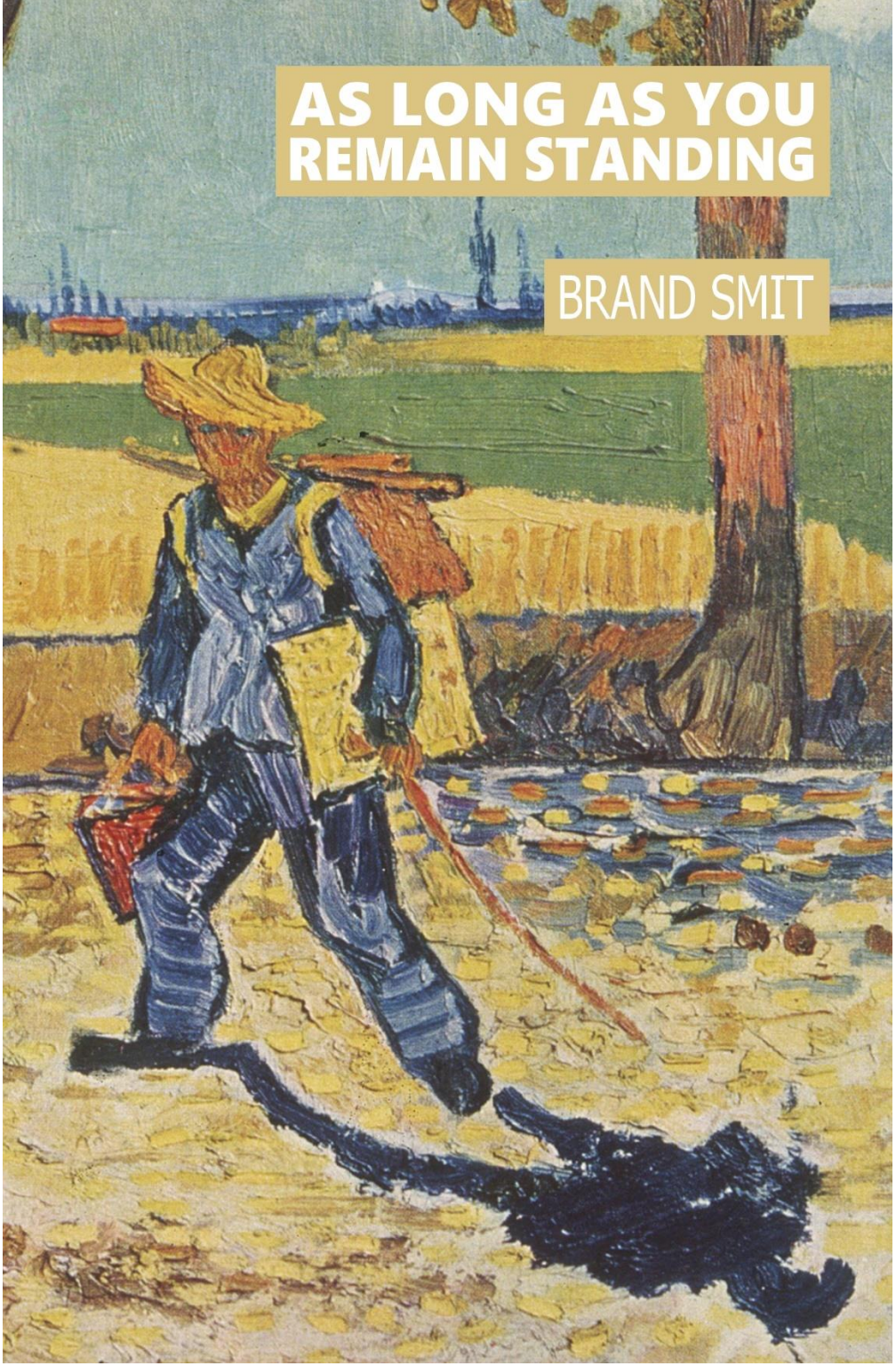


**AS LONG AS YOU  
REMAIN STANDING**

**BRAND SMIT**



**As long as you  
remain standing**

BRAND SMIT

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Cover: *The Painter on His Way to Work*, by Vincent van Gogh  
(1888)

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# INTRODUCTION

## **Who is the writer?**

Born on 29 June 1971 in Pretoria, in the Republic of South Africa.

Went to South Korea in June 1996 to work as an English teacher.

Worked in Johannesburg for six months in 1998.

Departed for Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, in January 1999.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **What is this collection of notes about?**

On Monday, 19 December 2005 I wrote, if you don't get up and continue walking after stumbling, "you will end up flat on your face. People – friends, family, and some strangers – will help you up to a point. But after a while they, too, will continue their own journeys. That is simply how it is."

On Thursday, 2 June 2011, I wrote about my own partner: "If you're not happy, she will help you overcome whatever obstacle is in your way. She will help you solve your problem. She will insist on it – even, if necessary, at the expense of her own happiness. But if you don't co-operate, if you fail to do your part to make yourself happy, then you can go to hell as far as she is concerned."

There are quite a few friends, family members, and even some strangers I can thank for assistance over the years, but one fact remains: If you want to make it through another day, it's your responsibility to do what you have to do to stay on your feet, and when you stumble, getting back on your feet and continuing the journey must be your firm resolve.

The notes and essays in this collection were written between 1994 and 2017. It demonstrates my own modest efforts over the years to stay on my feet and to see the journey to its end.



## Notes from a few places

**APRIL 1994**

“We are constantly looking for something we can be sure of. Sometimes you find it in an intimate relationship with another person. Sometimes you find it in the religious system you choose to adhere to, in your faith in the god you worship. I find my security in three things: Birth, Life, and Death. A person is born. A person lives. A person dies. These are unwavering beacons of human existence.”

\* \* \*

“What value should we attach to the idea that there is no such thing as a perfect life? That what you currently have is perhaps the best you will ever get; that there is no perfect life to be pursued; that, in other words, there is no target that can be missed. Is it a false assumption that your life will improve the closer you get to a target of supposed perfection?”

\* \* \*

“It is said human beings are animals. The difference is that people have learned how to use tools and make fire, and then they built roads and buildings and cars and factories and banks and schools and universities and ports and parliaments and sports stadia and prisons and hospitals. As part of a generation that was born at a time when all these things have become established beacons of civilisation, and where it is expected to only fall in and conform to the standards of this society, it doesn't help you much to wish you could live in simplicity like your brothers and sisters in nature.

Our society is too big and too impersonal. We and those before us have created a monster which has long gotten out of

control. And if you don't bow before the monster, you are devoured and your remains spat out."

\* \* \*

"We live on a planet of which there are millions. We stand no chance against the cosmic powers. We have long abandoned our original habitat where we just had to search for food and shelter like other animals and where we could find comfort in community with others like us. And we are all at the end destined to die, to pass away like vegetation. So, exactly what is this complex modern society in which we were born, and which we are doomed to maintain?"

## **OCTOBER 1997**

"Miguel de Cervantes said he would rather eat a crust of bread and an onion alone in a corner than to eat a fat turkey at another man's table, where he would be forced to chew slowly, drink little, wipe his mouth every minute, not sneeze or cough, or do other things that are the privileges of freedom and solitude."

\* \* \*

"One thing I have learned in my life so far is how important it is to have choices, and to have the ability and resources to act on choices made. There are always people who can do it, and people who cannot do it. Those who suffer a lack of executable choices are, in many cases, directly or indirectly, the servants of those who do have choices and who can act on them. Once you have learned this, you stand before a choice: On what side of the line do you want to be? If you do not consciously choose to be counted among those who make choices and act on their choices, you will inevitably be numbered among the other group."

## **NOVEMBER 1997**

“I have eight months left on my contract [in South Korea] before I go back to South Africa. Instead of thinking of another eight, long months ... I’m starting to think about the fact that for another eight months I’ll still have a job, I’ll still be earning money, and I’ll have a place to stay. When I’m back in South Africa, at least for the first few weeks I’ll be unemployed, I won’t make any money, and I won’t have a place of my own.

It’s like a chasm eight months into the future. I can close my ears, close my eyes, and just start running – and hope time passes quickly, just to eventually realise that I don’t know how to cross the chasm; that I’m staring straight down a steep cliff.

[...]

The fact is that these eight months are going to pass, and it is up to nobody but myself what things will look like when I look back. Will I see wasted chances, and look ahead and realise I’m in trouble? Or will I be waiting at the airport in Singapore before flying to South Africa, feeling good about myself, thinking about everything I will have done over the previous eight months, and confidently expecting to cross the chasm?

It all depends on myself – right now. I have, hopefully, another eight months to prepare.”

## **MARCH 1998**

“I cannot bear the idea of losing – not when I expected to win. I get obsessed about winning, about reaching my expected point of success. If I fail to realise this expectation, nothing makes sense to me and my world starts crumbling: “How is it possible that I didn’t win?!”

I must learn to be satisfied with less, and to set lower expectations for myself.

In *Ten Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* the main character talks about compiling a list of ten things you'd like to do. According to him, you'd never be so lucky as to do all ten, but if you do five or six, you'd have done well for yourself.

That's crap. If I have to compile such a list, I would expect to do all ten. Nine out of ten would mean that I failed.

How do I go about changing this destructive attitude?"

\* \* \*

"Everything I've always said about freedom, financial debt, my own ideals, my aspirations, my dreams, achieving my potential, living as I'd like to live, crystallise around a single, essential prerequisite. I have seen enough, experienced enough, and read and heard enough to understand how important power is: The power to make choices and act on those choices. 'Kto kgo?' asked Lenin. 'Who (masters) whom?'

If you don't want to play the role of the servant, the debtor, the person in self-imposed economic exile, for the rest of your life, stop running and start working, purposefully, effectively, with a single goal in mind: to acquire what will make you free – from creditors, bailiffs, poverty, and an insignificant existence, and free of economic masters who want to rule your life."

\* \* \*

"Wait a second ... I was watching you from that rock," he puffs when he catches up with the man. "I saw you arrive, and I saw how you sniffed the air, and then you just started walking. I've been sitting here for years. I know everything there is to know about all the paths. I've seen many people come and go, and still I can't say for sure which is the one I should take. Most people pause for at least a day or two before

they choose a path. But you? You sniff the air and just start walking! How can you be so sure?"

The guy looks at the rock sitter, sighs, and then says: "You've been sitting on that rock for years. You've considered all the options over and over again, and you've probably filled dozens and dozens of notebooks. But what do you have from all the years of sitting and thinking? A rock, and it's not even your own!

"I, like you, know there are obstacles in the path I've chosen. Good days await me ... and there will probably also be less pleasant days, circumstances that would cause me to question whether I did, in fact, choose the right path. Every path has these elements of uncertainty.

"The idea," the guy continues, "is not to choose the path with the least number of obstacles. The idea is to commit to a path regardless of the obstacles, whatever the risks, regardless of good weather or foul. To commit yourself to a path until you have reached its end.

"If you commit yourself to a path, your fellow travellers will accept you. That will increase a sense that you belong on that particular road, at that particular time.

"Every time I reach a crossroads, I see people like you, people who've been sitting on rocks for years on end arguing with themselves over which path to take. There is no absolute right path! What there is, is commitment. And that can make any path the right one for you."

The rock sitter lowers his head and stares at the dirt and gravel around his feet. By the time he looks up again, the other man is already over the first hill.

## **JUNE 1998**

"At this stage, I'm ready to commit myself to things – and that's one hell of an acknowledgement, considering my erstwhile loathing of the idea. I have a strong need to belong somewhere, to be involved in organisations and with people, and to commit myself to relationships, and to plans, and ideas.

The things I want to connect myself to are here – in South Africa. If I go abroad again, I'd have to postpone the fulfilment of these needs, throw a few tapes and some books and other loose items in my backpack, and again temporarily establish myself elsewhere. This runs contrary to everything I've thought and decided these last few months. Furthermore, there's no guarantee that I can make more money overseas than I can make in the medium and long term in my own country. Lastly, what exactly do I want to do abroad? I'm not exactly thrilled with the idea of teaching English again in the Far East."

## **JULY 1998**

"What needs can I fulfil here in South Africa? The need to be part of a community, to belong somewhere, to play a role, to engage with people, to build a refuge on home turf brick-by-brick, book-by-book, one chair at a time, one rug at a time, one souvenir at a time.

Several months have already passed since it dawned on me that I was not going to just wake up in suburbia one day, that I'm not going to be helplessly sucked into the middle class. Truth is that even if you work deliberately for many years at becoming a Suburban Everyman, there are no guarantees, seeing that you need an almost spotless credit record before you can even be invited to a tea party in the average suburb. Even if you qualify it is still an open question – do you really want this life?"

## **AUGUST 1998**

"The Situation: I have been living in Johannesburg for seven weeks. I work in an office in an administrative capacity. I earn between R1500 and R2000 per month. I rent a room in Norwood for R500 per month. I don't have a car. I don't have a proper postal address. I have to pay R2000 per month on my student loans. I live in someone else's house. In the evenings,

I watch someone else's TV. I have to rely on friends to go anywhere outside a 3-kilometre radius of my room (except when I go to work, thankfully). I can't afford the social activities of the circle in which I move. I've been struggling with a broken tooth for the past six weeks because I don't have money to do anything about it.

The Problem: Seeing that the money I brought back from Korea is almost depleted, I have to increase my income by at least 250% very soon to prevent my current strategy of paying off my debt from stalling. I depend on other people for habitation, transportation, and even for good food. This is not a desirable situation. Everything in my life is uncertain. Something drastic must be done."

## **DECEMBER 1998**

"But that is to paint a pretty picture for the sake of not regretting anything. For the sake of honesty, I also have to flip the painting to show a little bit of the other side.

In terms of power – which I once again define as the ability to make choices and to act on these choices, and to not be dependent on other people, I was a big time loser for the past seven or eight months. Big time. In actual fact, I'm embarrassing myself by still trying to fight back, by continuing to insist on defending my dignity.

The truth is that I am currently more powerless than I have ever been in my life. For all the importance that power, independence, dignity and pride had for me eight months ago, it's ironic that I have lost so much in all these areas! For this reason, and this reason alone, I would say that I regret that I did not try to get another EFL job at the end of June.

But, there's no point to regret, so I'm not going to waste time on it. I did what I did. I learned some things, and a few times I was knocked to the ground. But at least I came out for the fight, right? Even though it was reluctantly, and even if I don't exactly look like a hero at the moment.

What's next?

I have seen, in case I had forgotten, what financial powerlessness looks like. Not again. Not if it depends on me. Taking everything into account, this year has been one of the fullest and richest years of my life, even though I am leaving it injured and poorly armed. (One can almost say that I came into the year like a German soldier in 1939, and I'm going out like a Russian soldier in 1917.) A lost year it was not, for I struggled too much and survived too many skirmishes. The rest of the thousand-mile journey that I have started will continue. Two steps forward and one step back. But I shall continue."

## **JULY 1999**

"Success does not necessarily follow a chronological order of events. In many cases it is two steps forward and one and three-quarter steps back. But in the end you have visited all the important places on the journey, and when you open your eyes one day, you find yourself in a more pleasant situation.

Don't worry if you don't always follow a well thought-out plan. Just starting somewhere and then moving from one completed task to the next is better than deferring action until a perfect plan has been formulated.

Lastly, if your mood is already on the pale side, make sure you at least have clean underwear."



## Emotional problems, or inhibitions

March 2000

I wasn't even properly awake yesterday morning when I realised I still had the very same hang-ups as the previous night. It's like when you go camping with a group of people. As soon as everyone wakes up in the morning, they recognise each other as the same people they were the previous day. So it is with my hang-ups. The moment my alarm goes off and I realise it's not a nightmare or a sick joke, it's as if someone also woke up my hang-ups. And what do you know! There they are – all in place, ready for another day's service!

What am I talking about? What exactly is my problem? Mainly the fact that I think I don't make an impression on people I meet. I always wish I can deliver a better performance – be a sporty guy for the sporting types, an amateur musician for the wannabe rock stars, an experienced traveller to the travellers, a capitalist for the capitalists, and a communist for the communists. I wish I knew more about more things, so I could join the discussion around more campfires. I wish I have experienced more than I have actually experienced, and have seen more than I've seen. I wish I could do more things, and in such a way that people would refer other people to me, or refer to me in their conversations.

Then everything changed. I thought, who are these people I want to impress so badly? Who are these people with whom I oppress myself so much? There are six billion people on this planet, thousands of cultures, millions of subcultures, countless numbers of back rooms and crannies and corners in dark and dimly lit corridors. There are basements and attic rooms; almost as many spaces as there are people. Why on earth do I oppress myself so much with a few people who in actual fact mean nothing to me?

Free yourself, one is almost tempted to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am an army of one.

Then again, if I think about it, I am part of an army of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions. The only thing is, we all hide in our houses or apartments, or in backrooms, guest rooms, spare rooms, caravans or homes for the mentally unstable. Some of us keep watch at night, and only go to bed when other people wake up. Some of us keep more regular hours. Sometimes we recognize each other on the street, sometimes not. Some of us have beards; some of us just have a head full of unkempt hair. We are men, and we are women. Some of us are rich; some of us will always be poor. Some own houses, and some only own the shirts on their backs. Some are known to millions; some don't even always remember their own names.

We – are the Army of One.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Two plus one important remarks

Wednesday, 10 September 2003

People, myself included, are too serious. Take the whole story of having to move to another flat. You live in a place for almost five years, and then you get a call one night. The owner informs you they want to sell the apartment, and you should have been out yesterday. You feel a little anxious about the place that will soon be your new home, about your new surroundings, new roads you'd have to explore. What I want to suggest here is that this issue, like so many others in life, does not justify nearly so much seriousness.

That was the first remark. The second point is that the first point is a load of crap. I mean, some things are never as bad as you initially imagined they would be, but if you have to be honest, you'd have to admit that life is a fairly serious business. If you laugh at every second thing that happens to you, or at every third person who crosses your path, you will definitely see your ass.

\* \* \*

Life is no joke, but outside the great truths like "Doughnuts make you fat" and "The earth is round" few things are as true as that you can forget about surviving in this world without a good sense of humour.

To laugh at things that are "not really funny" also subverts our calculations. Is one plus one not two? And if that is the case, then we're not supposed to laugh at three-quarters of the things we laugh at, right? Yet this is exactly what we do, and on the cosmic calculator this is exactly what enables us to go on living despite what circumstances sometimes dictate.

## **The criteria for survival (are getting tougher by the day)**

Tuesday, 16 September 2003

The criteria for survival are getting tougher by the day. As usual, the perception of my person is one of the biggest problem areas – but not necessarily how others see me; I judge myself. If I find myself too light, I wear it like a billboard around my neck. I'll be a walking morale and self-esteem crisis ready to explode in an innocent bystander's face.

Take my friend L. as an example. When I returned to South Africa from Korea five years ago, he was sharing a house with a group of working twenty-somethings in Johannesburg. At that time he was the publishing editor of a magazine that he largely started on his own (other people had also made a contribution, but it was mainly his idea, and his responsibility).

This was the situation when I joined the company as a glorified secretary in July of that year. By October L. had purchased a house in a nice part of the city. The office also moved to his new residence. Since it was slightly too far for me to reach by bicycle every day, I accepted his invitation to make the servant's quarters in the backyard my temporary abode.

