



# IDIOT SAVANT

(OR  
AVANT  
IDIOTS)

WORDS BY DAVE REGAN

I hope this finds you well, or at least close to well, you know, somewhere between better and otherwise. Or, maybe drunk. Slightly less worse for wear, anyway. I'm sitting here sipping coffee at 6:30am in Poland and, I have to admit, it's getting more and more difficult to find things to write about. It's not that I don't have an endless stream of nonsense to babble about, but I really don't like the idea of being a constantly critical voice in an endlessly critical industry. I'm pretty sure we are all stocked-up on bitching. Personally, I prefer humorous griping, but it's pointless if it doesn't really contribute anything to the collective. If you're going to say anything, reiterating the same complaints we all have does run its course quickly... So, without corn-balling my way through this, I want to talk about something I don't hear about very often in this job- when you've got so much to say it's called

## GRATITUDE

And that's right. All Beastie Boys asides aside, what we do every day is pretty darn amazing. There's not a lot of folks out there that get the luxuries we do in this line of work. Many of the freedoms we have are unique to tattooing. We are very fortunate, which isn't to say we don't work for it; that would be largely inaccurate, but what we do have is one of the last merit-based jobs out there. You do good work? You'll stay busy. You'll have a shop to work in. Your livelihood won't be threatened by the hundred people in line waiting for your job. These days, that may be the luckiest bit

of all. I know loads of people that spent their early twenties stuck in school for jobs that they would never think of taking a week off of, once a year. The fear of leaving and coming back to being replaced, or feeling that you are body filling a chair, that is just awful. That is reality for many. I like that tattooing (mostly) takes care of itself. Maybe it used to be a little better at regulating, but in the end, the core is unchanged. And, possibly the best thing to me, is that we are each smaller parts of the greater whole.

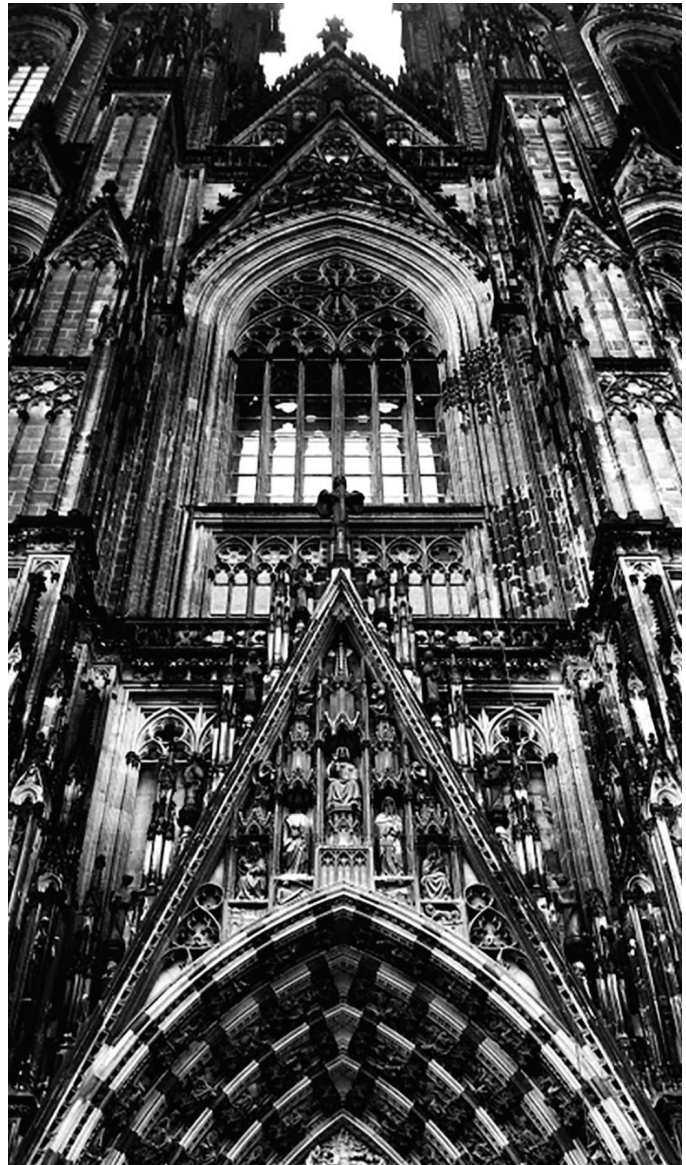
## LOSE YOUR “SELF”

