

Memories of Aaron Bushnell

As Recounted by His Friends

CrimethInc., Anonymous

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On February 25, Aaron Bushnell set himself on fire at the gate of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC as an act of protest against the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Hostile critics have attempted to shrug off Aaron's action as the consequence of mental illness. On the contrary, Aaron's choice was a political action arising from his deeply held anarchist convictions. In the following collection, we share Aaron's own summary of his politics, followed by testimony from three of Aaron's close friends.

As Aaron recounted to his comrades in a mutual aid group in San Antonio, he grew up in a very Christian conservative white enclave in Cape Cod. He was 18 years old when Donald Trump was elected; he joined the Air Force in 2019. While in the Air Force, he arrived at anarchist politics through a process of self-education.

In February 2023, Aaron prepared a document aimed at helping this group to become more cohesive. As another participant in the group told us, "Aaron sought to formalize and mature some of our organizing methods, and he felt that having deep and open discussion was a crucial first step for building long-term trust. He created a list of questions as a way for our ragtag group of lefties doing mutual aid to start a conversation with each other."

In his own answers to these questions, Aaron states:

I am an anarchist, which means I believe in the abolition of all hierarchical power structures, especially capitalism and the state... I view the work we do as fighting back in the class war which the capitalist class wages on the rest of humanity. This also informs the way in which I want to organize, as I believe that any hierarchical power structure is bound to reproduce class dynamics and oppression. Thus, I want to engage in egalitarian forms of organizing that produce horizontal power structures based on mutual aid and solidarity, which are capable of liberating humans...

I favor consensus-based decision-making over "democratic" or voting-based governance.

In the same document, Aaron explained why he was committed to doing mutual aid work in solidarity with the unhoused:

I've always been bothered by the reality of homelessness, even back when I was growing up in a conservative community. I have come to believe in the importance of solidarity politics and I view the enforcement of homelessness as a major front in the class war which must be challenged for all our sakes. I view helping my houseless neighbors as a moral obligation, a matter of social justice, and a matter of good politics. If I don't stand with those more marginalized than me today then who will be left to stand with me tomorrow.

I view enforced homelessness as a societal failing and a crime against humanity. I believe that no one deserves to be deprived of basic human necessities. I believe that homelessness as an involuntary condition must be abolished.

In the following three accounts, Aaron's friends share their memories of who he was and how his life touched their lives.

If you wish to do something in Aaron's memory, one option is to donate to the Palestine Children's Relief Fund, which he mentioned in his will.

“Aaron Will Live Forever”

Lupe

Aaron will live forever. I know this, because everyone who was loved by Aaron will carry a bit of him in their soul, and everyone who witnessed his sacrifice will carry him in their minds. Aaron cherished life. He knew that in giving up his own, he could give the people of Palestine a chance to keep theirs. Aaron has permanently changed the fabric of your being. You know this because for the rest of your life, you will wrestle with the thought of what you will sacrifice for the liberation of others.

My friend said that everywhere Aaron went, he planted trees. I imagine these seeds planted in our hearts and minds. They will sprout, and they will grow into giant strong trees with deep roots built to weather the many battles that lie ahead on this burning planet. They will remain upright, like Aaron did, until they no longer can, but by then their own seeds will have been planted in the hearts of our loved ones, and they will grow into trees as well. They will continue this struggle until the beautiful world that Aaron knew we deserved is born.

“He Was Someone We Really Needed”

T Bear

It seems a lot of people just saw Aaron as someone in the military. Online lefties and liberal media alike were quick to dispose of his words and actions, and choose instead to judge him based on puritanical ideals just as bad as the ones he’s been trying to escape his entire adult life.

I write this knowing it will be read by comrades. I want to say something profound that can make us reflect on why we have such a tendency to be so quick to treat others as disposable, but I don’t think I can. I hope that instead, you will carry the burden of finding an answer to that with me.

After a lifetime of engaging with anarchists, it was this recently radicalized, 25-year-old active-duty airman I spent two years with who showed me my chains—long before his decision to leave this earth. Aaron had this effect on every single person he met. He was incredibly committed to developing relationships based on deep trust and understanding—and would be the first to give you the raised brows for a snarky answer to an important question. He never let a potential harm go unaddressed. He embodied more than anyone I know the anarchist spirit, “that deeply human sentiment, which aims at the good of all, freedom and justice for all, solidarity and love among the people.”¹

He was someone we really needed here. I encourage you remember Aaron’s words and actions the next time you’re about to flatten someone’s lived experiences. I encourage you to reflect on

¹“By anarchist spirit I mean that deeply human sentiment, which aims at the good of all, freedom and justice for all, solidarity and love among the people; which is not an exclusive characteristic only of self-declared anarchists, but inspires all people who have a generous heart and an open mind.” Errico Malatesta, *Umanita Nova*, April 13, 1922

your relationships, and how you can reduce control and coercive power dynamics. I encourage you to build deeper, and ever deeper, bonds with your comrades. Honor them now. It's not worth losing them.

