Rule 1: OVERTURE.

1 The yin/yang symbol is the second part of the more comprehensive five-part tajitu, a diagram representing both the original absolute unity and its division into the multiplicity of the observed world. This is discussed in more detail in Rule 2, below, as well as elsewhere in the book.

2 I use the term Being (with a capital “B”) in part because of my exposure to the ideas of the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger tried to distinguish between reality, as conceived objectively, and the totality of human experience (which is his “Being”). Being (with a capital “B”) is what each of us experiences, subjectively, personally and individually, as well as what we each experience jointly with others. As such, it includes emotions, drives, dreams, visions and revelations, as well as our private thoughts and perceptions. Being is also, finally, something that is brought into existence by action, so its nature is to an indeterminate degree a consequence of our decisions and choices —something shaped by our hypothetically free will. Construed in this manner, Being is (1) not something easily and directly reducible to the material and objective and (2) something that most definitely requires its own term, as Heidegger labored for decades to indicate.

RULE 2: TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING.

1 It is of great interest, in this regard, that the five-part taijitu (referred to in Chapter 1 and the source of the simpler yin/yang symbol) expresses the origin of the cosmos as, first, originating in the undifferentiated absolute, then dividing into yin and yang (chaos/order, feminine/masculine), and then into the five agents (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and then, simply put, “the ten thousand things.” The Star of David (chaos/order, feminine/masculine) gives rise in the same way to the four basic elements: fire, air, water and earth (out of which everything else is built). A similar hexagram is used by the Hindus. The downward triangle symbolizes Shakti, the feminine; the upward triangle, Shiva, the masculine. The two components are known as om and hrim in Sanskrit. Remarkable examples of conceptual parallelism.

2 Or, in another interpretation, He split the original androgynous individual into two parts, male and female. According to this line of thinking, Christ, the “second Adam,” is also the original Man, before the sexual subdivision. The

symbolic meaning of this should be clear to those who have followed the argument thus far.

RULE 3: MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO WANT THE BEST FOR YOU.

THE OLD HOMETOWN.

The town I grew up in had been scraped only fifty years earlier out of the endless flat Northern prairie. Fairview, Alberta, was part of the frontier, and had the cowboy bars to prove it. The Hudson's Bay Co. department store on Main Street still bought beaver, wolf and coyote furs directly from the local trappers. Three thousand people lived there, four hundred miles away from the nearest city. Cable TV, video games and internet did not exist. It was no easy matter to stay innocently amused in Fairview, particularly during the five months of winter, when long stretches of forty-below days and even colder nights were the norm.

The world is a different place when it's cold like that. The drunks in our town ended their sad lives early. They passed out in snowbanks at three in the morning and froze to death. You don't go outside casually when it's forty below. On first breath, the arid desert air constricts your lungs. Ice forms on your eyelashes and they stick together. Long hair, wet from the shower, freezes solid and then stands on end wraith-like of its own accord later in a warm house, when it thaws bone dry, charged with electricity. Children only put their tongues on steel playground equipment once. Smoke from house chimneys doesn't rise. Defeated by the cold, it drifts downwards, and collects like fog on snow-covered rooftops and yards. Cars must be plugged in at night, their engines warmed by block heaters, or oil will not flow through them in the morning, and they won't start. Sometimes they won't anyway. Then you turn the engine over pointlessly until the starter clatters and falls silent. Then you remove the frozen battery from the car, loosening bolts with stiffening fingers in the intense cold, and bring it into the house. It sits there, sweating for hours, until it warms enough to hold a decent charge. You are not going to see out of the back window of your car, either. It frosts over in November and stays that way until May. Scraping it off just dampens the upholstery. Then it's frozen, too. Late one night going to visit a friend I sat for two hours on the edge of the passenger seat in a 1970 Dodge Challenger, jammed up against the stick-shift, using a vodka-soaked rag to keep the inside of the front windshield clear in front of the driver because the car

the inside of the front windshield clear in front of the driver because the car heater had quit. Stopping wasn't an option. There was nowhere to stop. And it was hell on house cats. Felines in Fairview had short ears and tails because they had lost the tips of both to frostbite. They came to resemble Arctic foxes, which evolved those features to deal proactively with the intense cold. One day our cat got outside and no one noticed. We found him, later, fur frozen fast to the cold hard backdoor cement steps where he sat. We carefully separated cat from concrete, with no lasting damage—except to his pride. Fairview cats were also at great risk in the winter from cars, but not for the reasons you think. It wasn't automobiles sliding on icy roads and running them over. Only loser cats died that way. It was cars parked immediately after being driven that were dangerous. A frigid cat might think highly of climbing up under such a vehicle and sitting on its still-warm engine block. But what if the driver decided to use the car again, before the engine cooled down and cat departed? Let's just say that heat-seeking house-pets and rapidly rotating radiator fans do not coexist happily.

Because we were so far north, the bitterly cold winters were also very dark. By December, the sun didn't rise until 9:30 a.m. We trudged to school in the pitch black. It wasn't much lighter when we walked home, just before the early sunset. There wasn't much for young people to do in Fairview, even in the summer. But the winters were worse. Then your friends mattered. More than anything.

My Friend Chris and His Cousin.

I had a friend at that time. We'll call him Chris. He was a smart guy. He read a lot. He liked science fiction of the kind I was attracted to (Bradbury, Heinlein, Clarke). He was inventive. He was interested in electronic kits and gears and motors. He was a natural engineer. All this was overshadowed, however, by something that had gone wrong in his family. I don't know what it was. His sisters were smart and his father was soft-spoken and his mother was kind. The girls seemed OK. But Chris had been left unattended to in some important way. Despite his intelligence and curiosity he was angry, resentful and without hope.

All this manifested itself in material form in the shape of his 1972 blue Ford pickup truck. That notorious vehicle had at least one dent in every quarter panel of its damaged external body. Worse, it had an equivalent number of dents inside. Those were produced by the impact of the body parts of friends against the internal surfaces during the continual accidents that resulted in the outer dents. Chris's truck was the exoskeleton of a nihilist. It had the perfect bumper sticker: Be Alert—The World Needs More Lerts. The irony it produced in

combination with the dents elevated it nicely to theatre of the absurd. Very little of that was (so to speak) accidental.

Every time Chris crashed his truck, his father would fix it, and buy him something else. He had a motorbike and a van for selling ice cream. He did not care for his motorbike. He sold no ice cream. He often expressed dissatisfaction with his father and their relationship. But his dad was older and unwell, diagnosed with an illness only after many years. He didn't have the energy he should have. Maybe he couldn't pay enough attention to his son. Maybe that's all it took to fracture their relationship.

Chris had a cousin, Ed, who was about two years younger. I liked him, as much as you can like the younger cousin of a teenage friend. He was a tall, smart, charming, good-looking kid. He was witty, too. You would have predicted a good future for him, had you met him when he was twelve. But Ed drifted slowly downhill, into a dropout, semi-drifting mode of existence. He didn't get as angry as Chris, but he was just as confused. If you knew Ed's friends, you might say that it was peer pressure that set him on his downward path. But his peers weren't obviously any more lost or delinquent than he was, although they were generally somewhat less bright. It was also the case that Ed's—and Chris's—situation did not appear particularly improved by their discovery of marijuana. Marijuana isn't bad for everyone any more than alcohol is bad for everyone. Sometimes it even appears to improve people. But it didn't improve Ed. It didn't improve Chris, either.

To amuse ourselves in the long nights, Chris and I and Ed and the rest of the teenagers drove around and around in our 1970s cars and pickup trucks. We cruised down Main Street, along Railroad Avenue, up past the high school, around the north end of town, over to the west—or up Main Street, around the north end of town, over to the east—and so on, endlessly repeating the theme. If we weren't driving in town, we were driving in the countryside. A century earlier, surveyors had laid out a vast grid across the entire three-hundred-thousand-square-mile expanse of the great western prairie. Every two miles north, a plowed gravel road stretched forever, east to west. Every mile west, another travelled north and south. We never ran out of roads.

Teenage Wasteland.

If we weren't circling around town and countryside we were at a party. Some relatively young adult (or some relatively creepy older adult) would open his

house to friends. It would then become temporary home to all manner of party crashers, many of whom started out seriously undesirable or quickly become that way when drinking. A party might also happen accidentally, when some teenager's unwitting parents had left town. In that case, the occupants of the cars or trucks always cruising around would notice house lights on, but household car absent. This was not good. Things could get seriously out of hand.

I did not like teenage parties. I do not remember them nostalgically. They were dismal affairs. The lights were kept low. That kept self-consciousness to a minimum. The over-loud music made conversation impossible. There was little to talk about in any case. There were always a couple of the town psychopaths attending. Everybody drank and smoked too much. A dreary and oppressive sense of aimlessness hung over such occasions, and nothing ever happened (unless you count the time my too-quiet classmate drunkenly began to brandish his fully-loaded 12-gauge shotgun, or the time the girl I later married contemptuously insulted someone while he threatened her with a knife, or the time another friend climbed a large tree, swung out on a branch, and crashed flat onto his back, half dead right beside the campfire we had started at its base, followed precisely one minute later by his halfwit sidekick).

No one knew what the hell they were doing at those parties. Hoping for a cheerleader? Waiting for Godot? Although the former would have been immediately preferred (although cheerleading squads were scarce in our town), the latter was closer to the truth. It would be more romantic, I suppose, to suggest that we would have all jumped at the chance for something more productive, bored out of our skulls as we were. But it's not true. We were all too prematurely cynical and world-weary and leery of responsibility to stick to the debating clubs and Air Cadets and school sports that the adults around us tried to organize. Doing anything wasn't cool. I don't know what teenage life was like before the revolutionaries of the late sixties advised everyone young to tune in, turn on and drop out. Was it OK for a teenager to belong wholeheartedly to a club in 1955? Because it certainly wasn't twenty years later. Plenty of us turned on and dropped out. But not so many tuned in.

I wanted to be elsewhere. I wasn't the only one. Everyone who eventually left the Fairview I grew up in knew they were leaving by the age of twelve. I knew. My wife, who grew up with me on the street our families shared, knew. The friends I had who did and didn't leave also knew, regardless of which track they were on. There was an unspoken expectation in the families of those who were college-bound that such a thing was a matter of course. For those from less-

college-bound that such a thing was a matter of course. For those from less educated families, a future that included university was simply not part of the conceptual realm. It wasn't for lack of money, either. Tuition for advanced education was very low at that time, and jobs in Alberta were plentiful and high-paying. I earned more money in 1980 working at a plywood mill than I would again doing anything else for twenty years. No one missed out on university because of financial need in oil-rich Alberta in the 1970s.

Some Different Friends—and Some More of the Same.

In high school, after my first group of cronies had all dropped out, I made friends with a couple of newcomers. They came to Fairview as boarders. There was no school after ninth grade in their even more remote and aptly named hometown, Bear Canyon. They were an ambitious duo, comparatively speaking; straightforward and reliable, but also cool and very amusing. When I left town to attend Grande Prairie Regional College, ninety miles away, one of them became my roommate. The other went off elsewhere to pursue further education. Both were aiming upward. Their decisions to do so bolstered mine.

I was a happy clam when I arrived at college. I found another, expanded group of like-minded companions, whom my Bear Canyon comrade also joined. We were all captivated by literature and philosophy. We ran the Student Union. We made it profitable, for the first time in its history, hosting college dances. How can you lose money selling beer to college kids? We started a newspaper. We got to know our professors of political science and biology and English literature in the tiny seminars that characterized even our first year. The instructors were thankful for our enthusiasm and taught us well. We were building a better life.

I sloughed off a lot of my past. In a small town, everyone knows who you are. You drag your years behind you like a running dog with tin cans tied to its tail. You can't escape who you have been. Everything wasn't online then, and thank God for that, but it was stored equally indelibly in everyone's spoken and unspoken expectations and memory.

When you move, everything is up in the air, at least for a while. It's stressful, but in the chaos there are new possibilities. People, including you, can't hem you in with their old notions. You get shaken out of your ruts. You can make new, better ruts, with people aiming at better things. I thought this was just a natural development. I thought that every person who moved would have—and want—the same phoenix-like experience. But that wasn't always the case.

One time, when I was about fifteen, I went with Chris and another friend, Carl, to Edmonton, a city of six hundred thousand. Carl had never been to a city. This was not uncommon. Fairview to Edmonton was an eight-hundred-mile round trip. I had done it many times, sometimes with my parents, sometimes without. I liked the anonymity that the city provided. I liked the new beginnings. I liked the escape from the dismal, cramped adolescent culture of my home town. So, I convinced my two friends to make the journey. But they did not have the same experience. As soon as we arrived, Chris and Carl wanted to buy some pot. We headed for the parts of Edmonton that were exactly like the worst of Fairview. We found the same furtive street-vending marijuana providers. We spent the weekend drinking in the hotel room. Although we had travelled a long distance, we had gone nowhere at all.

I saw an even more egregious example of this a few years later. I had moved to Edmonton to finish my undergraduate degree. I took an apartment with my sister, who was studying to be a nurse. She was also an up-and-out-of-there person. (Not too many years later she would plant strawberries in Norway and run safaris through Africa and smuggle trucks across the Tuareg-menaced Sahara Desert, and babysit orphan gorillas in the Congo.) We had a nice place in a new high-rise, overlooking the broad valley of the North Saskatchewan River. We had a view of the city skyline in the background. I bought a beautiful new Yamaha upright piano, in a fit of enthusiasm. The place looked good.

I heard through the grapevine that Ed—Chris's younger cousin—had moved to the city. I thought that was a good thing. One day he called. I invited him over. I wanted to see how he was faring. I hoped he was achieving some of the potential I once saw in him. That is not what happened. Ed showed up, older, balder and stooped. He was a lot more not-doing-so-well young adult and a lot less youthful possibility. His eyes were the telltale red slits of the practised stoner. Ed had had taken some job—lawn-mowing and casual landscaping—which would have been fine for a part-time university student or for someone who could not do better but which was wretchedly low-end as a career for an intelligent person.

He was accompanied by a friend.

It was his friend I really remember. He was spaced. He was baked. He was stoned out of his gourd. His head and our nice, civilized apartment did not easily occupy the same universe. My sister was there. She knew Ed. She'd seen this sort of thing before. But I still wasn't happy that Ed had brought this character into our place. Ed sat down. His friend sat down, too, although it wasn't clear he

into our place. Ed sat down. His friend sat down, too, although it wasn't clear he noticed. It was tragicomedy. Stoned as he was, Ed still had the sense to be embarrassed. We sipped our beer. Ed's friend looked upwards. "My particles are scattered all over the ceiling," he managed. Truer words were never spoken.

I took Ed aside and told him politely that he had to leave. I said that he shouldn't have brought his useless bastard of a companion. He nodded. He understood. That made it even worse. His older cousin Chris wrote me a letter much later about such things. I included it in my first book, Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief, published in 1999: "I had friends," he said.62 "Before. Anyone with enough self-contempt that they could forgive me mine."

What was it that made Chris and Carl and Ed unable (or, worse, perhaps, unwilling) to move or to change their friendships and improve the circumstances of their lives? Was it inevitable—a consequence of their own limitations, nascent illnesses and traumas of the past? After all, people vary significantly, in ways that seem both structural and deterministic. People differ in intelligence, which is in large part the ability to learn and transform. People have very different personalities, as well. Some are active, and some passive. Others are anxious or calm. For every individual driven to achieve, there is another who is indolent. The degree to which these differences are immutably part and parcel of someone is greater than an optimist might presume or desire. And then there is illness, mental and physical, diagnosed or invisible, further limiting or shaping our lives.

Chris had a psychotic break in his thirties, after flirting with insanity for many years. Not long afterward, he committed suicide. Did his heavy marijuana use play a magnifying role, or was it understandable self-medication? Use of physician-prescribed drugs for pain has, after all, decreased in marijuana-legal states such as Colorado.63 Maybe the pot made things better for Chris, not worse. Maybe it eased his suffering, instead of exacerbating his instability. Was it the nihilistic philosophy he nurtured that paved the way to his eventual breakdown? Was that nihilism, in turn, a consequence of genuine ill health, or just an intellectual rationalization of his unwillingness to dive responsibly into life? Why did he—like his cousin, like my other friends—continually choose people who, and places that, were not good for him?

Sometimes, when people have a low opinion of their own worth—or, perhaps, when they refuse responsibility for their lives—they choose a new acquaintance, of precisely the type who proved troublesome in the past. Such people don't believe that they deserve any better—so they don't go looking for it. Or,

perhaps, they don't want the trouble of better. Freud called this a "repetition compulsion." He thought of it as an unconscious drive to repeat the horrors of the past—sometimes, perhaps, to formulate those horrors more precisely, sometimes to attempt more active mastery and sometimes, perhaps, because no alternatives beckon. People create their worlds with the tools they have directly at hand. Faulty tools produce faulty results. Repeated use of the same faulty tools produces the same faulty results. It is in this manner that those who fail to learn from the past doom themselves to repeat it. It's partly fate. It's partly inability. It's partly … unwillingness to learn? Refusal to learn? Motivated refusal to learn?

Rescuing the Damned.

People choose friends who aren't good for them for other reasons, too. Sometimes it's because they want to rescue someone. This is more typical of young people, although the impetus still exists among older folks who are too agreeable or have remained naive or who are willfully blind. Someone might object, "It is only right to see the best in people. The highest virtue is the desire to help." But not everyone who is failing is a victim, and not everyone at the bottom wishes to rise, although many do, and many manage it. Nonetheless, people will often accept or even amplify their own suffering, as well as that of others, if they can brandish it as evidence of the world's injustice. There is no shortage of oppressors among the downtrodden, even if, given their lowly positions, many of them are only tyrannical wannabes. It's the easiest path to choose, moment to moment, although it's nothing but hell in the long run.

Imagine someone not doing well. He needs help. He might even want it. But it is not easy to distinguish between someone truly wanting and needing help and someone who is merely exploiting a willing helper. The distinction is difficult even for the person who is wanting and needing and possibly exploiting. The person who tries and fails, and is forgiven, and then tries again and fails, and is forgiven, is also too often the person who wants everyone to believe in the authenticity of all that trying.

When it's not just naïveté, the attempt to rescue someone is often fuelled by vanity and narcissism. Something like this is detailed in the incomparable Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky's bitter classic, Notes from Underground, which begins with these famous lines: "I am a sick man … I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased." It is the confession of a miserable, arrogant sojourner in the underworld of chaos and despair. He

analyzes himself mercilessly, but only pays in this manner for a hundred sins, despite committing a thousand. Then, imagining himself redeemed, the underground man commits the worst transgression of the lot. He offers aid to a genuinely unfortunate person, Liza, a woman on the desperate nineteenth-century road to prostitution. He invites her for a visit, promising to set her life back on the proper course. While waiting for her to appear, his fantasies spin increasingly messianic:

One day passed, however, another and another; she did not come and I began to grow calmer. I felt particularly bold and cheerful after nine o'clock, I even sometimes began dreaming, and rather sweetly: I, for instance, became the salvation of Liza, simply through her coming to me and my talking to her…. I develop her, educate her. Finally, I notice that she loves me, loves me passionately. I pretend not to understand (I don't know, however, why I pretend, just for effect, perhaps). At last all confusion, transfigured, trembling and sobbing, she flings herself at my feet and says that I am her savior, and that she loves me better than anything in the world.

Nothing but the narcissism of the underground man is nourished by such fantasies. Liza herself is demolished by them. The salvation he offers to her demands far more in the way of commitment and maturity than the underground man is willing or able to offer. He simply does not have the character to see it through—something he quickly realizes, and equally quickly rationalizes. Liza eventually arrives at his shabby apartment, hoping desperately for a way out, staking everything she has on the visit. She tells the underground man that she wants to leave her current life. His response?

"Why have you come to me, tell me that, please?" I began, gasping for breath and regardless of logical connection in my words. I longed to have it all out at once, at one burst; I did not even trouble how to begin. "Why have you come? Answer, answer," I cried, hardly knowing what I was doing. "I'll tell you, my good girl, why you have come. You've come because I talked sentimental stuff to you then. So now you are soft as butter and longing for fine sentiments again. So you may as well know that I was laughing at you then. And I am laughing at you now. Why are you shuddering? Yes, I was laughing at you! I had been insulted just before, at dinner, by the fellows who came that evening before me. I came to you, meaning to thrash one of them, an officer; but I didn't succeed, I didn't find him; I had to avenge the insult on someone to get back my own again; you turned up, I vented my spleen on you and laughed at you. I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to

humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate, I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power…. That's what it was, and you imagined I had come there on purpose to save you. Yes? You imagined that? You imagined that?"

I knew that she would perhaps be muddled and not take it all in exactly, but I knew, too, that she would grasp the gist of it, very well indeed. And so, indeed, she did. She turned white as a handkerchief, tried to say something, and her lips worked painfully; but she sank on a chair as though she had been felled by an axe. And all the time afterwards she listened to me with her lips parted and her eyes wide open, shuddering with awful terror. The cynicism, the cynicism of my words overwhelmed her….

The inflated self-importance, carelessness and sheer malevolence of the underground man dashes Liza's last hopes. He understands this well. Worse: something in him was aiming at this all along. And he knows that too. But a villain who despairs of his villainy has not become a hero. A hero is something positive, not just the absence of evil.

But Christ himself, you might object, befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. How dare I cast aspersions on the motives of those who are trying to help? But Christ was the archetypal perfect man. And you're you. How do you know that your attempts to pull someone up won't instead bring them—or you—further down? Imagine the case of someone supervising an exceptional team of workers, all of them striving towards a collectively held goal; imagine them hard-working, brilliant, creative and unified. But the person supervising is also responsible for someone troubled, who is performing poorly, elsewhere. In a fit of inspiration, the well-meaning manager moves that problematic person into the midst of his stellar team, hoping to improve him by example. What happens?—and the psychological literature is clear on this point.64 Does the errant interloper immediately straighten up and fly right? No. Instead, the entire team degenerates. The newcomer remains cynical, arrogant and neurotic. He complains. He shirks. He misses important meetings. His low-quality work causes delays, and must be redone by others. He still gets paid, however, just like his teammates. The hard workers who surround him start to feel betrayed. "Why am I breaking myself into pieces striving to finish this project," each thinks, "when my new team member never breaks a sweat?" The same thing happens when well-meaning counsellors place a delinquent teen among comparatively civilized peers. The delinquency spreads, not the stability.65 Down is a lot easier than up.

Maybe you are saving someone because you're a strong, generous, well-put-together person who wants to do the right thing. But it's also possible—and, perhaps, more likely—that you just want to draw attention to your inexhaustible reserves of compassion and good-will. Or maybe you're saving someone because you want to convince yourself that the strength of your character is more than just a side effect of your luck and birthplace. Or maybe it's because it's easier to look virtuous when standing alongside someone utterly irresponsible.

Assume first that you are doing the easiest thing, and not the most difficult.

Your raging alcoholism makes my binge drinking appear trivial. My long serious talks with you about your badly failing marriage convince both of us that you are doing everything possible and that I am helping you to my utmost. It looks like effort. It looks like progress. But real improvement would require far more from both of you. Are you so sure the person crying out to be saved has not decided a thousand times to accept his lot of pointless and worsening suffering, simply because it is easier than shouldering any true responsibility? Are you enabling a delusion? Is it possible that your contempt would be more salutary than your pity?

Or maybe you have no plan, genuine or otherwise, to rescue anybody. You're associating with people who are bad for you not because it's better for anyone, but because it's easier. You know it. Your friends know it. You're all bound by an implicit contract—one aimed at nihilism, and failure, and suffering of the stupidest sort. You've all decided to sacrifice the future to the present. You don't talk about it. You don't all get together and say, "Let's take the easier path. Let's indulge in whatever the moment might bring. And let's agree, further, not to call each other on it. That way, we can more easily forget what we are doing." You don't mention any of that. But you all know what's really going on.

Before you help someone, you should find out why that person is in trouble. You shouldn't merely assume that he or she is a noble victim of unjust circumstances and exploitation. It's the most unlikely explanation, not the most probable. In my experience—clinical and otherwise—it's just never been that simple. Besides, if you buy the story that everything terrible just happened on its own, with no personal responsibility on the part of the victim, you deny that person all agency in the past (and, by implication, in the present and future, as well). In this manner, you strip him or her of all power.

It is far more likely that a given individual has just decided to reject the path upward, because of its difficulty. Perhaps that should even be your default assumption, when faced with such a situation. That's too harsh, you think. You might be right. Maybe that's a step too far. But consider this: failure is easy to understand. No explanation for its existence is required. In the same manner, fear, hatred, addiction, promiscuity, betrayal and deception require no explanation. It's not the existence of vice, or the indulgence in it, that requires explanation. Vice is easy. Failure is easy, too. It's easier not to shoulder a burden. It's easier not to think, and not to do, and not to care. It's easier to put off until tomorrow what needs to be done today, and drown the upcoming months and years in today's cheap pleasures. As the infamous father of the Simpson clan puts it, immediately prior to downing a jar of mayonnaise and vodka, "That's a problem for Future Homer. Man, I don't envy that guy!"66.

How do I know that your suffering is not the demand of martyrdom for my resources, so that you can oh-so-momentarily stave off the inevitable? Maybe you have even moved beyond caring about the impending collapse, but don't yet want to admit it. Maybe my help won't rectify anything—can't rectify anything—but it does keep that too-terrible, too-personal realization temporarily at bay. Maybe your misery is a demand placed on me so that I fail too, so that the gap you so painfully feel between us can be reduced, while you degenerate and sink. How do I know that you would refuse to play such a game? How do I know that I am not myself merely pretending to be responsible, while pointlessly "helping" you, so that I don't have to do something truly difficult—and genuinely possible?.

Maybe your misery is the weapon you brandish in your hatred for those who rose upward while you waited and sank. Maybe your misery is your attempt to prove the world's injustice, instead of the evidence of your own sin, your own missing of the mark, your conscious refusal to strive and to live. Maybe your willingness to suffer in failure is inexhaustible, given what you use that suffering to prove. Maybe it's your revenge on Being. How exactly should I befriend you when you're in such a place? How exactly could I?

Success: that's the mystery. Virtue: that's what's inexplicable. To fail, you merely have to cultivate a few bad habits. You just have to bide your time. And once someone has spent enough time cultivating bad habits and biding their time, they are much diminished. Much of what they could have been has dissipated, and much of the less that they have become is now real. Things fall apart, of their own accord, but the sins of men speed their degeneration. And

apart, of their own accord, but the sins of men speed their degeneration. And then comes the flood.

I am not saying that there is no hope of redemption. But it is much harder to extract someone from a chasm than to lift him from a ditch. And some chasms are very deep. And there's not much left of the body at the bottom.

Maybe I should at least wait, to help you, until it's clear that you want to be helped. Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, believed it was impossible to start a therapeutic relationship if the person seeking help did not want to improve.67 Rogers believed it was impossible to convince someone to change for the better. The desire to improve was, instead, the precondition for progress. I've had court-mandated psychotherapy clients. They did not want my help. They were forced to seek it. It did not work. It was a travesty.

If I stay in an unhealthy relationship with you, perhaps it's because I'm too weak-willed and indecisive to leave, but I don't want to know it. Thus, I continue helping you, and console myself with my pointless martyrdom. Maybe I can then conclude, about myself, "Someone that self-sacrificing, that willing to help someone—that has to be a good person." Not so. It might be just a person trying to look good pretending to solve what appears to be a difficult problem instead of actually being good and addressing something real.

