

THE ADULT LIFE

BRAND SMIT



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Cover: *Boat Adrift*, by Charles Napier Hemy (1890)

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INTRODUCTION

This collection is part of a series covering specific themes. The material includes notes and essays. Some of the pieces were written for an audience years before I published them, and other pieces were originally only written as reminders to myself.

Available titles, in both digital and printed formats, include: *In the grip of heretics – or, The Christian; Not a table, a dog or a pencil; The real, or non-real purpose of our existence; As long as you remain standing; The necessary unpleasantness; The adult life; On writing and the writer; Exile; Thirteen minutes on a Saturday night; Time doesn't really fly.*

More information is available from ASSORTEDNOTES.COM.

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 bundle about?

Figure out what to do with your life, make money or struggle, get married – or not, have children – or not, buy a house or rent an apartment, get a loan for a new car or drive with a bicycle that creaks, settle in a middle-class suburb or live abroad for years. As a child, one looked forward to being an

adult. Then, suddenly, you have to make choices that will affect the quality of your life, even your survival, for the next few decades. And you must take responsibility not only for your own life but for the health and well-being of other people you care for.

The material in this collection follows the sometimes confused process of one who thought it was his duty to find his own path as an adult.

* * *

The first two pieces date from the last months I spent in South Korea in the late nineties. For months I had been feverishly thinking what my next step should be, seeing that I was approaching the end of a two-year contract. By the time I jotted down “New Insights, February 1999”, I had lived and worked in Johannesburg for six months, and I had already been in Taiwan for a month. As I also point out in the text, the few pieces that follow were written in February 2004, after I had gone through material I wrote before, during, and shortly after the time I was in Korea. The rest of the material was written between March 1999 and early 2017.

Notes from Korea and Taiwan

Commitment and place

Wednesday, 25 March 1998

In the first three years following my graduation, I struggled with the idea of commitment. I had no clue to what I should commit myself. I was also reluctant to devote myself to something or commit to it if there were a vague possibility of failure.

If you don't have a focus point in your life, something you're committed to, you are intensely aware of the effect this state of affairs has on your sense of well-being. Shortly after graduating from university (which left me with a small mountain of debt), I went to Europe for a few weeks (more debt). Whatever I tried to achieve with the trip, it did not succeed. Then I spent more than a year wandering between places in the hope that "something will happen" that could give me direction – in the hope that I might find something to which I can commit myself.

Eventually, I found myself in another foreign country, still looking for something to fill the void left by my lack of commitment. Or maybe I thought the mere fact that I was living abroad, away from the hassle of student loan creditors, away from even family and friends, would be enough – for the time being.

Alas, escaping does not work if you cannot escape from yourself. In my case, I could not escape the feeling that I don't belong. If you're not committed to something or someone, you're not going to feel as if you belong. And if you don't feel as if you belong, you will experience what some academics call existential angst.

You can keep yourself busy for a while with a variety of things to make up for the lack of commitment in your life, but once the effect of these measures begins to fade, or if you get bored with it, you're back at square one.

To what do people commit themselves? They commit to a religious entity, an idea, a dream, an ideal, or to someone else, a group or even a subculture. That to which I want to devote myself ought to be meaningful enough to keep my attention and to take hold of my imagination. It will also help if this focus point is of such a nature that, by keeping myself busy with it, I can provide for my daily needs.

I'm a dreamer, but I am also realistic. I have seen enough, and I've experienced enough to know what kind of life awaits you if you are not free; if you are not in a position to make choices and act on them. I know what it feels like to wonder when you're going to get evicted from your rental home, or to wonder when you'll again sit down to a proper home-cooked meal, or to wonder if the next knock on the door will be the repo man. I know what it feels like to have dreams, but to not know whether a fraction of it will ever come true.

I can thus with a fair amount of certainty say that I am committed to the idea of freedom – freedom from debt bondage, and freedom from poverty. I can go further and say that I am dedicated to reaching a point where I will have options, and access to the necessary resources to act on choices made; also to having the ability to give more than I ask. It only makes sense to then also commit myself to a path that would lead to financial wealth – not as an end destination, but as a path to freedom.

Where is a better place to commit myself to the above-mentioned ideals than the piece of earth where I was born and where my deepest roots still lie?

Story of two travellers

Friday, 27 March 1998

Allow me to tell you a story of two travellers. One guy arrives at a crossroads. He looks in every direction, walks to the carts placed at the entrance to each path, picks up a copy of all the brochures and reads through all of them. After an hour or so

he sits down on a rock by the side of the road and wonders out loud: “Which one should I take?” As he sits there, silently pondering, time goes by.

The seasons come and go, and still this guy sits on his rock at the crossroads. And he ponders. Every now and then he takes a notebook from his back pocket and scribbles a few notes. Then he thinks some more. From time to time he rises to walk in circles for hours on end, occasionally stopping to jot down a few ideas, after which he sits down again.

From this position, he sees many other people arrive and depart. Sometimes he sees someone turn into a road; a few months later he sees that same person, stumbling out with a few bruises, a wound or two, and maybe a shirt or a jacket with a tear or a sleeve missing. This person may hang around for a while, catch his breath, and then he’ll start walking in another direction. The guy on the rock would shake his head, and he’ll know he’s doing the right thing – to think long and hard before taking action. After all, he doesn’t want to end up like that guy, he always tells himself. Then, after a while he will start circling the rock again, looking in this direction then that, writing down a few thoughts, and again sitting down on his rock, his face buried in his hands.

One bright autumn day another man appears on the horizon. The moment he reaches the crossroads, he goes down on his haunches. He sniffs the air for a moment, casts his eyes in a westerly direction, then north, then east. Then he gets up, slings his bag over his shoulder and starts walking.

The man on the rock observes this spectacle. He mutters to himself, and shakes his head. “How can this man just make a decision like that? I’ve been sitting here for years pondering what path I should take! After how many preliminary conclusions, after so many stories people have told me about the different paths, I still can’t decide which one is the best!”

Annoyed, the guy jumps down from his rock and yells after the man. The man, already some distance along, stops and looks behind him. The rock sitter picks up the pace.

“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 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.

* * *

A few days later a tired and weary traveller arrives at the crossroads. He notices a rock a few metres from a large oak tree. In the light of the late afternoon sun, his eye catches an inscription: *The right path for you – is the path to which you are committed. And if you are committed to a path, it is the right path for you.*

New insights, February 1999

Monday, 15 February 1999

To be free and independent, I have written more than once in the past few months, is my great ideal. Superficially considered, it was about not having any financial obligations to any creditors. But it stretched deeper than that: I did not want to have any obligations. My ideal life was that of a bachelor, a “Steppenwolf”. No commitment, no obligations – to anyone.

About a year ago I identified “commitment” and “belonging” as fundamentally sound ideas, even for myself. What I did not realise was that I had two horses in the race. And I tried to ride both. I wanted to belong and commit, but I also wanted to be free and independent. What I did not apparently understand at first was that you cannot commit yourself to something whilst crying “Freedom!”, that you can’t belong somewhere and simultaneously suggest that you are independent.

The idea of a family of my own was never something I could work into my ideal lifestyle of freedom and independence. Now, this wouldn’t have been a problem if I weren’t yearning so much after these basic joys of life.

It dawned on me that to love a woman and to raise children with her would be much more of a restriction on my freedom

and independence than the obligation of owing some banks some money.

When I realised this, it was like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. I felt relieved. I could relax because at that moment I knew that total freedom and independence were not what I wanted! If this was what I had wanted to achieve, it was possible! It's not an illusion. It's not a dream that can never be fulfilled. It's a dream I don't want! It's a path I would never have wanted to walk to its endpoint, because I wouldn't have been committed to anything, and I wouldn't have belonged anywhere. And I want to commit myself to something. I want to dedicate myself to something. I want to strive for something, and I want to feel I belong somewhere.

In Johannesburg I wouldn't easily have gained this insight because there freedom and independence were concrete short-term ideals, even desires, that I had confused with an ideal life. I needed to come to Taiwan to realise that if I wanted to be free and independent, it is doable; it is an ideal that can be realised. I had to know that it is a life I can pursue and achieve, if that was indeed what I wanted to do. But it is not.

Of course I still want to pay off my debts as soon as possible. I hate living under the sword of debt. I believe that to owe someone money is to be that person's slave. It's not the same as loving someone and fulfilling a financial obligation to that person out of love.

In financial terms, I still want to be free and independent. But I also want to achieve a different ideal – I want to belong somewhere. I want a home in the full sense of the word. I want to love a woman and be loved by her.

To finish off this notebook then, which first tasted ink ten months ago in Stellenbosch and that experienced Johannesburg with me, the following: I want to commit myself to an ideal the realisation of which has already begun, namely to be a writer. And I want to love and be loved, and thus belong somewhere.

I am committed. And one day, I will also belong.

[The following pieces were written in February 2004 after working through material I had written in the period 1996 to early 1999.]

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

On Saturday, 14 March 1998, I wrote: "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".

Korea: Greenhouse for my grievances?

As I read through the 1996-1998 material, I got the strong impression that Korea had been an incubator for my grievances, and for my insecurities and fears. I was somewhat

surprised when I saw how much poison I had spat in that time over “suburbia” – things like “the bane of suburbia”, “I hate suburbia now more than ever” and “culture and art die in suburbia” (just to name a few of my favourites).

What exactly was my problem with life in a middle-class suburb? The architecture of the place isn’t comparable to old European cities, but my goodness, what do you expect? The average suburban garden is also not Kirstenbosch, but the average suburban citizen is not Cecil John Rhodes! And what is a barbeque on a Saturday night, Christmas meals, birthday parties, rugby on TV, and late afternoon walks with the dog if not culture? And “art dies in suburbia”? Give me a break!

Nevertheless, I feel compelled to stand up for myself. Suburbia was to me about more than just the architecture of three-bedroom houses – or any other version of a suburban house, or the number of flowers in the front yard or dog droppings in the backyard. It was a symbol of a broader phenomenon in society, where people constantly peer over the proverbial fence to see what how the neighbours are doing, in what clothes they’re walking around, what model car they’re driving, and how often and to where they go on vacation. Status in this community is like a devil that forces people to do things they never thought they could devote an entire life to. How are success and failure measured in the middle class? Money and professional status. A man beats his wife? That’s terrible, but it would be much worse if he were a financial failure as well. The Johnson children are doing well in school? That’s nice, but did you hear that the father is changing jobs again? A man or woman who doesn’t know how to spell morality, but “did you see they’re driving a new BMW?”

Of course, it made a difference that my own family had tasted dust on the wrong side of the line. Of course you’d have some difficulty with grievances when you get up off the ground. I could nevertheless not fail to confront myself with the question of whether “they” were right, or whether “something” was wrong with the “whole thing”.

How do I feel today about the socio-cultural phenomenon that is middle-class suburbia?

I have mentioned at some point that I no longer have a problem with the idea of a pleasant three-bedroom house, a nice garden, a lawn mower, two dogs and a car (and I know the middle class is about more than just that). I can take this position because in recent years I have taken the concept of middle-class suburbia that had so haunted me in Korea, pulled it apart, and examined exactly what had bothered me so much about the place, and what aspects are actually quite innocent – like the poor dog, and the lawn mower. I finally realised that it is not about the house or the garden or the neighbours, but about *what you do* to afford life in the middle class.

The problem is ... city planning!

The fact that I have made my peace with middle-class suburbia does not mean that I don't have a problem with the layout of many suburbs.

The average suburb spreads out over several hectares of land. Each house is on a plot which is often cordoned off from the next with wires, walls or sharp poles. Neighbours may be familiar with each other, but regular interaction between fifty or more people of a particular area is not common. Little space is usually reserved for public use.

As an example of a better layout, I can point to the neighbourhood where I currently reside in Taiwan. It isn't in or near the business district, and can probably qualify according to Taiwanese standards as a suburb. My immediate neighbourhood comprises ten lanes with four-storey apartment buildings – about eight apartment buildings in a row on each side of the lane, with a small alley at the back of the building. On the other side of the road is an area with small houses with very little yard space, if any.

The central point of the area is the park at what can be described as the entrance to my neighbourhood. The park has

a basketball court where young men test their skills in the evenings and on weekends; next to this is a tennis court where older men and women and sometimes younger people play tennis throughout the day. Stretching south of this area is a tree-lined park with tables and benches where people of all ages regularly sit and talk, where old men play cards, where grandparents relax with their grandchildren, and where people go for a walk in the late afternoon and early evening.

At the entrance to the park are a few stalls selling snacks and drinks from morning to late at night. There is also a sizeable general store right across from the park. Further down the street is a bustling market in the mornings and some evenings, and by the roadside a variety of small shops, restaurants, bicycle repair shops, and so on.

It is certainly not a wealthy neighbourhood. I get the idea that it is mostly old people, taxi drivers and office workers who live here; nobody at first glance looks as if they can afford any extravagance. However, there is a strong manifestation of community, of people who are comfortable spending time with friends, acquaintances and strangers in public.

I would very much like to return to my own country, but it is unfortunate that I would have to leave this type of neighbourhood for – if I am lucky – a suburb where you can probably not even go to a convenience store without a car, and if you can still reach the local 7-Eleven by foot, you can most likely not walk to the nearest bank or post office. And it is indeed unfortunate that I will probably not end up in a neighbourhood with a park filled with activity and life for at least twelve hours every day of the week.

* * * * *

“The *Homo sapiens* had an edge over the Neanderthal because they were nomadic. Constant change made the *Homo sapiens* flexible and innovative, whereas the settling habits of the Neanderthal led to stagnation, and probably eventual extermination.”

~ From a TV program

* * * * *

Icarus journal, entry # 1

Saturday, 6 March 1999

What I mean by *arriving* in the metaphor of the road is that you emerge from the woods at some point. After weeks of walking in semi-darkness on endless paths and living on wild fruits and berries, you see the light one morning. Just before noon you reach the edge of the forest. You find yourself on a road that runs across rolling hills, along cool rivers, through green valleys ...

You get tired of walking and walking and walking. You get tired of trying to find your way. Would this be why some people are happy with the idea of a suburban existence? Maybe they got tired of all the footpaths, of sleeping under trees, of running away from things that threatened them. Perhaps they had reached the end of the forest, and decided to settle down on a patch of open ground – in a place where they feel safe.

Now, I can criticise bourgeois culture as much as I want, but these people at least have a life! They don't pretend their lives are massively exciting. They work year in and year out for the same company, or in similar situations. And even if they exchange one suburb for another, the same basic lifestyle is maintained. They're not waiting anymore for their lives to start. They have come to a point where, if they had to stop and think about it they would say: "It's not the life of a rock star, but it's my life." They also say: "I live, today. It may not be everything I dreamed of, but at least I *live* today. I'm not waiting for tomorrow in the hope that I'll be leading a more glorious and exciting existence then."

I, on the other hand, always dream of tomorrow. *Tomorrow* I will start living, and it's going to be the way I wanted to live today, but it's only going to be tomorrow. I find it highly problematic to say: "Well, this is it, this is home. I hope you're comfortable, because you're probably going to be

here for a long time.” If I look back over the past few years, I’ve always shown this tendency to say: “If you don’t think it’s fantastic, don’t worry. This place is not really home. Tomorrow ... or very soon I’m going to reach my real home. And it’ll be a great place ...”

The question is not whether I want to settle down at some point; the question is for *what* I want to settle. I’m not an adventurer. I just don’t want to be stuck in a place where I don’t really want to be.

I believe as long as you have the energy and the will to work for something that you would like to settle for, you shouldn’t get comfortable with anything less. You’d probably always have to settle for less than your number one ideal life, but you can be realistic, and still end up in a good place.

Exile 5?

“You play out your happiness on a piano that is not infinite.”
(from *The Legend of 1900*)

Friday, 8 December 2000

(It’s been three months since my last essay.)

It is not always easy to sit still, think for a while, and then destroy the freshness of a blank piece of paper in an attempt to summarise where, at a particular time, your life is at. Until recently, to escape the effort such a Wider View required, I would have turned on the TV that couldn’t pick up a signal anymore and played Super Mario until the end of frustration. Then I bought my fourth Pearl Jam album. Three days later I bought myself an electric guitar. And a few weeks after that a keyboard. A recorder and two harmonicas followed over the next few months. Now when my conscience calls for a renewed climb to the hill above my life – to see which way the wind blows, to be able to say, “Okay, that’s where I stand,” I look the other way, grab a guitar, and try some new chords. The time has, however, come.

It is the eighth of December. There are three weeks to go before Christmas, and then another few weeks before the winter holidays. More than two months have already passed since I was supposed to have had a complete physical, mental and spiritual breakdown, according to a forecast I had made early September. I’m doing okay, despite the fact that there is still no one with whom I could share the good things of life.

But ... EXILE! The past few weeks have been very informative as far as this theme goes. For the sake of clarification, it can be mentioned that the idea’s origin – in my particular case – lies in Korea, when I said I was in economic exile, away from the pressures of conventional middle-class life in the Republic of My Birth. I also said that I would lift

my exile when I am sufficiently empowered to live on my own terms in South Africa. I finally returned after two years, not because I had been sufficiently empowered but because I was dying of loneliness. I had a few ideas about what I wanted to do – hardly watertight, but like the movie said on the plane on the way back, a good idea today is better than no idea yesterday (or something like that).

Almost two years have passed since I came to Taiwan, and, as the title of this piece indicates, these are not the first words I have written on the topic of exile. I usually try not take seriously Sunday Blues-inspired ideas about the lifting of my exile if they don't hold up until at least Monday night, but in the past few weeks the blues-inspired ideas have reached a certain maturity (I am after all writing this essay on a Friday).

[...]

A few months ago I started propagating the belief that the life we as expat teachers lead in Taiwan is conducive to us deceiving ourselves. What do I mean? As a foreign English teacher in Taiwan you can make good money without having to work yourself to death. You stay in a spacious apartment; you have a few luxuries that make your life comfortable; you can afford to treat yourself to things like Japanese sunglasses and American trainers; and you live an exotic life in the Far East (exotic compared to the life with which I grew up anyway in a sort of middle-class suburban area). But none of these things make you happy when that primordial need to belong somewhere is not fulfilled. So you think you're okay until you wake up one Sunday morning with a hangover of yet another Saturday night you spent on your own (to spend the evening with other foreigners is about the same as giving candy to a hungry child). By Sunday night you once again realise that you have made yourself very comfortable in a place where you don't really belong. To make yourself feel better you drive to the nearest music shop to buy more CDs, just to hear Bob Dylan preaching to you that you shouldn't confuse paradise with that "home across the road" [from "Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest"].

This brought me to the point where I wanted to throw a new belief into the wind: that I would never feel I belong here – with the exception if I marry a Taiwanese woman, which would make the place personal to such an extent that it could compete with the land of my birth.

In the absence of any meaningful relationship with a woman from this country it was inevitable that I would return to some old questions: What exactly am I doing here? Am I going to stay here for the rest of my life? If not, will I return to South Africa? If some good reasons may be found why I should go back, then when? The main question that then comes to mind is exactly what I will do when I get back.

It may have value to remind myself (and perhaps the reader) of the reasons I decided in November 1998, despite what I had said in May of that year, to pack my things again and head back East. I enjoyed being with my own people, seeing my family every few weeks, and going out with women with whom I could carry on a proper conversation. Why was I willing to give these things up again? I was living in the servant's quarters of a friend's backyard; all my furniture was made of discarded planks; my mattress consisted of two pieces of sponge I had cello-taped together; I didn't have a car; I was earning R2,600 per month of which I had to pay R2,000 to cover my student debt, and I was working in an administrative capacity at the company of the aforementioned friend who was so kind to allow me to live rent-free on his property. There were certainly other options, but my ambitions and my personal politics were such that returning to Asia seemed to be the only real solution.

What I have done here in the past two years, was much, much more than I thought I would do. The original idea was to make money, and to pay off my debt. At some point I was supposed to return to South Africa, buy a house, and sit on the porch flipping off passers-by. I wanted to be free and independent.

It didn't take me long before I realised that I had to qualify these goals. To be free and independent, so I reckoned, could

also imply that no one really mattered to me: No wife, no children, no obligations or responsibilities.

A clearer formulation looked like this: to have the freedom to *choose* what I want to do and keep myself mainly busy with *that* activity; to be independent of bosses and businesses and institutions that want to dictate how I should look, what I should say and how I should spend much of my day – just because I rely on the money they channel to my bank account at the end of each month.

Seeing that I'm not quite in a position to start flipping people off, it can be said with relative certainty that I am currently trapped between my ambitious goals and my actual situation.

Two solutions exist for this dilemma. One is a well-known fantasy: the countless millions you can call your own when you win the British Lottery. The other solution is to seek tools with which you can *actively* bring about independence of your economic masters. In my case it boils down to a great extent to possessing a good computer.

To have in your possession all the tools you need and to make regular use of it does, of course, not necessarily pay the rent at the end of the month. Initial capital is essential. It is for this reason that I continue to leave my apartment every day to provide a service for which there is a need in this place, namely English lessons offered by an actual speaker of the language (which amounts in most cases to a different skin colour, and sometimes different coloured eyes than all the local English teachers who are sometimes more capable of offering the same service).

One thing is important to mention in this review of my noble struggle for independence – I don't intend anymore to accumulate enough money to buy a house and spend the rest of my days playing tunes to pedestrians walking by. The idea is to rather use these tools I have gathered to earn a *regular income*. This process of making Creative Works my income-generating business has already begun.

[...]

[In the rest of the piece I tried to explain the principles of using your creativity to generate an income. I got bogged down in long sentences that didn't quite say what I wanted to say, and the process came to an abrupt halt in the middle of one of these sentences. The idea and the argument behind it do, however, continue in other writings.]

The purpose of my life

Sunday, 25 February 2001

An Honest Attempt At Solving A Nasty Problem/A Preliminary Investigation Into The Purpose And Meaning Of Life, And What We Have To Do To Lead Fulfilling And Happy Lives

PART ONE

~ An Ode to the Movies ~

“Real life is not like in the movies where you get a realisation and your life changes the next day. In real life, you get a realisation, and your life changes a month later.” ~ From *Postcards from the Edge*

A few days ago, at a quarter past one in the morning, I gave myself a deadline: at half-past one, I had to have an answer to the question of what I want to do with my life. I took up position on the porch, and smoked a cigarette. Half-past one came and half-past one went, as expected, with no progress in my investigation. Help, or inspiration, would have been welcomed with an open mind.