We share a craft heritage. Whether you choose to educate yourself or not, you belong to something far bigger than you. This isn't about you, me or them; it's about US, those before and those after. Craft is creating something with your hands, in a skillful manner (ideally). And being a craftsman is an honor. It's important to remember that

One of my favorite quotes comes from the mythical and elusive tattoo philosopher known to some of us simply as “Pee Wee”, who says, “We are part of a 6,000-year-old cultural revolution that people are just waking up to—again.” And again, and again, evidently. People from every culture on this planet have symbols by which they identify themselves, their families, or their social strata. These symbols are vehicles that record their time spent here. We are responsible for carrying this tradition along. It has become extremely diverse, because what that tradition is seems so much more limitless in this day and age than it ever has before. The downside is that a lot of the time, meanings get scrambled along the way, designs lose their significance and things can get watered down. And then you have folks who, for whatever reason, decide adornment is barbaric or sophomoric. They place a social stigma upon it and people turn away, but not entirely, or else you wouldn't be reading this right now.

One example is U.S. military tattoo tradition. I've worked around my fair share of military bases and have tattooed plenty of troops, but the regulations on what they can and can't have seem to change with the wind and for no apparent reason other than limiting recruitment options. Personally, I think the military should be allowed to look as terrifying as they possibly can (especially the infantry). Imposing some kind of silly morality on tattoos in their line of work seems ridiculous, but some higher up takes issue and suddenly troops can't have visible tattoos here or there.

Japanese tattooing has also weathered great changes in public opinion. In ancient Japan, tattooing was used as a means of designating status, spiritual connectivity, or forms of beauty according to the Kojiki, an early history of the country. This was the case until the Kofun period (250-538 AD), when tattoos became synonymous with criminals, thus began the negative connotation still present today. Tattooing was banned entirely





during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and remained illegal until Occupation Forces said otherwise in the late 40's. I've read differing opinions on the functionality of tattoos during the Edo period (1603-1868). Lovers tattoos had been around for some time, but Edo truly brought Horimono and Gaman tattooing to the public. Most seem to agree that large-scale tattoos were a means of rebelling both against the wealthy upper classes as well as laws that prohibited flaunting ones wealth via fancy dress and the like, so one had to hide everything under clothing. In addition, firefighters (Isami-hada) were early proponents of large-scale body tattooing. When Katsushika Hokusai released his version of the Suikoden, bodysuit tattooing was brought to the public eye and was popularized with the help of artists like Kuniyoshi Utagawa, whose Suikoden is the archetype, and who was believed to have designed tattoos as well. More importantly, these artists connected tattoo with printmaking in both design and technique. The two crafts consistently influence one another—obvious to anyone who has spent five minutes on their phones looking at ukiyo-e, musha-e, shunga, et al. Even today that relationship survives in America thanks to people like Bud Shark and Paul Mallowney. Tattooing was a cross platform craft in its modern infancy.



The Pacific Islands are another great example. These cultures have enjoyed a massive resurgence of their native art forms, largely due to a greater awareness of their cultural significance. The 90's showed a tremendous rise in interest in and preservation of Island cultures, and because of people like Keone Nunes, Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a, Sua Sulu'ape Paulo II, etc. who promote a connection to time-honored traditions, hopefully future generations won't lose the skills that are etched into their bloodlines.

What all of these examples share is a preservation of praxis. Yes, the infinity knot on your finger with some inspirational paragraph from Maya Angelou about your journey into womanhood is the apex of banality to those of us that have to create it, as well as being a reflection of our world, and our traditions. It's for you, I know. It's also really lame. In no way am I arguing in favor of the rapid dumbing-down of everyone either by any means. It is increasingly more challenging to stay afloat in this milky ocean of mediocrity, but it just means you have to swim harder than everything and everyone else. And then it becomes butter. Sweet, sweet, mediocre butter.

Modern tattooing is a most double-edged of swords. It is said that something is only beautiful when everyone thinks it is so and this is the root of it's destruction. Think about how your own tastes have evolved over the years. Something that is so cool and secret to you and only you becomes something everyone likes, and thusly, you begin to drift away from it. Tattooing has gone the way of the zombie and vampire, things that were really important to a few of us when we were younger, but have



become alarmingly commonplace. The impact they once had is left virtually powerless. I used to be so excited to see a zombie flick when I was a kid, and now it's like, really? This is all we can make?

