

# **Your Life, Your Hero**

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# Preface

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## Shock

The shock of what is not,  
Is more disturbing...  
Than the acceptance of what is!  
Once what is not,  
Is stopped and dropped...  
A reality delivered,  
Ceases attempts...  
To make what is not,  
Meant to limit with intent.  
Meant to have many consent...  
To a controlled existence with contempt!  
And what is 'not'...  
Loses the attention given.  
Loses an illusion driven,  
To have and behold delusion.  
And delusion and reality...  
Do not a couple make.  
Not today,  
When earthquakes are shaking foundations...  
Once believed permanent,  
Because they were man made!

—Lawrence S. Pertillar (2008)

Imagine someone distraught by the shock of what is not.

A moment arrives where one has to figure out whom to become. A past plan suddenly seems senseless.

Or a crisis occurs and the world suddenly reveals itself as dangerous, crazy, contemptible. The things people talk about as good, the things people seek, may suddenly seem empty, even evil. So-called success. Romance. Family. Not to mention the ills of the world, disease, cruelty, want.

If so, logic may lead to this conclusion: Avoid the world. Taoism says this. So do strains of many religions, as Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out long ago. He called the avoidance of the world a “denial of the will to life.”<sup>1</sup> He emphasized the Eastern religions, but he also saw this

anti-world strain in Christianity. His exemplar was a certain kind of solitary ascetic who renounced the world and withdrew to his cell.<sup>2</sup>

The shock of what is not may lead to another conclusion: treat that “controlled existence with contempt.” The ideals you’ve embraced, the ways you’ve been taught to behave: these are the false prophets.

Forget about faithfulness. Altruism is for the slave class. Religion is the opiate of the masses. Friends? They’re not. Family? Obsolete.

Your life is about you. Lose those social norms, those restraints of religion, those admonitions of your mother.

And so, the person facing life’s upheavals—let’s say, you and I—may succumb to polar logics. One is to avoid the world, because it leads to suffering. The other logic is to grab each and every thing the world offers, without delusion. Just do it. The result of the second, in the limit, is the addict, for whom alas increasing doses of the desired have diminishing returns.

The solitary ascetic and the extreme addict thus signify polar reactions to the shock of what is not. At one time or another in our travails, both logics may appeal: reject the world, or reject anyone’s limits on our worldliness. In the extreme, both the solitary ascetic and the addict end up alone. Both may end up in a kind of living death.

Is there an alternative? Ascetics and addicts exist across cultures. So does a third narrative: the hero. It has resonance as another way, not avoiding the world nor abusing it and ourselves. Rather, we find in the world (and perhaps also “outside the world”) our callings. We discover, or receive, big insights that make sense of big contradictions. And then we engage in the world and with the world, through sharing and service.



The point of what follows is not proof. “Because of A, B, C, you must believe D.”

Or “others have said this and that, but really it’s this other thing.”

Rather, it’s play and experiment. Ponder the extreme constructions of solitary ascetic, extreme addict, and hero.

Consider those steps of calling, insight, and sharing and serving. Ask what your calling might look like, and then assess some ways others have found their callings.

Open your eyes to big insights as “big aha’s” that show up in places as different as economics and sociology and religion. How might you evaluate big insights, hold them in your mind (even perhaps more than one of them), try them out? How might you incorporate insights from others?

And then consider those awkward and perhaps off-putting words, “sharing and serving.” They sound like a cost, not a benefit: something with an optimum point well short of an admonition. We’ll see that sharing and serving may be better seen as an attitude, with a rule of thumb: begin with gratitude, end with love.

“Ah, love—that’s precisely ‘the shock of what is not’ that I faced. Don’t talk to me about love.” Especially about romantic love, tied in with one of the most powerful and intimate experiences, sexual union. Contaminated, too, by power, stereotypes, puerility. True, but please try this: the roles of romantic love and intimacy may be reappraised with the models of ascetic, addict, and hero. An ideal for romance and intimacy is when we develop together a calling, a big insight, and then sharing and serving.

After romance comes family, at least sometimes. “Family is the most important thing in my life,” many people say. Yet also, to many people, their source of greatest conflict and disappointment. How can we find our heroes, and be heroes, in family life?

And so, thank you for having a look at this book. Here’s an abstract of sorts:

A full human life is portrayed by the hero, and it lies far away from withdrawal or greed. Across many cultures and walks of life, many heroes have similar journeys. They receive or discover a calling. They obtain an insight. Then, they share the insight and serve. The hero exemplifies a full human life. We can learn about the hero aesthetically, the life as art. And even though we are ordinary people, the hero’s example can help kindle our own full human lives.

What, is that ... it? you may respond. What is someone supposed to do with that? Suppose someone purported to figure out what characterizes a full human life. What’s that even mean, “figure out”? If you figured it out, how would you expect someone else to react to your “solution”?

As Thomas Macaulay pointed out long ago, nothing is so useless as a general maxim.<sup>3</sup> Not just because maxims often contradict each other.<sup>4</sup> Rather, unless we've somehow earned the maxim—authored it for ourselves by experiencing it—how can we return to it, rely on it?

Yes. On the other hand, we know from experience that big aha's sometimes happen. When daughter Kristen was a high-school freshman, she provided an encouraging example. After dinner one night, Kristen was talking about some of her friends, who seemed to know exactly what they wanted to become.

"They ask me what I'm going to do, where I want to go to college. I don't have a clue. They seem to know. I wish I was as clear about my passions."

I got up and fetched the laptop. Brought up some material that now appears in Chapter 3 below. First some examples of some folks who just knew from childhood what they would be. And then noted that most of us aren't like that. What should we do?

Thank you, Kristen, for being a good audience, for sitting through some more from that chapter. At the end, these words of Friedrich Nietzsche struck Kristen.

To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion of *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, "modesties," seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task. All this can express great prudence, even the supreme prudence: where *nosce te ipsum* [know thyself] would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself... become reason itself...

So many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to "understand itself." Meanwhile the organizing "idea" that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us *back* from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares "single" qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole—one by one, it trains all *servient* capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, "goal," "aim," or "meaning."<sup>5</sup>

Kristen got the big aha. She didn't have to try to figure out right now what her passion is, or even who she is. Over time, in due time, she should experiment.

She asked, "Dad, would you send that passage to me?"

I did, and that night, Nietzsche's first sentence was a text box on her Facebook homepage. Kristen's aha and appreciation made writing that chapter worthwhile.

How are what kinds of big aha's communicated to whom? It helps, I guess, when the communicator is a father who loves his daughter and the recipient is a daughter who loves him; when the messages are borne by masters like Nietzsche; and when the moment is right, when the question is on one's lips.

Or putting it another way, maybe we can receive big messages when we feel they come in love, when they contain the wisdom of many, and when they come to us through stories and examples. When the music and rhythm of the words is right. When we are open and receptive. Then—sometimes, anyway—we can be inspired to rethink what we do and why.

May you, dear reader, be in such a mood as you begin this book. May you find in these pages the wisdom of many, as well as inspiring examples. May I invite you to consider your life in the light of a heroic pattern, and may the music of my words help you consider how to find your calling, discover your insight, and create your model for sharing and serving.

# 1. Living Death

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Reading Thomas à Kempis is a sobering experience. His book *The Imitation of Christ* (1441) has been called the most widely read book in Christianity aside from the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Thomas created it as a series of teaching aides for young monks in the monastery where he resided more than five hundred years ago.

Thomas advises that we seek Christ in everything we do, and also that we not do many things. He advises against too many friends and too much knowledge, against women in general, and against the pleasures of the world. He recommends instead solitude, quiet, and the negation of self.

In fact, we should not just avoid the world, we should hate it. “And this is the supreme wisdom,” he says, “to despise the world, and draw daily nearer to the kingdom of heaven” (pp. 27-8). In effect we should die now, as far as ordinary life is concerned.

Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ. Learn now to despise all earthly things, that you may go freely to Christ. (59)

[Christ speaking, through the author] My son, you must needs be ignorant of many things: so consider yourself as dead, and crucified to the whole world. (150)

Blessed is the man who for Your sake, Lord, bids farewell to every creature, and, forcibly overcoming his natural inclinations, crucifies the desires of the flesh by the very fervor of his spirit, in order that he may offer you pure prayer with a quiet conscience. Having excluded all worldly things from his heart and life, he will be worthy to take his place in the choir of Angels. (158-9)

[Christ speaking, through the author] And the more completely a man renounces worldly things, and the more perfectly he dies to self by the conquest of self, the sooner will grace be given... (212)

To many readers, including me, Thomas’s prescriptions are not only sobering but to say the least nonintuitive. What on earth frightened Thomas so? Are there alternatives besides what Thomas advises and what Thomas fears? Are there other ways “to imitate Christ”?

Thomas was afraid of the temptations of the physical being, as opposed to the growth of the spiritual being. He believed Satan threatens everywhere, even in monasteries, and at one point Thomas said that monks of many years' standing are particularly vulnerable. He feared sin, which is to him a vivid and expansive category. The temptations and sins vary greatly, and it is hard to characterize them. But let me attempt a contemporary rendition of what Thomas might have considered a fearful state of affairs.

Suppose our inclination is not to avoid life but to embrace it. We want to experience the wonders of this world. But suppose further that we discover that many of the high points of life are the products of *pleasure, status, and power*. (If this is not true of you, please bear with me—you may find yourself more accurately described later.)<sup>7</sup> Suppose we therefore design our lives to attain pleasure, status, and power. Many of the pleasures are a function of money, so we seek money. Status and power come in part from factors that we can't help, such as gender and race and age and innate endowments, and also from things we can help at least in part, such as education, style, and career. And so we pursue money, and we choose our education, style, and jobs to enhance our status and power.

This is a stark and unflattering characterization; let us now take it to extremes.

### ***Pleasures***

For many people, among the most extreme of *pleasures* are intoxication, sexual union, and what might be called personal magic. The last means the feeling you have when, for example, you solve a difficult problem, play a beautiful piece of music, make a splendid soufflé, win a big tennis match, or otherwise display your talents. Or something more commonplace: your own special style and relationships. John Updike writes:

#### **Perfection Wasted**

And another regrettable thing about death  
is the ceasing of your own brand of magic,  
which took a whole life to develop and market —  
the quips, the witticisms, the slant  
adjusted to a few, those loved ones nearest  
the lip of the stage, their soft faces blanched  
in the footlight glow, their laughter close to tears,  
their tears confused with their diamond earrings,  
their warm pooled breath in and out with your heartbeat,  
their response and your performance twinned.

The jokes over the phone. The memories packed in the rapid-access file. The whole act. Who will do it again? That's it: no one; imitators and descendants aren't the same.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Status and Power***

For many people, among the most extreme experiences of *status and power* are access to exclusive benefits and the power to make decisions that others will or must follow. Arguably, today's world contains more opportunities for pleasures such as intoxication, sexual union, and personal magic than most people could enjoy at most times in history. Arguably, the average person today has more access than ever before to important places and decisions that in the past were restricted to a privileged few.

You may disagree with these two assertions, but let's play with them for a moment. If they were true, would people today be experiencing greater levels of happiness and fulfillment and joy than in centuries past? Would people start to have "enough" of these pleasures and "enough" status and power so that they would seek "something more"?

I think the answer to both questions may be no, at least for many people. In this sense Thomas à Kempis had a point. Imagine Thomas stating, "I do not believe that people are on average better off with greater access to alcohol and drugs than with less, with greater sexual freedom than with less, and with greater opportunities to display their personal magic, because all these things lead people away from God." Thomas was also skeptical of what happens to people who focus on status and power, and so he advocated the polar opposites: humility and obedience.

The extremes Thomas feared may include these.

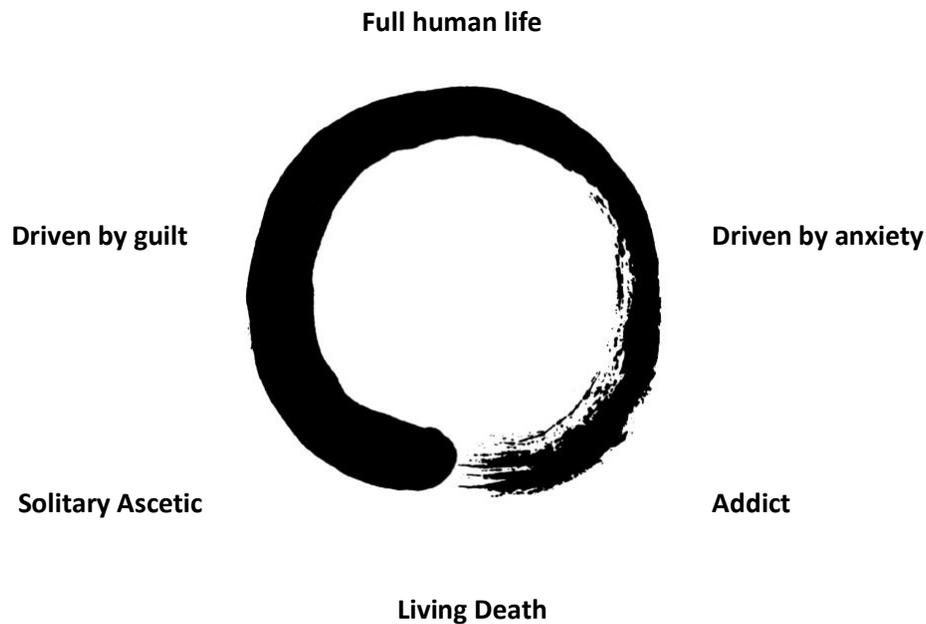
- The drug addict so intoxicated with intoxication that he (or she, throughout) ends up with bad health, confusion, and paradoxically the inability to experience real pleasure.
- The sexually promiscuous person so dedicated to conquests and orgasms that sexual union becomes jaded and unsatisfying.
- The person so dedicated to his personal magic that he becomes less interested in the magic for its own sake and more interested in how he compares with other people and their personal magic—in which case, the magic can disappear.

In these extreme cases, we perceive the opposite of Thomas’s own recommended escape from life. But I am struck by similarities. The extreme drug addict, for example, also experiences a kind of living death. Not the living death of Thomas’s ideal monk, holed away in self-denial and aspiring to a life that is not this one. But an extreme addict, who moves from dose to dose in a semi-conscious stupor, with the “highs” less and less like those moments of joy the addict originally sought, may also end up alone in his cell, also far away from a full human life.

## The Opposite of Living Death

*A full human life?* What does that mean? Let’s work toward it from the two extremes of living deaths—from the side of the monk and from the side of the addict.

Where are we? Imagine this characterization.



From one extreme, the solitary ascetic in his cell, let us move to a spiritual person trying to make his way and avoid sin.<sup>9</sup> Consider one type, the kind Nietzsche disparages when he has Zarathustra say, “Now I know what people sought formerly above all else when they sought teachers of virtue. Good sleep they sought for themselves, and poppy-head virtues to promote it.”<sup>10</sup> A good night’s sleep as the ultimate goal: by this he means a person whose objectives are to feel no guilt, to be materially secure, to wall off a little world of peace and quiet. Nothing is

wrong with these three feelings per se; Nietzsche criticizes making them the purpose of one's life. He deplores a person for whom the avoidance of guilty feelings becomes the ultimate objective, for whom comfort becomes the blessed state, for whom peace towers over all other states of the world. In making these desirable feelings ultimate aims, such a person may seem to us as well as to Nietzsche to be missing something more important in a full human life. I leave this as a thought to return to in a moment.

Now let's turn to the other limiting case, the living death of the extreme addict. From there, let us move inward on the spectrum to a materialistic, pleasure- and status-seeking person who is not, however, a self-destructive addict. Think of a person dedicated to surface pleasures and signs of status and power, preoccupied with how well he (or throughout, she) is doing compared with someone else or with socially instigated styles or standards of living. His daily worries are about things that even he, in moments of reflection, may admit are superficial signs of "success." He is characterized by anxiety rather than guilt, by a concern for relative status rather than absolute security. He makes the avoidance of anxiety and the achievement of status the ultimate aims, and often finds that these are unattainable because there is always one more thing to buy, one more rung to climb, one more task left undone.

What is at the top of the circle? What ideal of a full human life is the opposite of both kinds of living death?

## Heroes

Across many cultures, one finds myths and examples of heroes. What "hero" means varies, and the details of heroic lives are diverse.<sup>11</sup> And yet, patterns have been discerned. The Greek epic hero, says the classicist Gregory Nagy, is characterized by three elements:

1. The hero is unseasonal.
2. The hero is extreme—positively (for example, 'best' in whatever category) or negatively (the negative aspect can be a function of the hero's unseasonality).
3. The hero is antagonistic toward the god who seems to be most like the hero; antagonism does not rule out an element of attraction - often a "fatal attraction" - which is played out in a variety of ways.<sup>12</sup>

By “unseasonal,” Nagy means outside the usual pattern of life. Heroes leave the usual path or cycle. And this being out of season prods them, indeed enables them, to be heroic.<sup>13</sup>

In Europe in the late Middle Ages:

The hero is the ideal personal type whose being is centered upon nobility and its realization—hence upon “pure” not technical, values—and whose basic virtue is natural nobility in body and soul. The hero is distinguished by a superabundance of intellectual will and by its concentration against the instincts. It is this which characterizes his greatness of character. The specific virtue of the hero is self-control. But the hero’s will does not rest here, it presses into power, responsibility, daring.<sup>14</sup>

And one can compare the Shakespearean hero,<sup>15</sup> the hero of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism,<sup>16</sup> and “the hero of history.”<sup>17</sup>

Amid this variety, Joseph Campbell identified common features. Their life journeys feature momentous departures that often involve a calling, some sort of initiation including a realization about themselves and their place in the world, and a return home.<sup>18</sup>

In this book, we play with a simplification of this sequence.

- Heroes experience a *calling*.
- They attain a big *insight* about themselves and the world.
- And then they *share and serve*.

It is not just mythological heroes who portray this pattern. David Bornstein studied people around the world who work at the grassroots level and make a difference. At one point he paused in the book to ask what motivates these extraordinary people. Each of them had a hero, someone close to them with “outstandingly strong values.” And at some point, a combination of a crucial event or situation and their own preparation yielded a conversion from their former lives.

However the influences differ, a pattern remains: At some moment in their lives, social entrepreneurs get it into their heads that it is up to them to solve a particular problem. Usually something has been brewing inside for a long time, and at a particular moment in time—often triggered by an event—personal preparedness, social need, and historical opportunity converge and the person takes decision action. The word

“decision” comes from the Latin *decidere*, meaning “to cut off.” From that point on, the social entrepreneurs seem to cut off other options for themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Such examples can help us appreciate a full human life, even when we can’t define a full human life.<sup>20</sup> As philosopher Tim Mawson points out, “A life, a period or an aspect within a life, or even an individual action within a life is said to be more deeply meaningful than another and there is a notable consensus on such first-order judgments, a consensus that spans very different theories of what the meaning of life is.”<sup>21</sup> We may then note that many examples of full human lives contain common features: calling, insight, sharing and service.<sup>22</sup>

### *Calling*

You experience a *calling* to something when that something becomes apparent or obvious as the right thing for you to be or become. A calling has the odd feeling of being both outside and inside oneself. People use words like intuition—“I could just tell”—or they speak of inspiration, as with a muse or a spirit or a living ideal.

The psychologist Abraham H. Maslow studied “self-actualizing people,” his term for the “more matured, more fully human” among us.<sup>23</sup> Their basic needs of belongingness, affection, respect, and self-esteem are gratified. They are spontaneous, natural, “more easily themselves than other people.”

What motivates these people?

Self-actualizing people are, without one single exception, involved in something outside of themselves. They are devoted, working at something, something which is very precious to them—some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense.

They are working at something which fate has called them to and which they work hard at and which they love, so that the work-joy dichotomy in them disappears. (p. 43).

What does it mean to have a calling? “The best way to communicate these feelings to someone who doesn’t intuitively, directly understand them is to use as a model ‘falling in love.’ This is clearly different from doing one’s duty, or doing what is sensible and logical” (p. 301).

The psychologists Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi interviewed hundreds of successful painters, dancers, poets, novelists, physicists, biologists, and psychologists—all people who seem to have crafted lives for themselves built around a consuming passion. These

are admirable lives, the sort that many young people dream of having. The authors wanted to know how such lives happened.<sup>24</sup>

Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi called the end state of this deepening process “vital engagement,” which “is characterized by completeness of involvement or participation and marked by intensity. There is a strong felt connection between self and object; a writer is ‘swept away’ by a project, a scientist is ‘mesmerized by the stars.’ The relationship has subjective meaning; work is a ‘calling.’”<sup>25</sup>

### *Insight*

Like a calling, an *insight* also creates an “aha,” but now of a more cognitive sort. A big insight makes sense of things that heretofore were mysterious or contradictory or unconnected. A big insight clarifies the world, not just one’s own calling.

Sometimes the calling or the insight, or perhaps both, originate with what Maslow called a “peak experience.” Almost all his self-actualizing subjects had therapeutic effects from peak experiences described as “mystic” or “oceanic” or “a cognition of being.” Their insights were “so profound as to remove neurotic symptoms forever; or were followed by greater creativity, spontaneity, or expressiveness; or produced a more or less permanently changed, more healthy world-view, and so on.”<sup>26</sup>

The hero of Herman Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) tried described his peak experiences as glimpses of reality.

What gives these experiences their weight and persuasiveness is not their truth, their sublime origin, their divinity or anything of the sort, but their reality. They are tremendously real, somewhat in the way a violent physical pain or a surprising natural event, a storm or an earthquake, seem to us charged with an entirely different sort of reality, presence, inexorability, from ordinary times and conditions... Later on we may start to question them or examine their significance, if that is our bent; but at the moment they admit no doubts and are brimful of reality. My “awakening” has a similar kind of intensified reality for me.<sup>27</sup>

## *Sharing and Serving*

In the heroic progression, *sharing and serving* come next. The calling and the insight are not confined to the hero's own well-being or sanctification. They are shared with others.

What does *sharing* a calling and an insight mean? It is probably not the same as teaching a scientific theory or demonstrating a chemical reaction. This kind of sharing is usually done artistically, through metaphor and myth, parable and philosophical abstraction, and/or a practical program of discipline and passion combined.

And *serving* is part of the equation. The service is often directed toward causes and people that those driven by anxiety and guilt wish to avoid and exclude. The hero serves the needy and the forgotten, even the sinners and the enemies of society.

Sharing and serving, to be done well, must be attentive to situation, norms, and conventions. Sharing and serving have to be tailored to individuals as well—to a person's feelings, needs, fears, and level of preparation. As a hypothesis, I would suggest that sharing and serving should presuppose a relationship. The relationship could be one of community, or it could be one of friendship or love.

Imagine you and I are lucky enough to receive sharing and service from another person. If that person is dour and impersonal, if we feel that he is simply doing a duty or worse a penance, we will not be happy even though we may be appreciative. But if that person shares with us and serves us with kindness and joy, as if they want to share and serve for the delight it gave them, then we will receive it in a completely different way. Anne Colby and William Damon studied "moral exemplars" who served others in remarkable, sustained ways.<sup>28</sup> What they had in common was

strong, enduring, and general *positivity* toward their lives, toward their work, and toward other people. What do we mean by "positivity"? First, we are referring to an enjoyment of life, especially an enjoyment of the work they are doing—whether it is fighting for racial justice, helping the poor, or working for peace. (p. 262)

Also, these moral exemplars exhibited a sense of humor, humility, and "the ability to see oneself as contributing to an ongoing effort, not a savior who is out to change the world" (p. 272).

## The Hero's Example of the Full Human Life

These reflections introduce an image of a full human life that we will explore in the chapters that follow. It contrasts with the living deaths of the solitary ascetic who withdraws from life and the extreme addict who greedily grabs things and people. A full human life is very much in this world through sharing and service. It supersedes both guilt (with its ultimate goals of security and peace) and anxiety (with its attendant idols of pleasure and status).

The hero seeks, or receives, a calling. This means heroes are attentive to who they are or can be, nurturing this understanding through knowledge and experience, and they are open to answers that may appear rather than being readily deduced or derived.

The hero gains, or is granted, a big insight, which addresses a personal challenge as well as a social one. Heroes are fortunate, we might say; but they are also prepared and available for insight.

And then the hero reaches out to others. Heroes apprehend that their sharing may be "indirect," through example and artistic expression. They also feel what might be called a non-verbal command to serve others.<sup>29</sup>

This full human life is the opposite of the living death sought by the monk and the addict. It is also far away from lives that concentrate on pleasure and status, or on security and peace. It transcends selfish conceptions of the ultimate good. It accepts the wonder of an individual calling and reveres the possibility of a deeply felt and transforming insight. It addresses, indeed embraces, the imperfections of this world.

## 2. For Non-Heroes, Too?

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All of that is fine for heroes. Maybe they have “a full human life.” But what does all this talk about heroes mean for the rest of us, who are not heroes?

When he was fifteen years old, the last thing my brother Bill wanted was to be a hero. In fact, he earnestly desired to be a non-hero. He used to say, “I just want to be average.”

This desire did not go down well with the adults in his life.

“But you’re not average,” a teacher or a coach or a parent would respond.

“I don’t care!” Bill would answer sadly or angrily. “I just want to be average.”

This is not unusual. Many of us flee the exceptional, perhaps in order to flee expectations—especially when the expectations are not our own. Anxiety can overwhelm. So can guilt in cases where expectations are not fulfilled. How much better to set our sights lower. Asked why we flee, we may pose questions in return.

“Why should I study so hard?”

“Why should I train so hard?”

“Why should I try to be so good?”

When I was writing this chapter, I talked with Bill—now a great success as a person and as a professional. I asked him if he recalled his reaction in those days. He thought about it, and later that day he handed me a note with these recollections of what he felt then:

Let go of those expectations—the ones you have of me, the ones you want me to have for myself. I’m not sure I can live up to them, I’m not sure I want what they bring. “A big fish in a small pond” lets me move more easily and find my own way. The confines of parental expectations conflict with self-discovery. Let the silt settle out of muddy water.

At first it was liberating—an absence of nagging. In time another voice developed that set goals and objectives, blending the voice of my parents with my own perceptions and ability. There are interior truths that need to be discovered by direct experience. If I’m not average now, it’s because of a confluence of innate ability with good fortune.

There is a role for structure and obedience—but in my experience those became overblown with importance. There is also a role for emergence and discovery, but watch out for self-indulgence. Teachers are so much better when you're ready to learn. A clear mind finds things out and unintended things happen. That's happiness—a sudden realization of an unexpected truth.<sup>30</sup>

Bill is now a board member and senior consultant in the world of clinical trials and digital medicine. He is a long-distance cyclist, an environmentalist, and a wonderful husband and father. None of these was automatic. As Bill and every one of us finds out, it is not easy for us to study or train or practice virtue. Even when we do, our “success” doesn't just depend on us. Achievements are often couched in relative terms. Where did you finish in the race? What was your class rank? Did you provide the most hours of service? Did you win the election? Even standardized tests are normed, meaning that your score depends on how well the others did who took the tests. Relative success introduces *competition*. Sometimes the people you compete with are unknown takers of standardized tests. More often, your competition is with colleagues and friends. Your being exceptional often means that someone you know and like won't be as exceptional. If you ask a young person who's fleeing from being exceptional why, and if you listen carefully, you may hear something about not wanting to look better than one's friends, not wanting to make others look bad. Or perhaps you'll hear “I don't want to look worse than my friends. I don't want others to make me look bad.”