Maybe instead of continuing our friendship I should just go off somewhere, get my act together, and lead by example.

And none of this is a justification for abandoning those in real need to pursue your narrow, blind ambition, in case it has to be said.

A Reciprocal Arrangement.

Here's something to consider: If you have a friend whose friendship you wouldn't recommend to your sister, or your father, or your son, why would you have such a friend for yourself? You might say: out of loyalty. Well, loyalty is not identical to stupidity. Loyalty must be negotiated, fairly and honestly. Friendship is a reciprocal arrangement. You are not morally obliged to support someone who is making the world a worse place. Quite the opposite. You should choose people who want things to be better, not worse. It's a good thing, not a selfish thing, to choose people who are good for you. It's appropriate and praiseworthy to associate with people whose lives would be improved if they saw your life improve.

saw your life improve.

If you surround yourself with people who support your upward aim, they will not tolerate your cynicism and destructiveness. They will instead encourage you when you do good for yourself and others and punish you carefully when you do not. This will help bolster your resolve to do what you should do, in the most appropriate and careful manner. People who are not aiming up will do the opposite. They will offer a former smoker a cigarette and a former alcoholic a beer. They will become jealous when you succeed, or do something pristine. They will withdraw their presence or support, or actively punish you for it. They will over-ride your accomplishment with a past action, real or imaginary, of their own. Maybe they are trying to test you, to see if your resolve is real, to see if you are genuine. But mostly they are dragging you down because your new improvements cast their faults in an even dimmer light.

It is for this reason that every good example is a fateful challenge, and every hero, a judge. Michelangelo's great perfect marble David cries out to its observer: "You could be more than you are." When you dare aspire upward, you reveal the inadequacy of the present and the promise of the future. Then you disturb others, in the depths of their souls, where they understand that their cynicism and immobility are unjustifiable. You play Abel to their Cain. You remind them that they ceased caring not because of life's horrors, which are undeniable, but because they do not want to lift the world up on to their shoulders, where it belongs.

Don't think that it is easier to surround yourself with good healthy people than with bad unhealthy people. It's not. A good, healthy person is an ideal. It requires strength and daring to stand up near such a person. Have some humility. Have some courage. Use your judgment, and protect yourself from too-uncritical compassion and pity.

Make friends with people who want the best for you.

RULE 4: COMPARE YOURSELF TO WHO YOU WERE YESTERDAY, NOT TO WHO SOMEONE ELSE IS TODAY.

THE INTERNAL CRITIC.

It was easier for people to be good at something when more of us lived in small, rural communities. Someone could be homecoming queen. Someone else could be spelling-bee champ, math whiz or basketball star. There were only one or two

be spelling-bee champ, math whiz or basketball star. There were only one or two mechanics and a couple of teachers. In each of their domains, these local heroes had the opportunity to enjoy the serotonin-fuelled confidence of the victor. It may be for that reason that people who were born in small towns are statistically overrepresented among the eminent.68 If you're one in a million now, but originated in modern New York, there's twenty of you—and most of us now live in cities. What's more, we have become digitally connected to the entire seven billion. Our hierarchies of accomplishment are now dizzyingly vertical.

No matter how good you are at something, or how you rank your accomplishments, there is someone out there who makes you look incompetent. You're a decent guitar player, but you're not Jimmy Page or Jack White. You're almost certainly not even going to rock your local pub. You're a good cook, but there are many great chefs. Your mother's recipe for fish heads and rice, no matter how celebrated in her village of origin, doesn't cut it in these days of grapefruit foam and Scotch/tobacco ice-cream. Some Mafia don has a tackier yacht. Some obsessive CEO has a more complicated self-winding watch, kept in his more valuable mechanical hardwood-and-steel automatic self-winding watch case. Even the most stunning Hollywood actress eventually transforms into the Evil Queen, on eternal, paranoid watch for the new Snow White. And you? Your career is boring and pointless, your housekeeping skills are second-rate, your taste is appalling, you're fatter than your friends, and everyone dreads your parties. Who cares if you are prime minister of Canada when someone else is the president of the United States?

Inside us dwells a critical internal voice and spirit that knows all this. It's predisposed to make its noisy case. It condemns our mediocre efforts. It can be very difficult to quell. Worse, critics of its sort are necessary. There is no shortage of tasteless artists, tuneless musicians, poisonous cooks, bureaucratically-personality-disordered middle managers, hack novelists and tedious, ideology-ridden professors. Things and people differ importantly in their qualities. Awful music torments listeners everywhere. Poorly designed buildings crumble in earthquakes. Substandard automobiles kill their drivers when they crash. Failure is the price we pay for standards and, because mediocrity has consequences both real and harsh, standards are necessary.

We are not equal in ability or outcome, and never will be. A very small number of people produce very much of everything. The winners don't take all, but they take most, and the bottom is not a good place to be. People are unhappy at the bottom. They get sick there, and remain unknown and unloved. They waste their

lives there. They die there. In consequence, the self-denigrating voice in the minds of people weaves a devastating tale. Life is a zero-sum game. Worthlessness is the default condition. What but willful blindness could possibly shelter people from such withering criticism? It is for such reasons that a whole generation of social psychologists recommended “positive illusions” as the only reliable route to mental health.69 Their credo? Let a lie be your umbrella. A more dismal, wretched, pessimistic philosophy can hardly be imagined: things are so terrible that only delusion can save you.

Here is an alternative approach (and one that requires no illusions). If the cards are always stacked against you, perhaps the game you are playing is somehow rigged (perhaps by you, unbeknownst to yourself). If the internal voice makes you doubt the value of your endeavours—or your life, or life itself—perhaps you should stop listening. If the critical voice within says the same denigrating things about everyone, no matter how successful, how reliable can it be? Maybe its comments are chatter, not wisdom. There will always be people better than you —that’s a cliché of nihilism, like the phrase, In a million years, who’s going to know the difference? The proper response to that statement is not, Well, then, everything is meaningless. It’s, Any idiot can choose a frame of time within which nothing matters. Talking yourself into irrelevance is not a profound critique of Being. It’s a cheap trick of the rational mind.

Many Good Games.

Standards of better or worse are not illusory or unnecessary. If you hadn’t decided that what you are doing right now was better than the alternatives, you wouldn’t be doing it. The idea of a value-free choice is a contradiction in terms. Value judgments are a precondition for action. Furthermore, every activity, once chosen, comes with its own internal standards of accomplishment. If something can be done at all, it can be done better or worse. To do anything at all is therefore to play a game with a defined and valued end, which can always be reached more or less efficiently and elegantly. Every game comes with its chance of success or failure. Differentials in quality are omnipresent. Furthermore, if there was no better and worse, nothing would be worth doing. There would be no value and, therefore, no meaning. Why make an effort if it doesn’t improve anything? Meaning itself requires the difference between better and worse. How, then, can the voice of critical self-consciousness be stilled? Where are the flaws in the apparently impeccable logic of its message?

We might start by considering the all-too-black-and-white words themselves:

“success” or “failure.” You are either a success, a comprehensive, singular, overall good thing, or its opposite, a failure, a comprehensive, singular, irredeemably bad thing. The words imply no alternative and no middle ground. However, in a world as complex as ours, such generalizations (really, such failure to differentiate) are a sign of naive, unsophisticated or even malevolent analysis. There are vital degrees and gradations of value obliterated by this binary system, and the consequences are not good.

To begin with, there is not just one game at which to succeed or fail. There are many games and, more specifically, many good games—games that match your talents, involve you productively with other people, and sustain and even improve themselves across time. Lawyer is a good game. So is plumber, physician, carpenter, or schoolteacher. The world allows for many ways of Being. If you don’t succeed at one, you can try another. You can pick something better matched to your unique mix of strengths, weaknesses and situation. Furthermore, if changing games does not work, you can invent a new one. I recently watched a talent show featuring a mime who taped his mouth shut and did something ridiculous with oven mitts. That was unexpected. That was original. It seemed to be working for him.

It’s also unlikely that you’re playing only one game. You have a career and friends and family members and personal projects and artistic endeavors and athletic pursuits. You might consider judging your success across all the games you play. Imagine that you are very good at some, middling at others, and terrible at the remainder. Perhaps that’s how it should be. You might object: I should be winning at everything! But winning at everything might only mean that you’re not doing anything new or difficult. You might be winning but you’re not growing, and growing might be the most important form of winning. Should victory in the present always take precedence over trajectory across time?

Finally, you might come to realize that the specifics of the many games you are playing are so unique to you, so individual, that comparison to others is simply inappropriate. Perhaps you are overvaluing what you don’t have and undervaluing what you do. There’s some real utility in gratitude. It’s also good protection against the dangers of victimhood and resentment. Your colleague outperforms you at work. His wife, however, is having an affair, while your marriage is stable and happy. Who has it better? The celebrity you admire is a chronic drunk driver and bigot. Is his life truly preferable to yours?

When the internal critic puts you down using such comparisons, here's how it operates: First, it selects a single, arbitrary domain of comparison (fame, maybe, or power). Then it acts as if that domain is the only one that is relevant. Then it contrasts you unfavourably with someone truly stellar, within that domain. It can take that final step even further, using the unbridgeable gap between you and its target of comparison as evidence for the fundamental injustice of life. That way your motivation to do anything at all can be most effectively undermined. Those who accept such an approach to self-evaluation certainly can't be accused of making things too easy for themselves. But it's just as big a problem to make things too difficult.

When we are very young we are neither individual nor informed. We have not had the time nor gained the wisdom to develop our own standards. In consequence, we must compare ourselves to others, because standards are necessary. Without them, there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. As we mature we become, by contrast, increasingly individual and unique. The conditions of our lives become more and more personal and less and less comparable with those of others. Symbolically speaking, this means we must leave the house ruled by our father, and confront the chaos of our individual Being. We must take note of our disarray, without completely abandoning that father in the process. We must then rediscover the values of our culture—veiled from us by our ignorance, hidden in the dusty treasure-trove of the past—rescue them, and integrate them into our own lives. This is what gives existence its full and necessary meaning.

Who are you? You think you know, but maybe you don't. You are, for example, neither your own master, nor your own slave. You cannot easily tell yourself what to do and compel your own obedience (any more than you can easily tell your husband, wife, son or daughter what to do, and compel theirs). You are interested in some things and not in others. You can shape that interest, but there are limits. Some activities will always engage you, and others simply will not.

You have a nature. You can play the tyrant to it, but you will certainly rebel. How hard can you force yourself to work and sustain your desire to work? How much can you sacrifice to your partner before generosity turns to resentment? What is it that you actually love? What is it that you genuinely want? Before you can articulate your own standards of value, you must see yourself as a stranger—and then you must get to know yourself. What do you find valuable or pleasurable? How much leisure, enjoyment, and reward do you require, so that you feel like more than a beast of burden? How must you treat yourself, so you

you feel like more than a beast of burden? How must you treat yourself, so you won't kick over the traces and smash up your corral? You could force yourself through your daily grind and kick your dog in frustration when you come home. You could watch the precious days tick by. Or you could learn how to entice yourself into sustainable, productive activity. Do you ask yourself what you want? Do you negotiate fairly with yourself? Or are you a tyrant, with yourself as slave?

When do you dislike your parents, your spouse, or your children, and why? What might be done about that? What do you need and want from your friends and your business partners? This is not a mere matter of what you should want. I'm not talking about what other people require from you, or your duties to them. I'm talking about determining the nature of your moral obligation, to yourself. Should might enter into it, because you are nested within a network of social obligations. Should is your responsibility, and you should live up to it. But this does not mean you must take the role of lap-dog, obedient and harmless. That's how a dictator wants his slaves.

Dare, instead, to be dangerous. Dare to be truthful. Dare to articulate yourself, and express (or at least become aware of) what would really justify your life. If you allowed your dark and unspoken desires for your partner, for example, to manifest themselves—if you were even willing to consider them—you might discover that they were not so dark, given the light of day. You might discover, instead, that you were just afraid and, so, pretending to be moral. You might find that getting what you actually desire would stop you from being tempted and straying. Are you so sure that your partner would be unhappy if more of you rose to the surface? The femme fatale and the anti-hero are sexually attractive for a reason….

How do you need to be spoken to? What do you need to take from people? What are you putting up with, or pretending to like, from duty or obligation? Consult your resentment. It's a revelatory emotion, for all its pathology. It's part of an evil triad: arrogance, deceit, and resentment. Nothing causes more harm than this underworld Trinity. But resentment always means one of two things. Either the resentful person is immature, in which case he or she should shut up, quit whining, and get on with it, or there is tyranny afoot—in which case the person subjugated has a moral obligation to speak up. Why? Because the consequence of remaining silent is worse. Of course, it's easier in the moment to stay silent and avoid conflict. But in the long term, that's deadly. When you have something to say, silence is a lie—and tyranny feeds on lies. When should you

push back against oppression, despite the danger? When you start nursing secret fantasies of revenge; when your life is being poisoned and your imagination fills with the wish to devour and destroy.

I had a client decades ago who suffered from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. He had to line up his pyjamas just right before he could go to sleep at night. Then he had to fluff his pillow. Then he had to adjust the bedsheets. Over and over and over and over. I said, “Maybe that part of you, that insanely persistent part, wants something, inarticulate though it may be. Let it have its say. What could it be?” He said, “Control.” I said, “Close your eyes and let it tell you what it wants. Don’t let fear stop you. You don’t have to act it out, just because you’re thinking it.” He said, “It wants me to take my stepfather by the collar, put him up against the door, and shake him like a rat.” Maybe it was time to shake someone like a rat, although I suggested something a bit less primal. But God only knows what battles must be fought, forthrightly, voluntarily, on the road to peace. What do you do to avoid conflict, necessary though it may be? What are you inclined to lie about, assuming that the truth might be intolerable? What do you fake?

The infant is dependent on his parents for almost everything he needs. The child —the successful child—can leave his parents, at least temporarily, and make friends. He gives up a little of himself to do that, but gains much in return. The successful adolescent must take that process to its logical conclusion. He has to leave his parents and become like everyone else. He has to integrate with the group so he can transcend his childhood dependency. Once integrated, the successful adult then must learn how to be just the right amount different from everyone else.

Be cautious when you’re comparing yourself to others. You’re a singular being, once you’re an adult. You have your own particular, specific problems—financial, intimate, psychological, and otherwise. Those are embedded in the unique broader context of your existence. Your career or job works for you in a personal manner, or it does not, and it does so in a unique interplay with the other specifics of your life. You must decide how much of your time to spend on this, and how much on that. You must decide what to let go, and what to pursue.

The Point of Our Eyes (or, Take Stock).

Our eyes are always pointing at things we are interested in approaching, or investigating, or looking for, or having. We must see, but to see, we must aim, so

we are always aiming. Our minds are built on the hunting-and-gathering platforms of our bodies. To hunt is to specify a target, track it, and throw at it. To gather is to specify and to grasp. We fling stones, and spears, and boomerangs. We toss balls through hoops, and hit pucks into nets, and curl carved granite rocks down the ice onto horizontal bull's-eyes. We launch projectiles at targets with bows, guns, rifles and rockets. We hurl insults, launch plans, and pitch ideas. We succeed when we score a goal or hit a target. We fail, or sin, when we do not (as the word sin means to miss the mark70). We cannot navigate, without something to aim at and, while we are in this world, we must always navigate.71

We are always and simultaneously at point "a" (which is less desirable than it could be), moving towards point "b" (which we deem better, in accordance with our explicit and implicit values). We always encounter the world in a state of insufficiency and seek its correction. We can imagine new ways that things could be set right, and improved, even if we have everything we thought we needed. Even when satisfied, temporarily, we remain curious. We live within a framework that defines the present as eternally lacking and the future as eternally better. If we did not see things this way, we would not act at all. We wouldn't even be able to see, because to see we must focus, and to focus we must pick one thing above all else on which to focus.

But we can see. We can even see things that aren't there. We can envision new ways that things could be better. We can construct new, hypothetical worlds, where problems we weren't even aware of can now show themselves and be addressed. The advantages of this are obvious: we can change the world so that the intolerable state of the present can be rectified in the future. The disadvantage to all this foresight and creativity is chronic unease and discomfort. Because we always contrast what is with what could be, we have to aim at what could be. But we can aim too high. Or too low. Or too chaotically. So we fail and live in disappointment, even when we appear to others to be living well. How can we benefit from our imaginativeness, our ability to improve the future, without continually denigrating our current, insufficiently successful and worthless lives?

The first step, perhaps, is to take stock. Who are you? When you buy a house and prepare to live in it, you hire an inspector to list all its faults—as it is, in reality, now, not as you wish it could be. You'll even pay him for the bad news. You need to know. You need to discover the home's hidden flaws. You need to

know whether they are cosmetic imperfections or structural inadequacies. You need to know because you can't fix something if you don't know it's broken—and you're broken. You need an inspector. The internal critic—it could play that role, if you could get it on track; if you and it could cooperate. It could help you take stock. But you must walk through your psychological house with it and listen judiciously to what it says. Maybe you're a handy-man's dream, a real fixer-upper. How can you start your renovations without being demoralized, even crushed, by your internal critic's lengthy and painful report of your inadequacies?

Here's a hint. The future is like the past. But there's a crucial difference. The past is fixed, but the future—it could be better. It could be better, some precise amount—the amount that can be achieved, perhaps, in a day, with some minimal engagement. The present is eternally flawed. But where you start might not be as important as the direction you are heading. Perhaps happiness is always to be found in the journey uphill, and not in the fleeting sense of satisfaction awaiting at the next peak. Much of happiness is hope, no matter how deep the underworld in which that hope was conceived.

Called upon properly, the internal critic will suggest something to set in order, which you could set in order, which you would set in order—voluntarily, without resentment, even with pleasure. Ask yourself: is there one thing that exists in disarray in your life or your situation that you could, and would, set straight? Could you, and would you, fix that one thing that announces itself humbly in need of repair? Could you do it now? Imagine that you are someone with whom you must negotiate. Imagine further that you are lazy, touchy, resentful and hard to get along with. With that attitude, it's not going to be easy to get you moving. You might have to use a little charm and playfulness. "Excuse me," you might say to yourself, without irony or sarcasm. "I'm trying to reduce some of the unnecessary suffering around here. I could use some help." Keep the derision at bay. "I'm wondering if there is anything that you would be willing to do? I'd be very grateful for your service." Ask honestly and with humility. That's no simple matter.

You might have to negotiate further, depending on your state of mind. Maybe you don't trust yourself. You think that you'll ask yourself for one thing and, having delivered, immediately demand more. And you'll be punitive and hurtful about it. And you'll denigrate what was already offered. Who wants to work for a tyrant like that? Not you. That's why you don't do what you want yourself to do. You're a bad employee—but a worse boss. Maybe you need to say to

yourself, “OK. I know we haven’t gotten along very well in the past. I’m sorry about that. I’m trying to improve. I’ll probably make some more mistakes along the way, but I’ll try to listen if you object. I’ll try to learn. I noticed, just now, today, that you weren’t really jumping at the opportunity to help when I asked. Is there something I could offer in return for your cooperation? Maybe if you did the dishes, we could go for coffee. You like espresso. How about an espresso—maybe a double shot? Or is there something else you want?” Then you could listen. Maybe you’ll hear a voice inside (maybe it’s even the voice of a long-lost child). Maybe it will reply, “Really? You really want to do something nice for me? You’ll really do it? It’s not a trick?”

This is where you must be careful.

That little voice—that’s the voice of someone once burnt and twice shy. So, you could say, very carefully, “Really. I might not do it very well, and I might not be great company, but I will do something nice for you. I promise.” A little careful kindness goes a long way, and judicious reward is a powerful motivator. Then you could take that small bit of yourself by the hand and do the damn dishes. And then you better not go clean the bathroom and forget about the coffee or the movie or the beer or it will be even harder to call those forgotten parts of yourself forth from the nooks and crannies of the underworld.

You might ask yourself, “What could I say to someone else—my friend, my brother, my boss, my assistant—that would set things a bit more right between us tomorrow? What bit of chaos might I eradicate at home, on my desk, in my kitchen, tonight, so that the stage could be set for a better play? What snakes might I banish from my closet—and my mind?” Five hundred small decisions, five hundred tiny actions, compose your day, today, and every day. Could you aim one or two of these at a better result? Better, in your own private opinion, by your own individual standards? Could you compare your specific personal tomorrow with your specific personal yesterday? Could you use your own judgment, and ask yourself what that better tomorrow might be?

Aim small. You don’t want to shoulder too much to begin with, given your limited talents, tendency to deceive, burden of resentment, and ability to shirk responsibility. Thus, you set the following goal: by the end of the day, I want things in my life to be a tiny bit better than they were this morning. Then you ask yourself, “What could I do, that I would do, that would accomplish that, and what small thing would I like as a reward?” Then you do what you have decided to do, even if you do it badly. Then you give yourself that damn coffee, in

to do, even if you do it badly. Then you give yourself that damn coffee, in triumph. Maybe you feel a bit stupid about it, but you do it anyway. And you do the same thing tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. And, with each day, your baseline of comparison gets a little higher, and that's magic. That's compound interest. Do that for three years, and your life will be entirely different. Now you're aiming for something higher. Now you're wishing on a star. Now the beam is disappearing from your eye, and you're learning to see. And what you aim at determines what you see. That's worth repeating. What you aim at determines what you see.

What You Want and What You See

The dependency of sight on aim (and, therefore, on value—because you aim at what you value) was demonstrated unforgettably by the cognitive psychologist Daniel Simons more than fifteen years ago.72 Simons was investigating something called "sustained inattentional blindness." He would sit his research subjects in front of a video monitor and show them, for example, a field of wheat. Then he would transform the photo slowly, secretly, while they watched. He would slowly fade in a road cutting through the wheat. He didn't insert some little easy-to-miss footpath, either. It was a major trail, occupying a good third of the image. Remarkably, the observers would frequently fail to take notice.

The demonstration that made Dr. Simons famous was of the same kind, but more dramatic—even unbelievable. First, he produced a video of two teams of three people.73 One team was wearing white shirts, the other, black. (The two teams were not off in the distance, either, or in any way difficult to see. The six of them filled much of the video screen, and their facial features were close enough to see clearly.) Each team had its own ball, which they bounced or threw to their other team members, as they moved and feinted in the small space in front of the elevators where the game was filmed. Once Dan had his video, he showed it to his study participants. He asked each of them to count the number of times the white shirts threw the ball back and forth to one another. After a few minutes, his subjects were asked to report the number of passes. Most answered "15." That was the correct answer. Most felt pretty good about that. Ha! They passed the test! But then Dr. Simons asked, "Did you see the gorilla?"

Was this a joke? What gorilla?

So, he said, "Watch the video again. But this time, don't count." Sure enough, a minute or so in, a man dressed in a gorilla suit waltzes right into the middle of

the game for a few long seconds, stops, and then beats his chest in the manner of stereotyped gorillas everywhere. Right in the middle of the screen. Large as life. Painfully and irrefutably evident. But one out of every two of his research subjects missed it, the first time they saw the video. It gets worse. Dr. Simons did another study. This time, he showed his subjects a video of someone being served at a counter. The server dips behind the counter to retrieve something, and pops back up. So what? Most of his participants don't detect anything amiss. But it was a different person who stood up in the original server's place! "No way," you think. "I'd notice." But it's "yes way." There's a high probability you wouldn't detect the change, even if the gender or race of the person is switched at the same time. You're blind too.

This is partly because vision is expensive—psychophysiologically expensive; neurologically expensive. Very little of your retina is high-resolution fovea—the very central, high-resolution part of the eye, used to do such things as identify faces. Each of the scarce foveal cells needs 10,000 cells in the visual cortex merely to manage the first part of the multi-stage processing of seeing.74 Then each of those 10,000 requires 10,000 more just to get to stage two. If all your retina was fovea you would require the skull of a B-movie alien to house your brain. In consequence, we triage, when we see. Most of our vision is peripheral, and low resolution. We save the fovea for things of importance. We point our high-resolution capacities at the few specific things we are aiming at. And we let everything else—which is almost everything—fade, unnoticed, into the background.

If something you're not attending to pops its ugly head up in a manner that directly interferes with your narrowly focused current activity, you will see it. Otherwise, it's just not there. The ball on which Simons's research subjects were focused was never obscured by the gorilla or by any of the six players. Because of that—because the gorilla did not interfere with the ongoing, narrowly defined task—it was indistinguishable from everything else the participants didn't see, when they were looking at that ball. The big ape could be safely ignored. That's how you deal with the overwhelming complexity of the world: you ignore it, while you concentrate minutely on your private concerns. You see things that facilitate your movement forward, toward your desired goals. You detect obstacles, when they pop up in your path. You're blind to everything else (and there's a lot of everything else—so you're very blind). And it has to be that way, because there is much more of the world than there is of you. You must shepherd your limited resources carefully. Seeing is very difficult, so you must choose what to see, and let the rest go.

What to see, and let the rest go.

There's a profound idea in the ancient Vedic texts (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, and part of the bedrock of Indian culture): the world, as perceived, is maya—appearance or illusion. This means, in part, that people are blinded by their desires (as well as merely incapable of seeing things as they truly are). This is true, in a sense that transcends the metaphorical. Your eyes are tools. They are there to help you get what you want. The price you pay for that utility, that specific, focused direction, is blindness to everything else. This doesn't matter so much when things are going well, and we are getting what we want (although it can be a problem, even then, because getting what we currently want can make blind us to higher callings). But all that ignored world presents a truly terrible problem when we're in crisis, and nothing whatsoever is turning out the way we want it to. Then, there can be far too much to deal with. Happily, however, that problem contains within it the seeds of its own solution. Since you've ignored so much, there is plenty of possibility left where you have not yet looked.

Imagine that you're unhappy. You're not getting what you need. Perversely, this may be because of what you want. You are blind, because of what you desire. Perhaps what you really need is right in front of your eyes, but you cannot see it because of what you are currently aiming for. And that brings us to something else: the price that must be paid before you, or anyone, can get what they want (or, better yet, what they need). Think about it this way. You look at the world in your particular, idiosyncratic manner. You use a set of tools to screen most things out and let some things in. You have spent a lot of time building those tools. They've become habitual. They're not mere abstract thoughts. They're built right into you. They orient you in the world. They're your deepest and often implicit and unconscious values. They've become part of your biological structure. They're alive. And they don't want to disappear, or transform, or die. But sometimes their time has come, and new things need to be born. For this reason (although not only for this reason) it is necessary to let things go during the journey uphill. If things are not going well for you—well, that might be because, as the most cynical of aphorisms has it, life sucks, and then you die. Before your crisis impels you to that hideous conclusion, however, you might consider the following: life doesn't have the problem. You do. At least that realization leaves you with some options. If your life is not going well, perhaps it is your current knowledge that is insufficient, not life itself. Perhaps your value structure needs some serious retooling. Perhaps what you want is blinding you to what else could be. Perhaps you are holding on to your desires, in the present, so tightly that you cannot see anything else—even what you truly need.

Imagine that you are thinking, enviously, “I should have my boss’s job.” If your boss sticks to his post, stubbornly and competently, thoughts like that will lead you into in a state of irritation, unhappiness and disgust. You might realize this. You think, “I am unhappy. However, I could be cured of this unhappiness if I could just fulfill my ambition.” But then you might think further. “Wait,” you think. “Maybe I’m not unhappy because I don’t have my boss’s job. Maybe I’m unhappy because I can’t stop wanting that job.” That doesn’t mean you can just simply and magically tell yourself to stop wanting that job, and then listen and transform. You won’t—can’t, in fact—just change yourself that easily. You have to dig deeper. You must change what you are after more profoundly.

