

Growing up online:
teens, social media
and who belongs
here anyway?




Goals

- To present a perspective on technology and mental health in the 21st century.
- To explore through a dialectical lens.
- “Dialectics” refers to the way complex systems produce apparent “contradictions” or “paradoxes.”
- I hope you find this exploration useful and supportive.




Topics

- Growth and development.
 - Implicit learning.
 - Stability and flexibility.
 - The culture of buying and selling.
 - The role of adaptive AI.
 - Options and alternatives.
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How do we learn?

- How do parents “teach” their children a language?
- One possible answer: “they don’t.”
- They simply talk to them.
- And listen to them talking back.
- Over time, patterns show up.



Implicit learning

- Behavior + social connections can lead to complex patterns.
- THIS DOES NOT REQUIRE CONSCIOUS AWARENESS!



Robert Sapolsky

“With enough quantity,
extraordinary quality
just...emerges, often even
unpredictably.”



A dialectic

- Patterns in systems can be BOTH stable AND flexible at the same time – this is quite interesting (and amazing)!
- Cultures, as patterns, can be both very stable and very flexible at the same time.

What cultures do we learn?

- “Consumer culture.”
- “Retail therapy.”

- A culture of “buying and selling.”

Is consumption “healthy” or “unhealthy”?

- As with all things dialectical, I suspect the answer is “it depends.”
- I would like to focus on situations in which “consumer culture” becomes compulsive.



Compulsion

- I am thinking of a compulsion as a behavior which the individual struggles to bring under conscious control.

- Remember: Patterns may show up in systems without any conscious intent or awareness.



What's the consequence?

- When we live in an environment centered on buying and selling, what happens to our sense of self?
- What happens when children and teens are swept up by this pattern before they have the capacity to keep themselves safe.
- What happens to adults who are caught up?

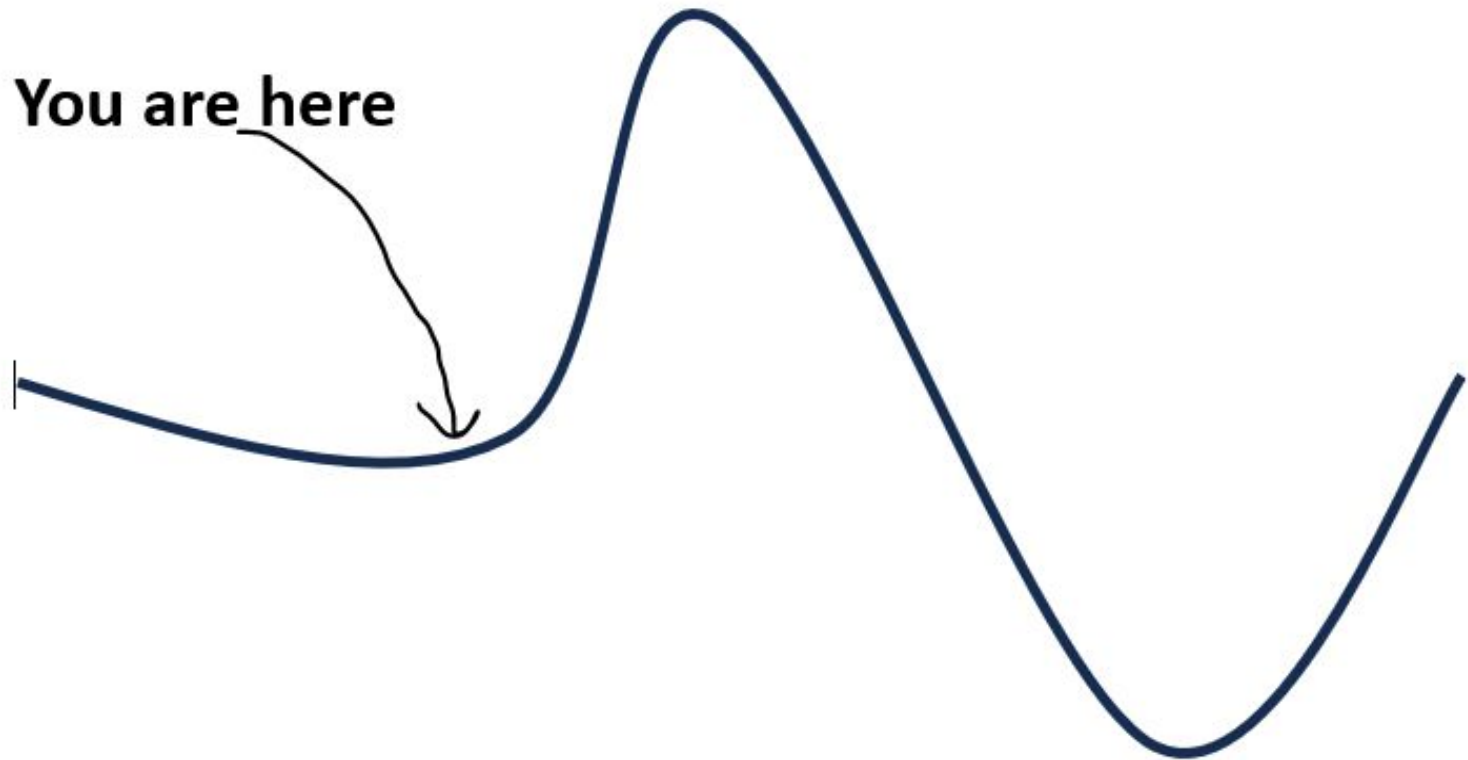
“Getting stuck”

