

**The Art of Living**

*A Work of Happy Philosophy*

by Jonathan Rechtman

*May 2007*

American University – Department of Philosophy  
Academic Adviser: Andrea Tschemplik

## **CONTENTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Because everything must begin.*

### **ON APPRECIATION**

*The Environment and Eggs*

### **ON THE USE OF PHILOSOPHY**

*A Time and Place for Everything*

### **ON CREATIVITY, BEAUTY, AND THE ARTS**

*Tollbooths and Talking Muffins*

### **ON ETHICS**

*Simply Solving Puzzles*

### **ON BEING WITH OTHERS**

*Friends, Strangers, Lovers, and the Japanese*

### **ON BEING BY ONESELF**

*Getting Lost and Found in the Desert*

### **CONCLUSION**

*Because everything must end.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*"We are, therefore, about to see... a light, an almost gay, philosophy, and the best proof of [this] philosophic temper is to be found in the wise and merry philosophy of living." –Lin Yutang, The Art of Living*

### **A Question for Kindergartners**

When I arrived in Washington, D.C., in autumn of 2002, I had in mind that I was going to become the greatest socioeconomic-political-communications psycho-super-analyst-of-public-policy and media-institution-reform/hardcore-legal-social-justice-brigadier that the capital had ever seen. I was ready to rock the establishment.

It took about three weeks for me to realize that wasn't going to happen. I looked at my classmates—who really *did* want to be senators, think-tankers, People in Important Positions—and realized that I had neither the capacity nor the slightest inkling of a desire to engage in a forty-year rat-race with these people.

I took a year off in 2003 to get my priorities straight; if I wasn't to become a champion of the establishment, where *would* I wind up? I thought back to that most existential of questions that all kindergartners are asked by their teachers and not-often-seen-uncles: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And I thought about all the answers I'd given over all the years: lawyer, policeman, computer programmer, journalist, poker shark, politician.

But one day I started thinking about the question differently— I meditated on the English verb "to be" and its ability to coordinate not only with nouns, but with adjectives as well. And so it was that I conjured up my inner-kindergartner one last time to ask him the same tired question:

“What do you want to be?”

And the answer this time bore no resemblance to the others; for we can always and often change our careers and professions, but we can never change that single, most fundamental desire of our hearts.

The answer was: “I want to be happy.”

### **A College Student’s Search**

The bulk of my college career has not, I’m afraid, been devoted to academic study. Rather, it has been a continual examination of myself, the world around me, and the infinite number of contact points between the two that we often call human experience.

For four years I’ve searched for happiness in the smiles and tears of experience: traveling, listening, writing, adventuring, exploring. Four years of arguing with monks and with atheists, attending poetry slams, strip shows, and a Catholic mass. I’ve slept on the backs of holy mountains waking to the sound of birds making music-beats with their beaks, and walked into the desert alone to contemplate the meaning of silence. I’ve clinked glasses with friends from five continents and made love in three languages. I’ve eaten dog, goat, turtle, frog, scorpion, yak, and rabbit skull. I’ve seen someone I care about lose their mind. I’ve lost things that were precious to me, got some of them back, and felt lighter without the rest. I’ve crossed oceans blue as crystal and camped out next to rivers black as the coal that pollutes them. I’ve loved more fiercely than my brain knew was possible, and hurt so bad that I’ll never forget the feeling of a sob like a heart-choke at the back of my throat.

I’ve learned an awful lot in college.

I've learned a lot about what it means to be happy.

### **On the Purpose of This Paper**

Though my college career comes to a close, my search for happiness through experience goes on. On the road of life—to use a cliché—I find myself at a point where the path broadens and becomes less predictable, and is all the more beautiful for being so. So I think it is fitting at this point to take the time to reflect on what I have learned in preparation for what I soon may encounter. At the same time, I would like to share what I have learned with others; not to instruct them, per se, but only to point out the things in life that have made me most happy, in the hopes that others will be inspired to seek these things out for themselves.

This paper—titled “The Art of Living”—is not the culmination of a completed study or the prize at the end of a journey, but is rather a series of reflections that represent the ideas, insights, and beliefs that I've collected over this first early portion of my life. I would like to think it contains wisdom, but I know for sure that it is all subject to change; though I firmly believe every word I have written herein, I acknowledge that I am young and that my base of experience—however rich it may be to date—is only a fraction of what I hope it will become.

Take this paper not as the treatise of a well-trained academic, but as the collected essays of a well-lived young man. The writings within are unapologetically subjective—there will be no a priori statements here. *The only proof I can offer of the validity and effectiveness of the philosophy within is the extent to which living according to its principles has made me a happy, passionate, reasonable, and well-rounded individual.*

## **On Criticism**

Do I validate my philosophy or does my philosophy validate me? Does writing about happiness preclude actual knowledge of happiness? These are questions that I am all too willing to let the peanut gallery decide. The self-indulgent nature of these essays—indeed, the self-indulgent nature of happiness!—puts them comfortably above the din and clatter of criticism. While deep analysis is being made of the logical fallacies in my arguments and the inconstancies in my beliefs, I will be sitting on a park bench somewhere watching the clouds arrange themselves before sunset. While the absolutists holler “relativism!” and the relativists holler “absolutism!”, I will be roasting hot dogs with a friend over a birch-bark campfire in the forest. Please let me know when the relevant verdict has been decreed; I am sitting on the edge of my seat with curiosity.

## **On Saying Thank You**

As will be seen in the pages to follow, I highly value the appreciative spirit, and so I would be remiss to neglect taking a small space to say thank you to those that have made this paper possible.

Thank you first and foremost to my mother, father, and brother, without whom I would be nothing of the sort of person I am today, and thank you also to my grandparents and extended family, who have bred in my bone the finest qualities humanity has to offer. Thank you to my friends across the world that have loved me, the poets and teachers that have inspired me, the strangers that have smiled at me, and the antagonists who have challenged and strengthened me. Thank you to the mountains and deserts that have let me trespass into their magnificence and thank you to the benevolent spirits that have helped guide me safely back home. Thank you God, or Wakan Tanka, or the Tao, or whoever up

there is in charge of making sunsets so beautiful on a daily basis. Thank you especially to the late, great Lin Yutang,<sup>1</sup> whose *Art of Living* is the model for this work, and to all the other thinkers and writers whose ideas have influenced my own thinking and writing. Thank you to my thesis adviser and first philosophy teacher, Andrea Tschemplik, and to the entire American University community which has—in its own special way—taught me a lot about what it means to be happy.

### **A Final Word on Enjoying This Paper**

I would describe this work as a “philosophy of happiness,” but if I had to choose, I would rather this work bring people happiness than philosophy—that is to say, I would rather people enjoy reading it than agree with it. At all times I have done my best to make the writing interesting, compelling, and clear—not because better-written essays are more persuasive per se, but because they are less likely to bore the reader. Whatever philosophy is, it should not be a chore; the discipline already has too many geniuses whose work is made useless (from a happiness standpoint) by the author’s utter inability to express themselves in a pleasant and readable manner. I would rather be a Schopenhauer, however wrong, than a Kant, however right. I would rather be a well-spoken sophist than an indecipherable oracle.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lin Yutang—a remarkable scholar, philosopher, linguist, artist, and inventor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—aimed in much of his work to expose Western readers to classical bits of Chinese poetry, philosophy, and folklore. His *Art of Living* follows a tradition of similarly-titled treatises written by happy-minded thinkers throughout Chinese literary history. These ancient texts have inspired Lin’s work just as his has greatly inspired my own, and this paper’s greatest aspiration is merely to add a trickle to the great river of wisdom that this tradition has collected over time.

So as you read the essays that follow, take them merrily and in stride—believe in them if you can, but enjoy them even if you can't. Let them inspire you, and if you fail to be inspired, then let them entertain you.

Already we are studying *The Art of Living*.

## ON APPRECIATION

### **Invention and Re-Design**

The apocalypse draws nigh.

It is difficult to watch the news these days without seeing a clip about the much-heralded end of the world. To the disappointment of many evangelicals, however, the end of days will not be marked by a Rapture of angelic trumpets and sword-wielding incarnations of Christ, but rather by the relatively mundane, silent creep of polar icecaps melting. According to scientists and Al Gore, climate change might be the death of humanity; a plague upon all our houses.

But, as we are a resilient people, we have already begun a campaign to reverse (or at least minimize) the damage we have done and are doing to the environment, spurred on by the righteous motive of panicked self-preservation. What has struck me most about the nature of this campaign is its emphasis on *re-design*, as opposed to *invention*.

I had always assumed that our salvation from environmental disaster would lie in some *deus ex machina*, a new technology, some invented machine or process: the discovery of a new form of energy, a breakthrough in refinement or desalination, etc. Quite the opposite, it seems that the largest gains in our struggle have come in the simple re-thinking of how we use existing technologies and materials. The popular trends of building “smart-houses” or employing “green-architecture” do not rely so much on new technologies (such as great leaps forward in solar paneling) but rather in giving greater and deeper thought to the fundamentals that underlie the concept of a “home.”

In fact, in many cases there is a trend *away* from technology in favor of more primitive solutions: modern home-owners are using mud to build and insulate their floors

with great gains in heat-fuel efficiency; roofs are being made of sod; windows are being widened to let in more sunlight and further reduce heating and lighting costs.

This recent focus on design over invention is not limited to the environmental movement. Take, for example, the greatest and most accessible repository of human knowledge that has ever existed: the popular website Wikipedia. This user-informed online encyclopedia maintains six million articles in 250 languages, and connects them all simply by a clever use of hyperlinks, a method of organizing information conceived of in 1965 (practically pre-historic in Internet chronology). Wikipedia is the perfect example of how a monumental human achievement owes its existence not to a new technology (i.e. software or hardware developments) but rather to better planning, more efficient design, and a more thoughtful utilization of existing materials.