A film I had seen a few months ago came to mind as a possible indication of how to look for an answer. The film is about a bunch of software engineers, and how they struggle with the question of the value of their lives. (As it happened, one character is a little more obsessive about the topic.) During one conversation, they discuss the difference between what they are doing with their lives, and what everyone would consider being more ideal for them. In other words, if they don't have to while away at least eight hours per day, five days per week in office cubicles for an income, what would they do with their time? One character mentions that a teacher once

asked them what they would do with a million dollars. The answer, in theory, would have given them an indication of what career they should follow. For example, if one had said he would fix old cars then that was supposed to mean he should become a mechanic. (Don't you get the impression sometimes that life is a white elephant? Someone gave you this thing we call "life", but you're not sure what to do with it and throwing it away is not an option.)

Inspired by this bit of advice, I asked myself the following question: If I had a million dollars, how would I spend my days and nights?

Now, this happens to be a cloud upon which I often fall asleep at night, and preliminary answers are always the same – buy my parents a large house and give them enough money so they can retire, give my two sisters enough money so they'd never have to worry about money again, buy myself an old building, travel for at least six months, see all the places I've always wanted to see, build up an international network of lovers ... and then I usually fall asleep.

After an hour or so of considering what I would do with a million dollars, I could not come up with a better answer than the usual line-up. I knew these are all short-term goals. If I'm done buying houses and giving away boatloads of money, the goals are no longer valid.

So let's say my parents and my sisters are comfortable for the rest of their lives, I've seen the world, and I've built up an international reputation, how will I keep myself busy? Or maybe I should go further and ask, what shall I do to give meaning to my life?

I then thought of another movie where some suburban fellows from a big city reckon it will do them good to chase cattle across the plains. During this adventure, they meet an old cowboy. One of the city folk, who is also contemplating the Big Question, thinks an old cattle man ought to know the answer. The latter ponders for a moment, then raises a single finger in the air. "One thing," he says. The city guy waits with bated breath for the rest of the answer. When the rancher fails

to finish his sentence, he asks him what the one thing is. “You’ve got to figure that out for yourself,” the old man replies.

My own views made me comfortable with the idea, so my sights have increasingly been set on identifying a single thing. In fact, the One Thing Theory has become an almost dogmatic part of my thought processes on the Higher Questions of Life. I was convinced that, whatever the answer, it can only be one thing.

By the time I went to bed (at about half-past four), I had an idea: to start a business that sells documentaries, music videos, travel programs and films on DVD, maybe a mail order business so I don’t have to sit in a store every day of the week. This would cover my interests in history, music, movies and current affairs. I also thought if I had to tell people this is my ambition, the goal I want to pursue, they would find it acceptable; it would sound like the kind of response they would want to give if anyone asked them about their goals and ambitions. We all know people who go on endlessly about a restaurant they want to open, or a coffee shop or a bookstore, even a shoe store. Few of us are in the habit of laughing in the faces of people with such ambitions, and we rarely think their dreams are ridiculous. Such ambitions make sense. They will have something to keep them busy most of the time, and they will probably enjoy being in an industry that serves good food, or they will find it pleasing to stay up to date on the most commercially successful books of the day. And everyone knows this kind of ambition, if successful, will generate income for the owners and their families.

The notion of sufficient capital to fund whatever you want to do had thus brought a preliminary answer. Hoping that the answer would hold until brunch, I drifted off, dreaming of shelves filled with documentaries, music videos, and other interesting items.

The next day (or later the same day) I awoke with a slight suspicion of a point that had recently been reached. The

moment I remembered what it was, it was as if someone had knocked me on the head. A shop?! Me, a store owner? How on earth did I stumble on that as a reason for my existence?

The light of a new afternoon had indeed brought clarity. I had to start from scratch.

In a systematic fashion, I decided to look at the possible reasons why I had initially regarded the idea as worthy of consideration, in order to proceed with the next step in the process. People find satisfaction in their jobs, right? And not everyone has a job that others envy! I know people who are happy in jobs others will find incredibly dull. On the other hand, should salaried work necessarily get the credit for happiness in one's life? Put differently, must you necessarily find a job that makes you happy?

But I'm trying to smuggle in an idea that is entitled to at least a provisional theory: happiness, and why it is so interwoven in our quest to find purpose and meaning in our lives (at least at this time of world history, if not necessarily always the case in bygone eras).

Elementary psychology and common sense teach us that we have certain basic needs. Whether or not the satisfaction of these needs occurs in hierarchical order, we know that they must be satisfied to a reasonable extent to ensure physical survival and to more or less keep your sanity. It also follows from common sense more than anything else, that if our needs are met, we experience a sensation that we usually call "happiness". If we have enough to eat, we're relatively healthy, we get six to eight hours of decent sleep every night, we have a suitable hiding place (either in a rented room or a mansion), we love and are loved (in both physical and emotional terms), we have a reasonable understanding of how everything fits together, and we give expression to our creative needs, then we usually feel that life is all right, to say the least.

If any of our basic needs – physical or otherwise – is not met, we experience a sensation of a different nature. Depending on the degree of want and the type of need, we

usually announce that we are “unhappy”, or “not feeling well”. In the case of serious emergency or deprivation – or just to be more specific – we give the unpleasant sensations names like “hunger”, “cold”, “fear” or “loneliness”.

But how does the fulfilment of needs fit in our discussion of employment (or unemployment, whatever the case may be)? It works as follows: the paid labour we provide, determines the extent to which most of our needs are met. Enough money means enough food (unless the money is blown on other needs that are less important in relation to the needs that must be met to ensure our physical survival). Heaps of money, again in theory, can provide a million dollar shelter for you and your intimate circle, and first class satisfaction of your other needs. Alternatively: no money, no food; no food, poor health, and eventual death due to complications caused by inadequate satisfaction of basic needs. Between these two extremes lies a spectrum with a thousand points of difference in degree of need fulfilment. All this confirms the basic truth that the income you earn stands in direct relation to the extent to which your needs are met as well as the quality of need satisfaction.

“Masters of simplicity,” is what the historian Alan Bullock called two of the bloodiest dictators of the twentieth century. According to him, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin refused to be overwhelmed by the complexity of problems they faced. I tend to be exactly the opposite. Not only do I feel overwhelmed by questions about the purpose and meaning of life, at times I suffer acute anxiety about it! The reason is the large number of possible answers to the questions. During the last few decades, many established religions have had to compete for fans (and monetary donations) with hundreds of sects, movements and quasi-religions. Ministers, high priests, low priests, popes, rabbis, holy men, ungodly men, holy women, even the local bartender, all have their answers to the questions we ask. To this list you can add ancient philosophers, pseudo-philosophers, psychologists, self-

improvement gurus, actors-turned writers, authors-turned-singers. The list is endless. If you add friends and family as well, you'll start to feel like a toy robot whose wires have become crossed. You even start running into the furniture, and you hit your head against the walls. And it's not even always intentional.

A few weeks ago, my mother added another ingredient to the simmering brew. She thought it would be prudent to share with me one of the basic facts of the real (read: middle-class) life, namely that a man must have made his mark by the 35th anniversary of his arrival on this planet. He must, to be sure, already start kicking in his heels by his mid-twenties, but if he's at least heading in the right direction by the age of thirty he can still put in the final push by his mid-thirties. After 35, according to my mother, it becomes increasingly difficult for a man to find his place in the world. (This of course applies to women, as well. I have two sisters, and I was not raised to believe that just because I was a boy, I needed to feel inferior to the girls in the family. Or the other way around, as I later discovered the tendency to be in the broader community.)

I thanked my mother wholeheartedly for her advice (which to some extent does make sense). The idea is to focus on something for a number of years, to master some skill or ability, or to obtain a qualification in order to pursue a specific career. I also realised that the motivation behind this advice as well as the age to which it is linked, possibly has something to do with the fact that one's parents don't want you to move in with them again at a point in their lives when they're not too enthusiastic about staring you in the face every morning – even more so if you're unemployed.

The other reason why it makes sense for you to be financially comfortable at 35 is because you might consider producing some offspring. We all know the associations: more mouths to feed, more groceries, new shoes and clothing, school fees, a bigger house, a bigger car, more expensive mortgage, 35 going on 60. I could see where this was going. The ideal of a typical middle-class life has never been my

main motivation for getting up in the morning (or in the early afternoon, as the case is nowadays). But to offer that as a reason not to do what people have been doing from long before the most ancient philosopher formulated the first “Why?” theory is not good enough.

Why does it seem that (almost) everyone (almost) always tend to do the same thing, in good times and bad, whether they’re beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, idiot or genius? A person reaches a certain age, he or she starts acting differently than before, and when they open their eyes one morning they are not eating breakfast alone anymore. This same tendency repeats itself through every era of world history, through every generation across all boundaries – regardless of race, religion, ideology, education, background, class or status. Why does it seem that people are always drifting towards each other – with two happily walking into the sunset every now and then? Why does it seem to make people happy to interact with individuals with whom they have something in common?

It’s simple, you might answer: People need each other. Like animals, we have a need for the protection and support of a group. We are also born with a strong desire to reproduce, thus the intimate contact between (usually) two people at a time.

A further explanation for this tendency among humans can be found in a superficial consideration of the opposite to relationships and association, namely the phenomenon of loneliness – to be on your own when you don’t necessarily want to be. A character in another movie once mentioned that according to Native American folklore, the worst punishment that can be imposed on a man is to force him to roam the earth alone. It is also incidentally the worst (official) punishment a prisoner can be imposed in a prison. “Throw him in the hole for two weeks,” a prison chief often hollers in a movie, and then the other prisoners stare at the floor in a mild panic. It’s not just the absence of sunlight that will bring the man to the verge of a nervous breakdown – people need other people. Wisdom from Africa complements that of the Native

Americans with the concept of “ubuntu” – a person is a person through other people.

Universal phenomenon, wisdom from Africa and North America, the prison boss in the movie, and my mother, all confirm the same thing: I need a dog. Is that not one of the main reasons why people keep pets? To compensate themselves for the lack of human companionship! Or if they’re lucky enough to share their daily life with others, to have something to talk to when the usual party is not in the mood, or temporarily unavailable.

But a pet has more value than to merely have something bark back when you speak, and has a more significant effect on the human psyche than the little entertainment it provides when it performs a well-practised trick. Having a pet is to experience how it feels when another creature needs you – when something or someone else needs you to be alive. It gives us a sense of value. It makes us feel like there’s a purpose in life, a reason for our existence. (The idea that you must stay alive to give Bruno that bowl of kibble twice daily will undoubtedly be put in a new perspective the moment you remind yourself that he will probably trot down the street to find food elsewhere if you continue to talk philosophy with him.)

We need other people – as I’ve already pointed out, and even more than we need pets – for obvious reasons: We need to feel we belong somewhere, we need companionship, and in the case of usually more intimate relationships, we feel the need to reproduce. In a recent movie about a wedding singer, the main character comes to a point where he says to his friend, from that moment on both of them are going to be “free and happy”. His friend empties his shot of whiskey in one gulp and replies, “I’m not happy. I’m miserable.” He continues to explain that, despite his reputation as a single roving male, he just needs someone to hold him, someone who can comfort him by saying that everything is going to be all right. Throw in the concept of “us” that defines a relationship, and you

become increasingly convinced of the fact that you belong somewhere if you're in a meaningful relationship with another person. A French madam who made comfort (and sometimes love) her business in another movie, summarises the reasons for an intimate relationship between two people as "romance, companionship and devotion". A relationship of this nature has the added benefit that you have someone to talk to if your pet is busy elsewhere. And to add a little spice to the brew, you'll have someone with whom you can refine the art of reproduction.

To be important to someone else, to have someone in your life who regard you as an indispensable part of his or her life, gives meaning to your existence. It's a simple agreement, but it works: I will give meaning to your life if you give meaning to mine.

Have I solved the One Finger Thing? Is love, as many suspect, the answer? Do "romance, companionship and devotion" give meaning to our lives, and a reason to live? It may sound cynical, but I'm not entirely satisfied.

It is true that we need love, and that it enables us to answer the Big Question to a satisfactory degree. However, I have come to the conclusion that we need at least two other things to complete the puzzle. First, we must find a way to ensure the continuous satisfaction of our material needs – including food on a daily basis and protection from the elements (already touched upon a few paragraphs back). In the language of modern times, this means one thing: money. Unless we've won some kind of lottery, it also implies that we need to work to obtain this money on a regular basis. In the second place – or besides love and money, the third piece of the puzzle – we need something we enjoy doing. Some call this activity a hobby; I prefer to call it the Third Thing.

Allow me to explain the significant impact the Third Thing has on the possibility of happiness and fulfilment in our lives. This thing – whether an activity, or the mastery of any ability, or just collecting things – is what many of us would

have spent most of our time on if we did not need to spend it earning a monthly salary. The reasons why we pursue these Third Things range from recreation to the challenge they present to the sense of self-worth that results from it. The underlying principle is that we enjoy doing these things.

Some would argue that they enjoy collecting stamps, but they don't necessarily want to busy themselves with it full time. They may argue further that they enjoy doing what they have chosen to make money with (if it's not collecting rare stamps to sell at a profit). This, in a sense, confirms the principle that we need something that some call a hobby – what matters is that it is something we enjoy.

Realistically speaking, the work we choose to earn our proverbial bread and butter with should be something we're more or less interested in, something we enjoy doing to a reasonable degree. A professional photographer is a good example of someone who generates an income in an area he or she is interested in. It might even lessen the need for a Third Thing because the way they earn money already provides the necessary fulfilment for which the third part of the formula is normally needed. If you haven't been so blessed with the ability to make smart career choices, or if you don't enjoy your salaried position because of other reasons, you need a separate interest or activity for the formula to work.

Balance is another factor that should be taken into consideration. A partner fulfils a whole range of needs, just as you (hopefully) do the same for him or her. But everyone knows that love does not pay the rent (if a character in a movie hasn't mentioned it, I bet your mother has). You or your partner, or both of you, need an income with which the rent or mortgage can be paid, with which food and clothing can be purchased, and like most people in the developed world have discovered since the Industrial Revolution, to acquire many more items than you can truly afford and/or need. If the work you do for an income provides you with a degree of pleasure and satisfaction, you will already have started to satisfy the

need normally covered by “what people do in their spare time for fun” (as the dictionary defines “hobby”).

So now you have enough food in your stomach to keep you for a few hours, and your imperfect nakedness is protected from the weather. You have a decent roof over your head, a reasonably solid understanding of the universe, romance and intimacy are part of your daily life, and you mow the lawn every second Saturday for fun and entertainment while you think about your stamp collection. But still you feel a gnawing discomfort in your belly. And no matter how hard you try, you cannot remember the question we contemplated when this whole discussion started.

(SORT OF) PART TWO

The search for answers to the questions that have haunted people since the awakening of intellectual curiosity usually produces several possibilities. But just when you start getting confident about your philosophical abilities, you realise that you never managed to properly formulate the question. What is it that we want to know? Do we want to know why we were born? Do we want to know whether or not we have a purpose we must fulfil? Do we want to be convinced that our lives have meaning and value? Do we want to know what we should do to live happy and fulfilling lives? Why do we want to live happy and fulfilling lives?

Most of us have certain expectations of ourselves, things we would like to achieve. Growing up we look at what other people do, and we identify – consciously or not – certain individuals as examples. We imagine what it would be like to do the same things these people do or have done, and to achieve similar results. But why do we want to pursue these goals? Why do we want to realise our expectations? Why do we have expectations of ourselves to begin with?

The Greek philosopher Plato argued that because we fear disappearing into the nothingness, we want to achieve

immortality. We look at the animal kingdom, and we hope that our lives are more valuable than that of a rat or a giraffe. We know how fragile our lives can be, but we are also aware of some unique qualities and abilities that other animals do not possess.

The notion that we should achieve more in our lifetime than a wild beast would achieve in his seems to be a natural result of our superior intellectual abilities. If we do not need to do more with our lives than the average animal, then why do we possess abilities that are much more advanced than our primate cousins to whom we are most closely related? We start formulating questions that can bring us closer to what it means to be “human”. We wonder about the “meaning of life”, whether or not there’s a specific reason why we were born, whether or not there’s a purpose to our existence.

I suspect that these questions are not merely different versions of the same basic inquiry, and it is therefore necessary to consider different answers to each question. I would also suggest that one initially focuses on one question, namely the one about what makes you happy. (Many will protest that personal happiness is selfish. “Should we not strive for something nobler?” they would ask. The latter is an issue that will be raised again later; the reader will also find that a nobler pursuit is not inconsistent with the primary emotion we call “happiness”. The possibility of happiness also plays a key role in the conviction that life is worth the effort, however people choose to define what makes them happy – whether it is endless entertainment, or commitment to a good cause.)

Is there an answer to what makes a person happy with which a majority of people can agree? I believe there is.

Now, at this point, some readers might expect a life-changing revelation. They may see in their mind’s eye how I clear my throat, take hold of the microphone and start speaking, slowly, carefully weighing my words. After hearing my magical utterances, they may imagine pulling back and muttering in awe: “Wow! So that’s what a man comes up if

he spends years in solitary isolation in an attempt to find an answer! I am so relieved that you have given me these magnificent words! It's now clear that I would never have been able to work it out on my own ...”

The truth is, fortunately for all of us, much less dramatic (even though it did take me years of possibly unnecessary semi-solitary confinement to work it out). What you need is the three things that have already been discussed. For those who didn't quite notice the pattern, here it is again: You need love, and you need money, and then you need something you enjoy doing – on your own, it might be wise to add. (Good health can be added to the mix, now that I think of it). If these elements are part of your life to a satisfactory degree, you are at least on your way to a state of existence that can be called “personal happiness”, and you might just be convinced that life is worth the pain and disappointment that are sometimes unavoidable ingredients of our existence.

An extra word of advice here would not be inappropriate: Balance must be maintained. If the balance is disturbed, it will be like a magic formula that doesn't work because the words were uttered in the wrong order, or because you have left something out. If you spend too much time making money, and you harm your relationship with the person (or people) you love, it will break the spell. On the other hand, if you warm up the bed all day with your lover, it won't do if you tell the bank manager that love is more important than money when he wants to know where the mortgage payment is. The third thing is also essential to complete the first two and balance the whole story out. Relationships are not always simple, and sometimes a colleague or superior at work makes your attempts at earning an income even more gut-wrenching than it's supposed to be. At such times, it helps if you know you can go fishing later, or spend a few hours plucking away at your guitar strings on the back porch.

There you have it, as you surely have always suspected: love, money, and something you do for pure enjoyment. It's up to

you to decide which one is more important, or which one is most deserved of your time. Personally, I think we can all do with a guitar, but not even Jimi Hendrix could survive without love or money. And remember, the *thought* that bread can quiet your hunger pains is not sufficient to fill your belly. You have to go out and find what you need; otherwise you'll end up a lonely and hungry fool, no matter how much you know or understand.

This brings us to the end of this part of the discussion. If, however, you find yourself among a small group of people who are not satisfied with enough money, true love and a decent hobby, I encourage you to continue reading the third and final part of this piece.

[...]

I am not the master of this world

Wednesday, 21 March 2001

I feel somewhat confused at the moment.

For the record, I think it's stupid that there is this expectation that everyone should know what is important to them and what they want out of life by the time they finish high school, and at the latest by the time they graduate from college. And if what they want to do, what is important to them, and what they want from life, do not correspond with what usually brings sufficient financial rewards, they should know how they are going to reconcile what they want to do with the world they live in – where everyone has to bring their pound of flesh to the table in monotonous regularity.

Citizens of the establishment hope – and expect – that everyone who graduates from the Schools of Middle-Class Education and Culture will take their places with full conviction so that an orderly and civil society can continue to be orderly and civilised. By this time, however, the Sages of the current incarnation of Civilised Society know that a certain percentage of middle-class candidates will search for paths that do not quite match what has been laid out for them. The Sages also know that most roads lead to Rome – not everyone needs to follow a conventional career to contribute their share to the maintenance and ultimate evolution of this society. And for those who insist on still not making a contribution, there's enough space in prisons, or in the streets, or in shelters for the homeless.

Since I have never felt strongly about a life in prison or on the street, I'm also trying to find my way to Rome.

“Where's the confusion then?” you may ask.

I would have been okay on my own, and I know what path I can take to get where I need to go – and the road even goes through the type of landscape from which one can derive inspiration every now and then. But deeply-rooted needs that

ensured the existence of a million generations dictate that I must find someone with whom I can share the road. And, as we all know, the next generation starts arriving soon after, whether you have marked out your territory or not.

Confused I therefore am, because – do I want my children to have blond hair and Chinese names, or will I prefer for their mother’s language to be the same familiar sounds with which I grew up? And if not here, then where ... and then what should I do to put food on the table?! And big sister wants a lawnmower, and little brother wants a pair of high heels! And my wife wants to buy *more* magazines?! And all I want to do is write ... and good grief, here comes another one! When did this happen? I hardly have time to shave! I don’t think this Babylon was ever meant for me ... but now it’s too late because they’re downsizing again! And I’m almost forty and all I ever wanted to do was ... but then suddenly I didn’t want to be alone anymore! And I was still stuck on an island in the Far East and I thought the grandparents would also like to see their grandchildren once in a while! And then I had no choice ... I had to roll up my bedding and start walking.

I am not the master of this world. Thus are the rules, thus is the game.

The beautiful world

Monday, 30 April 2001

A friend of mine recently mentioned the ambition of working four days per week, and work that's getting tedious. That she was frustrated with what she has to do for money, is putting it mildly. I could only respond in one way. "You're a creative person!" I told her. "How many hours per day do you spend making something, creating something? How many hours per week?"

We – the somewhat educated inhabitants of industrialised countries – live in a world where a large percentage of the population is required to provide certain services to maintain the economic status quo. Sometimes it takes sacrifice, on a daily basis, to do the types of work required for this purpose.

One of the sacrifices many people make is their creativity, to be connected with their true nature – to be creative. Of course, there are professions where creativity is required, and a privileged minority fills these positions. Most other workers of the First World order, as we know it, must ignore their inherent need to be creative – at least during "working hours".

Because we don't live in totalitarian states where people are forced to abandon their freedom, they must be persuaded by other means. Why on earth would people willingly give up free expression of their creative needs for forty to sixty of the best hours of the week? For "Good Money", of course! For the opportunity to belong to the "Beautiful World"! To look "beautiful" in this world is to look expensive. In order to be admired as one of the "beautiful people" you must fill your life with "beautiful things" – which, as we all know, means you're probably not going to pick it up at the local Hospice shop up for a few dollars.

"Don't you consider a Ferrari to be beautiful?" someone might ask. "Wouldn't you want one?"

Of course! Is a Gibson Les Paul electric guitar of \$600 not a more attractive and higher quality instrument than a Fender replica of a hundred? Anyone will be able to see and hear the difference. But we have to ask ourselves how much we sacrifice to be owners of these “beautiful things”.