- Patterns are often responses to environmental challenges.
- Example: Humans often want to “fit in” with their social group.
- Adaptation tends to make “re-adaptation” difficult.
- Example: It can be difficult adapt to a new culture, or to learn a new language.

Why?

- Imagine you are running a company that makes cars.
- You want to lower your costs of production.
- You find a method of doing this. You have adapted.
- Later, a new method of lowering costs is invented.
- But it costs “too much money” to move to this new method.
- You can’t access the more optimal method.
- You are “stuck” with the original method.

People are doing their best



The curious “stability” of suffering

- People can live with chronic suicidality for decades and not commit suicide.
- People can live with chronic substance addiction for decades and not die of an overdose.

The dialectic of order

- Order, consistency and stability can do two things at the same time:
 - Prevent us from accessing a more healthy state (i.e. block recovery from the illness).
 - Prevent us from accessing a less healthy state (i.e. prevent dying from the illness).

“A new normal” is difficult

- Moving towards a new state (healthy or harmful) often requires a qualitative change in the whole system...
- ...which may be difficult to achieve, and difficult to predict...

The world of social media...

- ...represents one of those systems which can be very difficult to change because it has adapted to an ecology (circumstances).
- And not just the internet.
- This also includes the entire system of compulsive consumption.

Social media as a world of buying and selling

- A bias towards compulsive consumption can be super charged in the world of social media.
- Example: People post a selfie of themselves (“the product”) and receive social attention (“the reward”) or social disapproval (“the punishment”).
- After posting, people compulsively check the “value” of the online product.

The system is adapted

- This is a complex system which has adapted to a specific challenge.
- And, naturally, has difficulty accessing other states.
- The state of the system is such that individuals become disconnected from each other and from themselves.
- Ironic, since social media is ostensibly about “connection.”

Two big problems (at least)


- The “if you feel anxious just buy or sell something” message, which is related to...
- ...“self invalidation” (people becoming disconnected from themselves and others).
- The world oriented towards compulsive consumption fits the DBT definition of “the invalidating environment.”

Invalidating environment

- The invalidating environment is the environment that does not recognize the nature of the way things are.
- Specifically, that does not recognize the nature of emotional challenges.



Healthy development

- To meet life's emotional challenges, we need to develop skills, not buy more things or accumulate likes on social media.
 - To meet life's challenges we need to develop a healthy sense of self that exists in balance (dialectic) with the demands of the environment.
- 



IOW

- The world oriented towards compulsive buying and selling, an invalidating environment, makes life's challenges look much easier than they really are.
- The world oriented towards compulsive buying and selling, an invalidating environment, neglects the acquisition of much needed skills....
- ...and heavily reinforces un-skillful behavior.

Long before the internet

- This has been going on for at least several hundred years.
- This is the classic problem of “nihilism.”
- Nihilism is a fancy term for “giving up,” or “the belief that nothing matters.”
- Many authors have tried to warn us.