### **A New Crisis, a New Revolution**

How does this relate to a happy life? The turn from invention (construction, expansion) to re-design (evaluation, consolidation) is one that we as individuals as well as a community can make. Just as humanity as a species is facing an environmental crisis, so too are hundreds of thousands of Americans facing their own personal, existential crises.<sup>2</sup>

It is not my desire or intention to begin here a polemic against the stifling lack of passion and gaping spiritual emptiness that marks mainstream, largely-corporate American society. Suffice to say, there are many people in the wealthiest, most powerful

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the “World Values Survey,” eight percent of Americans (roughly 225,000 people) claim that “taking all things together” they are “not very happy” or “not at all happy.” ([http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lif\\_hap\\_lev\\_not\\_ver\\_or\\_not\\_at\\_all\\_hap-level-not-very-all-happy](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lif_hap_lev_not_ver_or_not_at_all_hap-level-not-very-all-happy)). While the accuracy and legitimacy of such a survey is questionable at best, I believe the results serve as a fairly reasonable estimate of Americans’ general dissatisfaction.

country in the world that are not happy and know it, and many more (I suspect) that are not happy and do not know it. What can be done?

Let me first off say that a change will be necessary. For someone to go from leading an unhappy life to leading a happy life is no small thing, and I will not suffer pseudo-Buddhist claims that unhappiness *is* happiness, or *vice versa*, or that the inverse, converse, or meta-Zen-super-verse of this statement is true. *People who think they are unhappy are unhappy, if for no other reason than because they think they are unhappy.* To co-opt Rene: *cogito infortunatus, ergo sum infortunatus*. Unhappiness is a non-negotiable term, defined strictly in the negative sense as having an absence of happiness.

Happiness, luckily, is quite negotiable. People find happiness in many different things, and far be it from anyone to tell them their happiness is wrong, cheap, fake, or fleeting. The final (and only) arbiter as to the “truth” of one’s happiness is the extent to which it truly makes one happy.

*Truly makes one happy!* Ay, there in lies in the rub. The reason we are unhappy is because the things we *think* should be making us happy are not *truly* making us happy. Again, I will at this point omit the by-now-familiar rants about Starbucks and golf and capitalist pursuits being the demons that plague our modern world. Rather, I would like to focus once more on the idea of invention versus re-design as applied to an individual’s happiness; specifically, instead of seeking “new happiness” in the form of new activities, acquisitions, and experiences, how can we *re-think* the parts of our lives that are already in place to make them more “happiness-efficient”?

My dream is to see humans effect a “revolution of appreciation”— the complete rearrangement of our attitudes, practices, routines, relationships, and beliefs with the aim of better appreciating the things they have. It will be a bloodless revolution, and an

apolitical one; the status quo need not be toppled to affect the kind of a change I wish to see. I hope only for people—rich and poor, young and old alike—to re-design their ways of thinking so as to get more happiness out of the life they already lead.

For Nietzsche, re-designing oneself is a necessary and painful struggle; a grueling battle with fear, guilt, weakness, decadence, etc to rise above, conquer, enslave, squash, and dominate. Nietzsche was brilliant, yes, and ambitious; but he was certainly not happy, and insofar as he was unhappy, he was wrong.<sup>3</sup>

The re-design that I envision is not a complicated, torturous process, but rather a simple and pleasant one. In fact, the revolution of appreciation will hopefully be the most agreeable revolution in all history, for it will be marked by regular people doing what they regularly do, only enjoying it more.

At this point, perhaps, the skeptics will throw up their hands . “Of course people would be happier if they enjoyed things more!” they might say, accusing me of dressing the self-evident up as revelation. “It appears that your solution to unhappiness is simply to have everyone start enjoying things all of a sudden. Very well, but *how?!?*”

A perfectly fair question: how can we all begin to appreciate things more?

The answer—for me, at least—lies entirely in a hard-boiled egg.

### **The Tastiest Egg**

I was 19 when I read *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt's memoir of extreme poverty in Ireland. His story is not lacking in powerful images, but I was most profoundly affected by his ode to the experience of eating an egg. The McCourt family, celebrating a

---

<sup>3</sup> To be fair, it is not for me to say whether Nietzsche was happy or not, but the (brilliant) man led a lonely, disease-ridden, and—by all appearances—tormented life that eventually ended in insanity. Readers are encouraged to judge for themselves.

very special occasion, manages to secure enough credit at the grocers to buy a single hard-boiled egg, which is then painstakingly divided into five small slices and given to each of the protein-starved family members. McCourt writes this about eating an egg:

*“Tap it around the top, gently crack the shell, lift with a spoon, a dab of butter down into the yolk, salt, take my time, a dip of the spoon, scoop, more salt, more butter, into the mouth, oh, God above, if heaven has a taste it must be an egg with butter and salt...”<sup>4</sup>*

The description—whether intentional or not—is that of a nearly orgasmic sensual experience. The process of eating and enjoying this one-fifth of an egg is enough to overwhelm McCourt; his words are those of a man in ecstasy.

When I first read this passage, I put down the book and closed my eyes and wondered if I had ever in my life enjoyed food with even half the rapture that McCourt enjoyed this egg. The answer was a solid “no.” But ever since—going on three years now—I have not once eaten a hard-boiled egg without paying rapt attention to the wobbly texture of the white squishing into the roof of my mouth; the warm crumbliness of the outer yolk; the sweet moist center that—if cooked perfectly right—leaves the slightest yellow stain upon my tongue.

I do not enjoy hard-boiled eggs as much as Frank McCourt; but I’m pretty sure I enjoy them a lot more than the average egg-eating human being out there. I’ve effectively re-engineered the daily process of eating an egg to provide me with a very real increase in enjoyment and appreciation. And all it took was a short paragraph in a book.

We can all, therefore, develop our faculty of appreciation, or our ability to enjoy and be thankful for the things in our life that are good. I use the word “ability” because I believe this faculty is something that can be developed and nurtured; that as with any

---

<sup>4</sup> *Angela’s Ashes*. Frank McCourt. published by Scribner. 1996. page 220

other pursuit, the ability to appreciate is a skill that can be enhanced through thought, study, and practice.

So let us think, and study, and practice! Let the revolution begin! Drop copies of Neruda's *Ode to Common Things* from airplanes, so that the masses will remember the beauty of socks and of salt! Let schoolchildren study Williams Carlos Williams in kindergarten, and meditate with him on the importance of red wheelbarrows glistening with rain! It is not hard, our revolutionary task of appreciating the varied and wonderful things in our lives; let us go about it with passion and pleasure and ease.

## ON THE USE OF PHILOSOPHY

### **Philosophy as Tool**

Oscar Wilde, in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, writes that "there is no such thing as moral or immoral books. There are only well-written books and badly-written books." As far as this maxim can be applied to philosophy, I believe that there are no such thing as correct or incorrect philosophies, only useful and useless ones.

It is absurd to say that a particular philosophy is correct, for the same reason that one cannot judge the "correctness" of a particular language. The terms "correct" and "incorrect" belong in the lexicon of the math teacher and the grammarian; they are meaningless in regards to philosophies and languages and other wholly human constructions because these things are only tools; they are systems we create to help us understand ourselves, each other, and the world around us. One can no more call Kantian metaphysics "incorrect" than one could call a hammer "incorrect." The philosophy—and the hammer—simply are what they are, neither right nor wrong, correct nor incorrect. One can only judge them according to their ability to accomplish tasks.

Thinking of philosophies as tools—functional tools designed by humans for humans—is essential in recognizing the purpose and limits of philosophy. All philosophers are tool-makers, and every thinker puts forth his own tools for others to admire, criticize, ignore or use. Over the course of philosophic history, thousands of thinkers have fashioned thousands of tools, and the collective toolbox of human thought is a diverse and bountiful treasure chest of handy appliances for the mind. Humans have designed useful, common tools that— like hammers— have fairly obvious functions and are easy to use. Some thinkers have designed very specialized tools, perhaps harder to use

and relevant only for certain tasks, but ultimately capable of achieving quite extraordinary feats. Other thinkers have dreamt up enormous, fantastically complicated tools that require decades' worth of study before it can be determined whether or not the damn thing has any use at all (if your name is Hegel, perhaps your ears are burning as you read this).

### **On Chainsaws and Toast**

When I was 19, I lived by myself for two months in a small village in rural Thailand, teaching English. It was the most miserable two months of my entire life. I was the only English-speaking person within 20 miles, I taught classes of up to 60 children, none of whom had the slightest interest in learning and all of whom regarded my class as a chance to braid each other's hair (the girls) or practice kick-boxing (the boys and the girls). For two long months I was isolated, lonely, disrespected, underpaid, bored, and frustrated, but never thought of quitting due to a powerful fear of disappointing people: the school administrators, the children, myself, my friends and family back home.

What saved me was a book. It was a ratty-looking paperback I came upon in a ratty-looking bookstore in a ratty town I'd visited during a visa run to Malaysia, and it single-handedly reversed my entire personal philosophy, exposed to me the true nature of my situation, and empowered me with the courage I needed to take action and change it. It was a book of great scope, strong conviction, bold principles, and challenging morality. The book is titled "The Fountainhead," by Ayn Rand, and it is the silliest, over-dramatic, thoroughly unbelievable story about sex, greed, and architecture that has ever been written.

Looking back at Rand's righteous doctrines of capitalist-rationalism and self-interest, I know that her philosophy contains serious— even fatal— flaws. But whether Randian objectivism is "correct" or not is unimportant; the important thing is that her philosophy— at that time and place in my life— was a fantastically powerful tool, a useful intellectual device that allowed me to make serious changes in my thought, attitude, and action. Reading Rand convinced me that it is inhuman and immoral to sacrifice oneself and one's happiness for any cause— whether it be for poor rural Thai schoolchildren or the expectations of one's parents. Say what you will about the follies and inanities of Rand; the philosophic tool she provided me with helped me quit that job and move on with my life, and I still regard it as one of the best decisions I've ever made.

