

Decoding the Enigma of Russ's Emails. And Other Stories

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This perspective may not adhere to a single theme, it is not quite the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy of being Russ's student, but hopefully it offers a glimpse of what to expect. TL;DR: With Russ, one can expect an eclectic mix of ideas and influences, which may at times feel like a beautiful dance between the familiar and the unexplored, or the sacred and profane. And more than anything else, kindness.

When Russ responds with these two words:

"That's interesting!"

I often wonder if he is too polite to say "This sucks, but I'm too kind to say it." (Just kidding). But there is a good chance that he does mean that it really *is* interesting the way Davis (1971) meant it.

The Constant Gardener:

Russ once said ironically: *"Let a thousand flowers bloom!"*

Now the attribution of this quote is a bit murky. Some trace its path to Mao Zedong, the former Chairman of the Communist Party of China, who used it during a period of liberalization known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956. The internet researcher Michael Padlipsky (1974) had a slightly different take on it. Referring to the advances in computing, he said:

*"If as we should,
We let 1000 flowers bloom,
We let 10,000 weeds bloom as well;
It must be our great task, then,
To distinguish the weeds from the flowers"*

Detached from its origin, the relevance of this quote 'let a thousand flowers bloom' remains strong, particularly as we navigate the complex landscape of technological and social innovation. Each new idea, each 'flower', carries with it the potential for transformative growth, yet also the risk of becoming a 'weed' that threatens the existing ecosystem.

For instance, in the context of today's digital world, one could interpret these 'flowers' as groundbreaking technologies and revolutionary ideas that drive societal progress forward. Simultaneously, the 'weeds' could signify threats like misinformation, digital addiction, and privacy breaches, which are the undesired consequences of technological advancement.

There's another connection here where Russ critiques our attachment to 'theories' which perhaps stymie the blooming of these flowers (Belk & Sobh, 2019). In echoing Russ's sentiment, we find ourselves at a crossroads. The challenge lies not only in facilitating an environment where a thousand flowers (ideas) can bloom but also in developing the wisdom and tools necessary to discern and manage the accompanying weeds.

Work Ethic:

He has mastered discipline. He does not wait for perfect environments to work in; every flight, every train ride, every moment, he is at work because for him, he is exploring his thoughts as he writes them out.

He will work as hard as you will. Most likely, harder. You'll almost always be trying to catch up. Also, he's a runner, so there.

Email Anxiety:

Stephen Brown talks about the 'anxiety of influence' (Brown 1999). Well, you will also inherit 'email anxiety' for life. Because Russ responds to every email like he is a robot that stays awake day and night, across time zones that separate you, you will begin to have anxiety every time there is silence. When you do not receive an email response from him within 2 minutes, rest assured that he is either on a boat in the Galapagos, or there was an ice storm in Canada that knocked out his electricity.

On Sharing:

He takes sharing seriously. I don't know where he gets his fountain of kindness, but he shares it. He shares ideas, he shares thoughts, he shares and gives of what he has. Maybe it's mid-Western kindness, but he will share despite everything.

Good People:

People are fundamentally good. One of my favorite stories of Russ is when he did not have the fare to get home one night in Philadelphia, so he was about to take the subway, walking through a troubled neighborhood at night, and he came across a guy who asked him, "Do you have five dollars?" and when Russ said "If I did, I wouldn't be here". The man said, "Here's five dollars, now go home." He tells it a lot better than I just did, but the moral of the story as Russ said is: "People are good." And they will surprise you if you let them.

He's an amazing writer:

There's a poem by Philip Larkin:

*"They fuck you up, your mum and dad,
They don't mean to, but they do,
They give you faults of their own,
And then add some just for you."*

Now there's a rejoinder to this:

*If you wanted to be a writer,
And your parents didn't fuck you up,
Then they REALLY fucked up.*

Well, Russ is an exception to this. He is a great writer, and he also speaks very fondly of his parents. I just like that poem a lot. Speaking of poems, he is a true patron of the art form, and of other creative expressions be it photography or video.

Playing Infinite Games:

In the book *“Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life As Play and Possibility,”* James Carse sets up a dichotomy between finite and infinite games. Finite games, like sports or politics, have clear rules and objectives, and end when someone wins. Infinite games, on the other hand, have flexible rules and the goal is to keep the game going. For example, the game of life and human relationships are often infinite games as they continue to evolve and change.

Russ seems to be engaging in ‘infinite games’. Every piece of scholarly work for example has a conversation that preceded it and one that will continue its threads. Finite games aim at achieving a state of being—being a winner, being powerful, being the best. Infinite games, however, are about the process of becoming—becoming more experienced, becoming wiser, becoming better. Russ plays the latter and creates space for many others to come into the field to play.

