## **Stop Thinking and Burn Already: Action and Creative Tension as the foundations of Burning Man culture**

### **By Caveat Magister**

#### **Adapted from the forthcoming book *The Scene That Became Cities: What Burning Man Philosophy Can Teach Us about Building Better Communities* (Caveat Magister, Spring 2019, North Atlantic Books), and presented at the “Burning Progeny” symposium at the University of Fribourg, Nov. 30, 2018.**

I rewrote my introduction to this presentation after the previous day’s session, because so much of the discussions centered on identifying tensions in Burning Man culture - between Decommodification and funding needs, for example, and Radical Self-Expression and Radical Inclusion in the issue of cultural appropriation - and the questions being asked tended to be some variant of “how are we going to resolve this?” Or, worse, “how are you going to resolve this?”

And this is important to highlight, because in fact what Burning Man does is NOT to resolve those tensions. Those tensions are often not coincidental at all, but built in. Established deliberately, and occasionally even with forethought. Because the reason Burning Man has so successfully been able to move so successfully across so many wicked challenges, and Burners have been able to find compelling responses to so many issues that are otherwise intractable, is precisely because we do not solve or reconcile these tensions: we play with them. We make them creative and generative.

There are a number of reasons we’re able to do this, but I’d like to highlight three in particular, a combination of factors, basic to Burning Man, that when combined create a fundamentally different approach to both culture and problem solving than we see in daily life, in business, in government, or indeed in academia - one that allows us to to play with creative tension.

The first of these factors is that:

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### **Burning Man Is Not Benign**

Burning Man has never had a marketing department. It never advertises. What it does have is a “survival guide.” And the tickets clearly state that if you go to Burning Man, you may die. They urge you to be self-reliant.

What has never been printed on the back of the ticket is that you will have a great time.

Do you see where this is going?

Burning Man is not benign. Even if Burning Man spaces are not directly life threatening (and many are not), they are also not “festivals.” They are not consequence free entertainment venues. The most extreme example of that is whether you will prepare adequately to not die, but most such consequences (especially as the culture has matured) are existential - not about whether you’ll make it through, but about who you fundamentally are, what you really want, and what you’re willing to do about it.

That’s because the psychological effect of Burning Man isn’t to solve our issues automatically, as though it were faith healing, it is to *bring them up*. And even magnify them. Commercial life lulls you into passivity; waking up from that passivity does not involve just having a good time. Indeed the prospect of being constantly entertained without doing anything is part of the lulling process. Co-created spaces that operate outside of commerce require your total psyche, the full range of your humanity, not just what you celebrate. Carl Jung said that those who don’t confront their demons within will confront them without: Burning Man is a process whereby both happen at once. That’s an opportunity, but it’s also a crisis. What we do with our issues when they’re staring us in the face is never “automatically” healing. Instead, we must decide how we’re going to respond.

One of the important things about Burning Man that is most misunderstood is that Burning Man isn’t a “safe space” - it’s a space where we take your risks and lubricate them. Risks are easier to take, and when you inevitably fall on your face, there are a group of people who will (in between pointing and laughing) help you up and tell you how amazing that fall was, and offer to help you do it again.

But you are taking a risk by entering this space, and it is just the first of many such risks you are likely to encounter. These are spaces in which actions have real consequences, not just within the space but throughout your life.

The second of these factors is that:

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### **Burning Man Involves Meaningful Choices**

Since Burning Man is not benign, and everyone participates, it is not surprising that Burning Man is full of people deciding what to do for themselves. Indeed, while this is an ideal that different Burning Man spaces live up to only to different degrees, the fundamental premise of Burning Man is precisely that you get to throw yourself into something that is meaningful to you, rather than following along with a pre-scripted program of entertainment.

This is such a key dynamic that I often refer to Burning Man as “applied existentialism.” It doesn’t just involve making choices (all of life at some level does that) but it confronts you clearly and directly with the fact that you have to decide: what’s important to me, and what am I going to do about it?

This is very simple in theory, but it’s actually very difficult to understand properly without having experienced it. So let’s go a little deeper.

If existentialism has a snappy motto, it’s probably Sartre’s statement that “man is condemned to be free.” I think this perfectly encapsulates the experience of being at Burning Man for the first time, and having a moment where you suddenly look around and ask yourself: “Now what? What do I do?”

A few years ago a dear friend took me to the Aspen Food and Wine Festival, and we never asked ourselves - not once - “what am I supposed to do here?” It was obvious what we were there to do: we walked from table to table, and if they had food we ate it, and if they had wine we drank it.

