

I Am a Camerawoman

I think of myself, sometimes,
as a form with a camera for a brain.

This form is taking pictures
of what is right in front of me
all the time.

And lately,
I've gotten better
at using this camera.

If I am in right relationship
with my camera,

I can choose the aperture.

The focus.

The shutter speed.

I can wait for the light.

Or take a shot in the dark.

I don't just get in line
with everybody else
to take the money shot.

I use discretion.

I use memory—
the photographs I've taken before,
my preference for the intimate,
or for drone footage
when the landscape asks for it.

I use discernment.

I use care,
as a mother does,
or a teacher does.

Not toward the improvement of reality—

But to become

a more faithful witness to it.

Some days,
when I must care deeply
for one small thing,

I narrow the aperture.

The world grows sharp,

but very small.

So I can give
all of my attention
to the thing before me,

and help it grow.

Other days

I open it wide.

I welcome
sky,
clouds,
trees,
houses,
bodies,
traffic,
buildings,
grass,
flowers,
mailboxes,
signs,
and lights.

I don't want to miss a thing.

I want to step outside
my private experience

and borrow the view
from my brothers and sisters
who live beside me.

And then—

sometimes

so much light pours in

that everything disappears

into brightness.

I've flown too close to the sun.

There is such a thing

as trying to hold
so much forest

the trees are forsaken.

There is such a thing

as focusing
so completely
on a blade of grass

that it becomes
a universe unto itself.

Both

are forms of blindness.

The art

is not to capture
everything,

everywhere,

all the time.

Nor is it to photograph
only my own private reality.

It is to remain

in right relationship

with what appears.

To widen the aperture

without losing

the person

standing in front of me.

To narrow it

without mistaking

my focused attention
in this moment

for the whole world's needs.

Every photograph

is a confession.

This

is what I noticed.

This

is what I loved.

This

is what I could bear

to see.

Every photograph will leave something out of the frame.

Let me not forget that.

I am not trying

to make
or take

a perfect picture.

Only

to come into

a more perfect union

with the truth.

Welcome in to Season 3 of Ethical Adulthood with Andrea Fiondo.

I wrote that poem a few days ago.

At the time, I thought it had simply grown out of an article I'd read about some billionaire doing his billionaire thing.

I didn't realize I was writing the preface to today's episode.

Today's episode is called:

Capacity Zero: The Capacity for Complexity

The ability to admit increasing complexity while remaining in contact with reality.

A few days ago I read an article that left me unsettled.

Not because I disagreed with it.

Not because I was appalled by it.

And not really because of the person the article was about, the aforementioned billionaire.

What unsettled me was something else.

I found myself wanting to understand how someone so effective as a human being, so successful as to own multiple homes, planes, infrastructure and companies, how a person so brilliantly adapted to what our present world rewards so generously, could lose contact with ordinary human life.

How does someone become so intelligent, so successful, so influential, that kindness, justice, equality, and care begin to look... theoretical and therefore incidental to them?

I started thinking about the drone footage; I appreciate the earth porn available now because these wonderful cameras exist.

The higher you fly, the more you can see.

Patterns emerge.

Connections become obvious.

The landscape tells a story you couldn't possibly see from the ground.

That's real.

But from high enough,

the people in the streets begin to disappear.

They blur into movement.

Into statistics.

Into markets.

Into history.

Into theory, really, as you can't actually see them anymore.

The higher the drone climbs,

the easier it becomes to forget

that every dot in the landscape

is someone standing in line at the grocery store,

or sitting beside a hospital bed,
or worrying about how they'll pay next month's rent.

And I thought...wait.

Ho Lee crap, Batman.

Then the uncomfortable question arrived.

Do I ever do the same thing?

Not in the same way, perhaps. Money really does change a person in ways I'm not sure I'll ever intimately understand.

But do I ever become so attached to my own current map of reality...

so fascinated with seeing the whole landscape...

that I stop seeing the person standing right in front of me?

Because if billionaires can do it,

psychologists can do it.

Yoga teachers can do it.

Podcast hosts can do it.

Parents can do it.

Every photograph leaves something outside the frame.

Let me not forget that.

When I first wrote the Ethical Adulthood essay, I was writing from my own life.

I was reasonably well resourced.

Well educated.

Psychologically literate.

I was trying to understand my own relationships and the political climate I was living through.

Those pressures gave rise to the five capacities.

Not because they're the only capacities that matter.

But because they seemed to be the most common capacities required to do less harm, remain in better contact with reality, and live an ordinary life a little more honestly.

Over time, though, the project changed.

It had to.

I began thinking about people who still lived with certainty.

People who weren't well resourced.

People who were overwhelmed.

People trapped between impossible choices.

People living everyone else's lives instead of their own.

Then I spent a month recording *A Detroit Soundtrack*.

And I realized something.

I wasn't really talking about music.

I was talking about perception.

About the camera.

About the way each of us sees the world.

Then this article appeared.

And I couldn't stop wondering why seemingly ordinary people sometimes lose contact with reality itself.

Not reality in the sense of facts.

Reality in the sense of...

the people inhabiting the facts.

That's when I realized something was missing.

There is a capacity I hadn't named.

Something that comes before tolerating discomfort.

Before rupture and repair.

Before understanding power.

Before grief.

Before acting without guarantees.

I think each of us has a changing capacity

to receive reality.

Life is astonishingly complex.

We don't like that.

We want the picture to resolve immediately.

We want to know what we're looking at.