Slightly more than a year later, L. was on the point of entering the next phase of his life – marriage. By then I had already been back in North East Asia for eleven months. I had an entire three-bedroom apartment to myself. I was working full time, and I was earning enough money to live reasonably well. (Vague assumptions about exactly what I was doing suited me, because that meant I didn't have to explain to anyone that I made money teaching the alphabet to toddlers while clapping my hands.)

It's almost four years later. My friend has sold his magazine to a large company, which also offered him a

position that he “couldn’t refuse”. He and his wife now live in a larger, more luxurious home, and as I mentioned in the previous piece, they had recently become parents of a baby boy. According to the community’s criteria, my friend is successful in all respects – he is a homeowner, he’s a married man, he’s a father, and he has a job that requires a great deal of him but the monetary rewards make it worth it.

I, on the other hand, still rent the same apartment from a friend of one of my employers (although only until the end of this month). I am again commuting by bicycle because I don’t want to replace the scooter that is dripping oil on my front porch (and because the cycling is better for my health anyway). I still teach English. I am also working on a few projects that will hopefully generate a long-term income one day. And I write. And study Chinese. As long as I stay here in Taiwan I can visit my friend once a year, go to an Italian restaurant in his car, and even afford to pay the bill of R200 or so.

But where will I stand if I go back to South Africa? Gone are the days that I could rent a room from a friend from university. Gone are the days when I could sleep on a piece of sponge in a shed in a friend’s backyard. Gone are the days when it was good enough for me to work in an administrative capacity in an office. Also over are the days when it was okay to tell my pal I’ll go and have a drink with him as long as he can give me a lift – and possibly pay for my drink as well. It is therefore obvious that the criteria for survival – at least for myself – are tightening by the day.

Should we all compare our lives with those of old friends to judge how well we’re doing? That’s not my intention. But I do subscribe to certain criteria for a good life, and I am aware of how, at this stage of my life, I would have fared in a world similar to the one in which my friends in South Africa are living out their existences.

My identity as a writer who lives alone in a windowless apartment somewhere in the Far East, who has learned to speak Chinese, and who has learned how to ask a few

questions about life is firmly rooted in the reality in which I have found myself the past five years. The vision of myself as an entrepreneur who hopes to make money in South Africa “next year” while I dust off my Chinese books from time to time to see if I still understand some of it is rooted in faith. I don’t know if it will work out. I might fail. And if I fail, I feel miserable.

I can certainly say that I don’t have to compare myself with anybody. I can say that I don’t have to be a homeowner after six months or a year. I can say that I don’t have to be married within a year or eighteen months. And I might add that I don’t have to work according to anyone’s schedule. My life, after all, is not a series of scenes from an already written script.

The problem is that I have some ideas of what success looks like. In the world of the conventional middle class success looks like my friend L.’s life. With regard to the world of the free-thinking, solitary writer, my current life meets the much more modest criteria.

But is it enough?

Sometimes I feel like fleeing – to Mainland China. To pack my bag full of books and a few pieces of clothing, and let the rest of my belongings store dust in my apartment. I’d live in Beijing for three months and go on photo trips every day. I would study Chinese in parks and in tea shops, and practice it in small eateries in narrow back streets, and at onetime forbidden palaces.

I sometimes want to forget about Bronkhorstspuit, business, the meaning of life, getting married and having children, success before you reach 35, place in the world, and myself on the edge of the socio-economic middle class. I want to grow my beard and work on a project titled, “Lotus flowers of Red China”.

And I want to stop writing pieces like “The criteria for survival are getting tougher by the day”.

I also want to stop trying. Because no matter how hard we work on something, things don't always work the way they should. And sometimes we miss the point, because we try too hard to figure it out.

## **On the technical aspects of belonging and membership**

[At the beginning of September 2003 I was informed by my landlady that she wanted to sell the apartment I had been renting from her for almost five years, and that I had to be out of the place by the end of the month. This essay was written after a few weeks of packing, and of preparing the new place for habitation.]

Thursday, 25 September 2003

It was an exceptional experience at the end, this business of moving to another place. It cast an interesting and illuminating light on things I had been contemplating before I got the call to pack up and move. I refer of course – no surprises here – to the issues of identity and belonging. The difference is the experiences of this month have been concrete, with the academic value a boring sideshow.

I was confronted this month with the very real fact that I no longer belong – for the time being, and relative to a particular environment.

As I wandered through my apartment during the past few days, I couldn't ignore the fact that I no longer belong in a place that has become synonymous with the daily reality that I belong, for now, on this island. This structure, these dilapidated walls, the four windows that never allowed enough fresh air in my life, the front door that scrapes against the dull, unpolished marble floor, the front porch with old cigarette butts and unopened mail in one corner, the familiar path between the front door, my "office", the living room, the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, and back to the front door, was where I belonged for the past nearly five years. I did not belong at the neighbours' house. I did not belong at the 7-Eleven, or in any other place in this city, this country, or in this world more than I belonged in this stuffy, dimly lit



apartment. (Perhaps I exaggerate the “dark apartment” thing a bit for the sake of dramatic effect. Natural sunlight did sometimes penetrate the interior. I also had several electric lights, which did make the well-trodden path visible. And did I not experience many moments of intellectual enlightenment in this place?)

The fact remains I don’t belong here anymore. And it has nothing to do with identity, religion, or a vague understanding of the universe. (Or does it?)

Needless to say, an unpleasant sensation has gotten hold of my throat because of this suspended sense of belonging. And I suppose that’s where understanding makes a difference. If someone rushes at you and complains of an unpleasant sensation in the part of his anatomy where you know his stomach is located, it will be a pleasure for you to explain to this fool that he only needs to stuff his mouth with deep-fried calamari: Hunger is the problem, food is the answer. (Unless of course you’re wrong, and he’s actually complaining about a knife wound in his lower abdomen.)

In the case of my own unpleasant sensation, I could reassure myself with the explanation that I’m only experiencing a reduced sense of my place in the world, and that it is a normal reaction to a temporary situation. I could go further and say that I already have another place; that my sense of where I belong, will be restored promptly.

Still, there was no way I could allow such a rare, concrete manifestation of uncertainty to get away without milking it to the last drop of anxiety ...

MYSELF: “If you say another place you obviously refer to the apartment in Benevolent Light New Village, right?”

ME: “Yes. You’ll move all your stuff there tomorrow, and next week you will feel completely at home.”

MYSELF: “Why?”

ME: “Because all your stuff will be there! And you’ll have your own front door again, and more windows than you can count!”

MYSELF: “There are sixteen windows. I counted them.”

ME: “Well, there you have it! Your sense of where you belong shall be restored before you can say existential angst. You’ll even have a view of the neighbour’s kitchen.”

MYSELF: “It’s not my apartment. It belongs to someone who’s doing my employer a favour by renting the apartment to me.”

ME: “Yes, I know. But it will be yours for all practical purposes, at least for a few months.”

MYSELF: “But I don’t belong there. Not like you belong on your own patch of land, where you can sleep between the cabbages if you like.”

ME: “It’s true ... But do we ever belong anywhere for an indefinite period of our existence? Or are we strangers most of the time, running from one place to another – belonging here, not belonging there? And at the end of the day we rush ‘home’ because that’s where we think we belong – amongst our own people? What happens if that doesn’t work out? What happens if the relationships at ‘home’ are dysfunctional to such an extent that we feel we don’t belong there either? Do we keep roaming like the animals we are? Do we just keep fighting for our daily survival, for our right to a dignified life? Do we keep sniffing around in a desperate attempt to pick up a vaguely familiar scent? We are defenceless animals, for crying out loud! What more do you want?”

MYSELF: “Maybe I just wanted to hear that. Maybe I just wanted to hear it doesn’t always work out. That one should be

grateful when things do work out, and when you indeed feel as if you belong somewhere. Because you know nothing lasts forever, and if you can just enjoy the good things of life for one day, and then another ... it's better than to never have had it at all. Love doesn't last forever. Neither does life. At some time or another in your life, you will inevitably experience loss, and a reduced sense of your place in the world. How you handle it when it comes your way ... this, this is what gives you a sense of security."

ME: "Make the most of what you have while you have it?"

MYSELF: "Yes. I guess that's what it comes down to. To hold collar against the wind. To fight for survival, and if you survive, to continue fighting for the best you can get. And when things work out for you, to share the good you have with other people. Otherwise, what's the point?"

ME: "And never forget life is fragile? That death in the end conquers all? That all of us will eventually return to dust?"

MYSELF: "Well ... if you view human beings merely as a collection of meat and bone sniffing around for a place to lay down its head at the end of the day, I guess you can remind yourself of all of that."

ME: "And ... you should also try to find a mate with whom you can make a contribution to the survival of this wretched species, or what?"

MYSELF: "Hmm ... aren't there a few boxes left we can shuffle around?"

And so another few drops fall in the pail ...

## Storming ahead with a burning violin

Saturday, 11 October 2003

There's a popular saying that says we start dying the moment we're born. Our cells start ageing as they're growing, and even though damaged cells are, up to a point, nurtured back to full function, and destroyed cells replaced, the rate is never adequate to keep us alive forever. Then there's the fact that our lives could be terminated by unnatural causes as soon as we venture out of our cots. Can anyone be blamed for having severe existential anxieties every time they go outside?

A few years ago, in that glorious year right when I was supposed to join mainstream adult life, I was fortunate enough to watch a classic epic on my borrowed black-and-white TV. I had never been keen on cowboy or outlaw movies, but this movie gave me a particular perspective on life, and an attitude that has proven to be most useful.

The movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, tells the story of two outlaws in the Old West. After robbing their way into trouble, they make their way to South America. By the end, the two bandits are held up in a small town in rural Bolivia by what they assumed were just a number of local deputies, unaware of a platoon of soldiers who also happened to be in the neighbourhood. Butch and the Kid are sitting in a room, their backs against a wall, discussing the chances of them getting out alive. Surrounded by the local militia, oblivious of dozens of soldiers also taking position, they calculate their chances to be slim. They would try, nevertheless, they decide. Outside, on the walls of the town, surrounding them from every possible side and angle, dozens of loaded barrels are awaiting their attempt. They check their guns, exchange a few last words, and emerge dodging and ducking hundreds of bullets. Although it is merely suggested by skilful direction, everyone knows the only possible outcome: They went down, but – with all guns blazing.

As I was watching the credits, mesmerised by the profound implication for my own life, I recalled seeing a screenshot in the newspaper that advertised the movie on TV that night. I located the newspaper, cut the picture out with a pair of dull scissors, and decided to make it a permanent and prominent fixture of every place I would henceforth inhabit. It was stuck to the bathroom door in the council flat I shared with my younger sister, to a closet door in South Korea, and displayed on more than one wall after I had returned to South Africa. It was the first picture I pinned to my living room wall when I got to Taiwan, and at this very moment it is pasted next to the front door of my current apartment, lest I forget where I'm coming from, or where I'm heading.

It has become the closest to a personal dictum, a philosophy of life other than "live and let live" that I can be content with.

Entering my living room this afternoon after Chinese class, the picture once again drew my attention. I had been thinking of my recent plans of leaving this island – an important train of thought that usually takes precedence over any other truckload of ideas, but the picture distracted me. I thought about how the picture explained what I have been doing this past decade, and especially during my time in Taiwan. My ongoing attempts at keeping myself busy are my own valiant way of going down with all my guns blazing. It's not exactly heroic or brave, but it is my way of saying, "If we are going down no matter what, then I'd rather go down keeping myself busy to the final exhalation."

It did occur to me though that my version of this dictum, and my attitude to life on earth might be a tad defeatist, perhaps even a little morbid, and embarrassingly boring. "Is there no place for some mindless entertainment?" I asked myself. I stared out the kitchen window for a second, and then it came to me: Nero playing the violin while Rome was burning. He – or at least the mythical Nero – ignored the horrible facts on the ground, so to speak, and instead amused himself with some musical distraction.

A lot may be said about this attitude as well, but it does have a certain panache, a degree of defiant flamboyance. To indulge in casual entertainment in the current day and age is not dissimilar to Nero's drunken behaviour while flames were licking the marble pillars of his city. Watching a soap opera while people die of hunger may not qualify as flamboyant defiance in many people's minds, but that doesn't mean there is no justification for having fun.

We will all eventually die, our natural lives unavoidably reaching its conclusion. Going down with all guns blazing, whatever the substance of that for each person embracing this dictum, is one way of going. If you could have yourself some fun while you're at it, then so much better.

Butch and The Kid stormed into an avalanche of a thousand bullets, their own guns firing away until silence fell, until their lifeless fingers slipped from the triggers. Nero tried to silence the screams of burning citizens by plucking at his violin. I do my household chores, learn a few Chinese characters, write the odd line of poetry, fix my bicycle when necessary, paint my walls and doors different varieties of eggshell white, and plan my repatriation from exile. And I'm pretty sure if I look for it hard enough I'll be able to once again find that middle "C" on my cheap electronic keyboard.

## **It's still life, and still worthy of your commitment**

Friday, 13 February 2004

I am busy editing text I wrote in South Korea. One of the pieces was written on Saturday, 14 March 1998: "I'm afraid to commit to anything where success is not guaranteed. To tell the truth, I am unwilling to commit to anything where failure is even a vague possibility."

How do I feel about that now?

I have so far spent five years in Taiwan as an English teacher in a city that does not rank as one of the top locations in the world. (I am talking about Fengshan, not the larger area of Kaohsiung, which is the fourth largest container port in the world.)

I would probably not have considered such a life worthy of my commitment on 14 March 1998, and if perhaps such a life, certainly not in this place. Yet, I can categorically state that despite the price one pays and the imperfection of it, it has definitely been worth the time. Or, like a character remarks in the movie *Breakfast for Champions*, "It's all life."

The alternative is to get older year by year, never committing yourself to anything, all the while waiting for the elusive "perfect" project, or "ideal" life. And what will happen? You will realise too late you've gotten old, you mean nothing to no one, and you have done nothing with your life.

Get busy with anything remotely to your liking. It is a million times better than to allow your life to expire while you wait for "something better".

## [THE BIG UNTITLED]

Tuesday, 24 February 2004

(16:50)

We all are born in a certain era, in a society governed according to certain rules, in a culture with certain values, conventions, and ideas of what a good life looks like. It is always an open question how each individual will respond to the world in which he or she was born and grew up. Will he accept the rules and play by them most of the time? Will she accept some rules and reject others? Will he reject so many of the rules that he will be in constant conflict with everything and everyone around him in a short, miserable existence? Will he or she largely accept traditional values and conventions, and ideas about what a good life is and build their own lives accordingly? If not, what are the alternatives?

I find myself hanging between a tree branch and the soft green grass below. I don't want a "good" job – a so-called full-time position. I know I have to make money, but I believe there are many ways to go about doing it. I also attach importance to the noble ambition of a life devoted to study, charity and creative works. On the other hand, I hope that I can end up in a three-bedroom house in a quiet suburb or a large town, with a small garden, a car, and maybe a dog or two. I also hope that I can find a woman who will love me and accept me as I am; whom I will love, and in partnership with whom I can perhaps produce and raise some offspring.

Sometimes I think that my version of a good life is too idealistic. It is not.

I also sometimes reckon that especially the middle class part of the story might not be my destiny. But perhaps such a line of thinking is only the result of some personal experiences, and a suspicion that this, too, will not make me happy.



What is the alternative to my version of a good life?

The alternative is a cheap point-and-shoot camera, a notebook, a few pens and a ruler (something must be done in a neat, orderly fashion); no possessions, no home, no intimate relationships. I would travel from place to place – in my own country, because to go abroad costs money, and you need a passport and visas. I will spend time here, overnight there, and finally celebrate my fortieth birthday on a bus or a train on my way who knows where.

No place of my own, committed to nothing and no one except a wanderer's existence.

(17:32)

Will a nomadic existence make me happy?

Not according to my own beliefs.

I have been striving for years to attain the most perfect life I can find in order to devote myself to it. (A *ronin*, incidentally, is a masterless samurai, one whose master had died. Have I been a wandering *ronin* for the past more than ten years, looking for a new master to serve?) What would a perfect life look like? I've managed to squeeze a little time off in the pursuit of daily survival to consider this matter, and so far, I have come up with three possibilities (already mentioned): commitment to others – family, charitable endeavours; freedom to pursue creative expression; and the time, opportunity and resources to devote yourself to a life of study.

During the past fifteen years, I have dedicated myself to a great extent to the latter two. My family has always been important to me, but charity is a matter which I have so far avoided as far as possible. Why? I don't know. But I do believe that a life of voluntary, unselfish service to others is one of the noblest ways to spend your existence, and to lose your own life so that others can live, is the highest expression of this commitment.

This leaves me with a question: The life that I have tried for years now to avoid, namely that of the “regular guy” who marries, has children and goes to work every day, is this not in the end a beautiful manifestation of devotion to others?

Perhaps the man or woman enjoys the work they do, perhaps not. But they know joy in the workplace is not what really matters; for the working, married man or woman at the end of the day it is their marriage and children. They are therefore willing to sometimes sacrifice bigger ambitions for the sake of devotion to what “really” matters – namely their relationships with each other and with their children.

This is clearly an oversimplified picture. In reality, there is ambition that keeps married men and women from spending time with their families; there are extramarital relationships and divorce; men and women who leave a conventional family life after a few years to pursue other things – or the same things, but with someone else.

Let us for the moment return to a more uncomplicated picture of devotion to spouse and children, and income-generating activities enjoyed at least to some extent. In principle, this seems to be a good life, right? The principle is that the adult man or woman’s life is, at the end of the day, dedicated to the next generation – their sons and/or daughters.

Should this be accepted, and the matter left alone?

Maybe an additional question should be asked: What sort of life is made possible through dedication to the next generation?

I would venture to say that most adult men and women do not squeeze enough time off in their daily lives to consider this matter. And even if they do, what answers do they come up with? Are the lives of one generation after another sacrificed for a life that everyone postpones for the next generation to define? Do too many people desperately hold on to the old slogans, “We just do the best we can” and “Everything will work out as it should”?

(22:47)

Or does no one know any better, so everyone looks around them and do what most other people of their time and culture do? Is it good enough to say, “I don’t have time to think about such things, because I’m too busy at work (or at home) keeping everything going and staying afloat”?

Most adult men and women who marry and have children devote their lives to the possibility that their sons and daughters may one day lead a vague “better” life, or if not better, that they will at least as adults be able to keep their own heads above water, and perhaps experience some degree of happiness from time to time.

Is this sufficient? For many people of my time and culture, it is.

Can it be enough for me?

I have never experienced in my gut what it feels like to be committed to the next generation of my own blood. So, can I really answer the question? What value will my response have anyway? After five years of such a life, I may ask myself one Saturday morning if it has been “worth it”. Maybe I answer in the affirmative. If things can be that simple, it will settle the case for the moment. If I ask myself the same question again ten or twenty years later, and I give the same response ... then it must surely be “worth” it. Suppose I answer in the negative this time, how much weight will this response carry? Maybe something had happened that had damaged my faith and made me bitter towards my earlier conviction. Even in this case, the answer will be valid only for me.

I throw a bunch of ingredients in the pot, but something still does not taste right. The simmering stew is edible, but an essential ingredient is still missing. *I* am writing these words. *I* am thinking these thoughts. *I* am asking these questions. Me, not the mosquito that bit me a moment ago or the dog that wanted to rip my bicycle’s rear tyre to pieces an hour ago.

Why am *I* thinking about these things and why am *I* writing these words? Because there is something that is not in place; because there is an answer that remains elusive to me.