This is all to say that different philosophies have different uses for different people at different times; I would no sooner apply Rand to my daily life today than I would use a chainsaw to butter my toast in the morning, and for very much the same reason: these are brutal, clumsy tools that are useless for simple, gentle tasks. Better suited for buttering toast is the quiet, rapturous poetry-philosophy of Walt Whitman; the meditative serenity of the Vietnamese monk Thich Naht Than; the whimsical but passionate musings of Emerson.

### **On Picking and Choosing**

It should be understood, then, that to successfully employ philosophy in pursuit of a happy life, one should hone the skill of selecting the appropriate tool for the job; that is to say, to understand when to call upon the raging self-assertiveness of Nietzsche and when to fall back upon the calculating reasonableness of John Stuart Mill. It is not always easy, for we face many complex situations in our lives, and we have many tools. The skill

one needs to choose correctly depends— like so many other skills— partly on knowledge and understanding and partly on instinct and taste.

Knowledge and understanding simply means taking the time and mental energy needed to familiarize oneself with and comprehend the basic function of the tools in one's toolbox. The wood-shop apprentice must run his hands over the head of each screwdriver, so that one day he— like his master— will sense automatically the difference between an 1/8th" and a 1/16", just as a master of philosophy will know when to apply "The Meno" and when to apply "The Phaedrus". In other words, these things require study. Not necessarily lengthy or agonizing study— we cannot all be, nor should we all want to be, masters— but rather a critical survey of the major philosophic tools and how and when to use them properly.

But selection requires more than knowledge. It also requires instinct, or "taste" as I like to call it. A connoisseur of wines may know— in his head— the various attributes and qualities of all the great vineyards of France and Italy, but it is his taste— the sensory, instinctive discernment of his tongue— that is the final judge in selecting the proper wine for the meal.

### **Some Useful Philosophies**

Let me say outright that I am far from being a master or connoisseur of philosophy; I am familiar with many philosophies, and I have internalized—to some degree—a few, but I am still nothing more than a lighthearted amateur, a happy dabbler in the art.

That being said, I realize that this conception of philosophy as tool begs for examples, and so I would here describe two of my favorites. The selections below are

made according to my own understanding and taste—which are not perfect, and certainly not the same as anyone else’s—and so they may not agree wholly with the sorts of philosophy the reader prefers. That is fine; I offer these selections not because they are correct or because I believe in them, but only because they are useful, and because they serve well in illustrating the importance of usefulness in philosophy

### **Nietzsche: Eternal Recurrence**

One philosophic tool that I have always admired is Nietzsche’s suggestion of eternal recurrence. His idea, roughly stated, is this: the life we are currently living is but the first of an endless number of reincarnations, with each successive life destined to be exactly the same as this one. This life—right now—is the only life in which we have free will, and the actions we take in this life will dictate the infinite repetitions of the future.

One’s first reaction to the doctrine of eternal recurrence might be similar to the thoughts I had upon reading it for the first time: this is utter nonsense. The whole premise begs criticism; it is extravagant, unfounded, irrational, and seemingly arbitrary. Who does Nietzsche think he is, offering such a flamboyant cosmology of space and time? These Germans have some nerve, really.

But the genius of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence lies in the fact that it was never intended to be taken seriously. Nietzsche doesn’t actually want people to believe that this life will be the model for all future lives, he only wants people to live this life *as if it were!* Obviously, if we were doomed to repeat our actions in this life, we would make sure we lived as happily as we possibly could. And so the doctrine of eternal recurrence is not so much a doctrine as a philosophic tool; it is an artificial worldview one can adopt to force changes in one’s thinking and lifestyle in order to better live and appreciate

living. However ridiculous and unreal the premise may be, adopting such a mindset can produce very real and significant changes: that's powerful philosophy!

A logician would regard Nietzsche's "doctrine" as a silly, broken little toy, but a philosopher who regards happiness as paramount realizes that eternal recurrence is some powerful medicine for those living to anything less than the fullest.

### **Rechtman: Gravity Bullets and the Meadow-Gun Man**

Nietzsche's tool achieves its effect by artificially placing the thinker in a position where his every action will determine his fate for eternity. It is artificial because there is no reason for anyone to actually believe this, but the position it puts one in—whether artificial or real—greatly encourages one to live happily.

Below is the opening of a poem I have written that describes a similar technique. It is my attempt at suggesting a philosophic tool of my own, though—I rush to assure you—I have never taken the actions described, nor do I recommend them. As with Nietzsche's, my tool does not ask one to accept the premise, only to consider how one would live if it were so.

Each night the man takes the pistol from the drawer beside his bed  
And goes for a walk, in the empty meadow behind his house.  
Each night, the man finds a clearing in the grass, and lies down.  
Face to the sky he aims at the star directly above him— and fires.

He knows that the slightest breeze will save him from the bullet's return.  
That if his aim is off by just a degree  
The bullet will strike the ground a foot, five feet, a mile from where he lies.  
But he also knows that if you fire enough shots,  
You eventually hit what you're aiming for,  
And he's been doing this every night for twenty years.

Each morning, the man rises with the sun,  
Stretches like a newborn baby –and he runs.  
Runs for miles, loves the feeling  
Of earth passing beneath his feet  
And he smiles when the sweat begins  
To fall from his face cause it feels like he's shedding yesterday's skin.

He rebirths himself each day  
With a hundred sit ups  
And a meditation on the beauty of mountaintops and blue jays.

The concept is simple: by deliberately subjecting himself to a nightly threat of arbitrary death, the man in the poem artificially puts himself in a position in which he must literally live each day as if it were his last. He self-administers a daily dose of danger in order to lace each day with importance and thanksgiving; his life is no longer taken for granted, but becomes a precious and sacred commodity all the more to be cherished and well-lived. As Paulo Coelho reminds us: “Usually the threat of death makes people a lot more aware of their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, first reactions may be critical (to say the least): the man may be seen as self-destructive or suicidal, or as a reckless daredevil willing to kill himself for a thrill. His nightly forays into the meadow will be compared to solitaire bouts of Russian roulette or to self-inflicted cut marks on angsty teenage wrists. His shouts of triumph will be heard as cries for help; his attempts to live better will be misconstrued as an invitation to die sooner.

To repeat my earlier disclaimer: I do not endorse this kind of action. I no more believe in self-threatening than Nietzsche does in eternal recurrence; they are both highly exaggerated ways of looking at the world that can be used as stimuli for change in our lives. The premises may be absurd, but the position—the intellectual position—that these premises put one in can be a powerful point of departure from a hum-drum life. Don’t *believe* in these philosophies... *use* them! Use them as tools to force your mind to better appreciate this life— it may be the only one you get.

Or not.

---

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Coelho. *The Alchemist*. Page 142.

If you're living this life well, it really doesn't matter.

## ON CREATIVITY, BEAUTY, AND THE ARTS

### **The Tollbooth Dilemma**

Let me describe a beautiful feeling: you are on a road trip with a close friend. You are driving on the highway going west in the summertime, the sun is hot and bright and the sky is blue and there are thin clouds lazing at the horizon right above the mountains, which are orange, and the window is down (you are driving) and your arm is resting on the window, your fingers testing the rush of wind going by you (you are driving very fast) and you are wearing sunglasses, so you look cool and feel cool, and you are talking to your friend about some pleasant but trivial topic, or maybe just listening to an upbeat song and mouthing the lyrics to yourself as you drive, away from a city you've just visited for the first time where you stayed with an old friend who moved there recently, and now the city is at your back and you are driving towards the mountains, perhaps a National Park, where you and your friend will go hiking and camping and cook food on a dinghy portable gas stove before lighting a campfire and drinking hot cocoa and falling asleep happily in your tent, to awake with the birds the next morning.

You are doing all of this when you arrive at a tollbooth: a silent, one-lane tollbooth on a quiet, empty stretch of road in the middle of nowhere. You pull up to pay the toll. There is a woman (or a man); she is elderly and looks kind (or young and surly). You roll down your window.

“Hi,” you say.

“Hi,” she says. “That’ll be 50 cents, sir.”

“Here you go,” you say, giving her three dimes and four nickels. “Have a nice day.”

“You, too,” she says, tossing your coins in a basket and pressing a button.

And off you drive.

Here is the truth of the matter: tollbooth attendants have the single silliest, most obsolete job in all of America. In an age where electronic bank transfers turn the wheels of automated factories that use robots to assemble highly complex microchip platforms, *why in the name of all that is reasonable and good do tollbooth attendants still have jobs?* The single task that they perform with such mind-numbing repetitiveness could be more easily and inexpensively accomplished by the most rudimentary of machines; these people should be fired faster than you can say “E-Z Pass.”

But wait— there are deeper considerations to be made. For one thing, there is the union. Yes, the Tollbooth Workers of America lobbies ferociously against automating the time-honored industry of human toll-collection. We must protect America’s jobs, after all. Which raises another point: if we fire this old, kind woman (or young, surly man), how will they make a living? This is their job, their livelihood! Are we really to leave them unemployed for the sake of technology’s cruel march forward? Never!

This is the Tollbooth Dilemma.

My solution is simple. State and local governments should (at a very low cost) replace human tollbooth collectors with automated ones, and continue paying the laid-off workers the exact same wages they were paid before. But instead of asking them to come to work every morning, have them stay home and write poetry or paint or play music; tell them to exercise or meditate or work on unsolved chess problems; encourage them to contribute to a local community project or better yet, start one of their own; organize

community language lessons so that laid-off Spanish-speaking tollbooth workers can swap linguistics skills with laid-off English-speaking tollbooth workers; let some of them sing opera in the park and others grow tomatoes in the garden—all of this is to say, *let these people do whatever they want, only let them be happy and productive!*

As long as we are paying these people to do nothing (which we are), we might as well give them the opportunity to be happy and productive (which they are not). I know that some will argue that tollbooth collectors *like* being tollbooth collectors. This is nonsense. Tollbooth collectors are engaged in the most menial of pursuits: it the very definition of Marx's "alienation of labor." I refuse to believe that sane human beings—given the opportunity—would rather put change in a basket than paint portraits of their children.