“Do Not Forget His Message”

Moon

I am speaking to you as a friend and comrade of Aaron's, but I want to first acknowledge his last message to the world about the genocide in Gaza of Palestinians by Israel. The daily horror inflicted by the Israeli occupation forces on Palestinians is unconscionable and morally reprehensible, but it is normalized in our society by our government and all the other imperialist nations. We must acknowledge that this occupation in Israel must end, and everyone in Palestine must be free to live on their land and prosper without the threat of colonization.

Aaron himself was a principled, strong-willed man. He was keenly aware of hierarchical relationships due to his experiences growing up, and consistently pushed back on any potential hierarchies in our day-to-day organizing. He was steadfast, and I respected that greatly. He taught me so much about how to build my position, and the importance of building your own positions—because it does inform the work that you do and the organizing that you do.

From Aaron's sacrifice, I would like to bring attention to the risk that many of us face in the imperial core: complacency. We organize in the streets, get ignored, and then become complacent and further complicit. Let us not forget that we live in a settler-colonial society here as well—many of us are settlers—and we are also complicit in the genocide of our colonized neighbors, native Indigenous and Black people. We need to organize for long-term community building, long-term action, and sustainable radical action. The purpose of building social institutions is to keep momentum going so that no one ever feels the need to make a sacrifice like this again.

I love Aaron. He was my friend and comrade and I miss him a lot. Do not forget his message.

“My Friend Aaron”

E

My friend Aaron was kind, compassionate, and principled, sometimes to the point of being annoying, and he was incredibly reflective and willing to change to meet my needs in our relationship. He was one of my quickest and best friends.

I loved Aaron deeply. I have few regrets from my relationship with him. I was consistently vulnerable and open, which he returned in kind. I told him all the things I felt for him and often. I spent as much time with him as I possibly could and I am very grateful that I did. What I am most afraid of in this moment is that our relationship, our friendship, the deep, deep love I had for him, all of the little intimate moments, the bits, the laughs, the facts about his takes, all of it—I am afraid to be the only person holding that knowledge. I don't want it to disappear, I don't

want it to be held only by me and my fallible memory. I just want people to know that I loved him.

Cult

I want to provide some background context on Aaron's life. He shared this with me in confidence, but I feel OK sharing it with you all now because he is gone and I want to help contextualize him for you all. The press has also reached out to people from his past so it will be coming out regardless and I think it's better y'all learn from a comrade.

Aaron was raised in a cult. A Christian sect and self-styled monastery called the Community of Jesus. In this cult, as is a quality of many cults, Aaron was kept busy constantly from a very young age. Through working as unpaid labor, engaging in intensive training for performance arts programs organized by the community, or engaging in worship. This traumatized him deeply, partially because he had to maintain that while grappling with his neurodivergence that interfered with his ability to perform tasks well. He had to learn to mask very young and felt that his childhood was stolen from him. As a teenager, he had to work every day at multiple jobs one summer in order to make enough money to pay superfluous fees for a performance arts program he was required to be in. Everything at the Community of Jesus was motivated by shame and guilt and the threat of ostracization. This affected him deeply and fundamentally shaped how he could and could not engage in building relationships with people. It is the reason he left SACC [San Antonio Collective Care], for his own protection. I was incredibly lucky to have been able to forge the relationship I did with him.

Being raised in a cult, essentially a small society with different cultural norms than ours, gave Aaron the ability to see and better identify the norms and qualities of our society that are harder for us to see because we have been conditioned within it. He could see the latent fascist logic and cult-like tendencies that we swim through every day. He could see and feel them in ways that I struggle to feel and understand beyond an intellectual level. He was always very cagey about his past and did his best not to lie. You may recall him saying things like "sort of" or "something like that" whenever he was asked questions about being in theatre or band.

When Aaron lived there, he was a full believer, engaging in all of the shaming rituals and cycles of harm. He was completely invested in that reality. The fact that he was able to escape that ideology and the visceral experience of the shattering of that worldview was one of the things that made him so incredibly principled and dedicated to the abolition of hierarchy.

Times He Changed and Reflected

We would text and I would accuse him of texting like a straight man (which he was). He would never use reaction emojis or punctuation or expressions of laughter like lol. It was incredibly annoying. And he made such an active effort to do those things after I asked him to, very quickly and consistently.

Once, Aaron and I were having a discussion, a political one about the ethics of eating and producing meat. As a former vegan, I had many takes, as did he. At one point, the conversation got to plants and Aaron expressed that he thought of plants as nothing more than biological machines completely devoid of life or at least the essence that makes something morally valuable and worth protecting, like sentient animals. I was honestly very shocked. I told him he was wrong,

in more words than that, and told him to read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, kind of in the way you tell people to read books but never actually expect them to. Our conversation seemed to weigh heavy on him, it came up a few more times over the following weeks. On his drive up to Ohio, he listened to *Braiding Sweetgrass* and he was texting me about it. He really, really liked it. I think it reshaped some of his worldview.

