

Nothing

by Steve Abhaya

I play characters. One, in particular. I play characters who can say whatever they want, as long as I stay in character. Staying in character allows me to be spontaneous. I discover my true character, so I can live my life spontaneously. I'm genuine, in order to play.

My character is free. He's physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually true to himself. He's in the world, but not of the world. When I'm sure of the voice, the character speaks.

Creating a character opens the door, changes the frame of reference, makes my freedom possible. I don't concentrate on the success of my character in the world, but on my character being true to its self. The heart of the drama is not to make a drama of the heart, but to let the heart create its own drama.

I create my character, like a poem or a painting, without conscious planning. I'm in my life, as a character that's true to its source. I trust the natural occurrence of my character. I notice how deliberate this seems, but the inherent, natural rule applies.

I'm a performer of my own character. Being this character you see before you isn't a deliberate performance, but being who I am reveals that everything I do is a performance.

I ask myself, "Is it ego, when I am the witness to an unfolding life?" Ego is holding **anything** as a definition of one's personal reality. My life is only a performance, and my attention to it is a witness.

The assumption might be, that since I'm here, appearing in a show, that I'm playing a character, but I am the character. This character I'm playing is called Steve. It's my name. It's my character's name.

My character was born in the flesh, as I was, in Moline, Illinois, on the banks of the Mississippi. He was realized, in my imagination, in San Francisco, California. He was realized, in my awareness, in Seattle, Washington.

I used to be my character. I still am. Only our relationship has changed. He and I. Me and him. I am, and I was. I am present. So is he. I am what lives on, after my character lives. I can dip into my character's reality, at will, and by inspiration. I have a life to draw from. If I say I am this character, I'm not wrong, but it's slightly misleading.

I'm not a disembodied reality. I am what you see before you. What you see before you is more than what you're looking at, because your ability to recognize is greater than what you see, and what you recognize is greater than what can be seen.

If you have a mind you like, then you like the way the mind works, even when it's not your mind speaking. It's an activity you enjoy, in whatever way it occurs. All this is occurring, before you, in your mind, in your attention, in your awareness, in being who you are.

I tell a story. It's the story I know. I tell what I know, so it's not about me knowing it. I'm free to create and live a character, as if it is who I am, so that who I am is made even more clear.

I come on stage, in such a way that the illusion of being a character in a drama is made clear.

I'm the only character in a one man show that I'm presenting to you. I've been this character for so long it's completely believable that I am this

character. It may be difficult to believe that I'm not who I say I am, because who I really am is so completely without character.

If I say **that's** who I am, a being without character, it might not seem believable. So you see my dilemma. I'm appearing on stage as the person I've always seemed to be, but it's just not true.

I like this character I'm playing. I enjoy being this character. You could say this character even **has** character. I respect him, I admire him, and I honor him. He's a constant surprise to me, but **I am not** what he seems to be.

I became him when I was nobody and nothing. I'm still nobody and nothing, but now I like being somebody. And I like being nobody. There is no problem in this duality, because it's simultaneous.

I can honestly say where I was born, where I lived, what I did, and it's all true, relatively speaking, but it's all a dramatic illusion. For dramatic purposes, I am this character. In reality, I am not he.

Do you see how I say 'I am not he,' instead of 'I am not him?' I'm grammatically conscious, I'm articulate, and I'm as dumb as the inky void.

Tonight, I want to act out this character, and at the same time, I want you to know that I'm playing a character. It's the only character I've ever played, so I can't go out of character, except, and this gets tricky, my character is good at becoming other characters.

When I do that, it ought to be clear that I'm playing a character, so that won't be a problem, but even now, as I describe this capability of my character, I'm speaking in character.

I've been doing this for so long the words come rolling out without any effort at all. I hear the words, as they roll out, the habitual reality of a person, a life, a genetic history. Human history.

The trick to playing any character is that once I become a character, I can't make a mistake. Anything my character says, while I'm in character, is an expression of the character. The same is true of your character, or anybody else's character.

I'm known as this character that plays characters. I can become somebody else, but that's still in character. I want to open the possibility of stepping out of character, when doing that isn't about stepping into some other character.

For me to really let go of this character is to reveal myself in a characterless state. It's like the space of this theater. It's the space where the drama comes into being. Without this empty space, the drama couldn't occur. Without 'here' being here, nothing that's here could appear here.

I've done this before. That is, I've appeared on stage in one man shows. The first one was called **Showtime!**, in 1975, when I was 33, just out of graduate school in poetry, in San Francisco. That show came from an idea that came from a spontaneous performance at a party of poets and artists at a professor's house, the year before.

Fifty people were in Mark Linenthal's house, drinking, being social, being sexual, being friendly and competitive. I was drinking, like nearly everyone. There were drugs around, and people went out to Stan Rice's VW van, from time to time, to smoke marijuana.

Linenthal was a gentleman from the old school, a WWII pilot, shot down, a POW, and his students, in the 60's and 70's, were a constant challenge to his equanimity. He said, once, he didn't think Sylvia Plath's poetry was all that great. Some of the women were deeply offended, and they said so. That was the tenor of the times.

Toward the end of the evening, I was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, talking to those around me, when the voice of a character showed up. I began to speak in a Chicano accent about driving my car in Arizona. About being a boy in Nicaragua.

“But that was a long time ago.”

Keith Shein, a poet from Tucson, said, “I know him. I know that guy.” It was always fun, when a voice or a character would pop into my head.

Then I bent over, to pick up my beer, from the hardwood floor, next to my chair, and another character appeared. This time, it was different. This character had something to say. He spoke in a Texas accent. I realized he was in his robe and underwear, sitting on the porch of his house, talking to his teenage son.

He was distraught. Apparently, his son had done something, probably sexual, that brought shame on his father. Someone said, later, that I was acting out the relationship between us student-poet-artists and our professor. I don’t know. The character was doing all the talking.

As I was acting out this character, I’d pause and talk to the people around me, “Look at this guy. This is a trip. I don’t know what’s going on.” And then the character would come back, disgusted, shocked, outraged, confused.

He was shaking. He was almost in tears. He referred to the boy’s mother.

“Your goddam mother is in the back room, right now, crying her goddam eyes out, thanks to you, you goddam son of a bitch.”

Then he said something that surprised me and shocked me. He pointed to his teenage son, his hand shaking, and he said, "If you were a girl, I'd fuck you in the ass."