But what if they don't like painting? Then they can dance. What if they don't like dancing? Then they can cook. What if they don't like cooking? Nor this? Nor that?

Listen: it is my deepest conviction that every man, woman, and child on this earth has some activity—however silly or mundane—that makes them happy and productive. Furthermore, I believe a society of happy and productive people is the best kind of society there could ever be, and think we should always be looking for opportunities and incentives with which to encourage people to be as happy and productive as possible. And if, in the end, they cannot or will not—if, when all is said in done, they are so stupid and ungrateful as to refuse all opportunities and instead cling stubbornly to their dead, out-of-date profession..... then let them join the military. Because whereas the best citizens are happy and productive, the best soldiers must surely be angry and destructive, and even in an ideal society we will surely need some stupid, angry people to defend the smart, happy people from danger.

If I am only half-serious about this, it is because I am only half-joking. While a government-subsidized creativity program for laid-off tollbooth collectors might be more wistful thinking than actual sound policy, then at least the underlying principle is sincere: all people have tremendous creative powers, and because of the menial (and often unnecessary) tasks we must perform daily to make a living, very few of us have the leisure or energy to explore that potential creativity.

### **On Talent and It's Absence**

Yes, everyone has great potential creative energy. It is one of the few well-designed aspects of human evolution, our capacity for invention and art. I know this because I have seen it: I have seen factory workers conjure up music from the metal mouths of harmonicas and cab drivers recite poetry that quivers at one's heartstrings ten blocks after being dropped off. There are architects designing towers of mash potatoes in prison cafeterias, and children who don't walk to school, but dance. Humans can take the most mundane of activities and wring beauty from them like suds from a sponge... who can deny that we as a species are stunningly creative beings?

But do not mistake my belief that everyone has creative powers for the belief that everyone is talented. It is true what they say: we are all unique snowflakes with our own special qualities, but the fact remains that many of us are dirty, ugly, misshapen snowflakes whose special qualities are only "special" in the "Special Olympics" sense of

the word.<sup>6</sup> However awed I am by humanity's capacity for creation, I am just as often made incredulous by some humans' remarkable lack of talent.

But who am I to judge? It is unimportant whether people create *good* things or *bad* things, it is enough for me that they create at all. I agree entirely with Lin Yutang when he writes:

*“As it is more important that all college students should play tennis or football with indifferent skill than that a college should produce a few champion athletes, so it is also more important that all children and all grown-ups should be able to create something of their own as their pastime than that the nation should produce a Rodin. I would rather have all school children taught to model clay and all bank presidents able to make their own Christmas cards, however ridiculous the attempt may be, than to have only a few artists who work at art as a profession.*

*“That is to say, I am for amateurism in all fields. I like amateur philosophers, amateur poets, amateur photographers, magicians, amateur architects who build their own houses, amateur musicians, botanists and aviators. I get as much pleasure out of listening to a friend playing a sonatina [poorly] as I do out listening to a first-class professional concert... and every parent enjoys the amateur dramatics of his own children much more heartily than he enjoys a Shakespearean play. We know that it is spontaneous, and in spontaneity alone lies the true spirit of art.”<sup>7</sup>*

To be for amateurism in all fields—that is where I stand at Lin's side. But encouraging amateurism does necessarily preclude the preservation of the “high

---

<sup>6</sup> Does this sound exceedingly cruel? I am generally more politically correct than most others around me, but for some reason the name “Special Olympics” has always aroused a mean-spirited impatience within me. It is a highly disingenuous term that should offend both people with and without intellectual disabilities; it not only condescends to those *with* disabilities by not-so-tactfully avoiding their condition with a cutesy and poorly picked innuendo, but it also implies that those *without* disabilities are *not* special. Anyone competing in any kind of Olympic competition is, by virtue of their being there, special. We are *all* special—didn't these people ever hear the snowflake analogy?

<sup>7</sup> Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living*. “Art as Play and Personality,” page 371.

brow,” and I—though perhaps not Lin—believe in the value of art establishments and standards. In things artistic I am a populist snob: I think everyone should engage in art, but those who do it well should be accorded extra privilege and respect.

Some people say that the value of art is subjective, but I have never been convinced. Surely, people’s artistic abilities and aesthetic faculties differ qualitatively—some people are inherently good at judging beauty, just as some people are fast runners and others good at math. There are as many rocket scientists who can’t tell an ugly tie from a handsome one as there art critics who can’t do sums. We should let those who are most naturally adept at judging beauty set the standard; I trust the masses to make art that satisfies their own personal taste (which is the most important thing) but I do not trust them to guard the canon or determine what gets popularized and what gets forgotten.

This is because all humans have creativity, which is exactly one half of art, but not all humans understand beauty, which is the other half.

### **On Beauty**

I will tell you what beauty is.

But first, the funniest joke in the world:

*So two muffins are sitting in a toaster oven, right,  
and the first muffin, his name is Frankie,  
he says to the second muffin:  
"GEEZ! Is it hot in here or what?!?  
And the second muffin, his name is Mordechai,  
He looks at the first muffin and yells:  
"OH MY GOD!! Frankie the Muffin can... can talk!!!"*

Are you laughing? I'm laughing just telling it—it is, after all, the funniest joke in the world.

The joke works on a number of levels:

- a) The muffins' names and their use of colloquial language lend them a humanity that is later soundly rejected.
- b) The incongruence of the first muffin's statement with the second muffin's response.
- c) Our casual acceptance of the first muffin's speaking abilities being later thrown out the window by the second muffin's surprise.
- d) The second muffin's surprise being expressed vocally, therefore twice-violating the joke's sense of reality.

While these four platforms make up the (hysterically funny) punch of the joke, it is important to note that all four elements essentially tug at the same string: they make the joke *absurd*.

Absurdity is the funniest thing in the world, and absurdity is born out of incongruence. The joke is funny because it deliberately and repeatedly contradicts itself and the listener's expectations; it takes incongruent things (muffins and speech), combines them (which is absurd), and then explodes them again via another incongruent combination (even more absurd).

Yes, whatever is funny is incongruent. Simply peruse the annals of humor—I challenge you to find a joke that does not rely on absurdity. There is inane incongruence (gorillas wearing tuxedos), ironic incongruence (attractive/powerful people being made fools), lingual incongruence (wordplay and puns); there are all sorts of absurd, funny situations, and they all fundamentally depend on things being out of whack.

Everything that is funny is incongruent.

Everything that is beautiful is perfectly in sync.

Symmetry of line – harmony of music – lyricism of words – complementing of tastes and colors and smells. The underlying principle of beauty is the opposite of the principle of humor; we laugh at the absolutely absurd, and we marvel at the absolutely aligned.

I will hasten to allow that many seemingly chaotic things are beautiful. There is certainly a beauty in disorder, but it must be a studied disorder—there must be method to the madness. We love the unruly scribbblings of good abstract impressionism because it follows the form—however unintelligible—of raw human emotion; we find beauty in the unruly cacophony of bugs and birds and animals shrieking in the forest because, for all its randomness, it joins together in a chorus.

Note Jonathan Edwards' fascination with the geometric perfection of a spider web or H. W. Longfellow's appreciation of snowflakes. Note the aesthetic dedication to well-ordered shapes in religious symbolism across the world: the intersecting cross, the overlapping star, the perfect-curving crescent, the self-consuming *yin-yang*. Note that all good music of all genres must have rhythm, or that all attractive buildings must have elegance in their structure and design. Note the graceful, constellational lines of the stars, or the heavenly orbits of moons. The rise and fall of tides... a perfectly formed smile... rainbows—all that is beautiful is balanced.

### **Ink on My Skin**

I have a sunset tattooed on the back of my neck. It is simple and small, perhaps a few inches high and wide, but there it is: an outline of the sun falling behind the horizon

of an ocean, its rays striking out to the sky, its fallen light playing gently on the water below.

A tattoo is a funny sort of art in and of itself—indeed, the whole genre of body art is unique in its melding of subject and object, painter and canvas, artist and art.<sup>8</sup> The fusion of ink to skin demands that the artist (the tattoo-wearer) have as much dedication to the image he portrays as he does for his own body; he must truly love his art as he loves himself.

So choosing to get a tattoo is not a frivolous matter of whim and passing interest (woe to those with former band favorites and ex-girlfriends' names tattooed prominently on their chests), but rather an existential pledge of devotion to something one will find meaning in eternally.

Behold: though I may live to a hundred thousand years and see a hundred thousand of the most perfect and most vile turns of fate the world and God might ever set before me, I hereby pledge that I will forever find the view of the sun setting behind the ocean to be the most gratifying, spiritual, and heart-rockingly beautiful aesthetic experience that can ever be known. No other wholly tactile sensation can compare; a truly perfect sunset—for me, at least—is more beautiful and satisfying than the finest sex, jazz, chocolate, poetry, flowers, beer, or laughter.

Sunsets are beautiful because they are the virtual synthesis of earth and heaven. They blend the natural world and the divine majesty of the beyond into a cocktail of hues

---

<sup>8</sup> I assume in my passages regarding tattoos that the person wearing the tattoo has designed the tattoo him/herself. If this is the case, then the tattoo-wearer is an artist who wears their art; if the tattoo was designed by someone else, the tattoo-wearer is merely a patron who has been branded by the art they commissioned. Worst of all are those who wear tattoos that are generically designed for a mass audience (the skull and dragon and eight-ball stripper tattoos); they are not even patrons of someone else's art, but rather anonymous consumers—it is akin to having a corporate logo sewn to one's skin.

so well-formed, so exotic and overwhelming, that for a few moments the distinguishing line between earth and heaven (the horizon) is shattered into a broad splash of sky, a holy and colorful puddle.

I find in such sunsets as close a passageway to God as I believe can exist in our temporal world. In celebration and in homage to such power, I make tribute in the shallowest, most human of ways: I offer the sunsets a piece of my skin.