\* \* \*

Says the man on the bicycle on the way back from the Carrefour (Wednesday, 25 February, noon): “Write up what you can, and leave. To think that you too could lead a normal, happy life is absurd. Serve your purpose, and leave the show with your dignity intact. To try and gain more out of life is to lose your life.”

Why does it feel so right?

Intelligent partners in dialogue might ask: “How can you be so sure about what your purpose is? Perhaps it will only be revealed to you ten years from now! And what do you mean by ‘leave the show’?”

I sometimes think about giving up. I guess I will bite the dust within a year, and seeing that it will happen, it might as well be in my own country. Available funds and handouts from family and friends (before their patience runs out) will keep me going for a few months. After that it would be parks and streets to the end. Notebooks and printed material will be left with a trusted friend.

It always hits me in the ribcage when I think about it. It is indeed my fate if I quit trying. The fact that I did not fall asleep in a park last night on an empty stomach is because I did not cease to try, say nine months ago.

Nevertheless, how does one go about doing it, in practical terms? How do you give up?

You stop washing. You stop shaving. You stop working. You stretch your funds to the last penny, and then you go stand hands cupped in front of friends and family until they close the door, ever so politely, in your dirty, bearded face. Then you’re left to the elements, criminal characters, disease, and a rapidly deteriorating physical condition. You should be able

to leave the show in possibly not much longer than twelve to eighteen months – unless, of course, you run out of determination with your giving up, or you regain courage for life.

(New notebook)

We get up every morning, go through the usual routine, and if we are lucky we make it back home at the end of the day. Sleep to sleep. Most of us honestly do not know why. We cling to vague ideas about a “good life”, “happiness” and “trust and believe”.

I do it as well: Get up every morning, put water on the gas stove, rinse out my two ashtrays, pour a teaspoon of instant coffee in my yellow mug, mix my four breakfast cereals ... and the next morning I do exactly the same.

Maybe it's not so easy to give up. Maybe the value system with which we grow up keeps us from taking decisive steps to give up. There might be noises from our subconscious that discourage us, or perhaps that encourage us to continue with our existence. There is suicide ... but that is immediate, with no chance of rehabilitation – as in the case of a person who had given up at one stage, but then after months (or years) starts putting in renewed effort to stay alive.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, “Death is the true result and to that extent the purpose of life.” George Orwell said, “Keep the aspidistra flying.”

I believe both are right. Between these two statements lie boxed in human existence. The truth is that everyone's life will end in physical death, and it could happen at any moment. Until then, you must get up every day, wash your face, perhaps shave, boil water, make breakfast, and hope for a decent night's rest at the end of another long day. If you are smart, you will employ measures like buying a house and saving money, and you may get a full-time job to ensure that this process can continue for as long as possible. If you're less

lucky, your only hope is to survive each day. The alternative is to give up, long way or shortcut.

Thursday, 26 February 2004

(12:06)

I know the truth, but my daily life consists of employing measures to avoid it. I do not have any faith. Ironically, lack of faith is commonly understood in the context of faith in God, but it is not necessarily the case with me. My problem is that I do not have faith in the world. I can still believe that God loves me. The world, on the other hand, does not care much whether I live or die. And I understand this, in the same breath as I criticise it. I am part of the world that does not care too much. I am both a perpetrator of this crime, and to some extent a victim.

I have no faith in humanity. In my opinion, a large percentage of the people on this planet are nothing more than animals in clothes. Now, I have nothing against animals, it's just that I believe that human beings – in principle, if not always in practice – are more developed than other species. But what does this mean? What makes me more than an alley cat, or the rat that scrambles away from the cat? Among other things, my intelligence, my ability to manipulate the environment (much more than any animal is able to do), and free will to either create or destroy (although “free will” is sometimes pushed in one direction and other times inhibited from going in another direction by instincts and fears).

Nevertheless, I view the world with suspicion, and I have little faith in my fellow human being.

\* \* \*

I keep myself busy these days contemplating alternatives. One is to shave my hair, buy an orange dress and stand at traffic

lights with my breakfast bowl in my hands. Alternatively, I can join a Buddhist sect.

Apart from these options, there are two others that present themselves sporadically as some of the few possibilities that are truly worth considering: 1) to be a bearded, solo travelling full-time writer; and 2) to make enough money to convince a woman to spend her days in comfort as my companion.

(12:46)

If unrefined bits of wisdom and wit could be exchanged for money, I might be a rich man. If a certain weariness for the world could have compelled women to spread flattering rumours about a man and for other men to nod their heads respectfully for him in public, I would probably have had more reason to smile. But now I have this strong suspicion that I am either going to spend the rest of my days in increasing poverty and loneliness, or that I will alternatively “pull myself together”, figure out one plus one is two, and hope that two will be good enough for a few years of happiness.

I think too much and do too little. I suspect too much and believe too little. War is one thing; peace is another matter all together. Oh, and I am a coward who don't employ enough measures to ensure my life continues for as long as possible, but simultaneously I fear death just a tad more than middle class happiness.

(16:32)

You know, if you had a dog, say for two or three years, and you know the dog, you know what makes it angry, where its irritation threshold lies. Then one day you say something to the dog, or you do something, and suddenly it growls at you. Maybe you'll feel a little hurt, perhaps indignant. “I thought I knew the dog,” you'll say.

\* \* \*

People who do not give up have something to live for. What do I have to live for? Financial stability with a wife and children? And that's if I throw the dice at just the right angle and I have luck on my side! Alternatives exist for this future scenario ... as compensations and as measures to keep existential anxiety under control.

"You reject things before you even know how happy they will make you," someone might say.

"You're right," I'll reply. "But what are you saying? Financial stability plus marriage plus children equals happiness? Then life is mathematics and science! Then my current condition is simply the result of absent people and irregular cash flow."

"You allow present circumstances to smother your faith and hope," the person will strike back. Then he'll tip the cigarette against the rim of the ashtray.

"Present circumstances have simply shed light on certain issues," I will respond, and then I'll take a drag on the cigarette.

Then I will make a simple request. "It's Thursday, 26 February at 4:49 in the afternoon. Tell me now, at this moment, what the truth is."

"I do not know," my companion will say. "Or maybe I know, but I can't remember. Or maybe I can remember, but I don't want to say."

And the cigarette is snuffed out.

Friday, 27 February 2004, twelve minutes past midnight.

I have known the truth now for more than four and a half hours. It was revealed to me while I was sitting on the carpet of a room in a daycare/language centre, teaching a couple of six-year-old Taiwanese twins a few English sentences. The small faces, the innocence, the restlessness, the warmth of little hands grabbing my finger as I point to another flash



card ... almost forced me to bellow out: “This, to raise your own children, to see them grow up every day, to experience their unconditional love and to love them unconditionally, this must make everything worthwhile!”

And then it hit me: That’s all we are looking for, possibly the best that we can ever hope for! Love, art, entertainment, sex, money, vacations, creative freedom, study, togetherness and companionship – all things that we pursue to make life worth it!

We all know how vulnerable we are, how death crawls around everywhere like a thousand pests in a thousand different manifestations. And even if we have managed to avoid it for twenty or thirty or eighty years, it will get us!

But it was only death that we feared, it would be one thing. Between birth and death awaits pain, sorrow, hunger, disease, poverty, suffering, unfulfilled desires, longings, humiliation, aches, and age that causes hair to fall out, previously nimble fingers to warp, eyes to fade, ears to go deaf and hearts to pack up.

If it could be possible to freeze time for a moment and collect all the data of every person who lives at that moment, to take all the pain, suffering, hunger, desire, humiliation, and all other emotional and physical discomfort, and then also to take all the joy, happiness, love, all the beautiful and wonderful things in life, if you could give a specific weight to all these things, the conclusion will be that the average human life on planet Earth is filled with more pain than love, with more misery and longing and hunger than happiness and contentment.

Any person can protest the validity of this point, or declare that they believe the beauty and happiness are worth the pain and sorrow that people sometimes experience, even if you only experience the beauty and happiness for a moment or a single day. Maybe I’ll agree, maybe not. But even such a person would find that they also confirm the Truth – that the beautiful and good things make the pain and suffering (sometimes) worth it (if the person wants to go further he can

even add, “for some” – because many other people go through their entire lives deeply convinced of exactly the opposite).

Everything we do is a conscious or subconscious attempt to “make the best” of our lives – as if we know, deep down, that the story usually does not end well.

Animals – some pets excluded – usually live an existence filled with danger, food, fun, and death due to illness, accident, old age, or at the jaw of another, stronger animal.

People, on the other hand, are born, they learn how to survive in the environments from where their existence had sprung forth, and they start to take actions and employ measures from an early age to get as much happiness out of life as possible.

Most adults reach a point where they realise people sometimes die more easily than flies, and that people sometimes spend many years’ worth of time and energy to create something that can be swept away in the blink of an eye. Most know and acknowledge that the end of (physical) life is death.

Those among us with good observation skills also realise that holding out on this planet for as long as possible, ends, if we are lucky, in a nursing home or a guest room with family, or – in less fortunate circumstances – in a hospital room, with tubes in your nose, your skin all wrinkled up, and your sight and hearing a fraction of what it used to be.

We easily label those who remind us of these truths as pessimists, prophets of doom and all-round dampeners of a good mood. But whether you think about it or not, the chances are slim that you can say you are not even a little uneasy about the possibility that your life can be over three days from now. And who can say they can’t wait to hit sixty or seventy or eighty? Can anyone ultimately deny the value that happiness holds for the majority of the inhabitants of this planet as a consolation for the unpleasant truths of life?

Where does God fit into this truth? I do not know, but I do know that atheists, pantheists, monotheists, Christians, agnostics, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists all get sick, all feel pain and all die. The Truth is valid for everyone. It is universal.

Five hundred years ago all but a few eccentrics believed the earth was flat. The fact that people vehemently protested against the idea that the earth was round did not flatten the earth by a single millimetre.

DENY IT OR ACCEPT IT – WHILST BLOOD FLOW IN OUR VEINS, WE DO EVERYTHING WE DO IN ORDER TO MAKE OUR LIVES WORTH THE EFFORT.

What does this say about my criticism of the middle class I am so fond of reciting? A middle class life is then nothing more than an honest attempt to make life worth living! What does it say about my preference for a life dedicated to creativity and learning? This is also just an attempt to say: Keep trying, it can be worth it ...

(It's Friday, 27 February 2004, eight minutes past one in the early morning.)

\* \* \*

If the above is true, then what is the difference between a “good life” and a “noble existence”?

A Good Life is one where life is worth the effort for the person concerned, and if they can make a contribution to making life worth living for people who make their life worth living, then so much better.

The pursuit of a Noble Existence can be defined as active participation in a struggle to make life worth living not only for yourself and your loved ones, but also for others with whom you have no personal connection.

When your life is dedicated to (among other things) the improvement of the quality of other people's lives, you give

more value to your own life than would be the case if you were simply another single organism concerned with your own preservation.

To take actions that will be conducive for you and even a select group of significant others to be convinced that life is worth the effort, but that will deprive other people of a belief that their lives are worth living, or that compromise this belief to a serious degree, is to ... limit the value of your life to only yourself and a select group of significant others.

The actions of a person who sporadically and in varying degrees rob other people of the conviction that life for them is worth living, make the permanent or temporary isolation of this person concerned and the termination (in a legal manner) of his destructive activities a noble quest for people who pursue the cause of not only making life worth living for themselves and for their significant others, but who also want to facilitate a belief among members of the broader community that life is worth living.

Life is a struggle? Yes, it's a struggle for survival and a struggle to make life worth living. A Good Life is to succeed in this struggle. An Exceptionally Good Life is relative to what makes your life worth living. (If travelling to unfamiliar places is something that makes your life worth living, then to travel frequently and perhaps for extended periods of time would be something that makes your life exceptionally good – for you). A Noble Existence is to assist other individuals – even strangers – in their struggle; also to be active in promoting the notion that life is worth living, or that it can be. To lose your life so that others may live, is

Saturday, 28 February 2004

It can thus be said that I do not only ask about the meaning of my life anymore. The question that must first be answered is, “Why should my life have meaning?”

The answer is if you believe your life means something, you will have reason to live; if you have reason to live, it is probably because you believe your life has meaning.

None of us chose to be here. Most of us know too well that life is not always easy, and at times it can be downright miserable. Most people are also aware of several ways to end their lives. It will not be inappropriate at this point to state that it is of the utmost importance to find reasons

WHY  
YOU  
WANT  
TO  
LIVE.

Incidentally, the last sentence I started writing yesterday (“To lose your life so that others may live ...”) is still incomplete because everyone can think of their own nouns or phrases with which to complete the sentence. Possibilities include, “... is to be a hero”, “... is to be a giver of life”, and so on. People who have reasons why they want to live, but who still on the spur of the moment or after long deliberation decide to take the risk to possibly lose their own lives for the sake of allowing others to live, deserve to be honoured and remembered.

I also left the sentence incomplete last night because I was tired of thinking along those lines.

I can think of many reasons why I want to live: being with family and friends, love, possibly my own family someday, to be creative, to learn and understand more of the world. Currently some of these things give me reason on a daily basis to continue my existence. I am also compelled to do other things that do not, on a daily basis, provide reasons on their own to continue with my existence, but that will with the passage of time hopefully make possible a new environment and existential condition which, so I currently believe, will give me even more reason to live.

\* \* \*

To summarise and wrap things up:

Each one of us is born in a certain era and in a society with established rules and possibly a particular dominant culture, with a variety of resources with which to satisfy our needs, but also varying quantities and degrees of access. By the time we have reached a certain physical and mental maturity, we will have learned a few things about life: it's sometimes hard, and sometimes exciting; it's sometimes horrible and other times it's wonderful. Sometimes the most beautiful things come our way, and sometimes the opposite happens. We also become aware of the fact that everyone eventually dies, but also that it is easy enough to expedite our own death. Deep under the influence of all the aforementioned things we decide over the course of time WHAT we want to do with our lives, WHERE and possibly WITH WHOM. It is also quite a common occurrence that we contemplate the meaning of our lives, and a possible purpose for our existence.

While we are trying to work out answers to these questions, or perhaps after we have formulated a few satisfactory answers, or sometimes even before we consider any possibilities, we must know whether we WANT to live. (I say "know" rather than saying we should "contemplate" because although it is certainly a common phenomenon that people think about issues such as what you want to do with your life, where and with whom, I don't think too many people go and sit under a tree or on a rock to consider whether they actually want to live. Sometimes people reach a point when they become aware of a lack of enthusiasm to continue their existence. However, until someone reaches this point, they probably take it for granted that they want to live, seeing that it is already the existing reality and because they experience what can be regarded as an acceptable minimum degree of enthusiasm for the continuance of their own existence.)

If you are aware of a degree of willingness to give life a chance, or even a degree of enthusiasm, it follows that you will consider reasons why you would want to continue an existence that had started without you having had a choice about the date, place and other details that play a vital role in who and what you are.

Do you, therefore, want to continue with your life?

If so, why?

If you do not want to continue with your life and you would prefer to end it sooner rather than later, are you willing to accept responsibility – while you are still aware of it – for the consequences that your decision will have for the significant others in your life?

\* \* \*

In the end we only have ourselves, our relationships with other people, and what we believe in. The hope is always that we will find something to hold on to, something that will convince us that life is, at the end of the day, worth living. The hope is further that these good things will block our way to the abyss, should we seriously consider giving up.

## **Principles, statements, and a question**

Monday, 12 April 2004

I have this nagging suspicion that I am my own greatest hero, the guy who keeps storming forward even though the battle has already been decided. (I know how to continue functioning.)

- 1) If you don't get pulled to the ground, you remain standing.
- 2) If you are not kept standing, you fall down.

\* \* \*

I know how to be “normal” – how to function in the environment in which I find myself without unnecessarily undermining my chances of survival.

Tuesday, 13 April 2004

Statement 1: Eventually many people become aware of the fact that the odds are loaded against them, and even if things turn out okay for them, there are masses of others for whom it will never turn out well. People are also aware of their above-average intelligence in the animal kingdom – which, among other things, means that they know how to end their own lives. Reasons why a person does not do it include lack of courage to jump in front of a train, concern for loved ones, or even vague ideas about what might happen to their “soul”. Measures are taken to start “making things worthwhile” ...

Statement 2: To say that good things are not possible, is just not truthful.



And a question ... How much importance should one attach to your *ideal* vision of how things ought to be, your *ideal* place and living environment, and your *ideal* role in society? How much premium should one place on things that are “always possible”, if the fact that it is not in the process of becoming reality is depressing you more and more every day? Or is this the “devil” whispering discouragement in my ear?

## **End contemplation III**

Saturday, 1 May 2004

And what happened? I got my just rewards for thoughts about personal happiness and for the killing of a proud, brave cockroach just before going to bed – I dreamed about death all night!

Got up with difficulty at nine o'clock, and went to buy breakfast. Sun was shining nicely as I was riding through the morning market crowd. "That's what you get when you think you're happier these days – and when you step on a cockroach," I thought.

Then, around the next corner, a Hallelujah chorus waited in anticipation, with a neon board announcing another bit of truth on my path to enlightenment: "We must strive to be happy exactly because death is on our case every single day."

## The loner and the community

Sunday, 9 May 2004

I went out last night – Mama Mia’s, and then Pig & Whistle ... everybody that I thought had disappeared of the face of the earth was there – the two young ladies with whom I had socialised last March, the one’s brother, and a lady from the Green Jungle.

One of the two young ladies greeted me from where she had been standing on the other side of the bar. In the absence of anything better to say, I replied with, “Time passes, right?” The brother made a remark that was meant to indicate that he knew me, and the lady from the Green Jungle nearly put her hand on my groin.

By the time I crossed the bridge that separates the city from my neighbourhood, the sky was five-o’clock-in-the-morning blue. I felt surprisingly good despite the following question: What do you do when people hold a view of you that is inaccurate, or when they fail to take into account important aspects of your life, or their view is simply obsolete?

I think you have three options: 1) You go to the places where they spend time and manipulate and intimidate them until they give you the respect you think you deserve. 2) You hide, and try to forget about it. 3) Unless it threatens your survival, you let it go, and you think if you can accept the fact that some people have an inaccurate, incomplete or outdated view of you, you are one step closer to where you hope to be.

\* \* \*

Many people’s confidence – as manifested in, for example, the way they greet others and then walk away – is based on one thing: membership in a group.

I say, meet me person to person.

I can go further and add that a superficial performance of confidence does not impress me anymore. As long as I believe your display of confidence is built on nothing more than membership in a group, I have no reason to treat you with more than the minimum politeness with which I treat most people. Show me your confidence without the support of your group, then we'll talk.

Could it be that I desire the appearance of confidence that membership gives to a person? Could it be that I also envy people who do benefit from group membership? It is possible. But as in many other cases, I repeat the conviction that I believe my position, or my criticisms are valid, and have value, despite the possible motivations for my opinion or my criticism.

Sunday, 23 May 2004

This year seems to be a time of re-labelling.

Previously, church-going, dogma-reciting people were the "believers", and I the "heretic". Previously, I was the "alien" and anyone who were not like me, "normal human beings". Previously I was the being from another time and place, who sometimes evoked sympathy from people because I also have to deal with things like "us earthlings".

Now I say, fuck this. I am the believer. I am the normal human being. And from now on I refuse to be insulted by people who suffer from a weak imagination or an underdeveloped intellect, who stare themselves blind on their own inadequate frame of reference.