A cursory glance will bring home the impression that most of us are willing to sacrifice too much. One of the sacred cows we unceremoniously throw on the altar of the Beautiful World is our ability to be creative, to create things out of raw material. For it is true that it requires a lot of time! But most of the time we are too busy making money with work we would certainly not have spent forty-plus hours per week on were it not for the financial compensation, or we are trying to soothe away our headaches after work, or blowing our Good Money. But the fact that we choose not to be creative does not eliminate the innate desire to create!

Unless we put in some effort to satisfy our creative needs in a sustainable way – with the exception of paid creative work, we fill the void by spending the money we earn on “beautiful” stuff to make ourselves feel a little better about ourselves. If that doesn’t work, we justify the choices we make by pointing out that we are “adults”, that we have a better understanding of the so-called real world than that artist who makes no money. And we laugh so much louder for silly jokes in our two thousand dollar outfits than for something that’s genuinely funny, but it might damage your carefully assembled persona to show appreciation for it. And it’s much easier to give someone a dirty look when he asks, “Wait a minute, what exactly are we doing here?” when you, who don’t have an answer either, sparkle with pearls, and your new Italian shoes glow in the light emanating from expensive boutiques when you trot down the street on your way to yet another purchase.

But what value do pearls and expensive watches and Italian shoes have when you realise, sometime during your forties or fifties, that, despite your earlier dreams and ambitions, you walked straight into that old trap that is set for

all children of the middle class? Then you buy a Gibson Les Paul for ... \$600? “No wait, give me the one for 900, I’ve got a lot of catching up to do!”

But you realise it might be too late. You realise you have spent your life buying “nice things” instead of creating beautiful things. You have become a consumer; you have given yourself over to the disproportionate consumption of the results of other people’s decision to not also deny their creative nature.

It is necessary to point out that I don’t want to be faithful to my creative nature, but when it comes to paying up, the guy who slaves away in an office for ten hours every day has to pay for my steak and beer. I am very interested in money, and preferably lots of it. But my motivation is that having money will allow me to become even less subservient to the conventions of the Beautiful People; to establish a lifestyle recognisable as a good life, without denying what I consider being a central aspect of human nature.

What I want – to express it somewhat differently – is for the “beautiful people” to swallow their untested arguments with expensive French wine for which I’ll foot the bill.

How to be creative and have the ability to afford expensive drinks for your distinguished guests? I can’t provide an answer that will apply to everyone, but I believe too many people shy away from even the mere possibility. Or they consider the “reality” where they have to sacrifice creativity for money as so immutable that they are afraid they will be regarded as naïve, as “idealists” (such a dirty word in certain circles), if they propose something, however modest, that is against the accepted dogma of their “real world”.

People call me an idealist, and I plead guilty. I am, indeed, stubborn in my idealism. Why? Because the alternative is not nearly good enough or beautiful enough to persuade me to deny my own nature.

[Reading between the lines it becomes clear that it's still important for the writer to convince the "beautiful people" of his views, not only in his own world of cheap beer and garlic bread, but in the type of environment where "expensive French wine" is expected by the "distinguished guests". Perhaps a case of preaching to the unconverted in their own world?]

Exile, part viii

Wednesday, 31 October 2001

The plan

I stay in Taiwan, provisionally until the end of next year.

The immediate benefits

[...]

What are the long-term benefits?

[...]

The third factor

A third but no less important factor that also had to be taken into account was maintaining maximum productivity with my writing (and other projects). It is this issue on which I want to focus for the moment.

I am not and have never been destined to be the head of any company. I was born a creator – it's in my blood, and it's in my brain. It is the one thing I cannot deny without causing myself some serious personal problems.

The world in which I grew up, where my values were formed, and from which most of the people hail with whom I socialise reward people for their choice to earn money in conventional ways – which contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of the economic and political order of the day. Personal success is measured, and the amount of respect you receive is determined, by the value of your labour in this system. A man can compose the most complex and beautiful music since Amadeus Mozart, but if he has to beg for money

for a cup of coffee and sleep on a friend's living room floor, he will be considered a failure.

In this world, people are distinguished by a series of badges – nationality, socio-economic background, race, religion, political beliefs, status symbols, behaviour and dress, to name a few examples. Another badge, which overlaps with the aforementioned items, is career. A lawyer, for example, is treated at first glance with more respect than a street sweeper, a bank manager with more respect than a kindergarten teacher.

My older sister graduated with a qualification that, after getting some appropriate experience, gave her the right to introduce herself as a “Chartered Accountant”. My one friend is a certified “Landscape Architect”. After five years of tertiary education I faced the world as a qualified “High School Teacher”.

Being a teacher – even in a subject like History for which I've always had a strong affinity – has, however, never been the answer I wanted to give to the question of how I want to spend at least eight hours per day, year in and year out.

What to do now?

By the beginning of 1996 I had racked up thousands of rand's worth of student loan debt. I also needed to buy a new shirt every now and then, maybe once every two years a new pair of shoes, and maybe once a year a new CD. And I had to eat and live somewhere. I didn't want to start a career as a “High School Teacher”. I definitely did not want to be an “Administrative Clerk” in an office, and I didn't want any job where I would have been forced to do what others ordered me to do for eight plus hours each day. But money had to be earned.

Going to Korea enabled me to win some time. I could taste a little adventure by living in a foreign country while generating an income, without too many people asking me what I wanted to do with my life – or what I was doing with

it. After two years in Korea I was filled with a desire to commit to something, and to belong somewhere.

Back in South Africa, I was again faced with the problem of what badge I would carry in an environment where people regarded profession as a primary indicator of who you are, and how they should behave towards you.

An ambition had started growing in my head years previously: To be a writer. It wasn't just a badge with which I was comfortable; it represented how I wanted to spend my time. By the end of 1998, the idea occurred to me that writing could be more than just something I was interested in – it could be my career!

Being a writer by profession is, however, more complex than becoming a Chartered Accountant. To become a CA, you have to spend the better part of at least four years behind your books to obtain the appropriate tertiary qualification. Then you need to write some exams, and do an internship somewhere. After this lengthy process, you will have earned the right to call yourself a full-fledged “CA” in polite company.

The Road to becoming a Chartered Accountant is known to me, who have never harboured an ambition to become one. Why do I know this? Because it has been formally laid out – and of course I saw the markers as my own sister progressed along the way.

The Road to the Honour of Calling Yourself a Full-time Writer is much less formal. There's no degree you can earn that can be neatly framed that will tell all interested parties “This guy is a writer.” You can't shatter your nerves for months on end studying for a difficult exam, after which a Board of Writers will officially welcome you as one of them.

There is, in the end, only one thing you can do to legitimately wear the Badge of the Writer: write. Fill pages with your writing; fill notebooks with your writing. Develop ideas; read, think and write. Write poetry, short stories, articles, essays and letters. Write rubbish, and write good stuff. Write about life. Write about death. Write about people,

animals, institutions and nature. Write about mountains, cars, cows and flowers. Write about love and hate. Write about towns. Write about cities. Write about gutters and write about palaces. And in between all the writing, send what you think is good enough to publishers. Learn how to submit manuscripts. Discover in what type of material publishers or publications are interested. Be creative, but learn the habits of a professional labourer. Be an artist, but also know that you need to buy your own food and blankets.

Final thought

We are sometimes easily seduced by the image of the bohemian artist – who refuses to dirty his hands with something as vulgar as money, who never compromises his art for the sake of financial reward, who stumbles hungry and dirty and tired through the streets in old, tattered clothes, and who scribbles words on discarded sheets of office paper that will only after an untimely death be hailed as “Brilliant!”

Fortunate is the artist who has rich parents that still give him or her spending money even when they’re in their forties, or who has a friend or loved one who takes care of them so they needn’t be interrupted in their artistic creations, or who doesn’t want to buy a new pair of pants or a dress or a new pair of shoes out of their own pocket from time to time.

Verily, verily, fortunate is the artist – or writer – who doesn’t have any student loans to pay back ...

Exile nine

Tuesday, 20 November 2001 (and a few days later)

Six years have passed since I learned that it matters more that you *have* money than how you *make* money. This brilliant insight struck me about a week after a chain letter landed in my mailbox, which, in theory, could have delivered X amount of money each month into my bank account if I had followed the instructions. It dawned on me like a blessing that I didn't have to be in a salaried situation to pay my monthly rent, and to buy a new pair of jeans from time to time.

This idea corresponded well with my lack of enthusiasm to fit into the conventional course of business where you go to university, after graduation send out your resume hoping that you can soon start your life as an adult, and then after a year or three marry the person with whom you're sleeping at that point. I wanted to continue with the type of life of which my so-called student days were but a foretaste – a life filled with acquiring knowledge, sleeping late, going to the library, spending afternoons in second-hand bookstores, and most importantly, the freedom to grow my beard no matter how bad it looked.

I was 24 when I decided to come to Asia. I knew it would give me the right to inform anyone who wanted to know that I am an “English teacher in Korea”. I also knew it meant that I could delay a little longer the possibly inevitable point when I would have to trade my freedom for a more conventional life, and a clean-shaven face.

So I continued my search for an answer to the Big Question: What is it that this guy wants to do with his life?

Over the course of the next two years I came up with a few ideas. I wanted to live in England or Germany for a few months, or a year. I wanted to return, like a McArthur of the Philippines with trumpets blaring, to the lovely university town of Stellenbosch. And I wanted to write.

Shortly before the end of my time in Korea (May 1998), I added a few ideas to the list. Two of these was that I wanted to commit myself to something or someone, and I wanted to belong somewhere. Other ideas that were eventually added included that you need one thing to focus on, and that half of everyone's life is about the discovery of this one thing; that my position in society was by default that of a homeless man; that middle-class suburbia would not swallow me whole if I accidentally lost my footing for a moment; and that power is the difference between people who ultimately make it, and those who fall by the wayside.

Back in South Africa – where I was supposed to commit and belong – I considered the whole concept of a career. I discovered, in not the first brilliant insight of my life, that I did not necessarily have a problem with the idea of a career. The problem was that the profession had to be such that I could utterly and completely devote myself to it.

Shortly afterwards I bought some books on writing at a Hospice Shop for R1 each, and I took my writing ambitions and my fresh insight to new heights by declaring that this would be my career – I would be a writer! More than that, writing would be my business. I would combine my writing ambitions with business acumen. I wouldn't just write what I wanted to write. I would identify a market, and then produce the type of material publications like magazines needed to fill their pages.

Five and a half months later I was standing on a street corner in a city in the south of Taiwan, contemplating the concepts of freedom and independence. Since the ability to think amazingly clear did not catch me offside anymore, I wasn't surprised when I came to the realisation after only a few minutes that freedom and independence were, for me, empty ambitions. I realised the attraction of these two concepts had fundamentally to do with my desire not to have any debt – to not be obliged anymore to drag a financial burden behind me like a rotting carcass. (And of course it was also related to the old desire to grow a beard, even if I looked

like a tramp.) The attraction started to lose its lustre when I realised that perfect freedom and independence would imply that you have nobody to care about, or for whose life you are responsible. This, I knew, was at odds with my true ambitions. I wanted to love people, and I wanted to one day be part of an intimate group of people for whom I would accept co-responsibility.

Thus it came that long cherished ideals bit the dust.

It was in my 24th year on this planet when I had the insight that I mentioned at the beginning of this ninth part of what was never supposed to be such a long “exile” series. I am now thirty years old. It’s 20 November 2001, 25 minutes past 6 in the morning. The sun has already dropped its first rays over the cold winter landscape of Fengshan City. A puppy is warming up my right foot, and a cigarette is burning out in a new ashtray. The people at the local McDonald’s are getting ready to chuck the first cholesterol-laden breakfast foods into fryers sizzling with fresh oil as I type these words, and I have to work in a second round of sleep so I can look intelligent enough for my 21-year-old Chinese teacher at one-thirty this afternoon.

I am friends these days with people from exotic places like Krugersdorp, Kimberley, Vereeniging and Stellenbosch. I work fourteen hours a week at three different schools, and I earn a few thousand Taiwan dollars extra each month by writing short pieces for a local publisher of ESL magazines. I have completed two book projects this year. I can play Battle Hymn of the Republic on my keyboard, and at least six or seven chords on my two guitars. And if I have to, I can also play a tune on the recorder or on one of my two harmonicas.

The question that hangs in the air like a bad smell on a windless winter morning is, however, still the same: What do I do with my life?

* * *

A lovely morning of rest – filled with feverish dreams of murder, and kisses on blood-red lips of girlfriends who were never called back – has, as usual, brought new insight. I already knew that I wanted to write. The real question is thus not what I want to do, but what type of writing I want to produce.

A secondary question has to do with something I touched on in Exile Number 8, which is that being a writer is sometimes similar to the profession or vocation of being a missionary. The missionary, who believes he or she is called to preach a particular message cannot be a full-time bank manager and exercise the calling of being a missionary on a full-time basis. The missionary needs a trade, something with which they can earn money while they spend most of their time, and focus most of their attention on the sometimes time-consuming activities related to their mission. Whatever the missionary's trade – early church leader Paul was a tentmaker, for instance, it will always just be a practical measure to ensure that they and their families don't go hungry, and that they have gas in their car most of the time. (If they are supported by a wealthy suburban congregation, their situation will naturally be slightly different.) The same can be said of the political activist whose first priority is his or her political activities, but who might do something else to put food on the table. (Except, once again, if this person is kept alive with money from Norway or Sweden ... did I choose the wrong calling?)

The first question I must therefore answer is about the genre in which I want to write, and also what issues I want to address. The second question, which for the sake of successful pursuit of my calling has to be carefully considered, is what I want to do on a daily, but part-time basis to ensure that I have a regular income.

* * *

A thing that has become increasingly clear is that not all professions have the same value in the labour market. And if certain work or certain skills are not in demand, chances are that you will not be well compensated for whatever you are doing in this area. It also does not necessarily provide the person in this profession a status in the community with which he or she is content.

So, if after years of observation of your unique personality, and careful consideration of the available career opportunities you come to the point where you have no choice but to accept that what you want to do is not in high demand, you need to decide what other, related options might be acceptable to you. You also need to carefully consider your idea of a proper income, and how important status in the community is for you.

The alternative is reducing to hobby status (for lack of a better word) the interest or aptitude or skill you would have liked to focus on as a professional (or even as a calling). You would also have to be satisfied devoting most of your time and attention – indeed your daily life – to a profession that was not your first choice from the start; a profession you would probably never be able to practice with passion or commitment.

Question one

[...]

Second question

To want to write is not a simple ambition like wanting to become a doctor. With the latter, you go to university, memorise so many things over a period of six years that your mind becomes wobbly, and then you can make good money and everyone will respect you and call you “Doctor”. To be successful as a writer takes a lot more time and more mental and emotional instability (at least in some cases). It also

requires a part-time job that can keep your cash-flow going while you gather some followers who think what you have to say has its place in the Annals of Ideas and Opinions (and perhaps also a place on bookshelves stacked with short stories and poetry).

Life is not perfect. (Would a perfect life be in full colour? Black and white is so much neater.) A perfect life would surely mean that each of us would have two or three versions of our lives to be able to do everything we want to do. All of us would also need our own personal time machine, so that if we learn some important lessons, or – can you imagine this? – if we inadvertently commit a tiny blunder, we can go back and try again. Truth is, not even rich people’s lives are perfect. (Can Bill Gates, for example, suddenly become a hippie and grow his beard?) We all make mistakes. We miss opportunities. We mess up. We make decisions and we do things that make other people shake their heads and ask each other, “What the heck does this guy think he’s doing with his life?” And most of the time we’re too embarrassed to answer, or we simply don’t feel like explaining.

By this time I have certainly driven home the point that I need an income that can keep me alive while I write, so I don’t need to write for money.

Since I completed my tertiary studies, I have only had two jobs: One was to be a glorified secretary and seller of subscriptions for a friend’s environmental journal; the other was to teach children, and every now and then an adult in North East Asia to speak English.

The latter is not a job over which I’m terribly excited. Sometimes I’m embarrassed when I’m standing in a classroom thinking how ridiculous I must look when I swing my arms, or when I say the word “name” for the fifteenth time while pressing my lips together to show your mouth should be closed when pronouncing the “m”. It’s not a job that offers much security, and there is no housing subsidy or pension. Being an expat English teacher in Taiwan or elsewhere in Asia also does not give you status comparable to what engineers or

journalists or successful business people enjoy. However, teaching a few English classes every week does generate an income. You either earn enough money to buy ...

[... a new printer? A wig? A bus ticket out of town? As if I were suddenly overcome by sleep or boredom, yet another attempt at writing an essay bit the dust.]

The proverbial average

[First two paragraphs from the Purple Notebook, April 2002]

To rise above the (proverbial) average life in which I grew up was one of the primary motivations behind most of my major decisions over the past twelve years.

What is “wrong” with a “normal” life? One, it’s boring. Two, materialistic hoarding is synonymous with the average life in a middle-class suburb, and first-hand experiences between my twelfth and eighteenth birthdays drove the impression home that if you didn’t watch your step, you could lose everything you have patiently built up and collected – your furniture, your curtains, your car, your microwave oven ... but also your self-respect and the respect of others in the community.

[This thing of “rising above the average” needs some explaining.

If 99 out of 100 people want to do the same or similar things, it is a choice they make of their own free will, with their own motivations for it.

My problem is that I don’t want to look back at my footsteps on the Beach of Life (so to speak) after X number of years, just to find my own line of tracks unrecognisable from those of others who walked the Beach at the same time as I did. I want to look back and say: “Look! There are my tracks! I did live. I, too, walked over that sand – although I made different turns, and followed my own pace.”

Do I want to leave a new footpath? Not necessarily. I also don’t have an obsession with avoiding other people’s footsteps just because I’m afraid my own tracks will disappear inside theirs.

It is of course also true that some tracks need to be refreshed from time to time. Why? For one, as a marker for future generations – so that they can be reminded that, if they look carefully, there is more than one path that can be taken.]

In the name of the father

Sunday, 8 June 2003

The Current Economic System of the Modern Industrialised World demands victims on a daily basis. Many adults end up as failures in an environment where they, too, wanted to lift their heads and say: "Take me seriously. I also deserve to be treated with respect."

If you fail as an adult in this world, and you don't get back on your feet, you will suffer for the rest of your life under financial pressure, and endure disappointments, instances where you must abandon your dignity, hardships which will necessarily be your fate if you don't have enough money, humiliation, and pride that has to be swallowed.

I realised this thing – that the world gets the better of some adults, that they struggle for all they're worth, but once the game has turned against you, you will probably never again be on the winning side. I didn't realise this last year, or in Korea, or when I was at university and my awareness of the world became more sophisticated. I realised it long before I was old enough to understand it properly.

From then on my trousers trembled at the thought that my turn would also come to climb into the ring against the big boys. The same men who floored tough guys and who pushed their wives out of the ring when they wanted to help. My turn would come, I always knew; the day when my name would be called, when the men would look up to see what this "Brand Smit" guy looks like. And when they see it is I, they will look at each other, raise their eyebrows, and smile. Because they will know: "This guy shouldn't give us too many problems."

I am the only son among three children. My mother always thought I was a little "special" (in a good sense, but it's also true that my parents wanted me to be tested at one point for mental retardation), and I was always interested in things of a spiritual nature. Maybe it isn't that much of a

surprise that the idea occurred to me that it may not be “my lot in life” to find work after university, and get married and have children ... and then make one mistake and then everything is fucked up for everyone for the rest of their lives.

“Maybe I should be a writer,” I thought. “Isn’t it true that I believe I have a special calling I have to perform!” Meantime I’m just screwed up because nobody told Sonny, that’s not how it always goes in the Big People’s World ...

So it came that I’ve been hiding for fourteen years in the Adult World – to which I belong by default because enough time has passed since my birth.

The Bible says that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. Bruce Springsteen says, “They ain’t gonna do to me what I watched them do to you.” Which is nice and dandy when you end up a millionaire rock star, but what do you do if you’re an unpublished writer in self-imposed exile, and you want to go home?

In the name of the father
Thus will I approach the world

Where is my place in the Great Hierarchy?

Thursday, 12 June 2003

The World of the Working Adult is your destination if you are old enough to leave school and someone offers to pay you for your labour; also when you're done with your tests and exams at a tertiary institution, or when you're plain tired of learning, or when you have to start repaying your student loans.

Nineteen-ninety-six was the first year of my adult life that I was no longer a student. This was the first year I had to demonstrate where I was going to fit into the Great Hierarchy. The year started for me in a municipal apartment – without furniture, because I had sold all of it during the last few weeks of the previous year. From that very first month of my post-university adult life I couldn't afford to pay the rent of a municipal apartment. By the middle of this month the electricity was cut off, so I couldn't even celebrate this new phase of my existence with a cup of tea.

If you don't start with some paid work after your tertiary education ends, and you live either in a municipal apartment without electricity, or with your parents for a few months, or in your older sister's living room (not even in the middle of the living room, but behind the couch), you are a failure in the eyes of your friends, your family, other people who know you, and in the eyes of society at large.

To go abroad is – as it also was in the mid-nineties – a way to escape this negative view of your person. If you emigrated, or accepted a job in a foreign country where you received a formal work permit before you left, that would be one thing. You're still in a formal work situation contemporaries in your own country will understand, and can identify with to some extent. If on the other hand you only pack a backpack or two suitcases, and you go to England for a year or two, or to Northeast Asia to work as an English teacher for a year or three, it is commonly expected that you will “return” at some

point to begin a life in your own country as a Working Adult, and to take your Place in the Great Hierarchy.

My years in Korea and Taiwan fall in this second category of Going Abroad. The difference is that after seven years I still haven't made my reappearance in the Republic to take my place in the sun. (There was the experimental return in 1998 which ended in a domestic servant's room with pink walls, but that was over quickly enough.)

Now I know that I have been struggling for almost a decade to find an answer to a specific question: Where is my place in the Great Hierarchy?

My difficulty with this question can be attributed to a large extent to the fact that I don't sit comfortably in middle-class company – because of the “poor white” years, and also because of my personal ideology of Creative Independence before Financial Comfort.

Without an answer to this question it has always been difficult to work out what kind of life I wanted to live as a Working Adult, with what type of work I'd be able to identify myself, where I would (like to) live, with whom I would socialise without feeling like a “failure”, and what kind of life I would be able to give a family.

An interesting situation developed in our family regarding this matter. My parents both came from rural areas and worked their way up to the Urban Middle Class. Things went wrong just when they reached the peak of their success in their mid-forties. From then on they were in and out of the Poor White Class (mostly in). My older sister mastered the game well and now enjoys a relatively comfortable Middle-class Existence as a reward. My younger sister, who was eight years old when she stumbled into the Poor White Class with the rest of the family, can together with her husband be classified with ease as Working Class – or Aspiring Middle Class.