## Saying You Want to Be a Hero

Interestingly, those who flee heroism have something in common with some of those who declare heroism is their goal. Some fleers and some would-be heroes share low levels of achievement motivation.

More than half a century ago, the psychologist David McClelland began studying what he called the need for achievement, or achievement motivation.<sup>31</sup> He found that some people seem to need success more than others. In particular, they seek frequent feedback that they are succeeding. (He found that other people are more motivated by a need for power, and still others by a need for affiliation or friendship.)

People with a low need for achievement tend also to be fearful of failure. In a psychological experiment, people were asked to play a special game of throwing rings over a peg. They were allowed to choose the distance. They could choose a lay-up toss right next to the peg, or a throw several feet away, or a heave from the other side of the room—or any distance in between.

People with high achievement motivation tended to choose distances where it turned out they had about a fifty-fifty chance of making the toss. People with low achievement motivation chose differently. They would either select a lay-up or a long-distance bomb. If they chose the lay-up, they would be virtually certain to make the shot. Failure would be rare. If they chose the across-the-room miracle shot, success would be rare; but since the shot was so difficult, no one could blame them for failure. Low achievement motivation, high fear of failure.

Some people with low achievement motivation say they want to be heroes. For example, McClelland found that if you ask high-school students with low achievement motivation what they want to be when they grow up, they will tend to say one of two things. The first thing is to say they don't want to be anything. The very different second thing is that they want to be president of the United States, or discover a cure for cancer, or make a billion dollars. Failure can't be criticized, and isn't feared, because anyone can be a nothing, and only one in millions can be president.

## Training

So, some aspiring heroes have something in common with some who flee heroism. They fear failure. They tend not to need *achievement*. Fortunately, these dispositions are not permanent.

David McClelland found that people could be trained to increase their achievement motivation. He showed this through experiments in the inner city, as well as with business people, students, and people in India. The training involved several stages: self-recognition through a test, learning about various kinds of motivation and their effects, and practicing being achievement oriented.

In an almost forgotten book about economic development, McClelland showed that countries differed in average levels of need for achievement.<sup>32</sup> Later he argued that in cultures

with low need for achievement, a variety of treatments seemed able to raise that need for achievement, with ensuing increases in economic prosperity.

One of McClelland's examples of change involved Protestantism. He reviewed the old arguments of Max Weber, that the capitalist revolution in Europe was associated with the Protestant revolution. Causation is of course difficult to establish historically, but McClelland was sympathetic to Weber's thesis. McClelland cited newer evidence from Latin America. People and communities that had switched from Catholicism or atheism to evangelical Protestantism often had higher scores on his tests for need for achievement—and subsequently evinced better family situations, lower levels of alcoholism and crime, and higher incomes.

McClelland's work carries three lessons. First, that those who say they just want to be average and those who spout that they'd like to be heroes may have more in common than they realize. Second, simply saying that you want to be a hero isn't the same as achieving it—in fact, it may be a sign of low achievement motivation. Third, people can increase their achievement orientations. One way, at least for some people, is through formal training, and McClelland's techniques are today purveyed by private companies around the world.<sup>33</sup> Another way, at least for some people, is converting to Protestant Christianity.

The psychologist Philip Zimbardo has created a training program for heroes. Zimbardo supplements the hero of myth and romantic imagination with the hero of everyday life. He argues "it is possible to nurture a mind-set to help others in need, care for others compassionately, and to develop confidence in one's own ability to take heroic action."<sup>34</sup>

This is a useful distinction. The point is not some sort of ego magnification. Rather, Zimbardo's Heroic Imagination Project is designed to create everyday heroes, defined as those who act on behalf of others in need or in defense of a moral cause, aware of risks and personal costs.<sup>35</sup> Zimbardo and his colleagues believe that about one-fifth of the U.S. population have carried out a heroic act.<sup>36</sup> And his bet is that conveying some "principles of social psychology" will create more heroes—still a bet, because as he emphasizes, more research is needed.

The principles come in three batches. First, trainees learn that "our mindsets—the set of beliefs we have about whether our abilities can be grown or changed—profoundly impact the way we work, play, explore, and live." In the context of improving the world, trainees learn why limiting beliefs occur and how to change them. Trainees learn that "their daily efforts to

navigate challenges and failures and seek triumphs are valid and that doing these things can help make the world a better place.”

Second, trainees learn that the opposite of a hero is not a villain but a “bystander,” someone who does nothing during adverse situations. Trainees learn “how to identify bystander behavior in various scenarios and what can be done to prevent it in oneself and in others.”

Third, trainees learn about implicit and explicit biases. Trainees learn how to identify their implicit biases and how to change them. The idea is apparently that prejudiced people are more likely to be bystanders.

Similar themes emerge in training by the Hero Construction Company, founded and led by the psychologist Matt Langdon.<sup>37</sup> In both cases, a key audience is high-school students. In both cases, some risks of hero training as well as possible benefits have been identified, but scientific evaluations of the outcomes and costs remain to be done. These are humble heroes—a theme to which we will return.

## Therapy

If training and religious conversion can sometimes abet big changes, so can therapy. Interestingly, studies show that benefits sometimes ensue from a single visit to the psychologist or counselor.<sup>38</sup> From this encounter, the patient apparently garners an insight that helps him reconfigure his life. Some call this “the hello-goodbye effect.”

Although this hello-goodbye effect does occur, and sometimes powerfully, other patients need longer therapy—and some patients apparently never get much better, even after years.<sup>39</sup> Why? Do the improvers have easier neuroses to cure, or more will to change, or better doctors?

The psychologist Scott Peck described how some psychiatric patients respond beautifully and quickly to treatment, whereas some other patients never respond. He found no systematic differences in the difficulty of their psychological problems, their willpower, or the quality of their treatments. Stumped, Peck evoked the concepts of grace and serendipity. Both are paradoxical.

By this interpretation I have indicated that whether or not we become blessed by grace is a matter of our choice. Essentially, I have been saying that grace is earned. And I know this to be true.

At the same time, however, I know that that's not the way it is at all. We do not come to grace; grace comes to us. Try as we might to obtain grace, it may yet elude us. We may seek it not, yet it will find us. Consciously we may avidly desire the spiritual life but then discover all manner of stumbling blocks in our way. Or we may have seemingly little taste for the spiritual life and yet find ourselves vigorously called to it in spite of ourselves. While on one level we do choose whether or not to heed the call of grace, on another it seems clear that God is the one who does the choosing...

How do we resolve this paradox? We don't. Perhaps the best that we can say is that while we cannot will ourselves to grace, we can by will open ourselves to its miraculous coming.<sup>40</sup>

It is a fundamental fact, Peck seems to say, that not everyone can be saved.<sup>41</sup> The best he can say is that those who get better, like heroes, are usually open to a calling, to receiving an insight. Those who do not improve, like nonheroes, avoid callings and insights. But there are no guarantees.<sup>42</sup>

Artists note a similar phenomenon.

- Annie Dillard: "At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your fists, your back, your brain, and then—and only then—it is handed to you."<sup>43</sup>
- Lewis Hyde: Artists must suspend their wills until the unmerited grace of creation appears, and then their preparedness and will power can mold the work of art. Artists must be gifted in both senses: the gift of the insight and the gift of talent needed to turn the insight into a worthy creation.<sup>44</sup>

William James studied religious experience with an objective eye and an affective spirit, and he came to a similar conclusion.

We shall see how infinitely passionate a thing religion at its highest flights can be. Like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, it adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else. This enchantment, coming as a gift when it does come,—a gift of our organism, the physiologists will tell us, a gift of God's grace, the theologians say,—is either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more become

possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command. Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life...<sup>45</sup>

Agehananda Bharati (born Leopold Fischer) studied the "zero-experience," his name for the authentic mystical state. "The summary of his experience and knowledge of authentic mysticism is formulated rather laconically: the zero-experience comes to those to whom it comes, regardless of what they do; it also comes to those few who try very hard over a long period of time."<sup>46</sup>

Therapy may help, but it can only help prepare the way for serendipity.

## Example and Experience

Besides training and therapy, exemplars may help us find our way to fuller human lives. We may be lucky enough to have different kinds, or levels, of exemplars. A hero displays for us a full human life. A role model exemplifies a specific calling such as a composer or a stained-glass maker.<sup>47</sup> A behavioral model teaches us specific skills needed for our positions within our chosen "what." Ideally, our upbringing and education would provide us with exposure to all three.

In W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge*, Larry Darrell is an exemplar of a full human life.<sup>48</sup> As a young pilot in World War I, Larry loses his close friend, a particularly shattering experience because the friend was coming to his rescue. Larry launches into a search for meaning. He visits Europe, studies philosophy, and explores the artistic life. He works in a coal mine, where he discovers almost by chance that one of his fellow miners happens to be a former priest who says he is fleeing God. The priest tells the young man about India, about a special guru in a special mountain ashram.

The young man goes there. He meets a hero, the saintly Shri Ganesha. Larry is fascinated. He eventually dwells in a cabin on a Himalayan peak, where one dawn he is so overwhelmed by the beauty that he feels oneness with God. He relates this experience later:

"I wanted to spend my birthday there. I got there the day before. Next morning I awoke before dawn and I thought I'd go and see the sunrise from the place I've just told you about. I knew the way blindfold [sic]. I sat down under a tree and waited. It was night still, but the stars were pale in the sky, and the day was at hand. I had a strange

feeling of suspense. So gradually that I was hardly aware of it light began to filter through the darkness, slowly, like a mysterious figure slinking between the trees. I felt my heart beating as though at the approach of danger.”

Larry paused and a rueful smile played on his lips.

“I have no descriptive talent, I don’t know the words to paint a picture, I can’t tell you, so as to make you see it, how grand the sight was that was displayed before me as the day broke in its splendor. Those mountains with their deep jungle, the mist still entangled in the treetops, and the bottomless lake far below me. The sun caught the lake through a cleft in the heights and it shone like burnished steel. I was ravished with the beauty of the world. I’d never known such exaltation and such a transcendent joy. I had a strange sensation, a tingling that arose in my feet and travelled up to my head, and I felt as though I were suddenly released from my body and as pure spirit partook of a loveliness I had never conceived. I had a sense that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained. I was so happy that it was pain and I struggled to release myself from it, for I felt that if it lasted a moment longer I should die; and yet it was such rapture that I was ready to die rather than forego it. How can I tell you what I felt? No words can tell the ecstasy of my bliss. When I came to myself I was exhausted and trembling” (p. 220).

Larry rejects the life of the solitary ascetic:

“I felt in myself an energy that cried out to be expended. It was not for me to leave the world and retire to a cloister, but to live in the world and love the objects of the world, not indeed for themselves, but for the Infinite that is in them... in those moments of ecstasy I had indeed been one with the Absolute... I was willing to accept every sort of life, no matter what its pain and sorrow; I felt that only life after life, life after life could satisfy my eagerness, my vigor and my curiosity” (p. 222).

And so, having lived through his calling to find wisdom and having received an insight deep in his heart, the young man returns home to confront the Depression, his former fiancée (now married), and a former friend who has been crushed by tragedy. Then Larry Darrell dedicates himself to sharing and serving.

No one recognizes Larry as a guru or a hero. No one, that is, except the novelist and the admiring readers of *The Razor's Edge*.

## Which Hero?

We can be everyday heroes by identifying and being inspired by heroes. Larry Darrell is a fictional hero who amaze us as an example of a full human life. If we have experienced a sense of rightness in a hero's saga, he or she may become our own source of strength. We may have faith in the power of that example to transform our lives and through us, we hope, the lives of others. By holding these men and women close to our hearts, we can become more heroic even in our mundane lives.

An artistic analogy is useful. We may be appreciative of art and music, even if we are not ourselves able to produce it. Indeed, our appreciation of beauty may in some sense hinge upon those especially gifted and experienced to create it. "The spirit of an artist's gifts can wake our own," notes Lewis Hyde. "We may not have the power to profess our gifts as the artist does, and yet we come to recognize, and in a sense to receive, the endowments of our being through the agency of his creation."<sup>49</sup>

In the same way, people vary in their abilities to find a calling, discover an insight, and live both calling and insight through sharing and serving. They vary in their experiences. Those of us who have less ability and experience may well find inspiration and instruction from those with more. They can, in small or large measure, be our heroes.

It is very similar in the domain of the religious consciousness, religious production, and revelation. Here, too, most men have only the "predisposition," in the sense of a receptiveness and susceptibility to religion and a capacity for freely recognizing and judging religious truth at first hand... The prophet [or we might say, the hero] corresponds in the religious sphere to the creative artist in that of art: he is the man in whom the Spirit shows itself alike as the power to hear "the voice within" and the power of divination, and in each case appears as a creative force.<sup>50</sup>

One question is how to find a hero and a heroism that is meaningful *for us*. Ideally, we would have a hero whose insight encompasses our own very personal dilemmas, but also who speaks to our all-too-human dilemma of sharing and serving as imperfect beings. A hero who

would help us see that it is the purity of our love that matters, not how gifted we are in love or how powerful we are so that our love has a wider radius. Ideally, we would feel it is all right for us to be imperfect in execution, all right to be a human being, all right to be confused about the what to do and how—as long as we are aligned with that love and feel it in our hearts.

In the limit, we would have faith in this particular hero and this particular calling and insight, counting on his or her power to transcend our own limited powers, even as we try to share that insight through our imperfect actions and our service. We would understand that a full human life is open to non-heroes, too, just like us.

### 3. What Is Your Calling?

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For many people, especially young people, one’s calling isn’t evident. Especially, perhaps, for the multi-talented. So many possibilities. This very multiplicity can become a source of both pride—and of unreality.<sup>51</sup>

You may also sense that the standard paths just don’t seem to fit you. Many of the usual answers, phrased in occupational or familial terms, may strike you as banal. What can you do to help you find your calling?

#### “My Calling Just Came to Me”

The great maker of stained glass windows Rowan LeCompte found his calling suddenly. Here is how in his eighties LeCompte recalled an experience he had in his teens.

I was passionately interested in architecture and in painting, and I could never decide which I wanted to do first. When I first saw the cathedral, however, by chance it was a dazzling summer day with cool temperatures and brilliant sun. The building was half built. We walked up a set of concrete steps and across a great walk of wood to a big tin wall held up by vast beams of wood and then in through a door into darkness, but it wasn’t darkness. There was a marvelous rose window floating in the dark, and I was inside a vast building, the like of which I had never seen or been in. It went up to an unthinkable height, and the air was filled with music because the organ was only one year old then and the organist was practicing, and he was playing Handel and I recognized it at once. But I did not recognize the building as anything I had ever seen before. It was a magic, marvelous, dim, ravishingly beautiful place. And I was stunned. Really, I was stunned. And I think of that as my second birthday, because it did change my life utterly and from that time on I was obsessed with it.<sup>52</sup>

When we see LeCompte’s beautiful stained-glass windows in the National Cathedral in Washington—the first of which was commissioned when he was sixteen—and when we hear

him describe kindness and love as his ideals, we are grateful that he found such a good and proper calling for him.

Or take the conductor Andris Nelsons.

Harriet Gilbert: I read somewhere, Andris, that it was while you were watching a Wagner opera at the tender age of five that you decided you wanted to become a conductor. Is that right?

Andris Nelsons: Yes, you know it's true. I was five years old when my father took me to the opera house and it was Wagner's Tannhäuser. I was so touched by this opera and I was crying and I was so so emotional after that. And interestingly enough, during the performance I was watching the conductor, and I was thinking, "Oh my God, it must be such a great responsibility. If he does something wrong, everything goes wrong, and it's his fault." So I was thinking, it must be great to be involved in the music so much as the conductor. That was subconsciously my dream. Someday I would like to become a conductor, not because of being you know in front of the people but because of being involved in music all the time, you know, from the first to the last bar.<sup>53</sup>

## What If You Don't Know Your Calling?

If you are not like these two lucky souls, how can you discover your calling? One idea is to sit down, think hard, and figure it out.

The late Howard Raiffa, one of the pioneers of decision theory, told a story about the late 1960s, a time of social upheaval and uncertainty about what really mattered. One of Raiffa's students decided to write his senior honors thesis on the topic, "What I Should Do after Graduation." The student employed decision theory to analyze his options. He laid out every contingency pertaining to every choice. He assigned a numerical value to each possible outcome. Then he calculated which path had the highest expected utility for him. This was the calling he should follow.

The answer shocked the student. His analysis concluded that he should join the Army.

During the Vietnam War, this was certainly not the usual answer. Something, the bewildered student concluded, was wrong with decision analysis. He immediately consulted

Professor Raiffa. How, he asked, could this mathematical analysis of his life choices have produced such a bizarre result?

Raiffa went back to the beginning. What did the student value, and how much compared with other things? The student had found it uncomfortable to try to list all the so-called “attributes” of his utility function—and then, to try to trade them off against one other. But he tried again, and he and Raiffa reviewed the list one by one. Suddenly, the student lit up.

“I see what I forgot,” he exclaimed. “I left out my love life!”

This is not an omission I would expect many college seniors to make. But it is true that when we think about the future it is hard to know or to remember all the things that matter to us.

Most formal techniques for analyzing choice assume that the things we value are given. But these may be precisely what we need to discover. What values should we pursue? What calling should we follow? We probably can’t find out by writing a senior thesis. We probably can’t reason our way to a satisfying answer. Instead, we may need to try out different callings and see how they feel to us. We may need, in short, to experiment.

## Five Categories of Callings

It’s a truism that experience is the great teacher, but I like that word, *experiment*. It emphasizes that our learning from experience need not be haphazard, that we can plan our experiences and evaluate them.

How might you think about experimenting to find your calling? As a start, let’s consider five categories of callings. Under each of the five, a large variety of specific callings reside. But thinking about the big categories may be a useful beginning.

The first category relates to one’s own happiness. It might be called naïve egoism, to distinguish it from a sophisticated or large-scope egoism that can embrace another of the basic values. (More on this in a moment.) The calling here is to be as happy as you can. If someone asks you why you are doing thus-and-so with your life, the appropriate answer is “Because it makes me happy.”

This calling is also familiar from what you’ll hear some parents say about their child. “I don’t care what he does, as long as it makes him happy.”

But what will make you happy, or happiest? It may not be easy to know. Indeed, upon further examination this first category proves rather unhelpful. It describes a possible result of pursuing a calling rather than the calling itself. The problem of what specifically to do is just pushed one step back. But the point of considering the category of naïve egoism is that it treats your own happiness, no matter how narrow or wide its reach, as the objective to be sought. It is this calling that you should experiment with.

Contrast a second basic calling, altruism. Here the idea is to increase everyone's happiness, not just your own. You should choose a life that would contribute to the greatest good for the greatest number—to use a familiar formulation that is strictly speaking impossible—and you should do so even if some other path would leave you better off.

Attention: it turns out not to be so easy to say what makes humankind happy, either.

A third basic value might be called scientific. The goal here is not to make yourself or others happy, rather to seek and to attain truth. Forget about serving yourself or serving others. No great scientist, advised Max Weber, “has ever done anything but serve his work and only his work.”<sup>54</sup>

A fourth calling is artistic. The idea here is to create something authentic and uniquely yours. “Within the world of art,” writes the philosopher Stanley Cavell, “one makes one's own dangers, takes one's chances—and one speaks of its objects at such moments in terms of tension, problem, imbalance, necessity, shock, surprise.”<sup>55</sup> Notice that he does not include happiness, altruism, or truth among the objects of art.

Finally, a fifth basic value might be called religious. Describing the objective here is difficult. One may speak of trying to engage infinity, or ultimate reality, or God. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson refers to the *homo religiosus* “who looks through the historical parade of cultures and civilizations, styles, and isms which provide most of us with a glorious and yet miserably fragile sense of immortal identify, defined status, and collective grandeur and faces the central truth of nothingness—and, *mirabile dictu*, gains power from it.”<sup>56</sup>

How should we evaluate these five categories of callings? We should immediately admit that they are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. The five callings do not necessarily conflict. On the other hand, these diverse callings do not automatically overlap, and you may not know which should be yours. How might you find out?

My suggestion is that you can't do it in your armchair. You need experience. So, go ahead and get experience in the most efficient fashion: experiment. Make a willful effort to put yourself in circumstances—and in the frame of mind—where you can test alternative ways of valuing the world. Be an experimenter—with your own life.<sup>57</sup>

For example, you might test your altruistic values by placing yourself in an impoverished setting, where you define your concerns as helping those around you. You might experiment with your artistic side and try, for a while, painting or sculpting or composing. To explore a religious dimension, you might try for a period of time to pass four hours a day in prayer and meditation; or more generally, to prove its truths for you experimentally.<sup>58</sup>

## Gestation

If you undertake such experiments with your life, you might expect several things to happen. It will probably take time for an answer to emerge for you. The process may be likened to pregnancy. After a gestation period, a clarification of your deepest values, even that feeling of wholeness you have been looking for, may emerge, naturally.

If you are fortunate, your calling may combine a personal problem, *your* personal problem, with a problem outside yourself, in historical time. Such a combination, Erik Erikson observed, distinguished the lives of Luther, Darwin, Freud, and Gandhi. Combining “their individual problem” and “the world’s version of that problem” forged each of their callings—and provided them with the passion that enabled them to change the world.<sup>59</sup>

In none of their cases, Erikson notes, did the calling come by their seeking it. The calling arrived during a time of what Erikson labels a “moratorium,” after a period of preparation and a period of crisis. Darwin left the university on a boat trip around the world. Gandhi departed from his legal studies in London, where he had occasionally dressed in a top hat and gloves, to work with the poor in South Africa. Luther had a personal crisis just as he was about to become a Catholic priest, and his moratorium was a time of protected reflection under a sympathetic mentor.

You, too, may need a “moratorium.” Finding a calling does take preparation—it is not passive in that sense. But it is not something one does simply by pursuing a degree or taking a particular job.

In fact, finding your calling may even be hindered by trying too hard or too soon to define it. William James compared the process to incubation: “When the new center of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, ‘hands off’ is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided.”<sup>60</sup> Consider Nietzsche’s advice, which we encountered in the Preface:

To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion of *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, “modesties,” seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task. All this can express great prudence, even the supreme prudence: where *nosce te ipsum* [know thyself] would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, *misunderstanding* oneself... become reason itself...

So many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to “understand itself.” Meanwhile the organizing “idea” that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us *back* from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares “single” qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole—one by one, it trains all *servient* capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, “goal,” “aim,” or “meaning.”<sup>61</sup>

Accidents made good, even what the philosopher Willard V. Quine calls “happy confusions,” turn out to be welcome in many areas of life.<sup>62</sup>

So, if you feel anxious about what you’re going to do with your life and if you don’t have the answer, take heart. You probably don’t yet know exactly what you should value—and that’s all right, whatever your age. To find your calling, don’t just think about it, get experience. Experiment with your life and your calling. If you are lucky, you will experience something akin to falling in love.<sup>63</sup>

## 4. What Is Your Big Insight?

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An exuberant advertisement for financial software described the feeling of having an insight. The software's user sees raw data from the stock market instantly transformed into insights.

This is what we call the "Ah-hah! Factor."

As in "Ah-hah! That stock is way undervalued."

Or, "Ah-hah! We've got a terrible portfolio balance here."

Or, "Ah-hah! The trend suggests a trend in XYZ company's stock prices by late spring."

Or, "Ah-hah! We better get out of this while we still have our shirts."

Ah-hah! is the sudden glow of insight. The hair on the back of your neck that tells you you're on to something that no one else has seen yet.

It's the difference between a very informed buy-sell decision and a not-so-hot one.

One dictionary defines "insight" as "a clear understanding of the inner nature of some specific thing." But the "ah-hah!" of the software ad captures an important nuance. An insight surprises us, grabs us, satisfies us. Arthur Koestler went so far as to characterize three of mankind's most basic reactions as

"Ah!"—That feels good!

"Aha!"—That makes sense!

"Haha!"—That's funny!

Which itself may or may not be an insight.<sup>64</sup>

### Big Insights

The second step in the hero's story involves a big insight. But what are "big insights"? Where do insights come from? What can they become?

Not all insights are big, of course. Some are so small they are hardly worth the name, but others can be huge, for us as individuals and for societies. The big insights mean more to us, and

they are more widely shared. Some insights become approaches to entire fields of study: think of Darwin's big insight, for example, or Freud's. Some big insights become ideologies.

So, what about those "big aha's"—to use Koestler's economical spelling with a colloquial apostrophe. Let us consider a few of those insights that suddenly make sense of a range of puzzles or paradoxes and generate for us new ways of thinking about the world. Do they have common features? And without proper management on our parts, might the big "aha's" soon cease to be playful and useful, and start to be counterproductive?

Let us explore these questions by examining four big insights from different fields (economics, sociology, religion, clinical psychology). In the spirit of playful insight-enjoyment, I will condense into each "big aha" packages of insights, even populations of insights, and I will pretend that only one albeit large insight resides in each category. This simplification is nowhere more apparent than in discussing "the" elementary economic insight.

## The Economic Insight

The movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn once discussed making a film with George Bernard Shaw. Goldwyn elaborated on the joys of pure art and the importance of great movies. After this had continued for some time, Shaw became impatient.

"Well, Mr. Goldwyn," Shaw declared, "there is not much use in going on. There is this difference between you and me: You are only interested in art and I am only interested in money."<sup>65</sup>

What ensued is not recorded. Maybe Goldwyn saw nothing more than rudeness and responded with something unprintable. Or maybe Goldwyn later had a big insight. Maybe Shaw's joke had a serious point. Maybe Shaw really did only care about money, and for that matter, Goldwyn may have been prodded to think, maybe that's all anyone cared about. To dress the point, maybe all everybody did was maximize his or her income.

If Goldwyn entertained such a notion, he was close to what might be called the elementary economic insight. Each person has a bunch of tastes and capabilities. Each invests his or her effort in one or another activity. What the person decides to do is determined by the relative profitability of the various activities. The person maximizes profits (actually, "utility" as assessed

according to his or her own tastes) given his or her capabilities and the rewards for each available activity.

If you have the insight, you calculate at the margin, for that is where economics shows that maximizing calculations should take place. You draw implications for people, firms, and governments. For example, prices should be set equal to marginal costs: otherwise, prices are “inefficient” and aggregate output will not be “optimal.” You say that exchange rates and tariffs and taxes and tolls should be set in a similar way: the marginal cost should equal the marginal benefit. Along with each person’s endowments and tastes, the incentives he or she faces take center stage. How a maximizer behaves is importantly explained by the incentive structure.