So, you might think, “I don’t know what to do about this stupid suffering. I can’t just abandon my ambitions. That would leave me nowhere to go. But my longing for a job that I can’t have isn’t working.” You might decide to take a different tack. You might ask, instead, for the revelation of a different plan: one that would fulfill your desires and gratify your ambitions in a real sense, but that would remove from your life the bitterness and resentment with which you are currently affected. You might think, “I will make a different plan. I will try to want whatever it is that would make my life better—whatever that might be—and I will start working on it now. If that turns out to mean something other than chasing my boss’s job, I will accept that and I will move forward.”

Now you’re on a whole different kind of trajectory. Before, what was right, desirable, and worthy of pursuit was something narrow and concrete. But you became stuck there, tightly jammed and unhappy. So you let go. You make the necessary sacrifice, and allow a whole new world of possibility, hidden from you because of your previous ambition, to reveal itself. And there’s a lot there. What would your life look like, if it were better? What would Life Itself look like? What does “better” even mean? You don’t know. And it doesn’t matter that you don’t know, exactly, right away, because you will start to slowly see what is “better,” once you have truly decided to want it. You will start to perceive what remained hidden from you by your presuppositions and preconceptions—by the previous mechanisms of your vision. You will begin to learn.

This will only work, however, if you genuinely want your life to improve. You can’t fool your implicit perceptual structures. Not even a bit. They aim where you point them. To retool, to take stock, to aim somewhere better, you have to think it through, bottom to top. You have to scour your psyche. You have to clean the damned thing up. And you must be cautious, because making your life better means adopting a lot of responsibility, and that takes more effort and care

better means adopting a lot of responsibility, and that takes more effort and care than living stupidly in pain and remaining arrogant, deceitful and resentful.

What if it was the case that the world revealed whatever goodness it contains in precise proportion to your desire for the best? What if the more your conception of the best has been elevated, expanded and rendered sophisticated the more possibility and benefit you could perceive? This doesn't mean that you can have what you want merely by wishing it, or that everything is interpretation, or that there is no reality. The world is still there, with its structures and limits. As you move along with it, it cooperates or objects. But you can dance with it, if your aim is to dance—and maybe you can even lead, if you have enough skill and enough grace. This is not theology. It's not mysticism. It's empirical knowledge. There is nothing magical here—or nothing more than the already-present magic of consciousness. We only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that's most of it) is hidden. If we start aiming at something different—something like "I want my life to be better"—our minds will start presenting us with new information, derived from the previously hidden world, to aid us in that pursuit. Then we can put that information to use and move, and act, and observe, and improve. And, after doing so, after improving, we might pursue something different, or higher—something like, "I want whatever might be better than just my life being better." And then we enter a more elevated and more complete reality.

In that place, what might we focus on? What might we see?

Think about it like this. Start from the observation that we indeed desire things—even that we need them. That's human nature. We share the experience of hunger, loneliness, thirst, sexual desire, aggression, fear and pain. Such things are elements of Being—primordial, axiomatic elements of Being. But we must sort and organize these primordial desires, because the world is a complex and obstinately real place. We can't just get the one particular thing we especially just want now, along with everything else we usually want, because our desires can produce conflict with our other desires, as well as with other people, and with the world. Thus, we must become conscious of our desires, and articulate them, and prioritize them, and arrange them into hierarchies. That makes them sophisticated. That makes them work with each other, and with the desires of other people, and with the world. It is in that manner that our desires elevate themselves. It is in that manner that they organize themselves into values and become moral. Our values, our morality—they are indicators of our sophistication.

The philosophical study of morality—of right and wrong—is ethics. Such study can render us more sophisticated in our choices. Even older and deeper than ethics, however, is religion. Religion concerns itself not with (mere) right and wrong but with good and evil themselves—with the archetypes of right and wrong. Religion concerns itself with domain of value, ultimate value. That is not the scientific domain. It's not the territory of empirical description. The people who wrote and edited the Bible, for example, weren't scientists. They couldn't have been scientists, even if they had wanted to be. The viewpoints, methods and practices of science hadn't been formulated when the Bible was written.

Religion is instead about proper behaviour. It's about what Plato called "the Good." A genuine religious acolyte isn't trying to formulate accurate ideas about the objective nature of the world (although he may be trying to do that to). He's striving, instead, to be a "good person." It may be the case that to him "good" means nothing but "obedient"—even blindly obedient. Hence the classic liberal Western enlightenment objection to religious belief: obedience is not enough. But it's at least a start (and we have forgotten this): You cannot aim yourself at anything if you are completely undisciplined and untutored. You will not know what to target, and you won't fly straight, even if you somehow get your aim right. And then you will conclude, "There is nothing to aim for." And then you will be lost.

It is therefore necessary and desirable for religions to have a dogmatic element. What good is a value system that does not provide a stable structure? What good is a value system that does not point the way to a higher order? And what good can you possibly be if you cannot or do not internalize that structure, or accept that order—not as a final destination, necessarily, but at least as a starting point? Without that, you're nothing but an adult two-year-old, without the charm or the potential. That is not to say (to say it again) that obedience is sufficient. But a person capable of obedience—let's say, instead, a properly disciplined person—is at least a well-forged tool. At least that (and that is not nothing). Of course, there must be vision, beyond discipline; beyond dogma. A tool still needs a purpose. It is for such reasons that Christ said, in the Gospel of Thomas, "The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but men do not see it."75

Does that mean that what we see is dependent on our religious beliefs? Yes! And what we don't see, as well! You might object, "But I'm an atheist." No, you're not (and if you want to understand this, you could read Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, perhaps the greatest novel ever written, in which the main character, Raskolnikov, decides to take his atheism with true seriousness

character, Raskolnikov, decides to take his atheism with true seriousness, commits what he has rationalized as a benevolent murder, and pays the price). You're simply not an atheist in your actions, and it is your actions that most accurately reflect your deepest beliefs—those that are implicit, embedded in your being, underneath your conscious apprehensions and articulable attitudes and surface-level self-knowledge. You can only find out what you actually believe (rather than what you think you believe) by watching how you act. You simply don't know what you believe, before that. You are too complex to understand yourself.

It takes careful observation, and education, and reflection, and communication with others, just to scratch the surface of your beliefs. Everything you value is a product of unimaginably lengthy developmental processes, personal, cultural and biological. You don't understand how what you want—and, therefore, what you see—is conditioned by the immense, abysmal, profound past. You simply don't understand how every neural circuit through which you peer at the world has been shaped (and painfully) by the ethical aims of millions of years of human ancestors and all of the life that was lived for the billions of years before that.

You don't understand anything.

You didn't even know that you were blind.

Some of our knowledge of our beliefs has been documented. We have been watching ourselves act, reflecting on that watching, and telling stories distilled through that reflection, for tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years. That is all part of our attempts, individual and collective, to discover and articulate what it is that we believe. Part of the knowledge so generated is what is encapsulated in the fundamental teachings of our cultures, in ancient writings such as the Tao te Ching, or the aforementioned Vedic scriptures, or the Biblical stories. The Bible is, for better or worse, the foundational document of Western civilization (of Western values, Western morality, and Western conceptions of good and evil). It's the product of processes that remain fundamentally beyond our comprehension. The Bible is a library composed of many books, each written and edited by many people. It's a truly emergent document—a selected, sequenced and finally coherent story written by no one and everyone over many thousands of years. The Bible has been thrown up, out of the deep, by the collective human imagination, which is itself a product of unimaginable forces operating over unfathomable spans of time. Its careful, respectful study can reveal things to us about what we believe and how we do and should act that can

be discovered in almost no other manner.

Old Testament God and New Testament God.

The God of the Old Testament can appear harsh, judgmental, unpredictable and dangerous, particularly on cursory reading. The degree to which this is true has arguably been exaggerated by Christian commentators, intent on magnifying the distinction between the older and newer divisions of the Bible. There has been a price paid, however, for such plotting (and I mean that in both senses of the word): the tendency for modern people to think, when confronted with Jehovah, "I would never believe in a God like that." But Old Testament God doesn't much care what modern people think. He often didn't care what Old Testament people thought, either (although He could be bargained with, to a surprising degree, as is particularly evident in the Abrahamic stories). Nonetheless, when His people strayed from the path—when they disobeyed His injunctions, violated His covenants, and broke His commandments—trouble was certain to follow. If you did not do what Old Testament God demanded—whatever that might have been and however you might have tried to hide from it—you and your children and your children's children were in terrible, serious trouble.

It was realists who created, or noticed, Old Testament God. When the denizens of those ancient societies wandered carelessly down the wrong path, they ended up enslaved and miserable—sometimes for centuries—when they were not obliterated completely. Was that reasonable? Was that just? Was that fair? The authors of the Old Testament asked such questions with extreme caution and under very limited conditions. They assumed, instead, that the Creator of Being knew what he was doing, that all power was essentially with Him, and that His dictates should be carefully followed. They were wise. He was a Force of Nature. Is a hungry lion reasonable, fair or just? What kind of nonsensical question is that? The Old Testament Israelites and their forebears knew that God was not to be trifled with, and that whatever Hell the angry Deity might allow to be engendered if he was crossed was real. Having recently passed through a century defined by the bottomless horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, we might realize the same thing.

New Testament God is often presented as a different character (although the Book of Revelation, with its Final Judgment, warns against any excessively naïve complacency). He is more the kindly Geppetto, master craftsman and benevolent father. He wants nothing for us but the best. He is all-loving and all-forgiving. Sure, He'll send you to Hell, if you misbehave badly enough.

Fundamentally, however, he's the God of Love. That seems more optimistic, more naively welcoming, but (in precise proportion to that) less believable. In a world such as this—this hothouse of doom—who could buy such a story? The all-good God, in a post-Auschwitz world? It was for such reasons that the philosopher Nietzsche, perhaps the most astute critic ever to confront Christianity, considered New Testament God the worst literary crime in Western history. In Beyond Good and Evil, he wrote:76

In the Jewish 'Old Testament', the book of divine justice, there are men, things and speeches on such a grand style that Greek and Indian literature has nothing to compare with it. One stands with fear and reverence before those stupendous remains of what man was formerly, and one has sad thoughts about old Asia and its little out-pushed peninsula Europe…. To have bound up this New Testament (a kind of ROCOCO of taste in every respect) along with the Old Testament into one book, as the "Bible," as "The Book in Itself" is perhaps the greatest audacity and "sin against the spirit" which literary Europe has on its conscience.

Who but the most naive among us could posit that such an all-good, merciful Being ruled this so-terrible world? But something that seems incomprehensible to someone unseeing might be perfectly evident to someone who had opened his eyes.

Let's return to the situation where your aim is being determined by something petty—your aforementioned envy of your boss. Because of that envy, the world you inhabit reveals itself as a place of bitterness, disappointment and spite. Imagine that you come to notice, and contemplate, and reconsider your unhappiness. Further, you determine to accept responsibility for it, and dare to posit that it might be something at least partly under your control. You crack open one eye, for a moment, and look. You ask for something better. You sacrifice your pettiness, repent of your envy, and open your heart. Instead of cursing the darkness, you let in a little light. You decide to aim for a better life—instead of a better office.

But you don't stop there. You realize that it's a mistake to aim for a better life, if it comes at the cost of worsening someone else's. So, you get creative. You decide to play a more difficult game. You decide that you want a better life, in a manner that will also make the life of your family better. Or the life of your family, and your friends. Or the life of your family, and your friends, and the strangers who surround them. What about your enemies? Do you want to include them, too? You bloody well don't know how to manage that. But you've read

them, too? You bloody well don't know how to manage that. But you've read some history. You know how enmity compounds. So, you start to wish even your enemies well, at least in principle, although you are by no means yet a master of such sentiments.

And the direction of your sight changes. You see past the limitations that hemmed you in, unknowingly. New possibilities for your life emerge, and you work toward their realization. Your life indeed improves. And then you start to think, further: "Better? Perhaps that means better for me, and my family, and my friends—even for my enemies. But that's not all it means. It means better today, in a manner that makes everything better tomorrow, and next week, and next year, and a decade from now, and a hundred years from now. And a thousand years from now. And forever."

And then "better" means to aim at the Improvement of Being, with a capital "I' and a capital "B." Thinking all of this—realizing all of this—you take a risk. You decide that you will start treating Old Testament God, with all His terrible and oft-arbitrary-seeming power, as if He could also be New Testament God (even though you understand the many ways in which that is absurd). In other words, you decide to act as if existence might be justified by its goodness—if only you behaved properly. And it is that decision, that declaration of existential faith, that allows you to overcome nihilism, and resentment, and arrogance. It is that declaration of faith that keeps hatred of Being, with all its attendant evils, at bay. And, as for such faith: it is not at all the will to believe things that you know perfectly well to be false. Faith is not the childish belief in magic. That is ignorance or even willful blindness. It is instead the realization that the tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being. It is simultaneously the will to dare set your sights at the unachievable, and to sacrifice everything, including (and most importantly) your life. You realize that you have, literally, nothing better to do. But how can you do all this?—assuming you are foolish enough to try.

You might start by not thinking—or, more accurately, but less trenchantly, by refusing to subjugate your faith to your current rationality, and its narrowness of view. This doesn't mean "make yourself stupid." It means the opposite. It means instead that you must quit manoeuvring and calculating and conniving and scheming and enforcing and demanding and avoiding and ignoring and punishing. It means you must place your old strategies aside. It means, instead, that you must pay attention, as you may never have paid attention before.

Pay Attention

Pay attention. Focus on your surroundings, physical and psychological. Notice something that bothers you, that concerns you, that will not let you be, which you could fix, that you would fix. You can find such somethings by asking yourself (as if you genuinely want to know) three questions: “What is it that is bothering me?” “Is that something I could fix?” and “Would I actually be willing to fix it?” If you find that the answer is “no,” to any or all of the questions, then look elsewhere. Aim lower. Search until you find something that bothers you, that you could fix, that you would fix, and then fix it. That might be enough for the day.

Maybe there is a stack of paper on your desk, and you have been avoiding it. You won’t even really look at it, when you walk into your room. There are terrible things lurking there: tax forms, and bills and letters from people wanting things you aren’t sure you can deliver. Notice your fear, and have some sympathy for it. Maybe there are snakes in that pile of paper. Maybe you’ll get bitten. Maybe there are even hydras lurking there. You’ll cut off one head, and seven more will grow. How could you possibly cope with that?

You could ask yourself, “Is there anything at all that I might be willing to do about that pile of paper? Would I look, maybe, at one part of it? For twenty minutes?” Maybe the answer will be, “No!” But you might look for ten, or even for five (and if not that, for one). Start there. You will soon find that the entire pile shrinks in significance, merely because you have looked at part of it. And you’ll find that the whole thing is made of parts. What if you allowed yourself a glass of wine with dinner, or curled up on the sofa and read, or watched a stupid movie, as a reward? What if you instructed your wife, or your husband, to say “good job” after you fixed whatever you fixed? Would that motivate you? The people from whom thanks you want might not be very proficient in offering it, to begin with, but that shouldn’t stop you. People can learn, even if they are very unskilled at the beginning. Ask yourself what you would require to be motivated to undertake the job, honestly, and listen to the answer. Don’t tell yourself, “I shouldn’t need to do that to motivate myself.” What do you know about yourself? You are, on the one hand, the most complex thing in the entire universe, and on the other, someone who can’t even set the clock on your microwave. Don’t over-estimate your self-knowledge.

Let the tasks for the day announce themselves for your contemplation. Maybe

you can do this in the morning, as you sit on the edge of your bed. Maybe you can try, the night before, when you are preparing to sleep. Ask yourself for a voluntary contribution. If you ask nicely, and listen carefully, and don't try any treachery, you might be offered one. Do this every day, for a while. Then do it for the rest of your life. Soon you will find yourself in a different situation. Now you will be asking yourself, habitually, "What could I do, that I would do, to make Life a little better?" You are not dictating to yourself what "better" must be. You are not being a totalitarian, or a utopian, even to yourself, because you have learned from the Nazis and the Soviets and the Maoists and from your own experience that being a totalitarian is a bad thing. Aim high. Set your sights on the betterment of Being. Align yourself, in your soul, with Truth and the Highest Good. There is habitable order to establish and beauty to bring into existence. There is evil to overcome, suffering to ameliorate, and yourself to better.

It is this, in my reading, that is the culminating ethic of the canon of the West. It is this, furthermore, that is communicated by those eternally confusing, glowing stanzas from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the essence, in some sense, of the wisdom of the New Testament. This is the attempt of the Spirit of Mankind to transform the understanding of ethics from the initial, necessary Thou Shalt Not of the child and the Ten Commandments into the fully articulated, positive vision of the true individual. This is the expression not merely of admirable self-control and self-mastery but of the fundamental desire to set the world right. This is not the cessation of sin, but sin's opposite, good itself. The Sermon on the Mount outlines the true nature of man, and the proper aim of mankind: concentrate on the day, so that you can live in the present, and attend completely and properly to what is right in front of you—but do that only after you have decided to let what is within shine forth, so that it can justify Being and illuminate the world. Do that only after you have determined to sacrifice whatever it is that must be sacrificed so that you can pursue the highest good.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:

And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink?

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Luke 12: 22–34)

Realization is dawning. Instead of playing the tyrant, therefore, you are paying attention. You are telling the truth, instead of manipulating the world. You are negotiating, instead of playing the martyr or the tyrant. You no longer have to be envious, because you no longer know that someone else truly has it better. You no longer have to be frustrated, because you have learned to aim low, and to be patient. You are discovering who you are, and what you want, and what you are willing to do. You are finding that the solutions to your particular problems have to be tailored to you, personally and precisely. You are less concerned with the actions of other people, because you have plenty to do yourself.

Attend to the day, but aim at the highest good.

Now, your trajectory is heavenward. That makes you hopeful. Even a man on a sinking ship can be happy when he clambers aboard a lifeboat! And who knows where he might go, in the future. To journey happily may well be better than to arrive successfully….

Ask, and ye shall receive. Knock, and the door will open. If you ask, as if you want, and knock, as if you want to enter, you may be offered the chance to improve your life, a little; a lot; completely—and with that improvement, some progress will be made in Being itself.

Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.

RULE 5: DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU DISLIKE THEM.

1 I draw here and will many times again in the course of this book on my clinical experience (as I have, already, on my personal history). I have tried to keep the moral of the stories intact, while disguising the details for the sake of the privacy of those involved. I hope I got the balance right.

RULE 6: SET YOUR HOUSE IN PERFECT ORDER BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE THE WORLD.

A RELIGIOUS PROBLEM.

It does not seem reasonable to describe the young man who shot twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 as a religious person. This is equally true for the Colorado theatre gunman and the Columbine High School killers. But these murderous individuals had a problem with reality that existed at a religious depth. As one of the members of the Columbine duo wrote:108

The human race isn't worth fighting for, only worth killing. Give the Earth back to the animals. They deserve it infinitely more than we do. Nothing means anything anymore.

People who think such things view Being itself as inequitable and harsh to the point of corruption, and human Being, in particular, as contemptible. They appoint themselves supreme adjudicators of reality and find it wanting. They are the ultimate critics. The deeply cynical writer continues:

If you recall your history, the Nazis came up with a "final solution" to the Jewish problem…. Kill them all. Well, in case you haven't figured it out, I say "KILL MANKIND." No one should survive.

For such individuals, the world of experience is insufficient and evil—so to hell with everything!

What is happening when someone comes to think in this manner? A great German play, Faust: A Tragedy, written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, addresses that issue. The play's main character, a scholar named Heinrich Faust, trades his immortal soul to the devil, Mephistopheles. In return, he receives whatever he desires while still alive on Earth. In Goethe's play, Mephistopheles is the eternal adversary of Being. He has a central, defining credo:109

I am the spirit who negates

I am the spirit who negates

and rightly so, for all that comes to be

deserves to perish, wretchedly.

It were better nothing would begin!

Thus everything that your terms sin,

destruction, evil represent—

that is my proper element.

Goethe considered this hateful sentiment so important—so key to the central element of vengeful human destructiveness—that he had Mephistopheles say it a second time, phrased somewhat differently, in Part II of the play, written many years later.110

People think often in the Mephistophelean manner, although they seldom act upon their thoughts as brutally as the mass murderers of school, college and theatre. Whenever we experience injustice, real or imagined; whenever we encounter tragedy or fall prey to the machinations of others; whenever we experience the horror and pain of our own apparently arbitrary limitations—the temptation to question Being and then to curse it rises foully from the darkness. Why must innocent people suffer so terribly? What kind of bloody, horrible planet is this, anyway?

Life is in truth very hard. Everyone is destined for pain and slated for destruction. Sometimes suffering is clearly the result of a personal fault such as willful blindness, poor decision-making or malevolence. In such cases, when it appears to be self-inflicted, it may even seem just. People get what they deserve, you might contend. That's cold comfort, however, even when true. Sometimes, if those who are suffering changed their behaviour, then their lives would unfold less tragically. But human control is limited. Susceptibility to despair, disease, aging and death is universal. In the final analysis, we do not appear to be the architects of our own fragility. Whose fault is it, then?

People who are very ill (or, worse, who have a sick child) will inevitably find themselves asking this question, whether they are religious believers or not. The same is true of someone who finds his shirtsleeve caught in the gears of a giant

bureaucracy—who is suffering through a tax audit, or fighting an interminable lawsuit or divorce. And it's not only the obviously suffering who are tormented by the need to blame someone or something for the intolerable state of their Being. At the height of his fame, influence and creative power, for example, the towering Leo Tolstoy himself began to question the value of human existence.111 He reasoned in this way:

My position was terrible. I knew that I could find nothing in the way of rational knowledge except a denial of life; and in faith I could find nothing except a denial of reason, and this was even more impossible than a denial of life. According to rational knowledge, it followed that life is evil, and people know it. They do not have to live, yet they have lived and they do live, just as I myself had lived, even though I had known for a long time that life is meaningless and evil.

Try as he might, Tolstoy could identify only four means of escaping from such thoughts. One was retreating into childlike ignorance of the problem. Another was pursuing mindless pleasure. The third was "continuing to drag out a life that is evil and meaningless, knowing beforehand that nothing can come of it." He identified that particular form of escape with weakness: "The people in this category know that death is better than life, but they do not have the strength to act rationally and quickly put an end to the delusion by killing themselves…."

Only the fourth and final mode of escape involved "strength and energy. It consists of destroying life, once one has realized that life is evil and meaningless." Tolstoy relentlessly followed his thoughts:

Only unusually strong and logically consistent people act in this manner. Having realized all the stupidity of the joke that is being played on us and seeing that the blessings of the dead are greater than those of the living and that it is better not to exist, they act and put an end to this stupid joke; and they use any means of doing it: a rope around the neck, water, a knife in the heart, a train.

Tolstoy wasn't pessimistic enough. The stupidity of the joke being played on us does not merely motivate suicide. It motivates murder—mass murder, often followed by suicide. That is a far more effective existential protest. By June of 2016, unbelievable as it may seem, there had been one thousand mass killings (defined as four or more people shot in a single incident, excluding the shooter) in the US in twelve hundred and sixty days.112 That's one such event on five of every six days for more than three years. Everyone says, "We don't understand."

every six days for more than three years. Everyone says, "We don't understand. How can we still pretend that? Tolstoy understood, more than a century ago. The ancient authors of the biblical story of Cain and Abel understood, as well, more than twenty centuries ago. They described murder as the first act of post-Edenic history: and not just murder, but fratricidal murder—murder not only of someone innocent but of someone ideal and good, and murder done consciously to spite the creator of the universe. Today's killers tell us the same thing, in their own words. Who would dare say that this is not the worm at the core of the apple? But we will not listen, because the truth cuts too close to the bone. Even for a mind as profound as that of the celebrated Russian author, there was no way out. How can the rest of us manage, when a man of Tolstoy's stature admits defeat? For years, he hid his guns from himself and would not walk with a rope in hand, in case he hanged himself.

How can a person who is awake avoid outrage at the world?

Vengeance or Transformation

A religious man might shake his fist in desperation at the apparent injustice and blindness of God. Even Christ Himself felt abandoned before the cross, or so the story goes. A more agnostic or atheistic individual might blame fate, or meditate bitterly on the brutality of chance. Another might tear himself apart, searching for the character flaws underlying his suffering and deterioration. These are all variations on a theme. The name of the target changes, but the underlying psychology remains constant. Why? Why is there so much suffering and cruelty?

Well, perhaps it really is God's doing—or the fault of blind, pointless fate, if you are inclined to think that way. And there appears to be every reason to think that way. But, what happens if you do? Mass murderers believe that the suffering attendant upon existence justifies judgment and revenge, as the Columbine boys so clearly indicated:113

I will sooner die than betray my own thoughts. Before I leave this worthless place, I will kill who ever I deem unfit for anything, especially life. If you pissed me off in the past, you will die if I see you. You might be able to piss off others, and have it eventually all blow over, but not me. I don't forget people who wronged me.

One of the most vengeful murderers of the twentieth century, the terrible Carl Panzram, was raped, brutalized and betrayed in the Minnesota institution responsible for his "rehabilitation" when he was a delinquent juvenile. He emerged, enraged beyond measure, as burglar, arsonist, rapist and serial killer. He aimed consciously and consistently at destruction, even keeping track of the dollar value of the property he burned. He started by hating the individuals who had hurt him. His resentment grew, until his hatred encompassed all of mankind, and he didn't stop there. His destructiveness was aimed in some fundamental manner at God Himself. There is no other way of phrasing it. Panzram raped, murdered and burned to express his outrage at Being. He acted as if Someone was responsible. The same thing happens in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain's sacrifices are rejected. He exists in suffering. He calls out God and challenges the Being He created. God refuses his plea. He tells Cain that his trouble is self-induced. Cain, in his rage, kills Abel, God's favourite (and, truth be known, Cain's idol). Cain is jealous, of course, of his successful brother. But he destroys Abel primarily to spite God. This is the truest version of what happens when people take their vengeance to the ultimate extreme.

Panzram's response was (and this is what was so terrible) perfectly understandable. The details of his autobiography reveal that he was one of Tolstoy's strong and logically consistent people. He was a powerful, consistent, fearless actor. He had the courage of his convictions. How could someone like him be expected to forgive and forget, given what had happened to him? Truly terrible things happen to people. It's no wonder they're out for revenge. Under such conditions, vengeance seems a moral necessity. How can it be distinguished from the demand for justice? After the experience of terrible atrocity, isn't forgiveness just cowardice, or lack of willpower? Such questions torment me. But people emerge from terrible pasts to do good, and not evil, although such an accomplishment can seem superhuman.

I have met people who managed to do it. I know a man, a great artist, who emerged from just such a "school" as the one described by Panzram—only this man was thrown into it as an innocent five-year-old, fresh from a long stretch in a hospital, where he had suffered measles, mumps and chicken pox, simultaneously. Incapable of speaking the language of the school, deliberately isolated from his family, abused, starved and otherwise tormented, he emerged an angry, broken young man. He hurt himself badly in the aftermath with drugs and alcohol and other forms of self-destructive behaviour. He detested everyone —God, himself and blind fate included. But he put an end to all of that. He stopped drinking. He stopped hating (although it still emerges in flashes). He revitalized the artistic culture of his Native tradition, and trained young men to continue in his footsteps. He produced a fifty-foot totem pole memorializing the events of his life, and a canoe, forty feet long, from a single log, of a kind rarely if ever produced now. He brought his family together, and held a great potlatch, with sixteen hours of dancing and hundreds of people in attendance, to express his grief, and make peace with the past. He decided to be a good person, and then did the impossible things required to live that way.

