



18. A WITNESS TO LIFE



In 2009, starting on my thirtieth birthday, I began a simple practice of taking a photo and writing a short story each day, and posting them online each night before going to sleep. I continued this daily ritual for **440 days**, calling the resulting project *Today*.

I began *Today* in order to become more conscious of my life experience as it was happening, to create more vivid memories, and to explore my relationship with time.

During the process, it occurred to me that others could benefit from exploring a similar practice, so I created a storytelling platform called *Cowbird*, where anyone could share their life stories.

Cowbird launched in December of 2011 — offering a deeper, slower, more contemplative (and ad-free) alternative to existing online spaces like *Twitter* and *Facebook*.

The vision was to create a “public library of human experience” so that the wisdom accrued in individual lifetimes could live on as a part of the commons.

Cowbird quickly attracted a community of over 15,000 storytellers from dozens of countries, who used the space to share heartfelt, personal stories.

Sensing its further potential, I arranged a seed round of \$500,000 from a handful of Silicon Valley investors — but at the last minute decided not to take the money, realizing that accepting the investment would set *Cowbird* on an immutable path defined by the pressures of growth.

So *Cowbird* remained a labor of love, but without the capital to invest in a technical or marketing team, the project was soon eclipsed by newer offerings such as *Medium* and *Instagram*.

By 2016, the *Cowbird* community had coalesced around a group of about 150 authors, who spent huge amounts of time on the platform, commenting on one another’s stories.

When I tuned in from time to time, I was struck by the sense that *Cowbird* had become an addictive and unhealthy space — an emotional crutch for people who longed for a deeper sense of connection (a need that I knew a website could never truly meet).

In 2017, I made the difficult decision to close *Cowbird* to new contributions, while keeping it online as an historical archive for the sake of posterity — a decision that was met with great sadness and frustration from within that core group of authors.

In order to help them process their grief around the loss of this platform they loved, I invited those authors to visit me in Vermont later that summer — to meet one another in person, and to share stories together around an actual bonfire.

That July, around forty *Cowbird* authors traveled from Spain, Norway, Japan, Canada, and many American states to converge at **High Acres Farm** for a three-day gathering.

On the first night, we cooked steak (**cow**) and on the second night, chicken (**bird**). We hosted an “open-mic” slideshow where each author was invited to present his or her favorite *Cowbird* story to the rest of the group. Then we shifted to the High Acres Farm beach, where we had a joyful bonfire next to the water, with moonlit swimming under the stars.

On the final morning of our gathering, we performed this gentle ritual together, as a way of closing *Cowbird*.

In a grove of ash trees next to the water, I hang a collection of my mother’s sterling silver picture frames, after removing their glass and their backings.



The empty frames are carefully placed to highlight pieces of moss, leaves, twigs, tree bark, and other exquisite details of the forest.

I invite the *Cowbird* authors to enter the grove with bare feet and in silence, as quiet witnesses to what they perceive, embodying *Cowbird*'s longtime motto: "A Witness to Life".

Each author is invited to find a frame that resonates, to take it into their hands, and eventually to carry it home as a gift.

Through the shining rectangles of these simple silver frames, the authors examine the trees, the brook, the ground, and one another.

The silver frames help them see that every act of perception is itself an act of framing.

Cowbird the website is no longer needed.

As **Toni Morrison** writes in her novel, *Tar Baby*:

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. It is enough.

This brief film is accompanied by the beautiful song of the **Hermit Thrush**, Vermont's state bird, which **Walt Whitman** called "nature's finest sound".

Alongside the birdsong is the constant sound of flowing water from a vernal stream traveling into the lake — as though these peaceful visitors, merely through their attentive presence alone, are nourishing the landscape. And so they are.

Performed in 2017 — Duration 3:08

