

Who Are You When Nobody Is Approving?

By Austen Tucker · 2026

I spent the past three years in blissful maker mode, learning everything I could about AI tools. Not because someone told me to. Not because my job required it. Because I \love\ learning new things. I love that feeling of being just competent enough to glimpse the edge of a new world. The firehose still feels like a gift.

I got roasted for it. It hurt more than I wanted to admit.

Not because strangers on the internet said mean things. What hurt was that some of the contempt came from people whose affection still mattered to me. People I wanted closeness from.

What hurt was realizing how many people only knew how to love me if I stayed small enough to be legible. Curious, but not \tool\ curious. Creative, but not in a way that changed the weather in the room. Weird, but in the charming way. Never in the way that might force anybody else to examine their own fear.

I was learning, in real time, that I had been auditioning for acceptance from people who had already chosen a flatter version of me. I kept explaining myself to people committed to misunderstanding. I kept thinking clarity could save me from being unwanted. I kept mistaking debate for intimacy.

My social life had quietly become a place where I was negotiating against myself. I wanted closeness badly enough that I started treating self-erasure like a reasonable cover charge.

But I've learned. And learning is worth more than pride.

Some forms of loneliness are cleaner than that.

The anger I encountered was rarely as coherent as it wanted to sound. A lot of it felt like anxiety dressed up as a position. The vocabulary changed from week to week. The need to make my joy look suspect did not.

Once I could see that, I could also see that I was not really being invited into a conversation.

That is a lonely feeling. To realize people would rather reduce your joy than examine their own panic.

Some people hit a certain age and start defending what they know. The world keeps moving and they pick a spot and dig in. I understand the temptation. To pick a hill. To call it wisdom. To let contempt do the work that courage no longer can.

I went the other way.

I still feel like a kid. There's too much to learn and not enough time and I cannot believe I get to live through this particular moment in history. I get to be here while the walls move. While the instruments change shape in our hands. While entire creative grammars are being invented in public.

I've resisted saying so out loud because "special" got weaponized somewhere along the way, used sarcastically, as if delight were arrogance. As if appetite were a character flaw.

But I'm done apologizing for the configuration of brain I showed up with.

I thought I was fighting about technology. I was really learning to stop abandoning myself.

That is a much bigger, sadder lesson. It reaches backward and lights up half your life. The friendships you overwatered. The rooms where you performed being easy to understand. The little edits you made to yourself so other people would not feel judged by the fact that you were still hungry.

No more.

My aliveness is not negotiable.

Left alone, I move toward the work. Toward the manuscript. Toward the synth patch that still isn't right. Toward the sentence that keeps dodging me until I pin it down.

My resting state is not consumption. It is making.

That is not virtue. It is simply the shape of my hunger.

And I think, for a long time, I wanted somebody to tell me that hunger was good. I wanted somebody to see how hard I was trying to stay alive inside my own life and say, yes, that counts. Yes, I see you.

Maybe that is why the rejection cut so deep. Because underneath all the argument, there was a much more childlike ache:

Please do not make me feel ashamed of the thing that makes me feel most like myself.

That is who I am when nobody is clapping.

Dan Gable won Olympic gold in wrestling without a single point scored against him. The next morning, he was back in the wrestling room. A peer asked why he was training instead of celebrating.

"My opponent is training today," he said. "So I am training today."

I'm not competing with you. But my craft has an opponent: entropy, irrelevance, the comfortable silence of never finishing anything, the soft anesthesia of almost. And that opponent does not take days off.

So neither do I.

Not because I am trying to defeat anybody. Because practice is how I remain real to myself. Craft is still waiting for me in the morning.

I am done mistaking approval for love.

I make things. The work will find who it is for.

I am done asking people allergic to becoming to bless my becoming.

And I've never been happier.