## Enlightened spirit

Monday, 17 May 2004

Where does spiritual enlightenment fit in the range of personal development? What is spiritual enlightenment? Is it to disengage from a material existence in sole pursuit of spiritual purity, to “free the spirit” from the “cycle of birth and death”?

An interesting aspect of so-called spiritual enlightenment and detaching yourself from the world is that it is 100% selfish. You go on a mission where the rest of humanity matters even less than before ... except of course if it is spiritual enlightenment not through detaching yourself from the world, but by engaging in and with the world. Is this at all a possibility?

What does *intellectual* enlightenment mean? It means that you free yourself from ignorance, prejudices and beliefs based on fear rather than reason. You also learn to use your mind as a tool to improve your chances of survival; also to facilitate the development of your person, including working out what you want to do with your life that goes beyond mere physical survival. It implies an understanding of yourself and humankind as a species as well as an understanding of your environment –understandings that are likely to be more advanced than views held by a majority of the population.

## **I know who I am, part two**

Friday, 28 May 2004

People who think I like being alone should have their minds read. But what alternative is there for a person for whom being alone is a daily reality but to confirm his value as an individual according to his own standards?

This person will try to establish his value as an individual in a society where membership in a group is one of the most prestigious awards an individual can claim for himself.

To be one member of an intimate two-member group is however held in particularly high esteem since it implies inter alia that each of the two members is sexually attractive to at least one person. This in turn influences the esteem of these two members in the larger social group in which they move, and also in the wider community, for sexual attractiveness (and the accompanying satisfaction of another person's need for pleasure) is one of the main factors that determine an individual's value in the world we live in – the other being financial or economic prowess.

If you are not a valued member of a social group, and your sexual attraction is not of such a nature that people desire physical communion with you (in ways clear to other people), there remains but a single possible label for your person: SINGLE-LONER. (If, however, as SINGLE-LONER, you possess visible financial prowess, you will surely attract people who desire the delightful benefits your financial status entails.)

Being a SINGLE-LONER, especially one without visible financial prowess, is naturally not as enjoyable as being with another person. It also has absolutely no calming effect on any existential anxiety you might experience. It is also a condition that occasionally leads to nasty attacks on your dignity, that once again emphasise your consciousness of differentness,

which diminishes your chances even further of being taken seriously in any social context.

What should one do? Jump in front of a train? Bore other people with your self-pity? What you do, is you confirm your value according to your own standards that will sometimes be in conflict with the standards of the community that view loners with suspicion and that encourage membership to social groups. A critical view of some of the community's standards is therefore to be expected.

By the way, for whom do I make these notes? The mere possibility that it is just for myself is unbearable.

And I know where this latest piece of social criticism is coming from: It feels bad to be alone, so now I weave a whip out words with which I can punish the community (or a whip I can crack a safe distance from the nearest picnic table – I don't want to completely ruin any chances of some communion with other people).

I am not taking back a single word of what I said in the preceding paragraphs, but it is once again important for the sake of intellectual honesty to admit that I know what is fuelling my criticism.

I am in a difficult situation. The gap between how I see myself and how the "community" views me – as manifested in the reactions of people on what I am doing with my life and on the utterances I sometimes can't help making in polite conversation – is becoming increasingly unbridgeable.

Two possibilities: a) I have to get the recognition from the community that I believe I deserve, or b) I will continue to treat the community with increasingly vicious contempt. (It must necessarily be so – if "they" are not with me, then I am against them. And the insane asylum or the prison creeps ever closer ...)

Do I hold the community responsible for my loneliness? No. I am already guilty of cynicism; I cannot afford to be stupid as well.

[...]

But as you sometimes beat the grass to startle a snake, I believe my own lack of regular intimate contact and my isolation from the community is the medium through which I gain certain insights into the position of the individual in society. The bitterness with which I sometimes write merely confirms it is not just an interesting subject I approach with the objectivity of an academic. I know what I am talking about.

Again, I can declare that I know who I am. Again I can ask of people who avoid time on their own as much as possible if they know who they are – apart from the combination of imitations they employ to successfully function within a particular social community.

I can also declare that who I am is not always good, and certainly not always pleasant. One also sometimes wonders what is so good about extensive self-knowledge if the result of this is that you spend your days and nights alone ...



## **New approach | Commitment | Accept yourself**

Monday, 7 June 2004

### **A new approach?**

I hear there's cool Mexican hip-hop, but even if I buy some of it there will still be cool Uzbek music that I'll never hear. And even if I get to listen to some of it, I'll never be an Uzbek. And even if I marry an Uzbek woman and live in India, I will never be Indian. And even if we immigrate to America, I will never be a born and bred American. And even if I live in New York City for thirty years, I will never be a Frenchman. And even if I live in Paris, I will never live in Sweden. And even if I live in Stockholm for ten years, I will never live in Japan during the fourteenth century ...

**Precondition for commitment:** Once you accept that you are a *particular* human being, you can commit yourself to a *particular* kind of life.

Tuesday, 8 June 2004

### **Accept yourself – even if it's only to save time**

I accept the particularity of my background. I think and write most of the time in Afrikaans, my skin is “white”, my facial features mainly dictated by the genes I have received from my mostly Germanic ancestors.

I can change how I look. I can even be difficult and abandon my linguistic background – because I have not chosen it, and force myself to think and write only in English. I can be even more radical and choose another language (other than English), master this language, and eventually think and write exclusively in that language. At the end of such a

process – that will take years of hard work – I will be a splendid example of a so-called self-made man.

However, I am willing to forgo such a radical process for the sake of time and energy, and largely accept the particularity of my physical appearance, my mother tongue and cultural background as they stand, and to regard these things as good enough instruments to facilitate the process of self-discovery and self-invention.

## **So that the masses know | Life is a joy ride**

Tuesday, 8 June 2004

### **So that the masses know**

Being in a loving relationship is what makes life worth living for many people. I am not in a loving relationship, so I have to try a lot harder to make my life worth living. My attempts may ultimately prove to be inadequate, but until that day comes, I plan to keep my collar to the wind. And continue walking.

### **Life is a joy ride**

I reckon I may not make it.

I know what my teenage years were like. I know how my twenties played out, and I am currently ticking off my thirties one year at a time. What will my forties be like? My fifties? Will I even make it to forty? Do I even want to make it?

The fact of the matter is this, I bet everything I believe in, my hopes, the value and meaning of my life as well as what is still going to make my life worth living, I bet everything on the miracle of meaningful relationships with a few other people!

\* \* \*

This is how it is: Adam lived alone in Paradise. He thought it a good place, but he felt lonely. Then God made him a wife. And then they were happy. That is where the story should have ended.

But when they did something wrong – they ate.  
From the tree.  
Of knowledge.

\* \* \*

On my way back from town, and I reckon: I will make it.  
Many of the people I see every day are not going to make it,  
but I will.

## Results of a life

Friday, 11 June 2004

The question remains, what is the difference between “me, now” and “me, ten years ago”? What difference does it make that my knowledge about myself is more advanced now, or that I have defined myself more clearly?

Also, what’s the difference between me and anyone else whose knowledge about his or her SELF is not so advanced or someone who has not managed to define his or her SELF as clearly? Does it make me happier? More satisfied with myself? Does it enable me to more easily find peace with other people with whom I share a living environment?

Am I missing a great truth? How important is RESULT? [See notes in the piece, “The SELF is born” from Thursday, 8 April 2004.] Is this what distinguishes the artist from the salaried worker (if both have children, who can count as results of your life, or neither have any children)? Is it what distinguishes the person who sacrifices time and money for a good cause from the person who lives for him- or herself for the most part of their daily lives?

We come from Nothing, and we go back to Nothing. What we leave behind is what we have done with our lives – our handiwork, that which gives value to our lives while we are still living. (By the way, it’s strange that some people consider the “Nothing” reference as atheistic, and yet the line “You are dust and to dust you shall return” is central to the Christian funeral rite.)

Another question: How does the level of ENLIGHTENMENT an INDIVIDUAL reaches during their lifetime influence the RESULTS they leave behind?

\* \* \*

On Friday, 11 June 2004 (23:15) I consider the following two questions as two of the most vital questions that any person can ask themselves:

1. WHAT MAKES YOUR LIFE WORTH LIVING?
2. WHAT RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE ARE YOU LEAVING BEHIND (AT THE PRESENT MOMENT)?

## **It's only a game, and the rules can be figured out**

Sunday, 20 June 2004

I think I'm ready to declare that life is to a great extent a game.

It works like this: you define for yourself a character from the human character material you observe in your environment and from what you are exposed to from other sources (alternatively you become, to a large extent, the character your environment forces on you or which it requires from you), and then you play a role you define for yourself, or that you choose from the possibilities (or you play the role forced on you by the environment or the one required of you).

Differences between the ENLIGHTENED INDIVIDUAL and the OTHER INDIVIDUAL can be found in the above explanation: The former defines to a considerable extent his or her own character as well as the role they want to play, while the latter mainly plays the role of the character the community imposes on them or requires from them. The ENLIGHTENED INDIVIDUAL knows who and what they are, because in a practical expression of their free will they choose among many possibilities the role and character they deem fit for themselves. They can also explain why they chose a specific role and character, and not someone or something else.

How well both types of individuals function in the world depends on how well they know the Rules Of The Game Of Life, and how willing they are to play accordingly.

It is also true that many ENLIGHTENED people do not have a high opinion of the Rules. However, only a moderate degree of intelligence is required to decipher the rules of the Main Game, and of the various sub-games in which both ENLIGHTENED people and OTHER people are sometimes obliged to take part. In other words, there is always hope.

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[Additional note: The role and character chosen by the type of person I call enlightened are not necessarily better – in a moral sense – than the role and character that is required by the community of another individual, or a role they feel compelled to choose at the expense of other ambitions they may have harboured. The role in the latter case might be one of leadership in an extraordinary difficult time for the community, while the chosen role (and character) of the so-called enlightened individual in similar circumstances may be one that is characterised by non-involvement. I mention these possibilities because, despite the fact that the enlightened individual is my chosen hero figure, I am not blind to heroic acts of so-called other individuals.]

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[One more note: Just because a person does not define his or her own character and role, is not to say that he or she is not enlightened. Such a person may be fully aware of alternative characters that they could be or could have become, or alternative, even more enjoyable roles they are more than capable of playing. Due to the best of reasons they might accept their prescribed roles and characters (or the roles and characters that society expects of them), for the sake of service to the community, and for the sake of leaving behind positive results of their existence.]



## **The formula that leads to result**

Sunday, 27 June 2004

What is the difference between me and Joseph Stalin, or between me and Bill Gates? The difference is results of our lives.

Joseph Stalin, Bill Gates and I were all born in particular places at particular times, within communities with particular needs. If Stalin were born in 1979 instead of 1879, in the same town in Georgia, with a relatively similar domestic situation (adjusted for 1979 reality), his life would have produced different results. The same can be said if I were born in 1771 and not in 1971. The importance of fate data – where you were born, when, and as whose child, and events later in your life about which you have no control, or did not have control – and the needs of the community can NEVER be underestimated as factors contributing to the final results of a particular person's life.

The only other factor that plays a significant role is choices. Stalin chose against the path that would have led to him becoming a priest, and chose in favour of joining Lenin and the Bolsheviks. So I have chosen, for example, against whatever employment I could have obtained in South Africa and opted in favour of teaching English in Taiwan to keep myself alive. The choices Joseph Stalin had made had a dramatic impact on who and what he became, and on the results he produced of his existence. The choices I have made so far in my life have also had a dramatic impact on who I am at the present moment, and on the results that I have so far produced of my existence.

The following formula can thus be suggested: **RESULTS OF YOUR LIFE = FATE + NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY + PERSONAL CHOICES.**

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday, 3 July 2004

The UNENLIGHTENED says: This is who and what I am, so I should just accept it.

The ENLIGHTENED says: These are the cards I've been dealt, and these are the resources at my disposal. Here are my capabilities and my limitations, and here are my interests. Considering all these things, I declare a particular vision of WHO and WHAT I WANT to be, and WHERE I would prefer to be this person. Let the work begin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday, 7 July 2004

Happiness is primarily an issue of the senses.

Think about it for a minute: What are you looking at right now? What do you smell? What do you taste? What do you hear? What are you touching?

Equally important, and perhaps even more so: What are you not looking at, or what do you not see? What do you not smell? What do you not taste? What don't you hear? What are you not touching?

And then, if happiness is to a great extent dependent on how you experience your immediate environment: What do you want to see? What do you want to smell? What do you want to taste? What do you want to listen to? What do you want to touch?

\* \* \* \* \*

## The attraction of silence

Sunday, 15 August 2004

I am suddenly acutely attracted to silence, like sitting in or nearby a piece of open veld and just listening, and maybe having a whispered conversation with myself.

Some might consider this to be the flipside of a desire for non-appearance; the latter, of course, in order to protect oneself. I believe that I have become increasingly alienated from people because most people I meet are not on the same journey as me – intellectually speaking, but it can also be seen as a spiritual process.

If I had, for example, converted to an orthodox version of Judaism, my relationship with my immediate family and some old friends would have been at a similar level of alienation than is now the case. But now the convictions to which I have come and which I have worked out for myself, is my own faith, with no external paraphernalia like a prescribed dress code and a prescribed style of facial hair growth shared with others in a community of faith, as in the case of, for example, orthodox Jews. I am still trying to be recognisable (“basically the same guy you’ve always known”), but it is becoming increasingly difficult.

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[To some extent I do not blame my family. They love me, and they probably wish that I could be “more like other people” because they are convinced of the fact that I am miserable most of the time. It is also possible that if I were not so stubborn and if I did not hold so many beliefs unfamiliar to them, they would find it easier to relate to me.

In terms of a lot of things I say, I am indeed a stranger to the people who have known me a lifetime, and because they do not live the process with me day-in and day-out, they do not know where I am coming from half of the time I open my mouth.]

## **Boredom, and actions that compensate (and my English class on a Monday afternoon)**

Monday, 13 September 2004

I am okay by 16:25: my mind is manageable; my apartment is clean; plans, old and new, interesting enough for a Monday.

Within half an hour with a group of seven-year-olds (who are not unreasonably noisy or rowdy), the boredom and the farce of everything I am trying to do absolutely overpower me. Within minutes, my thoughts are rushing down a variety of dark corridors: What is the point of everything? Where are we heading? Face the facts! Etcetera. Regular Monday afternoon, 16:30 to 18:00 routine.

Then the thought came to me that one needs certain things. If you don't get these things, you will either deteriorate physically and emotionally, or you will get bored, or both (depending on your particular situation, and of what specific needs we are talking about).

COMPENSATING ACTIONS can alleviate the adverse effects of the situation, but if these types of action cannot be taken, then it's physical and/or emotional deterioration, or boredom and frustration, or all aforementioned.

This is how I can describe, for the umpteenth time, my hours at home on my own, and also the result of a lack of actions to compensate, on a Monday afternoon between 16:30 and 18:00.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday, 28 September 2004

If I had stopped eating on Wednesday 28 July 2004, I would probably have been dead by now. It can therefore be said that one of the reasons I am still alive is because I did not stop eating two months ago.

Friday, 1 October 2004

Last night I bought toothpicks, new razor blades, dental floss and some cotton buds. This morning I had breakfast, and then later at the morning market bought carrots, apples, something for lunch, and two 500 millilitre cups of green tea. Then I went to fetch fresh water, filled my two bottles when I got home, and put them in the fridge.

What does all of this mean? What value does it have on the Greater Landscape of My Life? All these things – the dental floss, the carrots, the water, and all the other things – are measures that are conducive to survival. All of this suggests that I have again so far today, on this Friday, October 1st 2004, not yet decided to “let things go”.

\* \* \* \* \*

## A meandering thought

Wednesday, 13 October 2004

01:27

Monday afternoon at 16:45 the wording of a thought came to me. The thought upset me somewhat. I figured, I if still remembered the thought by 18:00 I can make a note of it at home (the idea hatched during a class). Not only did I still remember the thought, but the state of mind that had given rise to the idea was still present at the appointed hour.

Nevertheless, I was home, I could watch a little TV, work on the computer, listen to music ... and I had a fresh, steaming box of shrimp fried rice to satisfy my appetite. The idea had still not been written down by the time I went to bed.

\* \* \*

This weekend I will again make an appearance where I will stoop so low as to feel embarrassed about the growing hairlessness of my scalp. Yes, there I'll be, bald-headed, barefoot\*, 33-year-old property-less, credit card-less, car-less, non-corporate, independent, unpublished "writer".

I might just succeed in entertaining one or two ladies for a while with my intelligent and – seeing that I can't manage to detach myself from the idea of arranging a date with one particular young woman – somewhat charming company. Before long, however, I will be pushed aside in favour of another male character who is so blessed to have hair on his head, and clothes in his closet in which appearances can be so much more impressive, and more in accordance with the fashion of the day.

I will therefore, after once again tying my shoes to my feet, rush back to the safety of my apartment that smells of loneliness and stale cigarette smoke. I might watch TV for a

while, work on a project on the computer, play a few FreeCell games, listen to music, drink tea, and blow even more cigarette smoke at the walls and ceiling whilst contemplating the sustainability of my present life.

\* [In Taiwan the custom is to take off your shoes before entering a dwelling.]

\* \* \*

(Back to the penultimate notation)

This brings us to Wednesday at 16:26, almost 48 hours after the original idea – or the latest manifestation of an old idea, because a new idea it is definitely not.

\* \* \*

Getting it, missing something ... insights, ignorance ... it's all the same ...

23:48

My life, as it currently stands, is not worth living, and I don't have the necessary faith or conviction to make the changes to make it worth the effort.

I am losing my faith. I have reached the end of the road, and nothing at the end of it is as rosy as ignorance and blind faith.

I think of sex and money, as though I desperately believe that these are the ingredients that will make everything "different". What does it say if that is my only remaining faith?

I hope to get up tomorrow morning, because I'll be hungry and in need of coffee and a cigarette. I will go to my class because it will be less stressful than to pick up the phone and explain to the school that I don't want to go. Plus, if I don't

make the effort to go to work, I will know the little red brick house that is the external structure and facade of my life is beginning to crumble.

Am I really close to an abyss? The funny thing is, I don't know. I am like someone who is standing blindfolded on a pitch-black night on a steep cliff – I know the abyss is somewhere in my immediate vicinity, but I don't know if it's one or a hundred metres away. Why not? Because this state of mind has reigned in my life for the past ... ten years? The only thing that kept this condition under control 15 years ago was religious belief.

I cannot discuss these things with anyone.

(We don't always see the things that push us closer to the abyss. We don't recognise the faces for the people they really are.)

\* \* \*

Hope. Not even faith is worth anything without hope.

\* \* \*

(Who can understand?)

This may sound strange, but I actually believe in the existence of God – I just don't know who or what God is. One of the reasons for this is my lack of trust in people; no one who talks about God is credible enough in my eyes (though many of these believers are honest and good people).

I also don't believe or trust handed-down truth. Who am I to believe, after all? Protestants? Catholics? Muslims? Hindus? Jews? Everyone has their own agendas, and there are reasons why all these groups of "believers" embrace different "truths", why they believe what they believe. Reasons good enough for them to believe, but not good enough for me. (Already Thursday 01:26)



# **Faith, hope, and love – and the emergency measures to make up for the absence of these things**

Thursday, 14 October 2004

On the train (09:22)

I now know that I have been losing my faith for the past several months – or, depending on how you look at it, the past several years: faith in the traditional “truths” of my youth, faith in people, faith that “things will work out”.

