled up to keep the item in place. So, I've started cutting that packing paper into mostly uniform sheets and

binding them together, which makes for a really cool notebook, especially when I use a lighter to uniformly burn all the edges. (And whether or not I set off my apartment's fire alarm seems entirely irrelevant to me and quite frankly, I'm surprise you would even ask me that.)

Beyond those, I've begun actually recycling paper. I bought a shredder so sensitive documents like monthly bank statements now get to be torn into scraps, thrown into a blender with water and made into something new. I didn't expect my wife to become excited about this process, but it has been wonderful to come home and see wet paper pulp in silicone molds on the kitchen counter. When the paper dries, it will be a solid, light-weight shape that she may paint and make into earrings or tokens for a game she wants to make and play with friends. It's also a real delight to listen to her enthusiastically describe her plans. I love my wife's creativity and enthusiasm for making things.

We've tried making sheets of paper to later put together in a notebook at some point. She and I are working out the process so we can streamline it, and I'm happy that we get to experiment a bit to figure out what works the best for us. I even love sweeping up small scraps of paper that fell onto the floor. It's a sign of how into this we both are.

Last month, I got the chance to see an ALIEN movie in a theatre with some dear friends of mine. It was the first film in the franchise I'd ever seen in a theatre and the experience was phenomenal for me. I had been so eagerly anticipating this movie that I spent a few weeks reading ALIEN comic books and fan theories to understand the world as deeply as I could.

And because, as I've said, I am a very particular brand of nerdy, I wrote a story about miners on an asteroid who encounter Xenomorphs. Ultimately, they must be rescued by a knight in black armor who wields a sword with a blade of red fire. I'm rather proud of this story. To be totally fair, I've only spoken to one person so far who read it, but he talked about it with all of the thrill and ardor he does with any sci-fi movie he tells me about. I took that as a good sign.

Do I think my Xenomorph story is better because I wrote it on a notebook I recycled?

I'm not really sure... but I can say this. I loved every aspect of making this story. I loved sitting at work, (in between calls) folding pages I'd just pulled from the recycling bin.

I loved dying the pages with coffee so they'd be a light-brown color, baking them in the oven so they'd have an aged, crinkly texture, binding them all together while sitting at the table and watching the first Alien Vs. Predator. I loved showing the notebook to coworkers and seeing the reactions when I explained that the paper had come out of the recycling bin.

I loved hand-writing the story and turning to each new page, and now that it's been typed and proof-read, I love seeing that completed story draft in the tome I made sitting on my bookshelf alongside so many other notebooks. I don't need all of these, but they certainly do make me happy.

-Daniel Aartman
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