

## Pause.

By John Clayton Seesholtz

A year ago, I left the mountains of Colorado and what I had once envisioned as my dream job. I now live in Paraguay, working on an education-based nonprofit, an idea conceived somewhere between a canceled opera and a flight to South America.

In the spring of 2020, we were all reconsidering what the future might hold. I had just completed preparations for the title role in Verdi's *Macbeth*, an opera that is largely an exploration of psychological unraveling. It felt like an oddly fitting parallel. The production was, of course, canceled due to the emerging pandemic. At the time, I held a prestigious academic position I felt wholly unworthy of. Impostor syndrome is an exhausting force. That exhaustion intensifies when one labors endlessly to convince others, and oneself, that the quiet voice of self-doubt is unfounded.

This is a familiar experience for many people with dyslexia, who are often first marked as "different" in childhood. From that point forward, the act of learning becomes entangled with inherited labels such as "slow" or "behind."

In the years that led to the pandemic, I unconsciously placed myself beneath the towering performance legacies of my colleagues. An internal narrative began to emerge, one that told me I had to achieve greater accomplishments, and that through continued effort, I might someday be worthy of the recognition I had received. An endless modality of *becoming*.

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"For the first time in years, I paused.  
The world paused. Silence took hold."

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As time went on, I accepted every opportunity that I believed might further my career. During my tenure review, a colleague described me as a "yes man." I believe he intended it as praise. I heard it as a diagnosis. I lived in a constant state of low-grade anxiety, perpetually wondering if I was doing enough. Enough for tenure. Enough for my students. Enough to silence the inner voice of inadequacy. Ironically, all of that fear had built an impressive eight-page CV that I could puff my chest out to and say "Here, here is the proof that I belong here," absent of the feeling that it was enough.



John Clayton Seesholtz

When academia shifted to online instruction, I resolved to "lean in," a phrase that sounds empowering until one realizes it often just means never stepping away. By April, I was falling asleep with my phone in hand, still composing responses to unfinished emails. Each morning, my inbox renewed itself with a fresh tide of obligations. I worked tirelessly through our jury process, offering detailed feedback with curated resources and links. All I cared about was ensuring my students had something, anything, that might sustain their artistic growth. But I was rapidly approaching total depletion.

Then, unexpectedly, stillness arrived. The semester ended. There were no conferences, no rehearsals, no deadlines, and no summer teaching programs. What emerged was a sense of calm, what people with boundaries might simply call a break. For the first time in years, I paused. The world paused. Silence took hold.

During the pandemic, I lived in a remote mountain cabin where the midsummer air hummed with energy. That first season, the world felt impossibly distant, like a piano playing in another room. The aspen trees moved as if with breath itself, rippling like a forest in communion with the sky. The world unfolded around me. My dog Sage stirred minor conflicts with the local wildlife. Squirrels quarreled. Birds made their declarations. All of it blended into something reminiscent of urban noise, a background hum only perceptible when one truly listens. It was vibrant, alive, and unconscious of its own richness. Most days, the sky was impossibly blue, as if the clouds had gone on strike.

In that space, I began listening to Eckhart Tolle and archival recordings of Alan Watts. Their voices, set against the natural world, formed an unusual counterpoint. Resting in my hammock, I often drifted into sleep amid this new atmosphere, a reprieve from the weight of the semester. In those moments of listening, Tolle, Watts, and that hum of the forest I began to hear helped illuminate my ego — not as an adversary, but as a patterned response within myself, one that required compassion rather than condemnation.

Academia is, in many ways, an ideal environment for constructing an elegant, productive, and highly functional ego. One reinforced and modeled at every turn. That ego brings titles, deadlines, curated biographies, and

applause. These are the costumes of meaning. Releasing my attachment to it has been slow, imprecise, and difficult. It's like cutting an orange with child safe scissors. It's messy.

The years that followed were a confrontation. Life brought with it a raw kind of clarity, though not always in real time. There was illness, discomfort, professional dissonance, the end of a long-term relationship, the sudden death of my sister, and the upheaval of a carefully constructed life. At times, it felt as though my inner world stood in direct opposition to the external one. These were the emphatic hurdles that offered a north star toward a more honest way of being. Amid the chaos, a deeper shift occurred. I began to recognize the cognitive static I had long mistaken for identity. As things unraveled, a new perspective emerged, one that held rationality and compassion in balance. I started to feel the freedom of releasing beliefs, roles, and patterns that no longer served me.