Principled

Aaron saw hierarchy and injustice and his role in those systems and hated it. He felt a lot of guilt because of the situation he was raised in; guilt was the primary emotion through which he engaged with most things. I feel very sad that he was not able to heal from that fully before this.

He had so much love for his cats. The contradictions of owning someone you love weighed on him heavily. He was constantly thinking of how to best accommodate them and navigate this relationship of domination, complete control of their agency. I saw how it genuinely distressed him.

Aaron refused to say words like crazy, insane, or lame due to their roots in ableism and he got on me for my use of the word lame constantly. He wouldn't say the word fuck because he saw its roots in misogyny and hetero-patriarchy.

Aaron also didn't like the word democracy for reasons that are too long to explain; we would argue about it a lot, it was kind of a recurring bit.

Aaron deleted Signal before he self-immolated. A last act of security and love for his comrades.

Excerpts

I was very vulnerable and open with Aaron and I am proud of that. Vulnerability builds trust and deepens our bonds with each other; it is something that I actively work to cultivate in myself. To that end, I would like to share excerpts from two things I wrote to Aaron.

All of our relationships change us, shape us. When I look at the people, the friends, who I love the most, the people who I have the most secure loving relationships with, I can mark the ways that they have changed me. The mannerisms, habits, forms of speech, or worldviews that I adopted from them. It makes me feel so proud and thankful. There is no doubt that you have already changed me in ways that I will be proud of and thankful for, but I feel that one of the things that hurts most is mourning the loss of the ways that you could change me...

I wish I could know you more. There are so many other things I want to know about you and so many other things I want you to know about me. I wish I could get to see firsthand your continuing political development and I wish we could have closer impacts on each other's development. I wish you could see mine, to change it and make me into a better revolutionary. I want to see you in struggle, to learn how to struggle next to you and to struggle with you. I want you to be here.

I keep imagining you here. Upon reflecting I am imagining you here but not as I know you, I am imagining you here and free. Free of your military indenturement. It brings me so much joy to imagine you free and in struggle, to imagine your joy.

Conclusion

I think it will be hard to grieve this loss without being able to be with his body. To not get to experience the physical and psychological effects of being with his body after he is gone.

I am feeling tiny and crushed by the magnitude and inertia of the systems we are fighting against. I feel tiny and helpless in the face of these systems that have existed for hundreds of years and will likely exist for hundreds more. I normally feel quite the opposite but right now I feel so small. How in this world do we find peace that is not complicity? I hope Aaron found his.

But the outpouring of support and parallel grief from you all and my comrades around the country has been immense and I am truly in awe. I used to tell Aaron about how sometimes I would get overcome with awe and love to the point of crying while thinking about my comrades. Y'all's support has moved me to tears many times in the past few days. I don't have words to express how much I love you all. I am just in constant and pure awe.

I want to end with two things, some words from Aaron's will and a poem that he had been practicing to recite once he was out of the military.

From Aaron's will:

"I am sorry to my brother and my friends for leaving you like this. Of course, if I was truly sorry, I wouldn't be doing it. But the machine demands blood. None of this is fair."

"I wish for my remains to be cremated. I do not wish for my ashes to be scattered or my remains to be buried as my body does not belong anywhere in this world. If a time comes when Palestinians regain control of their land, and if the people native to the land would be open to the possibility, I would love for my ashes to be scattered in a free Palestine."

The Empire Raised Me

A Poem from Anansi's Library

I was a soldier for her before I knew her name
Raised to die before I fully knew mine
Crafted by hand for eternal war
Raised for combat as the empire's ward
I was raised a soldier
I was built for bowing down
To drop to my knees and worship at the sound of
Blood money capital and oil king's crown
Obey our enforcers, pray to our flag
Our god is the state and war is her ballad
And you were raised a soldier

Stay your tongue child keep silent I beg
Don't you know that our god can look into your head
See thoughts and images
Fears and dread and shape it all into will
Ask too many questions
Look through the fog
Set truth to deception and raise up the mob
Fight for real justice and soon you will see
The beauty of our weapons pointed straight at you and me
In the end this state knows no loyalty
For we were both raised soldiers
Peer through the windows and watch every street
Heed George Jackson's words
Watch the pigs and never sleep
A muslin tall grass
A flashbang in the dark
Bombs for the masses
Soon the fires will start
A stalker in the nighttime
A predator
A drone
Tear gas and flames
Jack boots in your home
Door-to-door searches
To your knees dropping atone
Fearful and wordless we all look on
Toward the burning of Rome this can only progress
Toward panic in the streets
Police violence and unrest
Desperate riots to escape the cruelty
While the guilt is placed square on the shoulders of those in need
Fighting for justice is the greatest of sins
Punished by death since the empire began
And I was raised a soldier
Now the muzzle is at my back
The boots are at my door
The guns are all racked
And like my ancestors before
A hail of bullets will set me free
Express one day delivery
From your state god to thee
Expect from your lord no loyalty
For I was raised a soldier

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