

hiphiphapa

A monthly newsletter (of sorts) and corresponding supplements

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About hiphiphapa

hiphiphapa is my monthly newsletter addressing topics of interest, current affairs, gastronomical experiences, and other arbitrary thoughts and opinions about life and living it. hiphiphapa is a personal account of experiences and ideas from my vantage point as a mixed race Asian American person - nearing middle age - born, raised, and still - for better or for worse - living in Los Angeles, California.

Music rotation lately

Blur - Think Tank album (2003)

David Gray - White Ladder album on my iPod, and "streaming" what my smart phone plays when I type in "David Gray radio"

Latin Playboys - Latin Playboys (1994)

Enya - Shepherd Moons album (1991)

Howard Jones - "Best of" album

Bobby McFerrin - Spirityouall, Bang! Zoom, Medicine Music albums, and unheard of (to me) live recordings over the past 30 years posted on youtube.

Herbie Hancock - Fat Albert Rotunda album

Bill Evans

Cannonball Adderly

Weather Report - Mysterious Traveler and The Legendary Live Tapes 1978-1981 albums.

Life and death. A preface.

Whenever anyone I know who knew my father tells me - with good intention - that I resemble him or that I indeed confirm, even beyond, all the nice things he would say about me to them, I cringe. I deflect these so-called compliments because my automatic instinct is to reject any association, to the best of my ability, I have to my biological father. To this day, I find it an utter burden, a painful truth that I'll have to live with until I'm dead, that my dad was my dad. Now, I'm fully aware of the toxic impact my emotional attachment

to this "issue" has on my over well-being; the fact that I can't let go of my past and the damage my father caused me and our immediate family; how painful and traumatic it was for me to watch my dad exist in the world on a daily basis from my childhood through my adulthood; and the countless times I'd see my dad try to change but ultimately fail every time was quite discouraging, up until he died. Unfortunately, because we were practically estranged, it's still difficult for me to come to terms with his death. As morbid as it sounds, for at least the last 15 years, I often thought that my father would be better off dead. He and the world would be better off. I never wished it, but, now that he is gone, I hold many regrets for the way I treated him, especially in the last years of his life.

My father was "one of those people." He turned heads. He drew attention in the most unflattering ways. When he was the new guy at work - he had countless jobs because he could barely hold one down - he always struggled to fit in. He was often sneered at, looked at with reproach both by colleagues and customers wherever he was whether it was at one of his jobs or out in public, often at restaurants, at a bank, or at a grocery store. I saw this firsthand during his days as a truck driver for Frito Lay or when he sold used cars at various car lots throughout Los Angeles. He had an awkward personality, high anxiety, didn't know how to handle stress or any level of stress when it came to work responsibilities, and would immediately lash out at whoever was in his immediate environment if he felt he was being judged, mistreated, or misunderstood. He was like a child. Since we were children, my brother and I often took on the parenting role if we happened to be caught in the middle of such episodes, which were quite frequent because our father behaved this way practically everywhere we were, and especially in public.

In some ways, for better or for worse, I've inherited some of these poor habits from my father. I am extremely sensitive to people and situations where I feel or think others are being mistreated or judged unfairly. And depending on the circumstances, I can get self-righteous and unnecessarily defensive. I can also be rude, sarcastic, and take cheap quips at people in positions of authority who I think look down on others. As I close the chapter on my 30s, however, and with some wisdom gained from learning the hard way many times over, and talk therapy, I have learned how to mostly manage my emotions. In other words, I suppress them and internalize them. But, I do talk out the particularly harder things with my therapist, so good for me. Otherwise, I do everything in my power to be the opposite of my father and do the opposite of what my father normally

would - draw attention. Attention is the last thing I want and the very thing that makes me sick to my stomach.

I share this mainly as a reminder to myself, that life does indeed exist after death. People's presence carry on in many forms. What we, the living, think we can escape if we physically remove ourselves from the people and things that we believe don't serve us, inevitably those very same people and things take other forms and follow us wherever we go and wherever we are. That is, until perhaps, somehow, we come to peace with whatever or whomever is causing us the very suffering we are desperately trying to escape. Whether this is actually possible for me in my lifetime is my ultimate challenge.

My one week as a "Line Cook" at a busy and trendy restaurant

In June, I was nearing the end of a full-time job managing a quick-service independently-owned food establishment. With no concrete plans for my next job, I cold-called a busy, popular, and trendy modern Japanese-style restaurant and asked if they were looking to hire someone part-time to work in the kitchen. Within a few weeks, after interviewing with the Chef de Cuisine and "staging" one night during dinner service, I was offered the position of Garde Manger, an entry-level line cook position. The timing was perfect with my exit from my full-time job. That good - though temporary - feeling of going somewhere new and different with a different group of people was refreshing. Although, I knew that that good feeling would be fleeting and my new life and schedule would naturally come with its challenges, including my ongoing and everlasting existential crisis. So I braced myself for that and determined to challenge that base tendency of mine - where I fall into a depressive darkness as quickly as I express genuine enthusiasm for an exciting and new opportunity; where the freshness of endless possibilities supercede all "issues" until sadly, like with all things, wears off, and I come down to reality - again.

Working in a restaurant is like being on the frontlines of battle; concurrently at war with enemy forces, and at war with one's lesser self. I consider it a miracle that restaurant teams - any restaurant team - make it through their services every night. When you consider all the elements - good leadership and management, preparation, supplies and backup supplies, adequate number of staff to execute, a reliable staff that will show up to work and stay on until the end of service and post-shift it with the crew, a team that's made up of individuals that can each maintain overall good dispositions without

too much emotion, if at all, during service - it's a goddamn miracle that any restaurant especially in major and expensive cities survive at all. And given the socioeconomic and capitalistic structure of America, it's a miracle that ordinary people with ordinary dreams can start their own small businesses. If and when restaurants don't make it through services successfully, their first six months or even their first year, it's a clear indicator of poor leadership, poor management, and low team morale.