Michelle and Barack Obama have tried to warn us

- Barack Obama takes on 'woke' call-out culture: 'That's not activism'
- Michelle Obama: 'When they go low, we go high'

What were the Obamas talking about?

- I believe that the alternative to nihilism is what psychologists call “executive function.”
- This is the part of the brain that sets priorities and modulates impulsive behavior.
- Executive function is very active, and this serves as an alternative to compulsion / addiction which is very passive.



Quick summary

- Consumption can become compulsive.
- Compulsive consumption is an invalidating environment tending towards nihilism.
- People can be caught up in this system without knowing it.
- Nihilism has been a concern for centuries (at least).

The modern internet...


- ...now involves computers that can adapt, in real time, to our behaviors.
- Computers can actively learn to intensify our involvement with the world of compulsive consumption.
- Computers are actively involved in the intensification of nihilism.

Addiction...with a twist...

- This is no longer the same type of compulsive behavior (“addiction”) we have seen in the past.
- The nature of addiction has radically changed.



The new system

- Now the addictive product is delivered by a computer which is alert to subtle changes in human behavior.
 - Computers are able to adapt in real time.
 - To increase the addictive potential of the product.
- 



Furthermore

- Social media makes use of the human tendency to want to “fit in” with the group.
- This is an incredibly powerful mammalian trait preserved over millions of years of evolution.
- The combination of this tendency with new computer technology has created the “perfect storm” we see in today’s social media addiction.

What about a dialectic?

- Can social media use be healthy?
- Can the internet be useful?

- As with many things dialectical, I believe the answer is....“yes, maybe” and “it depends.”



Data

- If you want to review the data on tech and social media addiction, I recommend the work of three authors in particular:
- Jean Twenge
- Jonathan Haidt
- Judson Brewer

Jonathan Haidt:

- "...And right now, I think we're seeing the greatest destruction of human capital and potential in human history outside of the two world wars, because this is happening on a vast scale. Young people have basically given up all their attention to a few companies."
- --Author of "The Anxious Generation" shares his views on social media and children's mental health | AMA Update Video | AMA



Response?

- My response to these concerns is not to offer you advice or tell you what to do.
- My goal here is to explore ideas and options.
- And to clarify the model we use in DBT and at the BPD Alliance in the FC and MSTR programs.
- As a way of inviting dialogue and social support.



Clinical conditions?


- Professional help from licensed clinicians is sometimes necessary for clinical conditions like addictions, depression, anxiety, trauma, etc.

Mindful parenting in a digital age?

- “What has never arisen does not have to be annihilated.”
- This Zen Buddhist principle lies at the heart of DBT.
- In that DBT is not about “preventing suicide.”
- Rather, it is about “Building a Life Worth Living,” in which suicide naturally becomes irrelevant.

The ecology of behavior

- DBT is about the ecology of behavior:
- Under what ecological conditions do suicidality and chronic self harm emerge?
- Under what ecological conditions do suicidality and chronic self harm fade away and eventually disappear?



DBT is about orientation, not prevention

- We ORIENT in one specific direction, consistently.
- By orienting in a specific direction, we cultivate growth.
- More like a gardener than anything else.



Robert Sapolsky

To understand human behavior, “approach the problem as if this were a cloud that does not rain, rather than as a watch that does not tick.”

