

The Punk Rock Good Life

or: living an aesthetic life

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This week's post is a little longer than usual, but I'm also proud of it. I've been working on it for quite some time. I decided the end of the year is the right time for it, because honestly it's the closest thing I have to a list of resolutions.

Maybe this starts with an old friend of mine. We'll call her Ember. I first met Ember in Asheville, North Carolina, twenty years ago, when she was living in an 8x8' uninsulated shack she'd built in the backyard of a rented punk house. The ground floor of the shack held only a desk with her typewriter and her books. Above that was a loft with a futon mattress. The place was clean-but-cluttered, and I spent a lot of nights with her by a fire in the backyard of that house, talking about life.

She was a few years older than me, and I was wildly in love with her, or rather the idea of her, though this was in no way reciprocated. She wore a DIY carhartt overalls dress and she had better boundaries and clearer communication than anyone I'd ever met. She was so direct that she came across as severe and uninviting. She drank, some, but not the swill I was used to—despite having almost no money, she only drank good beer. “Better to drink one good beer than six cheap beers,” she told me, maybe the only life lesson she offered me directly. I saw her and I saw an inkling of how to live a beautiful life despite poverty.

I wrote my first short story collection, a zine I will not be reprinting, as bedtime stories for Ember. We didn't really wind up dating—she had those good boundaries, and she knew what she wanted—but years later she was living on the other side of the country, in library school and working at the infoshop, and she drew and silkscreened a poster for an event for my first book tour.

This isn't a story about her, not really. It's a story about the romanticized ideal of the punk rock good life. It's a story about zines and DIY, about simple cooking, about dumpstered feasts with friends and frenemies, about pie and record players and tea and punk mail and pen pals. It's a story about turning your phone off more often, about skinny dipping in rivers, about building shacks or shacking up, about storytelling and basement shows. It's a story about social centers and infoshops. It's a story about punk houses and cabins in the woods and apartments in rust

belt cities. It's a story about loving half-feral dogs and half-feral friends, a story about Food Not Bombs and community organizing. It's a story about doing art you're bad at, making music you're bad at. It's a story about doing art you're good at, about making music you're good at. It's a story about houseplants and books and pulling furniture out of the trash and owning so many knit beanies you're not sure which ones came from which of your friends.

Which is to say: it's a story about the good life. A life you can have. A life I can have. Or at least, an ideal we can chase. I know I've been chasing it my whole life—like all good dreams, it sits comfortably on the horizon, giving us a direction to walk. We'll never reach it, not really, but the joy is found in the walking.

I'm not making a moral claim about this life. It's not objectively better than any other. I'm instead making an aesthetic claim: this is a beautiful way to live.

For the first two years of the pandemic, I was living in an off-grid 12x12 cabin I'd built on some friends' land. I'd built it more or less as a bedroom, with no electricity, water, kitchen, or bathroom. It just held a queen-sized bed, some books, and a propane heater—there was a communal kitchen and shower on the land, and I did my work in cafes in town. When the lockdown first hit, I spent my days in a frantic rush to build everything I needed to survive in the house alone in a pandemic in winter. I had very little money to work with. It was hard as hell.

At the start of the pandemic, in February and March, I was washing my clothes in the nearby creek with a bucket and washboard, then drying them slowly on a clothesline. I was showering with a solar shower, 80 degree water in 50 degree air. I was using a camp stove to heat up canned chili and mixing it with wild greens from the forest. I read books and played music and stared at the sky and slowly lost my mind. It was more or less horrible. I had barely any human contact for months at a time and I worked on my cabin most of my waking hours. When I finally, after months, managed to get water barrels hooked up to a 12v pump (powered by solar panels) plumbed into a propane shower on my porch, I stood under actual hot water and literally cried with relief. I just sobbed as my body got warm and clean.

Was this the Simple Life that people romanticized? All those tiny house videos on YouTube told me that you're supposed to want a life like that.