It is also true that many people abuse narcotics and other substances on a daily basis to combat this problem (amongst others), or to make up for the negative effects this has on their lives.

Other people, or sometimes the same people, (also) give themselves over to criminal activities to (once again) make up for the absence of (amongst other things) faith in their outlook on life, and to provide them with the entertainment, excitement and/or money to make their lives worth living.

I hate drugs. They make me dizzy in the head, and I suspect – and know in one particular case – that using drugs will make me even more anxious rather than helping me to relax. And I don’t want to embark on a spate of criminal activities.

So, my balls are hanging between a pair of scissors and a furious scorpion.

By the way, I’ve been wondering all this time what it means to say, “My life is not worth living.” After all, I still satisfy many of my needs every day, my work load is not too bad, and I don’t have pressing financial problems. What is the problem, then?

The problem – and I have never thought about it like this – is that a person needs three things (except for never breaking

the greatest commandment namely to never be without money): You need faith, you need hope, and you need love.

I, “Brand Smit” live without love. I have been living in various degrees of faithlessness for ten years, and even the faith that I have carved for myself as my own in the past few years, is losing value – for me. The only thing I have to keep myself going is hope.

And hope without faith and love can keep Thanatos busy at the front gate for only that long.

Can a person survive – physically remain alive – without faith, without hope, and without love, and then also without drugs or entertainment to counter the painful absence of faith, hope and love?

I think ... no.

If you do not have faith, hope, or love in your life, you will feel a strong urge to indulge in the abuse of drugs and/or to surrender yourself to any activities, criminal or otherwise, that can provide you with unceasing excitement and entertainment.

## A few points on Monday, 18 October 2004

I grew up with the God of the Rich, who *tests* you with poverty and *rewards* you with wealth. How would the God of the Poor do it? Test you with wealth and reward you with poverty?

\* \* \*

My lowest point on a Monday arrives nowadays during my 16:30 to 18:00 class. Today, however, I had a reasonably peaceful 90 minutes with the seven-year-olds. And the class was peaceful not because I was suddenly hit by positive thoughts – in fact, my thoughts were about my parents and how things have still not worked out for them after all these years.

That led me to the thought that despite our tendency to choose hope over nothing (followed by physical death), you sometimes have to admit “things” do not always “work out” for everyone – this may not force us to go so far as to give up on hope, but it still stands as a verifiable one-plus-one-equals-truth type of fact.

The thought then came to me how it appears I have the same problem as my parents. That was when I made the connection between God and money – how it appears that those with money are rewarded with things working out and how those who are poor just keep hoping and believing that things might work out for them as well.

I felt surprisingly peaceful after these thoughts, as if I had wanted to say these things for a long time, but perhaps I had believed I ought not to; that it would qualify as rebellion against God, punishable by the loss of my soul.

An hour or so later – after dinner, drinking a bubble tea opposite the coffee shop – I thought how it is totally acceptable to entertain the thought of the God of the Rich, and the Middle Class, because this god is *in service* of the rich and the middle class, and thus not the True God.

[Hope is a strange thing. Someone might raise his hand and say, “Look at my life. What if I am one of those people for whom things will never work out? Where does that leave me?”

I don’t believe life is a script that we play out as puppets or second-rate actors and then we die. If you are already of the opinion things are not going to work out for you, then for all practical purposes you are taking a giant leap in exactly that direction.

Another thing: it’s not for nothing that my hero is the guy who continues to believe and who stubbornly clings to his hope even though he has a strong suspicion the battle is almost certainly already decided.]

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Noam Chomsky said this in an interview: “You basically have two choices: you can give up hope, feel hopeless and therefore ensure that the worst is going to happen, or you can have hope, and then try to realize the hope, and then there’s a chance that things will improve.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday, 30 October 2004

I am generally happy with who I am, what I do, and where I believe I'm heading.

Bad news is, these things don't necessarily add up to happy Mondays. I experience way too many days – despite all the so-called satisfaction – where I wonder if it's worth it. I also sometimes have to face the fact that things simply do not always work out for everyone, and that the point in your life “that might be as good as it's gonna get” won't necessarily be good enough for you.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday, 16 November 2004

I felt slightly embarrassed about my appearance today at the school for adults. It was all about my clothing: old, worn-out belt, and a cheap-looking short-sleeved shirt.

This is another issue than can be debated until your belt finally rots off your waist, but it won't take away a basic truth, namely that if you are embarrassed about how you appear, for whatever superficial reason, it just nips that edge off your confidence. The opposite is also true: if you feel good about your outward appearance, for whatever superficial reason, it just gives you that extra boost in confidence.

In light of these remarkable insights, what should I do? I need to buy myself a new belt tomorrow; I need to check out a few shirts, and I have to reattach the button on my green trousers.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **To become what will take you where you need to be**

Wednesday, 29 December 2004

The fact is that I function better now as a human being than was the case four years ago. I am more aware of the rules of the game, and I have learned to play by the rules without betraying myself. I am more convinced of my relative value in the broader community, and also more specifically in the Community of Particular Language and Culture to which I am connected by the proverbial umbilical cord. I am more convinced of who I am and who I want to be. I understand more of where I come from as well as the value of that in answering the questions about who I am and where I am going. I also understand the reasons and motivations for this specific vision. I am therefore more convinced of my place in the Bigger World, and more convinced of my own self when I walk into a local bar or restaurant, or when I arrive at a barbecue with friends and strangers. Finally, because I can now speak and read a little Chinese, I can function better in the particular environment where I live and work every day than was the case a few years ago.

It is ultimately as practical as the difference between a bicycle wheel with a problem and one that works as it is supposed to. Anyone who has ever ridden a bicycle will appreciate the difference between a wheel with broken spokes, a cracked tyre and a leaky inner tube and a wheel with new spokes, an expensive new tyre, and a brand new inner tube. One is simply better. One is simply more suited to taking you where you need to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday, 3 January 2005

To a large extent it comes down to how well you use your brain, not only in general, but for any specific period of, say, 15 minutes.

If you have used your brain for 15 minutes to decide how you are going to arrange the living room furniture ... then that's all well and good, but then those 15 minutes are used up, they're gone, you can never recover them. The same with the next 15 minutes, or any other quarter of an hour of your life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday 5 January 2005

I am full of enthusiasm for this year. Why? Because I am alive ... and I know no one makes it out in one piece, but until then I am alive. And that means I can apply every day of my life, every hour, every week and month, and also my hands, my feet, my brain, my eyes and my ears to something, to projects, to things I will be able to look back at and say, "That's good."

And as for the inevitably less positive? Well, life is a struggle, and as long as you keep standing, you're not falling down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 10 February 2005

Point of Power: Reckoned this morning at Kaohsiung airport that every person has a central point of power. Everything you do, where you do it, how you conduct your daily life, with whom you share your existence, and how you choose to apply your life will either strengthen this point, or weaken it.

[02/06/15: Think of your existence as an ointment or a salve, or something similar. If you are “Tiger Balm”, you are wasting your life if you apply yourself to a piece of wood. Apply yourself to an insect bite, and you are on the right track – the correct application of a very specific value.]

\* \* \* \* \*



## What you should believe

Tuesday, 12 April 2005

Over the past few hours I have (again) become aware of a few things:

- life is always a struggle – at first (or continuously) for survival, and then to either maintain a good life, or for something better – an extraordinary life, according to your own standards;
- there are so many things to fear it is almost a miracle that we are not so fearful all the time that it impedes our functioning;
- considering the previous point, it can be said that confidence is the hallmark of a fool – but, as an excellent illustration of the contradictions of life, you will accomplish nothing if you do not have confidence;
- I find myself quite absurd in the classroom – at home I apply my self-awareness and my abilities to productive and most interesting work, then suddenly I appear in an environment with rules and regulations and conventions, in a shirt that was chosen to go well with my trousers, with my poor Chinese pronunciation and my fabricated “professional” English accent.

Also became aware of what I want to do that I do not currently do; things I still want to know that I do not currently know; skills I want to master which I have not yet mastered; questions I have that I do not know the answers to – for example, what the difference is between an archbishop and a cardinal (train arrives, 21:30).

Wednesday, 13 April 2005

One must believe it is POSSIBLE  
for YOU  
to be FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT

that it is furthermore POSSIBLE  
for YOU  
to be HAPPY

and that it is POSSIBLE  
for YOU  
to make a POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

Too many people believe in only one thing: that what has been “given” to them, including socio-economic status and accompanying role, function, and relative value to the community, is the best they can and will ever get out of life; that it may even be vain and arrogant to nurture ambitions beyond that range. These beliefs will in my opinion be to a large extent responsible for that remaining their reality.

## Efforts and rewards | Personal reality

Thursday, 14 April 2005

I reckon I can justify being in a bad mood. I look at the amount of work, the labour from months and weeks and days and hours sown during the past four years on the field of projects with financial gain as primary goal.

I also look at my current financial capabilities.

Finally, I look at how I would like to improve my quality of life and trips I would like to take, and then at how I talk about these two issues; also the fact that I am still caught up in the “process”, with fruit of my labour and final results still only in theory on the horizon, and always just a few days’ journey away.

I am not saying I’m discouraged; I am simply saying I think it is okay if I have a little grumble about it ...

Monday, 18 April 2005

An American aid worker (a woman named “Marla”) died last weekend in Iraq (roadside bomb). She was probably in many ways an ordinary woman – as ordinary a person as most of us. What was extraordinary about her was her value for a certain community of people who are trapped in a primitive struggle for survival. What was extraordinary about her was her willingness to lose her life for this struggle.

Tuesday, 19 April 2005

I am, believe it or not, developing sensitivity to the correlation between my efforts and reward in terms of the work I do at home. I mean, I’ve been working on certain projects for how long? That has brought in how much money? And exactly how many people have read what I write? And it does not help that any day now my bicycle is going to deconstruct into ten

different parts on the way to the train station, or that my TV's sound is still screwed up, or that my computer is getting slower by the day, or that I still haven't been to the dentist ... but you remain standing as long as you don't fall, and the struggle is a daily one. And to complain about such nonsense is after all middle-class.

Thursday, 21 April 2005

Walter Reuther (1907-1970), American labour leader: "There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow man. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well."

Friday, 22 April 2005

12:01

The question is not whether or not each one of us is a fool; the question is what we do with our lives in spite of the fact.

The question is also not whether or not each one of us is going to die ...

18:15

Time spent in any place is worth the proverbial effort if you have used the time to achieve positive results. The idea that you could also have achieved similar results in a different place is of passing interest and maybe not even worth noting. What is important is the process, the goal, the end result. The place is either conducive, or not conducive, and should be judged according to this measure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday, 29 April 2005

Faith in your fellow human beings and in life itself is foolishness. / Foolishness is essential to having faith in your fellow human beings, and in having faith in life itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Voice from the Other Side

Monday, 11 July 2005

12:34

I now know this: you do not walk away from ten days of almost continual pain and discomfort in your face without at least a crack in your moral. [Ten days earlier I had a wisdom tooth removed.]

12:51

Notes from the last few days make it clear that a thought has been brewing. I am angry at myself, and it has to do with one thing: my life – and by *life* I mean the hours I am awake every day – is filled with tasks and objectives and projects that must be completed so that I can come up with more tasks and start with more projects, and pursue more goals. And then a bus hits me, and what will I regret most? Happiness. There is so little happiness in my life that it makes me nauseous. And the opportunities I have for happiness are almost endless.

The past two weeks have been conducive for this insight – my dental discomfort, [N.]’s absence, all the tasks I have completed, my new computer, the editing of “Personal Agenda”, and yet ... there are always more tasks, more projects, more objectives! There is no end to it! I worry myself to death about money and my next trip to South Africa and about how I appear! Get up, work, think, write, eat (worry about not getting fatter!), watch some TV (not too much because there are tasks waiting to get done), and then back to sleep. And then I get up again and shower and work and eat and pursue goals and then a bus hits me. And it’s all over. And the woman at the tea stall still makes tea every day, and children still go to English classes, and new TV shows are still made, and this Sunday there is a new feature movie on HBO.

And there I stand on the other side of the Great River, and I realise: tasks are important; goals are important; projects deliver results of a meaningful life. But if it did not bring you happiness, not just in your so-called life but in your hours every day, was it then truly a life worth the hardships, the humiliations, the embarrassments, and the toothache?

14:50

The time has come to cultivate a new voice: The Voice from the Other Side.

The Voice of Reason might say:  $X = 2$ . The Voice from the Other Side will say how much it matters – from the other side.

## **You win, despite the chaos**

Thursday, 22 September 2005

09:32

For some time now I have been moaning about dishes and dust and laundry and dirty tiles and chaos that threatens to collapse in on me every day.

Then, last night, as I was busy throwing something away or tidying up somewhere I realised: It is a struggle, and I win as long as chaos does not collapse in on me. And this struggle is a daily challenge.

21:34

The moment of recovery is not when you are 100% motivated and active again, it is when you get up from the couch, switch on the light above your desk, and continue to go through the actions.

Friday, 23 September 2005

1. I am executor of behaviour, constructive and/or destructive, with Objective X in mind, and/or in the name of Person Y, and/or for the benefit of Person Z.

2. All contemplations and arguments come down to us either being executors of a plan that pre-dates our existence, or we have to be very smart with our lives.



## Triumph! Despite my assumptions

Wednesday, 12 October 2005

I am confronted with [N]'s Stellenbosch experience, and following cryptic descriptions I again fall victim to a very unpleasant sensation: disappointment, even a sense of failure.

Why?!

That dirty archenemy, that big old culprit is once again to blame! Assumptions!

Fact is, to go to university, and to go to Stellenbosch, were not original actions on my part. "University" was not a concept that I devised one afternoon in 1987. "Stellenbosch" was not a fictional town that I came up with one evening in 1989 while I was soaking in the bath. Both concepts had existed, full of colourful images and implications long before I, Brand Smit started thinking about going to Stellenbosch. And from the moment I started thinking about it – in '88 or '89, assumptions took shape in my head about how it would be.

I saw myself with a bookbag over the shoulder, walking with friends from the cafeteria to some class. I saw myself in a so-called student house. I saw myself with a pretty girl, and us holding hands while we take a walk along the Eerste River, or sitting under an oak tree on a bench talking. I saw myself on a bicycle – my own bicycle! – or even in a cheap car.

Those were the images, the assumptions.

In the end my Stellenbosch was filled with worries and anxiety and financial difficulties and loneliness and longing. My first room was with a family that were complete strangers to me until a few days before I moved in. After six weeks, I began to feel extremely uncomfortable sitting down to dinner, knowing that my first month's rent had not been paid yet. After two and a half months not even the oak leaves could help me forget my overdue rent. One of the reasons why I went to the Cape was to be closer to a young woman who had

made my heart stop a year earlier, and then shocked it into beating again by telling me that she liked me. Six months after I had arrived in Stellenbosch, we agreed that we should rather just be “friends”.

Friends? Lunch at the cafeteria? My own bicycle? A cheap little car? By the end of my first year I was living in a room previously reserved for a live-in servant, a room just big enough for myself and the bed. I cooked lentil soup with one potato in on a gas stove that stood in the shower. Money to take a girl out on a date? Coffee and cake in town? Ha!

So, my Stellenbosch experience was a disappointment? Can we go further and say it was a failure? Just because it was different from what I had assumed it would be? Because it was different from how it was supposed to be? What kind of person allows himself to be bullied, after how many years, by assumptions?

I say: My Stellenbosch experience was a triumphant success! I, now, was born out of that experience! Was it a painful birth? Yes. Is the adult result of that pregnancy and childbirth a failure? What is the standard? What is the expectation? Property, permanent job, marriage, children, school fees, bills, barbecues on Saturday evenings with old friends? Are these still the standards of success as an adult? If that is the case, then I am indeed bloody disappointed!

Do I want to say after all these years that I, Brand Smit, want nothing more than to climb in a time machine and travel back ten, fifteen years? Will I burn incense on the altar of the mainstream establishment, and recite poetic prayers before the gods of John and Sandy Allman, and tread mighty carefully not to accidentally experience something that does not correspond with How Things Ought to Be When You Study at Stellenbosch?

Is this the seed of self-denial that has been growing inside me all these years since my Stellenbosch experience turned south? Am I still disappointed that my student years were not filled with enough money and a nice little apartment and

holding hands by the river and laughing with friends? I am what I am today because my student years were *not* like that!

It is time to raise my fist and declare: “Triumph!”

It is time to climb on a roof and shout: “My experience was shit, that’s true! But thank the gods for it otherwise I wouldn’t have been the person I am today!”

It is time to once again see that I have long since reached the end of the tunnel, that I have survived the birth, that I have become, and that I am now in a position to identify the source of unnecessary disappointments and say, “There! There’s the culprit!”

Life is a struggle, and as long as you remain on your feet, you win. And I, Brand Smit, have remained on my feet. Despite my assumptions.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 13 October 2005

17:42

For a moment I thought it was 21 November. Then I remembered it's only 13 October! I got 38 days! For free! To enjoy as I like! To do as I please!

17:58

Another one: age and the uncomfortable sensations that go with it.

Calculate the role and the effect of assumptions and competition with other people your age and from your cultural background.

What would be the result if you start ignoring both – if you ignore what you reckon you're supposed to do at age X or should already have done, and you simply lose interest in how much better or worse you are doing compared to your peers, and you truly live at your own pace and according to your own beliefs?

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday, 19 December 2005

If you do not get up and walk, you will end up flat on your face. People – friends, family, and some strangers – will help you up to a point. But after a while they, too, will continue their own journeys. That is simply how it is.

\* \* \* \* \*

## A shameful, embarrassing approach to life

Thursday, 26 January 2006

20:13

Fear of embarrassment: the large, hidden cause for a certain approach to life I have never been able to shake. I have always thought if you reach your dying moment, and five minutes earlier you were still jumping around laughing in joy that you were still alive, how embarrassed you would feel in that final moment before you breathe your last breath. Imagine how silly, how stupid you would feel! Almost as if you'd like to say to the Angel of Death, "I am sorry I was so frivolous just five minutes ago ... if I had known ... and I should have known! If I had considered the possibility at that moment that I could be uttering my final words in five minutes' time ... I would have been so much more solemn and sincere! I wouldn't have made jokes or listened to such upbeat music! In fact, I disrespected Death by being so frivolous! Now look at me! I feel so terribly ashamed!"

So then you are serious all the time. Or if not all the time, you make sure you think about death often enough, and about terrible things that can happen, and about all the situations that could bring you trouble if you are not careful, so that when you do get into a difficult spot, or worse, if you're staring Death in the face, at least you don't have to be embarrassed. So that no one, least of all yourself, can say at that final moment, "Yes, and to think you were having such a good laugh just moments ago!" Or, "Just the other day you were so happy. How silly you look now!"

Fear of embarrassment – how many carefree days, how much happiness do I not sacrifice on the altar of this fear?

\* \* \*

What is fear of embarrassment? What is shame? Is it not to be exposed for what you are – naked, small, vulnerable, frightened, and at the end, mortal, like a plant or an insect? This despite our best efforts to make ourselves appear better and more sophisticated than plants or insects or other animals.

“Are we not more important than plants or insects?” you might ask.