## **ON ETHICS**

### **The Ethics Puzzle**

I used to be very interested in ethics; I am not anymore. Ethics—and ethical decision-making—is a dilemma very similar to the puzzle posed by a well-scrambled Rubik’s cube; in both cases you are presented with a totally unique position that is in utter disorder, and you are asked to put it right. In both cases the task can seem daunting, even impossible, and in both cases the temptation to cheat is enormous. And while there is no one solution that can properly solve every puzzle, there does exist an algorithm—a technique, a trick—that can be applied to any Rubik’s cube, to any ethical dilemma, to solve it no matter how easy or hard. And once you figure out the trick, the puzzle is kind of boring.

So I have largely lost interest in ethics, for though I may struggle for quite awhile to properly apply the technique, I know that in the end the problem will succumb to the irresistible powers of algorithm, and the puzzle as a whole loses its mystery, and subsequently its interest.

Yes, that’s right: I’ve solved the ethics puzzle. I have the solution key to all ethical dilemmas, and I can state the algorithm in four words. I will share them with you, but not right away—in any case, I assure you, you will be disappointed.

### **Preconditions to Solving a Puzzle**

As one who battles chronic addictions to chess, cards, and crosswords, I know something about the relationship between one’s state of mind and one’s puzzle-solving abilities. To make ethical decisions while distracted, confused, or overly emotional is just

as dangerous as playing poker while in these states. This is not to say that puzzle-solving should be a strictly logical process; Kant is mistaken in believing humans can be wholly rational in their thinking, especially when it concerns the people they care about (as is often the case in ethics) or their money (to keep the poker analogy alive). It is not reason that is needed, but *reasonableness*.

The difference between reason and reasonableness is a crucial one; it is the precondition to thinking properly about ethics. This distinction—and its relevance to ethics—is described by Lin Yutang in his books *The Art of Living* and *My Country, My People*. Writes Lin:

*“In contrast to logic, there is common sense, or still better, the Spirit of Reasonableness. I think of the Sprit of Reasonableness as the highest and sanest ideal of human culture, and the reasonable man as the highest type of cultivated human being. No one can be perfect; he can only aim at being a likeable, reasonable being... It seems that what the Western logicians need is just a little humility; their salvation lies in some one curing them of their Hegelian swelled-heads.*

*“The logical man is always self-righteous and therefore inhuman and therefore wrong, while the reasonable man suspects he is wrong and is therefore always right. ”*

I think of reasonableness as a state of mind (I am being reasonable at this moment, but perhaps not the next); Lin seems to think of it as a permanent character attribute. Whatever it is, being reasonable is absolutely necessary in the realm of ethics and puzzles. Unreasonable people make poor choices, both moral and mechanical.

When we have a reasonable spirit, or are in a reasonable state of mind, we are able to think clearly about the puzzle before us. Only when we are reasonable can we

properly apply the ethical algorithm; only when we are reasonable can we correctly solve all our ethical dilemmas.

### **The Answer to Ethics, the Universe, and Everything**

*EXTERIOR: STREET-DAYTIME*

*MOOKIE* walks down the block with pizza box in hand when he sees *DA MAYOR* sitting on his stoop.

DA MAYOR: Mookie.

MOOKIE: I gotta go.

DA MAYOR: C'mere, Mookie.

*Mookie turns around and goes back.*

DA MAYOR: Mookie, this is Da Mayor talkin'.

MOOKIE: OK. OK.

DA MAYOR: Mookie, always try to do the right thing.

MOOKIE: That's it?

DA MAYOR: That's it.

--- Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1982)

### **The Puzzle Within the Puzzle**

Certainly one of the most insightful men making art today, director/writer/actor Spike Lee provides us with the universal technique for solving all ethical dilemmas with a single, non-negotiable mandate: Do the Right Thing.

Do the Right Thing! How simple, how understated; yet so beautiful in its simplicity. It is direct, forceful, clear, and unambiguous. No matter how sticky the situation, no matter how complex the dilemma, in order to make the correct ethical decision, all we must do is Do the Right Thing!

And so we discover that within the solution to the puzzle lies yet another puzzle. For anyone confronted with an actual ethical dilemma—when urged to “Do the Right Thing”—will perhaps be less than thankful for the advice. He or she might respond: “Obviously! But what is the Right Thing to Do?”

But this second puzzle is one that almost anyone can figure out for themselves, if they actually take the time to consider it. Anyone who asks “What is the Right Thing to Do?” should be told: “Be reasonable, and think about that very question.” It is surprising how often an answer is discovered.

The trick lies in shifting one’s thinking from the general question “What should I do?” to the ethical question “What is the right thing to do?” I cannot over-emphasize what a difference this can make. If people faced with ethical dilemmas put themselves in a reasonable state of mind and frankly evaluate not what *would be the best*, but rather *what is right*, I am convinced they will come upon the correct ethical solution. This is because *what is best* is a subjective, horridly complicated and usually unknowable standard that requires lots of supposing and second-guessing, while *what is right*, while also sometimes subjective, requires no guessing at all, and is usually fairly obvious; that is to say, most people already know—intuitively—what the Right Thing is, they just never stopped to considered it.

Thinking about things ethically rather than generally most often simplifies the matter; if you commit yourself to Do the Right Thing, a half-hour of reasonable contemplation is usually enough to solve the puzzle.

### **Post Script: In Defense of Simplistic Thinking**

I realize that my ethics of Doing the Right Thing will be seen as a cop-out, an quick-fix attempt at avoiding deep analysis of the nature of ethics.

It is.

As I said, I used to think quite a deal about ethics; I used to ponder the merits and detriments of competing moral systems and exercise the application of ethical rules to myriad and grotesque simulations.

I realize that ethics is perhaps the most complex and most important branch of human philosophy, largely because of its universal relevance to all our lives, all of the time. Every decision we make at every moment entails a value-judgment among multiple alternatives, and oftentimes several of these alternatives have valid but mutually exclusive claims.

It has been pointed out to me that the hardest ethical dilemmas do not, indeed, hinge on the choice between right and wrong, but rather on the choice between right and right. Rushworth Kidder breaks such dilemmas down into four fundamental paradigms: the dilemma of truth versus loyalty, of the individual versus the community, of short-term versus long-term, and of justice versus mercy.<sup>9</sup> These, he argues, are more difficult to solve than your average, run-of-the-mill ethical puzzles, because we cannot simply Do the Right Thing. How can we reasonably choose between truth and loyalty, his model asks. His response to my ethics would be: Do Which Right Thing?

Fine! I admit it—my ethics are simplistic! They ignore the soul-wrenching complexity and distressful wrestling match of human values that some ethical problems pose... and they are all the better for it! Simplicity and reasonableness are the best we humans can hope for—perhaps God will handle the rest.

---

<sup>9</sup> Rushworth Kidder. *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. Page 18.

My approach isn't meant to suggest that problems aren't difficult, only that they're puzzles that are best solved by calmly and reasonably thinking—not by thinking about the theoretical possibility of absolute truth or by second-guessing the probabilities of justice and mercy in a social-needs framework of rule/ends-based decision-making; but instead by thinking simply and reasonably about what is Right (or *more* Right, if that will satisfy Kidder).

I used to be very interested in ethics; I used to spend a lot of time, energy, and emotional capital on trying to see all sides and all competing claims of a dilemma... usually, it got me nowhere except frustrated, depressed, and convinced that whatever I did was wrong. That attitude—and any activity that leads to that attitude—has no place in the Art of Living.

Deep analysis can be valuable when it has a chance of producing results; when all it does is tire one out in a futile attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, then it is a fraudulent waste of thought and effort.

So if I must sacrifice the complexity of my thinking for the clarity and happiness of my living, it is a sacrifice I am willing and proud to make. Mr. Kidder may have his paradigms, but I have my Spike Lee sound bites—we'll see who leads a happier life.

## ON BEING WITH OTHERS

### **On Being With Strangers**

Sometimes I like to go to coffee shops and bookstores and sit down at a table with a chess set, challenging other patrons to play me. And sometimes I will get on the subway and search the unfamiliar faces of the riders, hunting for someone interesting to talk with. Sometimes I will be climbing a mountain and fall in step with another lonely hiker, and together we will share the trees and the rocks and the sun.

There are over 6 billion people roaming this earth, and we never know which of them will make a difference in our lives. Around every corner there is a new stranger, a new ship passing before us in the night—these brief encounters make the experience of living all the richer.

More than anything, I like to think of what I can *get* out of these encounters. For I am a self-centered creature; I demand utility from my strangers, and if they have nothing to offer me I am wont to ignore them.

Luckily, almost everyone has *something* to offer. With each stranger that we meet, at the very least, our knowledge of the human experience becomes that more well-informed; with each part that we encounter, we are able to understand the whole a little more clearly.

Strangers can teach us incredible things—we should always be ready to learn from them. But there is oftentimes a problem: the gifts that strangers offer may be baskets of uneven distribution—that is to say, they may teach us bad things along with the good, foolishness along with wisdom.

One summer, I befriended a good number of homeless men that slept in Dupont Circle or in shelters across the city. Wise men, the homeless are—they know a lot of things we don't. They often have much to teach us—tales of travel and camaraderie, of struggle and salvation far beyond the reaches of our own experience. But there is also a lot of nonsense—alcoholic ramblings and racist outbursts, bitterness and anger steeped in years of being undervalued, abused, and ignored.

Others are similar—old men and little girls, clean-cut college grads and middle-aged hippies, soldiers and poets, bankers and cooks—every stranger has their own unique lesson to teach, their own experiences to share and their own prejudices to transmit.

When these lessons contradict one another—as they inevitably will—there is a temptation to say “he is right” or “she is right,” accepting wholly the truth of one person's experience and disregarding the truth of another's.

But in the same way that philosophies cannot be *right*, neither can people. Their lessons may have truths within them, but it is unlikely that any one person's experience is wholly truthful, or wholly useful.

When dealing with strangers, we should always aim to “take the best and leave the rest.” That is, recognize that wisdom is not a complete package, and that there is nothing wrong with compartmentalizing the lessons we are offered. We can pick and choose—accept a stranger's ideas about loyalty but reject their ideas about love; adopt the ethics of a man on the bus ride home, save for one, tiny modification which is your own.