But by the second year of the pandemic, I had a propane stove and I had enough electricity and I had a strange cheap collapsible soaking tub and I had a little shed full of mice, spiders, and woodworking tools, and things were going well enough that I was able to romanticize my own life again. Romanticization made it more bearable. Some days I would lie in my hammock reading books and listening to the birds and the bugs. I learned to carve wooden spoons, and I listened to audiobooks on my porch while I whittled. For a week straight, an owl showed up outside my house during the day every time I played my handmade kantele. I had friends over, and we had a handle on the pandemic enough to know what we were risking.

It's a good thing to romanticize your own life. It's a good thing to embrace the aesthetics of how you live, and to play into those aesthetics. We should seek to wring as much beauty as we can out of our life. Some of the aesthetics we romanticize were born from suffering. But if it's your own suffering you're romanticizing, then there's not so much of a problem. What's dangerous is romanticizing other people's suffering. What's irritating is when other people romanticize *your* suffering.

It's useful to decide, for yourself, what constitutes the good life and seek out to live that way. For me, I want the punk rock good life. I don't want to move back into that cabin—I never did get a handle on the humidity and mildew, and my dog is wild enough that he needs a fenced yard. But I want to consciously take stock of who I am, what I enjoy doing. What habits serve me, what habits don't.

Baths on my porch serve me. Doomscrolling doesn't. Reading books before bed serves me. Doomscrolling doesn't. Cooking hearty, protein-rich, simple meals serves me. Doomscrolling doesn't. Buying new stuff rarely serves me, while repurposing old stuff or making my own stuff generally does.

Maybe this is early-aughts nostalgia, through and through. I don't really care. The early aughts punks I'm nostalgic about the lives of, they themselves

were nostalgic for 90s punk, who were nostalgic for 80s punk, and so-on back through decades and subcultures. Nostalgia is dangerous when it keeps us from appreciating the present, but useful when it informs how we want to find beauty in the present.

There's been a sort of joke going around my friend group for awhile now, about what an "anarchist tradwife" culture would look like. Maybe this "punk rock good life" is my overly earnest answer to that joke. It even rhymes with tradwife. Tradwife is nostalgia for an imagined, simpler past, and so is this. The punk rock good life, though, isn't gendered. It doesn't involve subjugating yourself to a patriarchal protector. But fortunately, it still involves sewing, DIY, and baking pies.

I'm not herein describing the life that I lead, not really, so much as the life I strive to lead. I'm writing this as a challenge to myself, a challenge to embrace the habits I want to have, the aesthetics I want to indulge in. This is a challenge to live my best life, a beautiful life. It's a challenge to live the punk rock good life.

Everyone's punk rock good life is going to be different, I suppose. But this is mine. Most of these ideas are built around some basic principles: it's best to do things with intention and to build small rituals into our lives. It's best to live aesthetically and to decorate yourself and your space. You can build your own space and you can build your own identity and body. We ought to celebrate the physical realm and only use the digital when it enriches the physical. And we ought to celebrate our friends and our connections with others as best as we can.

Create for the joy of creating, share your creations for the joy of sharing them. Most punk bands get by more with earnest fervor than with talent, and we can carry that attitude into everything we do... including into making music in genres we might like more than we like punk. The joy of being punk is celebrating people doing things whether or not they're amazing at those things. We celebrate our friends making music, making food, making clothes, or writing stories whether or not those people are likely to be able to make it professionally in that given field. Sure, some punk bands go on to tour the world, but we can have at least as much fun at a basement show played by local bands just giving it their all. Some zines will go on to be photocopied everywhere and influence hundreds of thousands of people, while others are read by maybe ten people. It doesn't matter. What matters is making things and sharing them.