Me? I'm a tough case. I had the opportunity to achieve membership of the Petite Bourgeoisie as a high school teacher. For ideological reasons, a problem with authority, a

small degree of artistic talent, and too much ambition I politely declined the opportunity.

Where do I therefore fit in, in this great Socio-Economic and Cultural Hierarchy? I am nothing more than a Poor White Intellectual.

Pale-beard does his math

Friday, 13 June 2003

The question of the day: Do my ambitions surpass my financial capabilities? Answer: Not as long as I stay in Taiwan.

You move in the direction of making calculations. You say: Okay, I am this old, and I've done this and that. I own a toaster and a nice laundry basket. My health is here and there, and I have so many years to go before I strike forty, or fifty.

You also look at what you don't have. You look at what you don't own – maybe a house or a caravan, or a microwave oven; things that have always been out of your financial reach. And you look at what you haven't done; things that are important for reasons only you can explain. This last point is the one I want to address for the moment.

The thing is, you get older by the year, and you start thinking about insurance for the day that will come sooner or later if you are ... lucky. And the big question, which you try to evade until you realise you can't ignore it any longer, is whether you at least enjoyed some of your life while you were looking for all the pieces of the puzzle, for all the answers, all the tags you wanted to hang around experiences, and incidents, and desires.

In answering this question one usually finds it almost impossible to lie – the truth tends to reflect even from under the darkest sunglasses.

I have chosen to hang the tag of “Things I Really Enjoy Doing” around travel experiences. The pleasure of arriving in a place for the first time and taking pictures of yourself in places you've previously only seen in movies or on CNN. It carries the type of weight I want to throw on the other end of the scale that age causes to lean so heavily to one side.

There are other things, but it mostly involves emotions that sometimes get out of hand. To have a family – to be

married and have children ... is a pleasant enough thought. But it's something that will make this discussion much more complex, and that brings its own uncertainties.

Another thought sometimes infiltrates my grey matter despite noble resistance: Are the odds completely against us in this life? Or is life not about math and science? Is it, as I have been suspecting for several years, a struggle that you win as long as you remain standing?

What I see

Friday, 4 July 2003

I always believe everybody has dreams that extend beyond the life they currently live. And I reckon that one or two hundred thousand rand would go a long way to realise these dreams. I further believe that one or two years in a place like Taiwan is the ideal way to muster that type of capital.

What I tend to forget is that the life of an expat is often rootless, and that many people prefer a different kind of life. These people have homes – spaces they have customised and equipped over many years to be exactly how they want it. They have friends and maybe family that live in the same city, or in a neighbouring town. They have pets. They have pension funds they've been working on for years. And they dream of having kids – if they haven't already started a family, and to have these children grow up in an environment familiar to them, the parents. It is a life about which these people often complain, but it's also a life in which they feel safe. It is a life they reckon they can sustain, and which they hope they can continue living until they hit 60 or 65 and that pension starts paying out.

The fact is not everyone knows what they would do with a hundred or two hundred thousand rand between when they return from a place like Taiwan and when they reach retirement age. People tend to choose what they know – even if it means you have to punch your timecard, the same time every morning, for forty years.

What if ...

Tuesday, 19 August 2003

Let's play a game. Let's imagine I'm wrong in terms of 90% of the things I've been saying for the past few years.

What would this mean? It would mean that creativity is a luxury that can only be enjoyed by the wealthy, or then only as a hobby by the rest of us. It would mean that one should be grateful if you get *any* kind of job, and that you therefore have to be grateful for the *privilege* to address someone as BOSS. That if your services are no longer required by a company, it's just your bad luck, and probably your own fault because you were dispensable in the first place. That by the time you leave high school – if you were so privileged to have spent twelve years in school – you should have worked out without any drama where you fit in the Great Hierarchy, and be ready to take your place with conviction. That you have to take what comes your way, and just accept it with a dignified “That's just life.” That you should get married and start procreating as soon as you get a job, because that is what nature dictates, and what society requires. And that you would go to hell if you don't believe everything the Bible says. It would also mean that banks, large corporations and the government are *right* because they are *stronger* than you. That you should treat the bank manager, the boss and the politician with respect because they are higher than you on the Hierarchy.

If these things are true and I'm wrong, I'm in deep trouble. Anyways, where was I ...

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.

A futuristic denial

Thursday, 18 September 2003

I am no longer in Taiwan. The fact that Neighbourhood-on-the-Edge-of-Town in Bronkhorstspruit (which I now call home) resembles Benevolent Light New Village to a speck of dust is a bizarre coincidence. I did not speak Chinese with the woman who sells tea on the street corner fifteen minutes ago. The newspaper I have just cast aside is not the *China Post*. I did not eat rice and vegetables with chopsticks last night, and I certainly did not teach English rhymes to Taiwanese children this morning!

To tell the truth, anyone who thinks that I am a 32-year-old man who has been stuck in Taiwan for the last five years – seven years altogether in the Far East – is a blatant liar who should immediately have his head examined! Such a person has an overactive imagination and easily believes sentimental stories and outrageous theories about the meaning of life to disguise boredom with his own life.

No, I am certainly not this cunning character who roams dark streets after midnight on a creaking bicycle in a desperate search for tofu kebabs and fried octopus.

What I am is ... a lawyer. Or an accountant. I live in a nice house on the edge of a large town in Gauteng. I've been married for seven years, and we have two beautiful children. We also have a car, two cats, a dog, a lawn mower, a swimming pool, and a trailer. I play golf on Saturday afternoons, and every now and then I win a bottle of sparkling wine. I believe in Society and Civilisation, in Order and Security. I have three life insurance policies, and a few good investments. I also have several credit cards, and I dutifully pay my bills every month. My friends think I'm a little conservative; I always say I just believe what I believe.

I, like everyone else, know, or know of people who live abroad for years, "searching" for themselves, or whatever

people search for in foreign countries. Personally, I think they're wasting their time; that there is nothing abroad that one cannot experience in our beautiful country, or that you cannot search for if you insist on searching for something. I also believe that many of these people don't have the guts to stare reality in their own country in the face. And I'm not talking about crime and violence in South Africa. I'm talking about growing up and getting on with your life when you've reached the age when you're no longer a child.

I have also been to London, and to the Maldives once for a holiday. I'm no idiot when it comes to what goes on beyond our borders. I watch the news every evening, and read the newspaper at least a few times a week. I am also not nearly as conservative as my wife and my friends mock me for. I believe that everyone has the right to choose the lives they deem fit ... and then to pursue that life. I also believe that everyone has a right to their own opinions, and that everyone has the right to say whatever they want, as long as it doesn't give unnecessary offence.

It is true though that I have a dislike in people who live in foreign countries and then voice criticism of choices that I have made; choices they call "bourgeois" with arrogant contempt. These people don't have the faintest idea what my life is about. They don't have a clue what is important to me, or what the motivations behind my choices and actions are.

I wish they would come home. Then we'll see who the real winners are and who will lose in the end. Yes, then we will indeed see who scoffs at who!

On the next generation: Introduction

[A sometimes foul-mouthed rant about wanting to become a father – or not.]

Sunday, 5 October 2003

I should not have children. Not now, anyway. I'm too tense, too wound up about life. It took me ten years just to say: "Okay, I think I've got it sorted out. I now have the recipe! Now I just need to bake the cake and hope others find it edible. Or I hope at least I reckon it tastes okay, otherwise I'd have to try again."

How do I expect to be a father figure to children?! An uncle to nephews and nieces, yes. I'll be a good uncle, the kind who knows and understand things my brother's-in-law may not know or understand. But I'm afraid I'll be the type of father of whom my own son will say to his friend: "I wish my father was more like yours. My father is so anxious about everything. I hope I don't turn out like him one day."

My problem is, after all these years, I still look at myself in a middle-class mirror. Still! After all these years! And in this mirror I still find myself too insubstantial! "Already 32 ... not married ... nothing on the horizon ... no house or car ... still writing the same pieces over and over since you were 23." Fuck everyone! Fuck the middle-class world that I still drag around my neck like a burning tyre! For once look at yourself in your own mirror and judge yourself according to your own criteria, not according to what you assume other people's criteria are!

But it all falls flat because I shuffle embarrassedly through middle-class homes in my plastic sandals, because I don't think I'm allowed to step on their carpets in better quality shoes! And I feel ashamed when I stand in their kitchens because I wish I also had a microwave oven!

Do I think it's time to clear my throat and announce, "Ladies and gentlemen, you're pissing against the wrong tree. I'm not one of you"?

Or am I? Is it not true that I also want to marry and have children at some point? But how can I reconcile that with my current ambitions, and with my anxiety about life and death?

It is indeed time that I crawl from my class closet and announce that a few things should be made clear, and fuck everyone basically, and that's how it is, how it's always been, and how it's going to be tomorrow and next year too.

Monday, 6 October 2003

Does what I said last night mean that I would prefer to be on my own for the rest of my earthly existence, or that I don't want to make ten times more money than I presently do? No, to want someone in your life is essential for survival in this world, and that large amounts of capital can be a useful resource cannot be ignored.

Particularly good reasons can be pointed out why I should continue to strive for companionship with another person and for financial independence. Striving towards these things so I can say to my contemporaries, "Look friends, I am now one of you!" is, however, not one of the reasons I'll be pointing to. If the friends don't want to play, they can go to hell.

Tuesday, 7 October 2003

Because I want to have children. That is why I still give weight to people's criticism and negative opinions about me that would otherwise not matter. After all the left-wing politics, after all the talk about creative and personal freedom, there is one thing I can't fit into my current lifestyle: the ideal of a Good Father who gives his children the best he possibly can, and who sometimes sacrifices his own preferences and ambitions for his children.

Why would the possibility of having my own children one day make me vulnerable to criticism regarding my choice of a lifestyle? Because, to be a Good Dad, I need money. I firmly believe that a father who can't afford to look after his children will always have a problem looking his children, his wife, his neighbours, his friends, relatives, other people in the community with whom he differs in many respects, and finally himself in the eyes.

Am I good enough to be a father figure to children? I have always believed I am, or could be one day, because I reckon my experience as a teacher has shown that I understand children to a certain extent, and that I get along with them well enough. I also know from experience that I can be strict when I need to be strict, conservative when I need to be conservative, and open-minded, tolerant and patient enough to let children be children.

The problem is, I suffer too much under my own fears and insecurities. I also have no record to show that I can carry the financial responsibility of taking care of a family – or at least to make a reasonable contribution with a salary-earning spouse. This leads me to only one conclusion: I don't qualify to be a father figure at this stage of my life.

* * *

It does strike me though: Many of the things I'm unsure of have to do with the highest and most necessary evil of our civilisation: MONEY.

If my future does include the basic joys of a spouse and children, I would only be able to declare without reservation my convictions of personal freedom and creative independence, and my own understanding of ethics and morality, if I have enough money. Why? Regardless of how commendable your ideal of creative independence is, or how noble your understanding of ethics and morality, it won't mean a damn thing if you cannot properly take care of your family.

* * *

The path I chose after university, the path I have been taking the last ten years, is not conducive to being a Family Man who meets my own exacting requirements for the role. These requirements are virtually identical to what is expected of a Good Father and Family Man of the Socio-economic Middle Class. As long as I have daydreams about becoming a family man one day, my own high expectations of myself for such a role would mean that I would tread lightly in middle-class company even as I criticise them; I would be intimidated by them even as I mock them.

The life I have been living the last ten years, the choices I have made and the results thereof, are suitable for the life of a single poet, writer and armchair philosopher. It is suitable for the eternal student of history, religion, philosophy and a language or three. Unless I get lucky, it is a life of loneliness that will most likely end in an early grave.

This is the life I have chosen for myself, for all practical purposes, and that I have to make worth living on a daily basis. This is the life in which I feel comfortable, that enables me emotionally to handle my fears and insecurities to some extent, and to even deal with it creatively.

This is also the life that is not conducive to the fulfilment of another ideal, namely to one day play the role of a Good Father and Family Man.

I have always wanted to be in a class of my own. At 32 years of age I can pat myself on the shoulder and say: "Congratulations, old buddy. Too bad you can't be everything you want to be."

Is that good enough? It must be, because this is my life.

On the next generation: Parenthood

Tuesday, 7 October 2003

One of the most prominent ideals of middle-class culture is GOOD PARENTING. According to the criteria of GOOD PARENTING parents justify their choices in life. It is also according to these criteria they judge the successes or failures of other parents. It is, finally, according to these criteria that I have disqualified myself from parenthood – at least for the immediate future.

One of the fundamentals of GOOD PARENTING is To Give Your Children The Best You Possibly Can. It is about this principle that I want to make a few remarks.

To give your children the best you can, may have consequences unforeseen, even to parents raising their offspring with the best of intentions.

One of these consequences may be that young adults who were raised by parents who provided in all their needs, who gave them abundant opportunities to develop their interests, and whose personality developed in a protective environment, increasingly become conservative, self-centred and selfish adults when confronted with a tougher reality than the one in which they grew up. This reaction may also manifest in calculated support for “the way things are” – the status quo – that had given them an edge in life without them having done much to deserve it. In a similar vein, they will also support all social, political and economic policies that entrench their position, and give a cold shoulder to those considerably less fortunate. They may even go so far as to call these people who were given less, “lazy”.

Another possibility in the case of a person whose luck of the draw included the benefits of the aforementioned background is that they will turn ashamed and embarrassed to people less fortunate than themselves. They may explain it as something they owe society because they “had it so easy,

while others had it so hard". They may even be unsure about what their chances of survival would have been, had they not grown up in an environment where all their needs were provided for, and where their interests and personality could develop without the interference of too much pain and unfulfilled desires.

My advice to parents is to, indeed, give their children the best they can, to teach them the value of responsibility, and to support their interests within reasonable financial limits. Furthermore, parents should be facilitators of the process that will allow their children to develop a self-esteem based on ability and merit, and not just on membership of a certain stratum of society.

Children should be aware of the suffering of others; that, and their own more privileged situation (if that is the case) should be explained to them in a way that will provide them with an incentive to develop a sense of responsibility towards their fellow human beings – including people in more impaired socio-economic conditions, as well as members of their own community.

Parents should teach their children the values of faith in their fellow human being, honesty, dignity, responsibility for others, and responsibility for their own actions. These values should not only be taught in words but in the actions and conduct of the parents towards their children, and towards others. Children should be made aware of the result of both love and hate, and should be taught through words, behaviour and actions to choose love. Parents should also cultivate in their children an attitude of open-mindedness and tolerance towards other people.

Children should be taught the value of principles, and to maintain these principles even if they sometimes have to stand alone. Children should be taught to believe in themselves and their abilities, by parents who believe in their children. Children should be taught that mistakes are sometimes a

necessary part of life and that they must learn from their mistakes as adults must also do.

Children should be nurtured, cared for and protected in ways that would increase the likelihood that they would become adults who will love rather than hate, who will take responsibility even when others look away, and who will protect the vulnerable against agents of destruction. Children should be nurtured as miracles of life, so that they can become adults who will maintain and protect life, and all that is good.

Finally, it is also important that children should be made aware, in a reasonable manner and at the appropriate time, of the possibility that they, too, might have to endure disappointment, pain and suffering. It will also not be inappropriate to teach them that death is inevitable; that it is the fate of all forms of life to reach the end of a physical existence.

However, it must always be emphasised that, although all forms of life reach an end, there is a condition that precedes death. Children should be taught that this state of LIFE should be cherished, greatly appreciated, and supported to the last breath.

Benchmarks of adulthood

Tuesday, 18 November 2003

The so-called benchmarks of adulthood are marriage and buying a house. According to this standard, I am still a child, trapped in the body of an adult male. Surely I will hit the benchmarks sooner or later. The question is, will I feel more like an adult then than is the case now?

It is strange how I almost look forward to being an adult, to finally, after so many years as a child-man caught up in my own strange world, qualify as a mature adult in the eyes of the community. Will I have a car? I will certainly own a house. Maybe I'll even shave every day! I'll also have to mow the lawn. I will, as a matter of course – because it's a requirement – be married.

My “wife” will introduce me to people as her “husband”. We'll go shopping on Saturday mornings – me in an old T-shirt and possibly unshaven (since it would be the weekend). My “wife” would throw frozen vegetables and fresh fruit into the trolley and remove the frozen pizzas and fresh doughnuts that I threw in. Maybe we'll go to church every Sunday – naturally I would be clean shaven, with a smart suit.

On Sunday afternoon we will visit friends, drink tea from cups with matching saucers like decent adults, and talk about what had happened at “work” that week. After the conversations we'll get back into our car. My “wife” will confirm the ingredients of a recipe with the other woman, and then I'll tap once or twice on the horn as we drive away, with a single arm waving out the window.

Oh my. How nice it sounds to be an adult. I just wonder, would it be all right if I only shave every third day? And is there a chance that we can negotiate about mowing the lawn?

A thought brews in my head, part two

Monday, 8 December 2003

A thought started brewing in my head somewhere in the first part of October. I could claim that I've thought of nothing other than of this egg waiting in its nest since then, but this idea is one of those that hatch in phases. I'm only now, in the first part of December, ready to tap the other end of the egg in the hope that the whole truth will come screaming out of its shell.

My question last time around: Do I still keep a familiar template regarding my future in the back of my mind? I have already to a large extent written what I had wanted to say, and I am running the risk of regurgitating the same politics, to once again dish it up as something new I just needed to add.

I've been planning for quite some time now to wrap up this unpublishable collection of pieces, stuff all my cash in a small plastic bag and head back to South Africa. Having arrived, I'll do this and that, print name cards that state who I am, why I want to spend my time in that particular town, and how I reckon I fit into the community – in terms that my fellow townspeople will understand. Within a few weeks, I'll be a local resident recognised and greeted warmly every Saturday afternoon when I go to the local golf course to collect old balls from the rough to sell for bread and tobacco.

Long before I'll start missing Taiwanese women and deep-fried octopus, I will sit down to dinner with the daughter of one of the town's most prominent leftists. Shortly thereafter she will be most delighted that someone like me will want to get married to her, since she can only play five operas on the piano; she often loses her temper for social injustice, and her mother always says she's way too smart to ever find a decent man and has much too keen a sense of humour to be taken seriously by any serious-minded poet or wealthy engineer.

And so my life will continue according to the conventional model. The in-laws will sometimes feel compelled to make excuses about my so-called lost decade, when “he went to the Far East to teach English and write and so on”. I will, however, be where most citizens of the Middle Cosmos once only dreamed they would end up – married, home, work, kids, lawn mower ...

I know I make myself guilty of stereotypes. I know life in the middle stratum of society is no Scout camp or Sunday school picnic. I know all people, middle-class or not, desire a proper roof over their heads. I know everyone tries their best to scrape together enough money each month to keep their souls contained within their skins. And I understand, to hold your own child in your arms changes how you view things, in ways you would never have guessed.

Still I wonder: Is the ideal of a middle-class existence on the cards for every adult person in the developed world? What, to ask the inevitable follow-up question, are the alternative models of a successful, happy, fulfilling adult life?

One difficulty in answering this question is the definition of a middle-class existence. There are also factors that make an answer different for different people – social reality, cultural expectations, and perceptions of what it means to be a successful adult, all play a role.

Since this is not academic material and because I am not in a position to write about anybody else’s life, the axe once again splits the stump at my own front door. What then, would be the alternative for me, or at least for someone in my position? I am 32 years old. I own no property and I don’t even have a car. The few pieces of furniture I call my own fill up an apartment in Northeast Asia. I have the equivalent of a few thousand rand in the bank; I believe credit cards are diabolical; I have no documentation of a fixed income with which I can convince a bank manager to give me a home loan, and I have a stubborn tendency that drives me to write what I want to write regardless of whether it can be published, even

when I should, in all honesty, be taking steps to earn more money.

What are my options if I do not qualify for the standard ideal of a middle-class family man? What are my options if conservative, middle-class criteria of what an “adult” ought to be doing with his life – as espoused by my own parents, my sisters, and friends whom I regard for various reasons as important – freely swing above my head?

Tuesday, 9 December 2003

To get married and have children is more than just a lifestyle choice – it is, and probably has always been, across all cultural divides and historical periods, the primary requirement to qualify as a full-fledged adult member of the community.

Obviously no one doubts your ability to make choices and take responsibility for your own actions if you are older than 21, and even more so if you have already reached the Big Three. But it’s one of those cases where people will say, “Yes, you’re old enough to join the conversation, but ...,” and then they don’t know how to complete the sentence.

A friend recently asked me – unaware that it is also one of my current pet issues, when I think one’s parents regard you as an adult, as a fully matured “one of us”. My question is: when do not only your parents, but the wider community regard you as an adult one of them? A preliminary answer has already been offered – marriage and children (and if you qualify for a loan, you can add purchasing your first residential property).

Which brings us back to my question of last night: Let’s say marriage-and-children is not your choice, or it just doesn’t work out for you, then what? Will you get treated as a second-class adult until you’re eighty? Will adults who do qualify to be considered as such according to the above criteria become annoyed if you want to raise an opinion on “adult issues” such as children and the educational process? Will they cut you

short with a “You don’t know because ... you just don’t know”?

(Incidentally, the three things – buying property, getting married, and having children – are regularly mentioned in one breath as milestones that qualify one as an adult. But even if you don’t own property, even if you are divorced or have never been married, what truly matters is whether you know the responsibility of taking care of your own child. This, more than anything else, is the Golden Unwritten Requirement.)

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule; people who never produce and/or raise their own children who are well respected as full-fledged adults. The best examples I can think of is the Catholic Pope and the majority of Catholic priests. This group is, in fact, respected because they voluntarily relinquish the joy (and responsibility) of their own children so they may serve the Church and their faith community according to their doctrines. Same goes for the Dalai Lama and Buddhist monks. One could almost say that full-time members of these religious communities and other similar communities have special waivers that allow them to be treated as full-fledged adults without having satisfied conventional qualifications for proper adulthood.

What about other adults who fall outside the conventional criteria? Where do the adults fit in who find themselves in mental institutions or those who sleep on the streets and are labelled, “homeless bums”? Nobody seriously expects adults in mental institutions to act or to function as adults (some are possibly even locked up in the fear that they do conceive children), and homeless people are in general not deemed good enough for anything other than maybe a few coins and a short sermon in the parking lot. But do they still fit in, in a way, as adult members of society? They are not quite treated as children, and in some cases are expected to take responsibility for their actions, so ... shall we settle it for the moment by calling them “semi-adults”?

To come back to my particular situation: If I were a homeless, mentally unstable priest calling myself “Pope”, I

would have fallen in the semi-adult category, although I could still have claimed exemption from conventional qualifications because of my priesthood. But because I'm not mentally unstable, homeless, a priest or a monk, and because I also do not have children, I find myself in a special group: unmarried, single, working adults who according to the standards espoused by many do not qualify for full adult status.

