

Our Show

*On the cheapest word in the language, and the size of
the life it quietly carries.*

For Erin.

. . .

“Do you want to watch our show tonight?”

IT IS A SENTENCE THAT SHOULD NOT MATTER TO ANYONE. Strip it for parts. There is a question, which is only politeness. There is a “tonight,” which is only a clock. There is a “show,” which is almost certainly not good: a procedural drama, a baking competition, something with dragons, and if you described the plot to a stranger they would nod the way people nod when they are waiting for you to stop. By every reasonable measure the sentence is nothing.

And yet one word in it is doing an enormous amount of lifting, quietly, the way a single beam holds up a ceiling nobody ever looks at. The word is “our.” Take it out and you are left with a logistics request. Leave it in and you have, without anyone raising their voice about it, a small institution. People will rearrange their

evenings to protect an “our.” They will defend it well past the point of reason. Some of them, when it is taken away, never fully recover. For a show with dragons in it.

I want to sit with that, because “our” is one of the most underrated technologies our species has ever built, and we hand it out as if it were free.

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It is almost free. That is the first strange thing about it. “Our” costs a single syllable, and you can bolt it onto nearly anything and change what the thing is. Our booth at the diner. Our song, which is objectively a bad song. Our spot on the trail. None of it required money, or planning, or talent. You said the word over an ordinary object, like a blessing, and the object quietly changed its category.

And it works better when the object is worse. Nobody is moved by “our yacht.” A yacht arrives already carrying its own importance; it has no need of you. The booth cannot manage that. It is vinyl and bad lighting and a draft on the left side, and the only conceivable reason to care about it is the person sitting across from you. The booth is a receipt. The “our” is what you actually bought.

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Philosophers have taken this more seriously than the rest of us. Margaret Gilbert spent a career arguing, with a straight face and a

great deal of rigor, that two people walking together is a fundamentally different thing from two people who merely happen to be walking the same way. In the second case you have two strolls that share a sidewalk. In the first you have what she calls a plural subject: a single unit, formed the moment two people commit to it, that immediately begins to carry small obligations and rights no one ever wrote down. If your companion wanders off without a word, you feel that something has been violated, because something has. You never signed anything. You agreed to a “we,” and a “we,” it turns out, has terms.

So “our show” is not a report on who controls the streaming queue. It is an act. It is the smallest available move toward joining, performed so casually that you do not notice you have done anything at all.

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Which is also why the word can be turned against you. A “we” that is offered is a gift. A “we” that is assigned is a leash, and everyone alive has been handed the assigned kind: the manager’s “we are all going to need to stay late,” the doctor’s bright “and how are we feeling today.” The tell never changes. A true “we” is an invitation, and an invitation can be declined. A false one cannot. The same syllable that fuses can also fence, which is why “ours” sits underneath so many of our ugliest fights, over territory and inheritance and whose people were here first. The word is powerful

precisely because it can be a gift or a trap, and the only thing standing between the two is whether you were actually asked.

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Set against that, the ordinary “we” of a shared life looks almost suspiciously good for you. The people who reach for “we” and “us” instead of “I” and “you” turn out to be steadier, more satisfied, even physically calmer, their hearts beating smoother through an argument when the other person keeps saying “we.” Under real strain, people drift from “I” toward “we” on their own, the way a hand reaches for a railing in the dark.

But the finding I cannot put down is the one with the twist in it. The person who gains the most from saying “we” is the person saying it. The one who merely hears it does not get the same lift. Sit with that, because it is quietly hilarious: the trick is worked mostly on the magician. You say “our show” out loud and you are the one who walks away a little richer, which means that a good deal of the warmth we picture pouring outward is really heat recirculating back toward its source. This does not cheapen it. It means only that, for once, the generous thing and the self-interested thing are the same thing, and you would be a fool not to take the deal.

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Where does the value come from, though? Nowhere outside the two of you. Every “us” is made out of a “me,” every “ours” out of a “mine,” and the move from the one to the other mints worth out of nothing: a chipped mug becomes an heirloom, a bad joke becomes scripture for a congregation of two. You are not discovering value that sat waiting inside these things. You are minting it. “Our” is a tiny printing press for meaning, and the two of you are the only bank that will ever honor the currency.

And here is the part that gives the whole thing away. “Our show” is almost never the same show.

You find one, fall into it, finish it or burn through it in a single greedy weekend, and then it is over. A week later there is a new one, and without ceremony, without anyone proposing it or putting it to a vote, the new one is also “our show.” The phrase never updates. The dragons are replaced by detectives, the detectives by bakers, the bakers by whatever you stumble onto next, and through every changeover the name holds. “What are we watching?” “Our show.” It is a standing reservation that different meals get served at. A permanent table for two.

Which means the “our” was never pointing at the show. It was pointing at the slot: the ritual of the two of you on the same couch at the end of a day that took something out of both of you. The show is only whatever happens to be on the table that month. You think you are sharing a program. You are keeping a small recurring appointment with the fact of each other, and the program is only the pretext that keeps it on the calendar.

This should be reassuring, and instead it is a little astonishing. The bond was quietly built to outlast the ending of anything inside it. Finishing a show ought to be a tiny death, and it would be, if “our show” meant that show. It does not. The credits roll, nothing is lost, and next week the second chair is full again and the name is sitting there waiting for whatever comes next. Without meaning to, you have engineered the one kind of “ours” that cannot be ended by the thing it is attached to, because it was never really attached to the thing.

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There is one thing it cannot survive, and it is the thing Gilbert pointed at and then, being careful, mostly left alone. A joint commitment cannot be cancelled by one person. You can walk out of a contract. You cannot dissolve a “we” on your own, because half of it was never yours to dissolve. So it does not end cleanly when the other half is gone. It just keeps running, with no one on the other side.

This is why the widow still says “we.” It is why the slot never refills. Every show could be swapped for the next one, and was, for years, without anyone mourning the change. The one thing that could never be recast was the second chair. The screen still asks whether you are still watching, and now it is a real question, and there is no new program to promote into the empty role, because the role was never the part you thought it was. “Our show”

becomes a phrase with no available referent and no honest way to retire it. You would never grieve a baking competition. You grieve an “our.” The same one syllable that can take any show at all and make it enormous is, on the far side, exactly the size of what it costs you.

And people pay it. Knowing the full price, having watched others pay it, they say the word anyway, over and over, about booths and songs and shows that are not even good. Not because they are reckless, but because the alternative, a whole life in the first person singular, careful and intact and alone, is the only deal on the table that is clearly worse.

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So yes. Let’s watch our show tonight.

It was never about the show.