Everybody in the room was just as shocked as I was. I was silent. And then he said, "I take that back."

Everybody was relieved, and so was I. He stopped talking, and so did I. Everybody was caught up in the character, and when he stopped, they went back to whatever they were doing. I sat, quietly, calmly, drained of anything and everything, empty. I got up, and I crossed the room, like being invisible in a crowd. I went down a short hall, and I saw a small TV, on the edge of a big table, the blue light glowing in the dark room. It was set up, so someone could watch it from a big leather couch.

I sat down next to someone watching TV in the dark. I turned, and I saw Mouse, Stan and Ann Rice's daughter, Michelle, who was eight, or nine, and dying of leukemia. She was ageless. Her hair had fallen out, and what remained was like angel hair, wispy strands of golden blond.

She was ethereal, not of this world, like being caught between this world and not this world. We looked at each other in a kind of non-expressive recognition, and for a while, we sat next to each other, looking at the blue light. We were in tune with each other.

That night was the impetus for my first show. The Texas father became one of ten characters. The experience gave me the sense that I could do a show, even though I'd never done anything like it before.

Keith Shein told me he knew I could do it, because I had fifty huge artist egos in the palm of my hand, but that isn't what gave me confidence.

It was the sense of the character coming alive, so completely present, unconnected to my own will. Two senses remained with me; the **presence**

of the character so completely, and the **absence** of any character, just as completely, **at the same time**.

Both were satisfying, and both are still satisfying. As much as character comes out of the state of being that is the absence of character, so, I believe, is that absence dependent on our presence.

That presence and that absence is what this is all about.

One of the other characters in that first show was Philippe Cella, a French mime. Cella means 'that's it.' Philippe Cella. That's it! He was the last performer of the night. He came out, sat down at his dressing table, put on his makeup, and started talking. He was a French mime who talked. He talked about what was real and what wasn't real. He said he had a puppy when he was a boy. Gee Gee. He came home from school, one day, and Gee Gee was nowhere to be found.

He went to his mother, and he said, "Mama, where is Gee Gee, I can't find him anywhere." His mother looked at him, and she shrugged. He went to his father, and he said, "Papa, where is Gee Gee?" His father looked at him, and he shrugged.

"Where is Gee Gee? I can't find him, anywhere. I think to myself, maybe there never was this puppy."

I had a puppy when I was a kid. Tippy. He was called Tippy, because he was black, and the tip of his tail was white. The same thing happened to me. I came home and no Tippy. My parents had no explanation, except to say I couldn't take care of him, and he was probably with some people who could take care of him. I found Tippy, a week later, only a block away, living with some other people.

Philippe Cella talked about his girlfriend.

"I really like this girl. I want to call her up. I want to ask her out. I want to spend some time with this girl. I like her very much. When I call her up, the telephone say, 'This party disconnected.' I think maybe there never was this girl."

That never happened to me, exactly, but apparently, it happened to Philippe Cella.

"What is real? What is not real? Sometimes I know, sometimes I don't know. For instance, I like to have a drink of water."

He raises his hand in the air, and a glass of imaginary water appears in an imaginary glass.

"I like water. I want to drink this water."

He drinks.

"Ah, taste good."

He waves his hand in the air.

"But there is no water. There is no glass. What is real? What is not real? Sometimes I know, sometimes I don't know."

At the end of the show, he says, "There is only me, and you, and I'm glad you came."

Someone asked Bob Hope's wife, Dolores, what Bob was like off-stage. She said there used to be two Bob Hopes, one on stage and one off stage.

"Now," she said, "there's only one."

"Which one?" they asked.

"The one you see on stage," she said.

I'm compelled to do the opposite. I was raised to be a performer. I was good at it. I had an empathetic nature. I was inclined to please other

people, by gauging them and adjusting my behavior accordingly. That was my way of getting along in my family.

When I was a Junior in college, I was put in charge of New Student Days. I went to the microphone in front of 350 new students, and I spoke for twenty minutes. I have no idea what I said, but the Dean of Men came up to me afterwards. He said he wished he could do that.

“Do what?” I thought.

As a Senior in high school, in Miss Garst’s English Class, we were required to give extemporaneous speeches on any topic we chose. I chose William Blake, the poet. The speech was supposed to be ten minutes long. I had notes for ten minutes. I spoke for twenty minutes, and the class was roaring when the bell for the next class rang. I kept talking, until the next class was leaning in the doorway to see what all the fuss was about.

Miss Garst, said, “I don’t want you to stop, but you have to.”

I stopped. I ran into a guy in the hallway, and he asked me how I did that. I had no answer. I still don’t. I ended up talking about Blake and his wife having dinner with Old Testament prophets, and sitting, naked, in a tree in the back yard, talking to angels.

I was raised to be a performer, to go out of myself to please others, but that isn’t what happened. I went into my imagination, I went into my heart, I went into my empty self, and it made me happy. The sense of trying to please others was overtaken by another sense.

I’m not here to please anyone. I’m here, because I’m compelled to be here, the same as I am compelled to paint pictures, to write poems, and to tell stories.

The other day I was standing in my bathroom, doing what men do, standing in the bathroom. Next to me on the wall were a couple of oil

paintings, mostly bright colors, and I was impressed by them. It was a little scary to think about trying to make more paintings like those paintings. It was almost as if someone else painted them, but I remember painting them. I put colors on canvas. Color, color, color, line, color, line, and paintings happened. I couldn't do it on purpose, if I wanted to.

I get to be a witness to this common miracle, this business of creating things. Any real artist, who's being honest, will tell you there's no one doing the creating. It happens. I certainly don't do it. I'm not doing this, right now. I see it happen. I'm there when it happens. I'm here now. I do something, but I can't deliberately recreate it. I can only be present for it. Like I am, right now. That's it. That's all there is. Sometimes I know, sometimes I don't know.

Keats said Shakespeare had the finest quality that goes into making a man, "To live in mystery, uncertainty, and doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason."

'Irritable' is probably the key word. There's nothing wrong with fact or reason, but the irritable reaching after fact or reason can be a real problem. Mystery, uncertainty, and doubt. No problem.

My name is Steve Brooks. It sounds made up. I know it's my name. It was my grandfather's name. He was called Uncle Steve by everyone. I could never understand how my 'grandfather' could be called 'Uncle' Steve. Steve was my name, too. It sounds like a stage name. Steve Brooks.