Of course we are, many would argue. But at what point does More Important Than A Plant Or An Insect become our demise? At what point do pride and self-love become the causes of our fear to be exposed?

In the end: What are we? What is our real value? How is it measured? And is one last moment of shameless recognition of our mortality worth the effort to avoid a careless moment of being slightly too joyous?

20:43

As if you will fall even further when Death and Misfortune hit you while you tried to worry a little less and be a little happier, and every so often succeeded.

But keep struggling, stay poor, keep wallowing in the dirt ... at least you won't have far to fall.

And dream! Yes, dream of lots of money and happy times and doing whatever you want! Dreams are cheap! Just make sure you never go so far as to work hard enough to turn your dreams into reality. Because once you have a lot of money, once you see how nice it is ... that days go by that you don't worry about a thing, when you can travel and visit interesting places and spend time with family and do things you enjoy ... you'll climb higher and higher ... and you'll have so much further to fall.

Twenty years ago I would have thought God would look at me with anger in his eyes if I aim to climb too high. Now it is Death and Misfortune. And you have to respect them. “Stay low,” you tell yourself. “Struggle. Keep dreaming, though. It doesn't matter after all ...”

## **A few days away from the place I know**

Monday, 10 April 2006

Each person has an environment where he or she functions at optimal level – where you are at your best or where you produce your best work. The environment where I am currently on vacation requires of me a certain appearance – to be polite, to be good company, to be a good guest, and so on. While I reckon I do okay with it, I am acutely aware of the fact that this is not the environment in which I operate optimally. I don't do any work here; I produce nothing; I create nothing. And these are things that I value in order to define myself and to distinguish myself from other people around me.

Thursday, 13 April 2006

A week in Cape Town, almost two weeks away from Benevolent Light, sees the following thought as a result:

Religion – ritual – environment with central point – environment changes – ritual cannot be administered because of distance from central point – religion is undermined

Identity – actions that confirm identity – environment with central point – environment changes – actions that confirm identity cannot be performed because of distance from central point – identity is undermined

Result: confidence is undermined, stress increases, potential for interpersonal conflict increases

Short-term solution: faith

\* \* \*

I sometimes feel like a puppet whose mind has been activated (the idea comes from a book by Fritz Leiber, *You're All Alone*): intelligent enough to see what I see, yet incapable of knowing or understanding the full truth, trapped in a shadowy half-life.

What advice would I offer to someone in my position?

I would say, take what you do know and understand, and aim to achieve results of your existence that are more positive than negative.

I reckon that's good enough for a person trapped in the twilight, right?



\* \* \* \* \*

Friday, 16 June 2006

Seven years ago, I talked about two woes that have been chasing me ever since I can remember. I am not alone anymore, yet loneliness is something that is always with you; even those with whom you are involved intimately do not always share your fears and your concerns. Poverty, or rather, to be broke, is however an affliction that I will struggle with until one of us collapses from exhaustion.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Brand Smit” and a better life**

Tuesday, 4 July 2006

If someone should ask me at this moment, “The whole truth, nothing but the truth, how are you?” what would I say?

If I say it is going well, it will be a positive response that I myself will appreciate. The truth is that I would ignore certain things with such a statement: I need to get to a dentist quite urgently; my bicycle might make it to the train station one more time, but it probably won’t make it back; it’s been months since I’ve had enough money to spend on enjoyable activities such as going out to dinner or seeing a movie.

On the other hand, if I say things are going badly, it will be an extremely negative statement that will ignore something very significant: I have found a partner, a woman who loves me, whom I love very much, and with whom I want to spend the rest of my days on earth. In my book, the presence of such a person in your life contradicts a general statement that it is going “badly”.

Thursday, 6 July 2006

“And so we come to the end of yet another day in the life of Brand Smit. Today has been the most recent in a series of thousands of days in this man’s life, some similar to today, some much better, other days – much worse.”

Tuesday, 18 July 2006

Funny how it seems that my brain is working overtime when I am slightly feverish. My calculations also seem to always be the same at such a time: *I pretend as if life is worth living, because to face the truth would simply be too much to handle.*

My non-feverish, sober opinion on this so-called calculation is simple: to hell with it. Fight against this idea

when you are healthy, and fight against it when you are sick and feverish.

If we accept such a pessimistic view as the sum total of our calculations, we are the victims of trickery. The hand was quicker than the eye. We didn't look hard enough, didn't pay enough attention, and the result is that we missed something.

Tuesday, 25 July 2006

You can make a positive difference in people's lives – specifically in the lives of people who struggle to keep going on a daily basis – by taking certain actions, without actually being physically present in a particular community.

Thursday, 27 July 2006

I need to believe in a better life. This belief must be based in reality. For this belief to be grounded in reality, I have to work to make this reality real.

Therefore, if I am not working, I undermine the attempt to ground my belief in reality. If my belief is not grounded in reality, I cannot hold on to it. If I don't have this belief to hold on to, I fall.

That is how it is. My job – writing and other work – is my religion, in the most practical way possible. I am the pope, the high priest and the pastor of my own religion. Work is the ritual that must confirm that my belief is more than mere fantasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday, 19 August 2006

“A man only needs one thing: to have someone to love. If you can’t give him that, give him some hope. If you can’t give him that, just give him something to do.” ~ quote from a movie about a plane that crashed in a desert

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Manifested value | Natural condition for human existence**

Thursday, 12 October 2006

Natasja is the type of person who makes one believe in life again, and in love.

We all weigh ourselves up against other people; we watch what they do with their lives, and how they see themselves. Based on these observations and accompanying self-criticism, we determine our own value. In many cases, the picture doesn't look all that encouraging.

Still, it is in relation to other people that our value is actually manifested. The above statement about Natasja places her in an elite class of noble earthlings: One Who Makes Another Person Believe in Life and Love.

The strange thing is, we often fail to appreciate our own value until we become that person for someone else.

Friday, 13 October 2006

At around 04:00 this morning I went to the bathroom. As I was standing there, a thought formed in the blood vessels that are my brain: "I am an unsuccessful entrepreneur."

Startled, and a little confused, I tried to make myself feel better by reminding myself that before I became an unsuccessful entrepreneur, I was an unpublished writer.

So much for that.

\* \* \*

Perhaps the author of that one e-book is right: the natural condition for human existence is happiness.

That means to feel miserable and constantly under stress is unnatural and must be resisted at all costs as an abomination.

## A free man's personal struggle

Monday, 20 November 2006

I am tired. I am tired of so-called money projects that either never get done, or that move three steps forward, and 2.999 steps back.

I want – I need to and I want to forget about money for just one evening, or for just one night and a day, or maybe even for one night and the rest of the week. Because at this stage, tonight, even success may be too much for me.

Wednesday, 22 November 2006

Brand thinks his life is boring and he doesn't spend enough time doing what he enjoys. The only way he can make his daily life bearable is to convince himself that things will be different in six months' time. In six months' time his life will be more exciting; in six months he will spend more time on the things he enjoys – writing, studying, and so on.

What Brand does not realise – or maybe he does realise this, but he is apparently powerless or unwilling to do anything about it – is that “six months” is renewed every six months. Every six months he swears anew: “In six months' time ...”

Or, closer to reality: Every day a previous six-month period ends. Every day he solemnly commits himself to the following six months.

Every day, every month, every year. Every six months.

Is he powerless to break this seemingly endless cycle? Is he going to turn 37, and 40, and 45 and 50 and still believe that everything will be different in six months' time?

No one can be blamed if they thought, “I sure am glad I'm not this Brand fellow.”

I don't have that option. I have no choice but to look myself in the mirror and say: “It is me, this ‘Brand’. It is I who

cannot turn my goals into reality.” Or can I? (Just had to ask, otherwise it looks like I don’t have any faith in myself.)

Friday, 24 November 2006

The students are busy with their writing exercises, so I am sitting here doing nothing. I have nothing to say. I am tired, and a little discouraged. I am 35 years old. My biggest writing project thus far is finished, and I know how to reach my target audience – I even how to get them to pay for what they read. I do have to raise a shitload of money to pay for proofreading and stuff like that, though. I also have to raise a shitload of money to pay for – and here I am sincere when I say I am blessed – Natasja’s and my wedding [we had gotten engaged recently]. I also have to raise a shitload of money to have my teeth fixed, pay off my debt, sort out my stuff in South Africa, and go on vacation early next year. I also have to raise a shitload of money to try and alleviate my parents’ suffering. I also have to raise a shitload of money to invest in projects that can continue to earn me lots of money in the future so I can continue to be what I am now: a free man.

Saturday, 25 November 2006

If you strive for personal freedom, but at the cost of another person’s quest for personal freedom, then you are not serving the cause of freedom; you are merely serving your own selfish needs.

Friday, 8 December 2006

What I want to become, what I want to be, the lifestyle I want to make my own, the type of days and nights I would like to make typical of my life is not meant for everyone.

Here is my advice, to myself and any other person with a dream: Keep on believing, keep working on it, comfort yourself when you have to work long days and nights on

projects with no end in sight, and with no fruit waiting to be picked and enjoyed. Ease your frustrations, especially those times when you think you are a Moses who would see the Promised Land but never enter it.

Things will come together. Believe in that ... and keep working on making it a reality.



\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday, 27 February 2007

A substantial change takes place in a person's life, and the earth keeps turning without missing a beat. You want to scream, "Hold the ball! Sun, give me a second! Everybody just hang on – I just have a think a while ..."

Unfortunately, this is how it happens: breakfast, lunch, dinner, TV, bedtime, breakfast, massive change, lunch, dinner, TV, bedtime, morning, food, TV, night, sleep, breakfast ...

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday, 18 March 2007

HOME is not necessarily a single geographical place. HOME is where you have the ability to do what you want. HOME – is where you are free.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 5 April 2007

An idea hit me a few days ago: Everyone is vulnerable. Everyone. There is not a single soul on this planet who is not vulnerable in some way, at some or other time.

This may compel one to recognise that we are all in trouble – or in slightly alternative wording, that we are all fucked. Is it not so?

Only one possibility remains: to look out for each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Fight for the Fighting Spirit**

Tuesday, 22 May 2007

A few days ago I talked with [someone close to me], and she told me how bad things are going – money, property on the market, second child on the way, husband that can't handle stress. I realised I couldn't really identify with her problems, and because I couldn't identify, my options for encouragement and advice were limited: "Hang in there!" isn't always appropriate.

What can you say? If you say one thing, the other person says something else that undermines the relevance of your advice or the effectiveness of your encouragement. So you find yourself in a position where you are looking for something that cannot be argued with, something that does not depend on something else to happen first for the advice or encouragement to be valid. Hang in there ... for what? Because things will change? If they don't change, "Hang in there!" sounds pretty hollow.

"Fight for the fighting spirit," I suddenly declared, the conviction back in my voice, "for the sake of fighting for the fighting spirit! On that I won't compromise."

Why? It is absolute. It does not depend on anything else like better days around the corner to make it valid. It is valid because the alternative is unthinkable. If you do not fight for the Fighting Spirit, the Fighting Spirit will die. And if that happens, you will never live again.

Even if better times really are just around the corner.

Friday, 25 May 2007

Natasja is coming back tomorrow, so I am trying to clean up my apartment – specifically the disorder I call my storeroom. It was here where I recently discovered a hot plate, a book bag that has never been used – and my current one is seriously

frayed, and a packet of printed papers dating back to a series of classes I did in July and August 2005.

Between the usual boring lists, vocabulary, sentence constructions and dialogues, the following note dating from Tuesday, 2 August 2005: “From the moment you open your eyes in the morning to the moment they shut late at night you are engaged in a struggle for survival – and for happiness, to make the survival worth it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 30 August 2007

The Power of One – not only the power that one person has to alleviate the suffering of other people, but the power of one person whose suffering has been alleviated.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday, 19 November 2007

“He has it in him to *become* successful, but does he have it in him to *be* successful?” ~ part of a conversation in my head

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday, 18 December 2007

I can take losing. A pain that I would like to avoid as much as possible, though, is disillusionment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday, 9 January 2008

I just remembered what I wrote a few months ago: “Fight for the fighting spirit, for the sake of fighting for the fighting spirit.”

Why? Why do you get back on your feet after a disappointment or a setback?

You get back on your feet, because what else are you going to do? Give up? Grow old within weeks, suddenly sick, annoyed, in the mood for nothing?

Fuck that. Count me in for another round.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Ready for another day's journey

Thursday, 8 May 2008

By Wednesday or Thursday or Friday repetition of the same boring actions and a lack of creative fulfilment become a problem. A good way to handle this is to go out for drinks, to play some tennis, or to watch a movie.

I, however, force myself back into my office chair, and the routine continues – whatever the routine is that particular week. My state of mind is therefore susceptible to any mistakes I make, to results that are not as good as I hoped they would be, even to good results that are “too little, too slow”.

The outcome is predictable: “It” does not work. I have to do “something else”. “It” is too slow. Perhaps I should look at “this” or “that” again.

If I had just sat down – on the green couch – and read a book, or watched a movie, I would have been on the road again after a few hours, or the next day. Well-rested. Ready for another day's journey.

But the way I approach the problem is like someone who has been on the road since shortly after breakfast. Instead of finding a motel when it starts getting dark, after ten or so hours on the road, the man continues driving, without stop. Until he crashes into a truck or a telephone pole.

## **As long as I remain standing**

Monday, 22 September 2008

We often hear ourselves and other people say things like, “My life should be better,” “X should actually be Y,” “A should be B.” You also regularly remind yourself that life hardly ever works out the way we want. You do your best, and you try to be happy with what you have. Yet you keep striving for a better life, to make things better.

Most of us know that life is a struggle – for a higher level of existence. Sometimes you succeed, and your life is better from that day on. Sometimes you struggle for what feels like an eternity, and you barely remain standing. But – and I know I have used this image more than a few times, but here it is again – if you are not down for the count, you’re still standing. And as long as you remain standing, you struggle on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday, 5 October 2008

“Somebody let off firecrackers in the street, then you became disoriented and fell out the window. Then I grabbed your arm, steadied myself against the window frame and pulled you back. Then I scolded you.” ~ the dream Natasja told me about this morning that she had had last night.

\* \* \* \* \*

## To do more, or less

Wednesday, 8 October 2008

I am getting a little tired of struggling every day and every night to pull a miracle from my computer. It feels as if I am confronted with a choice: take it easy, or keep pushing until I die, or until I drop dead.

If I consider it superficially, or if I want to be propagandistic about it, I would have to say, then I choose to keep pushing until I die, or until I drop dead (or until I succeed; I forgot to add that to the original set of possibilities ... we do after all strive for something). But I would like to know exactly what it means to “take it easy”. Does it mean give up and become a couch potato? Does it mean spending your days and nights watching TV until you are forced to sell your couch and TV for food?

Can you take it easy and just maybe get more done – and just maybe live longer and be happier?

Wednesday, 15 October 2008

I always want to do *more*, while less is in many cases *better*.



## Notes in the January of another year

Monday, 12 January 2009

Here is my advice to other people who want to write: write your ass off about everything that bothers you and everything that makes you happy. Write as if you're fucked in the head; edit later. And be modest. Opinions about your own importance, that the world won't function without you, that you possess knowledge and understanding that nobody else possesses, fade as the years go by, and guess what: there you are again, sitting on a rock next to a dirt road, forced to again draw your own map with a blunt pencil on an old discarded piece of newspaper, stuffing your bag full of dirt and grass and a bottle filled with watered-down cola in the hope that everything will turn into something better if you sit on it for long enough.

Life is a journey. Never take anything for granted. Struggle on.

And to think it's only Monday today. In January.

Sunday, 18 January 2009

Exactly one decade after I arrived in Taiwan.

Crossroads, again: I can either sputter out a few final sparks like a wet firecracker, or I can again flame up for five ... or just maybe, another ten years.

Monday, 19 January 2009

Discouragement is a monster who will wrap its trembling fingers around your throat and strangle the life right out of you – unless you intentionally sidestep it, every day, and actively oppose and undermine its repeated efforts.

Tuesday, 20 January 2009

Myth 1: Poor people who struggle for survival and who take nothing for granted never get bored. Boredom is the exclusive right of the bourgeoisie.

Myth 2: Happiness is a luxury that you can only afford if you are rich, or if you're stupid and you don't know any better.

## Your faithful servant, Almost Man

Thursday, 12 February 2009

Left to my own devices, I am good for a few things. I can make notes until the pen dries up, or edit material as if I have nine lifetimes to spend on it. I am also good at research. I can find dozens of PDFs from the most obscure sources, and it's not like I just leave the documents in some dark corner of my hard drive and forget about them. I can thoroughly immerse myself in sorting out information and categorising it into different topics.

And before I know what's going on, another five weeks have gone by. Whatever.

To make money on the Internet you are taught to do specific things in specific ways, and you should do them regularly enough, and enough of them. Does this make-money-on-the-Internet business actually work, or is it just a scam? Is it all just stories so-called Internet marketers spin to rob you of your hard earned cash in broad daylight?

In my experience, the possibility is real enough. The fact that I survived almost the whole of January – the fact that I could eat breakfast and dinner, buy toothpaste and tea and go to coffee shops with Natasja and even have a snack with my coffee, and that I could afford all the other items and activities that make one's life ordinary – was due to a few dollars that I had made because I had done a few things in a particular way, and did it often enough at some point, and did enough of it.

(To be continued ...)

Monday, 30 March 2009

Six weeks and four days later. (To be continued) was supposed to end with, "I need a manager because I am like a rock band that can write good music when they are left on their own, but the rock band needs a manager to get gigs and

arrange transportation, and get the band at the airport or bus station or train station so they can go to some or other town, city or country to perform and make money.

(20 minutes later)

I feel like I am walking around with a secret, a personal secret that I have always feared would be discovered by someone else. Only difference is, I am *burning* to blurt out the secret myself.

Saturday afternoon I collapsed for a moment into the cane chair in the kitchen, thinking, “I should’ve rolled in the money by now considering everything I know, and everything that I have learned to do.”

The reason, I thought, why I am not yet rolling around in cash bills of various colours and denominations is because I am not able to sell myself. I can’t do it. Or, I can, but it chafes against me to such an extent that I will probably always subconsciously undermine the process.

What do I mean by “sell myself”? I mean looking at myself, my interests, my natural abilities, my acquired skills, and then looking at the open labour market to consider where and how I can offer my services for a fee; how I can place on the table my labour and the value it may have for any prospective buyer in the hope and expectation of reasonable compensation.

Now, that is in a way exactly what I did when I came to Northeast Asia – but because language centres in countries like Korea and Taiwan are so eager to hire educated Westerners almost at first sight, to install him or her in a classroom and pay them quite handsomely for their effort, I have never had to try very hard to sell myself. I was also fortunate enough in the past to be offered enough classes to fill up my schedule. There were a few instances when I responded to advertised offers of work – Korea 1996, and a school in Kaohsiung that had advertised in the local newspaper in the summer of 2001. All the other teaching jobs

that I have had over the years were offered to me personally. I would usually receive a phone call from someone who got my number from someone else, and they would explain that they urgently needed an English teacher, preferably from a foreign country. My internal response was always, “Damn it! Why now?” But, I am a reasonable person. I know I need money, so in most cases I would start with the new job within a few days. And of course, after the first few weeks I would eagerly take ownership of the cash that would come my way as a reward for my labour, and for my free time that I had given up.