As abstract and simple as this insight may be, once you have it, it flies everywhere. Someone may talk about how redistributing incomes or opportunities may be “fairer” than what we have now. If you have the economic insight you can’t help but ask how this will affect incentives. How will the fairer system affect the relative profitability of various activities and therefore affect, after people maximize away, the resulting total amount of income and its distribution?

Or suppose someone else says that rents should be controlled so that poor people have affordable housing. As a person with the elementary economic insight, you will wonder about the resulting incentives for landlords—and you may forecast for the long term less and poorer quality housing.

The economist’s insight may creep, or indeed sprint, into domains beyond economics. If you are fond of insects, you may find that the behavior of ants or bees can be understood as maximizing the colony’s or hive’s chances of survival. Closer to home, it may seem to you that calculations of marginal costs and benefits serve to summarize your child’s decision to obey you without whining or your own decision to watch the game on TV tonight instead of reading that book you’ve been meaning to. You may even start to think of altruism with the economic insight. Isn’t there an optimal degree of altruism where one should do something that increases the welfare of another only provided that it doesn’t cost “too much” in foregone welfare of one’s own?

The elementary economic insight has psychological side-effects. Your predictions about rent control can be advanced without knowing the details of a particular housing system, and you don’t need to study philosophy to make some arresting points about fairness and altruism. You

may come to think that having this insight excuses you from the burdensome study of many details and of other big insights. This insight may start to seem self-sufficient.

And you may become frustrated with those who don't share the elementary economic insight. As Joan Robinson said, "You only realize that it's not common sense when you start to argue with someone who doesn't have it."

On the other hand, that exclusivity may help make it feel like a big insight. Others—the uninitiated, including you until you had the insight—don't grasp it. It's not common sense; it's even counterintuitive. You may be excused for feeling proud of having the insight, if not for what often goes along with that feeling, disdain for those who do not have it.

There is a fairly standard method for transferring this insight to others. It takes about a semester in a classroom, though this method is not always successful. You need to put the initiates in the mood to think abstractly, get them to make some assumptions such as there are these markets with identical people and products and everyone knows everything, and suddenly the price goes up and . . . then they too may say "aha!" If they do, it will make you happy.

Some people specialize in the economic insight. Academic economics has benefits, but its practical relevance is often disappointing. Sometimes proving the insight's simplest "aha's" becomes an end in itself. For example, research papers by professional economists may strive mightily to prove that the sign of the relationship between price and quantity supplied is positive in industry X, just like the elementary economic insight says it should be. This qualitative result may be a long way from practical application, but fellow holders of the insight, be heartened!

Nonetheless, the elementary economic insight has practical applications, or gets applied. The British economist David Henderson and the American economist Paul Krugman (among others) have lamented that policies are so often influenced by the economic arguments, not of academicians or specialists, but of "do-it-yourself economists" and "cranks."

"Unfortunately," lamented *The Economist* in a review of the state of economics, "it is these primitive models, rather than their sophisticated descendants, that often exert the most influence over the world of policy and practice... These basic models are also influential because of their simplicity. Faced with the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of the real world, policymakers often fall back on the highest-order principles and the broadest presumptions."<sup>66</sup>

In this handyman sense, the elementary economic insight slides easily into the free-market ideology of public and social policy. As in other ideologies, there are villains and promised lands. Here the enemies are those that distort prices from the optimal marginal equivalencies or that interfere with individual maximizing in the marketplace. These villains include bureaucratic controls, monopolies, big business and big labor and big media, and all intrusions on individualism. To be promoted are competition and incentives; to be avoided are government interference and shirking. Utopia is attained when individuals maximize their self-interests. Distrust those who say that people will work hard for the state or ideology or art. Remember, all George Bernard Shaw cared about was money.

The economic insight has degenerate forms. From an astonishingly simple recasting of reality that helps one to see what one did not see, the insight may come to replace reality. Remember the assumptions? They are often poor approximations of reality. People and products are not identical, and people are not perfectly informed. In such circumstances we cannot count on pure competition to deliver the right incentives. (Some of the best economists have proved that statement.)

Sometimes the elementary insight fails in another way. In experimental economics, an efficient equilibrium is often reached even with only a few, ill-informed, incompletely rational actors in the market. In his Nobel prize lecture, Vernon Smith observed, "The unexpectedly weak conditions under which the results obtain are good news for market performance, but not such good news for the scientific community because it demonstrates that we do not understand why markets work the way they do."<sup>67</sup>

And remember those preferences we said people had: Where did they come from? Are they all equally worthy? Do values enter here? Might those values be nonindividualistic? Plausible answers to these questions leave the simplest version of the economic insight in the dust. Moreover, what seem to be implications of the simplest economic insight can often be shown by more careful thinking to be wrong. The economic insight can become a pernicious ideology.

## A Morphology of Insights?

As I reflected on these points about the economic insight, I began to wonder if other big aha's followed a similar pattern.

What pattern? First a sudden insight in the sense of “immediate and clear learning that takes place without recourse to overt trial-and-error behavior”—one of the definitions in *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*—clarifies a puzzle and causes delight. Then one sees that the insight applies over a surprising range. The scope of a big insight comes to seem boundless, in the sense of leading to partial, qualitative, non-obvious understanding of many phenomena.

The insight then has psychological side-effects. One tends to forget the “partial” and “qualitative” aspects of the understanding attained and instead tends to glory in what is “nonobvious” to others. Reductionism lurks: one may think it unnecessary to learn the specifics of a situation or to master other insights. One may become exasperated with those who do not have the insight. This frustration may coexist with a sense of superiority and with a feeling of solidarity with fellow insight-holders. A big insight breeds a community of believers, abetted by standard methods for conveying the “aha!” The methods should be standard but exacting: possessing a big insight is exclusive but not unique.

Big insights are taken up academically. This leads to complicated studies that qualitatively reinforce the most basic lesson of the insight but have little practical value. For insight-holders, however, the studies are existentially satisfying.

Big insights are applied, often far afield. Usually the appliers are not distinguished academicians but purveyors of simplification. Often their applications can be shown by masters of the insight to be invalid.

In the course of all this, what began as a stylized and helpful illuminator of reality may turn out, in certain hands, to hide reality. Insight ends up as ideology.<sup>68</sup>

How well does this morphology apply to other big insights? Consider a sociological antidote to the economic insight.

## The Marxist Insight

Behind the appearances of economic and political life are the interests of groups, especially of economic classes. These interests are the ultimate forces of social reality. If someone says “We are doing this because it is right or just or socially optimal or the will of Allah,” the person with the elementary Marxist insight knows better: they are doing it because it is in the interest

of their class. Because whatever class is in power will make all policy choices on its own behalf, the only way to have change is to change the class in power.

If you have this insight, you gain a sudden sophistication, even cynicism. Take the current debate over public schools. Others debate the pros and cons of various programs to improve learning in schools. You see things differently. Schools are not primarily about cognitive skills but about class warfare: they are designed to teach future workers to be punctual, to accept the current social system, and to obey authority. You see the real issue as the socialization of the next generation of workers.

Or take foreign aid policy. The bourgeois debate deals with such questions as the effectiveness of aid strategies in promoting growth. You realize the real question in the background must be one of classes, both across and within nations. So, the real purpose of foreign aid must be to support the ruling classes' domination of international and domestic markets. The debate is really over how alternative aid strategies fulfill that objective.

Class interests have their own dynamic. Depending on the state of technology and the level of "development," certain classes will come to the fore in a predictable dialectic. (The time of the proletariat is coming.) Class interests dominate even science. Sure, scientists talk about pursuing truth. But if you have the Marxist insight, you know that "truth" is not absolute but can be defined only in terms of class interests. The history of science shows that the "paradigms" that guided scientists like so many mice in a maze were those imposed by the prevailing class-dominated ideology.

The purveyor of the Marxist insight distrusts positivism, individualism, and any static theory of preferences and capabilities. Positivism says that there is a truth out there in value-free, empirical space and time. Nonsense. According to the Marxist insight, nothing is value-free because nothing in this world exists except in a world of classes. Individualism is a charade. As a description it is simply inaccurate, and as a goal it is a reactionary bourgeois trick to keep the exploited classes' minds off their real problems. Static theories—that is, theories that ignore dialectics—miss the heart of the problem, the class-based generation of preferences and capabilities. (The economic insight, especially, is attacked on this score.)

The Marxist insight conveys other benefits. It undercuts the usual debates—also, therefore, the importance of many of the usual facts and tools of analysis. It may consequently seem to

you unnecessary to master the facts. Don't miss the forest for the trees. Raise consciousness and later we can worry about Robert Dahl's question, "After the revolution?"<sup>69</sup> And there's no need to master the usual analytical tools, except to uncover their hidden, nefarious, class-based assumptions. Having this big insight is intellectually economical.

You may also feel superior. Those who do not have the Marxist insight are naïve believers in appearances. Or they are reactionaries, the selfish upholders of the existing order and perpetrators of the systematic bourgeois campaign to cast everything in other terms than it really is. You may tend to apply terms like "systematic" and "radical" to your own way of thinking and analyzing social issues, saving for those without your insight such terms as "superficial," and "reformist." You may alternately feel proud of emphasizing the value dimensions of seemingly neutral approaches (thereby undercutting the technocrats) and of being a thoroughgoing materialist (thereby undercutting the moralists).

You may be frustrated with non-Marxists, but the fact that not everyone shares the insight, perhaps not even all Marxists, also sets your worldview apart. It is a bond between you and your fellow insight-holders, creating solidarity despite your different class backgrounds.

The Marxist insight can be conveyed. A main device is to show people that things are not what they appear to be. History is the main tool. (Marxist sociologists and economists tend toward the historical wings of their disciplines.) "You have been taught that the reason for the American Revolution was this, but look how this other version of the story makes more sense." Particularly subject to the insight's persuasion are those not doing well in the bourgeois world. It may be refreshing to know that the reason one is not succeeding is ultimately someone else's fault—more precisely, one's unjust exploitation by the class that is succeeding.

If you are bitten by the elementary Marxist insight, you may become an academic Marxist. Often this involves research to demonstrate that a historical event or a current process is qualitatively consistent with the idea that classes matter or that ruling classes tend to perpetuate their own interests. Usually this finding is a long way from prescriptive relevance and practical application, even in a Marxist nation.

But the Marxist insight gets applied. Class interests (workers, farmers, the poor) are the interests deserving attention. Their interests are served by "structural changes": controlling markets, inculcating (particular sorts of) values in education, and redistributing wealth and

opportunity. The enemies are laissez faire, individualism, religion (an opiate), and the bourgeois social order.

The Marxist insight has its degenerate forms, its lumpen-Marxists. It sometimes stimulates a sophomoric negativism. “You can’t separate facts from values . . . You can’t talk about this problem without talking about the whole system . . . You can’t talk about a tool of analysis without analyzing how it will be used and misused.” It is not that such declarations are wrong but that they can become excuses for nihilism and escapes from details, subtlety, and hard work. The Marxist insight can slide into paranoia. Nothing is what it seems, someone else is always to blame for your problems or society’s, there is always a conflict of interests. If a minority group is disadvantaged, it must be because a majority group benefits.

The Marxist insight in its degenerate forms collapses people into classes. It ignores individual differences and underemphasizes individual incentives. In its emphasis on conflict and the heavy swishing of a Hegelian dialectic, it seems to leave little room for compassion, cooperation, or love.

## The Protestant Insight

Let us next examine a very different sort of insight and see how well the pattern holds.

The key elements of Protestant insight are the presence of God as the creator of the world and of man in his image; the presence of evil in the world and in each of us; and the presence of love as the principle of redemption and restoration. If you have this insight, it may have come in this way: “God loves me, awful me, evil me!” This “aha” can make you reframe your world.

It is simple and abstract insight. Worldly striving for fame and fortune has been condemned by all the philosophers, even pagans; the Protestant insight says that it is equally fruitless to strive to achieve your salvation by doing good. No matter how much good you do, it is infinitely short of God’s perfect good. “Sinfulness” and “evil”—to use two old-fashioned words—are fundamental in every person and fundamental to you. According to the elementary Protestant insight, you need to remake the how and the why you live, going beyond the what you do. In this remaking, that God loves you is your joy, as well as your example of how and why.

You may apply the insight more broadly. Just as your own evil will not be overcome by getting that job, writing that book, helping that person, or trying harder, so the world’s evil will

not be overcome by democracy or communism, by free markets or social welfare, by better education or better health care or better prisons. Evil in the world and in each of us can only be transcended through love—God’s love and, thank God, sometimes our love as well.

If you have this insight, what seems important to others may seem trivial to you. Their preoccupations, their fields of study, the details of the question at hand: all may seem devoid of meaning compared with your infinite concerns. You may therefore feel safe in ignoring their worries, fields, and details. Indeed, these other people may exasperate you. What seems obvious to you—what really matters and what is superficial—evades them. They don’t “get” the insight—they ask how you know God created the world, why the world is evil, indeed what it means to say “God loves you.” Those without the insight find Christianity’s great mysteries—such as God becoming man, the virgin birth, the Trinity, revelation—to be grounds for disbelief. “Sure, love’s great,” they may say, “but not all the rest of that stuff.”

But then again, if everyone had it, it wouldn’t be an insight. You may subconsciously feel even luckier because you have been blessed with the insight in a world of nonbelievers. If you are aware of this pride, you probably hope that you avoid its frequent companion, a disparaging attitude toward those who aren’t insight-holders. You hope to remember that we are sinners all.

There are ways of conveying the Protestant insight to others. Sometimes a religious service can get the ball rolling. Christians of various stripes have developed methodologies for the inculcation and refurbishment of insight, such as St. Francis’ retreats or Pastor E. Stanley Jones’ “round table conferences” and “ashrams” in India. More often the insight is conveyed by example (as Jesus conveyed it), which sparks curiosity in others and then leads to the personal relationship in the context of which another person may understand the insight and give it a try. Studies show that the lower classes are overrepresented among the true believers: those most prone to adopt an other-worldly insight are those who in this world fare less well.

Some people become academic Christians. Many theologians are so fascinated by the insight that they want to trace its origins, explicate its parables, venerate its saints. Theirs is not the task of applying the insight to present problems.

Yet the Protestant insight gets applied, often in surprising and sometimes in distressing ways. One of its glories is that it enables people to believe that life is not meaningless or random as some scientists seem to imply, nor ultimately materialist as the mass media seem to want us

to profess. But this belief leads some of those with the Protestant insight to find enemies that need defeating: scientists who posit evolutionary doctrines or television programs that “propagate humanist perspectives.” The view may be taken further. If one is only saved from evil by having the insight, then we had better make sure everyone has the insight, like it or not. Those who do have it should be in charge of the state. They should decide what its schools teach, whether abortions should be allowed, and even how our foreign policies should deal with “Holy Lands.”

The Protestant insight can degenerate into its own dogmatism. The enemy of the instrumental view of life, it can become instrumental: believe this and you will be saved, don’t and you will spend eternity in uncomfortable surroundings. From the source of joy and grace in God’s love, the Protestant insight can become the smug and loveless conviction that we are right and they, those Godless ones, are wrong.

## The Process Insight

A fourth big insight is perhaps less familiar and more diffuse. I will call it “the process insight.” The basic idea here is this: most real problems, involving as they do idiosyncratic situations and real human beings, have no “solutions” or “right answers.” The most one can hope for is to bring people together, organize a process for the resolution of the problem, and enable them to solve the problem for themselves.

This insight is pervasive in American business schools, where the case method of teaching is used. The original idea behind the case method was pedagogical. Professors had some answers, some models, some theories. Busy students in professional schools—students not particularly oriented toward theory—needed to get what was relevant from those answers, models, and theories. Cases were a way of rendering the professors’ answers real to the students and thus to motivate the students to learn what the professors wanted.

But a funny thing happened. Students often discovered difficulties with the application of professors’ answers; professors began to see new problems in what the students and the cases taught them. Soon the case method changed. Instead of being a motivator to apply and to learn what the professor knew, it became a process for students (with the professor’s help, less help as student become more adept) to generate and debate alternative solutions, with no pretense

that what they eventually chose would be “the right answer.” The professor creates through the case method a process wherein students teach themselves.

Psychiatry has witnessed a similar transition. The meeting between analyst and patient was originally a device for eliciting from the patient the deep background of his or her problem. The analyst would then make a diagnosis and “tell” the patient the correct answer, perhaps doing the telling indirectly through further meetings. The analogy was medical, although the cure might have to be administered in a little trickier fashion.

Many psychiatrists today, however, view the process differently. The analyst meets with the patient to help the latter solve his or her own problem. The analyst seldom presumes to get the right answer and tell it to the patient. Rather, the analyst’s job is to create a process for the patient’s unique case to be worked through by the unique patient. The “cure” is in the process.

Or consider ethnography. The anthropologist’s distinctive contribution is “thick description,” the immersion in the details of a culture but not without constant cycling back to big questions like “What does it mean to be a person in this culture?”<sup>70</sup> Ethnographic fieldwork is valuable as a process, not necessarily for its scientific results.

The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo relates this anecdote:

On a foggy night a short number of years ago I found myself driving with a physicist along the mountainous stretch of Route 17 between Santa Cruz and San Jose... My companion opened by asking me, as only a physicist could, what anthropologists had discovered.

“Discovered?” I asked, pretending to be puzzled. I was stalling for time. Perhaps something would come to me.

“Yes, you know, something like the properties or the laws of other cultures.”

“Do you mean something like  $E = mc^2$ ?”

“Yes,” he said.

Inspiration unexpectedly arrived and I heard myself saying, “There’s one thing we know for sure. We all know a good description when we see one. We haven’t discovered any laws of culture, but we do think there are classic ethnographies, really telling descriptions of other cultures.”<sup>71</sup>

So, the process insight has many variations. Once you have the process insight, you may tend to apply it well beyond the classroom, the clinic, or the village. You may downplay the substance of constitutional negotiations and worry about whether the process allowed all parties to feel they were heard and honorably represented. Having talks, keeping the lines open, “wandering around” as a manager—these are always good. For a marriage or any other relationship to prosper, the key is communication—not so much what they say but that they talk.

With process elevated to such heights, substance may be demoted. As a master of process, you may begin to think you can be a novice of substance. Your job is to ask questions, not give answers. Indeed, you may get frustrated with all those so-called “substantive experts.” You may think they are naïve to think that a “theory” would be applicable to human beings and social situations in all their infinite variety. You may find all talk about “absolute truth” and “substantive justice” a bit unreal. Best, you say, to leave truth to a jury or a peer review, and justice to an elected parliament.

You may be pleased that others do not share this view. Curiously, you may be valued as a consultant or therapist or teacher even by those who don’t have the process insight, precisely because you never say they are wrong and you put them in the position of making the decision.

There are ways to convey the insight to others. The most effective method is to force someone to lead a class or a therapeutic session according to the insight’s assumptions that they will not provide the answers but those in the session will. It often turns out to be easier to facilitate an absorbing discussion than to give an absorbing lecture. (Most students would rather talk than listen.) Particularly prone to adopt the insight are people in fields where answers are few or people in fields with answers who don’t themselves happen to have them.

Academics with the process insight tend toward relativism. Methodologists study the cases and the patients and the processes and tend to conclude that it all depends on the particular circumstances which combinations work best. This relativistic conclusion carries little practical weight, except as a general reinforcement for the big aha.

Though academic studies of the process insight yield little of prescriptive value, some practical fields are thick with the holders of this insight: consider, for example, aficionados of case law (with their emphasis on “reasonable men and women” as the arbiters) and negotiators.

When applied to economic and social policy, the insight is above all anti-theoretical. Things simply cannot be decided deductively or statistically. It all depends and should depend on the process of getting people together to solve the problem.

The process insight can degenerate. In its emphasis on specifics, it may lose the general and theoretical—even when they might help us to understand the specifics. The insight invites charlatans and encourages vagueness: this is what happens when process and context are elevated above all. Decisionmaking may be left to anarchy or to the sheer exercise of personal magnetism on a group. Theory disappears and with it, rigor, science, and moral rules that cut across cases.

## Implications

There are many other big “aha’s” around, insights that go beyond resolving a particular puzzle to help us make sense of a range of problems and paradoxes. It is perilous to generalize from a sample of four, and even with these four I have engaged in considerable playful simplification. But is it possible that big aha’s share a pattern?

**Abstract, simple, and surprising.**<sup>72</sup> It is not, of course, that the four discussed above are not full of elaborations, tangents, and science. They go well beyond a few paragraphs’ summary. But big insights are at once simple and surprising, at least once you possess them. As they resolve paradox, they suddenly have an *obvious* quality. They generate an “aha!”

**Wide applicability.** Big insights have a number of fruitful applications within the fields from which they emerge. More importantly, they have suggestive applications ranging from our personal relationships to the state of the world. They help us look at life differently.

**Psychological side-effects.** Having a big insight that costs something to attain and then effortlessly provides lots of points that surprise those who do not have the insight: this combination has predictable and lamentable human consequences. One may become so proud of one’s insight as to avoid or even denigrate details, tools, and other big insights. To those who hold it, the big insight’s truth and relevance is obvious. Those without the insight may be deemed ignorant, naïve, unworthy, or unrealistic.

**A process of transferal.** Each insight has a somewhat costly methodology for conveying it to another. Optimally difficult transferability may be a condition for a big insight to become an ideology.

**The erosion of insight.** What strikes me most about these insights was that each has degenerate versions. These have common features. An insight that begins as a remarkably helpful simplification and clarification of the world can become a remarkably unhelpful complete view of the world.

## Keeping Multiple Insights in Mind

Maturity of mind and sensibility allows us to inhabit the tentative, George Steiner once wrote.<sup>73</sup> A big insight should open our eyes, not narrow our vision. We can benefit from being exposed to lots of big “aha’s” and from having them close at hand as we work on our practical problems.

This doesn’t necessarily mean each of us has to be multidisciplinary. We may still want zealous economists, Marxists, process experts etc. looking at the same issue. But we may advise that their fruitful coexistence is increased by (1) a forum where they can provide to an audience their different insights (and where they can hear each other) and (2) their being aware of alternative big insights—and of the dangers of insights becoming ideologies.

So, too, in our lives. We may gravitate toward one or another big insight and from there unconsciously descend into ideology. If we are aware of this tendency, we may step back and think how other big insights might apply to the problems we are working on. As individuals and societies, we face the challenge of managing big insights—controlling them, playing with them, using them without oversimplifying or overamplifying, and avoiding unwitting slides into ideology.

## 5. Borrowing Insights

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### You Know What They Say

Imagine we could imbibe great insights in rapid sequence. What if we could peruse in a single tome “what we hope will be remembered in the year 2000 of the things said and written in the first two thirds of the century”?

We can. This is the aim, at least, of *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, edited by J.M. and M.J. Cohen, according to the foreword to the first edition. The second edition, which I have in my hands, was published in 1980.<sup>74</sup> Presumably the 1980 edition contains the best things said in the first four-fifths of the century. “It is not always the great who make the best remarks,” the Cohens warn. “We are very conscious that some of the finest minds of the century are almost unrepresented. Scientists are seldom brief. Politicians are especially disappointing in their failure to provide the sparks for which we searched in the dull embers of their biographies.” Nonetheless, their book’s 361 pages of quotations ostensibly contain over 7000 insights.

So, maybe the quest for insights can begin in a book like this one. Why struggle? Look ‘em up. And it was in this spirit that I took a long look at this admittedly dated version of *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*.

### Who Are You and What Do You Mean?

The first thing I discovered is that I hadn’t heard of many of the people quoted in this dictionary, nor had I heard their sayings that I should have been remembering by the year 2000. To illustrate this, I will now turn to a random page.

Okay, it is page 263. Gabriel Péri is first up. Luckily, the authors identify him in parentheses—they do this for only a handful of quotees: “Gabriel Péri (French communist).” Péri said only one memorable thing, and he did so, the authors inform us in brackets, before his execution by the Germans in 1942. Gabriel Péri said, “In a few minutes I am going out to shape all the singing tomorrows.”

Juan Perón is next. I have heard of him and also of Faye Dunaway and Madonna. According to the *Penguin Dictionary* only one of his sentences is worth recalling. “If I had not been born Perón,” said Perón, “I would have liked to be Perón.”

Marshal Pétain is considered to have said three terrific things:

Nobody was better placed than the President to be aware that France was neither led nor governed.

One does not fight with men against material; it is with material served by men that one makes war.

To make a union with Great Britain would be fusion with a corpse.

I’ve never heard of Zarko Petan but love his name. He said, “Cowards’ hearts beat faster than heroes’, but last longer.” He also observed, “In the theatre, the director is God—but unfortunately, the actors are atheists.”

Laurence J. Peter of the Peter Principle (quoted here: “In a Hierarchy Every Employee Tends to Rise to his Level of Incompetence.”) gets eight entries. One is: “Competence, like truth, beauty, and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder.” Not very good, but besides the Principle itself it’s the best of the octet.

Four more people appear on page 263 whose quotations will live on. They are unknown to me. Like Zarko, though, three of them merit memorializing just for their names.

Nikolaus Pevsner had three insights, the *Penguin Dictionary* says, as well as a severe problem identifying himself over the telephone. They were:

To fight against the shoddy design of those goods by which our fellow-men are surrounded becomes a moral duty.

Hearty, robust, and revolting. [Of a church.]

No part of the walls is left undecorated. From everywhere the praise of the Lord is drummed into you.

Pierre Pflimin will be remembered for a name that sounds like a gargle. In addition, in 1963 Pierre said, “The Channel really is not much wider than the Rhine.”

Baroness Phillips' moment of literary glory was when she made the following observation. "On the subject of confused people, I liked the store detective who said he'd seen a lot of people so confused that they'd stolen things, but never one so confused that they'd paid twice."

Not to be picky, Baroness, but "never one so confused that they'd"? Yes, I know the singular pronoun might have had a confused reference back to the detective, and you would have had to choose among "he" or "she" or "s/he." But if you've only got one sentence to be remembered by, work on it.

And not to be picky, J.M. and M.J. Cohen, but why not find the store detective and quote him? He's no baron, but it was his line.

The last of page 263's twenty-one insights belongs to Eden Philpotts, whose parents must have been gardeners. Eden bore one memorable intellectual fruit, which appeared in *The Farmer's Wife*: "Beer drinking don't do half the harm of lovemaking." In this case the suspect grammar must have been considered part of the charm.

That's it for page 263 of *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*. This page was randomly selected, I tell you, and, I tell you too, it is typical of the rest of the volume. Now you tell me, what have we discovered?

- Some wonderful names.
- Less than one insight. (I gave partial credit to Zarko's witticisms; but memorable insights?)
- That, by themselves, almost half of these supposedly "best remarks of the century" make no sense.

## Best of the Best

Let's follow a different strategy. Let's look at the memorable ideas of all-star authors we've not only heard of but read and admired. This I have done, first for a few of my favorites and then for notables under each letter of the alphabet. What a disappointment.