The flip side of my name is that I like it. I get a kick out of it. It seems like a name I was given by a theatrical agent, to use in my career as a human being. It's fun having a name like Steve Brooks.

When I was in India, I was called Swami Steve. I asked a teacher, a guru, an enlightened master, to give me a new name. He gave me the name

'Abhaya.' I use that name like a nom de plume. It's a good artist's name. Steve Brooks seems more like a stage name.

When I was painting houses in San Francisco, many years ago, I worked with another artist, a guy named Dirk Kortz. Now there's a name. Dirk Kortz. Dirk and I invented the 'beauty break'. Whenever one of us would see something that was particularly striking to the eye, we'd call for a beauty break. We'd stop working and take in the beauty we saw.

One day, I told him something I'd been feeling about my life, about my sense of being present in my life.

I said, "I feel like I'm making it up."

I didn't mean I was manufacturing a life. I felt like I was in the center of an illusion, with tangible details, and an endless, ongoing story line. My illusion is rich in multi-layered realities. I'm the witness of this life, this illusion, and my Steve Brooks life is part of what I care about. I am Steve Brooks, even if it is only a name for an eternal particularity. I could say my name is Eternal Particularity, but that's your name, too.

This business, of being a witness to my own existence, is like coming to the theater. For the time you're here, you let go of your personal reality, **you sit in the dark, and you see what happens in the light.** That's all there is. It all happens in your awareness and no where else. You are the center of the universe. It's like coming to your own dream.

Someone once said, "Dreams are dramas presented by an author who wishes to remain anonymous, while seated in an audience of one." See how I said, 'Someone once said?' Actually, I said that, but if I take credit for it, it sounds presumptuous. Even when I know the words came out of nowhere. My character said it, and even he can't take credit for it.

When you step out of the drama, out of the dream, you may be able to describe it in detail, but the best part of it can't be articulated. You had to be there. To be there is the experience. It's being present in your own experience. It's all about you, and you don't have to do anything except be present and pay attention. And, you don't have to pay attention in any particular way. All you have to do is let go of the kind of attention that's distracting to your awareness.

Keats wrote a poem called, "This living hand," about his hand living on, in the imagination of others, beyond his death.

In my second show, **The Blood & Turnips Poetry Festival**, at some point during the show, I noticed my hand, held up in the space I occupied with the audience. It occurred to me, in that moment, that I could do that. I could hold up my hand, and that was enough to focus the attention of the moment.

The attention of the moment wasn't **my** attention, or the audience's attention, it was a shared attention, and it wasn't about my hand. It was the simple, extraordinary pleasure of being in the state of attention, that we were all sharing, the same state of attention that you and I are sharing.

Keats could sit in his room, at 24 years of age, on Hampstead Heath, outside London, nearly 200 years ago, and enjoy his attention, his being witness to the occurrence of his own hand. It wasn't, "Oh, look at my hand, how cool am I, what a great poet am I, oh, look at me."

It was, "I see, I enjoy my vision, I'm a witness. I'm in a state of awareness, in which even my hand is remarkable. It's remarkable, and it's insignificant. What is significant is this state of awareness."

“My hand is here. I like my hand. There is no hand. There is no one here, in this dark place full of light. There’s no one else here, but everything and everyone, and I’m glad you came.”

Before I got married, I discovered I could stand perfectly still, like a statue, like a mannequin. I could seem perfectly lifeless. It used to drive my wife crazy. I quit doing it, when I realized it would drive me crazy, too, if I saw anyone else do it. No one likes to see the absence of life. We’re in love with life, and we’re addicted to signs of life.

And yet, every night, when we go to sleep, we enter into a mindless state where all sense disappears. The world disappears, and so do we. All our pain and misery, all our joy and happiness, disappears. And we go there willingly, every night.

Our own nightly state of absence doesn’t frighten us enough to give it up. Something essential lives, even in the absence of any indication that it doe. Death is called the big sleep, dreams occur in sleep, and the thing we desire most is called our dream.

My brother told me, once, I should write down my dreams every day for a year. I dismissed his suggestion as typical of his fertile, aberrant imagination. But, the next January first, I woke up and wrote down my dreams. I did it for two and a half months. I was living on unemployment at the time, so I had the time to do it.

I discovered that by paying attention, I could remember seven complete dream sequences from every night. It began to take as long to write them down, as it did to dream them. I stopped, when I realized my dreams weren’t translating into anything, no poems, no stories, nothing. I still love to dream. It feels good to dream. It doesn’t have to have a

conscious purpose. I don't regret it that I failed to fulfill my brother's dream.

One dream, during that time, I didn't forget. I was sitting at a table in a white room, dressed in white. Across the room, was an old man wearing white, with white hair and a white beard. He was sitting with some others, all dressed in white.

He looked at me, across the room, he gestured toward me, and he said, "Can't anyone see that man is in distress?"

I didn't know what he meant. I thought I was doing fine. Then he was next to me, speaking intimately, the way dreams don't care about rules.

"You do your best work," he said, "when you're exhausted."

I never knew what he meant. It was my meaning, it was my dream, I was the dreamer. Now you're the dreamer, and I'm speaking to you. I'm an old man, across the room, and I say to you, "You do your best work, when you **stop** working. When you **completely stop working**. When you do **no work, at all**. Like right now. If this feels like work, stop it. If stopping it feels like work, stop that.

Start slow, slow down, stop. Now, you're getting somewhere.

Before I did my first show, it occurred to me, one day, out of the blue, that what I really wanted to do was 'nothing.' I wanted to walk out on stage with nothing to do and see what happened.

Never for a minute, did I consider actually doing that. It was absurd. It was suicidal. What I did do was create characters. I knew, in general, what they were going to say, but I left it open how it came out. It worked out just fine. It was great. But, still, I had that idea in my head. Or, it was in my heart, and my head overruled it.

Some years ago, in another dream, within this dream, I was on stage. I started doing characters, and the audience began to leave the theater. Then I dropped the satire, I dropped the character I was doing, and the audience came back. When I spoke in my own voice, the audience got larger.

A friend once said, "If only you could write like you talk."

I want to talk like I talk. I remember a lot of what others have said to me. The things other people say are like voices in my dream. I hear the voices in my dream. I am the dreamer. They are my voices, just as I am a voice in your dream, a voice in your awareness.