Does it bother me? It annoys more than it bothers. I consider myself a full-fledged adult, but if the requirements of children and possibly property are taken into account, I am not necessarily going to be treated as a full-fledged adult by people who do meet these requirements.

I can throw this whole debate over to the other side and say that there are many adults who can write "Parent" on their identity cards, but who I would regard as ... shall we just say, underdeveloped by my own measure of adult opinions and conduct.

Now that I think about it, shouldn't there be something like a credit system? Should one not receive credit for well-worked out opinions about mature issues that are relevant to all adults; credit that will make up for the lack of credit others receive for intimate first-hand knowledge of parenting, even though they may not have so many well developed opinions on other relevant matters? The answer is probably negative. Parent-adults have the broad community on their side. Fair and well if you have worked out your version of the meaning of life and issues of identity and the role of belonging in one's life, and if you're able to express these things in mature vocabulary worthy of a full-fledged adult; what matters, though, is whether you have children or not.

How will it change my opinion if I do one day hold my own child in my arms? I would like to say that my opinion will not change. It will still annoy me when someone believes that I can now join in the conversation when it comes to children, "because you are now a father, yourself". A person is a full-

fledged adult because they have reached a mature age, because they know how to function as an adult, and because they take responsibility for their own actions in the community in which they find themselves. I do not need children of my own to be defined as an adult, and I don't need children of my own to express an opinion on the subject of raising children.

(Are there people who, consciously or unconsciously, are motivated to have children just so that they can qualify as “real” adults in their community? I believe there are.)

This piece has made a few turns I had not originally considered. (I don't plan my writing anyway. I mostly write what I would otherwise have been telling myself out loud, wait for a title to present itself and call the end result “a piece”). I think I originally wanted to know if I only have one option for the future, namely to go back to South Africa, earn money, buy a house, get married and have children.

I still wanted to mention alternatives at some point, like the guy who lives in Hong Kong for twenty years, who can speak fluent Chinese, travel a lot each year, who produces loads of literary material (both publishable and unpublishable), and who will be known as the “eccentric uncle from the East” by his nephews and nieces.

However, I believe the issue of how full-fledged, respectable adulthood is defined, was the deeper issue behind the original idea that had been brewing in my head.

Postscript

The problem addressed in this piece was that people who qualify according to certain criteria are treated as “mature adults”. If you are old enough to qualify by default even though you do not meet these “benchmarks of adulthood”, you are still accepted as a fellow adult, but you are often reminded in subtle ways that you do not meet a few critical requirements.

It was only much later that I thought of something else. Is it not true that people will, in many cases, find anything to cast themselves in a better light? If the other adult is not married and/or has not produced any offspring, they will find it in that. Then they will keep pounding this issue into infinity. If it's not that, then it will be about the other person's job or career, or their children who make too much noise, or "astonishingly poor taste in home decor considering they have so much money".

Surely it is naïve to expect that you will get the same response from other adults at the table when the conversation is about fighting crime in the local district, when the other adults reside in that area and you live in a crime-free enclave in Scandinavia. Or that your opinion will necessarily carry the same weight if the conversation is about the education of children when you don't have any children. Same goes for a conversation about marital problems if you have never been married.

However, some adults will always keep standards, hand-picked and custom crafted, that cast their own lives in a better light. For this reason, adults who believe in their own value despite the sometimes biased opinions of other adults will find it easier to get on with making a success of their adult existence, regardless of their own relationship status and property portfolio, and despite a possible utter lack of desire or even inability to have children.

* * * * *

Saturday, 13 December 2003

“You don’t have a house, you don’t have a car, you don’t have a real job, and you’re already in your thirties and you’re not married.”

“Yes, I know. But ...”

“No buts. These are the things that matter when I judge a man. You might have spent seven years in Northeast Asia, speak broken Chinese, and have filled an entire literary project with your opinions. But you don’t have a proper home, you don’t have a car, you don’t have a job, and you’re already in your thirties and there’s not even a romantic relationship on the horizon.”

And that’s it. Case closed.

Does it matter? Not as much as it annoys.

* * * * *

Parents have this responsibility

Tuesday, 17 February 2004

As the parent of a child, one has the responsibility to at least try to lead the kind of life that a child can look at and say, “I also want such a life.” And the child must not only say this as a five or six-year-old but as a teenager of fifteen or sixteen, and even as a young adult.

If it is not possible for you to currently lead the quality of life that you want your child to have someday, it is your responsibility to educate your child and prepare them to strive for a better life than the one you currently call your own. One should be mindful of the consequences before telling a child, “This is just the way things work. We all have to accept it and move on.” Be realistic, but allow the child to dream.

If you as a parent do not lead the kind of life you dreamed of in your younger days, make the child aware of things that you might have done differently, and show the child possible routes that he or she may consider to not also become a “victim of circumstance”.

* * * * *

On Friday morning, 23 April 2004 at 11:26 in the morning, I once again contemplated the possibility of fully rehabilitating my person as a member of the suburban middle class in South Africa. Alas, I thought, my only hope would be to sneak into a middle-class suburb under cover of darkness, to appear to the community the next morning in full camouflage as one of them.

* * * * *

Identity, life, knowledge, and screws

Tuesday, 15 June 2004

My identity, my life (I)

I now know what made me change direction on Sunday, 2 May/Monday, 3 May. On that Sunday afternoon I had telephone conversations with my older sister and with my old pal in Johannesburg – and with both of their babies. I was deeply impressed with how their lives showed a definite character, while I was still “on my way home”. I reached a point that afternoon where I realised I had a profound desire to also be in a position where I could say: This is my life, and my life is also good.

* * *

Everyone has their own particular lives. Then the camera turns in your direction, the microphone is pushed in your face, and the inevitable challenge is made: Identify your life.

And the answer: “I am Peter X living in City Y, and I fill my daily existence with ...”

Traditional knowledge, and old screws

Many people do the “right thing” without reflecting on it too much. For me it has taken a long time to learn certain things – the kinds of things that, if I would tell people, “These are the conclusions I have come to after years of contemplation,” they would respond with, “We already know these things. We have been applying them in our own lives for quite some time. Did you really have to sit down and think about it?”

What is wrong with me? Did a screw loosen up somewhere in my head years ago? Am I stupid? No. (I had to

be quick with that answer before I could seriously consider the possibility.)

What happened was that I had lost faith in what had been offered as “the truth” and “the way things work”. I questioned everything, and had to reconstruct from scratch my own worldview and frame of reference by which I could function as an adult outside the madhouse.

Eventually I once again accepted some “old” truths – the difference is that I know why. And understanding why I believe what I believe has to make my years of life on the “outside” worthwhile.

Wednesday, 16 June 2004

My identity, my life (II)

I got tired of listening to other people talk about their particular lives and then when I opened my mouth to talk about my life, all that came out were vague plans and vague promises to the effect that I did not have a life, “but I am on my way”.

The truth is, I do have a life! It’s not perfect, but it is good! And it is my life!

Concoction full of thoughts

Monday, 28 June 2004

00:02

Children are the easiest “result of a life” to produce. The hard part comes afterwards.

00:09

Parents – in the ideal parent-child scenario – leave children behind as a result of their lives. Business people generate profit and leave businesses behind. Entrepreneurs and inventors leave products behind. Artists leave art behind. Writers leave books behind. Architects leave buildings behind. Civil engineers leave infrastructure behind. Revolutionaries leave behind new political dispensations.

And then there is the revolutionary who also leaves behind children, the inventor who leaves behind children and profit, the writer who builds up a successful commercial enterprise from which many people can benefit until long after he has moved on ...

Hierarchy of relationships

Sunday, 3 October 2004

02:34

There is a hierarchy of relationships: At the top you have the soul mate. Then you get the life partner, then the companion. And then, even if someone is not your soul mate, even if you don't even have enough in common to be companions, and then definitely not enough to be life partners, you can still have a functioning relationship as lovers.

It is also true that your soul mate can also be your life partner, your companion and your lover. Also that your companion might be your lover, but not your life partner or your soul mate. And it is also possible that your soul mate isn't someone with whom you will ever have an intimate relationship. Your soul mate might be a friend. It may also be that a man finds his soul mate in a woman who is married to another man, who loves her husband, and is committed to her marriage.

By the way, what is a soul mate? And what is the role of a life partner ... and a companion ... and a lover?

11:48

There is this idea that you necessarily have to be sexually attracted to your soul mate. Why? The expected process runs as follows: a man and a woman meet (to name one example on the sexual spectrum); they are sexually attracted to each other; they find their soul mates in each other; they become life partners; they seal their relationship in a marriage, and they live happily to the end of their respected earthly existences.

But what if you have already found your soul mate in someone of the same gender as you, but neither you nor the

other person is homosexual? Or what about if you find your soul mate in someone of the opposite sex, but you are not sexually attracted to that person? Do you keep looking until you find a soul mate in someone of the right gender to whom you are sexually attracted? That's ridiculous! Are you going to live a lonely, sexless existence until you've found this person? It's completely unnecessary! And it serves no purpose!

It is absurd to set such high requirements of someone you want to date, and it is ridiculous to expect that your soul mate should necessarily be an attractive, single man or woman with whom you'd like to go out on a date.

Last question: Can you love someone if he or she is just your lover, and not your soul mate? Answer: Of course.

Short essay on the chasm of unorthodox views

Tuesday, 2 November 2004

It is to be expected that the unattached single person will seek someone with whom they can suspend their solitary existence for a brief period – if a better arrangement cannot be reached. A rich variety of problems, however, sometimes prevents the best among us from crossing the divide between I-on-my-own and I-together.

Unorthodox views on life, human existence, what and who we are, religion, politics, and what people do with at least eight hours each weekday are one factor that inhibit the leap across the chasm.

The author of this note, as one or two readers may by now have realised, is one of those miserable souls who is convinced his own beliefs are so unusual that people who haven't known him all his life and who have made their peace with the words that so often flow from his lips would be so terrified of him that they will run screaming to the nearest bus or train station to establish as much distance as possible between themselves and this strange creature.

Like most other miserable armchair philosophers worth their butt-contoured cushions, I blame other people's short-sightedness for my situation. If people could just broaden the passages of their own minds by tiny degrees, maybe push open some windows, and occasionally enter through a different door to the one they normally use, I won't be able to keep up with all the social appointments.

I find myself in an environment where potential female companions can be divided into two groups: women who were born and raised in Taiwan, and women who were born and raised in Western countries. In reality the latter group, for my own purposes, amounts to women of my own country, who mostly share my language and cultural background.

There is an important difference between Taiwanese and Afrikaans candidates, as far as my person is concerned: my unorthodox views, and my lifestyle in which these views are a daily palpable reality, are a much more pertinent topic of discussion with the latter group. It is, in many cases, for example, easier to get away with my particular religious beliefs with a Taiwanese woman who either has no clear religious beliefs, or who follows her own mixture of more than one religion, than with an Afrikaans woman whose identity and worldview were formed in a Calvinist household.

The environment that is Taiwan is also conducive to me being a full-time “writer” whilst still earning a good income as a part-time “English teacher”. If I enter into a relationship with a woman with whom I share a language and culture, there’s a strong possibility that we will return to South Africa. The challenge to set up a life in South Africa that is similar to the life I lead in Taiwan is, however, much more complicated.

My so-called unorthodox views almost always come into play with Afrikaans women, in a language where I can’t hide behind limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation, and in terms and implications I know we both know and understand very well. Meeting a woman of my own linguistic and cultural group with whom I can share my views and beliefs without inhibition is therefore an exceptionally difficult challenge.

It can be said that I need one of two types of women in my life:

- a woman who is unaware of exactly what I believe in; or
- an extraordinary woman who understands my beliefs and personal politics and who thinks broadly enough to be able to say: “I don’t necessarily agree with everything, but I like you.”

Dear 18 to 35-year-old reader ...

Thursday, 11 November 2004

Dear 18 to 35-year-old reader, your options as a working adult are as follows:

1. Find a job that provides you with a sufficient income.
2. Find a job that provides you with sufficient income and that you enjoy doing.
3. Find a job that provides you with sufficient income, and that gives you a sense of fulfilling a valuable role in the broader community (not only in the workplace where you earn your income).
4. Find an opportunity that provides you with sufficient income and that is consistent with your critical self-perception – developed after confronting your Given Self and defining your Chosen Self.

(Number four is more complicated. Professional work, or any work from which you earn money, must be chosen, and is sometimes needed long before the person has a more sophisticated idea of who he or she is other than “My name is John or Mary; I was born in Town A or City B; I like this or that; this or that bores me; this or that makes me angry; my father and mother and siblings are A and B and C and D and my grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends are these and those; I want to live in a three or four or ten bedroom house or apartment in Country X or City Y; I want to drive a Porsche or donkey cart or truck, and I want to get married and have one or two or seven children.”)

Sexual desire, social appearances, and the accompanying view of the self

Thursday, 11 November 2004

22:22

I have just had a telephone discussion with an old friend, and I shared some of my most recent thoughts with her – on appearance, desire, embarrassment, failure, self-perception, and so on.

After the call I thought to myself that I may have said people should rather be celibate. I don't think I totally meant to say celibacy is better than having an active sex life. I just wanted to draw attention to the possibility that a change in sexual desire, or sexual behaviour, or expectation, will fundamentally affect your social appearances, and with that your view of yourself and of other people.

22:53

Am I saying people should stop mingling with one another and enter the wilderness one by one, or rather, enter their own private wildernesses lest they bump into each other?

Not necessarily.

All I am saying is that solitude and loneliness have fertilised my own tree in such a way that it has borne very unique fruit.

Friday, 12 November 2004

A brief overview of European and Asian civilisations reveals the existence of an ancient tradition of men and women separating themselves from the rest of society. The fact that you will hear of some of these men and women or read about them implies that their isolation had led to above-average

insights about life, and/or that they had undertaken actions after periods of isolation that immortalised their names in the annals of the history of humankind.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 24 November 2004

Eighteen months ago I wondered how the repatriation issue was going to work out. Would I finally go home? When? With how much money? What would I do? Where would I stay ...

The words that broke the camel's back were the following: "I have a life. This life is not perfect, but it's a good life. And it's lived in a place that is conducive to the expression of who I want to be and what I want to do with my life."

* * * * *

Point and the questions

Monday, 13 December 2004

11:26

The point is to live for something, so that when we die, we will know our lives were not in vain.

11:36

The question then is, what do you live for?

Many people will say, “We live for our children.”

I ask: What does that mean? You live for your children, they live for their children ... at some or other point someone will have to live for something else, whether they have children of their own or not!

I think it’s ill-considered, even dangerous to say you live for your children. It feels right. You truly love your children, and you will literally take someone’s face off to save your children, so ... it can only be right to declare: “I live for my children! And for my wife ... (or my husband).” Isn’t that true?

No! It’s something that feels noble and right – and it looks noble and right on paper, but in actual fact one generation simply replaces the next with no proper understanding of the value or possible purpose of their lives, other than, “I need to have children.”

Does anybody else hear alarm bells going off?

A thought is brewing in my head, parts three and four

Monday, 27 December 2004

Part three

More than a year ago a thought started brewing in my head. It was mainly about the kind of life I can lead in South Africa while I continue to be treated as an *adult* in a community of other people who are also over 25, but who fulfil the conventional criteria of *adulthood*. The two parts of the original thought eventually touched on the theme of exactly what these criteria are. What I came up with was not original: get a job, get married, acquire property, get pregnant, and be responsible for your own offspring.

More than a year has passed since the original idea had hatched. I am still sitting in the same apartment in the same chair, still typing essays on the same computer and for the most part still using only two fingers (I have moved from the spare room to a corner in the living room, though). My only medium of transport is still my yellow bicycle. My antique cabinet, my exercise bike, and all my boxes still occupy nearly the same space as a year ago.

Although I don't currently think much about the suspension of what I had previously called my "exile", the thought of two possible lives again started tapping on the inside of my skull: Alone, or With Someone.

If I continue to spend my days and nights on my own, it would be my choice. To be with someone will mean a more enjoyable experience of reality; it will also bring with it things like the possibility of a future together, which will again bring forth the question of place – South Africa or Taiwan or other possibilities, residence – house or apartment, seeing that attic or mobile home won't do – as well as the matters of money and regular income.

Let me repeat: If I continue to not share my life with someone, it will be with a very specific goal in mind. An image of a medieval ascetic comes into vision, and my belief that I am in the service of an idea and must therefore sacrifice more conventional comforts confirm earlier views about calling – that the purpose of my existence, even the purpose of my so-called own agenda have to do with an “obligation” which goes beyond the specific time and place in which I currently find myself, or may find myself in the future.

To be alone means I do not have to leave a place that is beneficial to the work I do – a place where I can earn a living in ways that do not hinder my real work too much. Being alone, so the case can be argued, may therefore be conducive to achieving certain positive results. To continue to spend my time on earth alone, if I want to rub it in even more, will inspire even more critical views on, for example, the real value of money, the individual and the community, how a person functions with his or her particular consciousness and identity in the modern world, and the role of the Church in a world that is still recovering from the shock of the industrial revolution.

I am aware of the possibility that I can stop writing. The box with all my notebooks fills a space not too far from where I usually sit. I also know where all the printed copies of my essays and other writings are, and the recently revised three volumes of “The Personal Agenda” is lying behind me on the wooden table with the 200-page excerpts version and a neatly printed and bound copy of my poetry collection. I can shove all this material in a crate, hammer the crate shut with six-inch nails, wipe all the related documents from my hard drive, and starting tomorrow devote my daily existence to making enough money to spend the rest of my days and nights on this planet in comfort. I am aware of this possibility.

* * *

It is necessary to mention at this point that I am not too perturbed anymore by the community's criteria of what qualifies one as a full-fledged adult. The "community" do what they do, for reasons I can probably explain to them better than many of them can explain to me, and I do what I do for reasons I could explain to them if I am bored enough or in a good enough mood for such an endeavour. "Their" criteria had more to do with my fears of a year ago about what would define my adult presence in a South African environment had I taken the radical step to re-establish myself in the country of my birth a year or so ago.

The thought that is currently brewing in my grey nest is therefore related to last year's idea, but the days are gone that the "community" would bully me with their so-called standards.

* * *

Let's say for argument's sake there is a certain woman who attends the same Christmas parties as I and (hopefully) will also bless the New Year's Party with her attractive person ... Let's go beyond that and claim that this character even has a left-leaning attitude towards politics and – will the reader think I exaggerate? – that she has had her own personal encounter with the world of corporatism and materialism and ten hours a day at the office. Would it be inappropriate if I calculate for a moment the potential impact such a female presence would have on my present life?

Seeing that this is nothing more than an academic discussion, and the female character in question is ... well, fanciful, I think it is perfectly okay to weave more interesting scenarios than Christmas dinners and barbeques into this cold, purely rational essay ... May one, just in passing, also mention that a certain imaginary character has a figure that forces a man to stare motionless into the night, and that she has eyes that inspire a thousand poems in his mind as he makes his way home from the coffee shop?

I can swear there was more I wanted to say ... but I feel a few lines of poetry beating in my chest, and isn't it time to make that telephone call?

Tuesday, 28 December 2004

Part four

A year ago I wondered what kind of impact it would have had on my view of myself as a writer if I had returned to South Africa. In the first two parts of this *Brewing Thought* I also considered what kind of life in South Africa would be conducive to me continuing to broach the topics I have touched upon so far, and to continue filling packs and packs of paper with "theories" and arguments that are sometimes more reminiscent of propaganda for a cause than academic discussion. Finally, I could only speculate how I-the-author would appear to the community in a town like Bronkhorstspuit, or Middelburg, Mpumalanga.

The issue of repatriation will never completely die down, but I do not milk it anymore for literary material. The matter I do want to shed some light on this Tuesday afternoon has to do with inspiration of a different kind. Considering that isolation, solitude, and even loneliness are conducive to the unique material I produce, and not only for specific texts but also for the zeal and pace of putting words to paper, what effect would it have if I were not alone?

I ask this because it may be of relevance in the coming months, and also because it will bring clarity similar to what a Catholic priest experiences knowing that he will sometimes be confronted with women who will stir things in him that were part of his life long before he had made a promise to his church to remain celibate. The priest has a prescribed response ready to recite were the possibility of romantic love ever to present herself to him. (I am not implying that it will be easy for him just because the answer is prescribed and required of him. I am only saying that the answer has already been

formulated. It is thus rather a question of whether he wants to continue to recite the already formulated answer, or to say, “No more ...”)

No church or bishop, or any other institution or person dictates to me what I should and should not do with my heart or other vital organs. I myself have to decide whether an intimate relationship would be beneficial to my self-defined life and the particular work I do – regardless of whether I believe I have to do this work or if I just need to do it so that I can be convinced I am not wasting my life.

One may also wonder how much of this problem will be solved using pure reason and what role the primordial desire to have an intimate connection with another person will play – that is, if a certain “other person” does decide to attend the New Year’s party ...

As I am sitting here staring over my monitor at the dark green cloth flapping in front of my living room window, I try to think of a specific word or phrase – like poking around in a toolbox for the right spanner to fasten a nut. And as the wind chimes at the open window tinkle against the cold winter wind, a word comes to me that might pin this issue down: sustainability. Is it sustainable for me to continue *ad nauseam* trying to address the themes with which I have kept myself occupied until now, and to continue at the pace at which I work not only because I want to complete projects but because it is necessary for me to maintain a sense of well-being?

I believe it is not sustainable.

I further believe that to spend most of your time alone in a space that is customised to your needs and to your tastes and preferences is conducive to specific themes. It follows that not spending most of your time in your own company will be beneficial to exploring other topics which are not necessarily less important than “The individual and the community” or “I am not a creature from outer space”.

Eventually this matter can be related back to questions about who you want to be, and the specific role that you have

defined for yourself in the community you are part of, both geographically and culturally. It also has to do with how you reconcile the result, as you currently see it, of the process of defining yourself and your role in society not only with the world and time in which you exist, but also with the satisfaction of your emotional and physical needs.

By way of illustration I can mention that I could have added a PART FIVE tonight to this Brewing Thought, but that it is not going to happen because I have to leave my apartment to go to teach some English classes so I can pay my phone bill at the end of this month. I could also have conjured up from my grey matter PARTS SIX and SEVEN tomorrow night, but it just so happens that a certain character has since the start of this piece organised a dinner date with a certain other character who, only in theory of course, inspires ideas in the Writer of Pieces that has very little to do with many of the themes he has been trying to address up to now – *ad nauseam*, it could be added.