Take three examples: Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, and John Updike. Very different, but each writes like an angel and thinks like a god. In fact, Nabokov had a line something like that. He said, "I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child." The *Penguin Dictionary* cites it, too. As it happened, Nabokov was a tongue-tied stutterer; he said he

was barely able to converse over the telephone. He would participate in “interviews” only if questions and answers could be submitted in writing. The point of Nabokov’s quotation is to contrast his speaking disorder with the elegance of his prose. (Peter Ustinov referred to Nabokov’s “perfumed English, so dense and intense you can hardly read it without taking deep breaths.” This remark appears in the *Penguin Dictionary*.) Without this context, the point of Nabokov’s remark is lost.

Eighteen other Nabokovisms appear. If you had never read the man, you’d wonder on the evidence of the dictionary why anyone would. Here are four of the selected gems.

There are aphorisms that, like airplanes, stay up only while they are in motion.

A good laugh is the best pesticide.

A novelist is, like all mortals, more fully at home on the surface of the present than in the ooze of the past.

Spring and summer did happen in Cambridge almost every year.

Have I cheated by selecting short citations? Not intentionally. Here is the longest of the Nabokov quotes:

Don’t forget that the whole of Russian literature is the literature of one century and, after the most lenient eliminations, takes up no more than three to three and a half thousand printed sheets, and scarcely one-half of this is worthy of the bookshelf, to say nothing of the bedside table. With such quantitative scantiness we must resign ourselves to the fact that our Pegasus is piebald, and that not everything about a bad writer is bad, and not all about a good one good.

There is an interesting idea here. But an arresting insight? Memorably expressed?

It was not until 2001 that V.S. Naipaul won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but already in the 1960s he was recognized by many as a master. The *Penguin Dictionary* culls three contributions from his works.

“But the man is a B.A.!” “And LL.B. I know. I wouldn’t trust an Aryan with my great-grandmother.”

I think, then, that we should pass a resolution to the effect that peaceful persuasion should be followed by militant conversion. All right?

They say there's good and bad everywhere. There's no good and bad here. They're just Africans.

Two racist remarks sandwich a decent witticism. Naipaul's genius and Naipaul's art are absent.

John Updike is cited nine times, from four of his works:

A healthy male adult bore each year consumes one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience.

The founding fathers in their wisdom decided that children were an unnatural strain on parents. So they provided jails called schools, equipped with tortures called education. School is where you go between when your parents can't take you and industry can't take you.

In general the churches, visited by me too often on weekdays . . . bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.

Americans have been conditioned to respect newness, whatever it costs them.

Donald is considerably to the right of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It is hard, of course, to console or advise professional consolers and advisers; rote phrases, professional sympathy, even an emphatic patience are brusquely shunted aside. At a convention of masseurs no one turns his back.

Everybody who tells you how to act has whiskey on their breath.

The difficulty with humorists is that they will mix what they believe with what they don't; whichever seems likelier to win an effect.

He is a man of brick. As if he was born as a baby literally of clay and decades of exposure have baked him to the color and hardness of a brick.

I reckon one can discern an interesting author here. But there are problems. Several of the quotes are clearly meant as amusing exaggerations, not insights. The last sentence of the schools quote is itself a puzzle: doesn't the *between* usage mean that it should be *can* both times instead of *can't*? The whiskey quote recalls Baroness Phillips' pronoun problem. In the last quote, the construction "As if . . . literally" is jarring, and anyway the reader is not clear on what

is it to be a man of brick. Upon reflection, does the line about masseurs make sense? One cannot quite appreciate the meaning of being to the right of Jesus. In brief quotation the author's sense is somehow lost. Not to mention his genius.

## From Aha! to Haha!

The dictionary's rate of success is higher for wit than wisdom. Woody Allen, for example:

I want to tell you a terrific story about oral contraception. I asked this girl to sleep with me and she said "no."

Some guy hit my fender the other day, and I said unto him, "Be fruitful, and multiply." But not in those words.

I was thrown out of college for cheating on the metaphysics exam: I looked into the soul of another boy.

Or Dorothy Parker:

I'm never going to be famous. My name will never be writ large on the roster of Those Who Do Things. I don't do anything. Not one single thing. I used to bite my nails, but I don't even do that any more.

But I, despite expert advice,  
Keep doing things I think are nice,  
And though to good I never come—  
Inseparable my nose and thumb!

If all the ladies who attended the Yale promenade dance were laid end to end, no one would be the least surprised.

But even with humor, there are many false notes. Catch phrases from running gags, like the "sock it to me" of Rowan and Martin's old television show, are cited; but without context and the perception of continuity, they do not amuse. Most of the dictionary's jokes seem dated or strained, again because their context is unclear. We are not *prepared* to laugh.

### *Preparation for Insight*

My major discovery in *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations* is that insights are hard to borrow. Indeed, the dictionary's selection of "best remarks" tend not to be insights in the

senses of “a clear understanding of the inner nature of some specific thing” or “immediate and clear learning that takes place without recourse to overt trial-and-error behavior.” Even if you cull the best of the selected remarks of the modern greats assembled here, you are left more often with an “eh?” than an “aha!” Why should this be so?

Context is absent; and for insight, context is crucial. To get that “aha” you have to have something you expected. You need a fine-grained situation and a demarcated prediction that the insight—or in a different way, the joke—turns inside-out. An insight is fertile when it takes you, or you take it, beyond the remark through which it is introduced. But this power to explain other problems in a new way can only be appreciated if you already have a theory or hypothesis for explaining those problems. Specific expectations, experience, and further problems related by a theory: without these ingredients of context, a borrowed “insight” collapses.

This is so for common sense as well as uncommon paradox. The dictionary’s selection of what were once fresh reformulations of ordinary wisdom are, without their original contexts, banal. One of the dictionary’s two quotations from Maxim Gorki is a good example: “Everyone knows that it is much harder to turn word into deed than deed into word.”

And remarks that may in context have been striking and fruitful paradoxes become, without those contexts, nonsensical. Consider these quotations from Marcel Proust:

It has been said that the highest praise of God consists in the denial of Him by the atheist, who finds creation so perfect that he can dispense with a creator.

For all the fruitful altruisms of Nature develop in an egotistical mode; human altruism which is not egotism is sterile, it is that of a writer who interrupts his work to receive a friend who is unhappy, to accept some public function or to write propaganda articles.

People often say that, by pointing out to a man the faults of his mistress, you succeed only in strengthening his attachment to her, because he does not believe you; yet how much more so if he does!

And so, context-free, most of the *Penguin Dictionary*’s supposedly memorable quotations of the first three quarters of the twentieth century turn out to be eminently forgettable. Indeed, even the meaning of many of them is hard to make out. Summary insights erode into platitudes or puzzles. Context is essential—be it the context of a work of art, a scientific theory, the

tradition of a people, or the long experience of a single wise man or woman—and we have to work to get it. Contexts being hard to loan or borrow, insights are, too.

## 6. Step One: Gratitude

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The third step in the heroic progression, after receiving a calling and having an insight, is to share and serve. We move from feeling and idea to action, and action of a particular nature and motive.

Just as the insight is often perceived as a gift, something coming from outside our will, so too this gift often fosters gratitude. The poet Gary Snyder says, “You get a good poem and you don’t know where it came from. ‘Did I say that?’ And so all you feel is: you feel humility and you feel gratitude.”<sup>75</sup>

And gratitude in turn often engenders sharing and serving. Margaret Visser, author of the remarkable book *The Gift of Thanks*, puts it this way: “Being aware of goodness received makes the ‘knowing’ mind want to find out where more good is needed and to do it, in response. Love’s insight turns, through the pivotal feeling of gratitude, into love’s action.”<sup>76</sup>

As we have seen, Lewis Hyde’s equally remarkable book *The Gift*, describes insight and inspiration as gifts. And after the gift come gratitude and sharing the work the insights have enabled: “I would like to speak of gratitude as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude... Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labor.”<sup>77</sup>

As we seek to find the implications of our callings and our insights, gratitude is a key step. Gratitude is good for us. And, though some people seem to be innately more thankful than others, we can learn to be more grateful, in a variety of ways.

Recent research on gratitude<sup>78</sup> shows:

- As a personality trait, individuals vary widely in the amount of gratitude they feel and the frequency they feel it and express it.
- People who feel more gratitude turn out to be more likely to be happy and less likely to be depressed or stressed.
- Gratitude has one of the strongest links with mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality variable.

- Grateful people tend to have better social relationships and contribute more to the harmony of family and community.

And we can learn to be more grateful. A review of the scientific literature puts it this way: “Gratitude interventions lead to greater gratitude, life satisfaction, optimism, prosocial behavior, positive affect, and well-being, as well as decreased negative affect.”<sup>79</sup>

## Learning to Be Thankful

How is gratitude learned? In English-speaking countries, we teach our children relentlessly to say thank you. Do you remember all the time you spent prompting your preschoolers with “What do you say now?” For children in America, thanking is believed to be the very last of the social graces they acquire. Most children don’t manage to produce thank you spontaneously until sometime between the ages of 4 and 6. A study in England asked parents to draw up a list of the most desirable children’s manners learned at the table. “Thank you” was at the top of the list.

As a result of our training, polite native speakers of English may say “thank you” a hundred times or more a day. One scholar estimates that thanking is performed twice as often in English than in other cultures and languages. It becomes ingrained to the point that in aphasia or Alzheimer’s disease, saying thank you is one of the last things that’s forgotten. Our constant reiteration of “thank you” seems odd to many foreigners. “For speakers of Lao (Southeast Asia) or Siwu (western Africa), saying ‘thank you’ is so rare that it may be perceived as bizarre or out of place, whereas English speakers in foreign contexts sometimes find it rude when gratitude is left unspoken.”<sup>80</sup> In the novel *The Newlyweds*, a Bangladeshi immigrant in America thanks a cousin in Dhaka for looking after her parents. Her cousin rebukes her for sounding like a foreigner (or “bideshi” in Bangla): “You are becoming a *bideshi* over there—‘thank you’ this and ‘thank you’ that.”<sup>81</sup> Japanese people tend to say “I’m sorry” instead of “thank you.” *Please pass the soy sauce*, one says. *Here you go*, says the other. *I’m very sorry*, says the first.

But the gratitude I want us to consider in this chapter is deeper than custom or politeness. We feel grateful for a gift, be the gift an object or a kindness or a courtesy or sheer grace. Gratitude is a feeling of joy and the desire to reciprocate. Gratitude may sometimes be accompanied by a sense of indebtedness or obligation, but its essence is a feeling quite unlike

anything that accompanies a payment or a contract. A disposition to gratitude helps and encourages us to carry out our responsibility in life, which is to grow in love.

The opposites of gratitude are superiority, narcissism, a sense of entitlement, and selfishness. So are thoughtlessness and forgetfulness. In his *Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce defines "ingratitude" as "a form of self-respect that is not inconsistent with acceptance of favors." (A great book, by the way. Do you know how Bierce defines "saint"? "A dead sinner revised and edited.")<sup>82</sup>

How do we develop a deeper gratitude beyond saying thank you on cue? Research shows that these two disciplines engender gratitude:

- Keep a "gratitude journal" for recording all the reasons, events, and help received that merit your gratitude, past and present and as they occur in the future. A number of studies have randomly assigned subjects to keep three kinds of journals. One group records specific things they are thankful for. Another group records things that have bothered them that day. And a third group receives the neutral instruction to write down some of the things that happened that day.

The results: the grateful group is happier, more successful in fulfilling their goals, exercises more, and reports better relationships with others

- A second idea is to write a gratitude letter. Professor Seligman developed this intervention, which he now uses in class as well. You think of someone to whom you are grateful but whom you have never properly thanked. You compose a 300-word testimonial to that person. And then you deliver it in person, not telling the purpose, just saying "I want to come over and see you." The results are emotional, and then measurable months later.

## From Attitude to Behavior, or Vice Versa?

What is the essence of these techniques? Let me ask you a question. Does behavior tend to follow attitudes, or do attitudes tend to follow behavior?

William James, writing more than a hundred years ago, found that changing behavior leads to changes in attitudes ... not the other way around. He shared this finding in one of his lectures to teachers.

There is, accordingly, no better known or more generally useful precept in the moral training of youth, or in one's personal self-discipline, than that which bids us pay primary attention to what we do and express, and not to care too much for what we feel...

Thus the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. If such conduct does not make you soon feel cheerful, nothing else on that occasion can. So to feel brave, act as if we *were* brave, use all our will to that end, and a courage-fit will very likely replace the fit of fear. Again, in order to feel kindly toward a person to whom we have been inimical, the only way is more or less deliberately to smile, to make sympathetic inquiries, and to force ourselves to say genial things. One hearty laugh together will bring enemies into a closer communion of heart than hours spent on both sides in inward wrestling with the mental demon of uncharitable feeling. To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind: whereas, if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent... and silently steals away.<sup>83</sup>

One day years ago, our then seven-year-old daughter Kristen came into the study and asked me, "Daddy, what are you reading?" I happened to be reading that essay by William James, and I shared it with her. She liked it. A few weeks later, she came to me again and told me about a project for her second-grade class. Each student was to choose a famous American, dress up like him or her, and in a special class with parents present, talk about his or her life.

"How about if I am William James?"

A week later, there we were in class. She had on a beard and a top hat. She said a sentence about who James was, and then in her own words summarized the idea that if we change our behavior, we change our attitudes. (Elaine and I felt very grateful.)

Act grateful, express gratitude, and we will soon feel grateful. Accepting a true gift can itself be a grateful act; gratitude is virtue in the receiver.

## From Awareness to Thankfulness

A key to this virtue is simply being *aware*. In the epilogue to her wonderful autobiographical book *An American Childhood*,<sup>84</sup> Annie Dillard ponders what she as the middle-aged author has in common with the girl and adolescent she has just written about.

...where have they gone, those other dim dots that were you: you in the flesh swimming in a swift river, swinging a bat on the first pitch, opening a footlocker with a screwdriver, inking and painting clowns on celluloid, stepping out of a revolving door into the swift crowd on a sidewalk, being kissed and kissing till your brain grew smooth, stepping out of the cold woods into a warm field full of crows, or lying awake in a bed aware of your legs and suddenly aware of all of it, that the ceiling above you was under the sky—in what country, what town?

You may wonder, that is, as I sometimes wonder privately, but it doesn't matter. For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present home.

What connected Annie Dillard now with all the other Annie Dillards she was? Two feelings.

One is the chilling sensation of lowering one foot into a hot bath. The other, which can and does occur at any time, never fails to occur when you lower one foot into a hot bath, and when you feel the chill spread inside your shoulders, shoot down your arms and rise to your lips, and when you remember having felt this sensation from always, from when your mother lifted you down toward the bath and you curled up your legs: it is the dizzying overreal sensation of noticing that you are here. You feel life wipe your face like a big brush...

Here is how Annie Dillard concludes the book: "I am here now, with this my own dear family, up here at this high latitude, out here at the farthest exploratory tip of this my present bewildering age. And still I break up through the skin of awareness a thousand times a day, as dolphins burst through the seas, and dive again, and rise, and dive."

Deeply felt gratitude is a species of awe. It implies a sense of one's littleness before the wonder of the universe, of the earth and all of nature, of one's unique self "breaking up through the skin of awareness." Awe, like gratitude, is the opposite of what we call "taking things for granted."

In 1795, the young Scottish physician and naturalist Mungo Park set off to explore West Africa.<sup>85</sup> Tall, sandy-haired, and quiet, Park was barely 24; he had already traveled to Sumatra. Now his goal was to be the first European to reach the Niger River and the legendary cities of Timbuktu and Haussa. He traveled up the Gambia River 200 miles to an outpost called Pisania, which had three white people, where he spent seven months learning one of the local languages and recovering from malaria. Eventually, he and two bearers headed east. He had many adventures, including four months' captivity under a Moorish chief. He escaped and eventually reached the Niger River. He went down the river as far as Silla, where, exhausted, he decided to turn back short of Timbuktu on August 25, 1796. On the return journey he was robbed and stripped by Moorish bandits. They took everything—his horse, his compass, his hat, all his clothes except his trousers and his battered boots. They had evidently intended to kill him, but saw him as a feeble white man beneath contempt. They did throw his hat back to him—not realizing that it contained the papers of his travel journal folded up in the band. In what became a famous passage, Park described sitting down in utter despair, believing that the end had come.

After they were gone, I sat for some time looking round me with amazement and terror ... I saw myself in a vast wilderness in the depth of the rainy season, naked and alone; surrounded by savage animals, and men still more savage. I was 500 miles from the nearest European settlement. All these circumstances crowded at once on my recollection; and I confess my spirits began to fail me. I considered my fate as certain, and that I had no alternative but to lie down and perish.

But then something curious happened. As he hung his head in utter exhaustion and misery, Mungo Park's gaze wandered listlessly over the bare ground at his feet. He noticed a tiny piece of flowering moss pushing up through the stony earth beside his boot. In a flash, his scientific interest was aroused, and leaning forward to examine the minute plant, for one moment he forgot his terrible situation. He carefully described this movement out of paralyzing despair:

At this moment, painful as my reflections were, the extraordinary beauty of a small moss in fructification, irresistibly caught my eye. I mention this to show from what trifling circumstances the mind will sometimes derive consolation; for though the whole plant was not larger than the top of one of my fingers, I could not contemplate the delicate conformation of its roots, leaves, and capsula, without admiration.

In that moment of wonder, Park was transformed:

Can the Being (thought I) who planted, watered, and brought to perfection, in this obscure part of the world, a thing which seems of so small importance, look with unconcern upon the situation and suffering of creatures formed after his own image? – surely not! Reflections like these would not allow me to despair. I started up, and disregarding both hunger and fatigue, traveled forwards, assured that relief was at hand; and I was not disappointed.

He soon fell in with two friendly shepherds, and continued on his way westwards, towards the sea and the long journey home. Miraculously, he found he could pay his passage by writing phrases from the Koran on loose scraps of paper, saved from his journal, and selling these as religious charms.

He finally reached Pisanía on June 10, 1797, and then Scotland on December 22. He was greeted with delight and astonishment, for people had assumed him dead. Two years later, his book *Travels in the Interior of Africa* was published, and it became a classic.

Mungo Park's awe kindled gratitude. To encourage gratitude, we should develop what G.K. Chesterton called "the ancient instinct of astonishment," the surprise and wonder that quickly turn into gratitude. "There is no way in which a man can earn a star or deserve a sunset."

And so, in these many ways, we can learn to be—resolve to be—more grateful. Today, tomorrow, and in the days that follow, may we, like Mungo Park but without the malaria or the robbers, be aware beneath our feet of the wonders of creation. At night, may we, like Annie Dillard, be aware of our legs under the sheets, and imagine the starry skies above.

And may we continually remind ourselves that the gifts we most appreciate—"the gift we long for, the gift that, when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us"<sup>86</sup>—kindle the desire to share and serve.

## 7. Sharing and Serving

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Heroes in legend and literature, in history and all around us, are characterized by sharing their callings and insights, by serving without obligation or self-regard. We know this, and yet *sharing* and *serving* have two immediate disadvantages. They don't sound like much fun. And, more subtly, they both seem upon reflection to have limits. Both disadvantages raise questions, not so much about whether to share and serve, but how much to do so.

And then comes the question of how.

### Not Fun

The word “sharing” may evoke negative memories. As a child, when you were told to share your toys, didn't it really mean fewer toys for you? Didn't “sharing time” in elementary school really mean boring stories about stamp collections and summer vacations? Later in your life, “sharing” may be a cover for something else. In a political or economic discussion, when people start talking about sharing, will their next topics will be taxation, redistribution, or socialism?

“Serving” doesn't fare much better. It slides into words and meanings we don't naturally like, like “servant.” One of Strindberg's autobiographical works shocked his contemporaries from the title on—he called it *Son of a Servant*.<sup>87</sup> The heartiest rebuke I ever heard from my English-born grandmother was when she once scolded us children for the way she thought we were acting toward her daughter. “You treat your moth-uh like a suh-vent,” she sputtered. Her uncharacteristically hostile tone sent us the message that to be a servant was low indeed.

Serving may also suggest “servility.” One dictionary's definition is “slavish, truckling obedience.” Sound attractive?

Even the word “service” has its unpleasanties. Stallions are said to service mares, and that usage carries over to some of the lowest renditions of human sexual intercourse. In Spanish, a toilet is a *servicio*.

If a Gallup Poll were to ask people “What are your favorite things to do?” almost nobody would unreflectively respond with “sharing and serving.”

## Limits

It is a different point to note that sharing and serving are concepts with limits. As a junior in college, I watched an economics professor prove mathematically that there is an optimal amount of altruism. Complete altruism is inefficient, he demonstrated. It doesn't make sense, for example, for you to walk all the way across a room to open a door for someone only a pace away from the door—someone equally able and strong. It's nice, but it's inefficient. We should, the professor said, economize on altruism. Sharing and serving have optimal limits.

At least he didn't suggest that altruism should be set at zero. Sometimes elementary microeconomics is interpreted that way. Mandeville argued that the best outcome for society would generally be reached if each person simply followed his or her own interests.<sup>88</sup> Private selfishness would lead to social optimality. Moreover, Mandeville argued that people's attempts to help others, through things like service and sharing, might well backfire in the aggregate. In a similar vein, some macroeconomists have suggested that the apparent failures of communist and of "populist" economic policies—both of which seem to be altruistically redistributing power and wealth to workers and peasants—result from trying to share with the poor. Efficiency, a god of economics, seems to limit sharing and serving.<sup>89</sup>

Other economists have shown how institutions replace sharing. Many examples of sharing in pre-modern societies are analyzed by modern scholars as ways to pool risks or encourage trade or enforce contracts or define property rights. But as the ability to measure things develops, so do formal institutions. Over time, more and more of the functions of primitive and traditional sharing are carried out by the institutions of the impersonal market and state.<sup>90</sup> One implication is that economic and political development renders many traditional forms of sharing obsolete. Sharing will diminish over time.

Beyond economics, do some modern intellectuals at least unconsciously seek ways to avoid and undermine sharing? John Cuddihy thinks so.<sup>91</sup> He contends that the common problem of Jewish intellectuals from Marx to Freud to Lévi-Strauss was how to avoid "the ritual exchange of gifts we call 'civility'" (p. 3). Roughly, *civility* meant to share and serve without a market or a rule or an order from the state. Civility discomfited these emergent, socially awkward, theoretically gifted Jewish intellectuals. Their intellectual contributions, ranging from Freudian psychology to

modern socialism (and sociology), their obsession with reason applied to human relations, had as a unifying motif a desire to avoid being criticized for shortcomings in sharing and serving.

## The Ways We Share

*How much* we should share is one question. *How* we should share is another.

In his Depression-era novel *Heaven's My Destination*, Thornton Wilder describes a young man full of religion, who eagerly launches forth to share his insight with the world.<sup>92</sup> On a train, George Marvin Brush sits next to an old man. The two begin to talk. Immediately, the old man lays the whole fundamentalist pitch on the startled Brush. He gives George no chance to speak. The older man has an insight, and, by God, he is going to share it. George can't even say, "I know, I know—I'm saved just like you!" He has no choice but to withstand the onslaught of insight, and through his ordeal he may ascertain that the old man's method is not a successful way of sharing.

Reciting a formula and conveying it, even God's formula, is usually not effective sharing and serving.

Let me give an example from my own field, economic development. This field studies the situation of the poorest countries of the world. They are often small, ill-formed countries, residues of a colonial world where they were washed over with constitutions and freedoms and educations that only patchily took hold. These countries are prime locations for a kind of epistemological schizophrenia, local "realities" pitted against "human rights" and economic "principles."

In this field I have focused on the underworld of underdevelopment. With all the paeans to the market, why do newly "liberated" markets so often disadvantage the poor, and what might be done to make markets work better and fairer? How can corruption be reduced, if never eliminated? What can be done about self-reproducing, self-protecting élites? What can be done to reduce racial and ethnic inequalities?

It has been my privilege to work on these issues with people all over the world. My task has been not just to write books but to help local people share their own and other people's knowledge, to share whatever quasi-scientific insights I and others might provide, in ways that

stimulate local people to think and act more creatively and constructively. We begin with the audience: what do they need. And then ask, what can we share?

Especially on sensitive issues, audiences have barriers to creative rethinking. Whenever disadvantage is present or perceived to be, definitions and measurements may readily provoke resistance. Add feelings of shame and stigma, cultural differences, and asymmetries of power: classic policy analysis may not be able to overpower this resistance.

What do I mean by classic policy analysis? A decisionmaker has to choose. The objectives and alternatives are given. So are the relevant measures. Here is the model that links policies to outcomes, taking contextual confounders into account, for a particular population. Given the objectives, alternatives, models, and data, the policy analysis derives optimal choice—what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called “size-up-and-solve social science.”

In the real world, however, those givens are anything but. There are usually more than one decision and more than one decision maker. The objectives may be unclear, not just controversial in number and weighting. Measures and data may be debated, not just because of reliability but because of perceived stigma and possible misuse. A final point emerges on hard issues: cynicism lurks. After all, who can define economic development or ethnic inequalities or corruption? Who can do anything about them? We have no perfect, cross-country empirical study of such issues—and what extrapolation can be done from research done somewhere else to here, or from the past to the future?

What to do, then? First, an attitude check by us. Humility about the limits of social and behavioral sciences. About locals knowing more, their having agency. And at the same time, boldness. We want to take on hard problems, not just write “the critique” or trickle out one more little study of one more little piece of the issue. We may believe that we can help them with additional data, outside examples of success, and theoretical simplifications that stimulate new insights for them on goals, alternatives, concepts, measures, and implementation.

How to do that? Let me contrast two approaches. One is “the expert.” The scientist, the doctor, the therapist, the teacher knows what works. How? From validated theory and empirical evidence about your situation. The expert’s job is to appraise you, apply the theory, and prescribe your treatment. What should happen to you (what medicine, fertilizer, therapy...) and what you should do (exercises, readings, prohibitions...).

In religion, this would be the proselytizer. This expert knows what God requires and therefore what you need and should do. Pope Francis inveighs against this approach, directly and indirectly. He says toward the end of the documentary “Pope Francis: A Man of His Word” (2018), “Above all, don’t proselytize.” Earlier and at many times in the film, he begs us to *listen*.

Love is at the heart of Pope Francis’ message, and as he says, of the Christian message. He tells us that God loves every single person—even if that person rejects God. We reflect God’s love by being grateful and aware, by listening, by respecting each person’s freedom and dignity.

This can guide us to a second approach, different from the expert stereotyped above. If we have knowledge to share—data, examples, theories—how can we do so in ways designed to evoke local knowledge about the challenges faced? To catalyze creative responses that might work in contexts they know much better than we do?

Here is a method I have found useful. First, we share data about the problem being addressed—sometimes data from the local setting, often data from outside that help locals contextualize their situation. Next comes a telling example of progress. Let’s look together at a case elsewhere where this problem has been tackled more or less successfully. Then comes sharing a model or framework or theory that helps people think about the problem differently. *How* things are shared can make all the difference. For example, in my books I have tried to combine both models and detailed examples, and to adopt a practitioner’s perspective. In consulting, I try to share knowledge through “convenings.” For example, I design and facilitate workshops in which participants work through case studies from other countries, in a problem-solving mode, before addressing their own situations. And when they finally do look at their own problems, I help them only methodologically. “Let us look again at the framework or model. Let us apply the same analytical and practical spirit of analyzing various alternatives, which we used in the case studies of other countries.”