Before I went to India, I lived with a psychic for four years. I met all her psychic buddies and pals. After a while, I began to think about doing a show of psychics and mediums, but it didn't interest me enough to stay with it.

When I got back from India, after spending time with a teacher, I **knew** that experience would affect me, as an artist. I just didn't know how. My teacher said, "Nobody has ever been able to describe this, but don't stop trying."

I tried to create a show about what I saw and heard, sitting with an enlightened master. I tried, over and over, to come up with a form of theater, to show what I saw and what I heard.

I thought about putting two microphones on stage, and having one for my human voice and one for the voice of my true self, and moving between them. I thought about playing the role of an enlightened master. I made some progress inventing characters who told their spiritual stories one after another, but even that never came to fruition. The idea of creating a stage play of enlightenment finally felt futile.

I realized I still wanted to come out on stage with nothing to say, only this time I had a topic. It was nothing. Nothing was my topic. But I couldn't imagine how that could possibly be entertaining.

When I first saw the man in India, I saw something I'd never seen before or since, in any other teacher. **I saw Being speaking to Being**, not a man speaking about Being to a bunch of devotees. **I saw love pouring out toward itself.**

That's what I saw. Of course, it was my dream. How do you make a show out of that? Well, you don't. It can't be done. I give up. My teacher talked, and he told stories. And he laughed a lot, not like a crazy person, but because laughter is often the show of true happiness in the heart.

And he told stories of miracles in his life. I never liked the idea that miracles could be used to show the truth about the most common reality of all. Miracles seem to separate the one from the many. I wanted to hear a story that didn't separate me from anyone, or anyone from me.

My teacher was a performer. He came out on a small stage, and he spoke a kind of one man show, for two hundred people, for three hours, every day. But his uncle was a saint, his teacher was the greatest teacher of them all, and he lived a life of miracles. I'm just a guy. I've seen a few miracles in my time, but nothing I could use to validate my awareness. I believe only what's true in one's own awareness can validate anything for anybody.

I was driving into Taos, New Mexico, a while back. I'd been driving all night. I slept a couple of hours, in a rest stop in Colorado, in the back of my Volvo wagon. I stayed, the night before, in my childhood hometown in Nebraska, and I was on my way to visit some friends in Taos. I was sleep

deprived, but I felt great. I was rolling along in the foothills of Northern New Mexico.

My friend Gregory Vose lived in a cabin north of town, and he didn't know I was coming. I thought about leaving a message on his answering machine. A voice came to me. It was a character I'd never heard before. He wanted to leave a message on Greg's machine. Greg is a sculptor. His art was showing in galleries in Taos. The voice knew what to say.

"Mister Vose, You don't know me, but I like you art. Maybe I like to buy you art. I like to buy good art, and you got a good art. You don't know me. My name Wu Wah, but when I come to this country, my parent, they like American name, so they give me name, Walter Wah. I got a store. I got a lot of store. Maybe you know my store. I got a store all over the place. It a carpet store. My store called Walter Wah Carpet. **People say it a funny name, but they buy the carpet!** Anyway, I like you art, so maybe I come see you, maybe I buy you art. OK, Mister Vose?"

I don't know where that voice came from. Walter Wah showed up just in time to leave a message on Gregory's answering machine in Taos. Since then, I've discovered that other people like Walter Wah. I do too, but I don't know what to do with him. He's just there. He's just here, whenever he shows up. He's got nothing more to say. I didn't make up what he said, I didn't think of Walter Wah Carpet and then make up the character. I heard him talking, and he told me who he was.

Characters appear. They seem to have a mind of their own. I could put them in a show, but what if there's no show? What if I don't feel like making a show for them to appear in? What if I do a show, and the show disappears? What do I do with these characters?

They're like people who appear in a dream. Do I dishonor them, if I forget the dream? It's my dream, right? I can do what I want with my own dream, can't I?

You can get up and walk out of this dream. You can leave the theater and forget the whole thing. There's nothing wrong with that. Is it wrong if the finest moments in your experience have no past or no future? Do I need snapshots to prove I went to India? Is the journey made real by having a record of it?

Should I be loyal to Walter Wah? What about Steve Brooks? Should I be loyal to him, too? What if Steve Brooks is just as ephemeral as Walter Wah? Steve Brooks. "It's a funny name, but will they buy the carpet?"

Rene Descartes was the philosopher who said, "I think, therefore I am," thereby validating the way we all confirm our existence. One day, Rene Descartes walks into a diner. The waitress says, "Would you like coffee?" Descartes says, "I think not," and disappears. Hold the coffee.

I'm tempted to play characters, one after another. It's the temptation of a performer who's reluctant to reveal the emptiness at the center. I don't mean the awful emptiness. I mean the lively, rich, creative emptiness of nothing. I am, we are all, good at doing nothing, not the nothing that's the absence of something, but the nothing that's the presence of everything.

There's a hesitancy about opening up that nothing, in the presence of others. Only the openness of others to the same sense of empty presence, could make that possible, if not acceptable.

The openness to nothing, that's called anticipation, is the expectation that something is coming, but what if the expectation is that nothing is coming? Like waiting for Godot, and knowing that Godot is nothing, and is already here. And we all run screaming from the room. But, of course, even

that would be **something**. The anticipation of something about to happen is, in itself, nothing, and when something finally shows up, it often seems like less than what we anticipate.

You're witnessing one of my characters, the main character, the one called myself. He likes to speak the unspeakable. It's kind of endearing that he tries. Sometimes, he gets close. He's inarticulate, until he starts articulating, and then he's off and running.

In my second show, there was a character called Perfidio Vitus. After I'd been a poet in San Francisco for seven years, after I'd heard hundreds of poets read their poetry, in dozens of situations, from small groups, to great halls, all over the Bay Area, I wrote a show about poets.

One poet I knew was Sami Farhat. He said he was Persian. I thought he might be Iranian. I was thinking of him when Perfidio Vitus emerged. Like most of the poets in the show, he read two poems. I announced his credits, "Perfidio Vitus' collected poems are called **The Silver Sub-Machine Gun and the White Swans**. And now, Perfidio Vitus."