Write letters. The time and intention that goes into a letter shows care, and receiving things in the mail is always exciting. You can write letters to your friends whether or not you expect them to write you back. You can send punk mail—if you have a friend who is traveling somewhere

you know people, have that friend carry letters or zines or presents to folks at the destination. You can write to prisoners, both political prisoners and those who are just caught up in the nightmarish carceral system. If you were locked up, wouldn't you want people to show they are thinking of you?

Cook more. Part of living with intention is cooking. You don't have to be a good cook to enjoy cooking or to enjoy the food you cook—potlucks are like punk shows, everyone brings what they can and the amazing cooks are just as celebrated as the people who only know how to make one thing. Some good punk staples include: the forever soup, a big pot of soup on the stove that gets new stuff added to it daily; what German punks call Reis mit Scheiße (rice with shit), which is to say rice with whatever vegetables and proteins you feel like adding; tofu scramble; homefries. Anything you can add siracha, nutritional yeast, and/or braggs liquid aminos to is good punk food. Anything you feel like calling “good punk food” is good punk food. Eat protein with most meals and you'll have more energy. Avoid snacking on carbs between meals and you'll have more energy. Eat fewer processed foods and you'll potentially have more energy. Every body is different and wants different stuff. Veganism works for me—eating lower on the food chain has done me a world of good. Other friends are far better off with animal products. Let meals be something you eat with intention, with friends if possible. Learn to cook not just for your own dietary restrictions, but for those of your friends.

Grow food. Gardening is one of the most offline things you can do and is the cornerstone of a lot of DIY practices. You don't have to be good at it. Grow simple foods, maybe in buckets, maybe on windowsills, maybe in raised beds, maybe on reclaimed public land, maybe at your friend's house, maybe in community gardens. Just grow some food and eat it and share it. Potatoes, tomatoes, kale, all the staples. Save some money and eat better and get your hands dirty.

Embrace aesthetics. Decorate your space, whether or not you plan to live there long. Even if you live in a squat and might get evicted at any moment, decorate your space anyway. Hang show flyers, your friends' art, or art and pictures you find in the trash. Collect houseplants—it's always good to find small things to be responsible for. Hang dried flowers. Collect books. Put instruments on the wall. Collect little crossstitched things from your friends. Candles are good aesthetics too, but this is only for expert level punks: never ever leave candles burning unattended, too many punks have been killed by their candles. Display your medieval weaponry—maybe that's just me. Maybe write on the walls, or just some of the walls. Leave pens around for your friends to do the same. Don't be afraid of maximalist aesthetics, don't be afraid to cover every surface with art. Don't be afraid to then strip back your decorations to something less cluttered; let your decoration ebb and flow. Paint the walls. Paint them with murals or paint them with deep colors, dark colors, bright colors, contrasting colors, whatever you want.

Alter, repair, and make your own clothes. You don't have to be good at sewing to alter or patch your clothes. You can get better as you go, but bad repairs have their own aesthetic too. Cut the sleeves off your tshirts (follow the two rules of tshirt sleeves: “sun's out, guns out” and the corollary “sun's gone, sleeves gone” to determine whether or not you should have sleeves on your tshirt). Midriff shirts are for every body. Make your clothes your own. Let them be affected by the elements. Patch up your pants. If you want to go old school, sew black patches on black fabric with white dental floss. Old pants can become punk miniskirts easily enough. Overalls make great dresses. You can do all kinds of things with tshirts. Learn to silkscreen, or support your friends that do, and silkscreen art onto shirts, vests, dresses, patches.

Your body is not a prison; your body is not a temple—your body is your home. You can and should decorate your home however you'd like, with piercings and tattoos and jewelry, or without any of those things. You should style your hair however suits you. You should change the shape of your body or the sex of your body through hormones, surgery, exercise, or whatever you'd like. You should learn about your body and work with it. Embrace your physical form. Stay as fit as suits you. Exercise every morning. Lift weights. Do yoga. Go for runs. Go for silly little walks after dinner. Get massages. Or don't.