Postscript

The point is this: the person you want to be and the role that you have defined for yourself should not only be compatible with the world in which you exist, but it should also not undermine your chances of fulfilling your emotional and physical needs. If this essential balance between what you have defined for yourself and what you need to be and do to survive is not maintained, who you want to be and the role that you have defined for yourself are not sustainable.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 5 January 2005

Intimate love, and the warm body of another person is not a panacea for pain and disappointments, and the unbearable boredom that is sometimes part of our daily existence. It can however not be denied that it enables millions of people to endure pain, disappointments and boredom on a daily basis. It is also true that if these things are endured, we don't always do anything to improve what needs to be improved ... which brings us back to the positive aspects of celibacy and being on your own. The point, however, that I wanted to make is about the benefits and value of being with someone else.

* * * * *

Pregnancy | Mortality | Marriage

Friday, 7 January 2005

12:55

1. Many people say they have dedicated their lives to their children – or they are currently doing so.
2. People do not have children in the first place for the children's sake, but to satisfy their own deep desires.
3. Many people have children to improve their roles and sense of self-worth at the particular time and in the place where they live out their lives.

Conclusion: Planned pregnancy is a calculated step people take to give more value to their own lives, to play other, more fulfilling roles than the roles they have been playing up to that specific point in their lives, and to dedicate their lives to something “better” than their own survival in a world filled with suffering, disappointments, pain and sometimes unbearable boredom.

(Question: Why would I want to have children? For the same reasons ...)

17:27

Data is processed from the moment of self-awareness ...

One of these pieces of data that has run chills down my spine since my childhood is that of mortality – the idea that *people* perish, sometimes unexpectedly at a very young age, and sometimes after enough decades to count on both hands. Another truth that cannot be denied: even if the actual moment of mortality strikes at a ripe old age, after a long and fruitful

life, it is preceded by age that plough the face full of wrinkles year after year, that makes the full mane of the young lion fall out until nothing but a shiny scalp with a few tufts of hair covers the skull, that makes organs fail and that weakens the muscles, and that causes the bones to become brittler by the day.

Saturday, 8 January 2005

People marry whom they marry because they believe that specific person can give them what they need at that stage of their lives. In many cases, the rest of their lives are marked by a struggle to reconcile themselves with the choice they had made.

Children and failure

Tuesday, 11 January 2005

The newspaper says Taiwanese men are not so keen to produce offspring than Taiwanese women.

I know the following thought is rushed, and certainly not currently supportable by scientific study, but ... my guess is that the lack of keenness amongst men to have children is caused by the same phenomenon that causes eagerness in some women: in both cases the childless person feels like a failure.

Men are wary of the extra responsibility, the extra pressure on already thin resources (namely, themselves) and are afraid that a child (or more children) will accentuate their failure, or that it will worsen their current status because not only will they be failures as adult men or husbands, but also as father figures.

Some women, on the other hand, also feel like failures, and/but see the role of “mother” as one that would make them appear better to themselves, their families and to the broader community.

A dangerous frequency

Saturday, 22 January 2005

09:21

I am on a dangerous frequency! Yesterday afternoon I almost knocked my shoulder out of its socket because I wasn't focused on the mechanics of getting out of my trousers – and ended up storming my bedroom wall with my trousers around my ankles.

Now I stand here with a sore foot and a swollen big toe because last night I lost my rhythm coming down the stairs and reckoned, “Never mind, there's only a few steps left,” and jumped.

This morning I was thinking of this frequency thing while frenetically looking for my keys ... only to find I had already put them in my jacket pocket.

I know on what frequency I am, and that it is dangerous is not debatable. I am intoxicated; intoxicated with an idea ...

12:53

I am intoxicated with an idea; that is true. It is also true that this idea has to do with a certain young woman's existence. It can also be said that if this young woman does not contemplate similar thoughts on a specific Writer of Notes, this specific writer will compose a poem of grief and sorrow, solemnly burn it, and then go to sleep after such a miserable day ... to get up the next morning and have breakfast with his usual and unquenchable Faith – and shall one dare to say, Hope? – in the Irreplaceable Third One.

Friday, 4 February 2005

The book *People in Context* has the following to say about self-discovery and acceptance: “[You can] can extend an authentic and warm invitation to authenticity and warmth in

another person in a companionship that creates a safe, non-threatening space for the fearless discovery of who I am and who you are ...”*

[Almost as if the cosmos is saying to me, “You think of yourself and your life in a certain way, and now you have the opportunity to be with someone. Here is the bridge to that life.”]

* My own translation from the Afrikaans text

* * * * *

Friday, 11 February 2005

On the subject of people who have children in the conscious or unconscious hope that it will give meaning to their lives, the next piece of advice to myself: consider the possibility that there are aspects of the matter that I (still) do not understand. Maybe this – to hold your own child in your arms – is the element that unlocks great things, beautiful things, in some people. (And in other peoples' cases, it might be something else.)

* * * * *

New relationships and romantic ideas

Tuesday, 15 February 2005

1. Starting a relationship is a creative process. It is organic, take-it-as-it-comes, not a step-by-step, just-follow-the-dotted-line-for-desired-outcome process.

2. One must, at the beginning, be prepared to lose the person, however unpleasant that may sound. The reason is simple: If you're not willing to lose someone at the start, you will a) not be yourself, b) appear desperate, and c) force the process; virtually all of which will doom the endeavour to failure anyway.

* * *

Two days ago I thought about how comfortable or relatively more relaxed I usually feel in the company of [my younger sister's former in-laws], people my parents' age, whom I have known for a few years but with whom I have no emotional connection.

I realised that it probably has to do with the fact that they have no prior knowledge of me – what they see now, is what they have always seen. My own parents knew me as a newborn, as a seven-year-old boy, a twelve-year-old preteen, a sixteen-year-old teenager, and as a young man of twenty ... They know the person I am now is not the person I have always been.

It also occurred to me that my mother has a bigger problem than anyone else in the family with the discrepancy between the earlier version of me and the person I currently am. She is still holding onto a romantic image of me when I was at my most beautiful, so to speak – maybe about twelve years old, clean face, quiet, on my knees praying every night

before bedtime, the first signs of religious dedication, the idea that I might become a minister one day.

My father, on the other hand, doesn't have a romantic image of me as a young boy. Although he loved me, he saw me as clumsy and incompetent to overcome even the smallest technological challenge; plus, I had little interest in how a car engine worked. His view of me, now, is actually more positive – that of an intelligent man, someone with an interest in the Greater Questions of Life.

So, on the one hand my mother, who still hopes that I might return somewhat to the romantic image of her “beautiful son”. And on the other hand my father, who readily accepts me as I am now, since it is somewhat of an improvement from my childhood.

Then a thought kicked me in the face late this afternoon: I am also guilty of this romantic idea business. Ten years ago my younger sister appeared to me differently than she does now – she was a rebel, ready to take on the world ... and yet vulnerable and fragile. Now, ten years later, she is a mother, a partner in a marriage, and a valuable administrator of my parents' business. But without really noticing it, I have been slightly disappointed all this time, because “What happened to the rebel?”

Family is not just people who lived together for many years, and who call each other from time to time to hear if everything's still okay. Family – and in this case I mean parents and siblings – are people you should allow to constantly grow in your own eyes. That is how relationships are kept alive, and real.

Boredom in exotic South Africa

Friday, 18 February 2005

I have never been so bored while on a visit to my homeland. I feel slightly guilty about it ... but then I remind myself that emotional needs which are satisfied by seeing one's family are not to be confused with the need for intellectual stimulation.

I also realised that I project my own feelings on other people in the place where I find myself. I might say, "Look how boring all those people are! They sit in cars, walk in and out of shops, walk up and down the streets ..." Then I realise, as I am insulting the villagers, I'm basically describing myself: I am sitting in a car, walking in and out of stores, walking up and down the street.

* * *

Thought inspired by my browsing through a magazine last night: *my* South Africa comprises Johannesburg, Bronkhorstspuit, Pretoria, Stellenbosch and maybe Vryheid and Pongola. There are places in this country of my birth which I have never even heard of let alone visited: places like Grootmier [Big Ant], Kleinmier [Small Ant], Middelmier [Middle Ant]; places where people speak Afrikaans, and where the children call the adults "Uncle" and "Auntie". It's a world I still want to discover – the isolated places, towns with dusty main streets, hamlets where people live lives that are at the same time familiar yet also stranger to me than the life of the average Taiwanese person in Taiwan.

Saturday, 19 February 2005

This past week I have again been confronted with a few things: estrangement – never a pleasant experience, especially not if you are the one who has become the stranger to the

people you love the most; boredom; residential areas where the layout and structures provide no inspiration; commercial areas where people meet on a daily basis to do business and buy things and enjoy meals, which, like the residential areas, don't stir up an inkling of enthusiasm or inspiration; standards that dictate that to be considered successful at 34 you'd have to own property, and a car, and a TV and other furniture, and at least be married but preferably have also brought forth some descendants ("because what type of success can you be if you're alone?"). Finally, I have been confronted with stories of murder, manslaughter, heart attacks, cancer, stroke, and several other diseases and disorders that remind you, in case you dared for a moment to forget, how vulnerable your existence is.

Well, what more can one say? It is 00:21. I'm going to bed now. Tomorrow ... is just a short journey away.

Wilderness | Moment of Birth

Saturday, 5 March 2005

If you want to hold something in your hands forever and it slips through your fingers, are your hands ever the same afterwards? Or does it leave behind, not so much a scar, but something beautiful that will remind you of the wonder you had wanted to hold onto so tightly?

Wednesday, 9 March 2005

01:51

Jacob the Desert Walker stumbles into the wilderness. He has been there before. He has a rough map in his head. But wilderness, this he knows, is not desert. And desert ... is certainly not the wilderness.

21:49

The career I have defined for myself or that I have chosen from the many possibilities I have been confronted with since it dawned on me that I, too, had to become a working adult at some point, was that of poet.

Not few are the people who have commented on this. "Poet?" they dryly ask. "You do know that you will never live above the poverty line, don't you!"

It is true that over the years I have become aware of the fact that the world in which I have to fight for my place in the sun does not reward "poets" with permanent employment, financial security, a regular income, a company car or medical aid. I therefore had to slightly broaden my chosen path so I can, besides writing poetry, also employ other genres to criticise in fine detail the world where I cannot enjoy the same

compensations for my career as a dentist, a street sweeper, or a bank clerk.

Thursday, 10 March 2005

You only exist until you are born.

Or: Some people exist only as that which he or she has been given plus the results of their choices up to a point – the result of introspection, of knowledge attained about themselves, of confronting themselves, observing themselves and of defining who and what they want to be. If this process is of a certain quality and if they spend enough time on it, the moment when that point is reached can for all practical purposes be regarded as the Moment of Birth.

Friday, 11 March 2005

Many things in my way – scars, fears, insecurities, past experiences that have caused measures to rise like forts in the desert ... everything is remembered, yet abandoned because of one thing – if you believe again, despite fears and insecurities, you know that you allow yourself to live.

Screw the measures, just in case

Friday, 18 March 2005

09:30

I had a particular view of myself before I met [N.]. This view included that if I had to be happy on my own, that would simply be the way it had to be. (I never accepted that I necessarily had to be alone, but I knew that I was faced with the very real possibility.) My view of myself as an “enlightened individual” also underlined that I did not need intimate confirmation of who and what I thought I was.

And then she arrived.

And then came the idea that to turn back time and again be without her ... that it would be difficult.

Likewise, she had a certain view of herself before I made an appearance in her life. This view included that unless a good man crossed paths with hers, she would have had to find happiness on her own. Like me, she certainly hoped that she would not have to be alone for the rest of her life; like me, she knew the possibility kept lingering behind her like a shadow on a sunny, cloudless day. She also increasingly thought of herself as stronger than some of the female characters she had spent time with. That she should not be seen by a man as needy became her own pet obsession.

And then I appeared on her scene. And then she developed feelings for me. And she remembers how she had felt about herself and about men in general before I appeared. And she observes how she feels about me now.

Does the contradiction also cause her some anxiety?

12:18

You meet someone, and soon after you develop a feverish need for her presence in your life. You fall into a state of panic because you know, if this person withdraws, you'll be in

serious trouble. So you find that you surreptitiously start putting safety measures in place, just in case ... and in such a way that it doesn't disturb the process the two of you are actively involved in too much.

What I would like to suggest is simple: Screw the measures. Surrender. Open your heart. And if the process does not lead to the results you had hoped for in your finest moments, you simply pick up the pieces, again – and pieces they will be! But you know you have to do this, because if you don't stop the surreptitious construction of safety measures, she will quietly start setting up measures of her own. Where does that leave you?

No, damn the measures. Free yourself from fear and uncertainty. Live ... and if it doesn't work out, you will at least know, and remember.

17:23

Last night we were drinking tea in town. I joked that I still feel a bit tense when I am with her.

“Why?” she asked. “It's just me.”

What love is

Saturday, 23 April 2005

What is love?

Love is a willingness and a free conscious choice to keep someone else's needs, well-being and best interests at heart*. Romantic love is when this willingness combines with a strong desire* to be with this person, to share* your life with him or her, and to have this person share his or her life with you.

Asterisks:

to keep at heart = to consider something of great importance;
to at least take co-responsibility for something

strong desire = a need which, if not met, may lead to emotional distress

to share = to not keep what makes you happy or what is important to you, or what makes you sad, or what causes you pain or discomfort to yourself

Everything revolves around the POINT

Tuesday, 3 May 2005

One ad on CNN reckons some people “live inspired lives”. I like the idea, but what would be the opposite? What name should we give to a life that is not so much inspired ... and inspired by what? An idea?

Wednesday, 4 May 2005

15:41

Sometimes a person's life unfolds in a way that leads you to understand that there is a POINT around which your life revolves. What then happens is that everything you do can be seen in terms of how far away this activity is from this POINT. Basic hygiene and food intake, for example, sustain the body, which is necessary for you to allow your life (which is not viable without the body) to revolve around this POINT. So it is with work, or then income generating labour, which is done in the first place to earn capital to sustain your life (unless your work is the POINT of your life, which is a matter you have to sort out with yourself). Another example is my own EFL projects. I am currently contemplating whether a series should consist of three or five books, how many pictures will be included, whether the book should be in colour or black and white, how many and what kind of exercises I should include, the dimensions of the book, and so on. As long as I know these decisions I have to make are still related to the POINT of my life (in this case in a secondary/sustaining/conductive role), I can continue with this activity without developing an existential crisis about it.

17:02

Everything revolves around the POINT.

The POINT is not a goal you strive for and reach – it is something around which your life revolves. You do however strive for a long time to accomplish something so that your life can revolve around this POINT.

[27/01/15: What is “purpose” and what is “point”? A purpose is a reason for doing something (like staying alive). You can either succeed with this purpose, or you can fail. A point is an axis around which things revolve. Why do things revolve around this particular axis? Perhaps because it enables you to strive towards a particular purpose. Therefore: to strive towards and fulfil the purpose of your life, your life must revolve around a certain point.]

[13/06/15: A woman says, “To keep my children happy and to raise them properly so that they themselves can one day become productive members of society and help maintain civilisation, is the purpose of my life ... No, wait. The woman actually says: “The purpose of my life is to make a contribution to make the world a decent place to live in, for myself, for my children, for all the other people I love, and for all those with whom we share our world. Considering that I see that as the purpose of my existence, I see my primary role at this stage of my life as keeping my children happy and raising them properly so that they can also someday become productive members of society and do their part to maintain civilisation. To do this, to play this role properly, my children have to be the POINT around which my life currently revolves.”]

Advantages and disadvantages of an intimate relationship | To have children

Tuesday, 17 May 2005

To be on your own has both advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages include feeling truly isolated and forsaken at times, as well as feeling bored and frustrated with your own company. In times of intense loneliness, people tend to think of a relationship as heavenly paradise – with perhaps a little argument here and there to make it realistic.

Of course, an intimate relationship also has advantages and disadvantages. The benefits, as might be expected, have a lot to do with the disadvantages of being alone. The disadvantages of an intimate relationship, on the other hand, are related to the benefits of solitude.

At the end you have to decide for yourself whether the benefits of an intimate relationship – love, support, companionship – outweigh the disadvantages, including continual appearance, conflicting habits and preferences, being generous when you don't really feel like being generous, and higher financial expectations; also whether the disadvantages of being on your own eventually outweigh the benefits.

Thursday, 19 May 2005

One of two things needs to be considered when it comes to having children: a) We want to have a child, so let's do our best, and b) pregnancy is already a reality, so what are we going to do?

The above must be taken into account in remarks about what motivates people to have children.

Another thing: I have much to say about parents who have children to fill holes in their lives, to satisfy their own emotional or psychological needs. The point is that in both the above cases the person cannot exactly claim that the child was conceived for the sake of the child – simply because the child does not yet exist! (More correct in the first case.)

It thus follows that adults, when they consider having a child, naturally do so for their own reasons and to satisfy their own needs. What else?

I-now have a life of my own. There is still an emotional umbilical cord between me and my parents, but I have to a large extent abandoned my parents' ideas of an adult life and even their convictions, and have become my own man (so to speak). I too was conceived 34 years ago by two adults who had wanted to satisfy their own needs in the process of conception (I mean emotional needs rather than physical – yet it's also true that a child is conceived in the first place because two adults want to and have to satisfy their physical needs.)

One cannot escape the reality that children are conceived because adults have their own needs to satisfy – whether physical, psychological or emotional needs, and of course often a combination of these needs.

Tuesday, 24 May 2005

When you do not appear, you do not feel embarrassed; you do not need to explain yourself; you do not need to apologise for aspects of your life or the state of your living space.

The benefits of an intimate, honest and serious relationship are well-known. I simply want to mention that there are advantages to not appearing – that is, to be alone.

* * * * *

Monday, 23 May 2005

What is transformation?

I look at myself and I see a functioning adult. When the whistle blows in the morning, I also start jogging along, at my own pace, and at the end of the day when the survivors are counted ... well, so far I have been counted every time. If survival is the primary consideration, I make it as a working adult in the time and place where I have chosen to live out my existence.

However, various factors play a role in my conviction that I can do better, that I can live better, function better, show better results at the end of every day's existence. The steps I decide on after careful consideration ... that is transformation.

* * * * *

Value in the Greater View of Things

Wednesday, 1 June 2005

15:41

The feudal order and the organised societies that followed the feudal order are good illustrations of how one is born with certain information – never anchored in concrete, but according to which people nevertheless live out their lives.

A similar situation exists today. Unless you are born with excellent – indeed, superior – pedigree and other information in terms of position, wealth and prescribed role and function – you fall in the group in which most people find themselves: where your position and your value for all practical purposes amount by default to next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, or Only of Value for Friends and Family.

What it comes down to is that by the time you are a functioning adult, you sort into one of three groups: a) next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, Only of Value for Friends and Family; b) role, function and value that extend beyond your Circle of Friends and Family; c) next to nothing in the Greater View of Things, and of No Value for Any Living Being. (Train arrives. The point: if it is not given, make it a reality.)

16:08

Statement: Some people's lives only have value for friends and family, and by chance possibly for a few outside this circle. (Let us call it for the moment Type A.)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will also for a few outside this circle. (Type B)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will also for people they will never personally meet, in places that will never be visited by this person. Thus, his or her value exceeds the time and place where his or her existence takes place. (Type C)

Statement: Some people's lives have value for family and friends, and by their own will for people they will never personally meet, in places they will never visit; these individuals' names will be recorded in the official political history of a nation. (Type D)

Statement: Same as Type D, but to a significant extent because of given factors rather than own will, for example, the crown prince of the British royal family. (Type E)

Note: Some Type A accept their fairly limited value. Others murmur, but never actually do anything to change it (can therefore be called, respectively Type A and Type A2).

Statement: Some people's lives have no value for friends and family (possibly because of the absence of the person in the lives of family and former friends, and/or the absence of friends and family in the person's life), and also has no value for any human or animal. (Type A2)

Monday, 6 June 2005

In the end 99.9% of the people on Earth comes and goes, and they either contribute in their own way to the maintenance and growth of civilisation, or they contribute to its destruction. Of only 0.01% of people and perhaps even less it will be said in hindsight that they were exceptional, superior to most of their peers, even that they were "destined" for important roles.

The environment and process of an intimate relationship

Thursday, 16 June 2005

Rain – continuously for five days, endless laundry, dirty dishes, credibility as a writer and an entrepreneur, and a new question: Am I a little embarrassed about the effect that an intimate relationship has on me? It affects what I say and how I say it; that I am apologetic and what I am apologetic about; and it makes me appear to someone in a way I previously only appeared to myself – meaning financial status, my status as an unpublished writer, the fact that I work on many so-called money projects ... that make no money at all.

Another question (an essential one): Do I feel as good about myself in an intimate relationship as I felt on my own?

As I was writing down the question, I realised it was loaded with misunderstanding and unspoken detail. Was I always happy on my own? Did I expect to be happy in a relationship at all times? The answer to both questions is no.

Here is my advice to myself: An intimate relationship is an environment where you are once again confronted with yourself – an environment which differs in crucial ways from the one in which you were on your own. It provides you with a new mirror in which you see yourself. It is an environment where conflict, both large and small, makes a regular appearance. A relationship is also a process in which you have to again define yourself – who you are, what you are, where your place in the world is, your ideal role, your relative value as a human being (and as a possible role player), your strengths and your weaknesses, what the future may hold for you, how much money you need to not only survive but to be who you want to be and do what you want to do.

Like the environment of the Desert (celibacy and loneliness), this environment and the accompanying process are also both constructive and destructive, both positive and

negative; sometimes it leads to an awareness of happiness, sometimes to frustration; sometimes it leads to a decrease in positive self-image and confidence in your potential and abilities, sometimes it confirms your existing positive self-image and confidence in your potential and abilities, and sometimes it is conducive to a strengthening of the latter.

An intimate relationship is a living environment where patience, love and mutual acceptance will lead to fulfilment of much more than just physical needs. In the ideal situation it will lead to a richer experience of being human. Of course, an intimate relationship can also lead to pain, disappointment and frustration. It is an environment where high value should be placed on honesty and sincerity. It is a process that must be cherished, even if you have to occasionally endure the less pleasant aspects that will be part of any situation where two people are in regular and intimate fellowship.

What was your process?

Tuesday, 28 June 2005

A phrase frequently heard around barbecue fires, on porches or balconies, next to a table in a restaurant or a counter in a bar or other places where middle class mid-twenties spend their time, is this: "I now know what is important in life. I know what I want out of life."