I had a client who did not have good parents. Her mother died when she was very young. Her grandmother, who raised her, was a harridan, bitter and over-concerned with appearances. She mistreated her granddaughter, punishing her for her virtues: creativity, sensitivity, intelligence—unable to resist acting out her resentment for an admittedly hard life on her granddaughter. She had a better relationship with her father, but he was an addict who died, badly, while she cared for him. My client had a son. She perpetuated none of this with him. He grew up truthful, and independent, and hard-working, and smart. Instead of

widening the tear in the cultural fabric she inherited, and transmitting it, she sewed it up. She rejected the sins of her forefathers. Such things can be done.

Distress, whether psychic, physical, or intellectual, need not at all produce nihilism (that is, the radical rejection of value, meaning and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations.

Nietzsche wrote those words.114 What he meant was this: people who experience evil may certainly desire to perpetuate it, to pay it forward. But it is also possible to learn good by experiencing evil. A bullied boy can mimic his tormentors. But he can also learn from his own abuse that it is wrong to push people around and make their lives miserable. Someone tormented by her mother can learn from her terrible experiences how important it is to be a good parent. Many, perhaps even most, of the adults who abuse children were abused themselves as children. However, the majority of people who were abused as children do not abuse their own children. This is a well-established fact, which can be demonstrated, simply, arithmetically, in this way: if one parent abused three children, and each of those children had three children, and so on, then there would be three abusers the first generation, nine the second, twenty-seven the third, eighty-one the fourth—and so on exponentially. After twenty generations, more than ten billion would have suffered childhood abuse: more people than currently inhabit the planet. But instead, abuse disappears across generations. People constrain its spread. That's a testament to the genuine dominance of good over evil in the human heart.

The desire for vengeance, however justified, also bars the way to other productive thoughts. The American/English poet T. S. Eliot explained why, in his play, The Cocktail Party. One of his characters is not having a good time of it. She speaks of her profound unhappiness to a psychiatrist. She says she hopes that all her suffering is her own fault. The psychiatrist is taken aback. He asks why. She has thought long and hard about this, she says, and has come to the following conclusion: if it's her fault, she might be able to do something about it. If it's God's fault, however—if reality itself is flawed, hell-bent on ensuring her misery—then she is doomed. She couldn't change the structure of reality itself. But maybe she could change her own life.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had every reason to question the structure of existence when he was imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp, in the middle of the terrible twentieth century. He had served as a soldier on the ill-prepared Russian front lines in the face of a Nazi invasion. He had been arrested, beaten and thrown into

prison by his own people. Then he was struck by cancer. He could have become resentful and bitter. His life had been rendered miserable by both Stalin and Hitler, two of the worst tyrants in history. He lived in brutal conditions. Vast stretches of his precious time were stolen from him and squandered. He witnessed the pointless and degrading suffering and death of his friends and acquaintances. Then he contracted an extremely serious disease. Solzhenitsyn had cause to curse God. Job himself barely had it as hard.

But the great writer, the profound, spirited defender of truth, did not allow his mind to turn towards vengeance and destruction. He opened his eyes, instead. During his many trials, Solzhenitsyn encountered people who comported themselves nobly, under horrific circumstances. He contemplated their behaviour deeply. Then he asked himself the most difficult of questions: had he personally contributed to the catastrophe of his life? If so, how? He remembered his unquestioning support of the Communist Party in his early years. He reconsidered his whole life. He had plenty of time in the camps. How had he missed the mark, in the past? How many times had he acted against his own conscience, engaging in actions that he knew to be wrong? How many times had he betrayed himself, and lied? Was there any way that the sins of his past could be rectified, atoned for, in the muddy hell of a Soviet gulag?

Solzhenitsyn pored over the details of his life, with a fine-toothed comb. He asked himself a second question, and a third. Can I stop making such mistakes, now? Can I repair the damage done by my past failures, now? He learned to watch and to listen. He found people he admired; who were honest, despite everything. He took himself apart, piece by piece, let what was unnecessary and harmful die, and resurrected himself. Then he wrote The Gulag Archipelago, a history of the Soviet prison camp system.115 It’s a forceful, terrible book, written with the overwhelming moral force of unvarnished truth. Its sheer outrage screamed unbearably across hundreds of pages. Banned (and for good reason) in the USSR, it was smuggled to the West in the 1970s, and burst upon the world. Solzhenitsyn’s writing utterly and finally demolished the intellectual credibility of communism, as ideology or society. He took an axe to the trunk of the tree whose bitter fruits had nourished him so poorly—and whose planting he had witnessed and supported.

One man’s decision to change his life, instead of cursing fate, shook the whole pathological system of communist tyranny to its core. It crumbled entirely, not so many years later, and Solzhenitsyn’s courage was not the least of the reasons why. He was not the only such person to perform such a miracle. Václav Havel

why. He was not the only such person to perform such a miracle. Vaclav Havel, the persecuted writer who later, impossibly, became the president of Czechoslovakia, then of the new Czech Republic, comes to mind, as does Mahatma Gandhi.

Things Fall Apart

Whole peoples have adamantly refused to judge reality, to criticize Being, to blame God. It's interesting to consider the Old Testament Hebrews in this regard. Their travails followed a consistent pattern. The stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Noah and the Tower of Babel are truly ancient. Their origins vanish into the mysteries of time. It's not until after the flood story in Genesis that something like history, as we understand it, truly starts. It starts with Abraham. Abraham's descendants become the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible. They enter a covenant with Yahweh—with God—and begin their recognizably historical adventures.

Under the leadership of a great man, the Hebrews organize themselves into a society, and then an empire. As their fortunes rise, success breeds pride and arrogance. Corruption raises its ugly head. The increasingly hubristic state becomes obsessed with power, begins to forget its duty to the widows and orphans, and deviates from its age-old agreement with God. A prophet arises. He brazenly and publicly reviles the authoritarian king and faithless country for their failures before God—an act of blind courage—telling them of the terrible judgment to come. When his wise words are not completely ignored, they are heeded too late. God smites his wayward people, dooming them to abject defeat in battle and generations of subjugation. The Hebrews repent, at length, blaming their misfortune on their own failure to adhere to God's word. They insist to themselves that they could have done better. They rebuild their state, and the cycle begins again.

This is life. We build structures to live in. We build families, and states, and countries. We abstract the principles upon which those structures are founded and formulate systems of belief. At first we inhabit those structures and beliefs like Adam and Eve in Paradise. But success makes us complacent. We forget to pay attention. We take what we have for granted. We turn a blind eye. We fail to notice that things are changing, or that corruption is taking root. And everything falls apart. Is that the fault of reality—of God? Or do things fall apart because we have not paid sufficient attention?

When the hurricane hit New Orleans, and the town sank under the waves, was that a natural disaster? The Dutch prepare their dikes for the worst storm in ten thousand years. Had New Orleans followed that example, no tragedy would have occurred. It's not that no one knew. The Flood Control Act of 1965 mandated

improvements in the levee system that held back Lake Pontchartrain. The system was to be completed by 1978. Forty years later, only 60 percent of the work had been done. Willful blindness and corruption took the city down.

A hurricane is an act of God. But failure to prepare, when the necessity for preparation is well known—that's sin. That's failure to hit the mark. And the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The ancient Jews always blamed themselves when things fell apart. They acted as if God's goodness—the goodness of reality—was axiomatic, and took responsibility for their own failure. That's insanely responsible. But the alternative is to judge reality as insufficient, to criticize Being itself, and to sink into resentment and the desire for revenge.

If you are suffering—well, that's the norm. People are limited and life is tragic. If your suffering is unbearable, however, and you are starting to become corrupted, here's something to think about.

Clean Up Your Life

Consider your circumstances. Start small. Have you taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to you? Are you working hard on your career, or even your job, or are you letting bitterness and resentment hold you back and drag you down? Have you made peace with your brother? Are you treating your spouse and your children with dignity and respect? Do you have habits that are destroying your health and well-being? Are you truly shouldering your responsibilities? Have you said what you need to say to your friends and family members? Are there things that you could do, that you know you could do, that would make things around you better?

Have you cleaned up your life?

If the answer is no, here's something to try: Start to stop doing what you know to be wrong. Start stopping today. Don't waste time questioning how you know that what you're doing is wrong, if you are certain that it is. Inopportune questioning can confuse, without enlightening, as well as deflecting you from action. You can know that something is wrong or right without knowing why. Your entire Being can tell you something that you can neither explain nor articulate. Every person is too complex to know themselves completely, and we all contain wisdom that we cannot comprehend.

So, simply stop, when you apprehend, however dimly, that you should stop. Stop acting in that particular, despicable manner. Stop saying those things that make you weak and ashamed. Say only those things that make you strong. Do only those things that you could speak of with honour.

You can use your own standards of judgment. You can rely on yourself for guidance. You don't have to adhere to some external, arbitrary code of behaviour (although you should not overlook the guidelines of your culture. Life is short, and you don't have time to figure everything out on your own. The wisdom of the past was hard-earned, and your dead ancestors may have something useful to tell you).

Don't blame capitalism, the radical left, or the iniquity of your enemies. Don't reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city? Let your own soul guide you. Watch what happens over the days and

weeks. When you are at work you will begin to say what you really think. You will start to tell your wife, or your husband, or your children, or your parents, what you really want and need. When you know that you have left something undone, you will act to correct the omission. Your head will start to clear up, as you stop filling it with lies. Your experience will improve, as you stop distorting it with inauthentic actions. You will then begin to discover new, more subtle things that you are doing wrong. Stop doing those, too. After some months and years of diligent effort, your life will become simpler and less complicated. Your judgment will improve. You will untangle your past. You will become stronger and less bitter. You will move more confidently into the future. You will stop making your life unnecessarily difficult. You will then be left with the inevitable bare tragedies of life, but they will no longer be compounded with bitterness and deceit.

Perhaps you will discover that your now less-corrupted soul, much stronger than it might otherwise have been, is now able to bear those remaining, necessary, minimal, inescapable tragedies. Perhaps you will even learn to encounter them so that they stay tragic—merely tragic—instead of degenerating into outright hellishness. Maybe your anxiety, and hopelessness, and resentment, and anger—however murderous, initially—will recede. Perhaps your uncorrupted soul will then see its existence as a genuine good, as something to celebrate, even in the face of your own vulnerability. Perhaps you will become an ever-more-powerful force for peace and whatever is good.

Perhaps you will then see that if all people did this, in their own lives, the world might stop being an evil place. After that, with continued effort, perhaps it could even stop being a tragic place. Who knows what existence might be like if we all decided to strive for the best? Who knows what eternal heavens might be established by our spirits, purified by truth, aiming skyward, right here on the fallen Earth?

Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.

RULE 7: PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

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1 And this is all true, note, whether there is—or is not—actually such a powerful figure, “in the sky” :)

2 In keeping with this observation is the fact that the word Set is an etymological precursor to the word Satan. See Murdock, D.M. (2009). Christ in Egypt: the Horus-Jesus connection. Seattle, WA: Stellar House, p. 75.

3 For anyone who thinks this is somehow unrealistic, given the concrete material reality and genuine suffering that is associated with privation, I would once again recommend Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago, which contains a series of exceptionally profound discussions about proper ethical behavior and its exaggerated rather than diminished importance in situations of extreme want and suffering.

RULE 8: TELL THE TRUTH—OR, AT LEAST, DON'T LIE.

TRUTH IN NO-MAN'S-LAND.

I trained to become a clinical psychologist at McGill University, in Montreal. While doing so, I sometimes met my classmates on the grounds of Montreal's Douglas Hospital, where we had our first direct experiences with the mentally ill. The Douglas occupies acres of land and dozens of buildings. Many are connected by underground tunnels to protect workers and patients from the interminable Montreal winters. The hospital once sheltered hundreds of long-term in-house patients. This was before anti-psychotic drugs and the large scale deinstitutionalization movements of the late sixties all but closed down the residential asylums, most often dooming the now "freed" patients to a much harder life on the streets. By the early eighties, when I first visited the grounds, all but the most seriously afflicted residents had been discharged. Those who remained were strange, much-damaged people. They clustered around the vending machines scattered throughout the hospital's tunnels. They looked as if they had been photographed by Diane Arbus or painted by Hieronymus Bosch.

One day my classmates and I were all standing in line. We were awaiting further instruction from the strait-laced German psychologist who ran the Douglas clinical training program. A long-term inpatient, fragile and vulnerable, approached one of the other students, a sheltered, conservative young woman. The patient spoke to her in a friendly, childlike manner, and asked, "Why are you all standing here? What are you doing? Can I come along with you?" My classmate turned to me and asked uncertainly, "What should I say to her?" She was taken aback, just as I was, by this request coming from someone so isolated and hurt. Neither of us wanted to say anything that might be construed as a

rejection or reprimand.

We had temporarily entered a kind of no-man's-land, in which society offers no ground rules or guidance. We were new clinical students, unprepared to be confronted on the grounds of a mental hospital by a schizophrenic patient asking a naive, friendly question about the possibility of social belonging. The natural conversational give-and-take between people attentive to contextual cues was not happening here, either. What exactly were the rules, in such a situation, far outside the boundaries of normal social interaction? What exactly were the options?

There were only two, as far as I could quickly surmise. I could tell the patient a story designed to save everyone's face, or I could answer truthfully. "We can only take eight people in our group," would have fallen into the first category, as would have, "We are just leaving the hospital now." Neither of these answers would have bruised any feelings, at least on the surface, and the presence of the status differences that divided us from her would have gone unremarked. But neither answer would have been exactly true. So, I didn't offer either.

I told the patient as simply and directly as I could that we were new students, training to be psychologists, and that she couldn't join us for that reason. The answer highlighted the distinction between her situation and ours, making the gap between us greater and more evident. The answer was harsher than a well-crafted white lie. But I already had an inkling that untruth, however well-meant, can produce unintended consequences. She looked crestfallen, and hurt, but only for a moment. Then she understood, and it was all right. That was just how it was.

I had had a strange set of experiences a few years before embarking upon my clinical training.148 I found myself subject to some rather violent compulsions (none acted upon), and developed the conviction, in consequence, that I really knew rather little about who I was and what I was up to. So, I began paying much closer attention to what I was doing—and saying. The experience was disconcerting, to say the least. I soon divided myself into two parts: one that spoke, and one, more detached, that paid attention and judged. I soon came to realize that almost everything I said was untrue. I had motives for saying these things: I wanted to win arguments and gain status and impress people and get what I wanted. I was using language to bend and twist the world into delivering what I thought was necessary. But I was a fake. Realizing this, I started to practise only saying things that the internal voice would not object to. I started to

practise only saying things that the internal voice would not object to. I started to practise telling the truth—or, at least, not lying. I soon learned that such a skill came in very handy when I didn't know what to do. What should you do, when you don't know what to do? Tell the truth. So, that's what I did my first day at the Douglas Hospital.

Later, I had a client who was paranoid and dangerous. Working with paranoid people is challenging. They believe they have been targeted by mysterious conspiratorial forces, working malevolently behind the scenes. Paranoid people are hyper-alert and hyper-focused. They are attending to non-verbal cues with an intentness never manifest during ordinary human interactions. They make mistakes in interpretation (that's the paranoia) but they are still almost uncanny in their ability to detect mixed motives, judgment and falsehood. You have to listen very carefully and tell the truth if you are going to get a paranoid person to open up to you.

I listened carefully and spoke truthfully to my client. Now and then, he would describe blood-curdling fantasies of flaying people for revenge. I would watch how I was reacting. I paid attention to what thoughts and images emerged in the theatre of my imagination while he spoke, and I told him what I observed. I was not trying to control or direct his thoughts or actions (or mine). I was only trying to let him know as transparently as I could how what he was doing was directly affecting at least one person—me. My careful attention and frank responses did not mean at all that I remained unperturbed, let alone approved. I told him when he scared me (often), that his words and behaviour were misguided, and that he was going to get into serious trouble.

He talked to me, nonetheless, because I listened and responded honestly, even though I was not encouraging in my responses. He trusted me, despite (or, more accurately, because of) my objections. He was paranoid, not stupid. He knew his behaviour was socially unacceptable. He knew that any decent person was likely to react with horror to his insane fantasies. He trusted me and would talk to me because that's how I reacted. There was no chance of understanding him without that trust.

Trouble for him generally started in a bureaucracy, such as a bank. He would enter an institution and attempt some simple task. He was looking to open an account, or pay a bill, or fix some mistake. Now and then he encountered the kind of non-helpful person that everyone encounters now and then in such a place. That person would reject the ID he offered, or require some information

that was unnecessary and difficult to obtain. Sometimes, I suppose, the bureaucratic runaround was unavoidable—but sometimes it was unnecessarily complicated by petty misuses of bureaucratic power. My client was very attuned to such things. He was obsessed with honour. It was more important to him than safety, freedom or belonging. Following that logic (because paranoid people are impeccably logical), he could never allow himself to be demeaned, insulted or put down, even a little bit, by anyone. Water did not roll off his back. Because of his rigid and inflexible attitude, my client's actions had already been subjected to several restraining orders. Restraining orders work best, however, with the sort of person who would never require a restraining order.

"I will be your worst nightmare," was his phrase of choice, in such situations. I have wished intensely that I could say something like that, after encountering unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles, but it's generally best to let such things go. My client meant what he said, however, and sometimes he really did become someone's nightmare. He was the bad guy in No Country for Old Men. He was the person you meet in the wrong place, at the wrong time. If you messed with him, even accidentally, he was going to stalk you, remind you what you had done, and scare the living daylights out of you. He was no one to lie to. I told him the truth and that cooled him off.

My Landlord

I had a landlord around that time who had been president of a local biker gang. My wife, Tammy, and I lived next door to him in his parents' small apartment building. His girlfriend bore the marks of self-inflicted injuries characteristic of borderline personality disorder. She killed herself while we lived there.

Denis, large, strong, French-Canadian, with a grey beard, was a gifted amateur electrician. He had some artistic talent, too, and was supporting himself making laminated wood posters with custom neon lights. He was trying to stay sober, after being released from jail. Still, every month or so, he would disappear on a days-long bender. He was one of those men who have a miraculous capacity for alcohol; he could drink fifty or sixty beer in a two-day binge and remain standing the whole time. This may seem hard to believe, but it's true. I was doing research on familial alcoholism at the time, and it was not rare for my subjects to report their fathers' habitual consumption of forty ounces of vodka a day. These patriarchs would buy one bottle every afternoon, Monday through Friday, and then two on Saturday, to tide them over through the Sunday liquor-store closure.

Denis had a little dog. Sometimes Tammy and I would hear Denis and the dog out in the backyard at four in the morning, during one of Denis's marathon drinking sessions, both of them howling madly at the moon. Now and then, on occasions like that, Denis would drink up every cent he had saved. Then he would show up at our apartment. We would hear a knock at night. Denis would be at the door, swaying precipitously, upright, and miraculously conscious.

He would be standing there, toaster, microwave, or poster in hand. He wanted to sell these to me so he could keep on drinking. I bought a few things like this, pretending that I was being charitable. Eventually, Tammy convinced me that I couldn't do it anymore. It made her nervous, and it was bad for Denis, whom she liked. Reasonable and even necessary as her request was, it still placed me in a tricky position.

What do you say to a severely intoxicated, violence-prone ex-biker-gang-president with patchy English when he tries to sell his microwave to you at your open door at two in the morning? This was a question even more difficult than those presented by the institutionalized patient or the paranoid flayer. But the answer was the same: the truth. But you'd bloody well better know what the

truth is.

Denis knocked again soon after my wife and I had talked. He looked at me in the direct skeptical narrow-eyed manner characteristic of the tough, heavy-drinking man who is no stranger to trouble. That look means, “Prove your innocence.” Weaving slightly back and forth, he asked—politely—if I might be interested in purchasing his toaster. I rid myself, to the bottom of my soul, of primate-dominance motivations and moral superiority. I told him as directly and carefully as I could that I would not. I was playing no tricks. In that moment I wasn’t an educated, anglophone, fortunate, upwardly-mobile young man. He wasn’t an ex-con Québécois biker with a blood alcohol level of .24. No, we were two men of good will trying to help each other out in our common struggle to do the right thing. I said that he had told me he was trying to quit drinking. I said that it would not be good for him if I provided him with more money. I said that he made Tammy, whom he respected, nervous when he came over so drunk and so late and tried to sell me things.

The Delay of Gratification

When engaging in sacrifice, our forefathers began to act out what would be considered a proposition, if it were stated in words: that something better might be attained in the future by giving up something of value in the present. Recall, if you will, that the necessity for work is one of the curses placed by God upon Adam and his descendants in consequence of Original Sin. Adam's waking to the fundamental constraints of his Being—his vulnerability, his eventual death—is equivalent to his discovery of the future. The future: that's where you go to die (hopefully, not too soon). Your demise might be staved off through work; through the sacrifice of the now to gain benefit later. It is for this reason—among others, no doubt—that the concept of sacrifice is introduced in the Biblical chapter immediately following the drama of the Fall. There is little difference between sacrifice and work. They are also both uniquely human. Sometimes, animals act as if they are working, but they are really only following the dictates of their nature. Beavers build dams. They do so because they are beavers, and beavers build dams. They don't think, "Yeah, but I'd rather be on a beach in Mexico with my girlfriend," while they're doing it.

Prosaically, such sacrifice—work—is delay of gratification, but that's a very mundane phrase to describe something of such profound significance. The discovery that gratification could be delayed was simultaneously the discovery of time and, with it, causality (at least the causal force of voluntary human action). Long ago, in the dim mists of time, we began to realize that reality was structured as if it could be bargained with. We learned that behaving properly now, in the present—regulating our impulses, considering the plight of others—could bring rewards in the future, in a time and place that did not yet exist. We began to inhibit, control and organize our immediate impulses, so that we could stop interfering with other people and our future selves. Doing so was indistinguishable from organizing society: the discovery of the causal relationship between our efforts today and the quality of tomorrow motivated the social contract—the organization that enables today's work to be stored, reliably (mostly in the form of promises from others).

Understanding is often acted out before it can be articulated (just as a child acts out what it means to be "mother" or "father" before being able to give a spoken account of what those roles mean).116 The act of making a ritual sacrifice to God was an early and sophisticated enactment of the idea of the usefulness of delay. There is a long conceptual journey between merely feasting hungrily and

delay. There is a long conceptual journey between merely feasting hungrily and learning to set aside some extra meat, smoked by the fire, for the end of the day, or for someone who isn't present. It takes a long time to learn to keep anything later for yourself, or to share it with someone else (and those are very much the same thing as, in the former case, you are sharing with your future self). It is much easier and far more likely to selfishly and immediately wolf down everything in sight. There are similar long journeys between every leap in sophistication with regard to delay and its conceptualization: short-term sharing, storing away for the future, representation of that storage in the form of records and, later, in the form of currency—and, ultimately, the saving of money in a bank or other social institution. Some conceptualizations had to serve as intermediaries, or the full range of our practices and ideas surrounding sacrifice and work and their representation could have never emerged.

Our ancestors acted out a drama, a fiction: they personified the force that governs fate as a spirit that can be bargained with, traded with, as if it were another human being. And the amazing thing is that it worked. This was in part because the future is largely composed of other human beings—often precisely those who have watched and evaluated and appraised the tiniest details of your past behavior. It's not very far from that to God, sitting above on high, tracking your every move and writing it down for further reference in a big book. Here's a productive symbolic idea: the future is a judgmental father. That's a good start. But two additional, archetypal, foundational questions arose, because of the discovery of sacrifice, of work. Both have to do with the ultimate extension of the logic of work—which is sacrifice now, to gain later.

First question. What must be sacrificed? Small sacrifices may be sufficient to solve small, singular problems. But it is possible that larger, more comprehensive sacrifices might solve an array of large and complex problems, all at the same time. That's harder, but it might be better. Adapting to the necessary discipline of medical school will, for example, fatally interfere with the licentious lifestyle of a hardcore undergraduate party animal. Giving that up is a sacrifice. But a physician can—to paraphrase George W.—really put food on his family. That's a lot of trouble dispensed with, over a very long period of time. So, sacrifices are necessary, to improve the future, and larger sacrifices can be better.

Second question (set of related questions, really): We've already established the basic principle—sacrifice will improve the future. But a principle, once established, has to be fleshed out. Its full extension or significance has to be

understood. What is implied by the idea that sacrifice will improve the future, in the most extreme and final of cases? Where does that basic principle find its limits? We must ask, to begin, “What would be the largest, most effective—most pleasing—of all possible sacrifices?” and then “How good might the best possible future be, if the most effective sacrifice could be made?”

The biblical story of Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve’s sons, immediately follows the story of the expulsion from Paradise, as mentioned previously. Cain and Abel are really the first humans, since their parents were made directly by God, and not born in the standard manner. Cain and Abel live in history, not in Eden. They must work. They must make sacrifices, to please God, and they do so, with altar and proper ritual. But things get complicated. Abel’s offerings please God, but Cain’s do not. Abel is rewarded, many times over, but Cain is not. It’s not precisely clear why (although the text strongly hints that Cain’s heart is just not in it). Maybe the quality of what Cain put forward was low. Maybe his spirit was begrudging. Or maybe God was vexed, for some secret reasons of His own. And all of this is realistic, including the text’s vagueness of explanation. Not all sacrifices are of equal quality. Furthermore, it often appears that sacrifices of apparently high quality are not rewarded with a better future—and it’s not clear why. Why isn’t God happy? What would have to change to make Him so? Those are difficult questions—and everyone asks them, all the time, even if they don’t notice.

Asking such questions is indistinguishable from thinking.

The realization that pleasure could be usefully forestalled dawned on us with great difficulty. It runs absolutely contrary to our ancient, fundamental animal instincts, which demand immediate satisfaction (particularly under conditions of deprivation, which are both inevitable and commonplace). And, to complicate the matter, such delay only becomes useful when civilization has stabilized itself enough to guarantee the existence of the delayed reward, in the future. If everything you save will be destroyed or, worse, stolen, there is no point in saving. It is for this reason that a wolf will down twenty pounds of raw meat in a single meal. He isn’t thinking, “Man, I hate it when I binge. I should save some of this for next week.” So how was it that those two impossible and necessarily simultaneous accomplishments (delay and the stabilization of society into the future) could possibly have manifested themselves?

Here is a developmental progression, from animal to human. It’s wrong, no doubt, in the details. But it’s sufficiently correct, for our purposes, in theme:

First, there is excess food. Large carcasses, mammoths or other massive herbivores, might provide that. (We ate a lot of mammoths. Maybe all of them.) After a kill, with a large animal, there is some left for later. That's accidental, at first—but, eventually, the utility of "for later" starts to be appreciated. Some provisional notion of sacrifice develops at the same time: "If I leave some, even if I want it now, I won't have to be hungry later." That provisional notion develops, to the next level ("If I leave some for later, I won't have to go hungry, and neither will those I care for") and then to the next ("I can't possibly eat all of this mammoth, but I can't store the rest for too long, either. Maybe I should feed some to other people. Maybe they'll remember, and feed me some of their mammoth, when they have some and I have none. Then I'll get some mammoth now, and some mammoth later. That's a good deal. And maybe those I'm sharing with will come to trust me, more generally. Maybe then we could trade forever"). In such a manner, "mammoth" becomes "future mammoth," and "future mammoth" becomes "personal reputation." That's the emergence of the social contract.