What we discover is that, thus stimulated, locals often come up with insights and practical ideas that neither they nor I would have anticipated. They are prepared for serendipity.

This approach to sharing seems to me useful for problems that have these attributes:

- A chance to learn from problems and attempted solutions elsewhere, even though conditions and circumstances vary.

- An opportunity for people who ordinarily don't talk or work well together to consider a new way of tackling an issue through examples from unfamiliar environments.
- A problem whose solution, or even whose identification, seems to require creativity and energy, not just an understanding of well-known theorems or recipes.
- And at the risk of misunderstanding, a situation that allows the possibility for a humble sort of conversion experience, in the sense that some people may come to see an issue in an entirely different light—as a starting point, as something they can do something about, instead of just accepting current results as fate.

When a problem has these characteristics, I surmise that we should go beyond expert sharing of theory and scientific descriptions of regularities. I say this as one who enjoys and profits from both theory and data. But we need more: we need a process that engages the heroic instincts and invites a calling, an insight, and new ideas for serving.

Sharing and serving, to be done well, must be attentive to situation, norms, and conventions. Sharing and serving have to be tailored to individuals as well—to a person's feelings, needs, fears, and level of preparation. As a hypothesis, I would suggest that sharing and serving should presuppose a relationship. The relationship could be one of community, or it could be one of friendship or love.

Such sharing and service might even change us. It might evoke love toward the person. Reverting back to the economic parlance above, it might change our utility functions—quite beyond the optimal supply of altruism.

## Gifts and Bribes

Avoid proselytizing, says Pope Francis. His namesake St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Share the Gospel every day, if necessary with words."

We should also be wary of being the Teacher. "The true knight of faith," Kierkegaard admonished, "is a witness, never a teacher, and therein lies his deep humanity, which is worth a great deal more than this silly participation in others' weal and woe which is honored by the name of sympathy, whereas in fact it is nothing but vanity."<sup>93</sup>

And finally, we should be suspicious of giving, especially of characterizing ourselves as the Givers and the Others as Takers. John Steinbeck wrote a remarkable essay about his friend Ed

Ricketts, the unorthodox scientist and local legend who was the model for the character of Doc in *Cannery Row*. After Ed's death, Steinbeck tried to analyze "the great talent that was in Ed Ricketts, that made him so loved and needed and makes him so missed now that he is dead." Steinbeck eventually decided that Ed's talent lay in

his ability to receive, to receive anything from anyone, to receive gratefully and thankfully and make the gift seem very fine. Because of this everyone felt good in giving to Ed—a present, a thought, anything.

Perhaps the most overrated virtue on our list of shoddy virtues is that of giving. Giving builds up the ego of the giver, makes him superior and higher and larger than the receiver. Nearly always, giving is a selfish pleasure, and in many cases it is downright destructive and evil thing. One has only to remember some of our wolfish financiers who spend two-thirds of their lives clawing fortunes out of the guts of society and the latter third pushing it back. It is not enough to suppose that their philanthropy is a kind of frightened restitution, or that their natures change when they have enough. Such a nature never has enough and natures do not change that readily. I think the impulse is the same in both cases. For giving can bring the same sense of superiority as getting does, and philanthropy may be another kind of spiritual avarice.

It is so easy to give, so exquisitely rewarding. Receiving, on the other hand, if it be well done, requires a fine balance of self-knowledge and kindness. It requires humility and tact and great understanding of relationships. In receiving you cannot appear, even to yourself, better or stronger or wiser than the giver, although you must be wiser to do it well.<sup>94</sup>

Marcel Mauss wrote that gifts and sharing are "in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered, but the accompanying behavior is formal pretense and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest."<sup>95</sup> "It is the law of the gift," wrote H. Newell Wardle in 1931,

that it may not be summarily refused without giving offense, and a counter gift must be tendered in due season. The Maori of New Zealand class with theft failure to offer the return gift. Neglect to offer or refusal to take a gift is a declaration of war among

Dyak tribes of Borneo. The Northwest Coast tribes acknowledge the potlatch to be “fighting with favors” in place of “war by deeds.”<sup>96</sup>

Wardle went on to supply many other examples and concluded by noting, “Striving for prestige and the feeling of the need of reciprocity are not absent in gift giving in modern societies.”

Can be. Shouldn't be.

Look at the differences between a true gift and a bribe. A bribe has a purpose: to move the recipient to serve the briber's interests. The more impersonal the medium, the better. The bribe must be delivered secretly; the recipient is usually ruined if the bribe becomes known. The bribe is exchanged for a service, and this equivalence means that the size of the bribe is important. It is intended to create an obligation. A bribe is an act of self-interest.

A gift differs from a bribe along all these dimensions. A gift is a token of affection. Its context is a personal relationship, and its intent is to convey a personal feeling. A gift is the more suitable the more it expresses the recipient's interests and the giver's tastes. Secrecy is not essential, though a gift may be a secret; in general, the recipient is glad to acknowledge the giver. The size of the gift is unimportant. What matters is how the donor expresses identification with the recipient, for this identification is what a gift declares. The gift is wholly the recipient's and in the limit creates no obligation.

In the ideal case, writes John T. Noonan, Jr., a gift conveys love.

The donee's thanks are but the ghost of a reciprocal bond. That the gift should operate coercively is indeed repugnant and painful to the donor, destructive of the liberality that is intended. Freely given, the gift leaves the donee free. When the love the gift conveys is total, donor and donee are one, so the donor has no one to whom to respond. Every gift tries to approximate this ideal case. A present of any amount is a gift when it conveys love.<sup>97</sup>

Noonan could have been describing the purpose of the sharing in a full human life. We have received gifts of calling and insight, perhaps by someone sharing and serving us: perhaps also from heroic example. In some sense, we “owe” for these gifts but only in a highly metaphorical fashion. When we say we are indebted to the work and example of heroes, we mean we are

thankful for the gifts they have given to all of us. We in turn present our sharing and serving not as a payback but as an act of love.

## 8. Romance and Intimacy

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Suddenly, my research for this book was brusquely interrupted by romance. Conceptually, that is.

The precipitant was an essay by Becca Rothfeld about the collected letters of Iris Murdoch. Murdoch was a philosopher at Oxford who strayed, and flourished, as a novelist. “Her scholarly area was ethics, and her primary preoccupation was love, both romantic and platonic,” Rothfeld writes. “This was a topic whose manifest importance she felt was chronically neglected by her peers, most of them analytic philosophers.”<sup>98</sup>

Murdoch is right, I thought. Socrates and friends, lolling around the Symposium talking about beauty and boys, downplayed the physical side of romantic love (thus “Platonic love”). Dante chastely chased his beloved Beatrice into paradise. Romantic love is not featured in the philosophy of, say, Immanuel Kant.<sup>99</sup> Didn’t someone once say it’s impossible even to imagine a Mrs. Plato, a Mrs. Kant, a Mrs. Nietzsche?

Ah, Nietzsche. It is said that he was once smitten, that he so informed the young lady most awkwardly, then proposed marriage to her in a letter delivered through a friend who also liked her: a letter she never answered, perhaps never received (soon she had started living with the friend).<sup>100</sup> Is that why in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche says that women always put on an act, men must dominate, and romantic love is just an illusion, “the most ingenuous expression of egoism,” a manifestation of that acting and that pretense of dominating?<sup>101</sup>

And so, I grabbed some of Murdoch’s work, and I sent an email of praise to Rothfeld. She turned out to be finishing her first year as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. What, so young and already so wise?<sup>102</sup>

Later I was visiting Harvard and invited Rothfeld to have breakfast. I asked her how she thought philosophy should incorporate romantic love. She said—please forgive me, Ms. Rothfeld, for this summary that reflects my ignorance more than your answer—“I don’t know.”

I didn't, either. But clearly Murdoch and Rothfeld were right. Romantic love is part of the ideal of a full human life for many people. Including me. And yet, I had left it out of my research entirely.

As we have seen, Thomas à Kempis is the foil for a view of a full human life that, well, avoids being fully human. His book *The Imitation of Christ* (1442) was directed at his fellow monks, even though it became the most read book in Christianity apart from the Bible.<sup>103</sup> Avoid the world out there, Thomas admonished again and again; it is a threat to your life in Christ. He didn't mention romance and intimacy, but he did warn against women. "If I were you boys, I wouldn't talk or even think about women. It ain't good for your health."

Actually, that's not Thomas à Kempis speaking. It's Howard, the saintly old prospector in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. But Thomas would concur.

In contrast to this avoidance of the world, the extreme addict is prone to grab and grab some more of what he wants in the world, someone voracious and, eventually, insatiable. It is controversial among scientists whether a person can have an "addiction" to sex and romantic conquest.<sup>104</sup> Whatever: in my exaggeration, the addict ends up alone in a cell. It is not the cell of a solitary ascetic, but both may experience a kind of living death.

We have been investigating a different ideal type, a hero found in many traditions around the world in many forms and legends, and also in real life. We have been considering this pattern:

- The hero receives a calling.
- The hero discovers or is sent an insight that is specific to him or her and also resonates with the challenges of many.
- And the hero responds by sharing and serving, not remaining in a cell or in a castle but foraying out into the real world.

This hero is an archetype of a full human life.

And now, prodded by Becca Rothfeld and Iris Murdoch, I venture to consider how romantic love and intimacy might fit.

First, a reminder. In this endeavor, we're not describing neurological states; not statistically charting how many of what kinds have how much; and not calculating cultural, socioeconomic, or historical correlations. We do not aspire to necessary or sufficient conditions for a full human

life. We've been working schematically, impressionistically. "Consider a kind of hero who... And even though you and I are not heroes, let's see what we might learn."

And then, an acknowledgement of awkwardness. Romantic love is entwined with sex, a subject notoriously difficult to approach deftly. Some of us have more trouble with the subject than others. The anthropologist Raymonde Carroll wrote that Americans can't stand it when French friends go on and on about their sexual conquests (and the French can't abide the American tendency to blab about money).<sup>105</sup> But French, Americans, whoever nowadays: even if we feel uncomfortable, we can't seem to get away from romance and sex. They are everywhere.

### Love Life Low and High

For example, the other day while browsing the anything-but-sexy website TechCrunch.com, I came across a news story with this opening paragraph: "Let's admit it, you probably aren't reading that romance novel for the plot. Or its literary value. Audible knows this, and is today launching a new collection of romance-themed audiobooks that come with a handy feature that let's you skip right to the action. Called 'Take Me to the Good Part,' the feature will fast-forward you to the steamy section..."<sup>106</sup>

Ah, those steamy sections. But they're not just in trash novels. Audible® might consider adding Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, written around 1350.<sup>107</sup> Joan Acocella calls *The Decameron* "probably the dirtiest great book in the Western canon."<sup>108</sup>

Like romance novels today, *The Decameron* was written for "gracious ladies" and "amiable ladies" fascinated by the passions of love. "I offered this effort of mine," says the narrator at the end, "to ladies living in idleness rather than to anyone else... to dispel the melancholy with which ladies are afflicted" (p. 858).

In *The Decameron* ten friends go wandering in the Florentine countryside. Each day for ten days, each one tells a story to the rest about an assigned topic, such as cleverness or generosity. The resulting 100 tales cover over 800 pages.

Most of the stories include saucy accounts of sexual encounters, using euphemisms like "beating the fur," "delightedly making the nightingale sing over and over again," and "since they had only traveled six miles that night, they went two more before they finally got out of bed."

One unfaithful wife spends her first night with “a handsome, lusty young man” teaching him “how to sing a good half-dozen of her husband’s hymns.”

One of the longer stories is the saga of Alatiel, a woman so beautiful that she cannot escape the passions she inflames over a series of husbands and lovers, some of whom kill each other for her. There is a happy-ever-after when, finally, she becomes the wife of the King of Algarve. “Although she had slept with eight men perhaps ten thousand times, she not only came to the King’s bed as if she were a virgin, but made him believe she really was one, and for a good many years after that, lived a perfectly happy life with him as his Queen” (p. 156).

*The Decameron’s* narrator reports that, as they were hearing this tale, “the ladies sighed repeatedly over the lovely lady’s various misadventures, but who knows what may have moved them to do so? Perhaps some of them sighed as much out of a desire for such frequent marriages as out of pity for Alatiel” (p. 157)

In another story, a lovely, “lofty” lady overflows with passion. She is not punished for cheating on her husband because, she has the husband admit before the judge and audience, she never ever turned him down for sex, as many times as he wanted. Then she asks the judge and audience, “If he’s always obtained what he needed from me and was pleased with it, what was I supposed to do—in fact, what am I supposed to do now—with the leftovers. Should I throw them to the dogs? Isn’t it much better to serve some of them up to a gentleman who loves me more than his very own life than to let them go to waste or have them spoil?” (p. 496).

It’s a story of true love—but yes, it’s her allusion to steamy leftovers that make her audience laugh. And the judge lets her off.

Boccaccio’s stories celebrate *ingegno*, meaning thinking on your feet with cleverness and grace. Translator Wayne A. Rehorn notes that the tricks and wit in pursuit of sex are why *boccaccio* in Italian is synonymous with “licentious” (p. xxv).

## Falling in Love

The naughty stories attract us, and so does the prospect of true love. Iris Murdoch observed, “Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience, bringing with it a quasi-religious certainty, and most disturbing because it shifts the center of the world from ourself [sic] to another place.”<sup>109</sup>

Consider Zoë Folbigg's personal account of love at first sight.<sup>110</sup>

"I can't explain it. Something about him looked like he was a good soul," she said of a fellow passenger she saw one morning on her commuter train to London. "Just something about him felt comforting and that everything was right with the world."

And he was reading García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book Zoë adored. It was a sign of connection. This, too, was romantic.

She told her co-workers, fellow twenty-somethings, about her crush. They nicknamed him Train Man. They urged her daily to do something, say something. She couldn't. For weeks she was on the train with him; the two never even locked eyes. After eight months, she schemed to drop a ticket on the floor near him. This would start a conversation. Heart racing, she did it. He said, "Excuse me, you dropped this"; and all she could do was squeak and move away.

Finally, two months later, she emboldened herself to write him a note. "It's my birthday," it said, "and I think everyone should do one crazy thing on their birthday and here's my thing." The note went on: she thought he looked lovely and if he would like to have a drink with her tonight, here was her email address. If not, she wished him well and good travels.

But she just couldn't bring herself to give him the note.

This went on for over a week. Her colleagues hounded her. Finally, eleven days later, Zoë handed him the note, smiled, and walked away "as fast as my legs could take me" to the next carriage, where she slumped into a seat, feeling drained.

All that day, Zoë and her co-workers excitedly awaited a message. Nothing. Finally, at five o'clock came an email entitled "the guy on the train."

"Thank you, that was a lovely thing to do, but unfortunately I have a girlfriend." He went on to wish her well.

"It was a nice rejection," she recalled.

Zoë wondered if she should henceforth take a different train. She didn't. The next day, he and she happened to board at the same time and said hello. Both smiled, both blushed.

Life for her went on. But she was still smitten with Train Man. She went out with other people, but kept asking herself why. She just wasn't interested.

Another eight months later, on a Friday she received an email from him. "If you still fancy that drink, I'd love to go out."

Zoë was delighted but mortified. She said to herself, I know I've built him up to an impossible height. This can go badly.

They met for the drink. "He really was that lovely!" She found they had humor in common, interests in common, "the same hopes and dreams."

Fast forward. Zoë and Mark—he now had a name—went traveling together for a year. After six months, at sunset on a railway trip in rural Australia, Mark proposed. Train Man!

Fast forward further: now twelve years on, two sons, together in love. And Zoë Folbigg published an autobiographical novel about their romance, which in 2018 became a number-one bestseller in Britain.<sup>111</sup>

### "I Know and Am Right for You"

"Falling in love," wrote Annie Dillard in her remarkable 2007 novel *The Maytrees*,<sup>112</sup> "like having a baby, rubs against the current of our lives: separation, loss and death. That is the joy of them" (p. 2).

In *The Maytrees*, true love is entwined with true sexual passion.

It began when Lou Bigelow and Toby Maytree first met. He was back home in Provincetown after the war. Maytree first saw her on a bicycle. A red scarf, white shirt, skin clean as an eggshell, wide eyes and mouth. She stopped and leaned on a leg to talk to someone on the street. She laughed, and her loveliness caught his breath. He thought he recognized her flexible figure. Because everyone shows up in Provincetown sooner or later, he had taken her at first for Ingrid Bergman until his friend Cornelius straightened him out.

He introduced himself. —You're Lou Bigelow, aren't you? She nodded. They shook hands and hers felt hot under sand like a sugar doughnut. Under her high brows she eyed him straight on and straight across. She had gone to girls' schools, he recalled later. Those girls looked straight at you. Her wide eyes, apertures opening, seem preposterously to tell him, I and these my arms are for you. I know, he thought back at the stranger, this long-limbed girl. I know and am right for you (p. 7).

And so Toby courted Lou, who for her own part was soon enthralled.

She followed him up and down high dunes at the world's ledge. She looked at his neck. What kept him from taking her hand? In this charged air any touch would probably arrest her heart and disarticulate her joints, and so forth, but he should act soon because it could only get worse.

She was twenty-three. She could not imagine that a brave man could shrink from risking one woman's refusal. She wanted only a lifelong look at his face and his long-legged, shambly self, broken by intervals of kissing. After a while she might even, between kisses, look into his eyes. No time soon.

What could she do? She had gauged Maytree well: He never touched her. That is beauty's one advantage, she always thought, and might be its downfall. In town he left her at her walkway and waved off breakfast. She had been liking the way his hips set loosely, his shoulders tightly, his long wide-smiling face, pale eyes back under thick brows, alert. She stood in danger outside her door. What was she afraid of? Of his heartbeat, of his over-real eyes, of her breathing, everything (pp. 20-21).

Their love soon prospered in passion. In their early, heady days together, Lou, "shipwrecked on the sheets," "opened her eyes and discovered where on their bed she had fetched up" (p. 31).

For lovemaking nearly killed Lou. Was she all right? Abashed, he held her steady until she opened her eyes. Was he a brute? What ailed her? -- Whoa, she answered once, and another time, Yike. He stopped worrying. Hours afterward he used to see her, firm and young as she was, gripping the rail to check her descent downstairs (p. 38).

Intimacy could not be unique to her and Maytree, this brief blending, this blind sea they entered together diving. His neck smelled as suntan does, his own oil heated, and his hair smelled the same but darker. He was still fresh from an outdoor shower. Awareness was a braided river. It slid down time in drops or torrents. Now she knew he woke. The room seemed to get smarter. His legs moved and their tonus was tight. Her legs were sawdust; they were a line of old rope shreds on sand. All her life the thought of his body made her blush (p. 32).

Maytree, a poet, was also amazed. "Their intimacy flooded... their awareness rode waves paired like outriggers." He concluded Plato was misguided: "physical senses and wordless realms

neither diverge nor oppose: they meet as nearest neighbors in the darkness of personality and embrace" (p. 46).

## Fulfillment

Beyond the intoxication of union, there can be deep meaning in finding that special, unique someone. Beyond magic is fulfillment.

"Let's face it," Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal at age 21, "I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren't many around, I often unconsciously manufacture my own, and then, I retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward value is tangible and accepted ... I want a romantic nonexistent hero."<sup>113</sup>

Three years later she found him. To her mother she wrote, "I feel that all my life, all my pain and work, has been for this one thing. All the blood spilt, the words written, the people loved, have been a work to fit me for loving Ted."

Ted Hughes was not just her romantic hero but also her "male counterpart." To her brother she explained, "I am now coming into the full of my power: I am writing poetry as I never have before ... because I am in love with the only man in the world who is my match."

For special souls like Sylvia Plath, romantic intimacy connects with intellectual and spiritual union. Take the oh-so-bookish John Stuart Mill meeting Harriet Taylor at a dinner in 1831. He was 24, she 22.

Harriet was beautiful, big-eyed, with "a swan-like throat"—and oh yes, very intelligent. But married to another man since she was 18.

Before long, Harriet and John became inseparable—long talks, carriage rides, and despite the disdain of scandal-sensitive friends, perhaps sexual intimacy. There is little direct evidence of the last; many of the couple's letters were later destroyed; but clearly, they fell in love. Two years later, Harriet wrote John, "Far from being unhappy or even *low* this morning, I feel as tho' you had never loved me half so well as last night."<sup>114</sup> In 1834, Carlyle relayed the rumor that Mill had "fallen *desperately in love* with some young philosophic beauty" and been "lost to all his friends and to himself." Perhaps true of her, too, as captured in this note from Harriet to John: "When I think that I shall not hold your hand until Tuesday the time is so long & my hand so useless. Adieu my delight."<sup>115</sup>

For Mill, as for Plath, being in love with that special, superior someone catalyzed his thinking and writing. In his *Autobiography*, John acknowledged Harriet copiously. Hear how she inspires:

Her intellectual gifts did but minister to a moral character at once the noblest and the best balanced which I have ever met with in life. Her unselfishness was not that of a taught system of duties, but of a heart which thoroughly identified itself with the feelings of others, and often went to excess in consideration for them by imaginatively investing their feelings with the intensity of its own. The passion of justice might have been thought to be her strongest feeling, but for her boundless generosity, and a lovingness ever ready to pour itself forth upon any or all human beings who were capable of giving the smallest feeling in return.<sup>116</sup>

## Being Understood

Vladimir Nabokov wrote unforgettably about *eros* and romance. In real life, too, Nabokov memorably fell in love. In May of 1923, he met Véra Slonim at a ball for the Russian émigré community of Berlin. She was 21, he 24.

Over the previous two years, Véra had been admiring Vladimir's work in local publications, clipping and saving his poems. That night she approached him wearing a harlequin mask of black silk. She told him she loved his writing. She explained why; he could scarcely believe it. She recited some of his poems from memory. Véra and Vladimir wandered the streets long into the night, mutually entranced.

She daringly followed up with several letters. He was overwhelmed by the audacity of sudden love and understanding. Genius captured, prodding him to do even more. He did not answer her directly, but while he was away on a trip, he published in Berlin a poem alluding to their first meeting in a way he knew that only she would capture.

Romance and intimacy.

And then, in July, he wrote his first letter to her. It began without salutation (the ellipses are in the original):

I won't hide it: I'm so unused to being—well, understood, perhaps—so unused to it, that in the very first minutes of our meeting I thought: this is a joke, a masquerade trick ... But then ... And there are things that are hard to talk about—you'll rub off their

marvelous pollen at the touch of a word...They write me from home about mysterious flowers. You are lovely ... And all your letters, too, are lovely, like the white nights. It continued boldly: "Yes, I need you, my fairy-tale. Because you are the only person I can talk with about the shade of a cloud, about the song of a thought."<sup>117</sup>

Their love flourished. The next year, he wrote her: "How strange that although my life's work is moving a pen over paper, I don't know how to tell you how I love, how I desire you. Such agitation—and such divine peace: melting clouds immersed in sunshine—mounds of happiness. And I am floating with you, in you, aflame and melting..."<sup>118</sup>

From the first moments, Vladimir felt that Véra was destined to share his life. He wrote her, "It's as if in your soul there is a preprepared spot for every one of my thoughts."<sup>119</sup> For the next 54 years, he was inseparable from the brilliant, elegant woman who became Mrs. Nabokov. Among her many roles, Véra was amanuensis, translator, chief correspondent, teaching assistant, literary agent, chauffeur, Scrabble partner, and butterfly-catching companion. She was the first reader of all her husband's works, as well as critic, editor, and inspiration.<sup>120</sup> The dedication page of every Nabokov novel reads, "To Véra."

## Seeing and Being Seen

In *The Maytrees*, a "wider life" breathed in Toby: "Only the lover sees what is real, he thought... Far from being blind, love alone can see" (pp. 34-35). This point is taken up by Iris Murdoch and later, in a paper about her, by Martha Nussbaum. "One of Murdoch's major philosophical themes," Nussbaum notes, was "the relationship between erotic love and the true vision of other people."<sup>121</sup>

When Iris Murdoch was 24, she wrote to a male school friend, "Oh so much in need of intellectual intimacy. The patient mind which is prepared to comprehend my own and toss me back the ball of my thought" (*LP*, p. 126). She found some of that a few years later in Europe. She adored Parisian café life, met Sartre and Derrida, and in 1946 encountered the avant-garde French writer Raymond Queneau. Murdoch regarded Queneau as her intellectual soulmate, and her letters tell of her unrequited longing and "her final dignified settling for his friendship."<sup>122</sup>

But Murdoch wanted more. For her, sexual union and falling in love were personally and philosophically central. She described herself as having “an endless capacity for new loves”—especially men, sometimes women, and when in her fifties, what her editors call “complex and unwise emotional imbroglios” with two of her students. An emeritus professor ended his book review of her letters this way: “One closes this astonishing volume with the thought that in her creative years the sexual act was anything but ridiculous for Iris Murdoch. Indeed, it may have been as important as writing itself.”<sup>123</sup> Like the “amiable ladies” who heard Boccaccio’s story of Alatiel, we don’t quite know if the good professor suffered through Murdoch’s romantic travails or sighed over them.

Murdoch certainly got the sighing part:

Intense mutual erotic love, love which involves with the flesh all the most refined sexual being of the spirit, which reveals and perhaps even *ex nihilo* creates spirit as sex, is comparatively rare in this inconvenient world. This love presents itself as such a dizzily lofty value that even to speak of “enjoying” it seems a sacrilege. It is something to be undergone upon one’s knees. And where it exists it cannot but shed a blazing light of justification upon its own scene, a light which can leave the rest of the world dark indeed.<sup>124</sup>

But this magic also has a philosophical valence. In her letters as well as in her novels and philosophical writings, Murdoch speculated that romantic passion and intimacy enable a deep seeing of the other and, through love, of real presences beyond. Toward the end of her life, she returned to philosophy with a tome with the imposing title *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. “We may also see how sex can be the image of spirituality as well as its substance... A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it can be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself.”<sup>125</sup>

This “unselfing” is not the meek dimming and withdrawal of one’s own desires and needs. Rather, it refers a deep sense that Another is primal. With mystics, it is God and creation.<sup>126</sup> In romantic intimacy, Murdoch says, it is the person loved.

## The Glories and Desecrations of Love

One more time: “Where the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself.” What a wonderful dimension of romantic love. And as we have seen, there are more:

- Mutual love with a person who “just makes the world seem right.”
- Sexual union that turns your legs into “sawdust, a line of old rope shreds on sand.”
- Being seen and understood, “as if in your soul there is a preprepared spot for every one of my thoughts.”
- Encountering the beloved so deeply that you are “unselfed.”
- Forging an intimate partnership to pursue a calling, together.

*Chorus: “You are lovely; you are admirable! I am awed! And you see me; you understand! I see you, and through you, so much more! All of this, all of you, inspire me to create a fuller human life!”*

Bravo!

But one more time, too, from Murdoch: “A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate.”