The Throat of Joy

My woman has great steaming tits,
I love to grab them into heaven of terrible death,

My woman has great American Divide slit, stinking pit,
I dive in with my heart torn in pieces,

When I am dying inside my woman,
like an angel in the middle of Satan's Hell Cunt,

I scream, "I AM LOVER!" and the flowers of our mouths
blossom into the crimson of love's anguish,

Anyone who would come to interrupt us in love's despair,
I would rip his balls apart and eat his teeth for dinner,

She is rosy ass of dawn, and I am
chariot driver of mighty phallus,

She is wonderful moon goddess, and I am
her blazing sun and sexual master.

The Knife of Love

You rotten, stinking money lips,
you grubbing dog of death-shit,

My woman and I will not fuck for your pocketbook,
my woman and I will not kiss your shekel ass,

There is no more love in your heart
than there is hair in a Barbi doll's nose,

My woman and I will be fucking on your grave,
when you are dead and rotting,
you scum-sucking father dollar sign,

We have annihilate you,
you are no longer welcome in our genitals,

My woman and I will be fucking forever,
despite that she is American blonde girl.

Everybody thought I was doing Andre Codrescu, the Romanian poet,
but I didn't think so, at the time. The more I thought about it, since then,
the more it seems that Perfidio isn't anybody but Perfidio. Not Sami, not

Andre, not Steve. Maybe he's a little of them all, and a little of his own, like everybody.

Perfidio has presence. There are different kinds of presence, physical presence, psychological presence, emotional presence, spiritual presence, and then there is the presence that doesn't have any name. It just is. That presence is the presence of being itself. It isn't anything. It isn't physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual. It just is.

It's here, right now. It's everywhere. Everything that is, is in it. This room is a place of presence. This is a place of lively emptiness. Into this shape of presence comes our awareness.

I thought about putting a show together called **Welcome to Heaven**, based on an old AA joke. There are two doors. Above one door, there's a sign that says **Heaven**. Above the other door, a sign says, **Symposium on Heaven**. There's nobody at the **Heaven** door, and there's a huge, long line at the **Symposium** door.

This is your introduction to Heaven. This is your introductory meeting. We're here to let go of our previous existence. The past doesn't mean anything, here. We're in Heaven. I'm your guide. I just got here, myself.

Welcome to Heaven. This is it. There's no more waiting for Godot. I am Godot. You are Godot. We're here in Eternity. You're sitting in a theater in Heaven. I'm standing on a stage in Heaven. You think I'm kidding? This really is Heaven. I'm really an eternal being, and so are you.

You may think you have to be dead to be in Heaven. Do you seem dead to you? Let's take a few years, or a moment between seconds, and think about where we are. I have no voluntary memory, so I need to have some notes, or I'd be completely spontaneous. When I speak, I'm literally

speaking in the past, in a kind of dead language, like a continuous verbal instant replay of reality, but I'll do it, so we can communicate in a way that seems familiar.

Take a look at yourself. What you see is occurring the way it is because it is. Don't worry. It takes a little while to get past these old habits. You have eternity to see through these old ideas, or you can do it in a moment.

Everything I say is only occurring in your thoughts, so, of course, I can't make a mistake here, and neither can you, so we can relax. Here's the way our old thinking process works. Every thought comes into existence like an instantaneous tape delay of this moment of eternity, but thought is the only way we humans have of knowing anything.

Heaven, where we are right now, is between thoughts, and is always true. When we have a thought, we're still holding the past. Every thought we hold onto keeps us just a little bit outside of heaven.

Have you noticed that nothing seems to exist outside your own awareness? The consciousness that defines our personal identity can seem like a prison, like a small room, like this room, but it's also the staging area of the entire universe.

The state of our being is real. Everything is real. Everything in this eternal being, is by the very nature of your reality, real. (bang on something) This is real. This room is real. These bodies are real. Whatever your reality includes is real. Even in heaven. Only our thinking makes everything seem separate from everything else.

Apparently, it's my job to ease the transition from having a human mind to having an eternal awareness. In this Heaven, we have a ready recall of any thought we've ever had, but we don't hold onto thoughts, so

our awareness is open, no thoughts are held, they're let go of. The only problem is in the old way we have of trying to construct some understanding. As humans, we try to make a rational package out of this infinite reality. It's an admirable attempt but of course, **it's futile.**

Fears and desires are useless, here. You're not separate from anything, so there's no need to desire anything. As you get into the flow of things here, you may continue to see yourself and others as separate beings. This is a continuation of perception brought with you from your life on earth.

I, for one, feel a little awkward in my current form. It seems familiar, but we've only been in this form for a short time. You may think that you're sitting in a theater, watching a man talk, but let's look at that.

Has anything ever occurred to you that was outside your awareness? If anything was outside your awareness, as soon as you became aware of it, it was inside your awareness. Inside our awareness, each of us is the center of the universe. And that's always been true. All of us centers of the universe, here, in one place. This must be Heaven.

I have to ask if you are looking at me, or if you are looking at the presence of me. I'm like a drop of food dye in a vat of water. Suddenly, you notice the water. It's a way to see where this coming from, comes from, to see where this being here, is.

Everything in this heaven is you. I'm the introducer to the Heaven of your awareness. I'm a big man. I take up a lot of room. I'm present. I'm big, and I'm inside your awareness, so how big are you?

Are you waiting for God? In order to see God, we have to let go of our old way of seeing. We have to stop looking for something familiar and

recognize the presence that is as great as our presence, as great as our awareness, as great as everything that is.

This is Heaven, if I see it for what it is. If I know it's heaven, but I can't see it, I'm in a kind of limbo. If I don't see it, and I think I'm trapped in a body, then there is no Heaven, and that is a kind of Hell.

Everything that was once important to us is now meaningless. There's nothing here but pure being. Pure as the driven snow. And there's no snow. And there's no heaven, either. There is no glass of water.

There's nothing here, but the presence of being itself.

I've noticed, over the years, that when my attention is on the presence of indescribable emptiness, when I see the empty stage, the empty space, it's the same as having my attention on God. When my attention is on the presence of being itself, without holding onto anything, then, everything comes alive.

The Poem of the Room

My earliest technique, as a poet, was to
look around and describe the room I was in,

My purpose was to be present,
without time's furniture,

The room I'm inclined to describe
is the one I call the roomless room,

It's the same room as any room, uncluttered
of the physical, unfurnished by thought,

To look around and describe the room,

until the room is full, spare, ornate,
current, timeless, empty.