I am in no position to question what is important to them or what they want from life. The temptation does however exist to ask them: What was your process? In what way did you go about working out what is important to you, or what you want? Did you lie awake nights contemplating the possibilities? Did you spend years weighing the possibilities and mulling it over? Did you spend months? Weeks, perhaps? Did it ever hit you one morning on the way to work? Was it something someone said at a barbecue, or on TV or in a movie, or at the office, or on campus one day? Did you follow a thorough process of elimination where you considered a dozen, or at least half a dozen possibilities, with all the possible pluses of every possibility weighed against all the disadvantages and all the possible risks? Whose tracks did you consciously or unconsciously follow? Why those particular tracks? What needs do you hope to fulfil with your ultimate choice of what is important to you, a young adult? What goals will be fulfilled in the pursuit of what you want out of life? What is important to your friends, your brothers, your sisters, your cousins? Is there a correlation between what is important to you and what you want out of life and what they want and what is important to them? If you want to follow a different path, what are your reasons, your motivations? If you want to pursue a similar path, what do you think would be the reasons for that? And now that we are on this line of questioning, what was important to your parents, or your aunts and uncles? Did they pursue similar things to what you now want to pursue for

the next forty or so years of your life? Is or were they happy with their choices? For what reasons would you think were they happy with their choices? Did they regret some things? What are these things? Are there dreams or ambitions that you have already written off as unrealistic and unrealisable? How much regret will you have in ten or twenty years about the things that you considered unattainable in your mid-twenties? What will compensate you for the dreams and ambitions that you would never pursue?

These are but a few questions for which you can pinch off an hour or so if you have the time – if you find yourself in a place where you know no one, where for the moment there will be no familiar voices to echo your own, or to talk you down, or to offer support.

Coffee tables and identity

Wednesday, 29 June 2005

After years of thinking about himself and about life, a man has decided who he wants to be, where he wants to live and in what style, how much money he can be content with, and so on.

Then he meets a woman and they start a relationship. During the course of several months he spends with her, he forms an idea of what her vision looks like of a nice house. Some aspects correspond with his ideas. Other items he regards as perhaps too conspicuously “bourgeois”. He has also developed over the years an aversion to decor that seems to have been selected from a catalogue, and he is reminded of a *Fight Club* quote: “Flipping through catalogues, deciding which coffee table defines me the best.”

This man is comfortable making a political argument out of a coffee table. Still, he loves the woman, and her vision of a nice house ... is beautiful, stylish, aesthetically pleasing and warm. His question to himself: Should he admit that her suggestions of how to turn an apartment into a home are not in conflict with his basic idea of a pleasant living space that pre-dates her presence in his life, or should he continue to defend his vision of an intellectual’s lair to the last coffee table splinter because he would die of embarrassment if any other armchair revolutionary should express the opinion that he turned bourgeois the moment he lost his heart to a woman?

What is under discussion here is identity. Who and what you are in the environment where and at the time when your existence plays out find expression in your address, your clothes, your furniture, your mode of transportation and the ornaments and wall hangings in your living room. If any of these expressions of your who-and-what changes, what does it say about who and what you are, or have become, or is becoming? (And any reader who feels that a coffee table is

just a damn coffee table obviously has not contemplated the finer points of existence.)

People change, everybody knows that. One enters into a relationship with someone special, and your existence is transformed overnight (and over the course of months), from single amateur academic/writer to ... amateur academic/writer in a meaningful relationship with a beautiful woman who does not like broken toilet seats and second-hand couches with piles of newspapers under a sheet to prevent anyone from falling in.

Relationships, compromise, politics, coffee tables ... whatever. Let the shopping begin!

The kind of adults we become

Saturday, 2 July 2005

11:35

I am watching a Kevin Bacon movie, and a specific plot line catches me offside for the umpteenth time in my adult life. Now, I know it is just a movie, but it's not science fiction, it is a dramatised version of a life with which I am sure most viewers, who certainly count in the millions, can associate.

The story goes as follows: a young man who has ambitions to become a writer and who has a view of himself as someone who does not merely want to do the same as the proverbial everyone else marries a young woman whose character is not so clearly developed as her husband's, but who one can assume has ambitions of a more conventional life. They buy a house in a middle-class neighbourhood. He gets a job at an advertising company and tries to write in the evenings, but does not get much done. He doesn't really know what he wants out of life, but nonetheless works to maintain the "house" that is his life – a life he has not chosen as much as it just happened as a standard option for which he has taken the right actions at the right times like showing up for a job interview and showing up at the bank to fill out forms for a home loan. He wonders why he cannot just accept himself the way he is, and be satisfied with where he is.

As could be expected, it does not take long before pregnancy and children become part of the story. The man complains that his life is without meaning, and it is increasingly suggested that fatherhood will make a big difference.

The story thus follows a familiar plot:

- Man and woman get married.
- Man and woman are uncertain about the value of their lives in the Greater View of Things (and although it has been

mentioned that we do not always live in the Greater View of Things, we also do not only live in the world of sour milk and annoying pop tunes and screaming children – all these things are part of something bigger, and most of us know this). They may even believe that they have to justify their existence. They must show the world that they too are worth something, and that they can make a worthy claim to the oxygen they breathe and the sun warming their cheeks.

- They get jobs somewhere, buy a house, and try to fill holes that doubts about the value of their existence blaze into their consciousness like an open flame would burn holes through delicate rice paper.

- They have children – the joy, the profound change in their daily lives, the happiness and the congratulations from all serve to emphasise that they have reached a good point. They are parents now, which means new roles to play as well as the additional value this gives to their lives in the Greater View of Things. The child or children are raised to initially be like their parents (language, sports preferences, religious affiliation, other loyalties), and to perhaps lead similar lives after a few decades. The whole cycle continues: have children, adulthood, have children, adulthood, have children ...

What is my problem with this? I like children! My own sisters have beautiful children and I am happy for them! I may also want to have children one day! What is my problem with this most primitive, most widespread of phenomena? My problem is the type of adults that many people become. And I believe the kind of adults that people become are strongly influenced by the reason or reasons why they came into existence in the first place. [Example: Prince William of Britain: reason for coming into existence: to become king (or queen if the dice had fallen the other way).] If I look at my own case, my own parents may have had me because they had wanted more children for their own selfish reasons. I turned out okay. As an adult I make witty albeit slightly cynical comments on the lives of other adults, I pay my bills (late, but still), and I believe I make my contribution, however small, to

the progress of civilisation, or at least to preserve what is good.

Is this not in the end good enough?

I think it is time that I face one of the hardest truths ever: Not everyone's life is important in the Greater View of Things. To have one life with value that exceeds the primary needy-organism-behaviour-to-satisfy-needs model requires possibly dozens of primary models. This is a horrible truth: that my life in the Greater View of Things may be worth more than someone else's, and that someone else's life may be more valuable than mine – that my life can be regarded as disposable if necessary to keep someone else alive whose life is regarded as more precious and more valuable than my own. (And I am not referring to the value of my life in the sense that my life has value for my mother, and John X's life has value for Mother X. I am talking of value where personal relationships are not a measure.)

What this means is that perhaps as many as nine out of every ten adults must produce offspring to give value to their lives and to contribute their share to fulfil the needs of the community in the decades to come (children become teachers and doctors, and road builders, and so forth). One in ten, or maybe just one in every hundred people, does more – something that will transcend their value beyond their intimate inner circle and the labour value they have for the local economy. To produce these one-out-of-ten or one-out-of-one-hundred people, **MOST ADULTS SHOULD HAVE CHILDREN**. That is how it is. It is time that I accept this.

(Incidentally, the movie's name is *She's having a baby.*)

23:40

Again it comes down to this: there is no universal human value. Each person has to work out his or her own value in the Greater View of Things. If he or she is not satisfied with the

preliminary outcome, he or she must take action to achieve their desired value – in so far as it is within his or her ability.

What is your value if you do not work it out yourself, and if you are not among the group of people bothered with their value in the Greater View of Things? Then your value is the result of fate – time and place of birth, gender, family, socio-economic status, race, etcetera, needs of the community – X number of teachers are needed, X number of garbage removal workers, and so forth, and choices and actions you take, or have taken to satisfy your needs up until the current moment.

Great. (Possible title or subtitle for an essay: Initially about a movie.)

[Say you work out your own value – whatever that means, and you think you too can be counted among the group of people who are bothered with their value in the Greater View of Things, is this not ultimately also 100% part of your process to satisfy your own needs? One out of every hundred people who will then rise above the proverbial masses do so for the same reason a subsistence farmer plants a potato and harvest it: to satisfy their own needs.]

Free expression and matching bed linen

Sunday, 3 July 2005

This afternoon I purchased a whole new set of bedding – fitted sheet, duvet and two matching pillow cases. The guilt over paying what was in fact a very reasonable price, and the uncertainty about how the change in bedding would alter my view of myself kicked in before I had even reached the elevator of the department store.

A few months ago I was still adamant about my blue duvet, my other duvet with the huge arum lily, and the pillow cases that did not go with anything. I told [N.] the day I buy bedding where everything matches is the day I trample under my feet the aesthetic expression of how I see myself, and with it all it symbolises. She agreed that the value of matching bed linen was overrated; that it is indeed quite unnecessary. My bedding, so she thought, was perfectly okay. Weeks later she still reckoned there was nothing wrong with it. I, on the other hand, was suddenly convinced that it looked “common”. (In my defence, I should mention that the fitted sheet had frills hanging from it, which is not exactly my style. The only reason I started using that specific sheet was because I had put a thicker mattress on the bed and the only sheet that was big enough was one that my friend, J. had left me two and half years ago when she left Taiwan.)

Then, this afternoon, while [N.] was still on holiday in South Africa, I went out and bought that entire new set of bedding – stylish, matches the colour motif of the bedroom, no frills, nothing.

“Was I supposed to spend my entire life sleeping on old linen where nothing matches just because I fancy myself an anti-bourgeois intellectual?” I shouted at myself on the way home. “Should I hang my head in shame because I violated Rule # 17 of the Free-thinking Intellectual’s Handbook on Houseware and Bed Linen? Did I forget that no self-

respecting critic of everything that is middle class should ever stoop so low as to lay two pillows with matching covers on a bed?"

Then I thought: What is the value of free thinking, of self-definition when it comes to who and what you want to be, and of free choice when I have to live for the rest of my life under the punishing regime of my own caricature of a leftist critic? If I cannot choose to blow money on stylish, matching bed linen, what other choices are there where my so-called freedom is restricted by my own idea of what my life is supposed to look like, since I labelled myself a writer with anti-middle-class opinions? Who is my master when it comes to these issues? Did Marx or Lenin's bed sheets and pillows match? Does Michael Moore buy his bed linen at three different garage sales to prevent one sheet from inappropriately matching a duvet cover, and Great Revolutionaries forbid, to avoid buying anything that might actually be new? I thought I served my own agenda! I thought I make my own free choices! I thought what I was doing with my life, where, with whom, and how I decorate my house as an expression of my self-image and personal beliefs are all self-defined!

It is thus one hundred percent in line with my beliefs and my integrated philosophy and understanding of life when I say it is okay: you can in all credibility be progressive in your views and opinions, and criticise how other people live their lives, and at the end of a productive day cast your weary body on a bed where the fitted sheet matches the duvet cover, and where the pillow cases do not violently clash with the colour motif of your bedroom.

* * * * *

Friday, 14 October 2005

Here's an idea: It is the moral obligation of enlightened people to use their reproductive abilities to produce the next generation so that they can become the enlightened leaders of the communities where they will live and work in the future.

Let me try again: It is my moral duty to use my reproductive abilities to make a contribution to ...

* * * * *

Pull back from the detail

Monday, 21 November 2005

A handyman goes to a neighbouring town late one afternoon to fix a washing machine. For 45 minutes he is focused on the machine in front of him, all the wires and plugs and tubes, and all the tools he needs. Perhaps he lies flat on his back on the kitchen floor with his concentration sharply focused on what he is doing. This is as it should be; this is how he will get the job done properly.

This handyman must however be able to pull back at any moment from the washing machine in front of him, and answer questions on issues more important than this specific washing machine. For example, he must have a vague idea in whose house he is – maybe the local dentist; he should know in what town he is – not his own town, but the neighbouring town; he must know what time he wants to be at home – perhaps around 18:00; he must also know how to drive to get home; perhaps even what the weather looks like outside – maybe he has heard the thunder of an approaching storm. If the situation requires it, he may also consider other things: his age – mid-forties; his family – wife and two children; income – ±R12,000 per month; and his financial obligations – home and car payments, groceries, school fees, insurance policies, etcetera.

Should it be necessary, this handyman would be able to sit back, away from the machine and the tools and tubes and bolts and pipes, and for a few moments consider these things.

Wednesday, 23 November 2005

On the subject of paths laid out for you, and the steps you take in your youth and your twenties to make this path your own, the following metaphor: a tapestry. The motif was already worked out long before you begin weeks of patient labour

with wool and needle. At the end you have a beautiful tapestry. The tapestry is your own. You worked hard on it. But that does not change the fact that the basic image, the pattern, was laid out long ago, by someone else.

Vanguard of the bourgeoisie

Friday, 25 November 2005

17:21

I look at the world around me, and I cannot but declare that the great hope for the survival of human civilisation on Earth is the middle class – that big mass of people in the so-called developed world, and smaller percentages of people in so-called developing countries, who go to work every day, who own cars and houses and TVs and computers and refrigerators, and several sets of bed linen and music collections and beautiful coffee table books and souvenirs of holidays in other places.

People who are seriously wealthy also make a contribution, but by now we know most of that money never trickles down to the broad mass of humanity existing outside their tiny opulent worlds.

The working poor also contribute to the survival of human civilisation by performing for small fees various tasks for which no one else wants to dirty their hands.

However, without the middle class human civilisation would spiral down into brutal darkness. The middle class is Light, Spine and Balancing Factor.

One important additional piece of information must be mentioned: In order to continue to be Light, Spine, and Balancing Factor, it is imperative that the majority of the members of this stratum be educated, tolerant and peace-loving.

Of course this is a naïve ideal.

Here is what will help: a vanguard of rational, well-educated, open-minded and tolerant individuals. Intellectuals they need not necessarily be, although a core of this vanguard should consist of rational thinkers. This vanguard ought to be the leaders of middle-class communities. An organisation,

even a political movement, could also be suggested that would promote this idea of strong, tolerant, stable socio-economic communities, led by rational, open-minded and tolerant individuals. (Long live the vanguard of the bourgeoisie?)

17:56

One does get the idea from the above that I'm not exactly saying anything new. What I describe in the above piece of text as the hope of civilisation has already been an active factor in the survival and development of human existence on earth for centuries. The vanguard of rational, open-minded leaders will be a major improvement, though.

If these were to be my conclusions after ten plus years of thinking about society, it is clear that I do not propose revolutions, but more of the same – just better.

The realisation and development of true love

Friday, 6 January 2006

Realisation strikes: You become aware of the power and the choice to be good to someone, to do something that would make that person's experience of reality better, something that may even give that person's life a more beautiful quality. And it provides you with a particular satisfaction to turn that choice, that potential, into reality.

Sunday, 22 January 2006

A large part of what is called "love" in an intimate relationship is an intense compassion the two people have for one another, which in turn stems from a perception, after repeated and continuous contact in a wide range of situations, of the "other one" as one like me, in the most significant philosophical and psychological way possible.

The compassion aspect of "love" is deeply rooted. Once this attitude towards a particular person takes root, it can last a lifetime. It is much, much stronger than mere feeling – which can vary from day to day, and according to mood and circumstance.

Choice – an expression of free will and an expression of how you see yourself, how you define yourself and how you wish to be seen by others – plays a greater role in the compassion aspect of love than in the excitement of romantic euphoria.

The more compassion there is in an intimate relationship, the more accurately the relationship can be described as one where "true love" is the order of the day – or a relationship where "true love" acts as the ruling agent. If an intimate relationship is primarily characterised by romantic euphoria, with the much more significant and substantial compassion aspect mostly absent, or where the relationship is regularly

jeopardised by actions and behaviour that fluctuate according to feeling, it would be more accurate to say that “true love” is indeed not the governing agent in a particular relationship.

True love can ultimately only develop in an intimate relationship if the respective characters of the two parties permit it – character which stems from the development of your person, self-knowledge and a healthy degree of self-esteem.

Saturday, 28 January 2006

The ability to love precedes any significant relationship. It is of course a common occurrence for a relationship between two people to be conducive for this ability to love to be activated. It is also true that some relationships prove over the course of some time to simply not be conducive to activating this ability.

Three simple truths

Monday, 13 August 2007

It took a long time for me to see other people more as they really are, and not as I make them – and sometimes want them to be – in my own, sometimes simplistic world. It remains true, though, that some people will always be in the minority at backyard barbecues or at a family table during Sunday lunch.

A simple truth, number two: If most members of a group make the same lifestyle choices, these choices would appear to most members of the group as the best choices they can make – whether they really are such great choices, or not. (And to be fair – just because the majority thinks something is right, doesn't mean they are necessarily wrong.)

A simple truth, number three: You can't tell people they are wrong if you don't present them with an alternative – and not an alternative that will work better for *you*, an alternative that would be better for *them*.

The love of a woman

Thursday, 1 May 2008

The love of a woman – from a man’s perspective

Picture a man walking in a desert. He’s been walking for days. He has run out of food and water, and he is dehydrated. He stumbles as he descends down a dune. Rolls to the bottom. Just lies there.

Then, at that moment, a rescue plane appears in the blue sky above him. Someone parachutes down with emergency supplies. Three hours later a jeep ambulance arrives.

A few days later he wakes up in a hospital. He is connected to tubes, and doctors and nurses are monitoring his condition. He is going to be okay, the doctor assures everyone in the waiting room.

This, from the moment the rescue plane appeared, to the assurance of the doctor, this is the love of a woman. It is a most fortunate turn of events in the life of any man.

(for Natasja)

Things I had to learn

Friday, 9 May 2008

Here are the notes I should have made on Friday, 10 February 2006:

Besides learning to make money from home, in my own time, and with work that I see fit, I set myself the following goals over the next two or three years:

1. I have to learn to fail utterly and completely, and then to start again the next day, and to fail utterly and completely again, and to start again the next day.

2. I have to learn to venture an opinion and make predictions, and to be totally wrong, and the next day to again venture opinions and make predictions, and to be totally wrong again, and then the next day to again risk an opinion and make predictions.

3. I have to learn to be patient. I have to learn to progress painfully slowly, even slipping back every few days almost to where I had started, and then to continue the following day.

Oh, and I have to learn all the above whilst someone whose respect I want to be worthy of witnesses each and every one of my failures, and knows of almost every single time I am and have been wrong.

Why I do what I do – as long as I remain standing

Thursday, 4 September 2008

Why I do what I do: a conversation with myself on the way to the 7-Eleven late last night

Reason one: Distrust, since the age of fourteen, in an adult life of get a job, get married, get a loan to buy a house, get a loan to buy a car, have children, then the economy turns bad or some other fuck-up that makes you lose your job, you get desperate, you borrow more money, you move to another city, you trade in the car for an old wreck, you explain your situation to friends and relatives and strangers, you get even more desperate until you get to the point where you are willing to call anyone “boss” or do anything for a paycheck.

Reason two: Even when I was supposed to get ready for a career, interests like history and religion weighed heavier than subjects like personnel management or marketing.

Reason three: Like millions of other people I, too, have been given a gift, and I’ll be damned if I do not apply my life to something better than a mediocre existence.

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.

Whether everything works out or not

Monday, 13 October 2008

[Excerpt from an e-mail to a friend]

You ask whether everything is going to work out “right”. I’m old enough to know things don’t always work out exactly the way we wanted. We hope and believe – in a better tomorrow, that things will work out, that the future will be fantastic ... but everyone knows that faith and hope often end in disillusionment, and without a little luck every now and then our daily efforts wouldn’t take us nearly as far as we would like to believe they should.

What’s going to happen next is that you are going to go on struggling for everything that’s important to you, from serving a cause greater than yourself to fulfilling your potential. That is what will happen next.

Will things work out? You’re probably not going to have as many interesting experiences in the next few months as you have had in the past almost six months – or perhaps you are going to have even more interesting experiences. The immediate future might not bring *as many* interesting characters – but maybe other interesting characters.

Believe in yourself. Believe in what you do. Fight on. And forget about “everything”, the perfect life, and believing that something will always smile back at the end. As long as you remain on your feet, you’re still in the game – and if you stumble, you get back up.

If life is a struggle for something better, and for all that we can be, you already have more than enough tools, knowledge, experience, enthusiasm, vitality and tricks up your sleeve to see the fight to the end.

That is the best I can offer in terms of advice.

Sparks and true love, in a nutshell

Monday, 10 November 2008

There is true love, and there is sexual attraction. There is love that lasts a lifetime, and there are sparks of sexual desire. Sometimes you feel sexually attracted to a person, you take a chance, and you enjoy it for as long as it lasts. If you stay together, the sexual attraction must eventually be augmented with something more substantial, namely love – the kind that can last a lifetime, until long after the sparks have cooled down and you occasionally catch yourself wondering what it would be like with someone else.

A man is madly in love with a woman. The woman regards the man a pleasant enough fellow: he is kind, he can have conversations about interesting things, but that's where it stops for her. She wonders if a person can force a heart that doesn't want to beat faster. She thinks about sexual desire, for example, that is after all an honest physical response to someone's presence.

The woman pictures for herself a very specific life with the man, should she choose to be with him – a life where things would always be like they are now: he loves her, she pulls back. Five years later: he's still crazy about her, she's still distant. Twenty years later: he still loves her; she cares about him but she doesn't reciprocate his warmth, and occasionally she thinks back to an affair she had two decades earlier with a guy that looked like a movie star.

Reality looks slightly different in many cases, though: the man is currently at $X+20$, and the woman is at $X+2$; after two years, he is at $X+15$, and she is at $X+7$; after ten years, she cannot imagine a life without him; he still loves her very much – he still brings her breakfast in bed on Sundays, but sparks from his side don't set the wallpaper on fire anymore. That is how life sometimes is, in a nutshell.

Of course, things could turn out completely different between the woman and the man who doesn't look like a movie star. His torch may start showing signs of dimming after a few years, and he may start looking at other women just as the women in his life increasingly wants to be closer to him. This is also how life sometimes works out, in a different nutshell.

* * * * *

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?

* * * * *

Conversation with myself about planned versus unplanned pregnancy

Monday, 22 February 2010

18:37

The conversation with myself started as a contemplation on my bicycle on the way to my usual dinner place. I thought about how I constantly second-guess myself these days: *Was I supposed to say that? Should I have acted differently? Should I respond differently because I'm almost forty?*

I reckoned that I had always thought one outgrows these insecurities.

“Maybe it makes a difference if you have children,” I thought to myself. “You have more important things to worry about, so you have little time or inclination for ridiculous age-related insecurities.”

“Imagine,” came the response from the other voice in my head, “I suddenly say I want to have children.”

“That’s the problem,” I immediately retorted. “If pregnancy is the natural consequence of the being-together of a man and a woman, then so be it. I’ve been saying this for a long time. But if you plan pregnancy ... it’s too selfish. I want a child – no matter what suffering the child would have to endure in this world.”