*"If you are grateful for your life — which I think is a positive thing to do — then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can't pick and choose what you're grateful for. 'What punishments of God are not gifts?'"*

—Stephen Colbert, quoting J.R.R. Tolkien

Gaining perspective on the ego allowed me, at last, to set it down. That mind-made version of *Self*, so hungry for validation and so afraid of stillness, could finally rest. I saw how easily I had confused ego with purpose. Yet the more closely I observed its construction, the more I saw how it obstructed connection, equanimity, and presence.

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**"I am not the sum of my accomplishments.  
And impact does not need to be  
indelible to be meaningful."**

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In the quiet undoing of my former life, I was drawn inward. To memory. To a younger self. I remembered a boy of 14, earnest and defiant, who once protested McDonald's over their use of Styrofoam. A child who believed that poster board and markers could reshape the world. He danced barefoot in the grass. He trusted love as a compass. Through his eyes, I began to glimpse what would become *The Canciones Project*. Not an act of ambition, but an expression of alignment with my essential self.

What we have created with *The Canciones Project* is modest. Some may say we have merely produced editions of forgotten art songs. But for me, it is something more. It is



John enjoying the mountain air.



Meet Sage, the writer's dog.



a gesture, a moment of refusal. Refusing to allow artistry, heritage, and beauty to be lost. It is our way of declaring that the music of Latin America belongs in every rehearsal room, on every stage, within every conservatory. Especially in the hands of students who have never seen themselves reflected in those spaces.

I once thought that *leaning in* meant doing more, working harder, exceeding every expectation. Now, I believe that leaning in means remembering who you were when no one was watching. It means returning to your truest nature. To the child who sang, who played, who built entire worlds from soil and imagination. Everything unnecessary must eventually fall away, worn down by friction, until the self that remains is smaller, simpler, more authentic. A *self* no longer driven by excess but anchored in truth.

I am not the sum of my accomplishments. And impact does not need to be indelible to be meaningful.

That kind of deep change, that once felt institutionalized within my being, required disruption. In order to make the huge life shift I felt called to pursue, I had to be okay with upsetting people. In that final year of academia, I worked multiple jobs, sold most of my belongings, traded in my vehicle for a travel van, and practiced the art of letting go. All of it was to make space for something unknown, but something I knew I had to pursue.

So now, when I think about *leaning in*, I allow myself to feel. To soften. To be loved. To surrender. And in that softness, I find myself fully here, still listening to the hum of the world in this beautiful country of Paraguay. Traveling through Latin America. Meeting new friends. Surrounded by music, laughter, and community...

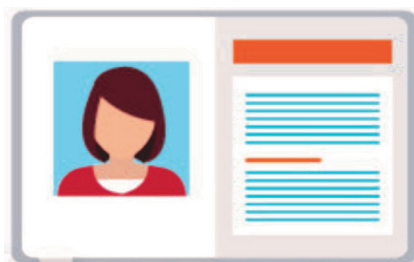
And perhaps, for the first time in a long while, it feels like *enough*.

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*These reflections have been shaped not only by lived experience but also by the insights of Eckhart Tolle, Alan Watts, my son Bradley, Gabe, Melissa, and the broader cultural dialogue around ego, ambition, and the narratives we inhabit.*

**Dr. John Seesholtz**, baritone, is executive director and cofounder with Dr. Melissa Lubecke Sarabia of The Canciones Project, a non-profit organization promoting Latin American music in academia. In 2025, he serves as resident professor at CEMTA Universidad in Paraguay. A seasoned performer, Seesholtz has sung across the U.S., Europe, and Latin America, with recent roles including Germont, Gianni Schicchi, and Iago. His publications explore bel canto, voice health and longevity, vocal pedagogy, and elevating marginalized communities through music literature. In August 2025, he debuted *Elías* (Mendelssohn) in Latin American Spanish. He studied at the University of Michigan, University of North Texas, and UT San Antonio. [thecancionesproject.org](http://thecancionesproject.org)

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