In the Place of Beauty

In this place of beauty,
the air builds rooms of textured detail,

In this place of beauty,
each face is serene, intent, or both,

In this place of beauty, my breathing
is low and soft, like the sigh of a forest,

In this place of beauty, my heart dies and is reborn,

In this place of beauty, my poem speaks
to the other purpose of breath.

The Quick and the Night

Poetry is the occupation of stillness
in the flurry of being,

I am made still, after being still
by nature, by desire, by habit,

Still by the encroachment of death,
still by the amazement of life,

I am still, not against motion, not out of time,
not in stolen truth, but in stillness itself,

To know this being made still,
matched with immortality's stillness,
I am made quick by the meeting,

The quick and the night are the same delight.

Witness to the Miracle

Each life is a miracle, each story is either
witness to the miracle or tries to claim it,

To claim the miracle reduces our place
in the presence of the miraculous,

Each witness can see the inseparable self,
and bask in its unreachable beauty,
at the will of no visible reality,
except in wonder.

The Porcelain Plate

I see the olive oily
pepper slice
slide

From the open faced sandwich
to the porcelain plate below,

And I'm home again
in the room of my eyes,

My heart goes out,
to come in, to the ordinary,

In this room, my roomless heart
is at home,

In this room,
I witness the tiny details

of the endless emptiness
of the miraculous.

The Purest Juice

Here,
are all the secrets, in one,

Here,
is the source
of every creativity,

And the way to taste them all,
the purest juice from the ripest fruit,
the moment of conception, the nursery,
and all its generations,

Here,
is the oracle's cave,
and the shock, at the entrance,
to see eternity, by turning to see

Where it is we have come from,
where it is we have come to,
where it is we go to,
in the same sight.

The Other One

I will never know
this one I call my self,

He never appears where I am,
he appears as some part of me,

I see him in shadow, in reflection,

in photographs, in letters left behind,

I hear him in the words
that come out of my heart,

We seem to be nearly one,
but I am the one,

And he is the one,
who thinks we are not one.

So what happened to my idea, to come out here and do nothing? I've been doing nothing all my life, in everything I've done. I've been doing nothing since I began.

That's true, but it's also a game of words. What about the simple idea of having nothing to say and speaking from the open center? What about being an oracle of this place?

Sami Farhat said, one day, "You know, Steve, after poet comes prophet."

"I'm not ready for that," I said.

I'll tell you a story, without premeditation. I went to India, and I met what is called enlightenment, in many forms. One form was a man who was called a master. It doesn't matter what his name was. He wasn't interested in being famous.

I was on my way to China, to teach. My girlfriend, at the time, was already there. We were planning to teach, in China, twice a year, for a month or two, and then travel in Asia the rest of the time.

She told me a story of Chinese village life. One of the villagers went on a cultural program to New Orleans, and when he returned, he told

everyone what he'd seen and what he'd done. More than that, he told the entire village what **they** had seen and done.

He was who they were, he was an extension of who they were, and they were who he was. They reached out to the world through him. What he did, they did. What he saw, they saw. He was the entire village on a trip to New Orleans. They had all gone to Louisiana, and he wanted to tell them what they had seen.

I want to tell you what you saw in India. I want to tell you what you did, in the company of an enlightened master. I want to tell you what the dirt felt like under your bare feet, on the street, in the crowded thoroughfares. I want to tell you what happened to your heart, and how your mind went wisely and quietly and joyfully to its peace.

But that's enough about that.

My original intention was to create the theatrical equivalent of a poem being written, or a painting being painted, with you as my silent, intuitive collaborator. I don't expect that to happen, without being deliberate about it, and deliberate art is an oxymoron.

The best advice I give myself, in any creativity, is to show up and see what might happen. The best definition of what happened to me in India is **nothing**. What I have to offer is **nothing**. I can offer it, but I can't give it. We can become aware of **nothing**, but we can't receive it.

We dance with each other in language, and something of **nothing** occurs. I'm here to dance, and I'm dancing naked. The emperor has no clothes, and he never has had. My mind goes out of itself. I turn my invisible socks inside out. The emperor has no clothes, and his invisible socks are especially beautiful.

Tim told me a story. He was at home with a roommate, when another roommate came through the door. There was a large glass of orange juice between them. As he came in, the new guy stumbled and kicked the glass. All the orange juice hit Tim in the face, and the glass flew past his head.

In that moment, Tim had a moment of satori. "A zen moment," he says. For a brief, timeless moment, Tim understood all of existence, unrelated to the orange juice or the foot of his friend.

And we ask, "How does satori happen? When does a zen moment occur?"

One guru in India had a habit of pausing during his speaking, at odd times, in unlikely places. He called it **the gap**, a way for others to come into their awareness, apart from the language, which he said was largely irrelevant, anyway.

The gap will find its way into anything, at any time. That same guru also spoke with a soft, lyrical sibilance. I suppose he did that to lift his language out of the familiar. Does our awareness care where we are when it occurs? Does it care about our techniques? It doesn't care.

Here we are, sitting in the crucible. This room is a crucible of awareness. Here we are, lifted from the familiar, disengaged from our routines. Here we are, paying attention. Will awareness occur here and now, in this place? I don't know. It could. Maybe. Maybe not.

The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, says the best way to get a child's attention is not to refer to them, or you, but to a third thing. Here, the third thing is the presence in which everything occurs. Except we come into it as a child, we cannot enter this presence. This is always true, in every situation, but here we are in the soup of awareness.

I can become characters, I can tell you stories from my anecdotal life, I can play myself as the focus of attention, I can talk about you, in the abstract, I can talk philosophy, and, no matter what I do, the magic of our presence doesn't care. I can just see it now, not caring.

I choose to play. Let the gaps fall where they may. And, besides, some gaps occur in the midst of no gap at all.

In the 1930's, a rich family in Vermont was concerned about their beloved son, Roland. He was a drunk, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get sober. His parents sent him to the most respected psychologist in the world, Carl Jung in Zurich, Switzerland.

Roland worked with Jung for a year. After the year passed, Jung called Roland into his office.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I made a mistake. I can't help you. There's nothing I can do."

Roland was stunned, "What do you mean, there's nothing you can do?"

"You are a dipsomaniac. You are addicted to alcohol, and there is no treatment for your condition."

"But, what can I do?"

"You have three choices. You can hire someone to watch you twenty-four hours a day. You can have yourself committed to an institution, where you will be under guard, and kept away from alcohol. Or you will drink. If you drink, you will lose your health, you will lose your mind, or you will die."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"There's only one other possibility."