To share does not mean to give away something you value, and get nothing back. That is instead only what every child who refuses to share fears it means. To share means, properly, to initiate the process of trade. A child who can't share—who can't trade—can't have any friends, because having friends is a form of trade. Benjamin Franklin once suggested that a newcomer to a neighbourhood ask a new neighbour to do him or her a favour, citing an old maxim: He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged.117 In Franklin's opinion, asking someone for something (not too extreme, obviously) was the most useful and immediate invitation to social interaction. Such asking on the part of the newcomer provided the neighbour with an opportunity to show him-or herself as a good person, at first encounter. It also meant that the latter could now ask the former for a favour, in return, because of the debt incurred, increasingly their mutual familiarity and trust. In that manner both parties could overcome their natural hesitancy and mutual fear of the stranger.

It is better to have something than nothing. It's better yet to share generously the something you have. It's even better than that, however, to become widely known for generous sharing. That's something that lasts. That's something that's reliable. And, at this point of abstraction, we can observe how the groundwork for the conceptions reliable, honest and generous has been laid. The basis for an articulated morality has been put in place. The productive, truthful sharer is the

prototype for the good citizen, and the good man. We can see in this manner how from the simple notion that “leftovers are a good idea” the highest moral principles might emerge.

It’s as if something like the following happened as humanity developed. First were the endless tens or hundreds of thousands of years prior to the emergence of written history and drama. During this time, the twin practices of delay and exchange begin to emerge, slowly and painfully. Then they become represented, in metaphorical abstraction, as rituals and tales of sacrifice, told in a manner such as this: “It’s as if there is a powerful Figure in the Sky, who sees all, and is judging you. Giving up something you value seems to make Him happy—and you want to make Him happy, because all Hell breaks loose if you don’t. So, practise sacrificing, and sharing, until you become expert at it, and things will go well for you.”fn1 No one said any of this, at least not so plainly and directly. But it was implicit in the practice and then in the stories.

Action came first (as it had to, as the animals we once were could act but could not think). Implicit, unrecognized value came first (as the actions that preceded thought embodied value, but did not make that value explicit). People watched the successful succeed and the unsuccessful fail for thousands and thousands of years. We thought it over, and drew a conclusion: The successful among us delay gratification. The successful among us bargain with the future. A great idea begins to emerge, taking ever-more-clearly-articulated form, in ever more-clearly-articulated stories: What’s the difference between the successful and the unsuccessful? The successful sacrifice. Things get better, as the successful practise their sacrifices. The questions become increasingly precise and, simultaneously, broader: What is the greatest possible sacrifice? For the greatest possible good? And the answers become increasingly deeper and profound.

The God of Western tradition, like so many gods, requires sacrifice. We have already examined why. But sometimes He goes even further. He demands not only sacrifice, but the sacrifice of precisely what is loved best. This is most starkly portrayed (and most confusingly evident) in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, beloved of God, long wanted a son—and God promised him exactly that, after many delays, and under the apparently impossible conditions of old age and a long-barren wife. But not so long afterward, when the miraculously-borne Isaac is still a child, God turns around and in unreasonable and apparently barbaric fashion demands that His faithful servant offer his son as a sacrifice. The story ends happily: God sends an angel to stay Abraham’s obedient hand and accepts a ram in Isaac’s stead. That’s a good thing, but it

obedient hand and accepts a ram in Isaac's stead. That's a good thing, but it doesn't really address the issue at hand: Why is God's going further necessary? Why does He—why does life—impose such demands?

We'll start our analysis with a truism, stark, self-evident and understated: Sometimes things do not go well. That seems to have much to do with the terrible nature of the world, with its plagues and famines and tyrannies and betrayals. But here's the rub: sometimes, when things are not going well, it's not the world that's the cause. The cause is instead that which is currently most valued, subjectively and personally. Why? Because the world is revealed, to an indeterminate degree, through the template of your values (much more on this in Rule 10). If the world you are seeing is not the world you want, therefore, it's time to examine your values. It's time to rid yourself of your current presuppositions. It's time to let go. It might even be time to sacrifice what you love best, so that you can become who you might become, instead of staying who you are.

There's an old and possibly apocryphal story about how to catch a monkey that illustrates this set of ideas very well. First, you must find a large, narrow-necked jar, just barely wide enough in diameter at the top for a monkey to put its hand inside. Then you must fill the jar part way with rocks, so it is too heavy for a monkey to carry. Then you must to scatter some treats, attractive to monkeys, near the jar, to attract one, and put some more inside the jar. A monkey will come along, reach into the narrow opening, and grab while the grabbing's good. But now he won't be able to extract his fist, now full of treats, from the too-narrow opening of the jar. Not without unclenching his hand. Not without relinquishing what he already has. And that's just what he won't do. The monkey-catcher can just walk over to the jar and pick up the monkey. The animal will not sacrifice the part to preserve the whole.

Something valuable, given up, ensures future prosperity. Something valuable, sacrificed, pleases the Lord. What is most valuable, and best sacrificed?—or, what is at least emblematic of that? A choice cut of meat. The best animal in a flock. A most valued possession. What's above even that? Something intensely personal and painful to give up. That's symbolized, perhaps, in God's insistence on circumcision as part of Abraham's sacrificial routine, where the part is offered, symbolically, to redeem the whole. What's beyond that? What pertains more closely to the whole person, rather than the part? What constitutes the ultimate sacrifice—for the gain of the ultimate prize?

It's a close race between child and self. The sacrifice of the mother, offering her

It's a close race between child and self. The sacrifice of the mother, offering her child to the world, is exemplified profoundly by Michelangelo's great sculpture, the Pietà, illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. Michelangelo crafted Mary contemplating her Son, crucified and ruined. It's her fault. It was through her that He entered the world and its great drama of Being. Is it right to bring a baby into this terrible world? Every woman asks herself that question. Some say no, and they have their reasons. Mary answers yes, voluntarily, knowing full well what's to come—as do all mothers, if they allow themselves to see. It's an act of supreme courage, when undertaken voluntarily.

In turn, Mary's son, Christ, offers Himself to God and the world, to betrayal, torture and death—to the very point of despair on the cross, where he cries out those terrible words: my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46). That is the archetypal story of the man who gives his all for the sake of the better—who offers up his life for the advancement of Being—who allows God's will to become manifest fully within the confines of a single, mortal life. That is the model for the honourable man. In Christ's case, however—as He sacrifices Himself—God, His Father, is simultaneously sacrificing His son. It is for this reason that the Christian sacrificial drama of Son and Self is archetypal. It's a story at the limit, where nothing more extreme—nothing greater—can be imagined. That's the very definition of "archetypal." That's the core of what constitutes "religious."

Pain and suffering define the world. Of that, there can be no doubt. Sacrifice can hold pain and suffering in abeyance, to a greater or lesser degree—and greater sacrifices can do that more effectively than lesser. Of that, there can be no doubt. Everyone holds this knowledge in their soul. Thus, the person who wishes to alleviate suffering—who wishes to rectify the flaws in Being; who wants to bring about the best of all possible futures; who wants to create Heaven on Earth—will make the greatest of sacrifices, of self and child, of everything that is loved, to live a life aimed at the Good. He will forego expediency. He will pursue the path of ultimate meaning. And he will in that manner bring salvation to the ever-desperate world.

But is such a thing even possible? Is this simply not asking too much of the individual? It's all well and good for Christ, it might be objected—but He was the veritable Son of God. But we do have other examples, some much less mythologized and archetypal. Consider, for example, the case of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher. After a lifetime of seeking the truth and educating his countrymen, Socrates faced a trial for crimes against the city-state of Athens, his

hometown. His accusers provided him with plenty of opportunity to simply leave, and avoid the trouble.118 But the great sage had already considered and rejected this course of action. His companion Hermogenes observed him at this time discussing “any and every subject”119 other than his trial, and asked him why he appeared so unconcerned. Socrates first answered that he had been preparing his whole life to defend himself,120 but then said something more mysterious and significant: When he attempted specifically to consider strategies that would produce acquittal “by fair means or foul”121—or even when merely considering his potential actions at the trial122—he found himself interrupted by his divine sign: his internal spirit, voice or daemon. Socrates discussed this voice at the trial itself.123 He said that one of the factors distinguishing him from other men124 was his absolute willingness to listen to its warnings—to stop speaking and cease acting when it objected. The Gods themselves had deemed him wise above other men, not least for this reason, according to the Delphic Oracle herself, held to be a reliable judge of such things.”125

Because his ever-reliable internal voice objected to fleeing (or even to defending himself) Socrates radically altered his view of the significance of his trial. He began to consider that it might be a blessing, rather than a curse. He told Hermogenes of his realization that the spirit to whom he had always listened might be offering him a way out of life, in a manner “easiest but also the least irksome to one’s friends,”126 with “sound body and a spirit capable of showing kindliness”127 and absent the “throes of illness” and vexations of extreme old age.128 Socrates’ decision to accept his fate allowed him to put away mortal terror in the face of death itself, prior to and during the trial, after the sentence was handed down,129 and even later, during his execution.130 He saw that his life had been so rich and full that he could let it go, gracefully. He was given the opportunity to put his affairs in order. He saw that he could escape the terrible slow degeneration of the advancing years. He came to understand all that was happening to him as a gift from the gods. He was not therefore required to defend himself against his accusers—at least not with the aim of pronouncing his innocence, and escaping his fate. Instead, he turned the tables, addressing his judges in a manner that makes the reader understand precisely why the town council wanted this man dead. Then he took his poison, like a man.

Socrates rejected expediency, and the necessity for manipulation that accompanied it. He chose instead, under the direst of conditions, to maintain his pursuit of the meaningful and the true. Twenty-five hundred years later, we remember his decision and take comfort from it. What can we learn from this? If

you cease to utter falsehoods and live according to the dictates of your conscience, you can maintain your nobility, even when facing the ultimate threat; if you abide, truthfully and courageously, by the highest of ideals, you will be provided with more security and strength than will be offered by any short-sighted concentration on your own safety; if you live properly, fully, you can discover meaning so profound that it protects you even from the fear of death.

Could all that possibly be true?

Death, Toil and Evil

The tragedy of self-conscious Being produces suffering, inevitable suffering. That suffering in turn motivates the desire for selfish, immediate gratification—for expediency. But sacrifice—and work—serves far more effectively than short-term impulsive pleasure at keeping suffering at bay. However, tragedy itself (conceived of as the arbitrary harshness of society and nature, set against the vulnerability of the individual) is not the only—and perhaps not even the primary—source of suffering. There is also the problem of evil to consider. The world is set hard against us, of a certainty, but man's inhumanity to man is something even worse. Thus, the problem of sacrifice is compounded in its complexity: it is not only privation and mortal limitation that must be addressed by work—by the willingness to offer, and to give up. It is the problem of evil as well.

Consider, once again, the story of Adam and Eve. Life becomes very hard for their children (that's us) after the fall and awakening of our archetypal parents. First is the terrible fate awaiting us in the post-Paradisal world—in the world of history. Not the least of this is what Goethe called "our creative, endless toil."131 Humans work, as we have seen. We work because we have awakened to the truth of our own vulnerability, our subjugation to disease and death, and wish to protect ourselves for as long as possible. Once we can see the future, we must prepare for it, or live in denial and terror. We therefore sacrifice the pleasures of today for the sake of a better tomorrow. But the realization of mortality and the necessity of work is not the only revelation to Adam and Eve when they eat the forbidden Fruit, wake up, and open their eyes. They were also granted (or cursed by) the knowledge of Good and Evil.

It took me decades to understand what that means (to understand even part of what that means). It's this: once you become consciously aware that you,

yourself, are vulnerable, you understand the nature of human vulnerability, in general. You understand what it's like to be fearful, and angry, and resentful, and bitter. You understand what pain means. And once you truly understand such feelings in yourself, and how they're produced, you understand how to produce them in others. It is in this manner that the self-conscious beings that we are become voluntarily and exquisitely capable of tormenting others (and ourselves, of course—but it's the others we are concerned about right now). We see the consequences of this new knowledge manifest themselves when we meet Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

By the time of their appearance, mankind has learned to make sacrifices to God. On altars of stone, designed for that purpose, a communal ritual is performed: the immolation of something valuable, a choice animal or portion thereof, and its transformation through fire to the smoke (to the spirit) that rises to Heaven above. In this manner, the idea of delay is dramatized, so that the future might improve. Abel's sacrifices are accepted by God, and he flourishes. Cain's, however, are rejected. He becomes jealous and bitter—and it's no wonder. If someone fails and is rejected because he refused to make any sacrifices at all—well, that's at least understandable. He may still feel resentful and vengeful, but knows in his heart that he is personally to blame. That knowledge generally places a limit on his outrage. It's much worse, however, if he had actually foregone the pleasures of the moment—if he had strived and toiled and things still didn't work out—if he was rejected, despite his efforts. Then he's lost the present and the future. Then his work—his sacrifice—has been pointless. Under such conditions, the world darkens, and the soul rebels.

Cain is outraged by his rejection. He confronts God, accuses Him, and curses His creation. That proves to be a very poor decision. God responds, in no uncertain terms, that the fault is all with Cain—and worse: that Cain has knowingly and creatively dallied with sin,132 and reaped the consequences. This is not at all what Cain wanted to hear. It's by no means an apology on God's part. Instead, it's insult, added to injury. Cain, embittered to the core by God's response, plots revenge. He defies the creator, audaciously. It's daring. Cain knows how to hurt. He's self-conscious, after all—and has become even more so, in his suffering and shame. So, he murders Abel in cold blood. He kills his brother, his own ideal (as Abel is everything Cain wishes to be). He commits this most terrible of crimes to spite himself, all of mankind, and God Himself, all at once. He does it to wreak havoc and gain his vengeance. He does it to register his fundamental opposition to existence—to protest the intolerable vagaries of Being itself. And Cain's children—the offspring, as it were of both his body and

Being itself. And Cain's children—the offspring, as it were of both his body and his decision—are worse. In his existential fury, Cain kills once. Lamech, his descendant, goes much further. "I have slain a man to my wounding," says Lamech," and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold" (Genesis 4:23-24). Tubulcain, an instructor of "every artificer in brass and iron" (Genesis 4:22), is by tradition seven generations from Cain—and the first creator of weapons of war. And next, in the Genesis stories, comes the flood. The juxtaposition is by no means accidental.

Evil enters the world with self-consciousness. The toil with which God curses Adam—that's bad enough. The trouble in childbirth with which Eve is burdened and her consequent dependence on her husband are no trivial matters, either. They are indicative of the implicit and oft-agonizing tragedies of insufficiency, privation, brute necessity and subjugation to illness and death that simultaneously define and plague existence. Their mere factual reality is sometimes sufficient to turn even a courageous person against life. It has been my experience, however, that human beings are strong enough to tolerate the implicit tragedies of Being without faltering—without breaking or, worse, breaking bad. I have seen evidence of this repeatedly in my private life, in my work as a professor, and in my role as a clinical practitioner. Earthquakes, floods, poverty, cancer—we're tough enough to take on all of that. But human evil adds a whole new dimension of misery to the world. It is for this reason that the rise of self-consciousness and its attendant realization of mortality and knowledge of Good and Evil is presented in the early chapters of Genesis (and in the vast tradition that surrounds them) as a cataclysm of cosmic magnitude.

Conscious human malevolence can break the spirit even tragedy could not shake. I remember discovering (with her) that one of my clients had been shocked into years of serious post-traumatic stress disorder—daily physical shaking and terror, and chronic nightly insomnia—by the mere expression on her enraged, drunken boyfriend's face. His "fallen countenance" (Genesis 4:5) indicated his clear and conscious desire to do her harm. She was more naïve than she should have been, and that predisposed her to the trauma, but that's not the point: the voluntary evil we do one another can be profoundly and permanently damaging, even to the strong. And what is it, precisely, that motivates such evil?

It doesn't make itself manifest merely in consequence of the hard lot of life. It doesn't even emerge, simply, because of failure itself, or because of the disappointment and bitterness that failure often and understandably engenders. But the hard lot of life, magnified by the consequence of continually rejected

sacrifices (however poorly conceptualized; however half-heartedly executed)? That will bend and twist people into the truly monstrous forms who then begin, consciously, to work evil; who then begin to generate for themselves and others little besides pain and suffering (and who do it for the sake of that pain and suffering). In that manner, a truly vicious circle takes hold: begrudging sacrifice, half-heartedly undertaken; rejection of that sacrifice by God or by reality (take your pick); angry resentment, generated by that rejection; descent into bitterness and the desire for revenge; sacrifice undertaken even more begrudgingly, or refused altogether. And it's Hell itself that serves as the destination place of that downward spiral.

Life is indeed "nasty, brutish and short," as the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes so memorably remarked. But man's capacity for evil makes it worse. This means that the central problem of life—the dealing with its brute facts—is not merely what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering, but what and how to sacrifice to diminish suffering and evil—the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering. The story of Cain and Abel is one manifestation of the archetypal tale of the hostile brothers, hero and adversary: the two elements of the individual human psyche, one aimed up, at the Good, and the other, down, at Hell itself. Abel is a hero, true: but a hero who is ultimately defeated by Cain. Abel could please God—a non-trivial and unlikely accomplishment—but he could not overcome human evil. For this reason, Abel is archetypally incomplete. Perhaps he was naive, although a vengeful brother can be inconceivably treacherous and subtil, like the snake in Genesis 3:1. But excuses—even reasons—even understandable reasons—don't matter; not in the final analysis. The problem of evil remained unsolved even by the divinely acceptable sacrifices of Abel. It took thousands of additional years for humanity to come up with anything else resembling a solution. The same issue emerges again, in its culminating form, the story of Christ and his temptation by Satan. But this time it's expressed more comprehensively—and the hero wins.

Evil, Confronted

Jesus was led into the wilderness, according to the story, "to be tempted by the Devil" (Matthew 4:1), prior to his crucifixion. This is the story of Cain, restated abstractly. Cain is neither content nor happy, as we have seen. He's working hard, or so he thinks, but God is not pleased. Meanwhile, Abel is, by all appearances, dancing his way through life. His crops flourish. Women love him. Worst of all, he's a genuinely good man. Everyone knows it. He deserves his good fortune. All the more reason to envy and hate him. Things do not progress

good fortune. All the more reason to envy and hate him. Things do not progress well for Cain, by contrast, and he broods on his misfortune, like a vulture on an egg. He strives, in his misery, to give birth to something hellish and, in doing so, enters the desert wilderness of his own mind. He obsesses over his ill fortune; his betrayal by God. He nourishes his resentment. He indulges in ever more elaborate fantasies of revenge. And as he does so, his arrogance grows to Luciferian proportions. “I’m illused and oppressed,” he thinks. “This is a stupid bloody planet. As far as I’m concerned, it can go to Hell.” And with that, Cain encounters Satan in the wilderness, for all intents and purposes, and falls prey to his temptations. And he does what he can to make things as bad as possible, motivated by (in John Milton’s imperishable words):

So deep a malice, to confound the Race

Of Mankind in one Root, and Earth with Hell

to mingle and involve—done all to spite

the Great Creator …133

Cain turns to Evil to obtain what Good denied him, and he does it voluntarily, self-consciously and with malice aforethought.

Christ takes a different path. His sojourn in the desert is the dark night of the soul—a deeply human and universal human experience. It’s the journey to that place each of us goes when things fall apart, friends and family are distant, hopelessness and despair reign, and black nihilism beckons. And, let us suggest, in testament to the exactitude of the story: forty days and nights starving alone in the wilderness might take you exactly to that place. It is in such a manner that the objective and subjective worlds come crashing, synchronistically, together. Forty days is a deeply symbolic period of time, echoing the forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after escaping the tyranny of Pharaoh and Egypt. Forty days is a long time in the underworld of dark assumptions, confusion and fear—long enough to journey to the very center, which is Hell itself. A journey there to see the sights can be undertaken by anyone—anyone, that is, who is willing to take the evil of self and Man with sufficient seriousness. A bit of familiarity with history can help. A sojourn through the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, with its concentration camps, forced labor and murderous ideological pathologies is as good a place as any to start—that, and some consideration of the fact that worst of the concentration camp guards were human, all too human, too. That’s all part of making the desert story real again:

human, all-too-human, too. That's all part of making the desert story real again; part of updating it, for the modern mind.

"After Auschwitz," said Theodor Adorno, student of authoritarianism, "there should be no poetry." He was wrong. But the poetry should be about Auschwitz. In the grim wake of the last ten decades of the previous millennium, the terrible destructiveness of man has become a problem whose seriousness self-evidently dwarfs even the problem of unredeemed suffering. And neither one of those problems is going to be solved in the absence of a solution to the other. This is where the idea of Christ's taking on the sins of mankind as if they were His own becomes key, opening the door to deep understanding of the desert encounter with the devil himself. "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto," said the Roman playwright Terence: nothing human is alien to me.

"No tree can grow to Heaven," adds the ever-terrifying Carl Gustav Jung, psychoanalyst extraordinaire, "unless its roots reach down to Hell."134 Such a statement should give everyone who encounters it pause. There was no possibility for movement upward, in that great psychiatrist's deeply considered opinion, without a corresponding move down. It is for this reason that enlightenment is so rare. Who is willing to do that? Do you really want to meet who's in charge, at the very bottom of the most wicked thoughts? What did Eric Harris, mass murderer of the Columbine high school, write so incomprehensibly the very day prior to massacring his classmates? It's interesting, when I'm in my human form, knowing I'm going to die. Everything has a touch of triviality to it.135 Who would dare explain such a missive?—or, worse, explain it away?

In the desert, Christ encounters Satan (see Luke 4:1–13 and Matthew 4:1–11). This story has a clear psychological meaning—a metaphorical meaning—in addition to whatever else material and metaphysical alike it might signify. It means that Christ is forever He who determines to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity. It means that Christ is eternally He who is willing to confront and deeply consider and risk the temptations posed by the most malevolent elements of human nature. It means that Christ is always he who is willing to confront evil—consciously, fully and voluntarily—in the form that dwelt simultaneously within Him and in the world. This is nothing merely abstract (although it is abstract); nothing to be brushed over. It's no merely intellectual matter.

Soldiers who develop post-traumatic stress disorder frequently develop it not because of something they saw, but because of something they did.136 There are

many demons, so to speak, on the battlefield. Involvement in warfare is something that can open a gateway to Hell. Now and then something climbs through and possesses some naive farm-boy from Iowa, and he turns monstrous. He does something terrible. He rapes and kills the women and massacres the infants of My Lai. And he watches himself do it. And some dark part of him enjoys it—and that is the part that is most unforgettable. And, later, he will not know how to reconcile himself with the reality about himself and the world that was then revealed. And no wonder.

In the great and fundamental myths of ancient Egypt, the god Horus—often regarded as a precursor to Christ, historically and conceptually speaking137—experienced the same thing, when he confronted his evil uncle Set,fn2 usurper of the throne of Osiris, Horus's father. Horus, the all-seeing Egyptian falcon god, the Egyptian eye of supreme, eternal attention itself, has the courage to contend with Set's true nature, meeting him in direct combat. In the struggle with his dread uncle, however, his consciousness is damaged. He loses an eye. This is despite his godly stature and his unparalleled capacity for vision. What would a mere man lose, who attempted the same thing? But perhaps he might gain in internal vision and understanding something proportional to what he loses in perception of the outside world.

Satan embodies the refusal of sacrifice; he is arrogance, incarnate; spite, deceit, and cruel, conscious malevolence. He is pure hatred of Man, God and Being. He will not humble himself, even when he knows full well that he should. Furthermore, he knows exactly what he is doing, obsessed with the desire for destruction, and does it deliberately, thoughtfully and completely. It has to be him, therefore—the very archetype of Evil—who confronts and tempts Christ, the archetype of Good. It must be him who offers to the Savior of Mankind, under the most trying of conditions, what all men most ardently desire.

Satan first tempts the starving Christ to quell His hunger by transforming the desert rocks into bread. Then he suggests that He throw Himself off a cliff, calling on God and the angels to break His fall. Christ responds to the first temptation by saying, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." What does this answer mean? It means that even under conditions of extreme privation, there are more important things than food. To put it another way: Bread is of little use to the man who has betrayed his soul, even if he is currently starving.fn3 Christ could clearly use his near-infinite power, as Satan indicates, to gain bread, now—to break his fast—even, in the broader sense, to gain wealth, in the world (which would theoretically

in the broader sense, to gain wealth, in the world (which would theoretically solve the problem of bread, more permanently). But at what cost? And to what gain? Gluttony, in the midst of moral desolation? That's the poorest and most miserable of feasts. Christ aims, therefore, at something higher: at the description of a mode of Being that would finally and forever solve the problem of hunger. If we all chose instead of expedience to dine on the Word of God? That would require each and every person to live, and produce, and sacrifice, and speak, and share in a manner that would permanently render the privation of hunger a thing of the past. And that's how the problem of hunger in the privations of the desert is most truly and finally addressed.

There are other indications of this in the gospels, in dramatic, enacted form. Christ is continually portrayed as the purveyor of endless sustenance. He miraculously multiplies bread and fish. He turns water into wine. What does this mean? It's a call to the pursuit of higher meaning as the mode of living that is simultaneously most practical and of highest quality. It's a call portrayed in dramatic/literary form: live as the archetypal Saviour lives, and you and those around you will hunger no more. The beneficence of the world manifests itself to those who live properly. That's better than bread. That's better than the money that will buy bread. Thus Christ, the symbolically perfect individual, overcomes the first temptation. Two more follow.

"Throw yourself off that cliff," Satan says, offering the next temptation. "If God exists, He will surely save you. If you are in fact his Son, God will surely save you." Why would God not make Himself manifest, to rescue His only begotten Child from hunger and isolation and the presence of great evil? But that establishes no pattern for life. It doesn't even work as literature. The deus ex machina—the emergence of a divine force that magically rescues the hero from his predicament—is the cheapest trick in the hack writer's playbook. It makes a mockery of independence, and courage, and destiny, and free will, and responsibility. Furthermore, God is in no wise a safety net for the blind. He's not someone to be commanded to perform magic tricks, or forced into Self-revelation—not even by His own Son.

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7)—this answer, though rather brief, dispenses with the second temptation. Christ does not casually order or even dare ask God to intervene on his behalf. He refuses to dispense with His responsibility for the events of His own life. He refuses to demand that God prove His presence. He refuses, as well, to solve the problems of mortal vulnerability in a merely personal manner)—by compelling God to save Him—

because that would not solve the problem for everyone else and for all time. There is also the echo of the rejection of the comforts of insanity in this forgone temptation. Easy but psychotic self-identification as the merely magical Messiah might well have been a genuine temptation under the harsh conditions of Christ's sojourn in the desert. Instead He rejects the idea that salvation—or even survival, in the shorter term—depends on narcissistic displays of superiority and the commanding of God, even by His Son.