How do I know this? What makes me so sure? I've seen it many times over and all in Los Angeles.

For over 15 years, I've worked at busy, high-volume cafes and restaurants at the front, in the back, and on the side. I've worked at farmers markets as a barista, market helper, and a bagel hawker. I've worked small (at home) catering gigs and large scale (5,000+) events setting up, cooking, serving, and breaking down. I have just nearly and quite literally broken my back for temporary jobs that have set me up to continue on working this way until I'm dead. No career trajectory. Only wishful thinking for "time" to work on "my writing" by keeping a haphazard, piecemeal work schedule. I spent summers through elementary and high school in the 1990s at a Japanese family sushi restaurant that my mother worked at for over 20+ years. I watched her bust her ass alongside her Japanese immigrant colleagues who did the same to support their families. I even went through a resentment phase toward this work and the industry and never thought I would get past it other than by getting out of it. Surprisingly, in recent years, I did in fact come out the other side. Past resentment and to a place of acceptance and deep bond that is now unbreakable. It still surprises me.

I never intended to "pursue" working dead-end, minimum wage (plus tips) jobs post-college, but somehow, I've spent the better part of the last 17 years working in Los Angeles' low-key but high-volume restaurant industry. I never lasted anywhere long enough to take on any key role - floor manager, assistant manager, manager, trainer, human resources, basically anything non-service at any of the small businesses I worked for (except for the one place I was with for about five years and left my post as general manager this past June). Unless they have major investors or are independently wealthy, most small businesses, especially restaurants, need all of their staff to be on the frontlines and willing to take on multiple roles. There generally is no middle management. Basically, there are those who show up to work and work, expending the labor required to maintain the operation, and there's the business owner or owners. It's

generally rare to see business owners present at their establishments and even rarer to see them working stations getting their hands dirty with the frontline staff. Most business owners are hands off or not present at all. Like a lot of workers in the restaurant industry, I would regularly quit either because I would get bored or had enough of the management or mismanagement. Once, I was fired. It's only in hindsight that I realize this trend in the restaurant world is all too common. I used to often blame myself for not working hard enough or lacking tolerance/endurance of my sometimes miserable work environments when really, I should have recognized that those very businesses I worked at were successful because of me, my efforts and labor.

Recently, when I started working at a relatively acclaimed Japanese-style restaurant in the kitchen, my station duties involved much more than I had ever taken on previously in any kitchen role. I was expected to come in at 2pm to prep, work through dinner service from 5pm to around 11pm, and then spend about an hour cleaning and breaking down the station. Our one 30-minute break was shared together from 4:00 to 4:30pm for a staff meal. After that, it was non-stop station duty. There were no two 10-minute breaks during a shift as "required" by California labor law. Such breaks were for milquetoasts.

Theoretically, all of this seemed possible at four days per week. My plan was to ride my bicycle or take the bus to work, work my shift, and either ride my bicycle or take the bus home. I would have my mornings and early afternoons "free" to do all things I've always wanted to do like go to yoga in the morning, go on long runs, work on my writing, work on my personal hobbies and projects. I looked at all of these items objectively, like simple "to-do" tasks, as if they were Tetris pieces for me to fill optimally on a blank page. I thought it would all be possible.

In reality, it took every ounce of my physical being to survive a shift. I felt as though I were in battle against the Viet Cong. The nearly 10-hour shift seemed like there was no end in sight and it was a miracle that I even got home after work. Dramatic, I know. Getting through a shift was half the battle; the homestretch of it was getting home. Upon clocking out, I'd walk three quarters of a mile to my bus stop at Sunset/Alvarado, wait for a bus that after 12am runs just once an hour, and then walk another half mile from the Sunset/Virgil bus stop to home. The time I spent alone on my commute was the loneliest, quietest, and most existential part of my day. "What am I doing?" and "what am I doing with my life?" and "who I am

kidding?" and "is this what I really want?" were questions I asked myself on my journeys home my first (and only) week I worked at the restaurant.

While most of the experience was torture, part of me enjoyed the battle of the dinner service, because I didn't have time to entertain the meaning of my existence. It's why I've always enjoyed working in coffee and food, particularly at popular and busy places. And it's why I've believed and still half hold onto this belief that I belong in the restaurant world. I like to keep my hands busy. I hate being idle. But I'm not a good line cook nor do I want to be a line cook, and I no longer want to work floor service anymore. What does this mean for a nobody like me?

I guess I'm probably considered one of the lucky ones. At the end of my last shift at the restaurant - it was a Saturday night - the boss pulled me aside and we had a sit-down in the alley near the dumpsters. She pulled out her tin of carefully hand-rolled, half-size cigarettes - organic American Spirit tobacco - and offered me one. We smoked the slow-burners together while we gave ourselves the first minute to decompress from the shift. The kitchen for the most part was shut down. It was 11:30pm. I had been there since 2pm. I knew what was coming before she said anything. And I knew going into the shift that afternoon that it would likely be my last.

The boss and I had a heart-to-heart that brought forth some tears on my part. It was a combination of the physically strenuous week, my realizing that I wouldn't be able to keep up in the long-term, and my realizing in that moment that what I thought I wanted for myself was in fact not the right thing for me at this point in my life. One of the things that she told me unabashedly that struck a chord was this: you don't have to do this just to prove something to yourself. We parted ways on good terms and what at least felt like genuine well-wishes for each of our futures in the industry. I left the restaurant that night with a sigh of relief, though a bit ashamed for not having been able to "fit in" and tough it out longer, but relief nonetheless.