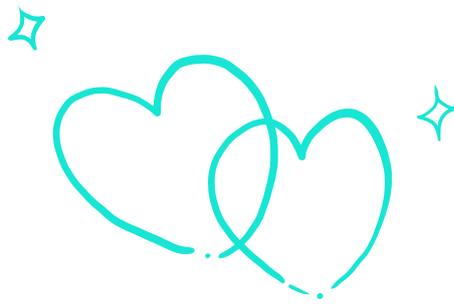


Thank you!



Since I don't know how to start this, I'll just say it as it is: I intentionally logged off from the world for the past two weeks, and now feel as if I've returned to a different one, which (geopolitics aside) is incredibly beautiful to witness. Maybe I'll share a little more in the coming weeks, but at least for now, I mainly want to say **THANK YOU** for all your love, light, and kindness! 🍷

Before I dive deeper into this, I'd like to gently make one small request: please don't put me on a pedestal or take my words as gospel. We're all imperfect human beings who stumble along in life (ideally together), make mistakes, misjudge situations, and sometimes end up being the "bad" person in someone else's story. What we can do, however, is learn from our mistakes, hold on to what we love, and try to make life a little brighter for everyone, because that's how we all win in the end.

In many ways, I've been lucky to encounter death early in my life, because it led me to gravitate toward people who reminded me that we're all just here for a comparatively short moment in time and that all we can really do is try to live our lives as fully as possible, mistakes and setbacks included. I truly believe that, at our core, we're a colorful blend of all the people we've met and learned from, the books we've read, the music we've listened to, the movies we've watched, the ideas we've engaged with, and so on. And I've been incredibly fortunate to meet many amazing people over the years, both in person and online, alive and with us in spirit.

So please remember that we all share and deserve due credit. I've simply built on existing works, tried to connect the many dots others before me have painted, and communicated my learnings in a way that, hopefully, resonate with you. While I do hope you find value and maybe even some inspiration in my work, the main "reward" for me will always be seeing you grow and become your own person, rather than following mine or someone else's path. The latter can easily lead to cult-like dynamics, which is important to be aware of, especially if you're younger or going through a vulnerable period in your life.

I originally hesitated to name living people who have influenced my path, because I didn't want to exclude anyone important (which will inevitably happen). But I've realized that it matters to me to acknowledge at least some of the incredible people who have brought light, wisdom, and direction into my life. Please note, though, that this is, in many ways, an inexhaustive list and intentionally includes only contemporary artists and/or public creators who I believe have important messages to share. [As I was putting this list together, I also noticed that it strongly reflects a Western lens, and there is so much more for me to learn and explore across cultures and ways of experiencing our world. If you know amazing people whose voices are missing from our current conversations, please give *them* the spotlight they deserve, not me.]

* John Ondrasik from [Five for Fighting](#): 100 Years has always been my favorite song since I first heard it when I was literally 15. I had “100 Years to live” engraved on a bracelet that I wore for almost a decade, and to this day, I still wake up to a blackboard that reads, “I’m fifteen / ninety-nine for a moment.”

* Everyone who was involved in bringing [Harold & Maude](#) to life: When I first watched the movie as a teenager, I somewhat identified with Harold and needed a Maude, paired with [Yusuf / Cat Stevens](#)’ wisdom, who reminded me to „sing out“ and „be free“ whenever I wanted to. This truly came full circle when I met Ilse Heinrich, who embodied everything Maude meant to me.

* [Studio Ghibli](#) and the whole anime and manga community: I’ve been incredibly lucky to have had the best role models growing up. Even now, I still have an anime playlist that I listen to during long runs, because songs like “Butter-Fly“ (Kōji Wada 🍷) and many others instantly bring back all those childhood memories. Collecting all 151 Pokémons in Pokémon Red will forever be the greatest achievement of my life, because if you can get Mew without cheating, you know you can do anything you set your mind to.

* [Jorge Bucay](#), for being my eternal source of wisdom in [Let Me Tell You A Story](#): I first read his book almost a decade ago, thanks to a friend’s recommendation, and it has been a treasure trove I’ve returned to many times ever since. This is also, by far, the book I’ve gifted most often, and if you ever have the chance to get your hands on a copy and read it, I can only encourage you to do so. [To use this space to spread some additional knowledge: more recently, I discovered [Great Thinkers](#) by [The School of Life](#), which I also think is worth reading because it distills “timeless” ideas from across history and cultures and presents them in an accessible, non-jargon way. And although I’ve only read half of the books featured there, I know from my own experience with the community that I can safely recommend the [reading list](#) curated by [RADAR](#) to anyone interested in building brighter futures.]

* When it comes to music in general, there are so, so many incredible musicians and bands I’ve had the privilege of experiencing either live or digitally over the years. The most meaningful concert I’ve personally attended was [Imagine Dragons](#) playing at Lollapalooza 2017 in Paris, shortly after Chester Bennington’s death (who will always be *the* light for so many of us 🍷). I still vividly remember Dan Reynolds, the band’s lead singer, using his platform to raise awareness about the importance of mental health and the special energy the entire band brought to the stage that evening. Other memorable moments include seeing one of my all-time favorite bands, [Rise Against](#), live for the first time at Rock am Ring, or Dan Smith from [Bastille](#) walking through the crowd and connecting with the audience during their performance at the same festival. Other artists who have brought, for various reasons, great joy to my life over the years include [Ludovico Einaudi](#), [Joe Hisaishi](#), [The Black Keys](#), [The Postal Service](#), [M83](#), [Bon Iver](#), [STARSET](#), [Patrick Park](#), [Modest Mouse](#), [The Notwist](#), [Muse](#), [Joshua Radin](#), and many, many more.