Some of the work that I have done over the years, and that I am still doing, is boring. Sometimes I think it is beneath me. But I do it, because of the compensation. And if my phone rang at this very moment, with a voice on the other side offering me a job that I’d think will be boring and possibly at times beneath me, I would most likely once again accept the job. Because I need the extra money. And because I am a reasonable man. I do sometimes think I am special, but not so special that I will spurn an opportunity to sell some of my time for some much-needed hard currency.

Willingness to do certain jobs is one thing. The problem is, I cannot bring myself to advertise myself. I am skilled in a few areas. There are individuals and businesses that can make a profit out of me, or make things more convenient for themselves, or improve their own situations by making use of my knowledge or labour. And they will compensate me adequately – if they only knew that my knowledge and my labour were available.

This brings me to the secret I carry within me, the secret that is burning to be shared with all for whom it will matter. I don’t think my financial situation is going to improve in the next few weeks. I also don’t think my financial situation is going to look much better in two or three months’ time. Perhaps by the end of June? July? September? December? Next year? 2011? I can keep throwing out numbers and months, hopeful that I’d be doing better by that month, or by

the middle of another year, than I have been doing until now. But my opinion will remain the same.

If I were feeling discouraged right now, or if I were being influenced by a state of mind that I would previously have associated with a Sunday night, or a Monday, or the month of March, I could write this note off as the result of emotion and chuck it in with old telephone bills like a poorly written poem. The fact of the matter is, I am not discouraged, and I am not suffering from a lack of faith or enthusiasm. If I did not deem it necessary to write this note to myself at this very minute, I could have been working on any of a half dozen projects.

That I do not believe that my financial situation will improve over the next two to three decades is a calculated opinion. I believe it will remain exactly as it is right now, until some or other crisis throws the story on its head. Then I'll kick and scream and plead and cajole just to have it as good again as I have it now. Because better it is not going to get.

Must it necessarily be so?

The temptation is there to say: Yes. Brand Smit has done his best. He has reached the end of his natural talents. It is like driving on the open road and then you get to a point where the road simply ends, in the middle of nowhere. Or it is like someone asking you in Kazakh to answer a complex scientific question. All you can do is smile awkwardly, because the question is in a language you do not speak – and even if you could speak broken Kazakh, you wouldn't know how to answer the question because you don't know enough science. In short, checkmate.

But then, the faint, sometimes annoying voice of reason: Is it checkmate? Why is it checkmate? What can be done to avert the impending crisis? Can anything be done?

1. The crisis would have been given a fatal shot a long time ago if I had only known myself better. (And I hear the author of "Personal Agenda" choke on his popcorn and tea.)

2. There would not be a crisis if I could work with other people – no, if I could approach other people and persuade them to work with me.

3. The crisis feeds on itself. If I did not have to change my focus every now and then to something that could make money “quicker”, I could have made more money a long time ago. Or maybe not – but it’s possible.

4. I will probably stay poor for the rest of my life, and forever be known to myself and others as Almost Man. Years from now I will say, “If only I ...” – which will give me the alternative title of, If Only I Man, which may come in handy when Almost Man gets boring.

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Enough funny business. Fact is, I am going to stay poor until I can make more money than I currently do, and more often than is now the case. There are other ways I can express this, but it has always come down to the same thing.

Poor, until then

Your faithful servant

Almost Man

## Thinking of church, and being like water

Thursday 12 March 2009

The Chinese film director Chen Kaige speaks of “cinema as church” – where a crowd of people sit in the dark, staring straight ahead, and not just being entertained but receiving something.

What they receive is not so much message, but stimulus, something that causes them to critically look at their own lives, that causes them to wonder and think and contemplate their own futures.

Thursday, 8 April 2009

“Be like water,” Bruce Lee still recites in my head. This dictum is also true when it comes to making money.

I know I can make money by promoting products or by selling things, but when I think of myself as a sales rep, a glorified door-to-door salesman, then I am not like water. Then I am like thick, gritty mud you have to pour through a narrow paper funnel.

On the other hand, if I think of making available or recommending resources that will facilitate the process that will lead to a better life for other people, or if I think of offering my skills and knowledge at a reasonable price to help others where they get stuck, then the mud becomes watery and the grit crumbles and disappears.

*Identifying and removing the obstacles in your way will increase the probability of you achieving your goal; it will significantly enhance the possibility of you reaching your destination in good time.* If neither Bruce Lee nor Confucius said that, I am sure someone else did.



## **The road that is behind me**

Thursday, 6 August 2009

I am surviving. I eat lots of vegetables and chicken and fish, and I drink lots of tea and water. I ride my bicycle and do exercises in the morning. I drink very little alcohol, and I stopped smoking.

I am surviving, but I won't say I'm maintaining the same quality of life as before. I have little social contact with people of my age, and I rarely enjoy social recreation of a kind common among people who superficially can be regarded as my socio-economic peers. Almost 40 months have passed since I had last seen my family. I have no cash to fall back on, should I accidentally fall off my bike, or more likely, if one of my teeth should suddenly fall out of my mouth. Lastly, I am pulling through each month by the seat of underpants with way too many holes in them – and I am no longer 19 or 28; in all honesty, I expected to at least be pulling through by the seat of better quality underwear by the time I reached my late thirties.

[Editor's note: The last reference was an unintended mixed idiom of “flying by the seat of your pants” and “pulling through by the skin of your teeth”. What I meant to say was, of course, money was extremely tight, which in Afrikaans is expressed in the word, “broekskeur” which literally means “torn pants”.]

Thursday, 27 August 2009

Let's be honest: What I have gone through since 2006 qualifies on many grounds as an utterly complete, deeply profound and thoroughly significant failure.

I say this with the greatest respect for myself. I say this with an open heart and a good attitude, because I know the

road ahead looks good; I also know the road behind me is part of my life story.

Monday, 5 October 2009

In the words of a popular Afrikaans poet: “I presumed so much, I believed so much, and yet, I proved so little.” Or, to quote Steven Wright: “If at first you don’t succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried.”

Well, I did believe a lot, and propagated much. I did try a lot of things and I am still trying, and what might be called conventional success eludes me still – just about, I might add. I always believe I am hot on its trail.

Finally, I wear my failures and my embarrassments like a boxer wears his scars – it isn’t who I am, but it does say: I’ve been in the ring. I don’t hide the proof, and I do not wear a mask.

## **Self-respect and money**

Monday, 23 November 2009

20:46

I only need one thing when I go to South Africa in three weeks and five days' time, and it is not a lot of money. My only request is that I manifest calm confidence in myself.

It is true that money is usually a source of superficial self-confidence. Many people's heads also spin from sheer confusion if you are calm and confident even though you don't have or make a lot of money.

The question is, can you respect yourself if your wallet is on the thin side? Can you really manifest calm confidence in yourself if you have to pinch your coins before you spend them?

There are ultimately many reasons why someone isn't rolling in the money, or why they don't have easy access to credit. If other people find it difficult to respect you if you don't have money, that is their problem. If you can still respect yourself even when you're broke, cash flow is your only problem.

21:41

Animals can smell fear and react instinctively to it. Likewise, most people can sense a lack of self-esteem in another person. Again, the response is involuntary.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday, 3 November 2009

Everyone is on their own journey. Everybody's struggle is different, and equally real. Everyone knows something, or is fighting something, or struggling with something, or trying to survive something, or trying to pursue something of which you know nothing. (The same can of course be said about you, to someone else.)

Before you compare yourself with other people, ask yourself: Do you understand the complexity of the other person's life?

\* \* \* \* \*

## Trying to be radical, without my blue guitar

Wednesday, 3 March 2010

11:58

Two (possibly) unrelated thoughts:

1. My blue electric guitar that I bought in 2000 in a manic period when I thought I was going to become a rock star or something has finally revealed its true purpose and value: to be sold after ten years for food money that might last for as long as two weeks.

2. In case I missed it, the point is education, and more specifically, me facilitating other people's education. I think the topic is obvious: financial independence. (How does it work if I am struggling to keep my own head above water? We learn from each other's mistakes, and from what we gather on the way to our destination.)

20:39

It is better to be psychotic and/or to live in a delusion than it is to give up. "One can never be radical enough; that is, one must always try to be as radical as reality itself," Lenin apparently once said.

Friday, 5 March 2010

Three images:

- The successful person – family and friends regard him as successful, so do colleagues and acquaintances, but above all, he regards himself as successful

- The one who has given up – draws life-energy from anyone who's still trying; shoots down all ideas; sours hope; criticises everything; bitter demeanour

- The one who keeps trying – even if it comes to a point where his friends and family start thinking he will never “make” it, even if he fails to achieve his objectives in the reasonable time he had set for himself, he will continue working on them, and he will probably continue until the day he withers away and disappears into the nothingness

Sunday, 21 March 2010

Nothing accentuates your shame and embarrassment quite as much as having absolutely no cash, and not enough money in the bank to withdraw what you do have from an ATM.

Friday, 26 March 2010

For years, I have had this tendency to be uncomfortable about the possibility of excessive happiness.

Says a voice in my head: You are doing about 25 or 30% on the happiness scale at the moment. Many people can go to about 80% before they start feeling giddy. You can personally go to about 60 or 65% before your head will explode – which means at least for the foreseeable future you don't have anything to worry about.

Monday, 29 March 2010

Protect the spirit – that is your main responsibility. When the spirit goes, everything goes.

## Even when you're losing, you can be winning

Tuesday, 10 August 2010

This has been coming on for several months. A week or two ago I wanted to make a note of it: The Truth.

The Truth is vibrating subatomic particles. This – this is the real, end-result-after-you-have-stripped-away-all-the-rest, as-real-as-real-can-be truth.

What we think and what we do within this “Uber” Reality become *our* reality, *our* lives.

Friday, 27 August 2010

Your reality is, to a large extent, what you DECIDE it is.

“That’s true,” someone will remark absent-mindedly.

Then, one day, it hits like a brick wall.

Wednesday, 15 September 2010

I think I am busy learning a lesson. It has to do with the whole business of me trying to make money on the Internet since 2006. It’s also clear that I am not done with the learning yet.

The lesson is this: I must stop trying to convince people I know better, and that my way produces faster and better results. Sometimes I have absolutely no clue what I’m talking about, and if I pretend I know more than I really do, I am only setting the table for my own humiliation. I simply must be more modest.

Thursday, 23 September 2010

Since 2006, I have had only one thing on the brain, one obsession, one project: to make money from home.

I get the idea, though, that there are parallel story lines. One is about renewed self-discovery. Another one is about

practical training. The cherry on the cake is a story line that says all my adventures (or lack thereof) since 2006 have been the best thing that could have happened to me as a writer.

Monday, 27 September 2010

“That’s what learning is ... not whether we lose the game, but how we lose and how we’ve changed because of it and what we take away from it that we never had before ... losing, in a curious way, is winning.” ~ Richard Bach, writer of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*



## The state of emergency is over

Wednesday, 9 February 2011

A state of emergency has ruled my life for the past five years. This existential condition dictates that I should ... that I need ... that I am absolutely obliged to first make money before I can afford to spend any serious time on my writing again. This implies that writing is a luxury I cannot afford in a time of emergency.

Well, I think it has become painfully clear that the state of emergency is not working. So, I am going to let it go. (Or do I need the state of emergency to get myself to do something that may eventually make money? I think: No.)

What does it mean in practical terms? It means for my first shift of the day, from after breakfast to dinnertime, I am going to work on writing projects. Second shift, after dinner to bedtime: business, including English classes.

I have a good idea what I should do with my business projects. But if these projects require so much work that I don't have time for anything else, it will mean I am biting off too much. In such a case I will simply have to pay other people to do some of the work. If I can't afford to do that, I'll have to let it go.

Fact is, without my writing, I am just a guy trying his best to make money. Sometimes this guy fails, and sometimes he succeeds. And the rest of the time he reads his history books and he watches TV. Is this me? Maybe in five years' time, in all honesty, or ten. But I will be doomed, if not damned as well, if I allow my writing to go to waste.

"But you do work on your writing – kind of," my imaginary interlocutor of many years might say.

Not really, I'll answer. The bits of work that I do now and then can be compared to the dry crusts and bones someone feeds to a dog under the table. It's not enough. It's not enough to keep a dog that is supposed to be on guard alive.

I don't choose my writing above attempts to make money, or as I like to call it, "business". I choose both. I know what I have to do. I am doing it. I don't have to worry about it all the time. And I certainly don't have to believe that I have to impress some money god with how hard I try.

I repeat: I know what I should do; I am already doing it; and I will continue to work on it six days a week. But the time has come to give more attention to something that goes beyond just money.

## Every man has his limit

Thursday, 19 May 2011

My bicycle's inner tube exploded on the way home last night, so this morning I had to push the bike to my old neighbourhood where my "office" is located. When I arrived at the bicycle repair shop near my old apartment, it was closed. Two hours later when I checked again, it was still closed. So, I had to walk to school this afternoon. And back. On my way back, I walked past the shop – which had finally opened its doors. Ten minutes later I was there with my bicycle and the busted inner tube.

"NT\$450," the owner tried to rob me when I asked him how much it would cost to replace the inner tube.

Seconds later, I was pushing my bike back to my office, and soon afterwards I again walked the two kilometres back home. In my sandals.

Two insights:

1. It's a sad truth that not every dark cloud has a silver lining. But if you don't see the silver lining because of your attitude, ask yourself: Is my problem terminal, or can I do something about it?

2. "Every man has his price, Bob, and yours was pretty low," sings Roger Waters. So every person has their limit where they say: "I can't go any further. I can't do it anymore ..."

Question: Where is your limit?

Perhaps your bitter experience is over in five minutes, or in two days, or in a week. Are you going to look back, when it's over, and say: "Damn, I shouldn't have given up so soon ... I really wish I hadn't started moaning and complaining so hard at that point already ..."

Near the end of my hike this afternoon my legs were stiff, and tiny little pebbles had gotten stuck in my sandals as I shuffled along the sidewalk. I thought of soldiers who had to

march miles in miserable conditions, just to lie down in a ditch the next morning and shoot at other soldiers who had also hiked a long way to get there.

That's when I thought of the Roger Waters lyrics: "Every man has his price ... and yours was pretty low."

I realised if I had started moaning at that point, it would have been my limit. And it would have been pretty damn low.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday, 2 June 2011

If you're not happy, she will help you overcome whatever obstacle is in your way. She will help you solve your problem. She will insist on it – even, if necessary, at the expense of her own happiness. But if you don't co-operate, if you fail to do your part to make yourself happy, then you can go to hell as far as she is concerned.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Note number 517 to myself**

Thursday, 3 November 2011

Stop fighting with every man and woman on the street.

Stop arguing with every person you encounter.

Stop making use of every opportunity you get to start a quarrel.

Stop being the dog that chases every cat whose smell the wind drives towards him.

Stop being the dog that barks up each and every tree, whether there's a cat in it or not.

Fight the battle where you have a reasonable chance of success.

Friday, 23 December 2011

If you're in a meaningful relationship ... Or, let me make it more personal. I think my relationship with Natasja makes it easier for me to allow myself to be happy. The reason is that I know the happiness of the woman I love, and whose welfare I care about, depends to a significant extent on whether or not I am happy.

If you don't allow yourself to be happy, the people closest to you will be affected by it. If you care for the people closest to you, if you sincerely hope that their daily existence will see a degree of happiness, you will permit yourself to be happy.

It is the unselfish thing to do.

## Time to give up

Wednesday, 22 February 2012

One of the few popular sayings I hold as a universal truth is that one should never give up. I've believed in this for many years, and I recite it to myself on such a regular basis that it could almost qualify as religious incantation. Everyone I respect who has anything to say about life confirms this: You do not give up. You should never, ever give up. If you give up, it's over. You put posters on your walls that remind you of this. You buy T-shirts with wording that confirms this. You forward links to videos with this message, and you share stories on Facebook so that friends and family never forget. If necessary, you write it with a black marker on the soles of your sneakers: "Never give up."

The giving up to which these sayings refer is the fatal type, the existential type. It refers to a decision to stop taking action; you're done with everything, done with trying.

Yet, despite the vital conviction you keep so close to your heart, occasionally you do come to a point where you don't have much of a choice. Difference, though, what you give up on is not life, and it doesn't mean you will never try again.

Sometimes you have to give up on things that do not work anymore, or things that have never really worked. Sometimes people give up on a relationship, or a marriage. Sometimes, after trying for years to hang on at a company because heaven knows you needed the money, you give up. You quit. You wipe your hands of something you gave your best to make work.

And sometimes you let go of the steering wheel of projects you have driven over a thousand rocky roads. You let go of the wheel, you unbuckle your seatbelt, and you jump out of the car before it comes to a crashing halt at the base of a wall, or before it shoots off the edge of a cliff.

Because sometimes you have to give up to survive.

## Measure you get from years of cycling away from the same place

Thursday, 19 April 2012

Earlier this evening I pedalled away from the language centre where I've been working for over thirteen years. I wondered what it would be like riding away knowing it would be the last time. A mile or so later I thought of how I've developed this habit of thinking about my life in Taiwan while riding home after teaching a class at this particular centre – the big, broad theme of my life in Taiwan, not specific issues only relevant to that day or that week.

I then worked out that I must have ridden away from that place more than 1 500 times since early 1999, which means I have probably contemplated my life in Taiwan around a thousand times after spending a few hours between those walls.

That this particular language centre has been the most stable, consistent part of my life in Taiwan for more than thirteen years was the next step in the thought process. Nothing, not place of residence, mode of transportation, what and where I eat, with whom I socialise, what I do at night, what time I get up in the morning, the amount of money I earn, my financial obligations, or my relationship status have remained the same during these last thirteen years. I have even gone through four different computers! No wonder I tend to go deep after once again punching my time card at this particular location.

What this type of consistency gives you is a measuring tool.

If a man is still doing the same job in the same office and earning the same income – adjusted for inflation – after thirteen years, he will probably be correct in thinking his life has stagnated, especially if he sees how his children have



changed during the same period from toddlers with crayons between their fingers to teenagers with iPhones in their hands.

With the language centre in question, I would appreciate stagnation. The reality is that my situation at this company progressively deteriorates as one year keeps plastering itself over the previous year. I started with at least 15 hours per week, which gave me an income of about NT\$30,000 per month. I now teach two hours a week at this place. That puts about NT\$5,000 per month in my pocket. (I do teach at one or two other places as well, as was the case thirteen years ago.)

If I look at the most consistent part of my life in Taiwan and use that as a tool to evaluate my life here, my life is not stagnating, it is going backwards.

I can say it's unscientific to measure your life according to a single criterion. If everyone were to measure their lives according to the one thing that has remained a consistent part of their lives for a significant duration of time – whether they like this thing or not, more people might feel like failures. Others might, to their surprise, realise they're not the big failures they've always considered themselves to be. You may also wonder according to what people measure their lives if there is little or nothing that has remained constant over the last decade or so of their lives.

Fortunately for most of us, the puzzle of our lives consists of dozens of big pieces, and hundreds of smaller ones. Some of these pieces may have stayed the same over many years; some may already be faded; other pieces might be shiny and new, made from the best type of material puzzle pieces can possibly be made of.

So it is with my life.

I will nevertheless admit, judging from my situation at the place where I've been working since my first week in Taiwan, that some aspects of my life in this country have indeed deteriorated.

I guess if I stand back for a moment, I will realise that this is just the way it sometimes is with life.