Take Murdoch’s own romance novels. “Above all,” say Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, editors of her letters, “she was superb at portraying the madness of love and the way it can transform ordinary people into crazed and possessive beings.”<sup>127</sup> Murdoch’s real-life sexual forays sound anything but heroic. Many of *The Decameron’s* stories end like sexy fairy tales. But translator Wayne A. Rehorn notes that sadism lurks: romantic passion sometimes contains, or becomes, the urge to harm and humiliate. “Desire in all its forms is something that intelligence is primed to serve, but desire, like intelligence, can also be a threat both to people and to the society they live in. A balancing act of sorts is thus absolutely necessary, the *Decameron* seems to suggest, but how to achieve such a balancing act is never clearly defined, making desire a mixed affair, to say the least” (p. xlv).

These days, sexual predators dominate the news. Their victims, in the beginning perhaps flattered by attention from a powerful man, end up spiritually and sometimes physically injured. Not loved, but exploited; not enthralled, but disgusted; not uplifted, but degraded. And some of the “patterns of predation, especially in the cases of Weinstein and C. K., have a grotesqueness

that discourages fantasy.” “These men exposed and pleased themselves in front of horrified women. Restate what they did, and it sounds like the worst sex life you could aspire to: frantically trapping people in a room, people who are disgusted to be there, while you engage in the most arid form of sexual pleasure possible.”<sup>128</sup>

No wonder Thomas à Kempis was worried.

Thomas probably didn’t ask the monks to focus their Bible studies on Solomon’s Song of Songs. In fact, if Audible® books did the Bible, that new “Take Me to the Good Part” feature might jump, with a breathy female narrator, to Song of Songs 7:11-13:

<sup>11</sup> Come, my love, let’s go to the field; let’s spend the night among the henna blossoms.

<sup>12</sup> Let’s go early to the vineyards; let’s see if the vine has budded, if the blossom has opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.

<sup>13</sup> The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our doors is every delicacy— new as well as old. I have treasured them up for you, my love.

Thomas commanded his charges to spurn the vineyards and mandrakes. For him and his monks, chastity is the solution to the desecrations of romantic love.<sup>129</sup>

Our stylized addict responds, nonsense, get as much as you can. Demystify romantic love, enjoy “zipless sex.”<sup>130</sup> The male addict may dream of the avatar in the 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049*: an Ana de Armas who reads you and then morphs to exactly the person you need right now, and even grows to love you. The avatar who is your “Cool Girl”:

Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. ... It may be a slightly different version—maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes everything he likes and doesn’t ever complain.<sup>131</sup>

But the hero’s full human life avoids these extremes. It neither spurns the world nor voraciously elevates worldly experiences to ultimate goals. In the world yet outside himself (or herself), the stylized hero is magnified by his calling, defined by his insight, and fully engaged with us in sharing and service. Just so for romantic love as well. Iris Murdoch’s philosophical

treatise *The Sovereignty of Good* argues that “We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.”<sup>132</sup> In philosophy, and in a full human life.

The narrator of Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Black Prince* says, “Love sees truly, in part, because it *does* see divinity rather than the muddled everyday.”<sup>133</sup> In Platonic terms that Thomas à Kempis might appreciate, *The Sovereignty of Good* talks about the full human life as one that sees the Good. The Good is metaphorically like the sun, metaphorically a magnetic center. We can discern light coming from the sun, and through iron shavings the forces of a magnetic field, but we “do not and probably cannot know, conceptualize, what it is like in the center” (pp. 32-33).

There is a way to get there, “though one rarely mentioned by our contemporary philosophers, and that is Love” (p. 99) Including, as always for Iris Murdoch, romantic love and intimacy. “Good is the magnetic center towards which love naturally moves... When true good is loved, even if impurely or by accident, the quality of love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived as lying beyond it... When we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just” (p. 100).

Iris Murdoch sees the risks of romantic love and intimacy but warrants its glories: “[Love] is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good” (p. 100).

## A Gift

“When we try perfectly to love what is imperfect...” It is the purity of our effort in love that matters, not our prowess or the radius of our talents and influence. When we receive the gift of love, we feel deep down that it is all right for us to be imperfect, all right to be human beings, all right to be confused about what to do and how.

In Lewis Hyde's remarkable book *The Gift*,<sup>134</sup> true artists welcome their creative gifts—both talent and “a specific intuition or inspiration”—and in turn impart gifts of art. To Hyde, the trajectory of art is receiving and giving, receiving again and giving again. Although there exist objects of art that are bought and sold, just as there exist sex objects, their commodification does violence to the artistic spirit, just as it does to romantic love and intimacy. Recall the “lofty” married lady in *The Decameron* who gave away in love her extra helpings of passion. After her acquittal, the story concludes, the town's law on adultery was changed to forbid only the sale of sex, not receiving it or giving it away.

The original 1979 edition of Hyde's book was subtitled “Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property.” “It is this element of relationship which leads me to speak of gift exchange as ‘erotic’ commerce, opposing *eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular)” (p. xx).

“A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts,” Hyde insisted. “We cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us... Although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance” (p. xvi).

The same goes for the gift of romantic love.<sup>135</sup> The jolt and surprise of romantic love, its physicality and yet its transporting otherworldliness, its radical *unselfing*, are signs and metaphors for meaning in life. In *The Maytrees*, the transcendence of sexual intimacy was so wondrous as to confound. “Love so sprang at her, she honestly thought no one had ever looked into it. Where was it in literature? Someone would have written something. She must not have recognized it. Time to read everything again” (p. 31).

Time to read everything again, together; and to create something new, together. The lover, like the artist, takes risks, embraces life's transience and the real presences beyond, and creates something unique and beautiful.

And we don't have to be Nabokov or Harriet Taylor, not the lofty lady or Zoë Folbigg. Romantic love goes right when we gratefully allow it to manifest itself in our calling, our insight, and our sharing and service. Whoever we are.

In 1958, John Steinbeck's son wrote him from boarding school, saying happily but worriedly that he thought he had fallen in love. Steinbeck's response was sweet and wise.

First — if you are in love — that’s a good thing — that’s about the best thing that can happen to anyone. Don’t let anyone make it small or light to you.

Second — There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you — of kindness and consideration and respect — not only the social respect of manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn’t know you had.<sup>136</sup>

A little later in the letter, Steinbeck wrote: “What you wanted me to help you with was what to do about it—and that I can tell you. Glory in it for one thing and be very glad and grateful for it.”

## 9. Family

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Romance and intimacy often lead to families. What roles does *family* have in a full human life? How might the scheme of the hero shed light?

This chapter switches styles and focus. It is more personal than the others, addressing these questions indirectly. Thankfully perhaps, no solitary ascetics or extreme addicts make an appearance. But heroes lurk, indeed barely lurk.

### Mom

March 2015, Upland, California

A couple of days ago, I saw a template for interviews with famous people. The first question was, “What is your earliest memory?” Hmm, never thought of that.

After a moment, my answer was “My mother’s hug.”

Mom was a champion of affection, especially for her family. She adored her sister Janet and grieved deeply the many tragedies of Janet’s family, including her early demise from cancer. Mom cared tirelessly for her mother Lillian, who lived with Mom and Dad during the last years of her life. Mom loved each of her children, different as we are. I never heard from her (or Dad) a negative generalization about any of us, only expressions of pride. The grandchildren: ah, what wonders they are! And Mom loved Dad, from beginning to end, always exchanging kisses and pats and expressions of deepest affection.

This deep love coexisted with abundant worry. News was filtered in her mind by “What could now go wrong?” This didn’t diminish her pride in the accomplishments of her children and husband, nor did it reduce her smiles over our shortcomings. It did mean we had to anticipate her worries and endure them. When I was fourteen, I was asked to go water skiing with a friend and his family. Mom: “You could be run over by the propeller of the boat.” C’mon Mom. Guess who insisted on joining that first trip to Lake Berryessa? Yes, Mom. Though only as a spectator.

After seeing that boats don’t run people over, Mom might have wanted to water ski herself. But a messed-up, arthritic knee—injured in a traffic accident in her early twenties—had ended

her athletic endeavors. She loved to dance and was a superb athlete. A tennis champion. A varsity basketball player in high school, and she also starred on the high-school varsity team for field hockey when she was still in junior high. You can read the press clippings.

One day when I was about twelve, Dad and I were outside shooting baskets on the driveway. Mom came out to tell us something. We were competing at free throws at the time. She came over to the foul line and asked for the ball. She held the ball in both hands in front of her, swung it down between her knees, and launched it. An air ball. She missed a second shot. Undeterred, she tried again. Swish. And then she drained five in a row. She looked at us and smiled, "That's enough!" Dad and I laughed a little nervously, maybe a little enviously.

Our family was one of conversation. Over meals every evening. Over games ranging from dominoes to cards to pool. In their 1995 book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley find that how talkative families are, more than social class or income or race, predicts children's intellectual achievements.

It is through their family micro-culture that parents pass on to their children the habits of talking a lot or a little, of what things to talk about, and of talking for pleasure or only for business. And, it is through this family experience that parents pass along their family culture to the next generation: a culture of family life full of words and social dance—or empty.<sup>137</sup>

Don't you like that, "words and social dance"? Mom was not the most talkative participant, not the one with the most opinions or the latest facts. She was grateful for goodness in the world, appalled by evil; but her views were not predictable. A Mayflower descendent and child of a wealthy family, she was mostly liberal on social issues, with a heart for the disadvantaged. Skeptical of war. Skeptical of organized religion, though attuned to God and nature. Yes, skeptical of foreign aid, too, and the kinds of places I worked. Not as bad as Granny, though, who used to write me letters in Pakistan with American flags Scotch-taped to the top and, at the end, pleas to come home, we need you here.

In conversations Mom would sometimes express opinions she did not really hold, to gauge people's reactions or perhaps to provoke them. This could be embarrassing with newcomers. Once from the next room I heard her quiz a date of mine by advancing a view that I know Mom didn't believe: "I think it's good for people to live together before they're married, don't you?"

In her last year, I asked Mom about places she had loved to visit. She smiled and described a lake in Maine where her family used to vacation when she was a girl. She talked about the mountains of Switzerland. About Lake Tahoe. What these places represented to her, I think, were beauty and peace, as well as a sense of wonder.

And so as we give thanks for Mom and bathe her in our affection, we wish for her that beauty and peace and wondrous joy, now and always. We wish for her divine hugs and glorious love, great conversations with family and friends, and nary a worry, forevermore.

## Dad

Fathers' Day 1996, Durban, South Africa

The translation of Eskild Klitgaard's 1959 history of a line of the Klitgaard family arrived on Thursday from Dad, and while Elaine was making dinner and the children were in the bath, I loaded it on the laptop and leapt in.

Eskild built on a 1909 study by "the postmaster Klitgaard," and an early 1800 family history in Danish is also mentioned as a source. Clearly Eskild *et al.* shared a passion that included investigating local church and court records as well as, when possible, obtaining second-hand reminiscences from old-timers who know the person long ago. As the account begins you're suddenly back some fifteen generations, back to some northern Dane who decided to call his family by the name of his farm ("farm on the dunes"). The history takes us through the generations by selecting the one line that led down to Jens Carl Bang Klitgaard, "progenitor of the Klitgaard family from Blokhus," born 1802. Also traced are three to five generations of JCBK's wife, Christianne Brix. There are some fun details about a few of the key figures before JCBK, such as the simultaneously renowned and infamous Baltzen Nielsen, who was accused of a number of illegal salvaging operations of shipwrecks, even of establishing his fortune by taking a lot of money from a Dutch lady who was the only survivor of a wreck. There are also some intriguing socialist activists.

But the story really only gets detailed with JCBK, in two senses. We learn much of his annual activities from the 1830s on—his importation of sheep from Iceland, his attempts to export butter to England (first a failure, then a booming success), and myriad other creative though often failed economic activities ranging from timber to manufacturing to speculation in grain,

and a variety of civic actions (ports, doctors, lifeguards for Blokhus). We also have brief descriptions of his bouts of depression and the occasional confrontations from invading warriors (which happened) and escaped prisoners (which didn't but which drew 22,000 men in northern Jutland to form a spontaneous militia).

The second sense that the story grows more complex is as it were horizontal. We no longer follow one preferred line, say the one to my father R.M. Klitgaard, but the entire branching bush is laid out, a considerable portion of it in the United States but most in various parts of Denmark. For most branches only sparse detail is provided, such as occupation and occasionally education. There are branches that contain many artists, other branches with merchants and engineers, still others with folks more humble: no peasants, but many who worked for government (many in hospitals and the like) and in small enterprises. A few were notorious—such as the one handsome blade who spent a small fortune during a visit to Europe from America on a countess he met en route, including the hiring of a private train and the consumption of a bottle of whiskey a day. The vast majority of them were productive, and reproductive—numbers of children stretched into six to twelve on many occasions. And this was the overwhelming feeling I took away from the family tree: how many progeny, most not even tabulated in this account, from fifteen generations ago! Even from five: there are scores of n<sup>th</sup>-degree cousins, many virtually my contemporaries, spread around Denmark and the United States, most of course without the Klitgaard surname. The feeling however is not one of grandness and similarity, but of diffuseness and almost haphazard variety and dissemination. In what sense is this whole tree a unity? Almost none.

And this leads, on Father's Day morning, with some spare time as the sun plays in the windblown bamboo palms and bougainvillea outside, to the question, what is it about family that does provide a unity, a meaning, and a context?

Clearly, the postmaster and Eskild, and Dad's father in his helping his own father write the autobiographical book *Fifty Years as Master Mariner*, all shared the sense that these roots are important, even essential, to revisit. Dad is himself putting together the Klitgaard and Sykes/Stemler clans in a huge family album of reminiscences and photos and birthdate/marriage/offspring details. It has details about his family back to his great-grandparents, and on Mom's Sykes/Stemler side for several generations. (Someone in the Cary

family, which paternally ended a few generations ago in Mom's genealogy, had done what Eskild did, with results back to the early days of settler America.) Sister Karin is an expert in genealogy and has traced the Sykes family back to the Mayflower.

So, what is it we learn from, enjoy, wonder about, are bored by, and value in a family tree?

The first impression is vastness, and variety. So many people. It's obvious when we think about it, but we don't think about it. If a generation has just two children, and that generation has two, and so forth, then in fifteen generations you could theoretically have 2 to the 15<sup>th</sup> power relatives (over 32,000). And the second fact, variety, is also obvious when you ponder basic genetics. A child shares half of her or his genes with a parent, one quarter with a grandparent, and so forth. This means that over fifteen generations the genetic similarity between any one person in the first and any one person in the fifteenth is virtually nil. The family history reminds us, too, of how much societies, be they Danish or American, have changed over the generations. Nature and nurture both have little in common with fifteen generations back, or even five. For real influence and meaning, we have to look closer in time.

We can begin with our parents, and for most of us nowadays sadly end there, or perhaps with our grandparents. Uncles and aunts and cousins seldom anymore play much of a role in our lives, and with mobility and later marriages, grandparents are often peripheral figures as well. In our case (Karin, Bill, and I) our paternal grandparents were taken from us in a tragic car accident before we ever knew them, and our maternal grandfather, who married late, was already ill when we knew him and died before we were old enough to bond. Only our maternal grandmother played, and still plays years after her death, a role in our lives, as an icon, a spirit, a source of humor and wisdom and love.

So, it's our parents we must begin with when it comes to family, and since today is Father's Day, it's there. Last night on the Voice of America an author was being interviewed by a panel of journalists. He has written a book about fatherhood, which apparently argues that fathers and mothers play different and complementary roles in one's upbringing, both of which are important for children. The author invoked stereotypes, with the usual disclaimers that not everyone is that way: fathers are the wings, mothers the roots. That is, fathers challenge their children to do better (and discipline them when they do worse), whereas mothers in general are more accepting, nurturing, no matter what. Like all generalizations, this one has its dangers, and

in my own case I find it pretty unhelpful, not because it's wrong but because it doesn't capture what was unique or special or invaluable about each of my parents.

Dad (it's your day, so you're on) exemplifies a certain male non-reflectiveness, in the healthiest and most helpful sense. By non-reflective I mean in contrast to Socrates' line that the unexamined life isn't worth living, perhaps your (unexpressed) idea was that the un-lived life isn't worth examining. The times seem to call, and have for this whole century since Freud, for self-analysis and even the sharing of explanations about oneself. A call you rejected instinctively. In part, the rejection was because it simply didn't occur to you to try to explain yourself or for others to explain themselves. (Disraeli's motto might have been yours: "Don't complain, don't explain.") Another part was that when "explanations" were indeed proffered, you were suspicious. "I'm a this" or "I'm a that," no matter what the this or that, struck you as a simplification tending toward a cop-out. And so there was never any pressure on me to provide an explanation to you, at least not in any general terms—there were specific choices that merited specific reasons. When I was trying to choose a major in college, I was puzzled—would it be physics, or perhaps philosophy—and I asked you for your advice. You told me that you hadn't regretted choosing engineering, even though you weren't practicing it anymore. There was no lecture, no pondering my nature, in this conversation. When I ended up choosing philosophy, there were no questions asked. As I reflect on it, this must have been the source of confidence to me, because of your confidence in me, not expressed in any compliments or categorizations but by your response to what must have seemed an unorthodox and perhaps even flaky choice.

There's a related "trait," if you'll permit the expression, that I can identify as well: perhaps related because it's not one you'd talk about, and if you did you wouldn't have the trait. You're a man's man in the sense that you roll with the punches, manage to contribute good will and humor to almost any situation, as you pull your weight in classic male activities ranging from sports to games to combat to business. One doesn't detect stridency here, but an ability to coax even from situations that look unpromising people's smiles and a sense of fun.

This has always been true in our family, too. You were always a source of light and comfort, virtually never one of hostility, friction, or sadness.

You succeeded with us. You did it. Your family is healthy and successful. We've done what we could with our God-given temperaments and neuroses and abilities—we haven't been detained by a lack of material resources or opportunities, and we've been encouraged to be ourselves by your love and approval.

Beyond the family tree that gave us Klitgaard, we have much more: a father named Robert Manito Klitgaard, whom we love and honor.

## Daughters (and Spouse)

March 1995, The Hague, Holland

A few days ago, I interviewed Professor Geert Hofstede at his home in a small town in the south of Holland. Our topic was culture and development. Toward the end of our interview, Hofstede talked about what he'd want to know if he were helping with my study of Zulu culture.

"I'd want to know what they consider are the differences between a good and a bad person. What would you hope your child would do? What would you dislike very much if your child would do it? What kinds of people do you admire, and what do you dislike in people?" Suddenly, Hofstede was cooking, and I was writing down his questions as fast as I could. "What problems keep you awake at night?"

What would you like your children to become? I'd never thought about it. A couple of months before, daughter Genevève's teacher had asked Elaine that question, or rather asked us both but Elaine answered and I was glad she did.<sup>138</sup> I suppose the question is especially loaded when you think about daughters, because of the complicated feelings we have about their maturing. When actor Robin Williams was asked what he thought about his adolescent daughter's incipient dating, he said, "I told her I have only one rule about that. No sex till after I'm dead."

A few days later, I was having breakfast in a small hotel in Scheveningen, a beach-side suburb of The Hague. As I sat alone eating, a young woman who could have been nineteen or twenty-four smiled at me as she moved to serve herself. I thought I had seen her yesterday, carrying a cello case out the front door. This week The Hague was hosting a major international cello competition, which I'd read about in this year's magazine of events in Holland. Curious, last

night I had gone to a nearby hotel to see it, only to learn that only the finals will be at that hotel but the early part of the competition is in The Hague.

I asked the young woman if she were here for the cello competition.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. I told her I thought I’d seen her yesterday and told her also about going to the hotel only to find that the contest was in The Hague.

“Oh, too bad,” she said, and then went on to tell me a little about the contest. It is a large one, with contestants from Japan and lots from Russia and Europe and some from America, which was fun. She herself was studying music in Cologne. She asked me if I played and I said I didn’t, only banged away at a guitar. She praised the guitar as an expressive instrument. I made clear that it my hands its expressions were mostly noise, but fun anyway. After a minute we smiled and she went back to her own seat.

A while later I was ready to leave but thought I might have a second cup of coffee and get to know the cello player a little bit. I walked over and asked her if I could join her. She said, “Of course,” and gave me another smile.

She was of middle height and had middle-brown hair of middling length. She had large expressive lips and big straight-ahead eyes. Her complexion was a bit blotchy: porcelain skin gone marbled.

I asked her to tell me some more about the contest.

As she explained the rather complicated procedures, I was struck by her pervading innocence—or does that word connote weakness, which wasn’t there at all. She seemed a bit shy and even awkward, but there was no trace of self-consciousness. It may have been the shyness of mastery, the kind you might find in a university math class from a very gifted student, who is living with his gifts but trying not to let them get in the way of his social relations. She spoke good English, occasionally stumbling or asking for a word but never embarrassed by that. She had succeeded in the first day of the competition, and today would play in the second round, this time not alone but with a piano. “That will make it more relaxed,” she said. “The last two days, if you make it there, you play with a whole orchestra. They only tell you which piece of two pieces that you’ve prepared they will do, right before you have to do it.”

The early rounds have compulsory pieces—a Beethoven, a romantic piece—and then allow the contestant to play one thing of her or his choice. There are three pianists who rotate the second day, I suppose meaning that this day must also be required pieces.

I asked her a question I've been eager to explore with a full-time classical musician. Once many years ago, I heard a touring pianist say, "Everyone knows that pianists don't understand music." Had she heard such an idea? Was it widely agreed upon?

"No, I don't think so," she said, frowning. "I have never heard it. What do you think he meant by the remark?"

It seemed bizarre to me, too, I said. But I suppose the idea was that the pianist could execute even a difficult piece without "understanding" it.

"Ah," she said. "It's true that in a sense a machine could play the piano, could produce the sounds of the keys hitting the strings. There is something almost mechanical about playing the piano." As she went on, she almost seemed to reach her left hand for the neck of an imaginary cello, and I thought I could see that in her mind she was contrasting the piano with the more physical, even emotional contact of a cellist with her instrument. She mentioned computers and music. "One could reproduce the notes almost in a purely technical or automatic way."

Then there's the issue of composers, I said, who may think that no one ever understands their ideas. Was it Schumann or Schubert who once played one of his pieces and was asked by someone sitting nearby what the piece *meant*. To which he responded by sitting down and playing it again!

She laughed and said, "Of course composers can be very snobby with you. They will say, 'You can play my music, but you can't really understand the ideas of the music.'" She was smiling again, in a way that made me think she had surprised a few composers by her understanding.

She asked me about what I was doing here. I told her a little about the culture and development theme. She asked a couple of good questions, which also somehow expressed a kind of child-like wonder in the fascination of the subject. Then she said, "It is so nice that you can range over so many subjects. My life as a musician is much more, um, should one say narrow, or focused. I must spend five hours a day with my cello."

Maybe for a musician, I said, just as say for a person doing a doctorate, there is an unavoidable need to concentrate, to specialize, to go deep. And so one couldn't be as broad as one might like. But the right analogy might not be "well-balanced" or as I was trying to do combining disciplines, but something more like shifting the gears of a bicycle—being able to shift all the way out of music into something very different, such as mathematics or sports.

"Now I'm studying mathematics," she said with a demeanor that once again I can't seem to find words to describe—does "quiet enthusiasm" say anything? "It is very different. But also it gives me ideas about music. I can see things about the music I couldn't see before." She talked briefly about Bach and mathematics, about theories of harmony that some had analyzed with mathematics.

I told her about the Paris book fair I went to last Friday. A third of the huge exposition was taken up by musical instruments. There were hundreds of pianos, scores of violins and cellos, lots of guitars. And on that weekday the crowd was thin but all musicians, who were enjoying the chance to handle and play, sometimes in special soundproof booths but mostly just right there at each exhibit, all the varieties of their favorite instruments. The noise of it all was chaotic, humorous, even joyous. She glowed in imagining it.

Before leaving I congratulated her and wished her good luck in the contest.

"Well, it's a good experience no matter what," she said. I took away the sense that her love of music and her instrument, and indirectly the chance to meet other musicians, were what made the experience "good." The competition itself, in the sense of winning, was secondary to the chance to exhibit her extraordinary musical talents. She seemed a girl in many aspects, yet she was so confident, without hubris. She was someone who it seemed to me will always be seeking beauty and depth in what life might provide. A person who can smile without self-consciousness or flirtatiousness.

The kind of person I would be proud that my daughters might become.

There's another way to ask Hofstede's question. *Who* (or I guess whom) would you like your daughters to resemble? This way of asking it leads down a different intellectual pathway. Immediately, I think of Elaine. What good luck our daughters have! Elaine is a wonderful mother, in the sense of the love and care she provides. She is also an example for her daughters.

Elaine is amazing for many reasons. One that connects to the two people just mentioned is her *groundedness*. She is *right there*. Elaine is sure of herself, confident in a deep-down sense that goes beyond particular things she can do or attributes she possesses. The groundedness also signifies being profound. What she has and is, run deep. Elaine is open to people and the world, and she's taking it all in, at pace, her pace, with openness and appetite.

I love it when she shares her feelings and thoughts about new fiction she reads. I love the way she wraps herself around puzzling events in the world, unafraid to ask questions, also unafraid to show a kind of naive enthusiasm of discovery. I hate it when she gets worn out by being a mother, especially with Kai's night-time demands,<sup>139</sup> and her energy just dissipates. I keep wondering what I can do to alleviate that, and it makes me wonder about the wisdom of having another child.

Of course, there's a lot more to say about Elaine. Just her appearance is stunning. She, too, has large expressive lips and big eyes—in her case, uniquely beautiful lips and eyes. Her beauty stops you in your tracks but never intimidates. Her appearance is a blessing, and I hope her daughters inherit it. But that's not what I'd say first, or second, now that I've thought a bit about Hofstede's question.

## Sons, Daughters, and Heroes

September 2009, Bora Bora, Tahiti

What legacy would you like to leave? Unexpectedly, this question pops up one evening. So does "The Most Interesting Man in the World."

Our family is traveling in French Polynesia—that is, some of us: Elaine and I and Kai (age 15) and Kristen (age 11) are in Bora Bora. (Genevève and Tamryn are busy in college.)

A big storm clears by noontime, when we check out of the Intercontinental Thalasso and take a boat to the Intercontinental Moana, on the main island. After lunch, we take a minivan cab first to Vaitape (money, stamps, groceries) and then to our new abode.

It's at the top left of a group of seven small houses on stilts, which together comprise what everyone on the island knows as "The Condos." The minivan driver refuses to climb the steep, narrow track to the summit. So, we borrow a wheelbarrow and a dolly from the property

manager and tote to the top three boxes of groceries, two heavy duffel bags, and four backpacks with snorkeling stuff.

We spend the late afternoon and evening admiring the views of the lagoon, the little islands, the reef, and the airport. Way off to the left in the distance, powerful rains are still falling. Glad they're departing Bora Bora. We have hot dogs, salad, and chips in the living room.