This principle applied to parenting

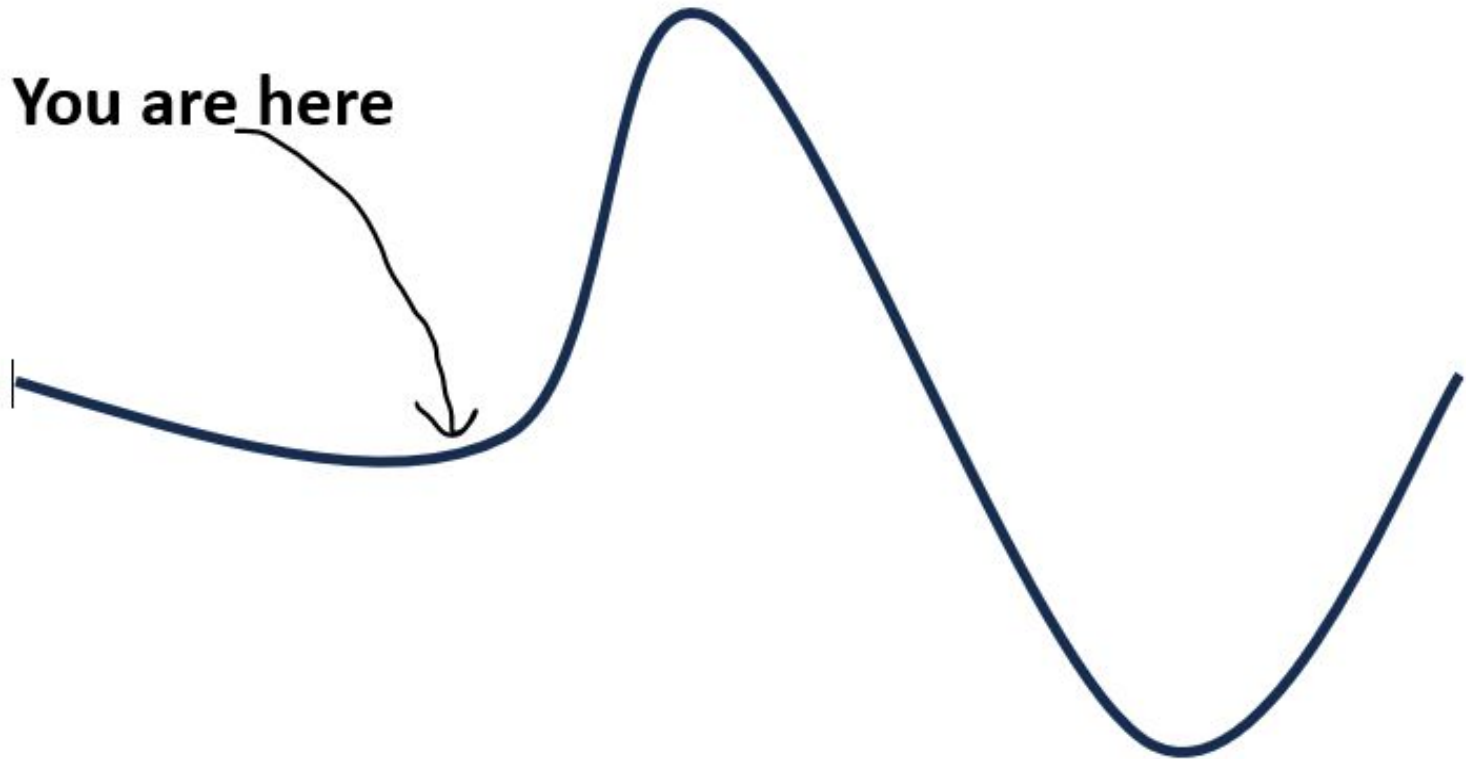
- How can a parent cultivate the ecological conditions under which addiction becomes less relevant?
- Or completely irrelevant?
- Because: “what has never arisen does not need to be annihilated.”

Ecological Change

- The gardener cultivates a “local” ecology designed to thrive in the more “global” ecology.
- Requires persistence and compassion.
- Because remember: adaptation makes re-adaptation difficult...
- ...though it is not impossible!

People are doing their best

You are here





Warm structured parenting

- love + limits
- validation + structure

Authoritative not authoritarian

- observing limits and supporting family values, for example:
 - Tech and consumer free “zones” within the family.
 - Monitoring and structuring use of tech and the pursuit of commodities.
 - Limits on younger children access to tech and the accumulation of commodities.




Community

- Seeking out others in the community who share one's values.

- ...tech light families?
- ...tech light schools?
- ...tech light activities?



“Tech light” Activities

- volunteering
 - sports
 - music, art, theater, writing
 - camping, hiking, exploring nature
- 



Setting people up for success

- Structuring the environment (“cultivate the ecology”) as much as possible to set people up for success.
- **ORIENTING** one’s self and, to the extent possible the environment, in the desired direction.



Orienting away...

... from nihilism...



...And orienting towards...

Effort

Dignity

Awareness

Discipline

Coping

Example

- A parent could decide that one day per quarter, the entire family will volunteer at community center, and that phones will be left at home during this activity.
- Why?
- Because that's what the parent has decided is consistent with the values of the family!
- This will not be easy for a teen who has already developed some significant addiction to their phone or the accumulation of "wealth."