Learning from strangers is the single greatest way to build one's knowledge of the human experience—but it should be a custom-built understanding, not a prefabricated one. Never swallow whole the teachings of a single man or woman; instead, take the best

of what they have to teach, and leave the rest behind. Perhaps someone else will find it useful.

### **On Being With Family**

The opposite of a stranger is a family member.

Strangers are valuable in that their lessons are apt to be utterly foreign to you—they can be sources of knowledge that are wholly removed from your own experience. Family members, on the contrary, are the most intimate, closely-connected sources of knowledge—nothing about them is foreign or new.

This is not to say that we cannot learn from our family; to be fair, we initially learn almost *everything* from our family. Are we products of nature or nurture? The debate rages on, but to me the answer is quite obvious: both. People are products of their personalities (innate) and their ideas (learned). I refuse to quibble over which has greater influence on a person's character; in any case, no one will dispute that a significant part of our knowledge and understanding of things is taught to us by our family.

The funny thing about families is that we all have them, and they're all crazy.

I love my family more than anything in the world, and still I cannot spend more than seven days at home without being driven crazy at least twice. It is not an uncommon experience, I am sure.

Aesthetically, the relationship between family members lies somewhere on the line between the beautiful and the absurd; the love among them is so perfect because their selves—their very beings—are so genetically aligned as to be almost identical, and yet that same love is so flawed and made so absurd by the grotesquely different manifestations that these genes produce.

The family dynamic is essentially the type of joke that is funny because it is true: a perpetual run-on gag of predictable and sometimes painful personality clashes and punch lines, a hilarious harmony of similarly-DNA'ed protagonists all trying to lead their own lives in their own ways.

I realize, of course, that some families are much better at “keeping it together” than others. In particular, many non-Western cultures still organize their societies on the basis of filial piety, thereby greatly strengthening familial cohesiveness at the expense of individual freedom and pursuit. In any case, the fact that some cultures (and some particular families within our own culture) do not *appear* to be as harmoniously absurd as I describe does not mean that are not *actually* this way—I maintain that however well the madness and love is kept under wraps, the inherent silliness of the family dynamic is eternal and ubiquitous, and will always surface in the end.

So what?

Well, thinking about one's family as being a big, beautiful joke—a very human, very comic play that one happens to be acting in— can certainly help take the tension out of some family conflicts. Like most problems, we tend to get upset only when we take things too seriously—but in a way, family problems can never be serious, because the beautiful bonds that tie family together will always be stronger than the absurd forces of conflict that drive them apart. A family squabble may last for an hour, or a day, or a year, or generations; but if we can look at the situation and chuckle and say “after all, it's family,” we're a lot closer to forgiveness.

The best stories, therefore, are always stories about dysfunctional families, because in some way or another we can all relate. The Buendías of G. G. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; the Sinai family of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*;

the Burnhams of the film *American Beauty*; from Columbia to India to our own suburban backyards, these tales of families that love each other despite their furtive madness touch us most deeply, because they remind us that among family more than anyone else, conflict is inevitable and forgiveness is possible.

### **On Being With Those One Likes**

There are three non-familial relations that all men and women should strive to cultivate: a best friend, a lover, and a team.

A best friend means only a single person with whom you can be your true self, with whom you can speak the most inane thoughts you might have and still somehow feel understood. A best friend need not be an old friend, or a friend with many similar interests, or even a friend that you spend much time with. The most important role of the best friend is to understand you, despite all your complexities, and to like you, despite all your faults.

Good things to do with a best friend involve cooking and eating, drinking tea or hard liquor, trying to make amateur art, engaging in playful competition, wondering idly about idle things, debating politics, taking road trips, confessing secrets, laughing at shared memories, evaluating the merits and detriments of other people, playing sports, pursuing a hobby, studying, enjoying the outdoors, discovering creative new ways to do something ordinary, exploring each other's religious beliefs, complaining about one's situation, comforting one another, watching television, trading witticisms, and inquiring about one another's family.

A lover is a person with whom you can be *more* than your true self, and who both sees you as and makes you feel like something greater and more powerful than you really are.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say you or your lover should deceive yourself or themselves, but rather to worship each other's strengths and ignore each other's weaknesses as much as is possible. A lover need not be highly sexual, or even attractive, and by no means should they necessarily be someone you get along with particularly well.<sup>11</sup> What is most important is that lovers worship each other as something special, and in that way, lovers become each other's gods.

Good things to do with a lover involve going out for dinner, drinking hot cocoa and wine, making breakfast in bed, going for slow ambling walks in pretty places, doing romantic and irrational things, flattering one another, playing silly mindless games that require the occasional intertwining of fingers, watching movies, giving massages, listening to soothing music, taking showers often, flirting, getting caught in rainstorms, listening to thunder while inside, eating fruit and chocolate, touching one another's belly and whispering compliments that aren't true, believing in one another, admiring one another's skin, mumbling softly in bed, laughing happily and inexplicably after sex, being generous in each other's presence, being chivalrous, being considerate, and encouraging one another to think highly of themselves.

If it seems that the activities I have suggested for best friends are more intellectual and those suggested for lovers more tactile, this is no coincidence. After all, the intellect seeks only to find and prominently illuminate the truth, and lovers have no use for the

---

<sup>10</sup> Writes Paulo Cuelo in *The Alchemist*: "When we love, we always strive to become better than we are."

<sup>11</sup> Which is why best friends make better spouses than lovers do.

truth, only for each other. Furthermore, best friends should be wary of too frequently sharing tactile pleasures, lest these pleasures lose their potency when with lovers.

I have mentioned that with a best friend one should be one's true self, and that with a lover one should be *more* than one's true self. With a team, as it happens, one learns to be comfortable being *less* than one's true self, and discovers the pleasure of being a small part of something large.

A team is a group of individuals—all with their own varied assortment of human flaws, quirks, and abilities—that come together to see if they can somehow form something that is greater than the sum of its parts. The success of this endeavor is unimportant; the value of belonging to a team lies in the realization that you are not self-sufficient but co-dependant, not a whole but a (vital) part. Whether it's a sports team, a book club, a military platoon, or a street gang, the relationship between the individual member and the collective team should minimize one's egoistic significance in order to realize one's co-dependant value.

Though teams generally form to serve a specific purpose (book clubs form to read books, etc) there is no reason why the team should not engage in "extracurricular" activities. Good things to do with a team include eating cheap food, drinking fruit juice and beer, telling jokes, adopting nicknames, roughhousing or friendly teasing, talking extensively about shared interests, using jargon, telling anecdotes, going out to public places as a large group, daring one another to do out-of-character deeds, singing, exercising, sharing ambitions, and venting any frustrations relating to best friends and lovers.

## **On Being With Those One Dislikes**

However amiable our personalities may be, and however much we learn to appreciate the more subtle, finer points of an otherwise unsavory character, we still inevitably run into many people over the course of our lives who we simply don't like. There's nothing wrong with not liking someone; it's natural. As far as dealing with them, remember that there are two types of people you dislike: those you can avoid, and those you can't.

Needless to say, the first one is easily dealt with. Humans beings—as animals—are much better served by fleeing than by fighting. Evidence of this lies in our evolutionary features: we have no claws, horns, or fangs, but rather long loping legs that are perfectly designed for walking away from situations and people that we find repulsive.

Dealing with people you dislike but cannot avoid is, of course, somewhat trickier. There are as many schools of thought on the subject as there are stars in the sky (that is to say, hundreds). Most of these fall into one of two camps: “mediation” (essentially asking them to change or abandon whatever habit or characteristic offends you) or “compromise” (changing your own attitude so that the offending characteristic no longer feels offensive).

I reject both of these theories, not because they are unreasonable, but because in practice they have never worked for me. I advocate instead a far baser strategy for dealing with those you dislike: be as calm, civil, and detached as is possible when around them, and vent whatever anger they cause in you by cursing them profusely behind their back to a friend.

This method will be accused of being juvenile, petty, and perverse. It is none of these things. Rather, it is a means of maintaining working relations with the people you must work with, and letting out the stress that necessarily accompanies unresolved conflict.

I base this brand of interpersonal conflict resolution on the social cultures of two groups of people I have become familiar with over the years: poets and the Japanese. It was during a study-abroad program—where the majority of my classmates and friends were Japanese—that I developed my (limited) understanding of Japanese civility and the importance of “face.” I was fascinated by the lengths to which my friends would go to avoid direct confrontation with the people that annoyed them, and was impressed by the cold, efficient ease with which they could work in close quarters with people they found frustrating. I therefore draw the first half of my conflict resolution model (detached civility) from them.

Largely because of this constant civility, however, Japan appears to be the second most repressed society in the world.<sup>12</sup> For balance, then, I take the second half of my model from the world’s *least* repressed culture: the culture that surrounds contemporary performance poetry. The collective social personality of performance poets can best be summarized by the title of poet Chris August’s book of collected works: *Self-Righteous, Catty, Vulgar, Judgmental, Insecure: Five Fundamental Flaws and a Few Assorted Virtues*. Indeed, all artists are masters of venting emotion. Performance poets, I have found, are particularly good at releasing pent-up aggression, frustration, and bitterness in short bursts of (quite eloquent, humorous) whining. The resulting relationships, not surprisingly, are the polar opposite of the Japanese’s civil but repressed ones: poets

---

<sup>12</sup> Second only to Britain, of course.

become completely bogged down in drama, find each other utterly impossible to work with, but deal with their stress promptly, frankly, and healthily (or at least non-violently).

In fusing the two, I hope to “take the best and leave the rest.” When I must deal with people I don’t like, I strive to be a Japanese to their face and a poet behind their back, and I have no regrets.

I would regret, however, missing the opportunity to close this chapter without summing up my theory in the simple, beautiful place where the Japanese and the poets intersect.