After dinner, Kai and Elaine are conversing in the kitchen. Kai has been thinking and talking for several days about the things he'd like to have and do and fantasizing about ways to get the money to do it. He likes expensive cars. Last night at the trendy Bubbles Bar he read us the ingredients of the exotic drinks on the bar menu. He asked about Cristal and Dom Perignon champagnes. Where did you hear about them, Kai? "In rap songs," he said. "The rappers say they're the best."

Now, in the kitchen with Elaine, he's on what may be a related topic: having a legacy.

"It would be terrible to die young. You'd never know what your legacy was. Don't you want to have a legacy, Mom?"

Elaine asks him what legacy he'd like to leave.

"I don't know. Having lived a full life. Having done something."

When Kai comes into the living room, I ask him whether dying young sometimes helps people have a legacy. Kai talks about a rap star, who's making bad records now. "If he would have died after his third album, everyone would have said he was one of the all-time greats."

I have the laptop out and read him something from George Orwell. "It is difficult," Orwell said, "to think of any politician who has lived to be eighty and still been regarded as a success."

Orwell went on:

What we call a 'great' statesman normally means one who dies before his policy has had time to take effect. If Cromwell had lived a few years longer, he probably would have fallen from power, in which case we should now regard him as a failure. If Pétain had died in 1930, France would have venerated him as a hero and patriot. Napoleon remarked once that if only a cannon ball had happened to hit him when he was riding into Moscow, he would have gone down in history as the greatest man who ever lived.<sup>140</sup>

We talk a little about legacies. I tell Kai (and Elaine and Kristen, who have now joined us) a little about Petrarch and what he hoped his legacy would be:

Greetings. It is possible that some word of me may have come to you, though even this is doubtful, since an insignificant and obscure name will scarcely penetrate far in either time or space. If, however, you should have heard of me, you may desire to know what manner of man I was, or what was the outcome of my labors, especially those of which some description or, at any rate, the bare titles may have reached you.

I have taken pride in others, never in myself, and however insignificant I may have been, I have always been still less important in my own judgment. My anger has very often injured myself, but never others. I have always been most desirous of honorable friendships, and have faithfully cherished them. I make this boast without fear, since I am confident that I speak truly. While I am very prone to take offence, I am equally quick to forget injuries, and have a memory tenacious of benefits ...

My style, as many claimed, was clear and forcible; but to me it seemed weak and obscure. In ordinary conversation with friends, or with those about me, I never gave any thought to my language, and I have always wondered that Augustus Caesar should have taken such pains in this respect. When, however, the subject itself, or the place or listener, seemed to demand it, I gave some attention to style, with what success I cannot pretend to say; let them judge in whose presence I spoke. If only I have lived well, it matters little to me how I talked. Mere elegance of language can produce at best but an empty renown.<sup>141</sup>

It wasn't his literary style or fame that mattered to him—it was the way he lived, those "honorable friendships."

Then Kristen asks everyone, "Who is your hero?"

"Me," Kai says. Earlier he said how he often trash talks at school, with the result that some people who don't know him well think he has a big head.

"I don't know, I don't like to have heroes," Kai continues, "because then you have to put them up there someplace perfect, and no one's perfect."

No one really answers Kristen's question. Elaine says, "I guess we haven't really thought about that."

Discussion ensues. I ask Kristen who her heroes are.

"I don't know. You and Mom." Who else, Kristen? Demi Lovato? "I don't really know. How about you, Dad?"

I tell her that to me there are so many heroes. I can think of writers and thinkers, like Petrarch. Other people who dedicate themselves to helping others. And you, Kristen. You and Elaine and Kai are also heroes to me.

She smiles in some amazement. "How, Daddy?"

"Well, last night, for example, at the Intercontinental. You knew that I'd sprained my knee. When we went from the bar area to the dining room, you walked with me and said for me to lean on you with my arm around you. Then at the buffet, you tried all the different cheeses with me, and you really got into it. I love the way you took care of me and played along with the tasting. It shows how you trust your Daddy, even when you might not like the tastes."

"If you can't trust your Daddy, who can you trust?"

Kai pipes up from the next room. "Who doesn't trust their Dad?" We don't catch him up on the conversation, but when he enters the room he provides a couple of names of possible heroes for him.

"Maybe George Clooney." He's in *Oceans Thirteen*, a DVD they're about to watch, which Kai's already seen. Why him? "I don't know, just been thinking about his character in the movie."

Elaine says, "He's always smooth and in control."

"Another one could be Jason Lee." Kai talks a little about this skateboarding great.

Then he mentions the lobbyist in *Thank You for Smoking* and the character in the movie *The Goods* who can sell cars to anyone. Kristen has gone into the other room to watch Mommy get the DVD/TV going. She pipes up. "Maybe Miley Cyrus, Dad."

Kai continues, "The guy in the Dos Equis commercial, 'the most interesting man in the world.'"

This is the bearded man-of-the-world who says, "I don't often drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis."

"You're just being silly now."

"That's true," Kai says brightly. "That's what I do when I don't know the answer."

The idea of the most interesting man in the world has been fascinating Kai for a while. He's been joking about this with me, based on some conversations with his friends and one of their fathers back in Claremont.

We start pulling the Dos Equis line into our banter. Later, Kai gets me a painkiller, a small bottle of something like Advil. I fumble with the lid. Kai says, "Hey, Dad, you're the most interesting man in the world and you can't open a child-proof top."

"I don't often take painkillers, but when I do, they don't have child-proof tops."

And later when we're saying prayers: "We don't always give thanks, but when we do, it's to you, O Lord."

## 10. Putting It Together

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When our world is in upheaval, when we experience what the poet Lawrence S. Pertillar calls “the shock of what is not,” we may recoil to extremes.

We may renounce the world.

Or we may grab the world, renouncing every limit on our grabbing.

As the poet Lisa Wells notes, “When a person has a problem with numbing or checking out, violence, drunkenness, sex, hallucination, whatever—extremes can be very seductive, as a strategy to feel and to locate a boundary.”

Wells is now writing a book about people who avoided these extremes, “people who have suffered painful traumas and have found ways to reconcile with that history, and now devote their lives to bringing reconciliation into the world. There’s no abstraction, there’s nothing really—and I don’t mean for this to sound anti-intellectual—but there’s nothing really academic about it. It’s like, ‘I survived and therefore I will help others.’”<sup>142</sup>

We have playfully called these three reactions the solitary ascetic, the extreme addict, and the hero. The ascetic tradition, wrote Arthur Schopenhauer, denies the will to life. We began this book with Thomas à Kempis’ advice to monks for how to follow Jesus: “Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ. Learn now to despise all earthly things, that you may go freely to Christ.” (59)

In contrast, the extreme addict renounces restrictions on his or her worldliness. Some examples:

- The drug addict so intoxicated with intoxication that he ends up with bad health, confusion, and paradoxically the inability to experience real pleasure.
- The sexually promiscuous person so dedicated to conquests and orgasms that sexual union becomes jaded and unsatisfying.
- The person so dedicated to his personal magic that he becomes less interested in the magic for its own sake and more interested in how he compares with other people and their personal magic—in which case, the magic can disappear.

Like the solitary ascetic, the extreme addict may end up alone, away from the world, in a kind of living death.

The hero embraces the world in a different way. The hero discovers or receives a calling, finds or is given an insight, and then shares and serves.

Apart from the heroes of myth and legend, we see this pattern in our midst. Anne Colby and William Damon tried to understand people who discovered a moral commitment, embraced it, and then spent their lives sharing and serving.<sup>143</sup> “It is not so much that they overcome their fears, doubts, or resentments over the risks and hardships in their lives; it is more that they treasure the chance to take them on. The exemplars create for themselves a world of certainty rather than doubt, a perspective of faith rather than despair” (p. xii). “It is a picture of striking joy, great certainty, and unremitting faith; one that results in both high standards for the self and charity toward others” (p. 5).

David Bornstein studied real-world heroes who engaged fervently with a crazy world. Each of them had a hero, someone close to them with “outstandingly strong values.” And at some point, a combination of a crucial event or situation and their own preparation yielded a conversion from their former lives.

However the influences differ, a pattern remains: At some moment in their lives, social entrepreneurs get it into their heads that it is up to them to solve a particular problem. Usually something has been brewing inside for a long time, and at a particular moment in time—often triggered by an event—personal preparedness, social need, and historical opportunity converge and the person takes decision action. The word “decision” comes from the Latin *decidere*, meaning “to cut off.” From that point on, the social entrepreneurs seem to cut off other options for themselves.<sup>144</sup>

What fascinates Bornstein most “is the way they hold to an internal vision no matter how many disruptive forces surround them. Somehow they find ways to construct meanings for themselves and hold to those meanings. On a daily basis, they manage to align their interests, abilities and beliefs, while acting to produce changes that are deeply meaningful” (p. 279).

Abraham Maslow began by studying two of his own, real-life heroes.<sup>145</sup>

I could not be content simply to adore, but sought to understand why these two people were so different from the run-of-the-mill people of the world. These two people

were Ruth Benedict and Max Wertheimer... When I tried to understand them, think about them, and write about them in my journal and my notes, I realized in one wonderful moment that their two patterns could be generalized. I was talking about a kind of person, not about two noncomparable individuals. There was remarkable excitement in that. I tried to see whether this pattern could be found elsewhere, and I did find it elsewhere, in one person after another (pp. 40-1).

What was the pattern among these heroes, which Maslow called “self-actualizers”? They have a calling: they are motivated by values and things outside themselves (43ff). They have enthusiasm that ranges wide, and yet is not goofy (92). It’s part of a dialectic, a seriousness. They experience fully, without self-consciousness (45, 65-66). They are aware of the here and now (99). Yes, they do lots of hard work to be prepared for discernment (48), and yet their big insights and peak experiences, being “surprised by joy” in C. S. Lewis’s expression, are not the result of hard work. They are creative (68, 93-4). The love they have for what they do, and for people around them, enable them to contribute more deeply (17).

What is the antithesis of these self-actualizing heroes? “The superficial, the moment-bound, the here-bound ones, those who are totally absorbed with the trivial, those who are ‘plated with piety, not alloyed with it,’ those who are reduced to the concrete, to the momentary, and to the immediately selfish.”<sup>146</sup>

These various heroes found, indeed exemplified, full human lives. “*A full life*,” concluded the psychologist Martin Seligman, “consists in experiencing positive emotions about the past and future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these strengths in the service of something larger to obtain meaning.”<sup>147</sup>

## Models, Examples, and Experiments

How can we find that full human life? As we saw in Chapter 2, it is daunting to consider heroes when we feel anything but heroic. How can we learn from exemplars? Or indeed since we are each so different, so unique, how are we to take generalizations about a full human life?

Poets and humanists—and you and I, according to the psychologist Daniel Gilbert—extol the existential incommensurability of each human being. This is misleading, Gilbert concluded. “If

you are like most people, then, like most people, you don't know you're like most people...we tend to overestimate everyone's uniqueness—that is, we tend to think of people as more different from one another than they actually are.”<sup>148</sup> Gilbert's research on “surrogation”—looking at the experiences of others in areas of interest to us—suggests tremendous practical value in terms of better predictions about what will make us happy.<sup>149</sup> Gilbert explained:

Now, most of us when offered that kind of information [about the experiences of other people] would shrug and say, “You know, I'm a unique individual, nobody's exactly like me—how much someone else enjoys a speed date or a meal or a hobby or a movie—that might be a little bit of information about how much I would enjoy it but not very much because, after all, I'm remarkably different from everyone else.” Well, that turns out to be wrong. In terms of people's affective reactions, people are remarkably similar.<sup>150</sup>

We may not accept Gilbert's generalization. Luckily, for our purposes here we don't have to. This book does not provide a scientific argument. Rather, we have been considering abstractions and examples. Look at this model of a full human life—very simple, too simple, but try it on yourself. Consider these examples: do they speak to your unique upheavals and opportunities? Do the model and the examples inspire your unique creative reactions?

If there were an abstract to this book, it might read:

A full human life is portrayed by the hero, and it lies far away from withdrawal or greed. Across many cultures and walks of life, many heroes have similar journeys. They receive or discover a calling. They obtain an insight. Then, they share the insight and serve. The hero exemplifies a full human life. We can learn about the hero aesthetically, the life as art. And even though we are ordinary people, the hero's example can help kindle our own full human lives.

Got it? Are you sure? What can be captured or conveyed in these, or any, summary sentences?

Over 150 years ago, Søren Kierkegaard said you could never *know* about your specific, full human life, at least not in the sense of a logical truth or a statistical finding. He attacked Georg Hegel's philosophy as mistaken even before it got off the starting line.<sup>151</sup> Hegel's philosophy

aspired to figure out what good and bad are, what a good human life is. Kierkegaard replied, *No way*. (My translation.) You can't deduce the meaning of your individual existence.

So, are books like this one doomed from the start to failure? Kierkegaard wrote books. What did he think he was doing? Kierkegaard's works had titles like *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and (my favorite title) *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. Surely, he wrote with the goal that his readers would *get it*, but not through logic and data. Rhetoric (in the original lofty sense of that word) and art are better. But they can only inspire us. They cannot derive or prove an answer, not to questions like "what is a full human life?"<sup>152</sup>

We "get it" through a combination of logic and evidence, art and rhetoric—and, often compellingly, through *example*. Which recalls a line from a man about as different from Kierkegaard as possible, Oscar Wilde, who chirped: "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."<sup>153</sup> The hero's example inspires us, in art and myth and also in reality, because his or her life is a work of art. A full human life is inspired by, and itself becomes, a work of art.

What is the antithesis of a work of art? Many things, I'm sure, but let me highlight one category: the formula, the recipe, the cliché. As we saw in Chapter 4, it's hard to borrow summary insights. Like jokes, clichés are particularly galling when you've been through them more than once.

A heroic story is poorly conveyed through a formula or a catch phrase. It is possibly conveyed, but not necessarily, through a work of art, or through a person whose life inspires as a work of art. But generalizations are not likely to help: "No amount of assertion will make an ounce of art," Saul Bellow wrote to Richard Stern.<sup>154</sup>

Let us note, then, this implication: a full human life is rarely discovered through a recipe or a plan. It may be imagined through art, or by being (or trying to be) yourself a work of art. If your trying is pure, this may itself be sufficient for artistic and therefore for human success; let us leave that as a point for reflection.

## Heroism in the Large and the Small

The ordinary person confronts heroic problems only at a distance. We are not heroes like saints or soldiers. Our challenges are usually mundane. What bothers us, what taxes the best we have to offer even if we seldom offer it, are events and people at work or school or church, and

in our families. If prophets are seldom well regarded in their hometowns, what can be posited about the reception of aspiring heroes in their families?

Nonetheless, the three steps in the heroic journey may serve as a kind of practical method for our self-improvement. Let's play with that idea at two levels, which I'll call, inelegantly, the large and the small.

**In the large** refers to the big choices about the way we're going to live our lives. About our calling and our insight. The proposition here is that even if we are ordinary people, we can aspire to find our callings, achieve our insights, and then share and serve. Having a hero to inspire us can make all the difference.

**In the small** refers to the routine choices that we face and make or avoid week by week, even hour by hour. In our small struggles, the three steps of heroism suggest helpful reminders. Consider a challenge you face. Characterize the challenge, in the sense of defining its essence and putting it in a category. With respect to that essence, what is your calling? What is your insight? Given that insight, how would you share it, perhaps through actions rather than words? How would the insight lead you to serve others?

### *In the Large*

Our earlier reflections suggested several processes.

#### ***Experiment***

Seek your calling through experimentation. Consider broad categories of callings and ask yourself which one or ones resonate with you. Then, create an experiment or experiments so you can try out a calling or callings. Learn by experiencing the results—not by thinking about what the results might be. Be prepared for serendipity. Experiencing a sonata is not the same thing as knowing the rules for writing a sonata. Knowing God is not the same thing as knowing about God.

Play with insights, maybe with more than one of them. And watch out for what an all-too-easy slide from life-enhancing insight to life-inhibiting ideology.

#### ***Be Open to Insight***

Insights may come unexpectedly. The psychologist Martin Seligman was one of those who discovered that people could willfully become more grateful and optimistic and therefore

happier and healthier. But he struggled to apply the insight to himself. It took a humble hero, his five-year-old daughter Nikki, to generate his conversion experience.

Seligman and Nikki were weeding in the garden.

I have to confess that even though I have written a book and many articles about children, I'm actually not very good with them. I am goal-oriented and time-urgent and when I'm weeding in the garden, I'm weeding. Nikki, however, was throwing weeds into the air and dancing and singing. Since she was distracting me, I yelled at her, and she walked away. Within a few minutes, she was back, saying, "Daddy, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Nikki?"

"Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn't going to whine any more.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch."

This was an epiphany for me. In terms of my own life, Nikki hit the nail right on the head. I was a grouch. I had spent fifty years enduring mostly wet weather in my soul, and the last ten years as a walking nimbus cloud in a household radiant with sunshine. Any good fortune I had was probably not due to being grumpy, but in spite of it. In that moment, I resolved to change.<sup>155</sup>

Margaret Mead describes how insight can occur unexpectedly in a conference. Note her characterizations of receiving a big insight: something akin to a conversion, something like falling in love, an aesthetic experience.

Sometimes a conference experience is given enormously heightened intensity through the dissolution of barriers due to hierarchy or formal professional rivalry, race or class prejudice, or simple cross-disciplinary ignorance. When this happens, something akin to a conversion may occur. For other participants, the experience may have some of the quality of heightened perception that comes from falling in love. Those with eidetic imagery may fall asleep with the faces of every member etched on their eyeballs

or the voices of each ringing in their ears. For others the emergence of a new conceptualization may be primarily an aesthetic experience.<sup>156</sup>

### ***Share and Serve in Person***

Share and serve, not in the abstract or for every man, but through relationships such as friendships and communities. As we have seen, sharing may entail “taking” even more than “giving”—*taking* in the sense of receiving from each person whatever they offer as if it were a precious gift.<sup>157</sup>

In its ultimate form, serving is an act of love, which changes those who receive it and especially those who give it. In Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, the priest comes to see the wounded Lieutenant Henry. Their conversation turns philosophical. The priest says he loves God, and Henry says he understands.

He looked at me and smiled.

“You understand but do not love God.” “No.”

“You do not love Him at all?” he asked.

“I am afraid of Him in the night sometimes.” “You should love Him.”

“I don’t love much.”

“Yes,” he said. “You do. What you tell me about in the nights. That is not love. That is only passion and lust. When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve.”<sup>158</sup>

### ***In the Small***

Our lives are hectic and can become too hectic even when we are devoted to laudable ends like sharing and service. We can forget our calling, trivialize our insights.<sup>159</sup>

Paradoxically perhaps, research on addiction may shed light on how to preserve and renew callings and insights.

Many if not most addicts wish to quit. In what might be called the addict’s normal mode, he (or she) does not want to get high. He understands the costs and has a correct perspective on the benefits. But then he is exposed to cues, which remind him of his addiction and evoke the benefits. The cues may be a certain setting of cigarette smoke, music, and other people getting high. A metaphorical switch in the brain flips, and he is a different person: in economic parlance, he behaves as if he is maximizing a different utility function. The addict falls off the wagon and

indulges. Later, when his high is over, the addict (often) returns to the first mode and (usually) laments his decision to take a hit. It is not quite that he was acting irrationally—rather, that he was acting rationally by a different utility function that he, in what we called his normal mode, rejects. The cues then become part of the problem, and part of the solution. Self-control involves managing one’s exposure to cues.

Can a similar idea be applied positively, not to cues that drive us to addiction but cues that inspire our calling and insight? All of us know the problem of awareness. Speaking for myself, I can go for hours, and I’m afraid to confess even days, without being really aware. It is as if I am cued by the pace and pressures of ordinary life, from the mundane to the challenging, to forget about many of the things that, deep down, I care about the most.

Applying the economic model of addiction: how can I get positive cues that will switch me back to the better person that, upon deepest reflection and commitment, I wish to try to be?

The right cues will depend on the person, and on the heroes that guide him or her. For some person with religious backgrounds, cues may be as simple as going to a church or mosque or temple, listening to certain kinds of music, or reading scripture. (Maybe things are not that simple.) For people who have had a peak experience, they might put themselves in the position where the experience occurred. In other words, can we arrange cues for that insight-providing event or phenomenon?

If you don’t have such a cue, how might you find one? Consider Reinhold Niebuhr:

The general revelation of personal human experience, the sense of being confronted with a “wholly other” at the edge of human consciousness, contains three elements, two of which are not too sharply defined, while the third is not defined at all. The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience, is the longing for forgiveness.<sup>160</sup>

### ***Majesty***

What might evoke in you that feeling of *majesty and dependence*? Can you evoke it through thirty minutes of gazing at the constellations? Or with a hike to the top of a mountain and then sitting there and staring out, with a wild surmise, at the nature you partake? Or is it a

particularly deep or noble study in history, or archaeology, or science? Can you beckon something outside yourself that enables you to perceive deeply, and be awed by, life's beauty, complexity, and mystery?

### ***Moral Obligation***

What might cue up for you a sense of *moral obligation and moral unworthiness*? Perhaps moral outrage is a start—outrage over cruelty, dehumanization, or the mistreatment of the environment. But it's only a start, because outrage may often lead to blaming others and condemning "the system," rather than to inspiring yourself and changing yourself. Niebuhr's point is to focus inside yourself on your own moral obligations, and what he provocatively puts in the same breath, your own moral unworthiness. What cues might evoke those feelings in you?

### ***Forgiveness***

Finally, what do you associate with a feeling that you want or need *forgiveness*? Niebuhr calls it a longing. Can you recall having a longing for forgiveness? When? What were the accompaniments? What might cue that feeling again?

## Which Hero?

Can we say more? Are there particular heroes that seem especially likely to inspire a full human life? A hero that is not withdrawn from the world and its dangers, but fully engaged in it?<sup>161</sup>

We might imagine collecting evidence. These fifteen hundred people are inspired in such-and-such ways and degrees by hero 1. These other fifteen hundred are inspired in so-and-so ways and degrees by hero 2. Now compare the two groups. According to what? Are they living full human lives? Are they avoiding living deaths? How weak are their anxieties, and how unobtrusive are their feelings of guilt? How little are they driven by status and power? How seldom do they seek security by closing off the world in self-contained small spheres of "good night's sleep"?

What a research agenda. The academic in me can imagine such a study, even as I mentally list the methodological problems with it. But scientific inquiries here may face limits reminiscent of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel.

In Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Brother Juniper investigates the lives of the people who happened to perish when the bridge collapsed.<sup>162</sup> Brother Juniper reasoned that their deaths could not have been random. His scientific study of the common characteristics of the victims would, he thought with delight, prove a point to skeptics of his faith. Alas, we discover along the way that Brother Juniper's enterprise was not appreciated by his superiors: they found his quest for evidence was so heretical that they burned him at the stake.

The novelist relates that Brother Juniper received this punishment without understanding it but having faith that somehow both his quest and his death were also God's will. The stories the imaginary Brother Juniper uncovered were the grist of the novelist's book, which the reader recognizes as a great work of art, with Brother Juniper as a hidden co-author. Thus, Brother Juniper's fictitious fate inside a work of fiction layers another inspiring complexity on the stories of the various victims, as we as readers try to figure out what the characters have in common, and what if anything their commonalities might signify. We may conclude that in these domains only an artistic insight, not a statistical analysis, is meaningful.<sup>163</sup>

Let's take a different route. What would be the characteristics of particularly promising heroes? Given all that we have considered so far, let us conclude this book with some tentative ideas.

The heroes would have received and would themselves issue a calling. Their calling would resonate with you. Ideally, the calling would speak to you in your unique situation *and* you would recognize the calling as embracing everyone, equally uniquely.

The heroes would have received insights that we can receive through them, through their art and especially through their lives as works of art. The hero would show us how to be heroes, even as ordinary people. The hero's message would help us with challenges in the large, like our big calling and our big insights, and perhaps also with challenges in the small, like how to meet our daily choices (and evasions of choice). We might experience the insight in a flash, something like falling in love, something like a big "aha!"

Like all deep insights, the insights we gain from these heroes would appear obvious once we have them, but paradoxical to those who don't have them. We would also find that there are processes for conveying the insight with some but not complete success—not everyone gets it, even when they try. But the insight itself would not exclude anyone *a priori* from possessing it.

The insight is not equal to a formula or recipe or cliché, even if we might later use a formula to remind ourselves.

The heroes would share their insights with people like us ... ideally, with you and me specifically, as individuals. They would share with their words perhaps, and also with their example.

The way they serve, the why of their sacrifice, would exemplify love.

Finally, heroes would combine in themselves a problem or dilemma that resonates in the outside world. The grander the internal and external dilemmas, and the more we recognize them and sympathize with them and are astonished by them, the greater the hero's resonance and relevance will be.

# Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “Thus it may be that the inner nature of holiness, self-renunciation, mortification of self-will, asceticism, is here [in Schopenhauer’s book] for the first time expressed in the abstract and free from all myth, as *denial of the will to life*... Although the whole body is only the visible expression of the will to life, the motives pertaining to this will are no longer active; indeed, the dissolution of the body, the end of the individual and therewith the greatest obstacle to the natural will, is welcome and desired.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. Trans. Jill Berman. London: Everyman, 1995 (1819), pp. 241, 254.

<sup>2</sup> Please forgive the exaggeration of ideal types. Not all monks are like those Thomas à Kempis advises. Monks come in many varieties, including many such as the Taizé community who engage fully with people outside their monasteries. Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Beyond All Reason: Monastic Life in the Twentieth Century*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> “Every man who has seen the world knows that nothing is so useless as a general maxim. If it be very moral and very true, it may serve for a copy to a charity-boy. If, like those of Rochefoucault, it be sparkling and whimsical, it may make an excellent motto for an essay. But few indeed of the many wise apophthegms which have been uttered, from the time of the Seven Sages to that of Poor Richard, have prevented a single foolish action.” Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Machiavelli,” in *Macaulay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. G.M. Young. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967 (1827), p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> “He who hesitates is lost” but “Look before you leap.” “Many hands make light work” and yet “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” Individually, maxims may dictate different choices, collectively none at all.

<sup>5</sup> *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Modern Library, 1992 (1888), p. 710.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Trans. Leo Sherley-Price. London: Penguin, 1952 (1441). On it being the most widely read, see “Imitation of Christ,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

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Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07674c.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Emil Brunner described a version of intoxication with the world.

The natural “inclination” of our heart and will is to seek ourselves. Like the rapacious spider that sits in the center of his web, we sit in the midst of our world in a spirit of acquisitiveness. We want men and what men have, their happiness, their possessions, their honor, their power. All this is our booty. But we want also from men their love, their respect, their time, and their sympathy. Our Ego sits like a king enthroned and demands that the world serve it. My wife, my children, my school, and—yes, even my dear God, are all to serve “me.” *I am the Lord my God.* Some maintain the primacy of the ego with delicacy, others coarsely; but all maintain it. So is the natural man, the unconverted man, the godless, loveless man. If any believes that I have made too harsh a judgment let him speak for himself. I confess in any case that *I am such a man—and those I know are such people.*

Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*. Trans. John W. Rilling. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962 (1936), pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> “Perfection Wasted,” *The Collected Poems of John Updike, 1953-1993*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Or nun in her cell. Throughout, I use “monk” as a term for both male and female ascetics from a variety of religious or philosophical backgrounds

<sup>10</sup> *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. First Part, II. The Academic Chairs of Virtue, Vol. 11 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Thomas Common. New York: Macmillan, 1911. Accessed through Kindle, electronically developed by Mobilereference, location 16000-16004.