We must “dig deep” for our own skills

- I believe we must cultivate a great deal of compassion and persistence.
- If most people are speaking “nihilism,” it may be difficult to learn to speak “anti-nihilism.”

One general principle

- I think of addictions and compulsions as the manifestations of a very passive mind.
- The alternative, therefore is all about cultivating active mind.
- Note: an active mind does not have to be a “loud” or “conspicuous” mind.
- Active mind can be an internal state, not always obvious to outside observers.



MBSR

- Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction is a science based meditation method developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- For example: Brown University's 8 week online MBSR program.



My teacher

- My own meditation teacher, Will Kabat-Zinn, has an in person and online group:
- <https://sundaysangha.net/>

Why meditation?

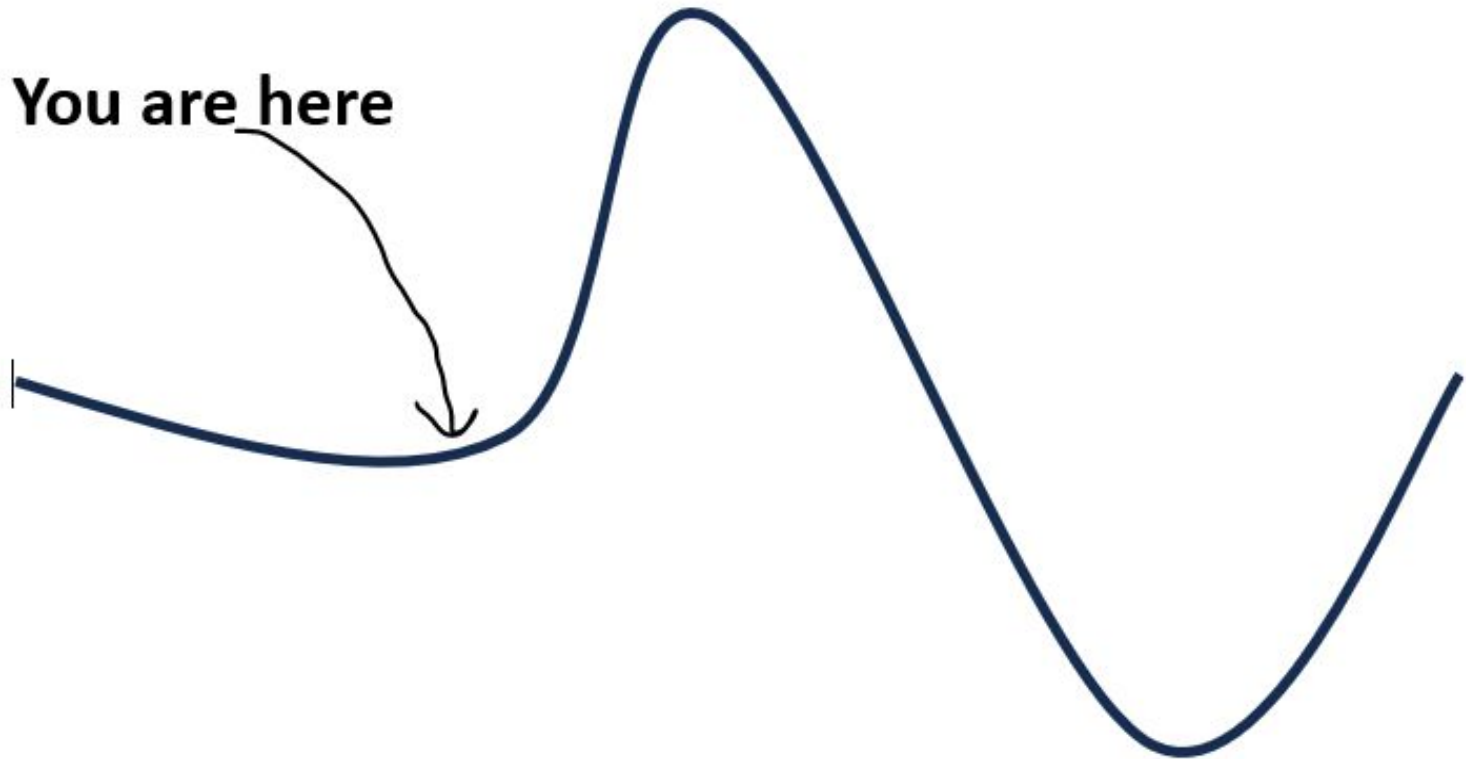
- The critical function that is often absent and/or overwhelmed in addiction is called “executive function.”
- Executive function is the slow response system which allows us to follow rules, set priorities, inhibit impulses, resists unhealthy urges, and think critically about the world and our actions.
- Meditation is a “mental workout” that strengthens executive function.