We want the scene in front of us

to become legible

at a glance.

—

Imagine the aperture on a camera.

Open it wider and more light enters.

More of reality becomes available.

But open it too far and the image washes out.

Everything turns white.

The details disappear.

Close it too tightly and very little light enters.

Again, the details disappear.

The goal isn't to let in the most light.

The goal is to let in enough light for reality to come into focus.

I've noticed my own camera changing settings all the time.

A few days ago I was thinking about Peter Thiel, democracy, artificial intelligence, immigration, my great-grandmother crossing the Atlantic, and the nature of consciousness.

The aperture was wide.

I could somehow hold all of it.

Then the power went out.

Forty-eight hours later I was standing in my kitchen wondering whether the cheddar cheese was still good.

My world had become very small.

Nothing about Peter Thiel had changed.

Nothing about immigration had changed.

Nothing about my grandmother had changed.

I had changed.

My camera had changed settings.

Or listen to this...

Mike and I are driving home from a concert.

He says one sentence.

One sentence.

Suddenly I can't see fifteen years of marriage anymore.

I can only see this one moment.

The aperture has narrowed.

The camera has changed settings.

Then, two days later,

Chicago is playing,

I am so upset that it's our anniversary and he's not acting right.

Want me to leave? he asks.

No, I want you to apologize, I say.

And he apologizes.

And suddenly I am softened, and the whole marriage comes back into view.

Nothing about the marriage changed in those fifteen minutes.

The camera did.

That's what I'm trying to point to.

This matters because I think every ethical failure begins with an aperture problem.

When the aperture narrows,

certainty becomes comforting.

The world simplifies.

Good people.

Bad people.

Right.

Wrong.

Us.

Them.

“They’re just sending people home.”

“I think this whole thing with pronouns is stupid.”

“This is obviously a vast criminal conspiracy.”

The complexity disappears because, for one reason or another, we no longer have the capacity to hold it.

Who among us hasn’t done this?

I certainly have.

My tolerance for discomfort is high when my drone footage is working well.

I can see institutions and organizations, history and likelihood, various people playing their parts. I can hold despair and hope in the same frame, and remain steady.

My ability to repair is at its weakest when I am certain I am right.

Then I become so focused on the story of my correctness that I can no longer see the impact of my actions.

So no—you don’t have to be a billionaire to lose the capacity to metabolize complexity.

I can do it before breakfast.

And there is another way to lose contact.

Sometimes the aperture opens so wide that reality itself begins to dissolve.

Everything connects to everything else.

Every event becomes part of an enormous theory.

A Grand Unifying Theory!

I alone can see it.

Let me map it out for my whole crew.

The people inhabiting the map disappear beneath systems, history, technology, civilization, and ideology.

The map becomes increasingly elaborate,

while the ones living in the territory quietly disappear.

That is not wisdom. That's just unethical, that's what that is.

So the capacity for complexity is not the ability to think about more things.

It is the ability to admit more complexity while remaining in contact with reality.

Reality is almost always more complicated than my first opinion.

Reality is almost always more complicated than my tribe's opinion.

Reality is almost always more complicated than the algorithm wants it to be.

And when something does not sound quite right,

that may be the moment to pause.

Use discernment.

Adjust the aperture.

Look again.

The more I've thought about this,

the less I think it has anything to do with intelligence.

I've met brilliant people

whose aperture collapses

the moment
their worldview is threatened.
I've met people
with very little formal education
who can sit quietly
with contradiction
for years.

This isn't IQ.

It isn't education.

It isn't politics.

It isn't spirituality.

It's something else.

Maybe...

it's a relationship

to reality itself.

And maybe this is why

I no longer think

ethical adulthood begins

by asking,

"What should I do?"

I think it begins

one step earlier.

"How much reality

can I bear

right now?"

Because if I can't bear reality...

I'll replace it.

With certainty.

With ideology.

With optimism.

With cynicism.

With conspiracy.

With outrage.

With whatever allows

my nervous system

to stop lighting up

like a Christmas tree.

Here's the humbling part.

This aperture doesn't belong entirely to "me."

It changes with sleep.

With hormones.

With grief.

With blood sugar.

With trauma.

With safety.

There is growing evidence that thoughts, emotions, and impulses arrive before we claim ownership of them.

Perhaps the miracle isn't that we choose wisely.

Perhaps the miracle is that, every once in a while,
we notice.

"Ah..."

"My aperture has narrowed."

Or...

"I've been looking through the drone lens again."

Or...

"I've mistaken this close-up for the whole landscape."

That moment of noticing
may be where ethical adulthood actually begins.

I don't think this capacity
is something we achieve
once and for all.

I think we're more like photographers.

Each scene
asks something different.

Sometimes
the moment calls
for the intimacy
of a blade of grass.

Sometimes

it asks

for the whole forest.

Sometimes

the drone.

Sometimes

the sidewalk.

The work

isn't to master the camera.

The work

is to remain

in right relationship

with it.

Not because complexity

is always good.

Not because certainty

is always bad.

But because

every photograph

will leave something

outside the frame.

Let me not forget that.

Reality deserves

my best attempt

to see it clearly.

The capacity for complexity
is the capacity
to let reality
be more complicated
than we wish it were...

**without losing contact
with the people
who have to live inside it.**

Can I widen my aperture
without ever losing
the human being
standing in front of me?

I think...
that's Capacity Zero.

Thanks for listening.
I'm Andrea Fiondo.
I'll see you next time.