<sup>11</sup> “The words ‘epic’ and ‘hero’ both defy generalization, let alone universalizing definitions” states Gregory Nagy in the first sentence of his essay “The Epic Hero.” (2nd ed. (on-line version), Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, DC. [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy.The\\_Epic\\_Hero.2005](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy.The_Epic_Hero.2005). The 1st ed. (printed version) of “The Epic Hero” appeared in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. J. M. Foley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 71-89.) The great medieval scholar Ernst Robert Curtius concluded, “A comparative phenomenology of heroism, heroic poetry, and the heroic ideal is yet to be given us.” *European*

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*Literature and the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series XXXVI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953 [1948], p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 1§50.

<sup>13</sup> “The goddess of *being on time* [Hērā] makes sure that the hero [Hēraklēs or Hercules] should start off his lifespan by *being not on time* and that he should go through life by trying to catch up—and never quite managing to do so until the very end... And yet, without this unseasonality, without the disequilibrium brought about by the persecution of Hērā, Hēraklēs would never have achieved the equilibrium of immortality and the kleos or ‘glory’ that makes his achievements live forever in song.” Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 1§45, 1§49.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Late Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series XXXVI. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953 [1948], pp. 168, 167.

<sup>15</sup> “The hero, with Shakespeare, is a person of high degree of public importance, and that his actions or sufferings are of an unusual kind. But this is not all. His nature also is exceptional.” A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London: Macmillan, 1904, p. 20. Bradley adds the classic feature of the tragic hero in Shakespeare: “In the circumstances where we see the hero placed, his tragic trait, which is also his greatness, is fatal to him” (p. 21).

<sup>16</sup> “He has to be made of pure gold; he has to be kind and dedicated, to suffer a trial by ordeal—loneliness and all that—and he must, absolutely must, be a man of genius. There are two strong reasons why the young rebel must be so outstanding. First, his excellence resolves the conflict between the conservatism and the progressivism within the romantic philosophy: the rebel is a progressive force, but he must be idolized, in order that there will be no widespread attempt to emulate him: the greatest majority are followers, and only a few can be leaders. Second, only the most excellent can transcend the tradition, yet thereby enrich it rather than destroy it.” Joseph Agassi, “Genius in Science.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* Vol. 5 (1975), p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> The philosopher Sidney Hook studied examples in literature, music, and painting; philosophy and science; religion; and “the historical hero.” To Hook, the hero is not just an eventful person but an event-making person “whose actions are the consequences of outstanding capacities of

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intelligence, will, and character rather than of accidents of position... [A] hero is great not merely in virtue of what he does but in virtue of what he is." Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History. A Study in Limitation and Possibility*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955 [1943], pp. 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Campbell (2008 [1949]), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII, Third Edition, *The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell*. Joseph Campbell Foundation. Novato, CA: New World Library. "The two—the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found—are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known" (p. 31).

<sup>19</sup> David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 240.

<sup>20</sup> "When the topic of the meaning of life comes up, people often pose one of two questions: 'So, what is the meaning of life?' and 'What are you talking about?'" Thaddeus Metz "The Meaning of Life", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/life-meaning>

<sup>21</sup> T.J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> In a different vein, psychologists have studied how (predominantly American) respondents define heroes and their characteristics. One recent list of heroic attributes: bravery, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice, protecting, honesty, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful. Less common but frequently included: proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable. Elaine Louise Kinsella, Timothy D. Ritchie, & Eric R. Igou, "Zeroing in on Heroes: A Prototype Analysis of Hero Features." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (January 2015): 114-127.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. New York: Basic Books, 2006, pp. 223ff.

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<sup>25</sup> Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “The Construction of Meaning Through Vital Engagement,” in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived*, ed. Corey L.M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> A.H. Maslow, “Cognition of Being in the Peak Experience.” *Journal of General Psychology*. Vol. 95 (1959): 43-66.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi)*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969 (1943), p. 395.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Max Weber observes: “It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes.” Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946 [1919], p. 128.

<sup>30</sup> Used with Bill’s blessing.

<sup>31</sup> David C. McClelland *et al.*, *The Achievement Motive*. New York: Irvington Publishers, 1976 (1953).

<sup>32</sup> *The Achieving Society*. New York: Irvington Publishers, 1976 (1961).

<sup>33</sup> A group called The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations provides a model program for training in achievement motivation at

[http://www.eiconsortium.org/model\\_programs/achievement\\_motivation\\_training.htm](http://www.eiconsortium.org/model_programs/achievement_motivation_training.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Zeno E. Franco, Scott T. Allison, Elaine L. Kinsella, Ari Kohen, Matt Langdon, and Philip G. Zimbardo (2018) “Heroism Research: A Review of Theories, Methods, Challenges, and Trends,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 58(4): 5.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.heroicimagination.org>

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<sup>36</sup> Philip G. Zimbardo, James N. Breckenridge, and Fathali M. Moghaddam (2013) "'Exclusive' and 'Inclusive' Visions of Heroism and Democracy" *Current Psychology* 32(3): 221-233.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.heroconstruction.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/HCC-Lesson-Plan-Teaching-Kids-to-Be-Heroes-revised-Dec-2016.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, one review of fifteen quantitative studies showed that between 10 and 18 percent of patients improved *before* their first visit to the therapist. Why? Perhaps because in anticipation of their treatment, the patients focused on their problems with new energy. Kenneth I. Howard *et al.*, "The Dose-Effect Relationship in Psychotherapy." *American Psychologist*. 41(2) (Feb. 1986): 159-64.

<sup>39</sup> Another literature review finds that "between 13 to 18 sessions of therapy are needed for psychiatric symptom alleviation, across various types of treatment and patient diagnosis." Nathan B. Hansen, Michael J. Lambert, and Evan M. Forman, "The Psychotherapy Dose-Response Effect and Its Implications for Treatment Delivery Services." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 9:3 (Fall 2002): 333.

<sup>40</sup> "The paradox that we both choose grace and are chosen by it is the essence of the phenomenon of serendipity. Serendipity was defined as 'the gift of finding valuable and agreeable things not sought for.' Buddha found enlightenment only when he stopped seeking for it—when he let it come to him. On the other hand, who can doubt that enlightenment came to him precisely because he had devoted at least sixteen years of his life seeking it, sixteen years in preparation? He had to both to seek for it and not seek for it." M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978, pp. 306-7.

<sup>41</sup> Psychologist Martin Seligman noted a similar point in his studies of "learned helplessness" in dogs. Some dogs never learned helplessness: they dogs stayed strong all the way. "One out of three never gives up, no matter what we do." Other dogs didn't need to learn helplessness—"one out of eight is helpless to begin with." When Seligman began asking why, it was a step in developing the field now known as positive psychology. Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Peck, p. 308.

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<sup>43</sup> “Thornton Wilder cited this unnamed writer of sonnets: one line of a sonnet falls from the ceiling, and you tap in the others around it with a jeweler's hammer.” Annie Dillard, “Write till You Drop,” *New York Times*, 28 May 1989.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/03/28/specials/dillard-drop.html>

<sup>44</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007 (1983).

<sup>45</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1982 (1902), pp. 47-8. James goes on: “If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce. It ought to mean nothing short of this new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes. This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion.”

<sup>46</sup> Adolf Holl, *The Left Hand of God: A Biography of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John Cullen. New York: Doubleday, 1998 (1996), p. 207.

<sup>47</sup> “Individuals use the role model attributes they observe as clues to creating their ‘ideal self’ — the self they would like to become. Role models are particularly helpful in imagining this ideal self because by observing role models, individuals can provisionally try out different styles or behaviors to see which ones best suit their developing style.” Donald E. Gibson, “Role Models” in *Encyclopedia of Career Development*, ed. Jeffrey H. Greenhaus and Gerard A. Callanan. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006: 702-3.

<sup>48</sup> Philadelphia: The Blakiston Company (1944).

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007 (1983), p. xvii.

<sup>50</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Trans. John W. Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 (1923), pp. 177-178.

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<sup>51</sup> Søren Kierkegaard explains: “Possibility then appears to the self even greater and greater, more and more things become possible, because nothing becomes actual. At last it is as if everything were possible — but this is precisely when the abyss has swallowed up the self ... At the instant something appears possible, and then a new possibility makes its appearance, at last this phantasmagoria moves so rapidly that it is as if everything were possible — and this is precisely the last moment, when the individual becomes for himself a mirage.” *The Sickness Unto Death*. Radford, VA: A&D Publishing, 2008 [1849], p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Scott Simon on National Public Radio, April 11, 2009.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=102977788&m=102997707>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p008lmss#p008y24c>

<sup>54</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation.” In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. C. Wright Mills, trans. H.H. Gerth. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1958.

<sup>55</sup> “Music Decomposed,” in his *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Updated Edition. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (1969), p. 199. Of Ezra Pound’s Cantos, Lewis Hyde writes: “The history cantos in particular—all the material about China and the long portrait of John Adams—are deadly dull, never informed with the fire, complexity, or surprise that are the mark of living images.” *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007 (1983), p. 300.

<sup>56</sup> *Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*. New York: Norton, 1994 (1969), p. 399.

<sup>57</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche—from whom more in a moment—posited and exhorted “philosophers of the future” who “will certainly be experimenters. Through the name with which I have ventured to baptize them I have already expressly emphasized experiment and the delight in experiment...” *Beyond Good and Evil*, §210.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Luther wrote of the need to experiment: “Christian faith has appeared to many an easy thing; nay, not a few even reckon it among the social virtues, as it were; and this they do because they have not made proof of it experimentally, and have never tasted of what efficacy it is. For it is not possible for any man to write well about it, or to understand well what is rightly written, who has not at some time tasted of its spirit, under the pressure of tribulation; while he

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who has tasted of it, even to a very small extent, can never write, speak, think, or hear about it sufficiently.” “Concerning Christian Liberty,” trans. R.S. Grignon, *Harvard Classics*, Vol. 36. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1938 (1520), pp. 344-5.

<sup>59</sup> “At any rate, I have found myself studying in the lives of religious innovators that border area where neurotic and existential conflict meet and where the “I” struggles for unencumbered awareness.” Erikson, Erik H. Erikson, “Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Fall 1970): 757. See more generally Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1969, and Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1958.

<sup>60</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1982 (1902), p. 210. Thich Nhat Hanh, considered by some of his followers to be a “Living Buddha,” expresses a similar idea: “Sitting and looking deeply into your body, your consciousness, and your mental states is like being a mother hen covering her eggs. One day insight will be born like a baby chick.” Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: Modern Library, 1992 (1888), p. 710.

<sup>62</sup> “Happy confusions are frequent in biological evolution: a disused organ or accidental growth becomes diverted in a later generation, by natural selection, to a vital new use. Boons, like people, are to be valued for themselves and not for their origins. Serendipity and opportunism are laws of nature.” W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 28-9.

<sup>63</sup> To cite the psychologist Abraham Maslow once more:

I hesitate to call this simply “purposefulness” because that may imply that it happens only out of will, purpose, decision, or calculation, and doesn’t give enough weight to the subjective feeling of being swept along, of willing and eager surrender, or yielding to fate and happily embracing it at the same time. Ideally, one also *discovers* one’s fate; it is not only made or constructed or decided upon. It is recognized as if one had been unwittingly waiting for it...

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The best way to communicate these feelings to someone who doesn't intuitively, directly understand them is to use as a model "falling in love." This is clearly different from doing one's duty, or doing what is sensible and logical. And clearly also "will," if mentioned at all, is used in a very special sense. And when two people love each other fully, then each one knows what it feels like to be a magnet and what it feels like to be iron filings, and what it feels like to be both simultaneously.

Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 1971, p. 303.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>65</sup> For various versions of Shaw's remark, see the Quote Investigator's report:

<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/03/30/art-money/#more-5828>

<sup>66</sup> "The State of Economics," *The Economist*, July 18, 2009: 67.

<sup>67</sup> Vernon L. Smith, "Constructivist and Ecological Rationality in Economics." *American Economic Review*. 93:3 (June 2003): 468n.

<sup>68</sup> I use "ideology" here in the negative senses of "theorizing of a visionary or impractical nature" (one definition in *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*) and "an extremist sociopolitical program or philosophy constructed wholly or in part on factitious or hypothetical ideational bases" (one definition in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*).

<sup>69</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*. Revised Ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990 (1970).

<sup>70</sup> Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, ed. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>71</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> "Perhaps great transforming ideas always contain only a limited number of truly provable assumptions--enough to establish some lasting roots in observation while branching out into

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new world-images.” Erik H. Erikson, “Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Fall 1970): 751.

<sup>73</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989: 176. And to cite Erikson once more, speaking autobiographically: “I must admit that my primary interest in the flux of phenomena precluded any attempt to find safety in orthodoxy or escape in heresy” (*ibid.*, 751).

<sup>74</sup> London and New York: Penguin, 1980.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1979*. New York: New Directions, 1980: 79. Cited in Hyde, *The Gift*: 193 and 364.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Visser, *The Gift of Thanks*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, 629.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007 (1983), p. 60.

<sup>78</sup> Here and elsewhere in this chapter I am indebted to Robert Emmons’ 2007 book *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, New York: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>79</sup> M. Anand (2014) “Gratitude Interventions and Its Applications in Youth” *Indian Journal of Health & Wellbeing* 5(10): 1232.

<sup>80</sup> Floyd, Simeon, Giovanni Rossi, Julija Baranova, Joe Blythe, Mark Dingemane, Kobin H. Kendrick, Jörg Zinken, and N. J. Enfield (2018) “Research article: Universals and Cultural Diversity in the Expression of Gratitude” *Royal Society Open Science* DOI: 10.1098/rsos.180391. 23 May. <http://rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/5/5/180391#sec-9>

<sup>81</sup> Nell Freudenberger, *The Newlyweds*. New York: Knopf, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Ambrose Bierce *The Devil’s Dictionary*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1906].

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<sup>83</sup> William James, "The Gospel of Relaxation," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, New York: Henry Holt, 1925 [1899]. Republished as an e-book by Project Gutenberg.

<sup>84</sup> Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987

<sup>85</sup> The story of Mungo Park and the quotes are drawn from Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: The Romantic Generation and the Discovery of the Beauty and Terror of Science*, New York: Pantheon, 2008.

<sup>86</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007 (1983), p. xxiii.

<sup>87</sup> August Strindberg, *Son of a Servant*, Trans. Claud Field. New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 1913 [1886-7].

<sup>88</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings*, ed. E.J. Hundert. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987 [components written in early 1700s].

<sup>89</sup> Noting these points does not signify agreement with them. Indeed, the proper rebuttal is Michael J. Sandel, "Market Reasoning as Moral Reasoning: Why Economists Should Re-engage with Political Philosophy" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2013): 121-140.

<sup>90</sup> Richard A. Posner, "A Theory of Primitive Society, with Special Reference to Law," *Journal of Law and Economics*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (Apr. 1980): 1-53.

<sup>91</sup> John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss and the Jewish with Modernity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987 (1974), especially the last chapter. Cuddihy (p. 233) cites Sartre: Tact "is connected with *esprit de finesse*, a thing the Jew does not trust...To base his conduct on tact would be to recognize that reason is not a sufficient guide in human relations and that traditional and obscure powers of intuition may be superior to it." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1948): 124.

<sup>92</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Heaven's My Destination*. New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2003 (1934): 92-5.

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<sup>93</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941 [1843] Anchor Books edition, 1954, p. 90.

<sup>94</sup> John Steinbeck *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. New York: Viking, 1951, pp. lxiv-lxv. Note a parallel comment by Søren Kierkegaard: "...he had not even comprehended the little mystery, that it is better to give than to receive, and has no inkling of the great one, that it is far more difficult to receive than to give." *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941 (1843) Anchor Books edition, 1954: 113.

<sup>95</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. W.D. Halls. New York: Norton, 1990 [1925], p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1931, p. 658.

<sup>97</sup> John T. Noonan, Jr. *Bribes*. New York: Macmillan, 1984, p. 695.

<sup>98</sup> Becca Rothfeld, "Affliction and Salvation," *The Nation* (September 9, 2016).

<sup>99</sup> He did say: "Love is a matter of feeling, not of willing, and I cannot love because I will to, still less because I ought to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a duty to love is an absurdity." Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1785]), p. 161.

<sup>100</sup> Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. 55-56.

<sup>101</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, (2003 [1882]) *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common, Paul V. Cohn, and Maude D. Petre (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003 [1882]), §14, §363.

<sup>102</sup> Which may recall a line by the great physicist Wolfgang Pauli—who at age 22 had written a 237-page monograph on quantum mechanics that is still used today—concerning a youthful candidate for a faculty position: "So young and he has already contributed so little?" Gino Segrè, *Faust in Copenhagen: A Struggle for the Soul of Physics and the Birth of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 268

<sup>103</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952 [1441]). On it being the most widely read, see "Imitation of Christ," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

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<sup>104</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Hanna Pickard, "What Is Addiction?" in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, ed. K. W. M. Fulford et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 851-864, especially p. 860. But consider Bonnie Phillips, Raju Hajela & Donald L. Hilton Jr., "Sex Addiction as a Disease: Evidence for Assessment, Diagnosis, and Response to Critics," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* 22 (2015): 167-192.

<sup>105</sup> Raymonde Carroll, *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>106</sup> Sarah Perez, "Audible's New Romance Audiobooks Learning to Jump to the Sex Scenes," *TechCrunch* (November 1, 2017).

<sup>107</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: Norton, 2013 [1353]).

<sup>108</sup> Joan Acocella, "Renaissance Man: A New Translation of Boccaccio's Decameron," *The New Yorker* (November 11, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>110</sup> "A Commuter Romance," Outlook, BBC World Service, broadcast November 2, 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Zoë Folbigg, *The Note* (London: Aria, 2017).

<sup>112</sup> Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>113</sup> Quotes taken from Elaine Showalter, "Sunny Sylvia." *Literary Review* (November 9, 2017), a review of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume I, 1940–1956*, ed. Peter K. Steinberg & Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

<sup>114</sup> John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, "Introduction," in *Autobiography and Literary Essays, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 1*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Oxford: Routledge, 1981), p. xvii.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Cass Sunstein, "John and Harriet: Still Mysterious," *New York Review of Books* (April 2, 2015).

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<sup>116</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 1*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Oxford: Routledge, 1981), p. 195.

<sup>117</sup> Brian Boyd, "Envelopes for the Letters to Véra," in *Letters to Véra*. Ed. and trans. Olga Veronina and Brian Boyd (New York: Knopf Borzoi Books, 2014), p. xxvi.

<sup>118</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*. Ed. and trans. Olga Veronina and Brian Boyd (New York: Knopf Borzoi Books, 2014), pp. 31-32.

<sup>119</sup> Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> Lauren Acampora, "Véra Nabokov: Vladimir Nabokov's Wife," in *The Who, the What, and the When*, ed. Jenny Volvovksi, Julia Rothman, and Matt Lamothe (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), p. 16.

<sup>121</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," in *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 135-153.

<sup>122</sup> Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, "Introduction," in Iris Murdoch, *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch, 1934-1995*, ed. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. xii; hereafter abbreviated LP.

<sup>123</sup> John Sutherland, "'Living on Paper: Letters From Iris Murdoch, 1934-1995'," *New York Times Book Review*, 22 January 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sacred and the Profane Love Machine*, p. 261, quoted in Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge,'" p. 145.

<sup>125</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>126</sup> "But it can, moreover it does happen, that this natural 'inclination' of the human heart to say, 'I, I' can be reversed so that it says 'Thou, Thou.' This is the great miracle, the miracle that we designate with the word Love. Love is simply this, that one no longer sits, like the spider, in the midst of its web, or like the King Ego upon his throne, demanding service, but that one instead of living for himself, lives for others, instead of ruling, serves." Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*. Trans. John W. Rilling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962 [1936]), pp. 100-101.

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<sup>127</sup> Horner and Rowe, "Introduction," in Iris Murdoch, *Living on Paper*, p. xiii.

<sup>128</sup> Leah Libresco Sargeant, "Consent and Louis C.K." *First Things* (November 21, 2017).

<sup>129</sup> The apostle Paul was asked if people should abstain from sex. Best, he replied, to be chaste like me—unless you can't control yourself, in which case get married so that you don't just "burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:1-9).

<sup>130</sup> Apologies to Erica Jong for toning down her epic phrase, which urbandictionary.com defines as "a sexual encounter between strangers that has the swift compression of a dream and is seemingly free of all remorse and guilt. It is absolutely pure, there is no power game and it is free of ulterior motives." Erica Jong's character liked the idea, but "it is rarer than the unicorn. And I have never had one." Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Henry Holt, 1973).

<sup>131</sup> Lightly edited quote from the film "Gone Girl" (2014), cited in Becca Rothfeld, "Gone Girl's Feminist Update of the Old-Fashioned Femme Fatale," *The New Republic* (October 9, 2014).

<sup>132</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. (Oxford and New York: Routledge Classics, 1970), p. 45.

<sup>133</sup> Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge,'" p. 148.

<sup>134</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2007 [1979]).

<sup>135</sup> Recall how the psychologist Abraham Maslow described "self-actualized lives":

One can fairly use the old words vocation, or calling, or mission to describe their passionate, selfless, and profound feeling for their "work" ... I hesitate to call this simply "purposefulness" because that may imply that it happens only out of will, purpose, decision, or calculation, and doesn't give enough weight to the subjective feeling of being swept along, of willing and eager surrender, or yielding to fate and happily embracing it at the same time...

The best way to communicate these feelings to someone who doesn't intuitively, directly understand them is to use as a model "falling in love." This is clearly different from doing one's duty, or doing what is sensible and logical. And clearly also "will," if

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mentioned at all, is used in a very special sense. And when two people love each other fully, then each one knows what it feels like to be a magnet and what it feels like to be iron filings, and what it feels like to be both simultaneously.

Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 301, 303.

<sup>136</sup> *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking, 1975).

<sup>137</sup> Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1995.

<sup>138</sup> Genevève was then 8 years old; Tamryn was 6½.

<sup>139</sup> Kai was then about 1½ years old.

<sup>140</sup> George Orwell, "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," in *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972, pp. 342-343n.

<sup>141</sup> Francesco Petrarca "Letter to Posterity," ca. 1372, in Frederic Austin Ogg, ed., *A Sourcebook of Medieval History* (New York: American Book Company, 1907), pp. 470-473,

<sup>142</sup> Michael Juliani (2018) "Lisa Wells: Tapering of Extremes," *Guernica: A Magazine of Global Arts and Politics*, 22 May. <https://www.guernicamag.com/lisa-wells-tapering-of-extremes/>

<sup>143</sup> Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* New York: Free Press, 1992, p. xii.

<sup>144</sup> David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 240.

<sup>145</sup> Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 1971.

<sup>146</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964, pp. 56-7.

<sup>147</sup> Martin E.P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press, 2002, p. 263.

<sup>148</sup> Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: Knopf, 2006, pp. 252, 254

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<sup>149</sup> Gilbert, D. T., M.A. Killingsworth, R.N. Eyre, & T.D. Wilson “The Surprising Power of Neighborly Advice,” *Science*, 323 (2009): 1617-1619.

<sup>150</sup> Science Magazine podcast transcript, 20 March 2009.

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/suppl/2009/03/19/323.5921.1620b.DC1/SciencePodcast090320.pdf>

<sup>151</sup> “It is from this side, in the first instance, that objection must be made to modern philosophy; not that it has a mistaken presupposition, but that it has a comical presupposition, occasioned by its having forgotten, in a sort of world-historical absent-mindedness, what it means to be a human being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general; for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher to agree to; but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press for American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1941 (1846), p. 109.

<sup>152</sup> Nor can we learn the important things from our forebears.

...[T]hat which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no different task from every previous generation, nor does it get further, except in so far as the preceding generation shirked its task and deluded itself...

Thus no generation has learned from another to love, no generation begins at any other point than the beginning, no generation has a shorter task assigned to it than had the preceding generation... But the highest passion in a man is faith, and here no generation begins at any other point than did the preceding generation, every generation begins all over again...

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 130.

<sup>153</sup> *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 6. New York: National Library Co., 1909, p. 177.

<sup>154</sup> *Saul Bellow: Letters*, ed. Benjamin Taylor. New York: Viking, 2010.

<sup>155</sup> Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002), p. 28. Seligman was prepared through his scientific research for the insight; Nikki’s heroic example, coupled with her

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love for him, were the catalysts for a deeply felt and transforming insight. His personal problem was at once connected with a challenge out there, in the world.

<sup>156</sup> Margaret Mead and Paul Byers, *The Small Conference: An Innovation in Communication*. Paris and The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1968, p. 40.

<sup>157</sup> Recall how John Steinbeck appraised the great talent of his friend Ed Ricketts as “his ability to receive, to receive anything from anyone, to receive gratefully and thankfully and make the gift seem very fine.” John Steinbeck *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. New York: Viking, 1951, p. lxxv.

<sup>158</sup> The conversation continued:

“I don’t love.”

“You will. I know you will. Then you will be happy.”

“I’m happy. I’ve always been happy.”

“It is another thing. You cannot know about it unless you have it.”

Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner’s Paperback Fiction, 1995 (1929): 72.

<sup>159</sup> “By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is (in the divine understanding of it), does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd. This form of despair is hardly ever noticed in the world.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941 (1849) Anchor Books edition, 1954: 166-7.

<sup>160</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 131.

<sup>161</sup> I cannot resist inserting here Nietzsche’s contrast between two kinds of philosophers, one removed from the world, the other fully engaged:

In fact, the philosopher has long been mistaken and confused by the multitude, either with the scientific man and ideal scholar, or with the religiously elevated, desensualized, desecularized visionary and God-intoxicated man; and even yet when one hears

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anybody praised, because he lives “wisely,” or “as a philosopher,” it hardly means anything more than “prudently and apart.” Wisdom: that seems to the populace to be a kind of flight, a means and artifice for withdrawing successfully from a bad game; but the GENUINE philosopher—does it not seem so to US, my friends?—lives “unphilosophically” and “unwisely,” above all, IMPRUDENTLY, and feels the obligation and burden of a hundred attempts and temptations of life—he risks HIMSELF constantly, he plays THIS bad game.

*Beyond Good and Evil*, Sec. 205, trans. Helen Zimmern.

<sup>162</sup> New York: HarperCollins, 2004 (1927).

<sup>163</sup> “Whether a man has been helped by a miracle,” Kierkegaard said, “depends essentially upon the degree of intellectual passion he has employed to understand that help was impossible, and next upon how honest he is toward the Power which helped him nevertheless.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie. New York: Anchor Books, 1954 (1849), p. 172.