America is good at a lot of things. One of them is doing everything to death. The power of tattooing will never be lost on all of us, but, we have allowed a lot of money-minded people into our inner circles that have no business being involved. These people are completely ignorant of what we do, and saw an easy way to profit without actually tattooing. Suddenly, they have become this faceless monster that motivates more and more people to tattoo. They say it's okay to not go through an apprenticeship. You are special! You are an artiste! You are different, you little snowflake, you. This is what's popular, because we say so! Here's a participation trophy, thanks for showing up! That's what they say. Well I say you and your entitlement attitudes can go fuck right off. You've tattooed for a year and a half and are complaining about anything? Bye. Seriously.

Participation is part of craft. You want respect? Earn it. There is an absolute need to be a part of everything from the foundation. Clean toilets, answer phones, scrub floors, sell tattoos, watch, listen, learn, make needles, make inks, make machines, know what you do in its entirety. It's what keeps the bar set high.

## SO...UH...THANKFUL, RIGHT?

Love will destroy you. At least for a time. You love tattooing? It's going to cost you. You'll hate it. You'll question it, you'll lose sleep over it, you'll sacrifice relationships, friendships, family ties, you name it, at some point, you'll lose it. It's not forever, but you have to walk through that desert, and face the trials that ensue.

But every day you paint, draw, agonize, go to work, and you do the best you can. You work in one of the last bastions of craft you can be this successful in. It's a pretty charmed life, I'd say, and one not many will have the chance to know. A lot of us came into this business on a trial-by-fire basis, and I don't know one person who wasn't burned, at least a little. But scars make you stronger. They teach you to survive. I know a few folks that have been tattooing for over four decades. They know storms we've never weathered. Ask them why they stuck it out, it's because they LOVE this. You can't stop caring about the craft. You can't stop thinking about it. Every day is a good day, especially the bad

ones. The worst days give you a measurable means to make the good ones better. I prefer a sine wave over a flat line any day. The valleys make the waves look bigger and there's nothing better than riding the top of the wave, but it's important to understand that everything is fluctuating, and at if nothing else, it means life is in a constant state of action.

It is your responsibility to better yourself. If every smaller action influences every larger action, then seemingly lesser endeavors pay off over time. The harder you work at being a better you than the year before, the more your work AND your life improves. Not all of us were successful in, or even finished school. So does this mean your education stops as well?

Having spent much time over the years in museums trying to fill my brain with ample amounts thinkin' meat, I have often wondered what it would be like to live like some of those supremely influential artists: Finding more solace in the work than in the rest of life, compulsively driven to create. It's never enough. There is something romantic in those thoughts, although the reality is far from the idea... And tattooing isn't much different! It's a trip to hear some of the misconceptions about tattooers. How much money people seem to think we have, the drugs we must do, that we are criminals or recovering cons, we date strippers (look, I'm not saying they're entirely inaccurate either...). Oh, and they think it's okay to talk to us about tattooing at any waking hour of the day, in any context.

*"Sam was an amazing guy, I'm so sorry for your loss."*

*"Thanks, I appreciate that." (shakes hand)*

*"Oh nice tattoos! Do you do them? Because I was thinking about getting..."*

People. Golly, they sure are always thinking!! But it comes with the territory. People don't mind, or maybe they feel obligated, to ask you about tattoos anytime, anywhere. It's annoying, yes. My personal favorite is going to a small party at a close friends house who maybe you tattooed a few years ago, and they introduce you as their tattooer, instead of their friend. So, instead of just relaxing and whipping everyone's ass at Cards Against Humanity, you get to spend the rest of the evening fielding the same questions you just spent 10 hours of your day already answering, or better yet discussing why the infinity loop with Ms. Angelou's "And I rise" may not be the best finger tat, but since everyone likes to hear themselves talk at you, you get to just sit and absorb! It's a fact we just have to deal with. You want to get pissed off every time it happens? Why bother?