Perhaps Russ exists with an abundance mindset. He spreads ideas like the woman in *The Sound of Music* who dances around or Oprah handing out cars “You get an idea, you get an idea, you get an idea”. As he often puts it: ‘Ideas are out there, the work is yours.’

Sage Advice:

One time during a car ride in which Russ was driving (tighten your seatbelts, both John Sherry and Stephen Brown were right about his driving), I was telling him about being sad about a B+ and he told me that grades don’t matter. And I asked him if he had any sage advice for a PhD student to which he replied:

“Not really. Everyone comes up with their own unique mistakes.”

Deep, but also rather pithy. Other sage advice when doing fieldwork in Miami was:

“And try not to steal any cars while you are there as a carry over from GTA-MV. ;-)”

[Grand Theft Auto - Miami Vice]

Mandelbrot Fractals:

His brain works like Mandelbrot fractals sometimes, the more you zoom in, the more complex it gets. Take for instance a small snippet of a response to field-notes that I had sent to him:

*“Great notes. I like the visuals and stream of consciousness for part of it, which give a good idea of what it was actually like. I also like the prison practice of Mackerel money--it reminds me of Ezra Pound’s cabbage money that Lewis Hyde writes about in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. Some of the weirder parts, like the snakeskin boots reminds me of Hunter Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Nicholas Cage (“Sailor”) and his snakeskin jacket in *Wild at Heart*. None of these associations are worth following up on, except perhaps cabbage money which also decays if kept too long.”*

Casting Long Shadows: The Inherent Trait of Giants

Russ casts a long shadow through his work and his influence. According to Carl Jung, the ‘shadow’ is the part of our personality that we often deny or ignore; it contains the characteristics, feelings, and impulses that we may not identify with or that we consider negative or undesirable. Jung once stated:

“The most important political, social, and spiritual thing that we can do is to withdraw the projection of our shadows onto others”

I say this with the caveat that I’m no psychoanalyst, but Russ seems to have mastered his own shadow. He meets people and understands and appreciates them for who they are.

Random Fun Facts:*Expletives:*

He reserves these for special occasions: Traffic and Reviewers.

Hippos and Groucho Marx:

An odd combination, but he seems to like both equally.

Is he a libertarian?

The earring suggests so. But he is certainly anti-authority.

On Meetings:

5 am. Wake up early.

On Patience:

He somehow has patience and faith that you might come through. I don't know where the fountain of patience springs from, but it is there, and we should all be grateful for it.

On Desire:

What Russ wishes the most when stuck at an airport after canceled flights:

"It would be nice to email myself home though. 😊"

On Awards, And Its Accouterments:

We have gathered here to acknowledge an award, and I am reminded of one of my favorite pieces by Russ, his ACR address of 1995, in which he expressed his discomfort with awards. This address holds a special place in my heart, as it resonates with the shared experience of

grief that many of us have encountered. Both Russ and I lost our younger brothers when they were just 16, and I will forever be grateful for Russ's patience and kindness during that difficult time.

When I think about Russ, a quote by the Sufi poet Rumi comes to mind:

*"Take someone who doesn't keep score,
who's not looking to be richer, or afraid of losing,
who has not the slightest interest even
in his own personality: he's free."*

Rumi's words, advocating for the relinquishing of material attachments and the fear of loss, mirror Russ's enlightening work on materialism. Our attachments can often become significant self-imposed hindrances. Rumi encourages us to dissolve our ego and self-centeredness, positing that the ego is the source of much of our suffering, as it perpetuates a false sense of division between ourselves and others, and between us and the divine.

In a sense, Russ embodies a more interconnected worldview—perhaps one might even say, a psychedelic-friendly one? :) This vision perceives us all as interconnected in myriad ways. Perhaps this perspective is a result of the influence of the '60s counterculture (after all, Russ does sport an earring and long hair), or perhaps it stems from his deep understanding of nature and trees (Simard, 2021).

Could the wisdom that Russ imparts to us be the capacity to disengage ourselves from worldly constraints? To overcome our fears of tenure, of reviewers, and to cultivate an insatiable curiosity about subjects that truly captivate us without fear? Russ urges us to dissolve our egos and sets us on a path toward liberation, encouraging us to work towards a more compassionate world. In his address, Russ expressed a humble wish:

"I hope that someday I can better balance the scales by giving back as much as I have received."

In many ways, it is clear that he has been fulfilling this wish and continues to do so. Here's to Russ, may his wisdom continue to inspire us. Also a thank you to his family for sharing Russ with us. Cheers to his journey, and my deepest gratitude for his influence.

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