Finally comes the third temptation, the most compelling of all. Christ sees the kingdoms of the world laid before Him for the taking. That's the siren call of earthly power: the opportunity to control and order everyone and everything. Christ is offered the pinnacle of the dominance hierarchy, the animalistic desire of every naked ape: the obedience of all, the most wondrous of estates, the power to build and to increase, the possibility of unlimited sensual gratification. That's expedience, writ large. But that's not all. Such expansion of status also provides unlimited opportunity for the inner darkness to reveal itself. The lust for blood, rape and destruction is very much part of power's attraction. It is not only that men desire power so that they will no longer suffer. It is not only that they desire power so that they can overcome subjugation to want, disease and death. Power also means the capacity to take vengeance, ensure submission, and crush enemies. Grant Cain enough power and he will not only kill Abel. He will torture him, first, imaginatively and endlessly. Then and only then will he kill him. Then he will come after everyone else.

There's something above even the pinnacle of the highest of dominance hierarchies, access to which should not be sacrificed for mere proximal success. It's a real place, too, although not to be conceptualized in the standard geographical sense of place we typically use to orient ourselves. I had a vision, once, of an immense landscape, spread for miles out to the horizon before me. I was high in the air, granted a bird's-eye view. Everywhere I could see great stratified multi-storied pyramids of glass, some small, some large, some overlapping, some separate—all akin to modern skyscrapers; all full of people striving to reach each pyramid's very pinnacle. But there was something above that pinnacle, a domain outside each pyramid, in which all were nested. That was the privileged position of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely above the fray; that chose not to dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend all. That was attention, itself, pure and untrammeled: detached, alert, watchful attention, waiting to act when the time was right and the place had been established. As the Tao te Ching has it:

He who contrives, defeats his purpose;

and he who is grasping, loses.

The sage does not contrive to win,

and therefore is not defeated;

he is not grasping, so does not lose.138

There is a powerful call to proper Being in the story of the third temptation. To obtain the greatest possible prize—the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, the resurrection of Paradise—the individual must conduct his or her life in a manner that requires the rejection of immediate gratification, of natural and perverse desires alike, no matter how powerfully and convincingly and realistically those are offered, and dispense, as well with the temptations of evil. Evil amplifies the catastrophe of life, increasing dramatically the motivation for expediency already there because of the essential tragedy of Being. Sacrifice of the more prosaic sort can keep that tragedy at bay, more or less successfully, but it takes a special kind of sacrifice to defeat evil. It is the description of that special sacrifice that has preoccupied the Christian (and more than Christian) imagination for centuries. Why has it not had the desired effect? Why do we remain unconvinced that there is no better plan than lifting our heads skyward, aiming at the Good, and sacrificing everything to that ambition? Have we merely failed to understand, or have we fallen, wilfully or otherwise, off the path?

Christianity and its Problems

Carl Jung hypothesized that the European mind found itself motivated to develop the cognitive technologies of science—to investigate the material world—after implicitly concluding that Christianity, with its laser-like emphasis on spiritual salvation, had failed to sufficiently address the problem of suffering in the here-and-now. This realization became unbearably acute in the three or four centuries before the Renaissance. In consequence, a strange, profound, compensatory fantasy began to emerge, deep in the collective Western psyche, manifesting itself first in the strange musings of alchemy, and developing only after many centuries into the fully articulated form of science.139 It was the alchemists who first seriously began to examine the transformations of matter, hoping to discover the secrets of health, wealth and longevity. These great dreamers (Newton foremost among them140) intuited and then imagined that the material world, damned by the Church, held secrets the revelation of which could free humanity from its earthly pain and limitations. It was that vision, driven by doubt, that provided the tremendous collective and individual motivational power necessary for the development of science, with its extreme demands on individual thinkers for concentration and delay of gratification.

This is not to say that Christianity, even in its incompletely realized form, was a failure. Quite the contrary: Christianity achieved the well-nigh impossible. The Christian doctrine elevated the individual soul, placing slave and master and commoner and nobleman alike on the same metaphysical footing, rendering them equal before God and the law. Christianity insisted that even the king was only one among many. For something so contrary to all apparent evidence to find its footing, the idea that that worldly power and prominence were indicators of God's particular favor had to be radically de-emphasized. This was partly accomplished through the strange Christian insistence that salvation could not be obtained through effort or worth—through "works."141 Whatever its limitations, the development of such doctrine prevented king, aristocrat and wealthy merchant alike from lording it morally over the commoner. In consequence, the metaphysical conception of the implicit transcendent worth of each and every soul established itself against impossible odds as the fundamental presupposition of Western law and society. That was not the case in the world of the past, and is not the case yet in most places in the world of the present. It is in fact nothing short of a miracle (and we should keep this fact firmly before our eyes) that the hierarchical slave-based societies of our ancestors reorganized themselves, under the sway of an ethical/religious revelation, such that the ownership and absolute

the sway of an ethical/religious revelation, such that the ownership and absolute domination of another person came to be viewed as wrong.

It would do us well to remember, as well, that the immediate utility of slavery is obvious, and that the argument that the strong should dominate the weak is compelling, convenient and eminently practical (at least for the strong). This means that a revolutionary critique of everything slave-owning societies valued was necessary before the practice could be even questioned, let alone halted (including the idea that wielding power and authority made the slave-owner noble; including the even more fundamental idea that the power wielded by the slave-owner was valid and even virtuous). Christianity made explicit the surprising claim that even the lowliest person had rights, genuine rights—and that sovereign and state were morally charged, at a fundamental level, to recognize those rights. Christianity put forward, explicitly, the even more incomprehensible idea that the act of human ownership degraded the slaver (previously viewed as admiring nobility) much or even more than the slave. We fail to understand how difficult such an idea is to grasp. We forget that the opposite was self-evident throughout most of human history. We think that it is the desire to enslave and dominate that requires explanation. We have it backwards, yet again.

This is not to say that Christianity was without its problems. But it is more appropriate to note that they were the sort of problems that emerge only after an entirely different set of more serious problems has been solved. The society produced by Christianity was far less barbaric than the pagan—even the Roman—ones it replaced. Christian society at least recognized that feeding slaves to ravenous lions for the entertainment of the populace was wrong, even if many barbaric practices still existed. It objected to infanticide, to prostitution, and to the principle that might means right. It insisted that women were as valuable as men (even though we are still working out how to manifest that insistence politically). It demanded that even a society's enemies be regarded as human. Finally, it separated church from state, so that all-too-human emperors could no longer claim the veneration due to gods. All of this was asking the impossible: but it happened.

As the Christian revolution progressed, however, the impossible problems it had solved disappeared from view. That's what happens to problems that are solved. And after the solution was implemented, even the fact that such problems had ever existed disappeared from view. Then and only then could the problems that remained, less amenable to quick solution by Christian doctrine, come to occupy

a central place in the consciousness of the West—come to motivate, for example, the development of science, aimed at resolving the corporeal, material suffering that was still all-too-painfully extant within successfully Christianized societies. The fact that automobiles pollute only becomes a problem of sufficient magnitude to attract public attention when the far worse problems that the internal combustion engine solves has vanished from view. People stricken with poverty don't care about carbon dioxide. It's not precisely that CO2 levels are irrelevant. It's that they're irrelevant when you're working yourself to death, starving, scraping a bare living from the stony, unyielding, thorn-and-thistle-infested ground. It's that they're irrelevant until after the tractor is invented and hundreds of millions stop starving. In any case, by the time Nietzsche entered the picture, in the late nineteenth century, the problems Christianity had left unsolved had become paramount.

Nietzsche described himself, with no serious overstatement, as philosophizing with a hammer.142 His devastating critique of Christianity—already weakened by its conflict with the very science to which it had given rise—involved two main lines of attack. Nietzsche claimed, first, that it was precisely the sense of truth developed in the highest sense by Christianity itself that ultimately came to question and then to undermine the fundamental presuppositions of the faith. That was partly because the difference between moral or narrative truth and objective truth had not yet been fully comprehended (and so an opposition was presumed where none necessarily exists)—but that does not bely the point. Even when the modern atheists opposed to Christianity belittle fundamentalists for insisting, for example, that the creation account in Genesis is objectively true, they are using their sense of truth, highly developed over the centuries of Christian culture, to engage in such argumentation. Carl Jung continued to develop Nietzsche's arguments decades later, pointing out that Europe awoke, during the Enlightenment, as if from a Christian dream, noticing that everything it had heretofore taken for granted could and should be questioned. "God is dead," said Nietzsche. "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us?"143

The central dogmas of the Western faith were no longer credible, according to Nietzsche, given what the Western mind now considered truth. But it was his second attack—on the removal of the true moral burden of Christianity during the development of the Church—that was most devastating. The hammer-wielding philosopher mounted an assault on an early established and then highly

wielding philosopher mounted an assault on an early-established and then highly influential line of Christian thinking: that Christianity meant accepting the proposition that Christ's sacrifice, and only that sacrifice, had redeemed humanity. This did not mean, absolutely, that a Christian who believed that Christ died on the cross for the salvation of mankind was thereby freed from any and all personal moral obligation. But it did strongly imply that the primary responsibility for redemption had already been borne by the Saviour, and that nothing too important to do remained for all-too-fallen human individuals.

Nietzsche believed that Paul, and later the Protestants following Luther, had removed moral responsibility from Christ's followers. They had watered down the idea of the imitation of Christ. This imitation was the sacred duty of the believer not to adhere (or merely to mouth) a set of statements about abstract belief but instead to actually manifest the spirit of the Saviour in the particular, specific conditions of his or her life—to realize or incarnate the archetype, as Jung had it; to clothe the eternal pattern in flesh. Nietzsche writes, "The Christians have never practiced the actions Jesus prescribed them; and the impudent garrulous talk about the 'justification by faith' and its supreme and sole significance is only the consequence of the Church's lack of courage and will to profess the works Jesus demanded."144 Nietzsche was, indeed, a critic without parallel.

Dogmatic belief in the central axioms of Christianity (that Christ's crucifixion redeemed the world; that salvation was reserved for the hereafter; that salvation could not be achieved through works) had three mutually reinforcing consequences: First, devaluation of the significance of earthly life, as only the hereafter mattered. This also meant that it had become acceptable to overlook and shirk responsibility for the suffering that existed in the here-and-now; Second, passive acceptance of the status quo, because salvation could not be earned in any case through effort in this life (a consequence that Marx also derided, with his proposition that religion was the opiate of the masses); and, finally, third, the right of the believer to reject any real moral burden (outside of the stated belief in salvation through Christ), because the Son of God had already done all the important work. It was for such reasons that Dostoevsky, who was a great influence on Nietzsche, also criticized institutional Christianity (although he arguably managed it in a more ambiguous but also more sophisticated manner). In his masterwork, The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky has his atheist superman, Ivan, tell a little story, "The Grand Inquisitor."145 A brief review is in order.

Ivan speaks to his brother Alyosha—whose pursuits as a monastic novitiate he holds in contempt—of Christ returning to Earth at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. The returning Savior makes quite a ruckus, as would be expected. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. His antics soon attract attention from the Grand Inquisitor himself, who promptly has Christ arrested and thrown into a prison cell. Later, the Inquisitor pays Him a visit. He informs Christ that he is no longer needed. His return is simply too great a threat to the Church. The Inquisitor tells Christ that the burden He laid on mankind—the burden of existence in faith and truth—was simply too great for mere mortals to bear. The Inquisitor claims that the Church, in its mercy, diluted that message, lifting the demand for perfect Being from the shoulders of its followers, providing them instead with the simple and merciful escapes of faith and the afterlife. That work took centuries, says the Inquisitor, and the last thing the Church needs after all that effort is the return of the Man who insisted that people bear all the weight in the first place. Christ listens in silence. Then, as the Inquisitor turns to leave, Christ embraces him, and kisses him on the lips. The Inquisitor turns white, in shock. Then he goes out, leaving the cell door open.

The profundity of this story and the greatness of spirit necessary to produce it can hardly be exaggerated. Dostoevsky, one of the great literary geniuses of all time, confronted the most serious existential problems in all his great writings, and he did so courageously, headlong, and heedless of the consequences. Clearly Christian, he nonetheless adamantly refuses to make a straw man of his rationalist and atheistic opponents. Quite the contrary: In The Brothers Karamazov, for example, Dostoevsky's atheist, Ivan, argues against the presuppositions of Christianity with unsurpassable clarity and passion. Alyosha, aligned with the Church by temperament and decision, cannot undermine a single one of his brother's arguments (although his faith remains unshakeable). Dostoevsky knew and admitted that Christianity had been defeated by the rational faculty—by the intellect, even—but (and this is of primary importance) he did not hide from that fact. He didn't attempt through denial or deceit or even satire to weaken the position that opposed what he believed to be most true and valuable. He instead placed action above words, and addressed the problem successfully. By the novel's end, Dostoevsky has the great embodied moral goodness of Alyosha—the novitiate's courageous imitation of Christ—attain victory over the spectacular but ultimately nihilistic critical intelligence of Ivan.

The Christian church described by the Grand Inquisitor is the same church pilloried by Nietzsche. Childish, sanctimonious, patriarchal, servant of the state, that church is everything rotten still objected to by modern critics of Christianity

that church is everything rotten still objected to by modern critics of Christianity. Nietzsche, for all his brilliance, allows himself anger, but does not perhaps sufficiently temper it with judgement. This is where Dostoevsky truly transcends Nietzsche, in my estimation—where Dostoevsky's great literature transcends Nietzsche's mere philosophy. The Russian writer's Inquisitor is the genuine article, in every sense. He is an opportunistic, cynical, manipulative and cruel interrogator, willing to persecute heretics—even to torture and kill them. He is the purveyor of a dogma he knows to be false. But Dostoevsky has Christ, the archetypal perfect man, kiss him anyway. Equally importantly, in the aftermath of the kiss, the Grand Inquisitor leaves the door ajar so Christ can escape his pending execution. Dostoevsky saw that the great, corrupt edifice of Christianity still managed to make room for the spirit of its Founder. That's the gratitude of a wise and profound soul for the enduring wisdom of the West, despite its faults.

It's not as if Nietzsche was unwilling to give the faith—and, more particularly, Catholicism—its due. Nietzsche believed that the long tradition of "unfreedom" characterizing dogmatic Christianity—its insistence that everything be explained within the confines of a single, coherent metaphysical theory—was a necessary precondition for the emergence of the disciplined but free modern mind. As he stated in Beyond Good and Evil:

The long bondage of the spirit … the persistent spiritual will to interpret everything that happened according to a Christian scheme, and in every occurrence to rediscover and justify the Christian God in every accident:—all this violence, arbitrariness, severity, dreadfulness, and unreasonableness, has proved itself the disciplinary means whereby the European spirit has attained its strength, its remorseless curiosity and subtle mobility; granted also that much irrecoverable strength and spirit had to be stifled, suffocated and spoiled in the process.146

For Nietzsche and Dostoevsky alike, freedom—even the ability to act—requires constraint. For this reason, they both recognized the vital necessity of the dogma of the Church. The individual must be constrained, moulded—even brought close to destruction—by a restrictive, coherent disciplinary structure, before he or she can act freely and competently. Dostoevsky, with his great generosity of spirit, granted to the church, corrupt as it might be, a certain element of mercy, a certain pragmatism. He admitted that the spirit of Christ, the world-engendering Logos, had historically and might still find its resting place—even its sovereignty—within that dogmatic structure.

If a father disciplines his son properly, he obviously interferes with his freedom, particularly in the here-and-now. He put limits on the voluntary expression of his son's Being. forcing him to take his place as a socialized member of the world. Such a father requires that all that childish potential be funneled down a singly pathway. In placing such limitations on his son, he might be considered a destructive force, acting as he does to replace the miraculous plurality of childhood with a single narrow actuality. But if the father does not take such action, he merely lets his son remain Peter Pan, the eternal Boy, King of the Lost Boys, Ruler of the non-existent Neverland. That is not a morally acceptable alternative.

The dogma of the Church was undermined by the spirit of truth strongly developed by the Church itself. That undermining culminated in the death of God. But the dogmatic structure of the Church was a necessary disciplinary structure. A long period of unfreedom—adherence to a singular interpretive structure—is necessary for the development of a free mind. Christian dogma provided that unfreedom. But the dogma is dead, at least to the modern Western mind. It perished along with God. What has emerged from behind its corpse, however—and this is an issue of central importance—is something even more dead; something that was never alive, even in the past: nihilism, as well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalizing, utopian ideas. It was in the aftermath of God's death that the great collective horrors of Communism and Fascism sprang forth (as both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche predicted they would). Nietzsche, for his part, posited that individual human beings would have to invent their own values in the aftermath of God's death. But this is the element of his thinking that appears weakest, psychologically: we cannot invent our own values, because we cannot merely impose what we believe on our souls. This was Carl Jung's great discovery—made in no little part because of his intense study of the problems posed by Nietzsche.

We rebel against our own totalitarianism, as much as that of others. I cannot merely order myself to action, and neither can you. "I will stop procrastinating," I say, but I don't. "I will eat properly," I say, but I don't. "I will end my drunken misbehavior," I say, but I don't. I cannot merely make myself over in the image constructed by my intellect (particularly if that intellect is possessed by an ideology). I have a nature, and so do you, and so do we all. We must discover that nature, and contend with it, before making peace with ourselves. What is it, that we most truly are? What is it that we could most truly become, knowing who we most truly are? We must get to the very bottom of things before such questions can be truly answered.

questions can be truly answered.

Doubt, Past Mere Nihilism

Three hundred years before Nietzsche, the great French philosopher René Descartes set out on an intellectual mission to take his doubt seriously, to break things apart, to get to what was essential—to see if he could establish, or discover, a single proposition impervious to his skepticism. He was searching for the foundation stone on which proper Being could be established. Descartes found it, as far as he was concerned, in the "I" who thinks—the "I" who was aware—as expressed in his famous dictum, cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). But that "I" had been conceptualized long before. Thousands of years ago, the aware "I" was the all-seeing eye of Horus, the great Egyptian son-and-sun-god, who renewed the state by attending to and then confronting its inevitable corruption. Before that, it was the creator-God Marduk of the Mesopotamians, whose eyes encircled his head and who spoke forth words of world-engendering magic. During the Christian epoch, the "I" transformed into the Logos, the Word that speaks order into Being at the beginning of time. It might be said that Descartes merely secularized the Logos, turning it, more explicitly, into "that which is aware and thinks." That's the modern self, simply put. But what exactly is that self?

We can understand, to some degree, its horrors, if we wish to, but its goodness remains more difficult to define. The self is the great actor of evil who strode about the stage of Being as Nazi and Stalinist alike; who produced Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and the multiplicity of the Soviet gulags. And all of that must be considered with dread seriousness. But what is its opposite? What is the good that is the necessary counterpart of that evil; that is made more corporeal and comprehensible by the very existence of that evil? And here we can state with conviction and clarity that even the rational intellect—that faculty so beloved of those who hold traditional wisdom in contempt—is at minimum something closely and necessarily akin to the archetypal dying and eternally resurrected god, the eternal savior of humanity, the Logos itself. The philosopher of science Karl Popper, certainly no mystic, regarded thinking itself as a logical extension of the Darwinian process. A creature that cannot think must solely embody its Being. It can merely act out its nature, concretely, in the here-and-now. If it cannot manifest in its behavior what the environment demands while doing so, it will simply die. But that is not true of human beings. We can produce abstracted representations of potential modes of Being. We can produce an idea in the theatre of the imagination. We can test it out against our other

ideas, the ideas of others, or the world itself. If it falls short, we can let it go. We can, in Popper's formulation, let our ideas die in our stead.147 Then the essential part, the creator of those ideas, can continue onward, now untrammeled, by comparison, with error. Faith in the part of us that continues across those deaths is a prerequisite to thinking itself.

Now, an idea is not the same thing as a fact. A fact is something that is dead, in and of itself. It has no consciousness, no will to power, no motivation, no action. There are billions of dead facts. The internet is a graveyard of dead facts. But an idea that grips a person is alive. It wants to express itself, to live in the world. It is for this reason that the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung paramount among them—insisted that the human psyche was a battleground for ideas. An idea has an aim. It wants something. It posits a value structure. An idea believes that what it is aiming for is better than what it has now. It reduces the world to those things that aid or impede its realization, and it reduces everything else to irrelevance. An idea defines figure against ground. An idea is a personality, not a fact. When it manifests itself within a person, it has a strong proclivity to make of that person its avatar: to impel that person to act it out. Sometimes, that impulsion (possession is another word) can be so strong that the person will die, rather than allowing the idea to perish. This is, generally speaking, a bad decision, given that it is often the case that only the idea need die, and that the person with the idea can stop being its avatar, change his or her ways, and continue.

To use the dramatic conceptualization of our ancestors: It is the most fundamental convictions that must die—must be sacrificed—when the relationship with God has been disrupted (when the presence of undue and often intolerable suffering, for example, indicates that something has to change). This is to say nothing other than that the future can be made better if the proper sacrifices take place in the present. No other animal has ever figured this out, and it took us untold hundreds of thousands of years to do it. It took further eons of observation and hero-worship, and then millennia of study, to distill that idea into a story. It then took additional vast stretches of time to assess that story, to incorporate it, so that we now can simply say, "If you are disciplined and privilege the future over the present you can change the structure of reality in your favour."

But how best to do that?

In 1984, I started down the same road as Descartes. I did not know it was the

In 1984, I started down the same road as Descartes. I did not know it was the same road at the time, and I am not claiming kinship with Descartes, who is rightly regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. But I was truly plagued with doubt. I had outgrown the shallow Christianity of my youth by the time I could understand the fundamentals of Darwinian theory. After that, I could not distinguish the basic elements of Christian belief from wishful thinking. The socialism that soon afterward became so attractive to me as an alternative proved equally insubstantial; with time, I came to understand, through the great George Orwell, that much of such thinking found its motivation in hatred of the rich and successful, instead of true regard for the poor. Besides, the socialists were more intrinsically capitalist than the capitalists. They believed just as strongly in money. They just thought that if different people had the money, the problems plaguing humanity would vanish. This is simply untrue. There are many problems that money does not solve, and others that it makes worse. Rich people still divorce each other, and alienate themselves from their children, and suffer from existential angst, and develop cancer and dementia, and die alone and unloved. Recovering addicts cursed with money blow it all in a frenzy of snorting and drunkenness. And boredom weighs heavily on people who have nothing to do.

I was simultaneously tormented by the fact of the Cold War. It obsessed me. It gave me nightmares. It drove me into the desert, into the long night of the human soul. I could not understand how it had come to pass that the world's two great factions aimed mutual assured destruction at each other. Was one system just as arbitrary and corrupt as the other? Was it a mere matter of opinion? Were all value structures merely the clothing of power?

Was everyone crazy?

Just exactly what happened in the twentieth century, anyway? How was it that so many tens of millions had to die, sacrificed to the new dogmas and ideologies? How was it that we discovered something worse, much worse, than the aristocracy and corrupt religious beliefs that communism and fascism sought so rationally to supplant? No one had answered those questions, as far as I could tell. Like Descartes, I was plagued with doubt. I searched for one thing—anything—I could regard as indisputable. I wanted a rock upon which to build my house. It was doubt that led me to it.

I once read of a particularly insidious practice at Auschwitz. A guard would force an inmate to carry a hundred-pound sack of wet salt from one side of the

large compound to the other—and then to carry it back. Arbeit macht frei, said the sign over the camp entrance—"Work will set you free"—and the freedom was death. Carrying the salt was an act of pointless torment. It was a piece of malevolent art. It allowed me to realize with certainty that some actions are wrong.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, definitively and profoundly, about the horrors of the twentieth century, the tens of millions who were stripped of employment, family, identity and life. In his Gulag Archipelago, in the second part of the second volume, he discussed the Nuremburg trials, which he considered the most significant event of the twentieth century. The conclusion of those trials? There are some actions that are so intrinsically terrible that they run counter to the proper nature of human Being. This is true essentially, cross-culturally—across time and place. These are evil actions. No excuses are available for engaging in them. To dehumanize a fellow being, to reduce him or her to the status of a parasite, to torture and to slaughter with no consideration of individual innocence or guilt, to make an art form of pain—that is wrong.

What can I not doubt? The reality of suffering. It brooks no arguments. Nihilists cannot undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape from its reality. Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own sake, is wrong. That became the cornerstone of my belief. Searching through the lowest reaches of human thought and action, understanding my own capacity to act like a Nazi prison guard or a gulag archipelago trustee or a torturer of children in a dungeon, I grasped what it meant to "take the sins of the world onto oneself." Each human being has an immense capacity for evil. Each human being understands, a priori, perhaps not what is good, but certainly what is not. And if there is something that is not good, then there is something that is good. If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the suffering produced—then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that. The good is whatever stops such things from happening.

Meaning as the Higher Good

It was from this that I drew my fundamental moral conclusions. Aim up. Pay attention. Fix what you can fix. Don't be arrogant in your knowledge. Strive for humility, because totalitarian pride manifests itself in intolerance, oppression, torture and death. Become aware of your own insufficiency—your cowardice, malevolence, resentment and hatred. Consider the murderousness of your own spirit before you dare accuse others, and before you attempt to repair the fabric of the world. Maybe it's not the world that's at fault. Maybe it's you. You've failed to make the mark. You've missed the target. You've fallen short of the glory of God. You've sinned. And all of that is your contribution to the insufficiency and evil of the world. And, above all, don't lie. Don't lie about anything, ever. Lying leads to Hell. It was the great and the small lies of the Nazi and Communist states that produced the deaths of millions of people.

Consider then that the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering is a good. Make that an axiom: to the best of my ability I will act in a manner that leads to the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering. You have now placed at the pinnacle of your moral hierarchy a set of presuppositions and actions aimed at the betterment of Being. Why? Because we know the alternative. The alternative was the twentieth century. The alternative was so close to Hell that the difference is not worth discussing. And the opposite of Hell is Heaven. To place the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering at the pinnacle of your hierarchy of value is to work to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. That's a state, and a state of mind, at the same time.

Jung observed that the construction of such a moral hierarchy was inevitable—although it could remain poorly arranged and internally self-contradictory. For Jung, whatever was at the top of an individual's moral hierarchy was, for all intents and purposes, that person's ultimate value, that person's god. It was what the person acted out. It was what the person believed most deeply. Something enacted is not a fact, or even a set of facts. Instead, it's a personality—or, more precisely, a choice between two opposing personalities. It's Sherlock Holmes or Moriarty. It's Batman or the Joker. It's Superman or Lex Luthor, Charles Francis Xavier or Magneto, and Thor or Loki. It's Abel or Cain—and it's Christ or Satan. If it's working for the ennobling of Being, for the establishment of Paradise, then it's Christ. If it's working for the destruction of Being, for the generation and propagation of unnecessary suffering and pain, then it's Satan. That's the inescapable, archetypal reality.

That's the inescapable, archetypal reality.

Expedience is the following of blind impulse. It's short-term gain. It's narrow, and selfish. It lies to get its way. It takes nothing into account. It's immature and irresponsible. Meaning is its mature replacement. Meaning emerges when impulses are regulated, organized and unified. Meaning emerges from the interplay between the possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world. If the value structure is aimed at the betterment of Being, the meaning revealed will be life-sustaining. It will provide the antidote for chaos and suffering. It will make everything matter. It will make everything better.

If you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader world around you. Everything will stack up and align along a single axis. Everything will come together. This produces maximal meaning. This stacking up is a place in space and time whose existence we can detect with our ability to experience more than is simply revealed here and now by our senses, which are obviously limited to their information-gathering and representational capacity. Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies all impulses, now and forever. That's why we can detect it.