“Are you saying planned pregnancy is a bad idea?”

“No, I’m just saying that personally I have a problem with a planned pregnancy. This means I would have to look my child in the eyes when he or she is going through pain and suffering, and I would have to say I’m sorry, I needed to become a father, so you’re just going to have to suffer the consequences. If my wife should become pregnant, then we can say, okay, it was the natural consequence of a natural act between two people who love each other, a normal phenomenon in a healthy relationship: Sperm fertilised an

egg; the fertilised egg grew into an embryo, then a foetus; and nine months later a child was born. Okay, let's do our best. Let's make sure this child has everything he or she needs and that he or she gets a good education. We'll give him or her all the love and support we can. We'll create opportunities. We'll teach him or her how to seize opportunities. We'll protect him or her as much as we can against the onslaughts of this world. In this case, the child is the natural consequence of a man and a woman being together."

"But the woman can still choose to terminate the pregnancy. Not to end the pregnancy is also a choice. In that case, you still say: *We want to have a child.*"

"Fair enough, but it will be an unnatural interference."

"What you're saying is that if the child results from a natural process, that's okay. If a person says, *I want to have a child*, or *I want to be a mum or a dad*, it's no longer natural. Then you are forcing the process. If a woman becomes pregnant, and she gets an abortion, she is once again interfering with the process. Once again, it is unnatural."

"Right. If it is natural, if the birth is the result of a natural process – relationship, togetherness, sperm and egg, nine months, child – you're covered, so to speak. Then you would never have to look your child in the eyes and say, *I am sorry for the suffering that you, my child, must go through, but I really wanted to have a child.* You can say – even though you're still deeply distressed to see your child suffer – that the child's existence is the result of a natural process."

"What if the man or the woman uses contraceptives? Isn't that also interfering with the natural process?"

Silence.

Post-conversation thoughts:

What is the difference between the unnatural interference to create a child and the unnatural interference to arrest the process that would otherwise lead to the birth of a child?

Hormone treatment, sperm count, test tubes, abortion, too many children to care for, incompetent parents, contraception, adult men and women's emotional needs. Can the ball of wool still be untangled?

21:50

It is not a matter of RIGHT or WRONG, it is a question of where on the spectrum.

There is the extreme of unplanned pregnancy: an addict who exchanges sex for drugs and gives birth to a child who is addicted to drugs from the very start of his or her existence and who has almost no hope and no future.

Then there is the extreme of planned pregnancy: the bored adult who figures they are in the mood for a new role, or who thinks a child will give him or her something to do, or fill a void that cannot (currently) be filled with anything else. Dissatisfaction with the Current Self, and the belief: "I need a child."

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.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 13 April 2010

Fuck that nonsense of age and “I am already x-years old” – as if we’re all going to reach 100 and you’re already 37 or 54 or 45 years closer to the target.

Here is a more reasonable approach: Be grateful for every single day you get. Make the most of every single day! Every day is a gift!

* * * * *

To stop living like a fugitive

Monday, 17 January 2011

I live like a person who has escaped from somewhere and who's now in hiding.

- I have a work permit, granted on the condition that I work at least eleven hours per week at a specific school. Actually, I only work three hours per week at the school.

- I don't have a driver's license, although I regularly ride a scooter, for which I need a license.

- I don't have a National Health Insurance card – the only legal resident of Taiwan of which I know that doesn't have one. Which means I always have to explain why I can only present a residence card when I go to see a doctor or a dentist.

- I have been renting an apartment for seven years, but I have never signed a lease. I don't even know what the owner of the apartment looks like.

- I don't live in the apartment anymore. I use it as an office and storage space.

- My phone bill is in the name of one “Ma-li-ou Ma-ka-ne” – the sinified name of a South African friend of mine who left Taiwan five years ago.

- The residential address on my ID card indicates that I live in the school where I work. Naturally I don't live there.

A few years ago, I spoke of rehabilitating myself for entry into the socio-economic middle-class. Before I get to that phase of my life, I can think of quite a few benefits I will enjoy if at the very least I can manage to no longer live in apparent fear of doing things right.

Learn from the youth – despite vanity and insecurity

Tuesday, 27 September 2011

My whole adult life I've been thinking of myself as a young man – after all, I don't know what it's like to be *old*. But then one day you're confronted with the realisation that there are other young men as much as twenty years *younger* than you.

“Twenty years!” you cry out. “Twenty years?!”

And to top it all of you have to remind yourself that you can learn something from these youngsters any day of the week – that a guy of 20 or 25 can also sit on a rock for an hour or so and then rise with a piece of wisdom or good advice ready to share with the nearest bystander.

At the end of the day it's just vanity, and pathological insecurity about your own value that makes you want to hold on to time, that makes you panic when you think of time slipping through your fingers day after day – like it does through everyone's fingers.

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 1500 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 fifteen 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.

The least a parent should do

Monday, 10 September 2012

Parents must refrain from trying to create their children in their own image. Children will eventually have to survive in a world that is different from their parents' world, and where many things will work differently than the way they worked in the world in which their parents had grown up.

Parents have the duty to equip their children to survive in a sometimes hostile world, and to define a workable identity that will ultimately enable them to function as adults in this world, to foster relationships with a wide variety of people, to formulate a purpose to which they can apply their lives, and to find happiness.

Children need to be equipped to survive – physically, mentally and emotionally, and to lead fulfilling, productive, happy lives.

Parents should at least attempt to do no less than this, seeing that the child had no choice about being born in the first place.

My model works, but not for everyone

Saturday, 13 October 2012

When someone asks my advice on career, work or ways to make money – or when I give it on my own accord, I always base my opinion on a certain model that I have in my head. This model says: don't put too much weight on what will give you higher status in the community; think twice before you insist on trying to make money with something you're passionate about – there's not necessarily a market for it, and even if there is, you might find after a few years of commercial activity that you're not that passionate about it anymore; do not commit yourself to a career or a commercial activity where you will do the same thing over and over and over again, Monday to Friday, until someone finally taps you on the shoulder and says, "Stop! You're 65. Retire, for crying out loud!"

I believe this model makes sense, and have thought so for a long time. I can therefore never understand when someone hears my well-meaning advice, and then do the exact opposite.

But there's something I tend to forget.

In many cases, people get something back when they follow their own instinct and consider status in the community, when they go for something they have always had a passion for, and when they choose a profession or business where they will do the same thing over and over, ad nauseam. They establish a regular stream of income that puts food on the table and pays the rent. They develop a relationship with other people in the community. They become part of something. They will tell me: "You know what? It's true that sometimes the work is boring, but we like what we get back at the end of the day and at the end of the month. What we get for our labour, not only money but also the connection and sometimes friendship with people we work with, make up for

the things we don't like. We simply endure the less pleasant aspects of our labour.”

My model works for the individual who wants to be left alone, for the person who doesn't want to compromise his passion with commercial packaging, and who definitely does not want to do the same boring job every day, over and over until he goes out of his mind. My model works for the person who is not concerned on a daily basis with keeping a family alive, who doesn't want to endure tedious and boring work.

So, am I wrong?

No. I just don't always take into account what works for other people, what other people want, and what they're willing to give up for what they get in return.

Thank goodness children are not like (some) adults

Friday, 30 November 2012

As a child, you don't automatically know how to play chess. You don't know how to ride a bike, or how to do ballet or play football. You don't know how to use a computer. You don't even know how to read or write until you're taught how.

As a child, you almost never wavered when it came to something new you had to master. You just did what you were told. You kept trying, and after a few months or a few years you could play chess, ride a bike, play football, or do ballet. You learned to read and write, and eventually you learned how to use a computer.

Why then, as adults, do so many people doubt their ability to learn something new?

"I don't know how," the man or woman will mutter.

"I'm too old to learn something new," the thirty or forty or fifty-year-old man or woman will say.

"No, good grief! There's no chance that I'll be able to do that!" one person will opine, safe in the knowledge that at least a handful of other adults in the area will support them in their belief that they are unable to do something.

Can you imagine if children suffered from the same malady?

"Oh no, Daddy, that bicycle is so big. I'm going to fall off and hurt my toe," little Johnny might say, and then he'll walk away and go sit under a tree.

"Those dances look so difficult, Mommy! I can't do them!" little Joanna might say, and then refuse to get out of the car at the ballet class.

"Chess seems so complicated ..."

"I don't know how to draw those curls and lines like the other boys and girls in class ..."

“You know I’m afraid of mice, and the computer always makes such funny noises ...”

The end of civilisation as we know it. The beginning of Zombieland.

“If you think you can do something, or if you think you cannot do something, you’re right,” Henry Ford advised.

What I want to know is what kind of example do people think they set for the next generation if, at the age of 25 or 40 or 50, they stop believing they can master anything new.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 20 February 2013

Is it not strange that, as adults, we are almost by default under the impression that we are not free to do what we want. We have to make ourselves valuable in order to justify our existence. We hope someone is so gracious to give us work as soon as we finish school, or after we have undergone some training to make ourselves more valuable. We hope somebody sees what we can do for them and are willing to pay us for the value we can deliver so that we can survive. Freedom, we've been told time and again from childhood, is like a private beach: a privilege reserved for the wealthy few.

* * * * *

Criticism about the habits and lifestyle of the bourgeoisie

Wednesday, 2 April 2014

I am currently reading the book, *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell, published in 1959. It tells the story of the middle-class Bridge family of Kansas City in the 1920s and 1930s, mostly from the perspective of the eponymous Mrs Bridge.

Mrs Bridge's life revolves around her children and her social life. The social environment in which she moves is described as "unity, sameness, consensus, centeredness".

Not much dramatic ever happens in her life, although she is sometimes faced with uncomfortable issues such as class consciousness. She also recalls that her one friend once asked her if she also sometimes feels like she is hollowed out and empty on the inside. She remembers this on the day she learns that the same friend killed herself.

According to Wikipedia, the book did not quite garner the attention it perhaps deserved:

By 1962, when critic Michael Robbins proclaimed that *Mrs. Bridge* answered the question asked by writer and social critic, "what kind of people we are producing, what kinds of lives we are leading", the novel was already out of print: readers of *College Composition and Communication* were urged to write the publishers in hopes of getting the book reprinted. In 1982, when both Bridge books were republished [*Mr. Bridge* followed in 1969], Brooks Landon, in *The Iowa Review*, commented that "Connell seems to have become one of those writers we know to respect but may not have read".

One of Mrs Bridge's confrontations with class consciousness takes place one day in a bookstore while browsing through a book titled, *The Theory of the Leisure*

Class, an actual 1899 book by Thorstein Veblen. The book is described as social criticism about the habits and lifestyle of financially comfortable members of the middle and upper-middle class. It focusses on what is called conspicuous consumption:

Conspicuous consumption is the spending of money on and the acquiring of luxury goods and services to publicly display economic power—either the buyer’s income or the buyer’s accumulated wealth. Sociologically, to the conspicuous consumer, such a public display of discretionary economic power is a means either of attaining or of maintaining a given social status.

Moreover, invidious consumption, a more specialized sociologic term, denotes the deliberate conspicuous consumption of goods and services intended to provoke the envy of other people, as a means of displaying the buyer’s superior socio-economic status.

The article continues:

In the 19th century, the term conspicuous consumption was introduced by the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), in the book *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (1899), to describe the behavioural characteristics of the nouveau riche (new rich) social class who emerged as a result of the accumulation of capital wealth during the Second Industrial Revolution (ca. 1860–1914). In that social and historical context, the term “conspicuous consumption” was narrowly applied to describe the men, women, and families of the upper class who applied their great wealth as a means of publicly manifesting their social power and prestige, be it real or perceived.

Read more:

Wikipedia article on *Mrs. Bridge*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mrs._Bridge

Wikipedia article on *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Theory_of_the_Leisure_Class

Wikipedia article on “conspicuous consumption”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspicuous_consumption

My perfect life

Monday, 18 August 2014

This evening in a local supermarket I observed a young couple loading kitchenware into their trolley. I thought to myself: “Imagine that was your dream when you were 28 or 29 – to be married and to start a family of your own.”

Not too many seconds later, I remembered it indeed was my dream when I was in my late twenties.

There was a problem though. I had no confidence in the process of making yourself useful, pleading or begging for a job, or smiling eagerly enough or performing your tricks well enough to be employed by some company or commercial enterprise. (And then, when it suits the company or enterprise, or when they want to go in a different direction, or when you start costing them too much, they throw you out in the parking lot with your box full of sharp pencils, Tip-ex, and a picture of you and your wife and your two children. And a dog and a cat. Waiting at home not knowing new money won't be coming in at the end of the month.)

For the next fifteen minutes I focused on my groceries, walked out to the parking lot, got on my bike and rode home.

As I was pedalling, I again pondered the core of the marriage-children-work idea. By the time I got home, an alternative opinion had formed in my mind: If I had wanted badly enough to be married in my late twenties and to start a family of my own, I would have tried harder to get work in my own country. I would still not have trusted the process, but like most people I would have closed my eyes, jumped, and hoped for the best.

The truth is, I did want to get married and start a family in my late twenties and early thirties, but there were other things that were more important to me. I ended up pursuing these other ... dreams, these other ambitions.

Eventually I did get married – to a woman who is my partner, who understands me, and who loves me. And although we don't have children, one fat cat with character and his eccentric cousin complete our family portrait.

And for me, that's perfect.

What people think before they have children

Wednesday, 8 October 2014

I don't have children, but I think I have a good idea what it means to have children.

1. You experience joy and fulfilment and happiness you will never be able to express to someone who doesn't have children of his or her own.

2. You also experience anxiety and sadness and disappointment you'll never be able to express to people who don't have children of their own.

3. You think differently about yourself, your value, your role in society, and what you will leave behind of your existence.

I do wonder how many people think about the joy and fulfilment and happiness, and still decide not to have children. How many people think of the anxiety, the sadness, and the disappointment they face, and make a conscious decision to have children regardless?

The trifecta of adult life success

Wednesday, 25 March 2015

Here is the trifecta of adult life success, as I interpret the views of the community at large – that is, most adults in your immediate environment, and/or your friends and family, and/or most of the people on your so-called Facebook friend list:

1. At least two children – one could have been a lucky shot; a second proves it wasn't
2. More money than you need for basic survival – it doesn't matter if you inherited the money or if you won it with a scratch card
3. You do something interesting – can be your career, or anything else that is more or less a challenge

If these criteria are accepted, I know very few truly successful people. I almost always see myself as less successful than most of my contemporaries because we don't have children, and because I only make a little more money than I need for my survival. But I know quite a few people with two children, not much money, and they don't do anything interesting; also people with money, but they have only one child, and they also don't do anything that I will regard as moderately interesting.

Monday, 6 April 2015

To move this discussion one step away from mere campfire talk, it has to be mentioned that there are a few exceptions that may upset this formula.

There is the case of wealthy parents who do interesting work and who lead interesting lives, but one of their three children becomes a murderer, or a drug addict, or both.

There is the man or woman with money, who leads an interesting life, who has two or three children, but who still

falls victim to a midlife crisis and say things like, “I wanted to do so much more at this stage of my life.”

And then there is the father of two children, who earns a lot of money and who, at least in his own opinion does interesting work, whose daughter is friends with the daughter of the CEO of an international conglomerate, who often goes abroad for interesting projects and who owns a villa in the south of France. “Why can’t Dad make more money so that we can also spend summers in France?” is the kind of request that would cause the man to occasionally doubt whether he really does as well as he sometimes thinks he does.

After twenty years you wonder: How am I doing?

Sunday, 30 August 2015

In 1994 I was still running in the pack along with other people of my age with whom I shared a broad socio-economic background. In my head I was already somewhat apart, but to all concerned and in terms of what was visible to everyone, I was still doing the same things many of my peers were doing.

In 1995 – twenty years ago this year – things changed. Many of my contemporaries started that year with a journey of more or less forty years that would end with their retirement, if they were to be blessed with a long life. That was the year when I split from the pack. And with that I am not saying my path was better or more special, and I make no judgement on my contemporaries who started with their forty-year career path. I am merely saying I have been on a different path since 1995.

Twenty years have since passed. Like many of my peers I also wonder: How am I doing?

Out of every hundred of my contemporaries who started in 1995 with a career (or with the first of perhaps four or five different careers) that will end in retirement in about two decades' time, how many of them do as well as they thought they would? How many have actually pursued any of the dreams they wanted to pursue? How many of them have realised at least one or two of their dreams? How many have missed one chance after another? How many do much better than they ever thought they would?

It is reasonable to assume that everyone has made at least a few mistakes and displayed some poor judgement a number of times, and that at least a few people have seriously slipped up at least once. I think it is furthermore reasonable to assume that most people would like to make more money than is currently the case, and that a few may wish they could do more

interesting work. Statistically it is also inevitable that a small percentage of this group are doing exceptionally well – they are making more money than they ever thought they would; their children are more beautiful and more intelligent than they ever thought they could produce, and they do work they find more fulfilling and more interesting than when they started out two decades ago.

To get back to my question, I think I am doing okay – in some areas much better than I thought I would; in other areas I am doing worse than I hoped would be the case. I have had a few slip-ups, and there have been a few times where I completely overestimated my abilities (or perhaps I simply did not know myself well enough, or I didn't have a proper understanding of the challenge). I have so far led a pretty interesting life. I am learning more every day about things I have always been interested in. I am almost never bored. And I share my life with a strong-minded, kind-hearted woman and two black cats. I have no debt, and I have a little money in the bank.

On the other hand, 99% of my income currently comes from teaching English part-time in Taiwan, on a sometimes unpredictable schedule. And my income is only a fraction of what I need to take care of my elderly parents, so the responsibility mainly falls on the long-suffering shoulders of my older sister.

Twenty years after I started walking on a different path and at a different pace than many of my contemporaries I am not doing too badly. Truth be told though, a few people, myself included, are hoping I do a little better in the future.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 9 February 2016

Old geezer thinks about his life, and what he sees is a 25-year-old man. Then he looks in the mirror, and a 70-year-old man looks back at him.

“Who the hell are you, and what have you done to me?” the man asks in the direction of the mirror.

“Sorry, old mate,” replies his reflection. “Time is nobody’s friend.”

* * * * *

And so time marches on

Monday, 4 April 2016

By the time you're a young adult, eighteen to early twenties, the people who will become the next generation of young adults are seven to twelve years behind you – at that time children, or at most teenagers to whom you pay little attention.

By the time you are thirty, that next group of birthlings are ready to take over the spots you and your age group had recently vacated as “young adults”.

By the time you are 35, that group of people are themselves between 23 and 28, which means it's not uncommon for you to warm your hands at the same barbeque fire as at least the older members of the next generation. Friendships might be forged, and you may even get romantically involved with someone from this generation.

Time goes on. You hit forty. If you haven't worked it out or noticed it yet, it will hit you soon enough: Yet another generation has made their appearance; people who are between seven and twelve years younger than the generation that had followed on your peer group. These new members of adulthood are at this stage ranging from high school age to mid-twenties.

And you know: If the world belongs to people with the most energy and vitality and ambition and even naïve idealism, the world now belongs to this group of young adults.

You reach the ripe age of 45, and the oldest members of that whole *second* generation who had reached maturity after you are now 30 years old. Some of them are married. Some have children. Chances are that they work for you, but it is also possible that you work for one of them, that a member of this generation is giving *you* instructions on what to do and what not to do.

You are mostly a stranger to this “second” group of new adults, but you have a reasonable idea of what's important to

them. References to their tastes and preferences are commonplace on TV and in everyday conversations, and it is *their* musings and ramblings that are pushed to the top of literary websites.

Chances are slim that your social circles will ever overlap. You shuffle past each other in crowded pubs. If you find yourself in a situation where silence would be awkward, they might be reluctant to say too much because they might expect that you'll be as critical as their parents about their appearance and the choices they make. You may also not be too talkative because you wouldn't want to sound old, and heaven forbid you create the impression you're trying to be cool.

And so time marches on. The forties, remarked someone who had gone through the strange process years ago, mark the old age of your youth – your fifties being the youth of old age.

One thing about this fifth decade of your earthly existence is nothing new: If you're lucky enough to slow down every now and then in the rush to stay alive, you might just find yourself once again trying to sort out who and what you are and who you want to be, more or less based on who you were ten and twenty years ago, and considering who and what you hope to be in the future – provided you're still to be found in the land of the living in another two or three decades' time.

When were we programmed, and by whom?

Friday, 24 June 2016

Since I am awake enough in the morning to register what is happening on the clock face, I think of work. I think of work when I eat breakfast, when I shower, when I brush my teeth and when I get dressed. I think of work when I'm travelling to a place where I work. After working at a particular place, I go home. Then I eat something, and then I work. When I watch TV, I am aware that I'm not working. When I lie down to take a nap, I think about how long I'm not going to work. When I open Wikipedia in my browser, or Twitter, or Reddit or Facebook, I think about the fact that I'm taking a break from work. On Saturday evening and the whole of Sunday the big thing is that I try not to work. I work when I make money, and I work when I am busy with long-term, ambitious writing projects that are most likely never going to make any money.

What I do when I work may differ from what you do when you work, but most adults accept this story that life revolves around work without thinking about it too much.

Our simple, often illiterate ancestors of five or more centuries ago only worked for a few months of the year. The rest of the time they did what they had to do to survive, they rested, and occasionally they enjoyed a little something of a life that only lasted on average about thirty or forty years.

This begs the question: Since when did we – the working masses – allow ourselves to be programmed with this thing that we have to work at least fifty weeks of the year, at least five days a week, at least eight hours per day?

Everybody wants to reach a point

Wednesday, 18 January 2017

Some people arrange their lives according to systems they believe will increase the likelihood that they'll survive and at least half of the time feel good about themselves. Other people have goals they pursue. Regardless of whether you prefer systems or goals, or a combination of both, I think everyone aspires to what I can only describe as a *point*. Sometimes you are aware that you are striving for this point, sometimes not.

This point for many people is an ideal lifestyle – a specific way they would like to spend their days and nights on earth.

Some people's point is to have a family, to play the role of mother or father to children of their own.

Then there are people who want to reach a point of almost inexhaustible financial means – to know they can buy whatever they want and do whatever they want, the well will either never dry up or the money spent today will simply be replaced tomorrow.

My point is to have the ability to get lost in an activity – it may be a writing project, or a book, or research on a topic that interests me. I want to get lost in an activity without needing to remind myself that I'd have to go out later in the day to sell something (usually my ability to do some or other activity) or do something else that is supposed to make money.

Most people don't think about it on a daily basis that the real purpose they are pursuing is to survive that specific day and night. And if you survive, you do what you have to do to make your survival worthwhile. To have a point you are aspiring to is more than just a goal you hope to achieve. It is the inspiration that propels you forward; it helps to make your survival today worthwhile.

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