0051 My Primal Scream

The Fundamental Preface · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/0051-my-primal-scream/

There is a table somewhere tonight where two people are sitting down to eat. One of them has been carrying something all week — a week that went badly, a phone call that landed wrong, a fear that has not yet been said out loud. The other one does not know it yet. The room around them is warm or it is not. The bread arrives or it does not. The server looks at them or looks past them. The light is right or the light is too bright. The music lives at a volume that lets them hear each other or it does not. Everything in that room — every surface, every sound, every interval between a glass being set down and a question being asked — is either helping those two people find each other tonight or it is getting in the way.

That room is what I have spent forty-four years protecting.

Not the P&L of the room. Not the concept of the room. Not the brand of the room. The with of the room. The fact that two people can sit down inside four walls that someone built on purpose and be more fully with each other there than they could be anywhere else. That is what hospitality is. That is what hospitality has always been. Everything else the industry does — the menus, the systems, the margins, the design decks, the loyalty programs, the tech stacks, the consultants, the decks within decks — everything else is in service to that, or it is a distraction from it, and there is no third category.

I am a romantic. I should say that now because it will explain everything that comes after it. My romance is not with the industry. My romance is not with the craft. My romance is not with the aesthetic or the lineage or the lifestyle or any of the other sentimental objects the business likes to dress itself up in. My romance is with the shape life takes when it is lived well in relationship to living with others. Hospitality is the name for that shape. The table, the room, the night, the exchange — those are the instruments. The with is the music. I have been in love with the with since I was a boy, and I will be in love with it until I am not here anymore, and The Operator's Playbook is the longest sentence I have ever written on the subject.

I am also about to scream.

Not yell. I have used that word with myself for a while. The word was wrong. A yell is a choice. A yell has a volume knob. A yell is something a person does when they have decided it is time to be

louder. What is coming out of me now is not that. It is involuntary. It starts below the throat. It starts at the ground of the organism. It is the sound a body makes when it has held something for too long and the holding has become the thing that hurts. In psychological terms it is referred to as the primal scream. That is the correct word, and I want it on the first page because I want you to understand from the first page that this is not a thought leadership exercise. This is not a content strategy. This is not a positioning move. This is the noise I am making because I cannot not make it anymore.

Forty-four years of silence is not patience. It is compression.

Service is in my blood. It is in my marrow. The silence was not actually silent, to be honest about it. For forty-four years I have been persuading — one conversation at a time, one operator at a time, one room at a time, one staff meeting at a time, one walk-through at a time, one late-night phone call at a time. I have been saying the thing I am about to say, quietly, to whoever was in front of me, for longer than most people in this industry have been alive. That work is not over. It continues tomorrow. What is different now is that the voice is armed. The Operator's Playbook is the armament. It lets what I have been saying one-to-one travel to rooms I will never stand inside. The scream is not a replacement for the conversations. The scream is what the conversations have been carrying underneath the whole time, finally set down in a form that can go where I cannot.

I want to tell you why it is coming out now instead of last year or the year before or ten years ago.

I lost my son. I lost my mother. I lost my father. In the same year. I am not going to write their names here. Their names live in the dedication, where they belong, where the one who stood by me through it is also named. I will not pull them onto this page because this page is not the room they belong in. What I will say is that when you lose the people who formed the first with of your life — the ones who taught you what it was to be in a room with other people and feel held there — you either come apart or you come back to the ground. I came back to the ground. And when I came back, I looked at the industry I had given my life to and I could not pretend anymore. I could not pretend the conversations were enough. I could not pretend someone else was going to say it. I could not pretend that the thing that had been underneath my voice for forty-four years was not, in fact, a scream that had been waiting for a reason.

The reason came.

Not one reason. A pattern. A reflex the industry had been running on for as long as I had been in it, and running harder every year. The reflex that treats hospitality as something you produce

rather than something you are. The reflex that treats the room as a revenue unit, the Guest as a conversion event, the cast as a labor line, the night as a ticket count. The reflex has a name now. The name is Road 1.

I am not making this sound because I am angry, though I am angry. I am making this sound because the with is under attack. The attack is structural. It lives inside the ordinary operations of the industry itself. It lives inside the transactional reflex that treats every room as a revenue unit and every Guest as a conversion event and every staff member as a labor input and every night as a ticket count. It is running every time an operator optimizes away the detail that made the room feel like a room. It is running every time a brand replaces a host with a screen because the screen is cheaper. It is running every time a chain discovers that it can simulate the feeling of hospitality without the practice of it and decides that the simulation is good enough. It is running every time the with is treated as a nice-to-have rather than the thing the business is actually for.