Burning Man is often incorrectly associated with festivals, but “what am I supposed to do here?” is not a question festivals usually compel one to ask. In fact, if people do ask it that’s probably seen as a sign of failure - it represents poor organizing. If it’s a music festival, they make it as easy as possible for you to look at the line-up of acts, pick the stages where they’re playing, and go see them. If it’s a political convention then you will have instructions to go and listen to the speeches, and maybe you get to cast a vote for something. Whatever it is, the premise of the festival or convention means your purpose is clear: not only is this what you’re supposed to do, but there aren't many other options for things you could do. Going to a political convention to start a band is way off topic; going to a music festival to run a marathon is likewise at odds with what the event is about.

We’re used to recreation that is a closed system. What’s a television for? You watch it. What do I do with this book? I read it - unless it’s a bad book, in which case I throw it at somebody’s television. The only real question you have to ask is: “will I attend or not?” Once you’ve figured that out, it’s easy to know what you’re supposed to do, and go through the steps - and they’re pretty much the same for everybody. When we go to festivals or events or entertainment venues, we’re used to it being a closed system.

But Burning Man is an open system. Not only doesn’t it come with a set of instructions, it comes with very few expectations. And that means you have to make choices.

Do you want to wear clothes or not? Do you want to wear a costume or not? Do you want to look for a big party, or go exploring out in the open desert? Do you want to ride an art car? Do you want to build an art car? Do you want to start an inflatable restaurant where you can offer people potato pancakes and bacon? Do you want to start a newspaper?

And these are the easy choices.

In other words, Burning Man gives you what festivals and lecture circuits and entertainment options don’t: it gives you agency. **You not only get to make choices, you have to make choices.** And there’s nothing you can do about it.

You are condemned to be free.

And “condemned” kind of works for those first moments, that first realization - because some people really have a problem with this. If you’ve been out there, you’ve probably seen them standing in slack jawed awe, maybe looking lost, maybe looking horrified, honestly not sure what to do with themselves. Because when you have agency, you are confronted with that most fundamental question: what’s important to me? Given all the choices in the world, what do I want to do now? This very moment?

You have to decide. And that’s the most meaningful kind of choice you’ll ever make. (Which is precisely why it can never be benign.)

Think about all this closely, and what it clearly implies is our third factor, which is that:

### **Action is the Basic Unit of Meaning at Burning Man**

In the default world, we like to sort people by what they believe. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in capitalism? Do you say you love me? What you say takes on tremendous meaning. You cannot lie under oath in court.

Meaning, in the commodified world, and indeed generally in academia, is assumed to be abstract and verbal. It can be articulated and spoken. Companies have mission statements. Religions have creeds. Politicians have oaths of offices. Products have descriptions. Presentations at conferences have abstracts.

The relationship between abstract, verbal, indicators, and meaning, breaks down very quickly within Burning Man spaces - in no small part because there is no abstract, verbal, requirement to belong in the community. There is no litmus test for politics or religion. There is no equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath or the Nicene Creed. There is no requirement that you come from a certain part of the country, or the world, or belong (or not belong) to a certain sect. There is no swearing in ceremony where you have to put your hands on the 10 Principles and make a promise.

In fact, you don’t even have to know that there are 10 Principles (and there weren’t, remember, when this whole thing began). While many people look to the 10 Principles as the unifying factor of Burning Man, most people going to Burning Man for the first time, at least historically, haven’t been aware of them. And I’ll bet good money that most Burners can’t name all 10 off the top of their heads - and I’m absolutely confident that, if asked, they would not agree on how they work or how to apply them.

That’s okay - we didn’t come to Burning Man because we we wanted to be with people who had all gotten an “A” in philosophy. We came because we saw something amazing – we felt its potential all the way down in our bones, sometimes from the other side of the earth – and were called to be part of it. I think in many respects seeing someone do something weird, wonderful, and inexplicable and being moved to ask “can I help?” even though you don’t understand it, is the essential experience of Burning Man. Later, maybe, we learned it has 10 Principles, and we started looking to them as a way to aspire to what we were already inspired by. *But neither our membership in the community nor the quality of our participation is measured by our ability to engage in abstract reasoning about key ideas, or even recall their existence much of the time.* Abstract reasoning is one tool among many, not something fundamental.

So what, then, unites people, and what does “meaning” mean, if you take it out of the realm of the abstract? What connects the sound camps to the Barbie Death Camp to the Heebie-Geebie Healers? What connects the Thunderdome to hula-hooper camps to the solo camper out on the edge of the Nevada desert to the artists burning an effigy on the beach in Taiwan?

The answer is action. Activity. What you do, your engagement and participation, is what matters, what indicates your belonging, and what generates meaning - which you are then free to think about abstractly in whatever way you like.

“Burning Man” is not a noun, it is a verb.

Burners are united by common actions and not common thoughts: the reasons we “burn” aren’t consistent, and don’t really matter. What we think “burning” means isn’t consistent, and doesn’t really matter. The fact on the ground, that we “burn,” is the only one that counts.