"What?" said Roland.

“**Very rarely**, someone with an addictive personality such as yours, will have a spiritual experience that will change him completely, and he will lose the desire to drink.”

“How do I get it? Would it help if I went to church?”

“It might. It might not. There’s no guarantee. That’s all I can do for you. I’m sorry. Goodbye.”

Roland left Zurich. He took the boat back to the States. When he landed in New York, he was sober. When he got back to Vermont, he was sober. His parents were amazed. Something had happened to Roland. He’d had a spiritual experience of some kind. A profound spiritual change had occurred.

That moment, in Carl Jung’s office, is the crux of the truth about the surrender to spirituality and creativity. It must happen for one to be free, and it does happen, but how does it happen? It happens. Sounds like fun, don’t you think?

Roland said, “How do I get it?” and Carl Jung said, “I don’t know. Goodbye.”

Roland got it. He got home, and he was sober. He heard about a friend of his who was in jail. Ebbe was an habitual drunk. Roland went to see him and told him what happened to him. Ebbe got sober and went to New York to visit a friend, another drunk from Vermont named Bill. Ebbe told Bill what had happened to him, and Bill had a white light experience in his hospital room.

Eventually, Bill Wilson started Alcoholics Anonymous. That’s cool, but what struck me, in all that, was the moment in Jung’s office when he told Roland what was needed and then said goodbye.

My teacher in India used to say to people, “Are you still here?”

The irony of me standing up here, is that nothing I say or do, can provide the recognition of our presence, and that presence is what I care about, as a poet, as a performer, as a human being. Everything else is window dressing, like the emperor's new socks.

That presence is the source of everything we know as spiritual or creative, and here we are in one of the temples of presence. This presence doesn't have a religion, a philosophy, a training, or a form of any kind. It's literal and not magical. It's not a form of anyone's imagination.

I've noticed, in my experience of becoming characters, that I'm not a good actor. I can only become. This life is the theater of becoming.

I become characters. I become human. I become Steve Brooks. I become who I am. I'm in a constant state of becoming.

The nature of God, or the Universe, or Being Itself, or Existence, is creation from nothing. Nothing is the source, and something comes from it. That's why there are so many different kinds of jellyfish. One or two ought to be sufficient, but that's not the case, in this reality that's born to be born, in endless variations of itself.

The guru I mentioned earlier, the one called Osho, said poets are lucky, because, ". . . they have the opportunity, at the moment of creation, to turn and look and see the source of creation."

But," he said, "they don't do it, because they fall in love with the thing created."

We all do. We fall in love with the thing created, when the thing created can't hold a candle to the original flame. But this is not a problem. The moment of falling in love with the thing created, is also close to the original flame.

Those who fall in love with the thing created are also lucky, because they have the opportunity, at the moment of falling in love, to turn, and look, and see the source. We don't see the source, because we think the object of our love is the source.

This nothing, that I'm playing, is the thing created in our awareness. The character I play is not the source of your awareness. I'm even not the source of my own awareness, much less yours. The presence of our being is the source, and it has no shape and no form. But everything exists in its eternal reality.

Truth And Beauty

Is there a poem, when none is in sight?
Is there a drama on an empty stage?

What's the name of the open-centered self?
What are the words for the wordless present?

What explorer calls out from the unknown,
that none of his kind, nor he, has ever entered?

What do I sing in a silent throat?
Who do I say is standing in this empty clearing?

The poet begins where he is, he stops time,
he looks around, he tells what he sees,

The prophet begins where he ends,
he speaks of nothing to no one, so that
it is, once more, impressed upon the heart,

Truth and beauty speak to each other
in a tongue that neither one understands,

Truth shows itself beauty, beauty speaks truth,
and all the words and images phosphoresce.

The character you see before you has a shape that comes and goes. If anything comes and goes, it isn't real. If anything does not come and go, but is always here, it **is** real. What is real? What is not real?

Our inherent nature is called spiritual. If you pay attention to the presence of your own awareness, you'll discover the reality that we call spiritual. We can't help it, and we can't stop it. I thought I was a poet, and I had a poet's nature. The only reason I thought I had a poet's nature was that, by paying attention, I discovered poetry was a way that people speak clearly about who we are.

I had an English teacher in high school who used to ask, "What is the poet trying to say?"

Even then, I knew the poet wasn't **trying** to say anything. The true poet was saying it. John Ciardi says, "It isn't what a poem means, it's what a poem does." A good poem has a presence. Presence is what it does. If you feel the presence of a poem, it's because your own presence recognizes **itself**. You recognize yourself in anything you call good.

I was in a museum in Honolulu, many years ago, just after my first one man show. That show proved to be devastating to my sense of personal self. I was shaken by the experience. Susan Kennedy told me, later, what had happened to me.

"Before you did your show, you had a nice safe Steve Brooks persona. Everybody liked you. Then, you went out on stage, and you blew it to smithereens."

“Oh, yeah,” I said. Her remarks were a revelation.

The museum in Hawaii was a kind of indoor-outdoor series of galleries. I turned a corner, and I came upon a painting of Gauguin’s. I stood alone, in that tropical setting, looking at a painted canvas, a floral scene, I seem to recall.

What I do recall, was the state of being I experienced. I’m a painter, but what happened next wasn’t a common experience for me. I walked up to the painting, and I walked back. I saw color and line and even bare canvas. I was in a state of benign shock. I was in awe. I was in wonder. I felt a vibrant stillness, just like the painting seemed to have.

Another man came into that part of the museum, and I felt as if I’d been caught in prayer, and masturbation, at the same time. I was in a **state of erotic wonder**. Stripped of my nice, safe Steve Brooks persona, I was free to experience my unfettered heart, my real self, in front of a painting.

I notice the characters I become. The Texas father and Perfidio Vitus are sexual, angry, passionate, confused. Oh, wait a minute, so is almost everybody else. The nature of creativity is sensual, if not sexual, and it’s spiritual, if not holy.

This character I am, is happiest and freest in a state of erotic wonder, and nothing can be done to induce that state. Nothing. Why? Because it’s always true, and it’s always present.

There’s nothing to do to induce what’s always present and always true. I say this slowly and distinctly, for my own benefit.

Why am I talking to you about this? Usually, this stuff is bandied about among spiritual types, in spiritual communities, for the mutual enlightenment of people who are, by their nature, inclined to be free of worldly concerns and inclined to embrace their eternal selves.