Support other DIY creators. You don't have to do everything yourself. Go to craft fairs, or punk rock flea markets, or find creators online. Buy pottery, buy clothes, buy patches, buy soap, buy candles, buy art. If every mug in your kitchen is different, you're doing it right.

Write stuff down. Keep notes in a physical notebook. Write in an actual journal. Write down your dreams, write down story ideas, write down your garden plans and your woodworking plans. Write down recipes. Write stuff down.

The physical is better than the digital. Meet your internet friends in real life. Socialize in person. Travel and see things.

Online isn't the enemy. Connections made with people online aren't inherently less real than connections made in person. Social media isn't any kind of absolute evil. Friends, community, and activism can all happen online. It's just a space more rife with danger and more pitfalls to navigate.

Throw and attend DIY events of every kind. The basement show is a perfect aesthetic experience. There is DIY theater, storytelling, comedy and dance. There are teach-ins and barn-raising, apple cider pressing and seed-swaps. Potlucks and book clubs. Birdwatching clubs, astronomy clubs. Whatever you're into, there are people doing it at small scale and large scale. Go support your friends. It's worth it.

Tell your friends your literal dreams. If you dream about your friend, tell them. Make a habit of telling people your dreams anyway, and make a habit of listening to people tell you their dreams. Our dreams are important, but our brains work hard in the morning to excise them from our memories—since they could otherwise become confused with reality. So it's best to write them down, or tell them to each other.

Tell your friends that you love them. Everyone you know is going to die. You are going to die. Let nothing stay unsaid.

Keep the internet out of your bed. Don't look at your phone first thing in the morning or last thing before bed. In bed, pay attention to your thoughts, or read a book, or cuddle with whatever person, persons, or animals might be in the bed with you.

Read zines and books. While movies and tv and social media are indeed ways to learn about the world and experience culture, and it's okay to interact with them (or create them!), they serve a different purpose than zines and books do. Zines create a horizontal culture, sort of like social media does, but physical and generally more honest and less about chasing clout and clicks. Books open the world up to us, with history and theory and narrative. The written word matters. No one is monitoring what you read in print, unlike what you read on social media. When you read printed matter, you also can't share your thoughts on that reading in real time and the whole act becomes less performative, allowing you to engage more earnestly with what you're reading. It's fine, of course, to binge-watch a TV show every now and then. It's fine to play video games. Just read books and zines also.

Write zines and books. You don't have to be good at writing to write a zine. You get better through the practice, but you likely have unique things to say regardless of how much you've developed the skill. Make zines. Make books.

Become responsible for others, whether houseplants, pets, or friends. Caring for each other, or other non-human living things, helps us take care of ourselves. If you have a dog, you will go for a walk every day whether you want to or not. If you have a cat, you will clean up after them even if you can barely clean up after yourself. You will hydrate your plants whether or not you hydrate yourself. Taking care of things helps us be our best selves. Taking care of friends helps us from becoming isolated, and positions us into a web of interconnectivity and interreliance.

Make a habit of doing things you're bad at. People who only do things they are good at are cowards. Do things you're bad at—but try to get better at those things. Sing out of key, until one day you sing in key. Learn skills that don't come naturally to you. Always have something you are bad at that you are working on, and your brain will stay flexible and probably you'll never die. Well, at least, I haven't died yet, so it's working so far.

Drink tea. I don't know why. It just seems like something people who are living the good life do. Maybe because tea drinking is drinking with a little bit of ritual. Tea is a little treat to give yourself. I'm bad at this one.

Be an anarchist. I wasn't sure whether or not to include an ideological framework in the Punk Rock Good Life, but I think it would be disingenuous to leave it out. Anarchism is a framework that teaches us that we are our own masters, but that we're also deeply interconnected with everyone around us. Anarchism believes in you, and it believes in your community. Anarchism believes that we can make the world better and we shouldn't be afraid to speak honestly about what we really want: a world built on mutual aid and solidarity, a world of equals where differences are celebrated instead of erased. The label isn't what's important here, but it's a label that has helped keep me focused.