A haiku:

*Beneath the sun, a  
calm breeze. But under the moon,  
the winds rage and rage.*

## **ON BEING BY ONESELF**

### **The Importance of Retreat**

We are social creatures, to be sure. But just as we need hunger to fully appreciate the deliciousness of a hard-boiled egg, so too do we need times of solitude to fully appreciate the joy of being with the friends and family we love. So in this respect, it is important to be by oneself if only in order to better enjoy the experience of being with others.

But there is also the trickier, more serious task of shedding one's pretensions. We spend our days wearing different hats: now a student, now a lover, now an employee, now a son. Existentialists that we all most certainly are, we constantly re-invent ourselves, day-by-day and minute-by-minute. With our friends we act witty and carefree; with our elders we act solemn and wise. But when we are alone, we can be our rawest, our most natural. Alone, we can shed our masks, hang our various hats on a peg at the doorstep of the wild, and enter a world that doesn't care who we are or who we pretend to be.

It is, of course, never this easy. We do not come home from work each night and peel back some fake exterior to reveal our true selves. Honestly, the exteriors we wear at work are not even fake; they are simply not-what-we-would-otherwise-be, they are alternative. And because we are not often aware that we are donning these alternative exteriors, we are very slow to remove them, even when we are alone for a few hours. To extend the metaphor, we can say that most of us wear our hats behind close doors.

The best way to remove one's hat, I have found, is to force it off; to put oneself in a situation so stark and absolute and powerful that none of our exteriors can cling to us.

To find one's deepest nature takes digging: sweat and muscle and exhaustion and determination. And as one digs, one forgets one is digging, and forgets what one is looking for. As we set off on our solitary searches for *ourselves*, we often lose sight of the fact that we exist; and—surprise of most Zen surprises—that is when we are most likely to find out who we really are.

### **Transcendence in Sand and Wind**

I wanted to go a little crazy once, so I walked into the desert and didn't come out again for another two days. I was in northwest China, I was 21, and I was alone.

The first thing I noticed was the wind, which was strong, and the second thing I noticed were the graves, which were everywhere. The flat rock floor that stretched east to west in front of the sand dunes had been partitioned into several hundred small burial grounds—small plots of earth marked by mounded sand and stone.

These barren tombs stretched to my east and west for almost as far as I could see. To my north was a jungle of nectarine trees, and behind that the oasis city of Dunhuang; to my south was several hundred miles of sand, and behind that nothing but mountains that stretched as far as Tibet. The only thing that separated the lush fruit from the empty desert was myself and a thousand forsaken graves.

Later, I would write in my journal about the desert and its unmistakable connection with death. The naturalist Edward Abbey writes—quite counter-intuitively, I think—that the desert is in fact a tribute to the tenacity of life; he finds the existence of the ant, the scorpion, and the buzzard to be triumphant symbols of survival in the meanest of environs. Obviously, Abbey and I spent time in very different deserts. The desert he speaks of may well represent a sort of hard-knock anthem for nature's most outcast

organisms; my desert was simply a complete and annihilating absence of all living things. There were no birds, no bugs, no yucca trees. There were no coyote, cacti, or rattlesnakes. Let me be clear: there was no water in this place, and as such there was a very real lack of things that grow, move, twitch, or shudder. Except me.

When I hiked out of the graveyard and into the dunes, it was not yet 5:00 pm, and—as it was mid-June—the sun would stay high in the sky for hours to come. I set out with a lustiness in my step; I felt young and strong and unconquerable. I wanted to be swallowed up in this desert, swallowed alive. I was a 21<sup>st</sup> century Jonah walking cockily into the belly of the whale, ready to be devoured, to be consumed by something enormous. This was my mysticism, my great escape. This was my little-bit-crazy. This was my rebellion, my reunion, and my rite of passage: transcendence in sand and wind.

### **From the Pages of My Journal**

*17 June 2006 9:13 pm  
Desert Day 1 – Campfire  
Outside Dunhuang, PRC*

Sitting in an empty, faceless valley in the Shaming Shan desert, surrounded by sand and wind.

Even this late, it's still very light out: I stopped hiking a while ago to watch a sunset that never came (clouds), but even now-- almost an hour later-- the sky still holds a faded glow. I've succeeded in setting up the tent (battling the wind all the way) and have built a fire out of some dry wood that is strewn across the desert floor.

For dinner, I opened a package of Jin Shan Golden Mountain Five Flavor Dog Meat that I bought in town and roasted it over the fire on a stick. Delicious: the folks at Jin Shan sure know how to shrink-wrap a preserved hunk of dog meat.

The wind here is enormously powerful. Sweeping through the valleys and bursting over the tops of dunes, it roars, and keeps my fire roaring as well: the fire feeds on the oxygen, but grows hungrier as it feeds, and has consumed a vast amount of wood in a short period of time. Luckily, wood seems plentiful here, with dry, cracking branches sticking out of the sand like dinosaur bones.

Speaking of wind, and of sand, it's worth noting the way the two of them play with each other here. Wind and sand, sand and wind: this is all the desert is. Together, they are beautiful. At the top of the dunes, the wind pushes sand off the edge and carries it for a moment, makes it dance and rush, sometimes like a big wave being launched into the sky, sometime like tendrils of smoke pirouetting in place. The effect at the bottom of the dunes is even more striking; the wind rushes down into the valleys, picking the sand up an inch above the desert floor and firing it in streams through the valley. Facing it, the screaming wisps of sand are a horde of phantom horses rushing; when it passes and you look behind, it's a column of ghosts fleeing, like refugee spirits pouring as fast as they can from dune to dune.

The fire is dying. Should I add more wood? Not now. Watching embers throb is a quiet, powerful moment-- so dormant and silent and alive, placid and dangerous and captivating. I can hear the wind now, hear it caressing the dunes, running it's fingers through the sand, just like I do.

It is late, and I am tired. Soon to bed with me! I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I plan to be ready for it.

Huzzah!

### **On the Spirit of Adventure**

There is a part of us—a part of all of us—that has a romantic inspiration for adventure. This is not to say that all of us are adventurers; quite the contrary, in fact. There are some of who love adventure and excitement and danger and thrill, and some of

us who fear these things because of the threat they represent to our comfortable lives. But we are all *inspired* by adventure, which is why half of the world goes gallivanting about on mad and noble quests and the other half stays home and reads books about these quests.

Yes, one need only look at the millions of works of human literature to discover that we are all inspired by adventure: from Homer to Shakespeare to Jack London to Dr. Seuss, we are eternally entertained and motivated by tales of other people's quests.

In fact, it is said that in the history of narrative storytelling there has truly been but one single plot: stories are either about someone going on a journey, or about about someone coming to town (which is really the same thing only told from a different perspective).

Whether this is true of literature or not is up for debate; but there can be no doubt that even the most timid of us harbor secret dreams of the fantastic unknown—the human spirit of adventure.

The Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho refers to this as our “Personal Legend.” He believes we must all embark on our own unpredictable journey to discover that which is our destiny; for Coelho, the spirit of adventure and one's solitary quest for what is written are perhaps the most sacred aspects of the universe—nothing could be more precious or more beautiful than a person setting off by themselves to let the winds of the world carry them to wherever they are meant to be.

### **From the Pages of My Journal**

18 June 2006  
Morning at Camp 9:24 am  
Shaming Shan

Desert morning. Silent; wind's gone. Sun starting to break through clouds. Fire already devouring wood and oxygen with a vengeance. Utterly, utterly silent here-- I can hear the emptiness of my eardrums pounding. In the desert more than anywhere else, it's true what they say: silence is deafening.

My plan for the day: eat breakfast (Powerbar, nectarine, raisins, water). Hike. Hydrate. Hike. Pee. Eat lunch. Hike. Hydrate. Hike. Camp. It's a beautiful day to be alive and alone. Game time-- let's go.

### **On Pushing One's Limits**

Once in awhile—perhaps every year or so—I find myself so bogged down in the routines and dramatics of living among people, and so frustrated with the sloth and unproductiveness that this bogged-down feeling produces, that I force myself to tear away and enter a state of furious productivity and focus that I like to call Warrior Mode.

Laugh, if you must.

Warrior Mode is, essentially, a short-term change in lifestyle aimed at breaking free of local boundaries and pushing oneself as far as one can to the limit of natural potential.

Warrior Mode usually lasts anywhere from a couple of days to (at the most) a week, and should include very vigorous physical exercise, intense periods of focus and mental concentration, and a strict monitoring of time and energy to ensure that one is constantly riding at the limits of one's stamina.

Why would one want to do this?

Pushing the limits—physically and mentally—does just what the words imply: it expands the boundaries of what we are able to do. We cannot be at “maximum” all the time, so in our day-to-day lives we usually push, oh, say 80% (a wholly arbitrary

number). Which is fine. But if we never push at the limits of our capacity, those boundaries are likely to shrink in around us. In other words, unused capacity disappears over time—just ask anyone who was a child prodigy at some or another activity... and then stopped. When we don't push the borders of our potential outwards, they are prone to falling back inwards.

Thus Warrior Mode: the struggle to regain 100%, and indeed, to reach 105%. If for the majority of our lives we hover at slightly below maximum (for our bodies desire comfort and leisure and rest), then we should at least once in awhile push to go *beyond* our maximum capacity, if only to remind ourselves that we still can.

Only when we are alone can we truly exceed ourselves.

### **From the Pages of My Journal**

*June 18th  
Lunch 1:30 pm  
The Desert*

Tired as shit. Writing this as I munch on my lunch (rhyme!) of dried yak jerky that I got in Tibet and have been lugging around this whole goddamn country for a month. Not bad-- wish I had more water to wash it down with. Honestly, I'm not really worried, but the word "thirsty" isn't far from my mind. I still have a good bottle and a half of water (big bottles), and they should be enough to get me through the rest of today and the hike out tomorrow. Right? Yeah.