## Result, Process, Identity and Happiness

Saturday, 11 August 2012

RESULT is what matters. And RESULT does not only refer to the calculations that are made the day after your passing; it also refers to the outcome of every task you attempt to fulfil, every undertaking, every project you take on.

PROCESS precedes RESULT. PROCESS is either conducive to good RESULT, or it is not conducive to it.

IDENTITY is what enables you to function as a human being during the historical period when your existence plays out, and in the place where you were born and raised, or where you find yourself as an adult. Your IDENTITY is good enough if it enables you to survive, and if it enables you to pursue good RESULT.

HAPPINESS is one of the conditions that make PROCESS worth the effort.

BEING HAPPY makes it more likely – although there are exceptions – that the PROCESS will lead to good RESULT.

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Preceding thought:

This week I started moving my workspace to a home about fifty metres from my old apartment. The new place – actually only two empty rooms on the second floor of a house where the couple who owns the place overnights once every two months or so when they have business in the city – is okay, but not perfect.

“The result of the process is ultimately what is important,” I thought to myself on my way back home earlier tonight, “and the new place is good enough to at least not undermine the process.”

## **Stay on your feet, or you will bite the dust**

Wednesday, 5 September 2012

Failure, and the renewed impression that, because I barely make enough money, I don't work. Despite books published – both personal material and commercial projects, websites and other internet properties, and years of day in and day out, week in and week out, and months of struggling to make money with projects that ended up as packs of scrap paper.

Which makes you wonder why you're still trying. What exactly is the point? Keep trying because it's better than giving up? Then I'd rather spend all of my time writing – morning, afternoon and night, weekday and weekend, twelve months of the year until I expire, and to publish what I have written, and to market what I have published.

Is that not enough? Who does better? People who have children? Do they necessarily do better? Do they leave more behind? Is what they leave behind necessarily good? What if their children become violent criminals? What if their children become corrupt, greedy bastards, or junkies and alcoholics?

I am trying to make money. Because it's the right thing to do. Because I like to eat. Because I like washing with soap and I like brushing my teeth at least twice a day. Because I like clean clothes, even if my shirts and trousers have seen better days.

I have to make money. And my wife has to make money. After work, my wife watches TV, or she cleans the house. After work, which at this stage is synonymous with appearances as an English teacher, because that's apparently all I can do to make money, I do more work because I don't want to make more appearances as an English teacher, and because it's not sustainable anyway. When I finish the other work, I have to continue writing, and I have to publish what I write, and market what I publish. Work, work, write – which is also work, but it only counts as work if it makes money.

Every day people bite the dust. Every day. And the world continues. It's not that people don't care, it's just that their own lives don't stop just because someone has crashed into the gutter, or worse.

Every day people bite the dust, victims of circumstances, victims of other people's diabolical deeds, or victims by their own hand.

It's simple: Stay on your feet, or you, too, will bite the dust. And the world will continue without you.

## **Christmas is a bit like life**

Tuesday, 25 December 2012

Christmas Day is a bit like life.

If a whole table full of food is prepared on the 25th day of the twelfth month of the year, a special tree is dragged into the living room and festooned with lights and small disco balls and dolls and stars, toys are bought and wrapped in colourful paper for the children, a few songs are sung, and all gathered together eat themselves into a new weight division, and laugh and joke around and chat, then it's "Christmas".

If you don't do these things, it's only the 25th day of what is coincidentally the twelfth month of the year.

So it is with life.

## **Strike hard with what you do best**

Wednesday, 21 August 2013

If you want to make it in this world – if you want to achieve important goals you have set for yourself, either financial prosperity, or looking back on your life at 45 or 55 or 65 and thinking you have done all right – you would have to spend the best hours of your day utilising your best skills, working on projects or tasks where your experience and/or natural talents are most prominent.

If you ignore what you do better than anything else for the sake of short-term considerations, the possibility of achieving some success is not entirely excluded, but the probability decreases by the day.

It is a simple strategy: Hit the hardest with what you do best. Or like the poet, W.H. Auden said: “You owe it to us all to get on with what you’re good at.”

Thursday, 22 August 2013

Maybe you don’t like the idea of competition. Perhaps you believe your only race is with yourself. Maybe you think life is not just science and math.

Whatever your feelings about this matter, if you want to make it in this world, you better be ready to compete. For every dollar you want to make, there is another man or woman who has set their eyes on the same dollar. For every product you hope to sell, or for any service you want to offer, there is at least one other man or woman who is working on a similar product or offering a similar service. If you think you know something, just know, someone else probably possesses the exact same knowledge.

What can you do? Is there hope for the average non-genius man or woman who doesn’t have access to inexhaustible resources to make up for their shortcomings?

The hope is this: Focus on your talents, every day. If it is to bake cookies and exchange one fresh dozen after another for cold, hard cash, then do that. If it is playing guitar or composing songs, then you do that. If it is bringing people together and teaching them something they did not know, do that. If it is taking care of people in need, do that. If it is to write poems or essays or stories ... then you know what to do. Hit as hard as you can with your number one skill.

What happens if you struggle to make money with your number one skill, or if you are convinced that there is no market for it? Do you sigh, "That's just how life is," before you start searching the classified ads for the first and best opportunity to sell your time?

The sentiments I express in this note are not motivated by my belief that a creative life is better than a life where you simply survive from one salary to another. They are motivated by a conviction that your best chance of survival – survival! – is to focus on your best abilities.

Still, if you reckon the best thing you can offer the world has no commercial value, ask yourself: Is there any way you can solve a problem for someone else with your skills or talents? Is there any way you can help someone get to a good place where they want to be? Is there any way you can help someone get away from a place they want to move away from? Even if you don't make money by solving problems for other people, helping them might improve your life in other ways, including opening opportunities you may never have thought of.

The hard reality is that most of us have to pay for our own bread and butter, and maybe for some other people's bread and butter too. Sometimes it means engaging in activities where we do not employ our best talents or skills, but it is important not to waste your time. Once you have done what you need to do to put food on the table, get back to the things you do better than most other people. Your survival, and your success in life depend on it.

## **Mediocrity or set yourself on fire**

Wednesday, 30 July 2014

13:15

More than a month of silence ... and then, this:

Is Brand Smit a middle-aged loser? Who makes the accusation? Who defends me? Who argues against me? Who is the magistrate? Society? Impossible. Society's values and standards are primitive.

The fact is, in this existential complaint I myself make the accusation, and I myself am the prosecutor, advocate, and, finally, the magistrate. You find yourself guilty? Then society will treat you as guilty. You find the accusation groundless and reject it? Then society doesn't have a case.

16:15

Two possibilities for me:

Option one: Mediocrity: I publish my books, but I don't do any marketing; I know how to make money, but I don't do it because I don't want to take risks with my money; I know how to get in better physical condition, but I'm too lazy.

Option two: On fire: Live out the rest of your life like a protesting Buddhist in Saigon in 1963.



## **You better stand up if you want to be counted**

Monday, 20 October 2014

This morning it occurred to me that the site Medium.com has become an exclusive platform for writers in their twenties.

Five seconds later I changed my opinion. “Bullshit,” I said to myself. “It’s like saying books have become the exclusive domain of young people because many people in their twenties write books.”

“You have to stand up to be counted,” I reminded myself. Or rather, you have to stand up to stand a chance of being counted.

If you hide in a dark corner, you won’t be counted.

If you camouflage yourself, nobody is going to notice you.

If you lie flat on your stomach, behind a bush, you will be ignored.

Is it important to be counted?

Fact is, many people are happy enough to live their lives without being recognised as anything more than mere mortals.

But, if you want to be recognised by at least a few people for something you say or do, especially if you regard what you say or do as having value, then you’d better get to your feet.

## **You're happily building your house of cards ...**

Friday, 19 December 2014

You're happily building a house for yourself – with playing cards. Someone comes along, observes what you're doing, and pushes the house over. The cards flutter down to earth. You're furious. “What the fuck ...” you scream. “How dare you? I was building a house – a home! Does that mean nothing to you? Does it mean nothing to you that I've been working on this house for the past several months?!”

“I've just done you a favour,” the guy starts explaining. “I understand that you were doing something you attach a lot of value to, but my goodness buddy, your home was built with cards! With playing cards! What do you think would have happened if you and your family had moved in there and a storm broke out?”

You walk away in anger, yelling filthy insults every now and then over your shoulder.

The next day you see the man again. You shake his hand. You say, thank you, I understand now. “I was so focused on my plan,” you continue, “the idea of a home, a house of my own, that I overlooked the reality of what I was doing.”

That very same day you again start from scratch.

## **Happiness and joy are the first wall and the last tree**

Friday, 30 January 2015

For a long time I believed joy and happiness to be luxuries that can only be enjoyed by people with no problems in life. I tried to convince myself that it is okay to be happy – that I won't be committing a mortal sin and risk being hit by a bolt of lightning if I walk around with a smile, being nice to people and making jokes and generally feeling positive about life.

Eventually I started believing myself.

Alas, I tend to fall back into old cognitive grooves way too easily. Time and again I catch myself thinking once more that only ignorant people, children, psychopaths and fools can get away with experiencing happiness and joy as a normal existential condition.

The truth, as many people already know, is that happiness and joy form the first wall that protects you against the onslaughts of life; happiness and joy are also the tree out back where you will take your last stand to keep yourself alive, and more or less healthy.

## **A few pleasant and unpleasant truths**

Friday, 13 March 2015

Most enterprises are doomed to fail.

Most investments never pay a dividend.

Most books are read by very few people.

Most websites get very little traffic.

Most new music is heard by relatively few people.

Optimism and faith sometimes propel you forward, and sometimes it leads to your downfall.

It should also be mentioned that if you launched a business venture and it becomes successful, the likelihood increases that your next venture will also be successful.

If you have made an investment and it turns a profit, chances are that you will repeat this success with your next investment.

If a book you have written is read by at least a few hundred people, the probability is strong that your next book will also be read by at least a few hundred people.

If you develop a website that regularly gets visitors, chances are your next website will also get decent traffic.

If you release some of your own songs and a few thousand people listen to it, chances are that these people will also listen to the next song you release, and maybe they will even tell other people about your music.

Success, after all, often generates more success, and if you have little of anything, you will probably have even less in the future.

## **One alternative to stepping in front of a train**

Monday, 16 March 2015

In your bleaker moments you often think things that are a bit rough. Then, when you feel better, you realise how many of those things are actually true.

In my case: In the first place, I will never be mistaken for a Viking warrior. Can I protect myself or my loved ones in a moment of danger? I don't know. Secondly, I am almost 44 years old, and although I have no debt, I also don't make much money with my few part-time jobs. Third place, I don't have children, and will probably never have children. Four: I recently responded "Yes" 23 times to a list of 27 questions to determine if I qualify as a Highly Sensitive Person – which among other things means I am more prone to physical pain, and can even be affected emotionally by a loud noise. (None of the questions were about fear of heights, but I could have added that as well.) Point five: My parents and my sisters think I am a lost cause who was fortunate to meet a good woman. Six: I struggle for years to make money with a variety of projects ... and the struggle continues still.

What to do? What are my options?

One is suicide. Get it over and done with. Make room for someone else, perhaps someone better.

Another possibility is to work really hard and to turn one view of you after another on its head and force people to eat their words and their opinions. Sounds nice. Could work.

Yet another possibility is to pretend not all the bad things about you are true, that you're not that much of a loser. While deliberately ignoring some things, you continue your efforts to improve those things that are in your power to improve.

Difficult to pretend, you might say. Not easy to ignore what many people think or say about you, someone might add.

Think about it this way: one alternative is to step in front of a train.

## **Just enough projects, and good systems to manage them**

Wednesday, 25 March 2015

On Friday, 13 March and Saturday, 14 March I made notes on the problem of having too many projects.

The last few days I've been thinking again about my failures, most notably the overall failure to generate a more decent income, and about my few successes – especially my writing, which, if it were commercially successful, it wouldn't have been necessary to make this note.

This brings me to a question I have reflected on so many times that some professionals might say I am obsessed with it. Two things stand out as reasons why I am stuck on my current income:

1) Since 2006 I have continued a trend that started in 1999, and that is to take on too many projects (as I have already mentioned).

2) I don't have good systems in place to manage these projects and even have them run 90% on auto-pilot.

At first I thought it was one reason or the other, but then I realised even if you only have one business or project, if you don't have a good system to manage it, it will not be successful in the long run. And even if you have a good system for one or two different projects, you cannot continue taking on projects because good systems don't fall out of the sky when you need them – they usually take time and effort and perhaps money to develop.

Thus, for each project or income-generating endeavour you take on, a well thought-out system is required to increase the probability of success to at least 50% if not better.

Thus, two: Good systems take time, effort and probably money to develop. You should therefore refrain from taking on projects if you do not have a good system to manage a new project and eventually put it on auto-pilot (if possible).

Thus, three: Focus on developing good systems, then work one project after another into the system machine, and then consider paying someone as supervisor or assistant to make sure the machine runs well.

## Own your failures

Thursday, 7 April 2016

Earlier this evening I read a note I had made on Friday, 28 August 2015. The note is about success, but as the story often goes, it is more about failure. I really like the piece. I was annoyed when I confirmed what I had suspected: I haven't yet finished editing the text so it hasn't been published.

I reckon the reason for my procrastination is that the part about failure leaves me a little too naked, too vulnerable.

Suddenly a thought pounced on me like a crazed cat: Own your failures.

I am already honest about my failures, but I have been thinking for quite some time about the discomfort I still experience because of it.

The fact is, failure in my efforts to make more money since 2006 is an integral and important part of my life. I shouldn't try to cover it up nor should I coat it with sugar. I shouldn't try to talk it away, or talk about it as if it isn't quite true (that is anyway too much of a challenge).

Just like I accept other things I have done that I am happy about as part of my story, so failure is also part of my story. It is my failure. It has been my process. They are my lessons learned. It is my emotional discomfort and my disappointments. I have paid dearly for this, and I should do with it what I want.

I have failed in many endeavours I have embarked on in my life. This too, is part of me.



## **The profitable period of 2006 to early 2011**

Thursday, 8 September 2016

Since 2011 I have thought of the years 2006 to the beginning of 2011 as a period of loss. What exactly did I lose? Time, I have always thought – because I wasted so much of it trying to make money in all sorts of ways.

Here is a more positive view of that period: I learned how to publish my writing – including formatting manuscripts so they can be printed, the creation and formatting of electronic books, setting up a WordPress site, basic web design, marketing; I learned about sports betting and trading, and I started my education on trading on the financial markets.

And, ladies and gentlemen, soon I will be able to say that the period 2006 to early 2011 also yielded a project consisting of more than 70 pieces [Post Untitled, volume three] which will include notes on the long and difficult process of trying to make money without having to work for someone else – which makes the material very different from all the material that preceded it, because it is about making mistakes, falling on your face, embarrassing yourself, failing again and again and again ... and in the end deciding that you're going to spend more time doing things that make you happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cognitive scientist, Donald Hoffman says evolution does not favour people who have a firm grasp of objective reality – reality as it actually is, but that it favours those who perceive reality in ways that enable them to survive most efficiently and procreate most successfully. (Reference in the piece, “What If Evolution Bred Reality Out Of Us?” by Adam Frank, on NPR.ORG.)

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## **Was it worth the time and money because you learned something about yourself?**

Wednesday, 21 December 2016

You get to know yourself in varied situations: by travelling to foreign countries, by spending time with people you don't really like, and in trying times, alone or with other people.

You also learn about yourself by speculating with money, say on the financial markets. You observe how you feel and act when you end up with some profit, and how you feel and behave after a loss. You also learn how you feel and how you act after a catastrophic mishap.

How long it takes you to give up is another important thing you learn about yourself, as well as how long you keep doing something simply because you don't want to give up, even though a stick blind man can see you're getting nowhere.

Does it qualify as giving up if you shift your experience to something else, or when you apply things you have learned to an entirely different market? Would you then still think you wasted your time? Would you still think you wasted your money?

How do you calculate "profit" when it comes to self-knowledge? And does it necessarily mean it was less of a waste of time just because you learned a few useful things about yourself?

## **A good and successful day is built layer by layer**

Wednesday, 28 December 2016

Who begins their day with a manifesto on their lips, and a finely worked-out blueprint in their heads?

The fact is, most people's days start with necessity: you get up because you need to go to the bathroom, because you are hungry, and because you have made arrangements with people and businesses, and if you do not show up, you're going to be in trouble.

And so begins your day. Eventually, you shower and you brush your teeth, you get dressed, and you go somewhere to earn your bread and butter, or to otherwise be of value to the community.

Layer upon layer your day is built up. Here and there you make a mistake. Here and there you say something or you do something that embarrasses you, but after a few minutes or an hour or so you are in full swing again.

By the time the day is over, you will perhaps look back on a good and relatively successful day. Did you start with slogans rolling over your lips, and a neatly printed plan waiting next to your bed for you to follow like an obedient robot? Most likely not, although you may have had a good idea of how you would like your day to progress.

So it is with other endeavours and projects that you undertake. You have a good idea of what you need to do to achieve reasonably good results. You have a good idea what you should do to stay out of trouble. You still make the occasional mistake, and every so often you slide on a banana peel. But successful results, like a good and successful day, is built up layer by layer – ten, twenty, a hundred big and small actions and steps following after another to produce a good result.

Slogans are good. Manifestoes have their place. Surely you have to know what you must do. But success is more often than not the result of layer upon layer of small, seemingly insignificant actions. Just like a good and successful day.

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Not exactly on the same topic, but in the same spirit: Scott Adams wrote the following in a blog post at Dilbert.COM: “The idea of a talent stack is that you can combine ordinary skills until you have enough of the right kind to be extraordinary. You don’t have to be the best in the world at any one thing. All you need to succeed is to be good at a number of skills that fit well together.”

## **Beat the drum with conviction, or hang your head in shame**

Monday, 13 February 2017

This morning I watched a program titled *Heart of Taiko*, about the traditional Japanese drum. The program follows three Malay-Japanese teenage girls who had established a taiko group in Penang. They are invited to attend a workshop at a legendary manufacturer of taiko drums in Japan. They meet three of the country's top female players, who will teach them technique and correct conduct. At the end of the few days it is expected of the group of teenagers to perform with the Japanese professionals in front of a select audience.

The younger of the three Japanese drummers take the lead in the young students' training. She is critical from the start. The girls don't play together. They show a lack of commitment. She gives them packs of magazines wrapped in paper to practice on, and she wonders the next day why the packs are not in shreds. She looks at their hands. Why are they not bruised? Why are there no blisters? She takes them to a windy beach where they have to stand with their legs apart while holding heavy drumsticks above their heads as they scream something. This while a strong wind is blowing at them. They do okay, but still leave their instructor unimpressed.

The next day they go to a monastery to meditate – they sit quietly on pillows, staring at a white wall. After the session, one girl describes it as a very helpful experience. She says she learned that you have to be fully present in the moment.

They go back to the training centre. They train harder.

The following day they again play their drums for their teacher – the young, professional taiko master. This time she smiles. They still make a lot of mistakes, she says. There's a lot they still have to learn. But, and this she says with great satisfaction – she could see more dedication in their eyes. She

also sees it in their arm movements, the arms being lifted high and brought down hard on the drum skin. And their screams were loud and full of energy.

And they learn: Technical mistakes are one thing; we work on them. Everybody makes mistakes at the beginning. Mistakes can be forgiven. What is unforgivable, what is in fact a great embarrassment to all concerned, is lack of dedication.

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