It was only after Burning Man formalized and organized that the 10 Principles were developed as a way of trying to explain what the hell this is. The 10 Principles, loosely speaking, are the factors that make Burning Man possible, but they are not themselves our commonality or *raison d’etre*. For some they’re things we strive to be, and admire when we see in others. For others they’re a road map … but in all cases, the experience of “Burning” came first. With Burning Man, the experience always comes first. That’s key.

Action is the basic unit of meaning in Burning Man spaces. More fundamental than theory, more fundamental than words. It really isn’t important what you think, it’s important what you do. It is important that you participate. And without an imposed sense of meaning or order, there are far more possible ways for *how you participate* than there are in other areas of life.

And this opens up a whole range of solutions to complex problems that are not amenable to an abstract, intellectually-based approach to culture. Because a playful, artistic, expressive, action-based culture can handle contradictions and tension in a way that a culture whose meaning is grounded in consistent intellectual abstractions cannot.

### **Finding New Kinds of Solutions Through Creative Tension**

All of the characteristics of Burning Man culture exist in tension: they can conflict, there is no conceptual consistency in how they are applied when they do conflict, and no effort is made to minimize that conflict. To most systems, this would be an Achilles heel. In Burning Man culture, it is seen as a compelling strength, because this tension between sometimes incompatible aspects of the culture *can in fact be creatively productive*. The creativity needed to address this tension in specific and unique instances, rather than creating a consistent hierarchy of values or top down set of one-size-fits-all blueprints, leads to cultural advances.

The interactions between Burning Man’s non-benign and gifting aspects, between its culture of art and of decommodification, between “burning” being a verb and Burning Man being a community, create areas of tension - and by engaging with these tensions creatively and in good faith, something greater and far more interesting than the sum of its parts is being created. Burning Man spaces do not value consistency for consistency’s sake: rather, they are radically pragmatic about the subjective experiences created. Is it working? If not, what do we do?

Tension in a culture can be a sign that things are going off the rails, and so we generally don’t orient to it, we avoid it, try to fix it, or just paper it over. When he created the 10 Principles, the temptation must have been very great for Larry to try and produce a synthetically harmonious view of Burning Man - one that would not leave people who looked at it scratching their heads wondering: “wait, how does that hold together?”

But a culture that strives not to be benign can never be fully harmonious. A culture that avoids a larger, mandatory, purpose in favor of encouraging authentic inspiration among its participants will never be wholly consistent. Tension is embedded in the bricks and DNA of Burning Man - as is the clear belief, demonstrated through practice, that properly handled creative tension enhances culture.

There is no hierarchy of the 10 Principles such that any one, or any set, are determined to be more important than the others. The goal when dealing with tension is not to resolve arguments with either a clear victor or a harmonious resolution, but rather to enhance people’s abilities to pursue their idiosyncratic visions - individually and collectively. Obviously there is a point past which tension becomes destructive and must be addressed, but much of the joy that people find in this environment comes from their unique inspirations and their unique humanity bouncing into one another in unexpected ways.

Rough edges are usefully smoothed down when they interfere with the ability of people to connect with one another - but the urge to smooth rough edges for its own sake is also the urge to stifle play before it has the chance to get interesting. Play is often a good lens through which to view the activities within Burning Man culture - especially the ones that are intrinsically motivated, done for the sake of doing them rather than for some larger goal. In that respect, perhaps the right way to understand Burning Man’s approach to the tension in its culture and principles is through the old improv adage of “yes, and …”

When Radical Inclusion and Civic Responsibility are in conflict, the real goal is not to figure out which you side with, or even to view them in isolation: it is to ask how you can address the situation so that you have the most responsibility AND the most inclusion. What would it take to get there? Would more Participation help? Would more Immediacy?

Often you will fail to get it right, or at least wholly right, the first time. But play doesn’t rest on its laurels, and when people discover solutions that they really like through this play, they lock them in - not through a fiat or mandate, but just by doing them again, over and over, until they become part of the culture in their own right.

It also seems reasonable, after decades of experience, to posit that creative tension is addressed more productively through art and play, rather than by logical reasoning and abstraction. The attempt to *be right* tends to limit options, while the effort to explore possibilities - obviously - tends to expand options in new and unexpected directions.

What is often seen as a problem with the 10 Principles, that they exist in tension with one another, is in fact one of its stronger virtues - so long as one is able to approach that tension with a mindset of art and play, making the tension productive. You can resolve cultural tensions creatively through art, ritual, and laughter, in ways that rational thinking cannot offer.

A mindset of play is also the opposite of a mindset of victory and finality. If you want to utilize creative tension, you have to give up on the idea of ever resolving it. Instead, you have to embrace its ambiguity: that ambiguity is the challenging place where your best innovations and advancements will come from. And why would you end that?

Burners are able to achieve, through a process in which actions and not words or concepts are fundamental, through a process that invites play and sees tension as a creative opportunity rather than a problem to be resolved or a conflict to be won, so much more than anyone had thought possible - or certainly reasonable.