Stability and flexibility

- Meditation involves the cultivation of BOTH stability of practice AND the flexibility to adapt to one's moment by moment experience.
- Meditation itself is a dialectical exercise.
- The ability to “adapt and re-adapt” to one's experience moment by moment.
- Meditation is about noticing the difference, internally, between active mind and passive mind.


We intend to do better

You are here



Cultivation not consumption

- Notice that meditation is not about “achieving” or “purchasing” mental health recovery.
- To try to “purchase” recovery in this way is to use the illness to try to cure the illness.
- The solution compulsive consumption is not more consumption.
- The active, meditative mind is not always “obvious” to outside observers, just because it has let go of obvious forms of “buying and selling.”



“What has never arisen does not have to be annihilated.”

References and resources: websites

- [The CRAFT Approach - Partnership to End Addiction](#)
- [Find a Certified Clinician - DBT-LBC](#)
- [Dialectical Behavior Therapy - Training & Education](#)
- [The Office of His Holiness The Dalai Lama | The 14th Dalai Lama](#) Essay entitled “Compassion and the Individual”
- [Health advisory: Artificial intelligence and adolescent well-being](#)

References and resources: Books

- *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman
- *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* by Sunstein, Kahneman, and Sibony
- *The Craving Mind* by Judson Brewer
- *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt
- *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Jonathan Haidt
- *iGen* by Jean Twenge
- *Healing the Soul Wound* by Eduardo Duran

References and resources: Books

- *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts
- *Building a Life Worth Living: A Memoir* by Marsha Linehan
- *Behave* by Robert Sapolsky
- *Determined* by Robert Sapolsky
- *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *Chaos: Making a New Science* by James Gleick
- *Notes on Complexity* by Neil Theise
- *Linked: the New Science of Networks* by Albert-Laszlo Barabasi

References and resources: Books

- *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn
- *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty
- *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* by Richard Rorty
- *The Liberalism of Fear* by Judith Shklar
- *Ordinary Vices* by Judith Shklar

References and resources: Books and Articles

- *Playfulness, "World"-Traveling, and Loving Perception* by Maria Lugones
- *All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks
- *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks
- Wang, X., Zhu, H., Zhao, Q., Song, C., & Wang, X. (2023). The link between self-uncertainty and conspicuous consumption: Tolerance of uncertainty as a moderator. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1066938.

References and resources: film and video

- [Chaos Theory: Unravelling The Universe With One Simple Equation](#) by Jim Al-Khalili
- [Finding Order in Chaos \(with toy bugs\)](#)
- [21. Robert Sapolsky Chaos and Reductionism](#)
- [22. Robert Sapolsky Emergence and Complexity](#)
- [This equation will change how you see the world \(the logistic map\)](#) by Derek Muller (Veritasium)
- [You've \(Likely\) Been Playing The Game of Life Wrong](#) by Derek Muller (Veritasium)
- [System Dynamics: Systems Thinking and Modeling for a Complex World](#)
- [Appearance: Evil Dictator Pulling Strings | Reality: Emergent Behavior of System](#)

References and resources: film and video

- ["Godfather of AI" Geoffrey Hinton: The 60 Minutes Interview](#)
- [Why It Was Almost Impossible To Solve Protein Folding \(But AI Did\)](#) by Derek Muller
- [AlphaGo - The Movie | Full award-winning documentary](#)
- [The Thinking Game | Full documentary | Tribeca Film Festival official selection](#)
- [Jonathan Haidt: The moral roots of liberals and conservatives](#)
- [Jonathan Haidt: Religion, evolution, and the ecstasy of self-transcendence](#)
- [Dr. Judson Brewer - "The Craving Mind"](#)