* While I'm not very pop-cultured, and most of my knowledge in this area comes from reading Wikipedia summaries, I want to credit two shows that touched me deeply: [Six Feet Under](#) and [After Life](#). Six Feet Under originally inspired teenage me to want to work in death care, which adult me finally did 20 years later. Also, it still has one of the best [series finales](#) of all time. Many years later, I found [Ricky Gervais'](#) After Life, and it impacted me in ways that are hard to describe. From a less personal perspective, it was very refreshing to see so many unconventional characters, each struggling in their own way, come together. (You might want to overlook their profanities from time to time.) Plus, [Anne always gave the best advice](#). From a deeply personal perspective, watching the main character's deceased wife, whose name is also Lisa, [recite the same poem](#) I had placed on someone's grave when I first experienced grief as a teenager was, and still is, a feeling that's difficult to put into words. Immediately after uploading my work in February, I rewatched [this scene](#) that reminds us that what truly counts is on the inside and, as we all know, inside Lenny is just loads of crisps and biscuits. So naturally, I did the only thing left to do: go to the supermarket and buy a bag of crisps. And although I haven't watched it yet, I have a strong feeling that [Famous Last Words](#) is well worth our time too.

* In this context, I'd like to mention two other artists who deserve all the love: [Jantje Friese](#) and [Baran bo Odar](#). Thanks to them, I once spent multiple days trying to solve one of the last remaining mysteries of our time: the meaning behind the TV series [1899](#). Looking back on it now, I don't think it was a coincidence that another one of their shows, [Dark](#), unlocked many answers for me. And if I understand 1899 at least somewhat correctly, the creators had figured out our „42“ all along.

* Finally, an extremely (!) incomplete list of young-ish, accessible creators I've followed at various points in my life and who have inspired me along the way [in no particular order]: [Humans of New York](#) (who tells all the beautiful stories life writes), [Eva zu Beck](#) (who lives the wild life, and our [Born to Run dreams](#), while we're sitting on the couch), [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (no matter your party affiliation, she's one of those voices we need in politics), [Thoraya](#) (for asking the big questions we often forget to ask ourselves), [Kilian Jornet](#) (who is not only a great athlete but also an important [voice for our environment](#)), [Jess Karp](#) (who is the artist I'd love to be in another life and who simply is light; same with [Valerie Lin](#)), [Nerdforge](#) (who build all the cool stuff us less creative mortals dream of), [Laurie A. Conley](#) (whose spooky art normalizes death in a beautiful, gentle way), [Project Happiness](#) (who inspires us to look deeper where we're often inclined to look away), [Deniss Vasiljevs](#) (who inspired me to start figure skating for some time and who I generally feel shares a lot of thoughts worth listening to), [Franziska Schöbel](#) (who reminds us that every pace has its place in running), [Reflections of Life](#) (for the inner wisdom we all need), [Victor M. Sweeney](#) (some people are just *born* for what they do, and he was definitely meant to be a mortician), [Jeff Pelletier & Aurée Lafrenière](#) (for creating some of the best ultrarunning documentaries out there), and [Natacha Océane](#) (who inspired me early on to eat and train in a healthy, science-backed way and who introduced many of us to incredible athletes like [Lucy Charles-Barclay](#) or [Janja Garnbret](#)). Here, I'd like to add [Courtney Dauwalter](#), because she shows us that you can run entirely on crisps and biscuits (or candy and fast food, in her case) and still be faster and arguably a little cooler than the rest of us.

When talking about creators who inspire me, I also want to explicitly celebrate every single person out there who openly talks about the hardships in their own lives to connect with and help others (if they intentionally choose to; there should never be any pressure, internal or external, to do so!). Over the course of my life, I've watched many videos from creators of all audience sizes who have given me, and many others, strength and hope to face the challenges in our own lives. Please never let anyone tell you that you are "weak" for experiencing difficulties or complex emotions. Whether positive or negative, they're valid, and suppressing instead of processing them in healthy ways will often backfire sooner or later. You don't need to perform "strength," and you are not in any way, shape, or form "less than" someone who (apparently) has it all together. Most people I've met, no matter their status or position, don't; they're often just good at pretending. You are valuable simply because you are. And in my experience, those of us who have endured hardship often carry a deeper wisdom, because we're closely connected to one of the core experiences that makes us human.

Last but definitely not least: I've saved this one for the end because, for me personally, it is (along with the previous paragraph) the most meaningful acknowledgment. I first encountered the [Foo Fighters](#), and especially their song Times Like These (another all-time favorite), when I needed it as a teenager. More than anything else, the band has always embodied, for me, the idea of saying yes to life and transforming hardship into light. When [Taylor Hawkins](#) died in 2022, it hit me incredibly hard, because a source of hope in my life had suddenly become a source of grief. However, thinking of Taylor and the light he brought into the world inspired me to pursue many things I had always wanted to do, including becoming a death companion. So please know that every light we see is also Taylor's light. 🧡

With love and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Joe' followed by a simple smiley face '☺'.