The hiking is good here, but I'm beginning to discover that hiking in the desert is NOTHING like I've ever done before. The dunes are generally at a 50-70 degree incline, which is steep enough in any case. I'm also carrying about 50 pounds worth of food, spare clothes, and tent/sleeping bag on my back. But the real distinctive flare is the sand, which has a sneaky way of giving out on you at the worst times. Often, a patch of packed sand will slide away

beneath my foot as I'm in mid-stride, sometimes sending me tumbling back down the dune. It's treacherous work, with zero-traction, and a harsh sun keeping guard above me.

Soldier on, kid, soldier on. This is what you came here to do.  
Peace.

### **On Ups and Downs**

In life we will be happy and sad, in danger and in safety, feel strong and feel helpless, triumph and be defeated; it is inevitable. There will be good times and there will be bad times; the bad times are always easier to bear when you are with others.

When you are alone, sadness and danger and helplessness and defeat become serious obstacles that must be overcome. Everything about the situation is exaggerated, and the stakes are very much raised—the consequences of failing to meet the challenge are more severe, and the self-pride and self-glory in succeeding are more personal and therefore more meaningful.

This phenomenon of heightened risk and heightened benefit that accompanies solitude is expressed most eloquently and most succinctly in an essay by Edward Abbey:

*“Most of my wandering in the desert I’ve done alone. Not so much from choice as from necessity—I generally prefer to go into places where no one else wants to go. I find that in contemplating the natural world my pleasure is greater if there are not too many others contemplating it with me at the same time. However, there are special hazards in traveling alone. Your chances of dying, in case of sickness or accident, are much improved, simply because there is no one around to go for help...”*<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Edward Abbey. “Havasu” from the book *Desert Solitaire*. Page 250.

## **From the Pages of My Journal**

*June 18th  
Fuck 4:50 pm  
Still in the Desert*

Lost.

Checked the compass, and found that what I had thought was south was actually east-north-east.

Climbed the highest dune I could find (took forty minutes of sweat and a lot of precious water), but no sign pointing me in the direction of Dunhuang.

Checked the map; the dunes are apparently surrounded on all sides by... nothing. The city is out there in one direction or another, but if I miss it, I could walk clear to Mongolia (or Kazakastan for that matter) without hitting so much as a road. Though, honestly, I'd run of water long, long before I got to either of those countries.

We're officially upgrading from "a little concerned" to "solidly freaked out."

I'm going to head north and see what happens... keep the compass in hand and hope to God I don't overshoot the city.

## **On Prayer**

There are no people I admire more than the Southern Baptists—those people know how to pray. I am in love with the idea of prayer being a loud, musical, celebration—I want raised voices, the soulful swelling of emotion, the peak of a soloist's notes rising with the congregation towards God.

But alas—in my youth I was forced to attend enough structured religious services and surrounded by enough stern, studious theologians to turn me off to God's houses

forever. I have no interest, and seemingly no ability, in being spiritual as a group; for me, prayer must be a meditation, and it must be conducted privately and ideally outdoors.

When I am faced with dilemmas or windfalls, or feeling happy or sad, I am wont to take a walk in the park, or climb a tree and scrape at the bark with my fingernails, thinking all the while of God.

I have made reference to God several times in this paper, always casually and never with an explanation of my religious beliefs. Here I will offer a few words: God for me is a very real, very present force in my life that has as little connection to the God of the Bible as a beautiful woman does to Barbie dolls. God—for me—is partly what poet Jeffery McDaniel described as a “Santa Claus God,” or a genie in a bottle that I conjure up only when I need to ask a favor. But if I see God partially as a phantom towards which I can direct my prayers of want, I see God also as a phantom towards which I can direct my prayers of thanks. My prayers are like letters I write, asking the universe for this and that and thanking it when those things (or others) are provided; God is simply the name I address these letters to.

And sometimes—in the deepest moments in the deepest deserts—my prayers are not even thoughtful meditations; they are simply deep-breathed moments of awareness and being and silence and joy and empty appreciation that sweeps through me like a rush of wind through a fire and I laugh, because sometimes I forget if I’m God or not.

From Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*:

*“The sun reigns, I am drowned in light. At this hour, sitting alone at the focal point of the universe, surrounded by a thousand square miles of largely uninhabited no-man’s-land, I cannot seriously be disturbed by any premonitions of danger... all dangers seem equally remote. In this glare of brilliant emptiness, in this arid intensity of pure heat, in the heart of a weird solitude, great silence, and grand desolation, all things recede to distances out of reach, reflecting light*

*but impossible to touch, annihilating all thoughts and all that men have made to a spasm of whirling dust far out on the golden desert...*

*“Through half-closed eyes, for the light would otherwise be overpowering, I consider the tree, the lonely cloud, the sandstone bedrock of this part of the world and pray—in my fashion—for a vision of truth. I listen for signals from the sun—but that distant music is too high and pure for the human ear. I gaze at the tree and receive no response. I scrape my bare feet against the sand and rock [below] and am comforted by their solidity and resistance. I look at the cloud.”<sup>14</sup>*

### **From the Pages of My Journal**

June 18th  
8:45  
The Des

I am sitting on a sand dune with my stick, my hat, my sweatshirt, my depleted water bottle, and this journal, watching a sunset so beautiful my pen is trembling in my hand. Describe... but why bother? Clouds, colors, the splitting of the sky-- no words for this kind of stuff. This sunset is what all the paintings and poems try to capture and fail... this is the sugar in the raw, baby... this is how you spelled beauty before you had letters.

I think I'm headed in the right direction now... I can see the dunes drop away directly to the north, and I think a couple hours' walk will get me there tomorrow morning. I'll have to leave early (I'm thinking 5) if I want to beat the sun and get out of here without thirsting to death. (Thirsting to death? That doesn't sound right... if I'm going to die, at least I should do it with proper diction and syntax).

No, I don't really think about dying here. All the same, I have spent most of the evening thinking about the desert and God; or rather, the Desert God, for I

---

<sup>14</sup> Edward Abbey. “The Heat of Noon: Rock and Tree and Cloud” from the book *Desert Solitaire*. Page 165 and 170.

believe anyone that spends a night alone in the desert will become an instant polytheist. It becomes immediately clear, when hiking here, that there is a God of the Desert, and a Sun God, and a Wind God, and that they all communicate and coordinate, do battle amongst each other and embrace. Some seek to destroy you, others seek to protect you, and we are constantly at the mercy of their whims.

I see the God of the Desert as a Poseidon of sorts: each a king of their own vast, inhabitable landscapes that offer serene tranquility or raging warfare at a moment's notice, each captivating and lethal, each a pleasure to get lost in.

I don't feel lonely here, strangely enough. There's not a soul around me for miles, but my own thoughts and the silent agreements of the desert are company enough. Perhaps one never feels lonely when they are alone... perhaps loneliness is not being away from other people, but rather being surrounded by people who don't know you or care about you. I feel lonely in strange cities far from home... in the desert, there is no one to be lonely from.

### **On Deliverance**

And a day will come, for all of us, when our adventure is over—when the final hurdle has been mounted and all that lies before us is the flat road home.

Or perhaps we will discover that all our travels and trials to date were but prologues to something greater, and our true adventure has yet even to begin.

Or perhaps our adventure is never complete, perhaps life is the adventure<sup>15</sup> and we end only in death.

---

<sup>15</sup> Isn't *that* a novel thought?

Perhaps, perhaps—I suspect it is largely a matter of attitude. In any case, it is undeniable that all stories (or at least chapters within those stories) wind inevitably towards resolution.

When we are with others, the resolution belongs to everyone; the story is shared and so is its ending. But when we are alone, the story is ours—solitary adventures belong only to us. In fact, it would be better to say that only group stories end in resolution; the adventures we embark on ourselves end in deliverance.

Deliverance is the feeling of emerging from a narrow mountain path and watching the road spread wide before you, splitting off into a dozen different directions; it is the feeling of surviving through the night and watching as the rising sun gives hope to new horizons. Deliverance is the feeling of being released by the clutches of circumstance and being set to drift once more in the open sea of unpredictable and unknowable life.

### **From the Pages of My Journal**

*June 19th  
Leaving the Desert 11:10 am  
Dunhuang, PRC*

I'm on the last dune, looking out over the oasis that is the city of Dunhuang. To my back is the sandy monster that, after two full days and five hours of hiking this morning, has finally released me.

Looking back-- literally as well as figuratively-- I know that the desert has changed me, and what's more, that I have not changed the desert a single bit. That's something that I keep having to remind myself, because when you hike in the desert, especially the dunes, you constantly feel like an intrusion.

In its way, the desert is remarkably beautiful: the sand gets swirled into the most delicate chaos, enormous mosaics of texture and color, rippling and undulating into perfect, unpredictable patterns. Walking across this landscape, you get that awful feeling of destroying something beautiful and smooth, like treading on fresh-fallen snow.

It helps to know, then, that the desert doesn't care about you, and won't remember a whit of you. Your entire existence in the desert, in fact, will be totally erased in mere hours, minutes, moments. Your footprints will sink into nothingness, the campfires and ashes and spit sunflower seeds and pee, the sweat and blood and messages written in the sand with sticks, all will be reclaimed, all will be repaved, all wiped clean by the wind and sand and sun.

God bless the desert, God bless man.

I love you God-- thanks for the sunset.

It was beautiful.

Jonathan

## CONCLUSION

A writing is considered poetic—insofar as I have heard—when its content (what it says) is manifest in its form (how it says it).

So if my “Art of Living” has preached the virtues of happiness, wholeness, and simplicity, then I would aim to be poetic by ending this paper as happily, wholly, and simply as is possible.

What is happiness? Happiness is not re-designing your life; it is not eating hard-boiled eggs in the desert or curling up on the couch with a book. Happiness is not art or friendship or going on adventures, it is not peace, or prayer, or Doing the Right Thing. Happiness isn’t any of these.

Happiness is the constant enjoyment of life, for no other reason than because life is something enjoyable, because you have *made* life enjoyable. It is appreciating the experience of enjoying life.

Happiness is just Happiness—the most wonderful thing in the world.

Go.

Be happy.

Start now.