

[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.

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