If you decide that you are not justified in your resentment of Being, despite its inequity and pain, you may come to notice things you could fix to reduce even by a bit some unnecessary pain and suffering. You may come to ask yourself, "What should I do today?" in a manner that means "How could I use my time to make things better, instead of worse?" Such tasks may announce themselves as the pile of undone paperwork that you could attend to, the room that you could make a bit more welcoming, or the meal that could be a bit more delicious and more gratefully delivered to your family.

You may find that if you attend to these moral obligations, once you have placed "make the world better" at the top of your value hierarchy, you experience ever-deepening meaning. It's not bliss. It's not happiness. It is something more like atonement for the criminal fact of your fractured and damaged Being. It's payment of the debt you owe for the insane and horrible miracle of your existence. It's how you remember the Holocaust. It's how you make amends for the pathology of history. It's adoption of the responsibility for being a potential denizen of Hell. It is willingness to serve as an angel of Paradise.

Expedience—that's hiding all the skeletons in the closet. That's covering the blood you just spilled with a carpet. That's avoiding responsibility. It's

blood you just spilled with a carpet. That's avoiding responsibility. It's cowardly, and shallow, and wrong. It's wrong because mere expedience, multiplied by many repetitions, produces the character of a demon. It's wrong because expedience merely transfers the curse on your head to someone else, or to your future self, in a manner that will make your future, and the future generally, worse instead of better.

There is no faith and no courage and no sacrifice in doing what is expedient. There is no careful observation that actions and presuppositions matter, or that the world is made of what matters. To have meaning in your life is better than to have what you want, because you may neither know what you want, nor what you truly need. Meaning is something that comes upon you, of its own accord. You can set up the preconditions, you can follow meaning, when it manifests itself, but you cannot simply produce it, as an act of will. Meaning signifies that you are in the right place, at the right time, properly balanced between order and chaos, where everything lines up as best it can at that moment.

What is expedient works only for the moment. It's immediate, impulsive and limited. What is meaningful, by contrast, is the organization of what would otherwise merely be expedient into a symphony of Being. Meaning is what is put forth more powerfully than mere words can express by Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," a triumphant bringing forth from the void of pattern after pattern upon beautiful pattern, every instrument playing its part, disciplined voices layered on top of that, spanning the entire breadth of human emotion from despair to exhilaration.

Meaning is what manifests itself when the many levels of Being arrange themselves into a perfectly functioning harmony, from atomic microcosm to cell to organ to individual to society to nature to cosmos, so that action at each level beautifully and perfectly facilitates action at all, such that past, present and future are all at once redeemed and reconciled. Meaning is what emerges beautifully and profoundly like a newly formed rosebud opening itself out of nothingness into the light of sun and God. Meaning is the lotus striving upward through the dark lake depths through the ever-clearing water, blooming forth on the very surface, revealing within itself the Golden Buddha, himself perfectly integrated, such that the revelation of the Divine Will can make itself manifest in his every word and gesture.

Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose—the glorification of a reality so that no matter how good it has

suddenly become, it can get better and better and better more and more deeply forever into the future. Meaning happens when that dance has become so intense that all the horrors of the past, all the terrible struggle engaged in by all of life and all of humanity to that moment becomes a necessary and worthwhile part of the increasingly successful attempt to build something truly Mighty and Good.

Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that.

Do what is meaningful, not what is expedient.

RULE 8

TELL THE TRUTH—OR, AT LEAST, DON'T LIE

TRUTH IN NO-MAN'S-LAND

I trained to become a clinical psychologist at McGill University, in Montreal. While doing so, I sometimes met my classmates on the grounds of Montreal's Douglas Hospital, where we had our first direct experiences with the mentally ill. The Douglas occupies acres of land and dozens of buildings. Many are connected by underground tunnels to protect workers and patients from the interminable Montreal winters. The hospital once sheltered hundreds of long-term in-house patients. This was before anti-psychotic drugs and the large scale deinstitutionalization movements of the late sixties all but closed down the residential asylums, most often dooming the now "freed" patients to a much harder life on the streets. By the early eighties, when I first visited the grounds, all but the most seriously afflicted residents had been discharged. Those who remained were strange, much-damaged people. They clustered around the vending machines scattered throughout the hospital's tunnels. They looked as if they had been photographed by Diane Arbus or painted by Hieronymus Bosch.

One day my classmates and I were all standing in line. We were awaiting further instruction from the strait-laced German psychologist who ran the Douglas clinical training program. A long-term inpatient, fragile and vulnerable, approached one of the other students, a sheltered, conservative young woman. The patient spoke to her in a friendly, childlike manner, and asked, “Why are you all standing here? What are you doing? Can I come along with you?” My classmate turned to me and asked uncertainly, “What should I say to her?” She was taken aback, just as I was, by this request coming from someone so isolated and hurt. Neither of us wanted to say anything that might be construed as a rejection or reprimand.

We had temporarily entered a kind of no-man’s-land, in which society offers no ground rules or guidance. We were new clinical students, unprepared to be confronted on the grounds of a mental hospital by a schizophrenic patient asking a naive, friendly question about the possibility of social belonging. The natural conversational give-and-take between people attentive to contextual cues was not happening here, either. What exactly were the rules, in such a situation, far outside the boundaries of normal social interaction? What exactly were the options?

There were only two, as far as I could quickly surmise. I could tell the patient a story designed to save everyone’s face, or I could answer truthfully. “We can only take eight people in our group,” would have fallen into the first category, as would have, “We are just leaving the hospital now.” Neither of these answers would have bruised any feelings, at least on the surface, and the presence of the status differences that divided us from her would have gone unremarked. But neither answer would have been exactly true. So, I didn’t offer either.

I told the patient as simply and directly as I could that we were new students, training to be psychologists, and that she couldn’t join us for that reason. The answer highlighted the distinction between her situation and ours, making the gap between us greater and more evident. The answer was harsher than a well-crafted white lie. But I already had an inkling that untruth, however well-meant, can produce unintended consequences. She looked crestfallen, and hurt, but only for a moment. Then she understood, and it was all right. That was just how it was.

I had had a strange set of experiences a few years before embarking upon my clinical training.148 I found myself subject to some rather violent compulsions (none acted upon), and developed the conviction, in consequence, that I really

knew rather little about who I was and what I was up to. So, I began paying much closer attention to what I was doing—and saying. The experience was disconcerting, to say the least. I soon divided myself into two parts: one that spoke, and one, more detached, that paid attention and judged. I soon came to realize that almost everything I said was untrue. I had motives for saying these things: I wanted to win arguments and gain status and impress people and get what I wanted. I was using language to bend and twist the world into delivering what I thought was necessary. But I was a fake. Realizing this, I started to practise only saying things that the internal voice would not object to. I started to practise telling the truth—or, at least, not lying. I soon learned that such a skill came in very handy when I didn't know what to do. What should you do, when you don't know what to do? Tell the truth. So, that's what I did my first day at the Douglas Hospital.

Later, I had a client who was paranoid and dangerous. Working with paranoid people is challenging. They believe they have been targeted by mysterious conspiratorial forces, working malevolently behind the scenes. Paranoid people are hyper-alert and hyper-focused. They are attending to non-verbal cues with an intentness never manifest during ordinary human interactions. They make mistakes in interpretation (that's the paranoia) but they are still almost uncanny in their ability to detect mixed motives, judgment and falsehood. You have to listen very carefully and tell the truth if you are going to get a paranoid person to open up to you.

I listened carefully and spoke truthfully to my client. Now and then, he would describe blood-curdling fantasies of flaying people for revenge. I would watch how I was reacting. I paid attention to what thoughts and images emerged in the theatre of my imagination while he spoke, and I told him what I observed. I was not trying to control or direct his thoughts or actions (or mine). I was only trying to let him know as transparently as I could how what he was doing was directly affecting at least one person—me. My careful attention and frank responses did not mean at all that I remained unperturbed, let alone approved. I told him when he scared me (often), that his words and behaviour were misguided, and that he was going to get into serious trouble.

He talked to me, nonetheless, because I listened and responded honestly, even though I was not encouraging in my responses. He trusted me, despite (or, more accurately, because of) my objections. He was paranoid, not stupid. He knew his behaviour was socially unacceptable. He knew that any decent person was likely to react with horror to his insane fantasies. He trusted me and would talk to me

to react with horror to his insane fantasies. He trusted me and would talk to me because that's how I reacted. There was no chance of understanding him without that trust.

Trouble for him generally started in a bureaucracy, such as a bank. He would enter an institution and attempt some simple task. He was looking to open an account, or pay a bill, or fix some mistake. Now and then he encountered the kind of non-helpful person that everyone encounters now and then in such a place. That person would reject the ID he offered, or require some information that was unnecessary and difficult to obtain. Sometimes, I suppose, the bureaucratic runaround was unavoidable—but sometimes it was unnecessarily complicated by petty misuses of bureaucratic power. My client was very attuned to such things. He was obsessed with honour. It was more important to him than safety, freedom or belonging. Following that logic (because paranoid people are impeccably logical), he could never allow himself to be demeaned, insulted or put down, even a little bit, by anyone. Water did not roll off his back. Because of his rigid and inflexible attitude, my client's actions had already been subjected to several restraining orders. Restraining orders work best, however, with the sort of person who would never require a restraining order.

"I will be your worst nightmare," was his phrase of choice, in such situations. I have wished intensely that I could say something like that, after encountering unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles, but it's generally best to let such things go. My client meant what he said, however, and sometimes he really did become someone's nightmare. He was the bad guy in No Country for Old Men. He was the person you meet in the wrong place, at the wrong time. If you messed with him, even accidentally, he was going to stalk you, remind you what you had done, and scare the living daylights out of you. He was no one to lie to. I told him the truth and that cooled him off.

My Landlord

I had a landlord around that time who had been president of a local biker gang. My wife, Tammy, and I lived next door to him in his parents' small apartment building. His girlfriend bore the marks of self-inflicted injuries characteristic of borderline personality disorder. She killed herself while we lived there.

Denis, large, strong, French-Canadian, with a grey beard, was a gifted amateur electrician. He had some artistic talent, too, and was supporting himself making laminated wood posters with custom neon lights. He was trying to stay sober, after being released from jail. Still, every month or so, he would disappear on a days-long bender. He was one of those men who have a miraculous capacity for alcohol; he could drink fifty or sixty beer in a two-day binge and remain standing the whole time. This may seem hard to believe, but it's true. I was doing research on familial alcoholism at the time, and it was not rare for my subjects to report their fathers' habitual consumption of forty ounces of vodka a day. These patriarchs would buy one bottle every afternoon, Monday through Friday, and then two on Saturday, to tide them over through the Sunday liquor-store closure.

Denis had a little dog. Sometimes Tammy and I would hear Denis and the dog out in the backyard at four in the morning, during one of Denis's marathon drinking sessions, both of them howling madly at the moon. Now and then, on occasions like that, Denis would drink up every cent he had saved. Then he would show up at our apartment. We would hear a knock at night. Denis would be at the door, swaying precipitously, upright, and miraculously conscious.

He would be standing there, toaster, microwave, or poster in hand. He wanted to sell these to me so he could keep on drinking. I bought a few things like this, pretending that I was being charitable. Eventually, Tammy convinced me that I couldn't do it anymore. It made her nervous, and it was bad for Denis, whom she liked. Reasonable and even necessary as her request was, it still placed me in a tricky position.

What do you say to a severely intoxicated, violence-prone ex-biker-gang-president with patchy English when he tries to sell his microwave to you at your open door at two in the morning? This was a question even more difficult than those presented by the institutionalized patient or the paranoid flayer. But the answer was the same: the truth. But you'd bloody well better know what the

truth is.

Denis knocked again soon after my wife and I had talked. He looked at me in the direct skeptical narrow-eyed manner characteristic of the tough, heavy-drinking man who is no stranger to trouble. That look means, “Prove your innocence.” Weaving slightly back and forth, he asked—politely—if I might be interested in purchasing his toaster. I rid myself, to the bottom of my soul, of primate-dominance motivations and moral superiority. I told him as directly and carefully as I could that I would not. I was playing no tricks. In that moment I wasn’t an educated, anglophone, fortunate, upwardly-mobile young man. He wasn’t an ex-con Québécois biker with a blood alcohol level of .24. No, we were two men of good will trying to help each other out in our common struggle to do the right thing. I said that he had told me he was trying to quit drinking. I said that it would not be good for him if I provided him with more money. I said that he made Tammy, whom he respected, nervous when he came over so drunk and so late and tried to sell me things.

He glared seriously at me without speaking for about fifteen seconds. That was plenty long enough. He was watching, I knew, for any micro-expression revealing sarcasm, deceit, contempt or self-congratulation. But I had thought it through, carefully, and I had only said things I truly meant. I had chosen my words, carefully, traversing a treacherous swamp, feeling out a partially submerged stone path. Denis turned and left. Not only that, he remembered our conversation, despite his state of professional-level intoxication. He didn’t try to sell me anything again. Our relationship, which was quite good, given the great cultural gaps between us, became even more solid.

Taking the easy way out or telling the truth—those are not merely two different choices. They are different pathways through life. They are utterly different ways of existing.

Manipulate the World

You can use words to manipulate the world into delivering what you want. This is what it means to "act politically." This is spin. It's the specialty of unscrupulous marketers, salesmen, advertisers, pickup artists, slogan-possessed utopians and psychopaths. It's the speech people engage in when they attempt to influence and manipulate others. It's what university students do when they write an essay to please the professor, instead of articulating and clarifying their own ideas. It's what everyone does when they want something, and decide to falsify themselves to please and flatter. It's scheming and sloganeering and propaganda.

To conduct life like this is to become possessed by some ill-formed desire, and then to craft speech and action in a manner that appears likely, rationally, to bring about that end. Typical calculated ends might include "to impose my ideological beliefs," "to prove that I am (or was) right," "to appear competent," "to ratchet myself up the dominance hierarchy," "to avoid responsibility" (or its twin, "to garner credit for others' actions"), "to be promoted," "to attract the lion's share of attention," "to ensure that everyone likes me," "to garner the benefits of martyrdom," "to justify my cynicism," "to rationalize my antisocial outlook," "to minimize immediate conflict," "to maintain my naïveté," "to capitalize on my vulnerability," "to always appear as the sainted one," or (this one is particularly evil) "to ensure that it is always my unloved child's fault." These are all examples of what Sigmund Freud's compatriot, the lesser-known Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler, called "life-lies."149

Someone living a life-lie is attempting to manipulate reality with perception, thought and action, so that only some narrowly desired and pre-defined outcome is allowed to exist. A life lived in this manner is based, consciously or unconsciously, on two premises. The first is that current knowledge is sufficient to define what is good, unquestioningly, far into the future. The second is that reality would be unbearable if left to its own devices. The first presumption is philosophically unjustifiable. What you are currently aiming at might not be worth attaining, just as what you are currently doing might be an error. The second is even worse. It is valid only if reality is intrinsically intolerable and, simultaneously, something that can be successfully manipulated and distorted. Such speaking and thinking requires the arrogance and certainty that the English poet John Milton's genius identified with Satan, God's highest angel gone most spectacularly wrong. The faculty of rationality inclines dangerously to pride; all

spectacularly wrong. The faculty of rationality inclines dangerously to pride: all I know is all that needs to be known. Pride falls in love with its own creations, and tries to make them absolute.

I have seen people define their utopia and then bend their lives into knots trying to make it reality. A left-leaning student adopts a trendy, anti-authority stance and spends the next twenty years working resentfully to topple the windmills of his imagination. An eighteen-year-old decides, arbitrarily, that she wants to retire at fifty-two. She works for three decades to make that happen, failing to notice that she made that decision when she was little more than a child. What did she know about her fifty-two-year-old self, when still a teenager? Even now, many years later, she has only the vaguest, lowest-resolution idea of her post-work Eden. She refuses to notice. What did her life mean, if that initial goal was wrong? She's afraid of opening Pandora's box, where all the troubles of the world reside. But hope is in there, too. Instead, she warps her life to fit the fantasies of a sheltered adolescent.

A naively formulated goal transmutes, with time, into the sinister form of the life-lie. One forty-something client told me his vision, formulated by his younger self: "I see myself retired, sitting on a tropical beach, drinking margaritas in the sunshine." That's not a plan. That's a travel poster. After eight margaritas, you're fit only to await the hangover. After three weeks of margarita-filled days, if you have any sense, you're bored stiff and self-disgusted. In a year, or less, you're pathetic. It's just not a sustainable approach to later life. This kind of oversimplification and falsification is particularly typical of ideologues. They adopt a single axiom: government is bad, immigration is bad, capitalism is bad, patriarchy is bad. Then they filter and screen their experiences and insist ever more narrowly that everything can be explained by that axiom. They believe, narcissistically, underneath all that bad theory, that the world could be put right, if only they held the controls.

There is another fundamental problem, too, with the life-lie, particularly when it is based on avoidance. A sin of commission occurs when you do something you know to be wrong. A sin of omission occurs when you let something bad happen when you could do something to stop it. The former is regarded, classically, as more serious than the latter—than avoidance. I'm not so sure.

Consider the person who insists that everything is right in her life. She avoids conflict, and smiles, and does what she is asked to do. She finds a niche and hides in it. She does not question authority or put her own ideas forward, and

does not complain when mistreated. She strives for invisibility, like a fish in the centre of a swarming school. But a secret unrest gnaws at her heart. She is still suffering, because life is suffering. She is lonesome and isolated and unfulfilled. But her obedience and self-obliteration eliminate all the meaning from her life. She has become nothing but a slave, a tool for others to exploit. She does not get what she wants, or needs, because doing so would mean speaking her mind. So, there is nothing of value in her existence to counterbalance life's troubles. And that makes her sick.

It might be the noisy troublemakers who disappear, first, when the institution you serve falters and shrinks. But it's the invisible who will be sacrificed next. Someone hiding is not someone vital. Vitality requires original contribution. Hiding also does not save the conforming and conventional from disease, insanity, death and taxes. And hiding from others also means suppressing and hiding the potentialities of the unrealized self. And that's the problem.

If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. That does not only mean that you suppress who you are, although it also means that. It means that so much of what you could be will never be forced by necessity to come forward. This is a biological truth, as well as a conceptual truth. When you explore boldly, when you voluntarily confront the unknown, you gather information and build your renewed self out of that information. That is the conceptual element. However, researchers have recently discovered that new genes in the central nervous system turn themselves on when an organism is placed (or places itself) in a new situation. These genes code for new proteins. These proteins are the building blocks for new structures in the brain. This means that a lot of you is still nascent, in the most physical of senses, and will not be called forth by stasis. You have to say something, go somewhere and do things to get turned on. And, if not … you remain incomplete, and life is too hard for anyone incomplete.

If you say no to your boss, or your spouse, or your mother, when it needs to be said, then you transform yourself into someone who can say no when it needs to be said. If you say yes when no needs to be said, however, you transform yourself into someone who can only say yes, even when it is very clearly time to say no. If you ever wonder how perfectly ordinary, decent people could find themselves doing the terrible things the gulag camp guards did, you now have your answer. By the time no seriously needed to be said, there was no one left capable of saying it.

If you betray yourself, if you say untrue things, if you act out a lie, you weaken your character. If you have a weak character, then adversity will mow you down when it appears, as it will, inevitably. You will hide, but there will be no place left to hide. And then you will find yourself doing terrible things.

Only the most cynical, hopeless philosophy insists that reality could be improved through falsification. Such a philosophy judges Being and becoming alike, and deems them flawed. It denounces truth as insufficient and the honest man as deluded. It is a philosophy that both brings about and then justifies the endemic corruption of the world.

It is not vision as such, and not a plan devised to achieve a vision, that is at fault under such circumstances. A vision of the future, the desirable future, is necessary. Such a vision links action taken now with important, long-term, foundational values. It lends actions in the present significance and importance. It provides a frame limiting uncertainty and anxiety.

It's not vision. It is instead willful blindness. It's the worst sort of lie. It's subtle. It avails itself of easy rationalizations. Willful blindness is the refusal to know something that could be known. It's refusal to admit that the knocking sound means someone at the door. It's refusal to acknowledge the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, the elephant under the carpet, the skeleton in the closet. It's refusal to admit to error while pursuing the plan. Every game has rules. Some of the most important rules are implicit. You accept them merely by deciding to play the game. The first of these rules is that the game is important. If it wasn't important, you wouldn't be playing it. Playing a game defines it as important. The second is that moves undertaken during the game are valid if they help you win. If you make a move and it isn't helping you win, then, by definition, it's a bad move. You need to try something different. You remember the old joke: insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.

If you're lucky, and you fail, and you try something new, you move ahead. If that doesn't work, you try something different again. A minor modification will suffice in fortunate circumstances. It is therefore prudent to begin with small changes, and see if they help. Sometimes, however, the entire hierarchy of values is faulty, and the whole edifice has to be abandoned. The whole game must be changed. That's a revolution, with all the chaos and terror of a revolution. It's not something to be engaged in lightly, but it's sometimes necessary. Error necessitates sacrifice to correct it, and serious error necessitates serious sacrifice. To accept the truth means to sacrifice—and if you have

serious sacrifice. To accept the truth means to sacrifice — and if you have rejected the truth for a long time, then you've run up a dangerously large sacrificial debt. Forest fires burn out deadwood and return trapped elements to the soil. Sometimes, however, fires are suppressed, artificially. That does not stop the deadwood from accumulating. Sooner or later, a fire will start. When it does, it will burn so hot that everything will be destroyed—even the soil in which the forest grows.

The prideful, rational mind, comfortable with its certainty, enamoured of its own brilliance, is easily tempted to ignore error, and to sweep dirt under the rug. Literary, existential philosophers, beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, conceived of this mode of Being as "inauthentic." An inauthentic person continues to perceive and act in ways his own experience has demonstrated false. He does not speak with his own voice.

"Did what I want happen? No. Then my aim or my methods were wrong. I still have something to learn." That is the voice of authenticity.

"Did what I want happen? No. Then the world is unfair. People are jealous, and too stupid to understand. It is the fault of something or someone else." That is the voice of inauthenticity. It is not too far from there to "they should be stopped" or "they must be hurt" or "they must be destroyed." Whenever you hear about something incomprehensibly brutal, such ideas have manifested themselves.

There is no blaming any of this on unconsciousness, either, or repression. When the individual lies, he knows it. He may blind himself to the consequences of his actions. He may fail to analyze and articulate his past, so that he does not understand. He may even forget that he lied and so be unconscious of that fact. But he was conscious, in the present, during the commission of each error, and the omission of each responsibility. At that moment, he knew what he was up to. And the sins of the inauthentic individual compound and corrupt the state.

Someone power-hungry makes a new rule at your workplace. It's unnecessary. It's counterproductive. It's an irritant. It removes some of the pleasure and meaning from your work. But you tell yourself it's all right. It's not worth complaining about. Then it happens again. You've already trained yourself to allow such things, by failing to react the first time. You're a little less courageous. Your opponent, unopposed, is a little bit stronger. The institution is a little bit more corrupt. The process of bureaucratic stagnation and oppression is underway, and you've contributed, by pretending that it was OK. Why not

underway, and you've contributed, by pretending that it was OK. Why not complain? Why not take a stand? If you do, other people, equally afraid to speak up, may come to your defence. And if not—maybe it's time for a revolution. Maybe you should find a job somewhere else, where your soul is less in danger from corruption.

For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)

One of the major contributions of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's masterwork, The Gulag Archipelago, was his analysis of the direct causal relationship between the pathology of the Soviet prison-work-camp dependent state (where millions suffered and died) and the almost universal proclivity of the Soviet citizen to falsify his own day-to-day personal experience, deny his own state-induced suffering, and thereby prop up the dictates of the rational, ideology-possessed communist system. It was this bad faith, this denial, that in Solzhenitsyn's opinion aided and abetted that great paranoid mass-murderer, Joseph Stalin, in his crimes. Solzhenitsyn wrote the truth, his truth, hard-learned through his own experiences in the camps, exposing the lies of the Soviet state. No educated person dared defend that ideology again after Solzhenitsyn published The Gulag Archipelago. No one could ever say again, "What Stalin did, that was not true communism."

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Nazi concentration camp survivor who wrote the classic Man's Search for Meaning, drew a similar social-psychological conclusion: deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism. Sigmund Freud, for his part, analogously believed that "repression" contributed in a non-trivial manner to the development of mental illness (and the difference between repression of truth and a lie is a matter of degree, not kind). Alfred Adler knew it was lies that bred sickness. C.G. Jung knew that moral problems plagued his patients, and that such problems were caused by untruth. All these thinkers, all centrally concerned with pathology both individual and cultural, came to the same conclusion: lies warp the structure of Being. Untruth corrupts the soul and the state alike, and one form of corruption feeds the other.

I have repeatedly observed the transformation of mere existential misery into outright hell by betrayal and deceit. The barely manageable crisis of a parent's terminal illness can be turned, for example, into something awful beyond description by the unseemly and petty squabbling of the sufferer's adult children.

Obsessed by the unresolved past, they gather like ghouls around the deathbed, forcing tragedy into an unholy dalliance with cowardice and resentment.

The inability of a son to thrive independently is exploited by a mother bent on shielding her child from all disappointment and pain. He never leaves, and she is never lonely. It's an evil conspiracy, forged slowly, as the pathology unfolds, by thousands of knowing winks and nods. She plays the martyr, doomed to support her son, and garners nourishing sympathy, like a vampire, from supporting friends. He broods in his basement, imagining himself oppressed. He fantasizes with delight about the havoc he might wreak on the world that rejected him for his cowardice, awkwardness and inability. And sometimes he wreaks precisely that havoc. And everyone asks, "Why?" They could know, but refuse to.

Even well-lived lives can, of course, be warped and hurt and twisted by illness and infirmity and uncontrollable catastrophe. Depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, like cancer, all involve biological factors beyond the individual's immediate control. The difficulties intrinsic to life itself are sufficient to weaken and overwhelm each of us, pushing us beyond our limits, breaking us at our weakest point. Not even the best-lived life provides an absolute defence against vulnerability. But the family that fights in the ruins of their earthquake-devastated dwelling place is much less likely to rebuild than the family made strong by mutual trust and devotion. Any natural weakness or existential challenge, no matter how minor, can be magnified into a serious crisis with enough deceit in the individual, family or culture.

The honest human spirit may continually fail in its attempts to bring about Paradise on Earth. It may manage, however, to reduce the suffering attendant on existence to bearable levels. The tragedy of Being is the consequence of our limitations and the vulnerability defining human experience. It may even be the price we pay for Being itself—since existence must be limited, to be at all.

I have seen a husband adapt honestly and courageously while his wife descended into terminal dementia. He made the necessary adjustments, step by step. He accepted help when he needed it. He refused to deny her sad deterioration and in that manner adapted gracefully to it. I saw the family of that same woman come together in a supporting and sustaining manner as she lay dying, and gain newfound connections with each other—brother, sisters, grandchildren and father—as partial but genuine compensation for their loss. I have seen my teenage daughter live through the destruction of her hip and her ankle and survive two years of continual, intense pain and emerge with her spirit intact. I

survive two years of continual, intense pain and emerge with her spirit intact. I watched her younger brother voluntarily and without resentment sacrifice many opportunities for friendship and social engagement to stand by her and us while she suffered. With love, encouragement, and character intact, a human being can be resilient beyond imagining. What cannot be borne, however, is the absolute ruin produced by tragedy and deception.