## BUT SERIOUSLY FORKS, I DIGEST...

The inconveniences are small, compared to the rewards. You have a job you can take with you, anywhere you go. And I do mean anywhere. Someone, somewhere around the globe, wants what you make. Personally, I have only recently delved into an intense work and travel routine, having left my job earlier this year and going across the States and then on to a chunk of the world, following in the footsteps of a number of other people who have decided to take what can sometimes be a very arduous trek. It's been months since I've been home, and I am still very much in the middle of my journey, but what I have learned, or maybe more accurately, what I have been reminded of, is that there are so many wonderful people out there that want nothing more than to share their lives, their homes, a meal, a bed, a place to make a tattoo – it tells us that we are family beyond just our shop lives. I haven't even spoken to some of the people I have been able to visit, and yet, when I show up at their door, it's like we've known one another for a lifetime. I can't think of another type of living where this is possible, this readily.

The figureheads in the world tell us we should be afraid of one another, that our customs and cultures are far too different to find a common ground, that we might get blown up, shot down, mugged, stabbed, and a myriad of other pleasant methods of instilling fear. Scariest of all, we'll sacrifice comfort and routine for something we can't have any prior knowledge of. Much like a lot of things in life, it's about having an ounce of faith in the general goodness of people, and it's worth every minute. Tattooing can certainly exist without a community, but what is the

good in that? Many of us come from fairly difficult upbringings. But tattooing, as well as our tattoo family, makes us who we are. It's not to say that bad seeds don't get in the mix, but when you have a strong, self-regulating community, it does a good job of weeding out those kinds of people quickly.

## RISK VERSUS REWARD

And yes, how much of a gamble is this? We may not all bet with money, but we do bet with our future. I remember my family's reaction when I told them I was going to tattoo. We'll just say the sun didn't shine on me that day... But I understand where the concern came from. How will you make a living? You have to work how much? You aren't getting paid for how long?

You could go to university, study, secure your safe place in the world, and live life out knowing that everything is going to be just fine. I don't see the fun in too much security, truthfully. Tattooing isn't secure and there are no guarantees, but plenty of people manage to live very well, raise families, have mortgages, cars, and all the goodies that come with the other way of living. True tattooing is like being a good salesman. You're not just selling a product, you're selling YOU with it. It's awesome to meet new people every day and show them a good time! Make 'em laugh, make them a part of the experience too, and they'll always come back. On the flip side, it can be unwanted and tough to be someone's psychiatrist, but it's a social job we do, so we run the social gamut. Tattooing has curative powers, too, and I've worked through some really challenging times under a needle. It's therapy in its own right.

The entire message is this: every day you wake up with breath in your lungs, every day you get to enjoy the freedom of the lives we have, every picture you draw, every brush, machine, pen, pencil you hold—be grateful you are a part of it. I hope it's an informative journey you are on, and I hope it's as regularly hilarious for you as it is for me. It's so insanely fortunate to make tattoos for people, even if it has changed dramatically. The more attention you give to what you love about it as opposed to what you hate about it, the more you create that reality for yourself. I'm not trying to walk down the hippie dippie path, but you get out what you put in. Many successful people are masters of the art of manifestation and I've seen it work in my life firsthand. I also want to take the opportunity to use this as a way of saying thank you for the time you have given to this silly little column of mine. I hope you enjoy it as much as your hamster enjoys having his cage lined with it. I'm going to keep doing this as long as they'll let me, and suggestions are always welcomed and appreciated, so don't hesitate to send 'em on over. I will leave you with what I had planned on opening the first versions of this article with. Jokes for days.

**How many tattooers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?**

The counter guy.

**What do you call a bum that hangs around a bunch of tattooers?**

A piercer.

**How many tattooers does it take to make a sleeve?**

10: 1 to do it, 1 to miss the appointment, 2 to take a deposit and forget to make the drawing, 3 to tell the customer that they have stupid ideas, and 3 to tell you how much better they could have done it.

**A kid says to his mom, "Mom, when I grow up, I want to be a tattooer"**

His mom says, "Well sweetie, you can't do both."

**What's the difference between a dead dog and DIY tattooers?**

The dead dog knows when to stop scratching.

**How do you get a piercer off your porch?**

Pay him for the pizza.

And finally,

**What's the difference between God and tattooers?**

God doesn't think he's a tattooer.

**Thanks,  
Dave**

Contact:  
dreg14@hotmail.com  
IG @dutchraven