This is the sharpest thing I will say, and I want it on the record early: a hospitality business that has stopped practicing the with has not become more efficient. It has stopped being a hospitality business. It has become something else — a transaction venue, a food-delivery service, a lodging product, a beverage outlet — wearing the costume of hospitality while quietly removing the organ.

The industry does not talk about this because the industry's largest voices are institutionally invested in pretending it is not happening. Their margins depend on it not being said. Their platforms are built on top of the thing they are hollowing out. They cannot admit the hollowing without admitting the cost.

I have no such investment. I have forty-four years of rooms and the people who worked in them and the people who ate in them and I have the scream, and I am going to spend the whole of The Operator's Playbook making the scream articulate.

There are two roads in this industry. I am going to name them here and then The Operator's Playbook will spend the rest of what follows walking you down one of them.

The first road is the road most of the industry is on. It is the road of transaction. It is the road of singularity — of treating each Guest as a unit, each shift as a shift, each night as a night, each metric as a metric, each role as a seat to fill. Most of the industry is on this road, and transactional, and they don't even know it. On this road, hospitality is something you do. You do service. You do menu. You do décor. You do experience design. You do loyalty. You do retention. You do reputation management. Everything is a verb aimed at a KPI. The with, on this road, is an accident.

Sometimes it happens. When it does, the operator takes credit. When it does not, the operator blames the Guest, the staff, the market, the weather, the economy, the reviews. The road looks sophisticated. It produces a great deal of revenue. It has killed more operators than anything else in my lifetime, because it is built on a category error — it treats hospitality as a thing you do, when hospitality is a thing you are. You didn't build a relationship on this road. You bought a transaction — and transactions don't compound.

The second road is the road The Operator's Playbook is for. It is the road of threading — of treating the operator, the staff, the Guest, the room, the night, and the industry as a single continuous fabric that you are either honoring or tearing. On this road, hospitality is not what you do. It is who you are. You run the business the way you run your life, because the life and the business are made of the same material — you, in relationship to other people, trying to make the with work under conditions that are always trying to break it. This road has fewer people on it. Its operators are harder to find. Its rooms are unmistakable when you walk into them. Its staffs stay longer. Its Guests come back for reasons they cannot always articulate. Its margins are, over time, better — but that is a side effect, not the point. What cannot be copied is the with. A competitor can match your price. A competitor can replicate your menu. A competitor can hire your manager out from under you. A competitor cannot replicate what happens between the people in your room when the with is being practiced as a discipline. The second road is a practice that only deepens with time. The first road is a treadmill that only slows down when the operator breaks.

The Operator's Playbook is the map for the second road. It is also the argument against the first. It is also the indictment of the people who are still pretending the first road is the only road there is.

I owe you one more thing before I let you go into the material itself, and it is the sentence the whole thing rests on.

I am writing this as an operator. I have run the rooms. I have stood the shifts. I have fired the people I should not have had to fire and hired the people I wish I had found earlier. I have been the bottleneck on my own business more times than I can count. I have made every mistake that is available to make in this work, and I have made some new ones on top of that. I know the thing no one understands who has not felt it — worn out by weeks of open-to-closes and getting back up to do it again, and again, and again, trying to fight through the tiredness, the self-doubt, the turbulence in the mind about continuing or moving on. I am not writing from a consultant's chair. I am writing from the stage. Everything in what follows has been paid for — in reps, in losses, in nights, in money, in relationships, in the slow expensive education of being wrong about things I was sure of.

You are who I wrote this for.

But I want you to understand that I am not writing this because I do hospitality for a living.

I am writing this because hospitality is the shape my life takes. The business is downstream of the life. The operator is downstream of the person. The room is downstream of the with. I run the business the way I run my mornings, my marriage, my friendships, my grief, my reading, my thinking, my body. There is no mode-switch. There is no work-self and home-self. There is one self, doing one practice, in different rooms.

This isn't what I do. It's who I am.

That sentence is the whole thing. Everything that follows is the expansion of it. Every framework, every principle, every section, every diagnostic, every story, every tool — all of it is an unfolding of those nine words. If you take nothing else from The Operator's Playbook, take those. If you take only those, you have the thing.

The scream, then, is not rage. It is not grievance. It is not a brand position. It is the sound a person makes when what they love is being cut and they have been quiet about it for forty-four years and they are finished being quiet. It is a romantic's scream. It is an operator's scream. It is a son's and a father's and a husband's scream, offered in the one register I have — the one I learned in the rooms — which is the register of the with.

The rest of The Operator's Playbook is me, armed with the scream, walking you down the second road.