That's exactly why I'm here, talking to you. I believe I have described everyone on the face of the earth. We are all in a process of reconciling our sense of separation, and everyone of us is trying to surrender to the reconnected whole.

In religious terms, God wants to re-unite with God. In philosophical terms, the truth wants to be true.

Everybody wants to surrender and be free. We try everything we can think of to accomplish it. We surrender to each other, to groups, to gangs, to countries, to wars, to leaders, to idols, to ideas, to plans, to desires, to dreams, to politics, to religion, to literature, to art, to adventure, to conflict, to sleep, to food, to alcohol, to drugs, to death. The Seven Deadly Sins are clumsy attempts to surrender.

And we almost get it right. We surrender to the presence of our own awareness, in our sleep, in our hearts, and in our souls, where surrender is the order of the day.

I asked the man in India about surrender. He said, "Yes, surrender. The only problem with surrender is that almost nobody does it."

This is all very simple. It's not what I surrender to that gives me my sense of fulfillment and freedom, it is the act of surrender itself.

Our being here is what allows this place to be called a theater. Whatever occurs in this surrender may be good or bad, but it isn't the source of our joy and delight. It's only the object of the being that we are, by our very nature.

I'm here to bask in surrender, and it's got nothing to do with me. I've discovered that the nature of theater is in this presence, in the surrender to this presence, in the presence of this surrender.

When I first heard the man in India talking, two very strange things happened to me. The first day I was there, I heard another human being say what I knew to be true, and **doubt disappeared from my mind.**

When something like that happens, like the abrupt absence of anything, it shows how much and how long it's been present. I suspect my doubt was ordinary human doubt, a kind of sludge, built up over thousands and thousands of years. It's the sense that we can't trust ourselves to know anything so simple and so profound. That doubt disappeared, and it's never come back.

The second thing that happened was a sense of reality. After awhile, I told him I didn't feel more spiritual, I felt more real. I said a dull gray human shape had slipped out of me, fallen, sank, flowed down into the ground beneath my feet, and was gone. I don't care about the image, but that I felt more real.

I used to be afraid, and I didn't trust love. On the plane coming back from Katmandu to Hong Kong, drifting in a restful half sleep, I knew, in a moment of clarity, with no voices and no thought, with no characters and no personality, that love was real, and fear was not real.

Simple as that.

There is knowledge, and there is real knowledge. Real knowledge has a presence in which thought and feeling become clear. No shape, no form, only presence. It is. You are. I am.

Many years ago, I said to myself, one day, "If it was simple, someone would write a very short book, and we'd all relax."

It's ever simpler than that. No book is necessary. Books are only necessary when they seem necessary. There's no difficult question, when

you already know the answer. The question is unnecessary, because the answer is always present.

Books aren't necessary. Books are play. Play is what reality does, when nothing is necessary.

Am I crazy, because I become different characters, and I think about nothing? I could be, if I didn't know the unchanging reality, and if I didn't enjoy everything else for what it is.

Everything, that we are, is an extension of the life of the Universe. Think about God, for a second. God is the personification of the absolute, eternal, unknowable, unlimited, inexpressible totality. That's us, too. We give that totality a name and human motivations, just like we give ourselves.

The incomprehensible vastness is called He. This is like pointing to the center of the deepest part of the Ocean and saying, "Bob." Bob is a good name for what's apparent on the surface.

The totality of existence is everywhere, inside and out. It doesn't stop somewhere and start up somewhere else. Eternity is the same thing. Eternity doesn't just exist before we're born and after we die. This is Eternity, right now. We live in the deepest part of Eternity. We are deep in the totality. It can't be any other way.

The Eternal Being is the same as my being, the same as your being. I know this is true, because it's true, and I recognize it in myself. In the same way that Being includes every little thing, my Being, who I am, loves all the little things that occur, like voices and characters. My life is full of voices and characters. I can't go anywhere without bumping into some of the six billion characters now living on this planet.

This room is full of characters, and, in the deepest part of our Being, we are the absolute, eternal, unknowable, unlimited, inexpressible totality, the incomprehensible vastness, the unchanging self.

It's beyond our understanding, but it's not beyond our recognition. When recognition occurs, everything else becomes the exquisite transiency of life, beautiful and wonderful, awful and cruel. And that's also who we are. That's part of who we are.

This is the only character I have left. I discovered, early on, that I was a blank slate, and my character was interchangeable with any number of characters. When I hear about people with multiple personalities, I think, "Only 20 personalities? Only 200?"

Beyond personality is character. Beyond character is soul. Beyond soul is the end of all distinctions and the recognition of Being Itself.

Instead of trying to develop one cohesive character, I discovered the source of all character, and this particular character became cohesive by its nature. I no longer think I'm making it up. In fact, I'm not **doing** anything.

When I was sitting with the man in India, one day, a big, handsome, young German stood up. There were a lot of Germans in India. They always seemed to ask well-thought out, sincere, and articulate questions. The Americans, on the other hand, would blurt out whatever they were thinking, or not thinking.

This man was with his beautiful German girlfriend. He asked a question. He was polite and deferential.

"Papaji," he said, "I want to ask you a question."

"Yes, what is it?"

"My friend and I have plans to go to the beach in Thailand. I want to know if it is OK. We like very much to be here with you, but we have plans

for our travel, and I need to know if it is OK with you for us to go to the beach in Thailand.”

Papaji laughed, “Yes, of course. Go to the beach in Thailand. Go wherever you like. You can have this, anytime. You can have this, now, or you can wait a hundred lifetimes, if you wish. Do whatever you want. Go to the beach in Thailand. It is very beautiful, there.”

What he said was beautiful. You can come into this recognition, anytime. There’s no hurry. Take as long as you want. And, I say, the beach in Thailand is the same as everything else. Recognition can come, anywhere, anytime, even on the beach in Thailand.

Buddha sat under a tree, after seven years of searching for the truth. He sat under a tree, **and something happened.**

And nobody knows what.

The problem is; you can’t make a religion out of that.

Or a one man show, either.

Carl Jung said to Roland, “All you need is a transformative spiritual experience, and I can’t tell you how to get it. Goodbye.”

The joy, in that, is almost overwhelming.

As Ferris Beuller says, standing in the family kitchen, in his robe and slippers, at the end of his movie, while the credits roll across the screen, “Are you still here?”