

Ping Pong; Coffee; 8th Grade English

Amid brain cancer recurrence, blogger Adam Hayden is living right at the edge of emotional regulation.

April 23, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

It's not unusual for the tears to well up and pool around my eye sockets. The tears feel heavy and less prone to flowing freely. You know, like when you fill a cup too full and the liquid sits just above the rim? How does the liquid exceed the volume of the glass without overflowing? Surface tension or something, I don't know, there is definitely a physical explanation for this phenomenon. I'm more humanities than hydrodynamics.

Each morning, I snag two mugs from the cabinet, and I pull the carafe from the coffee maker before it's done brewing to pour us each a cup. I slide the carafe back under the basket without sizzling too many drips on the hot plate beneath. The basket has a spring loaded thing that's supposed to allow just such a move. Inevitably, I pour the coffee from the carafe at such a pace that the coffee hits the bottom of the mug and leaps back out, splashing on the counter, until I control the rate of flow. The coffee ring stains beside the coffee maker are proof of my poor technique.

(Hope you got that one.)

Whitney won't be out of the bedroom for another 10 or so minutes, and I'll be half through my first cup by then. Whit likes a cooler cup so she can drink it quickly. If I pour it on time, she can walk right out and enjoy a first sip. If I'm too late in the pour, Whitney plunks an ice cube in the mug. She'll top it off and fill a Yeti three-fourths full for the drive to work. She has a Keurig in the office, so she leaves most of the coffee for me. I appreciate it. Isaac gets in a few eye rolls directed at me before Whitney drives him down for the 6:50am Middle School bus then she heads off to work. I finish another cup while writing before I get up the other two kids.

To wake them, I speak-sing a poem melody that I remember my grandpa saying anytime we stayed overnight at their place. My clearest memory of grandpa sing-speaking this poem to us was in their house in Terre Haute, Indiana. A bedroom was just at the top of the stairs on the second story, the same bedroom that my dad and his older brother closest in age shared growing up. I remember looking down the stairs and there was grandpa looking up, singing that melody. Banana pancakes were his thing, and that was the signature breakfast. In the basement of this home Grandma and Grandpa had a ping pong table. Years later Grandma was telling stories about this time in their lives, and she mentioned me and her playing ping pong.

“Adam was terrible!” I remember her saying so honestly. I was never insulted; maybe a little. Grandma was hilarious, more spicy in her advanced years, and she was always one to let fly a shit, hell, or damn when the situation called for it. The funniest thing about me being terrible at ping pong is that I was probably only eight or ten years old when this happened. Like, okay, let’s be fair, you beat a nine year old at ping pong, with home court advantage. Not the flex you think it is, Grandma.

Nobody is good at carrying hot coffee. That was my point. And I know what you’re thinking, this guy sucks at ping pong, no wonder he spills his coffee. But I stand by this. You ever look in the trash at a coffee joint? Those white lids for the disposable cups always, I mean always, have coffee puddle stains around the sipping hole.

What is it about a fresh, hot cup of coffee that gives us an unsteady hand and awkward gait?

Oh, it’s the caffeine? Yeah, that checks out.

When you’re holding the cup while walking, coffee spills onto that weird place on your hand that’s above the thumb but not quite the back of the palm. That place you’re supposed to touch on your hand, with your thumb in varieties of extension, to know whether your steak is cooked to your preference. Know what I mean? My steaks are rare or well done. That’s all I got. Red center or hammered. Your choice.

Mr. Potter in high school English wrote notes to himself on that part of his hand. I started doing that after I saw him do it. .7mm Pilot G2 Retractable. Up to four words in that space. I prefer the .5mm, but the skin doesn’t take that finer point as well. To do tasks, grocery list, locker combination, phone number, parking garage number or floor, and so on, scribbling notes on that part of your hand is useful.

No bullshit, this blog may not exist without Craig T. Potter. Dude told me in eighth grade, “You really know how to turn a phrase, Mr. Hayden.” He was the first person who made me think, genuinely, that I could write. I took risks with my writing in his class, and he rewarded me for it. Recently someone who I respect said this about my writing: “Your writing shows that you have to know the rules to break the rules” or something like that. That’s confidence from Craig Potter.

For the big end of year class project, Potter circulated a list of what he deemed were the works of literature that everyone should read in their lifetime. Each of us in this AP English class would read and present on one of these titles. I selected Nausea by Jean Paul Sartre. Potter called me to his desk. “This book is pretty heavy. Do you know much about it?”

I did not.

“I’m interested in philosophy, and I’m interested in existentialism.” Ok, that’s all true. Potter approved. In fact, the very next year I seriously fucked up my first semester plus at college, but I aced a 300-level undergrad lecture course on Existentialism, so I knew what I was about.

I struggled with the book.

I did not finish the book.

I wrote a paper that explained why I did not finish a book for which the entire project was to teach the class about the contents of that very book.

I got an A-.

“I can’t give you an A when what you turned in was a defense of why you didn’t do the project.” Something like that. It showed me the power of writing while reinforcing that I could do it. Like, I earned that A-, if not in the actual assignment, then in rhetoric, and knowing when to employ rhetoric in writing is worthy of an A-.

I wouldn’t have learned the rules if Craig Potter hadn’t developed his own grammar workbook that cross referenced grammatical rules with a system of letters and number to shorthand markup all of our papers. It was its own code system. 3IV2C scribbled in red in the margin would reference the handmade grammar guide chapter 3, section IV, heading 2, rule C.

That was probably not the code because I just made that shit up as an illustrative example, but you surely get the idea. By the end of the year I could identify mechanical errors in text in real time. Nail the syntax, finesse the semantics. That’s writing. Actually probably not. But I can turn a phrase.

Teachers should be among the highest paid professions. Not because Craig Potter told me I could write, but because a teacher encouraged a young student to pursue something they loved, and children need to be encouraged to pursue things they love.

Anything can make me cry at any moment.

I love the rawness of it all. Living right at the edge of emotional regulation. After a seizure I’m a mess. Whether I’m [postictal](#) or just sad, I sob after seizures. Then I sob about sobbing.

Who needs composure? Or having it all together? That’s all a lie, anyway.

It’s not unusual for the tears to well up and pool around my eye sockets. The tears feel heavy and less prone to flowing freely. I wipe across my eyes with both hands and spread the heavy tears across my face. I glance down to see my palms glistening. Being alive is reason to cry. Joy and sorrow.

Time to pour another cup and wake up the boys.

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