Get involved in local mutual aid or activism. Go cook with Food Not Bombs or distribute things to people who need them. Find groups of local people (whether they share every aspect of your ideological framework or not) who are involved in things you care about and then help them out.

Listen to tapes and records or even bandcamp downloads more than streaming music. Music is powerful, wonderful. It is part of living an aesthetic life. Let listening to music be an intentional act. Physical media is a good way to do this. Putting on a record should be an event, a little ritual for your day. Some wordless music is designed to sit in the background, but never let music with words play half-silently in the background—you're either listening to songs or you're not. Listen to music while cooking, driving, and cleaning. Not while in conversation.

Let social media be less of your life. This is not a call for absolutes or abstinence in any form, but instead a call for us to understand what habits serve us and what habits don't. Social media is addictive and while it can offer a great deal to our lives (keeping us informed of what's going on with the world and our friends, entertaining us, teaching us), it's very easy to run past the point of diminishing returns and stare into the void of our screens for longer than does us any good.

Be emotionally responsible to your partners. Our romantic lives, like everything else, should be intentional and considered. We should treat our partners well and respect them as our equals. We should always try to keep our promises to them and be honest to them, whether we

are monogamous or polyamorous or whatever labels we might use. We should be emotionally responsible to our friends too.

Let intoxication be less of your life. Maybe the core of this entire lifestyle is to live with intention, to do things with intention. Intoxication, by whatever means, might be part of an intentional and beautiful life. But it can easily become habitual, and soon hits diminishing returns. I learned the punk rock good life from someone who drank a good beer more nights than not but was almost never drunk. Myself, I've become "witch sober" over the years, where I only consider drinking or drugs for ritual purposes. Those rituals might be as elaborate as a Samhain dinner with food and wine set out for the dead at the table, or they might be as simple as "I would like to drink tonight under the stars to consider my place in the universe." But it's always intentional, and for me, it's vanishingly rare. Maybe inebriation is an important part of your good life, and that's fine—just always let it be intentional, even if it's common.

The punk rock good life can be lived in so many different ways. It can be lived by a rubber tramp living in a van or a school bus, drifting from town to town. It can be lived by people living in punk houses in the city, crammed to overflowing with people, houses that have someone living in a tent in the yard and someone renting space under the kitchen table to sleep. It can be lived by people living in shacks in the woods or their friends' yard. It can be lived by people who live alone in apartments or houses, or by couples, or throuples, or nuclear families in the suburbs, or three-or-four-generation households. You probably can't live the punk rock good life in a mansion, though, unless you've filled that mansion to the brim with people.

Ironically, the punk rock good life is inherently non-performative. It's non-competitive. Getting caught up in who is living the most authentic punk rock life, or comparing yourself to others constantly, disconnects you from the authentic punk rock good life. Any influencer in the punk rock good life space (as we might imagine existing) will have to contend constantly with this tension, much as a tradwife content creator is not living her authentic tradwife life while she is working the job of content creation.

The punk rock good life is about living intentionally and aesthetically, however suits you. No one truly lives this life perfectly. We will never master every habit we set out to adopt. We will always fall back on easier routines from time to time. But life is not about the destination, it's about the journey. My goal is to embrace the process of trying to live an aesthetic life, not beat myself up for all the ways that I regularly fail. Because I will fail. But like the great anarchist bards of the band Chumbawamba once prophesized: "I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down."

So for now, I will fill my house with flowers, and I will walk my dog every morning, and I'll try to remember to spend more of my time playing piano and less of my time doomscrolling. I'll cook food and house guests, and I'll clean the house with Godspeed on the record player, and I'll try to remember to watch the sunset, or the dawn, or to notice the phase of the moon. And I'll succeed, and I'll fail, and I'll succeed, and I'll fail, and one day I'll die, and that's alright too. My friends will know I loved them.

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