The capacity of the rational mind to deceive, manipulate, scheme, trick, falsify, minimize, mislead, betray, prevaricate, deny, omit, rationalize, bias, exaggerate and obscure is so endless, so remarkable, that centuries of pre-scientific thought, concentrating on clarifying the nature of moral endeavour, regarded it as positively demonic. This is not because of rationality itself, as a process. That process can produce clarity and progress. It is because rationality is subject to the single worst temptation—to raise what it knows now to the status of an absolute.

We can turn to the great poet John Milton, once again, to clarify just what this means. Over thousands of years of history, the Western world wrapped a dream-like fantasy about the nature of evil around its central religious core. That fantasy had a protagonist, an adversarial personality, absolutely dedicated to the corruption of Being. Milton took it upon himself to organize, dramatize and articulate the essence of this collective dream, and gave it life, in the figure of Satan—Lucifer, the "light bearer." He writes of Lucifer's primal temptation, and its immediate consequences:150

He trusted to have equaled the most High,

If he opposed; and with ambitious aim

Against the Throne and Monarchy of God

Raised impious War in Heaven and Battel proud

With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power

Hurled headlong flaming from the Ethereal Sky

With hideous ruin and combustion down

To bottomless perdition, there to dwell

In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire …

Lucifer, in Milton's eyes—the spirit of reason—was the most wondrous angel brought forth from the void by God. This can be read psychologically. Reason is something alive. It lives in all of us. It's older than any of us. It's best understood as a personality, not a faculty. It has its aims, and its temptations, and its weaknesses. It flies higher and sees farther than any other spirit. But reason falls in love with itself, and worse. It falls in love with its own productions. It elevates them, and worships them as absolutes. Lucifer is, therefore, the spirit of totalitarianism. He is flung from Heaven into Hell because such elevation, such rebellion against the Highest and Incomprehensible, inevitably produces Hell.

To say it again: it is the greatest temptation of the rational faculty to glorify its own capacity and its own productions and to claim that in the face of its theories nothing transcendent or outside its domain need exist. This means that all important facts have been discovered. This means that nothing important remains unknown. But most importantly, it means denial of the necessity for courageous individual confrontation with Being. What is going to save you? The totalitarian says, in essence, "You must rely on faith in what you already know." But that is not what saves. What saves is the willingness to learn from what you don't know. That is faith in the possibility of human transformation. That is faith in the sacrifice of the current self for the self that could be. The totalitarian denies the necessity for the individual to take ultimate responsibility for Being.

That denial is the meaning of rebellion against "the most High." That is what totalitarian means: Everything that needs to be discovered has been discovered. Everything will unfold precisely as planned. All problems will vanish, forever, once the perfect system is accepted. Milton's great poem was a prophecy. As rationality rose ascendant from the ashes of Christianity, the great threat of total systems accompanied it. Communism, in particular, was attractive not so much to oppressed workers, its hypothetical beneficiaries, but to intellectuals—to those whose arrogant pride in intellect assured them they were always right. But the promised utopia never emerged. Instead humanity experienced the inferno of Stalinist Russia and Mao's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia, and the citizens of those states were required to betray their own experience, turn against their fellow citizens, and die in the tens of millions.

There is an old Soviet joke. An American dies and goes to hell. Satan himself shows him around. They pass a large cauldron. The American peers in. It's full of suffering souls, burning in hot pitch. As they struggle to leave the pot, low-

ranking devils, sitting on the rim, pitchfork them back in. The American is properly shocked. Satan says, “That’s where we put sinful Englishmen.” The tour continues. Soon the duo approaches a second cauldron. It’s slightly larger, and slightly hotter. The American peers in. It is also full of suffering souls, all wearing berets. Devils are pitchforking would-be escapees back into this cauldron, as well. “That’s where we put sinful Frenchmen,” Satan says. In the distance is a third cauldron. It’s much bigger, and is glowing, white hot. The American can barely get near it. Nonetheless, at Satan’s insistence, he approaches it and peers in. It is absolutely packed with souls, barely visible, under the surface of the boiling liquid. Now and then, however, one clambers out of the pitch and desperately reaches for the rim. Oddly, there are no devils sitting on the edge of this giant pot, but the clamberer disappears back under the surface anyway. The American asks, “Why are there no demons here to keep everyone from escaping?” Satan replies, “This is where we put the Russians. If one tries to escape, the others pull him back in.”

Milton believed that stubborn refusal to change in the face of error not only meant ejection from heaven, and subsequent degeneration into an ever-deepening hell, but the rejection of redemption itself. Satan knows full well that even if he was willing to seek reconciliation, and God willing to grant it, he would only rebel again, because he will not change. Perhaps it is this prideful stubbornness that constitutes the mysterious unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost:

… Farewell happy Fields

Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail

Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell

Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings

A mind not to be changed by Place or Time.151

This is no afterlife fantasy. This is no perverse realm of post-existence torture for political enemies. This is an abstract idea, and abstractions are often more real than what they represent. The idea that hell exists in some metaphysical manner is not only ancient, and pervasive; it’s true. Hell is eternal. It has always existed. It exists now. It’s the most barren, hopeless and malevolent subdivision of the underworld of chaos, where disappointed and resentful people forever dwell.

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.152

…

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.153

Those who have lied enough, in word and action, live there, in hell—now. Take a walk down any busy urban street. Keep your eyes open and pay attention. You will see people who are there, now. These are the people to whom you instinctively give a wide berth. These are the people who are immediately angered if you direct your gaze toward them, although sometimes they will instead turn away in shame. I saw a horribly damaged street alcoholic do exactly that in the presence of my young daughter. He wanted above all to avoid seeing his degraded state incontrovertibly reflected in her eyes.

It is deceit that makes people miserable beyond what they can bear. It is deceit that fills human souls with resentment and vengefulness. It is deceit that produces the terrible suffering of mankind: the death camps of the Nazis; the torture chambers and genocides of Stalin and that even greater monster, Mao. It was deceit that killed hundreds of millions of people in the twentieth century. It was deceit that almost doomed civilization itself. It is deceit that still threatens us, most profoundly, today.

The Truth, Instead

What happens if, instead, we decide to stop lying? What does this even mean? We are limited in our knowledge, after all. We must make decisions, here and now, even though the best means and the best goals can never be discerned with certainty. An aim, an ambition, provides the structure necessary for action. An aim provides a destination, a point of contrast against the present, and a

aim provides a destination, a point of contrast against the present, and a framework, within which all things can be evaluated. An aim defines progress and makes such progress exciting. An aim reduces anxiety, because if you have no aim everything can mean anything or nothing, and neither of those two options makes for a tranquil spirit. Thus, we have to think, and plan, and limit, and posit, in order to live at all. How then to envision the future, and establish our direction, without falling prey to the temptation of totalitarian certainty?

Some reliance on tradition can help us establish our aims. It is reasonable to do what other people have always done, unless we have a very good reason not to. It is reasonable to become educated and work and find love and have a family. That is how culture maintains itself. But it is necessary to aim at your target, however traditional, with your eyes wide open. You have a direction, but it might be wrong. You have a plan, but it might be ill-formed. You may have been led astray by your own ignorance—and, worse, by your own unrevealed corruption. You must make friends, therefore, with what you don't know, instead of what you know. You must remain awake to catch yourself in the act. You must remove the beam in your own eye, before you concern yourself with the mote in your brother's. And in this way, you strengthen your own spirit, so it can tolerate the burden of existence, and you rejuvenate the state.

The ancient Egyptians had already figured this out thousands of years ago, although their knowledge remained embodied in dramatic form.154 They worshipped Osiris, mythological founder of the state and the god of tradition. Osiris, however, was vulnerable to overthrow and banishment to the underworld by Set, his evil, scheming brother. The Egyptians represented in story the fact that social organizations ossify with time, and tend towards willful blindness. Osiris would not see his brother's true character, even though he could have. Set waits and, at an opportune moment, attacks. He hacks Osiris into pieces, and scatters the divine remains through the kingdom. He sends his brother's spirit to the underworld. He makes it very difficult for Osiris to pull himself back together.

Fortunately, the great king did not have to deal with Set on his own. The Egyptians also worshipped Horus, the son of Osiris. Horus took the twin forms of a falcon, the most visually acute of all creatures, and the still-famous hieroglyphic single Egyptian eye (as alluded to in Rule 7). Osiris is tradition, aged and willfully blind. Horus, his son, could and would, by contrast, see. Horus was the god of attention. That is not the same as rationality. Because he paid attention, Horus could perceive and triumph against the evils of Set, his

uncle, albeit at great cost. When Horus confronts Set, they have a terrible battle. Before Set's defeat and banishment from the kingdom, he tears out one of his nephew's eyes. But the eventually victorious Horus takes back the eye. Then he does something truly unexpected: he journeys voluntarily to the underworld and gives the eye to his father.

What does this mean? First, that the encounter with malevolence and evil is of sufficient terror to damage even the vision of a god; second, that the attentive son can restore the vision of his father. Culture is always in a near-dead state, even though it was established by the spirit of great people in the past. But the present is not the past. The wisdom of the past thus deteriorates, or becomes outdated, in proportion to the genuine difference between the conditions of the present and the past. That is a mere consequence of the passage of time, and the change that passage inevitably brings. But it is also the case that culture and its wisdom is additionally vulnerable to corruption—to voluntary, willful blindness and Mephistophelean intrigue. Thus, the inevitable functional decline of the institutions granted to us by our ancestors is sped along by our misbehavior—our missing of the mark—in the present.

It is our responsibility to see what is before our eyes, courageously, and to learn from it, even if it seems horrible—even if the horror of seeing it damages our consciousness, and half-blinds us. The act of seeing is particularly important when it challenges what we know and rely on, upsetting and destabilizing us. It is the act of seeing that informs the individual and updates the state. It was for this reason that Nietzsche said that a man's worth was determined by how much truth he could tolerate. You are by no means only what you already know. You are also all that which you could know, if you only would. Thus, you should never sacrifice what you could be for what you are. You should never give up the better that resides within for the security you already have—and certainly not when you have already caught a glimpse, an undeniable glimpse, of something beyond.

In the Christian tradition, Christ is identified with the Logos. The Logos is the Word of God. That Word transformed chaos into order at the beginning of time. In His human form, Christ sacrificed himself voluntarily to the truth, to the good, to God. In consequence, He died and was reborn. The Word that produces order from Chaos sacrifices everything, even itself, to God. That single sentence, wise beyond comprehension, sums up Christianity. Every bit of learning is a little death. Every bit of new information challenges a previous conception, forcing it to dissolve into chaos before it can be reborn as something better. Sometimes

to dissolve into chaos before it can be reborn as something better. Sometimes such deaths virtually destroy us. In such cases, we might never recover or, if we do, we change a lot. A good friend of mine discovered that his wife of decades was having an affair. He didn't see it coming. It plunged him into a deep depression. He descended into the underworld. He told me, at one point, "I always thought that people who were depressed should just shake it off. I didn't have any idea what I was talking about." Eventually, he returned from the depths. In many ways, he's a new man—and, perhaps, a wiser and better man. He lost forty pounds. He ran a marathon. He travelled to Africa and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. He chose rebirth over descent into Hell.

Set your ambitions, even if you are uncertain about what they should be. The better ambitions have to do with the development of character and ability, rather than status and power. Status you can lose. You carry character with you wherever you go, and it allows you to prevail against adversity. Knowing this, tie a rope to a boulder. Pick up the great stone, heave it in front of you, and pull yourself towards it. Watch and observe while you move forward. Articulate your experience as clearly and carefully to yourself and others as you possibly can. In this manner, you will learn to proceed more effectively and efficiently towards your goal. And, while you are doing this, do not lie. Especially to yourself.

If you pay attention to what you do and say, you can learn to feel a state of internal division and weakness when you are misbehaving and misspeaking. It's an embodied sensation, not a thought. I experience an internal sensation of sinking and division, rather than solidity and strength, when I am incautious with my acts and words. It seems to be centred in my solar plexus, where a large knot of nervous tissue resides. I learned to recognize when I was lying, in fact, by noticing this sinking and division, and then inferring the presence of a lie. It often took me a long time to ferret out the deception. Sometimes I was using words for appearance. Sometimes I was trying to disguise my own true ignorance of the topic at hand. Sometimes I was using the words of others to avoid the responsibility of thinking for myself.

If you pay attention, when you are seeking something, you will move towards your goal. More importantly, however, you will acquire the information that allows your goal itself to transform. A totalitarian never asks, "What if my current ambition is in error?" He treats it, instead, as the Absolute. It becomes his God, for all intents and purposes. It constitutes his highest value. It regulates his emotions and motivational states, and determines his thoughts. All people serve their ambition. In that matter, there are no atheists. There are only people

who know, and don't know, what God they serve.

If you bend everything totally, blindly and willfully towards the attainment of a goal, and only that goal, you will never be able to discover if another goal would serve you, and the world, better. It is this that you sacrifice if you do not tell the truth. If, instead, you tell the truth, your values transform as you progress. If you allow yourself to be informed by the reality manifesting itself, as you struggle forward, your notions of what is important will change. You will reorient yourself, sometimes gradually, and sometimes suddenly and radically.

Imagine: you go to engineering school, because that is what your parents desire —but it is not what you want. Working at cross-purposes to your own wishes, you will find yourself unmotivated, and failing. You will struggle to concentrate and discipline yourself, but it will not work. Your soul will reject the tyranny of your will (how else could that be said?). Why are you complying? You may not want to disappoint your parents (although if you fail you will do exactly that). You may lack the courage for the conflict necessary to free yourself. You may not want to sacrifice your childish belief in parental omniscience, wishing devoutly to continue believing that there is someone who knows you better than you know yourself, and who also knows all about the world. You want to be shielded in this manner from the stark existential aloneness of individual Being and its attendant responsibility. This is all very common and understandable. But you suffer because you are truly not meant to be an engineer.

One day you have had enough. You drop out. You disappoint your parents. You learn to live with that. You consult only yourself, even though that means you must rely on your own decisions. You take a philosophy degree. You accept the burden of your own mistakes. You become your own person. By rejecting your father's vision, you develop your own. And then, as your parents age, you've become adult enough to be there for them, when they come to need you. They win, too. But both victories had to be purchased at the cost of the conflict engendered by your truth. As Matthew 10:34 has it, citing Christ—emphasizing the role of the spoken Truth: "Think not that I have come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

As you continue to live in accordance with the truth, as it reveals itself to you, you will have to accept and deal with the conflicts that mode of Being will generate. If you do so, you will continue to mature and become more responsible, in small ways (don't underestimate their importance) and in large. You will ever more closely approach your newer and more wisely formulated

goals, and become even wiser in their formulation, when you discover and rectify your inevitable errors. Your conception of what is important will become more and more appropriate, as you incorporate the wisdom of your experience. You will quit wildly oscillating and walk ever more directly towards the good—a good you could never have comprehended if you had insisted despite all evidence that you were right, absolutely right, at the beginning.

If existence is good, then the clearest and cleanest and most correct relationship with it is also good. If existence is not good, by contrast, you're lost. Nothing will save you—certainly not the petty rebellions, murky thinking and obscurantist blindness that constitute deceit. Is existence good? You have to take a terrible risk to find out. Live in truth, or live in deceit, face the consequences, and draw your conclusions.

This is the "act of faith" whose necessity was insisted upon by the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. You cannot know ahead of time. Even a good example is insufficient for proof, given the differences between individuals. The success of a good example can always be attributed to luck. Thus, you have to risk your particular, individual life to find out. It is this risk that the ancients described as the sacrifice of personal will to the will of God. It is not an act of submission (at least as submission is currently understood). It is an act of courage. It is faith that the wind will blow your ship to a new and better port. It is the faith that Being can be corrected by becoming. It is the spirit of exploration itself.

Perhaps it is better to conceptualize it this way: Everyone needs a concrete, specific goal—an ambition, and a purpose—to limit chaos and make intelligible sense of his or her life. But all such concrete goals can and should be subordinated to what might be considered a meta-goal, which is a way of approaching and formulating goals themselves. The meta-goal could be "live in truth." This means, "Act diligently towards some well-articulated, defined and temporary end. Make your criteria for failure and success timely and clear, at least for yourself (and even better if others can understand what you are doing and evaluate it with you). While doing so, however, allow the world and your spirit to unfold as they will, while you act out and articulate the truth." This is both pragmatic ambition and the most courageous of faiths.

Life is suffering. The Buddha stated that, explicitly. Christians portray the same sentiment imagistically, with the divine crucifix. The Jewish faith is saturated with its remembrance. The equivalence of life and limitation is the primary and unavoidable fact of existence. The vulnerability of our Being renders us

unavoidable fact of existence. The vulnerability of our Being renders us susceptible to the pains of social judgement and contempt and the inevitable breakdown of our bodies. But even all those ways of suffering, terrible as they are, are not sufficient to corrupt the world, to transform it into Hell, the way the Nazis and the Maoists and the Stalinists corrupted the world and turned it into Hell. For that, as Hitler stated so clearly, you need the lie:155

[I]n the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation.

For the big lie, you first need the little lie. The little lie is, metaphorically speaking, the bait used by the Father of Lies to hook his victims. The human capacity for imagination makes us capable of dreaming up and creating alternative worlds. This is the ultimate source of our creativity. With that singular capacity, however, comes the counterpart, the opposite side of the coin: we can deceive ourselves and others into believing and acting as if things are other than we know they are.

And why not lie? Why not twist and distort things to obtain a small gain, or to smooth things over, or to keep the peace, or to avoid hurt feelings? Reality has its terrible aspect: do we really need to confront its snake-headed face in every moment of our waking consciousness, and at every turn in our lives? Why not turn away, at least, when looking is simply too painful?

The reason is simple. Things fall apart. What worked yesterday will not necessarily work today. We have inherited the great machinery of state and culture from our forefathers, but they are dead, and cannot deal with the changes of the day. The living can. We can open our eyes and modify what we have where necessary and keep the machinery running smoothly. Or we can pretend that everything is alright, fail to make the necessary repairs, and then curse fate when nothing goes our way.

Things fall apart: this is one of the great discoveries of humanity. And we speed the natural deterioration of great things through blindness, inaction and deceit. Without attention, culture degenerates and dies, and evil prevails.

What you see of a lie when you act it out (and most lies are acted out, rather than told) is very little of what it actually is. A lie is connected to everything else. It produces the same effect on the world that a single drop of sewage produces in even the largest crystal magnum of champagne. It is something best considered live and growing.

When the lies get big enough, the whole world spoils. But if you look close enough, the biggest of lies is composed of smaller lies, and those are composed of still smaller lies—and the smallest of lies is where the big lie starts. It is not the mere misstatement of fact. It is instead an act that has the aspect of the most serious conspiracy ever to possess the race of man. Its seeming innocuousness, its trivial meanness, the feeble arrogance that gives rise to it, the apparently trivial circumventing of responsibility that it aims at—these all work effectively to camouflage its true nature, its genuine dangerousness, and its equivalence with the great acts of evil that man perpetrates and often enjoys. Lies corrupt the world. Worse, that is their intent.

First, a little lie; then, several little lies to prop it up. After that, distorted thinking to avoid the shame that those lies produce, then a few more lies to cover up the consequences of the distorted thinking. Then, most terribly, the transformation of those now necessary lies through practice into automatized, specialized, structural, neurologically instantiated “unconscious” belief and action. Then the sickening of experience itself as action predicated on falsehood fails to produce the results intended. If you don’t believe in brick walls, you will still be injured when you run headlong into one. Then you will curse reality itself for producing the wall.

After that comes the arrogance and sense of superiority that inevitably accompanies the production of successful lies (hypothetically successful lies—and that is one of the greatest dangers: apparently everyone is fooled, so everyone is stupid, except me. Everyone is stupid and fooled, by me—so I can get away with whatever I want). Finally, there is the proposition: “Being itself is susceptible to my manipulations. Thus, it deserves no respect.”

That’s things falling apart, like Osiris, severed into pieces. That’s the structure of the person or the state disintegrating under the influence of a malign force.

That’s the chaos of the underworld emerging, like a flood, to subsume familiar ground. But it’s not yet Hell.

Hell comes later. Hell comes when lies have destroyed the relationship between individual or state and reality itself. Things fall apart. Life degenerates. Everything becomes frustration and disappointment. Hope consistently betrays. The deceitful individual desperately gestures at sacrifice, like Cain, but fails to please God. Then the drama enters its final act.

Tortured by constant failure, the individual becomes bitter. Disappointment and failure amalgamate, and produce a fantasy: the world is bent on my personal suffering, my particular undoing, my destruction. I need, I deserve, I must have —my revenge. That’s the gateway to Hell. That’s when the underworld, a terrifying and unfamiliar place, becomes misery itself.

At the beginning of time, according to the great Western tradition, the Word of God transformed chaos into Being through the act of speech. It is axiomatic, within that tradition, that man and woman alike are made in the image of that God. We also transform chaos into Being, through speech. We transform the manifold possibilities of the future into the actualities of past and present.

To tell the truth is to bring the most habitable reality into Being. Truth builds edifices that can stand a thousand years. Truth feeds and clothes the poor, and makes nations wealthy and safe. Truth reduces the terrible complexity of a man to the simplicity of his word, so that he can become a partner, rather than an enemy. Truth makes the past truly past, and makes the best use of the future’s possibilities. Truth is the ultimate, inexhaustible natural resource. It’s the light in the darkness.

See the truth. Tell the truth.

Truth will not come in the guise of opinions shared by others, as the truth is neither a collection of slogans nor an ideology. It will instead be personal. Your truth is something only you can tell, based as it is on the unique circumstances of your life. Apprehend your personal truth. Communicate it carefully, in an articulate manner, to yourself and others. This will ensure your security and your life more abundantly now, while you inhabit the structure of your current beliefs. This will ensure the benevolence of the future, diverging as it might from the certainties of the past.

The truth springs forth ever anew from the most profound wellsprings of Being. It will keep your soul from withering and dying while you encounter the inevitable tragedy of life. It will help you avoid the terrible desire to seek vengeance for that tragedy—part of the terrible sin of Being, which everything must bear gracefully, just so it can exist.

If your life is not what it could be, try telling the truth. If you cling desperately to an ideology, or wallow in nihilism, try telling the truth. If you feel weak and rejected, and desperate, and confused, try telling the truth. In Paradise, everyone speaks the truth. That is what makes it Paradise.

Tell the truth. Or, at least, don't lie.

RULE 9: ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T.

1 Here, again, I have disguised many of the details of this case, to maintain the privacy of those involved, while attempting to maintain the central meaning of the events.

2 The strategy of speaking to individuals is not only vital to the delivery of any message, it's a useful antidote to fear of public speaking. No one wants to be stared at by hundreds of unfriendly, judgmental eyes. However, almost everybody can talk to just one attentive person. So, if you have to deliver a speech (another terrible phrase) then do that. Talk to the individuals in the audience—and don't hide: not behind the podium, not with downcast eyes, not by speaking too quietly or mumbling, not by apologizing for your lack of brilliance or preparedness, not behind ideas that are not yours, and not behind clichés.

RULE 10: BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

1 This is why, for example, it has taken us far longer than we originally assumed to make robots that could function autonomously in the world. The problem of perception is far more difficult than our immediate effortless access to our own perceptions predisposes us to infer. In fact, the problem of perception is so difficult that it stalled the early progress of artificial intelligence almost fatally (from the perspective of that time), as we discovered that disembodied abstract reason could not solve even simple real-world problems. Pioneers such as Rodney Brooks proposed in the late 1980s and early '90s that bodies in action

were necessary preconditions to the parsing of the world into manageable things, and the AI revolution regained its confidence and momentum.

RULE 11: DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE SKATEBOARDING. DANGER AND MASTERY.

There was a time when kids skateboarded on the west side of Sidney Smith Hall, at the University of Toronto, where I work. Sometimes I stood there and watched them. There are rough, wide, shallow concrete steps there, leading up from the street to the front entrance, accompanied by tubular iron handrails, about two and a half inches in diameter and twenty feet long. The crazy kids, almost always boys, would pull back about fifteen yards from the top of the steps. Then they would place a foot on their boards, and skate like mad to get up some speed. Just before they collided with the handrail, they would reach down, grab their board with a single hand and jump onto the top of the rail, boardsliding their way down its length, propelling themselves off and landing—sometimes, gracefully, still atop their boards, sometimes, painfully, off them. Either way, they were soon back at it.

Some might call that stupid. Maybe it was. But it was brave, too. I thought those kids were amazing. I thought they deserved a pat on the back and some honest admiration. Of course it was dangerous. Danger was the point. They wanted to triumph over danger. They would have been safer in protective equipment, but that would have ruined it. They weren't trying to be safe. They were trying to become competent—and it's competence that makes people as safe as they can truly be.

I wouldn't dare do what those kids were doing. Not only that, I couldn't. I certainly couldn't climb a construction crane, like a certain type of modern daredevil, evident on YouTube (and, of course, people who work on construction cranes). I don't like heights, although the twenty-five thousand feet to which airliners ascend is so high that it doesn't bother me. I have flown several times in a carbon fibre stunt plane—even doing a hammerhead roll—and that was OK, although it's very physically and mentally demanding. (To perform a hammerhead roll, you pilot the plane straight up vertically, until the force of gravity makes it stall. Then it falls backwards, corkscrewing, until eventually it flips and noses straight down, after which you pull out of the dive. Or you don't do another hammerhead roll.) But I can't skateboard—especially down handrails—and I can't climb cranes.

Sidney Smith Hall faces another street on the east side. Along that street, named St. George—ironically enough—the university installed a series of rough, hard-edged, concrete plant boxes, sloping down to the roadway. The kids used to go out there, too, and boardslide along the box edges, as they did along the concrete surround of a sculpture adjacent to the building. That didn't last very long. Little steel brackets known as "skatestoppers" soon appeared, every two or three feet, along those edges. When I first saw them, I remembered something that happened in Toronto several years previously. Two weeks before elementary school classes started, throughout the city, all the playground equipment disappeared. The legislation governing such things had changed, and there was a panic about insurability. The playgrounds were hastily removed, even though they were sufficiently safe, grandfathered re their insurability, and often paid for (and quite recently) by parents. This meant no playgrounds at all for more than a year. During this time, I often saw bored but admirable kids charging around on the roof of our local school. It was that or scrounge about in the dirt with the cats and the less adventurous children.

I say "sufficiently safe" about the demolished playgrounds because when playgrounds are made too safe, kids either stop playing in them or start playing in unintended ways. Kids need playgrounds dangerous enough to remain challenging. People, including children (who are people too, after all) don't seek to minimize risk. They seek to optimize it. They drive and walk and love and play so that they achieve what they desire, but they push themselves a bit at the same time, too, so they continue to develop. Thus, if things are made too safe, people (including children) start to figure out ways to make them dangerous again.165

When untrammeled—and encouraged—we prefer to live on the edge. There, we can still be both confident in our experience and confronting the chaos that helps us develop. We're hard-wired, for that reason, to enjoy risk (some of us more than others). We feel invigorated and excited when we work to optimize our future performance, while playing in the present. Otherwise we lumber around, sloth-like, unconscious, unformed and careless. Overprotected, we will fail when something dangerous, unexpected and full of opportunity suddenly makes its appearance, as it inevitably will.

The skatestoppers are unattractive. The surround of the nearby sculpture would have to have been badly damaged by diligent boardsliders before it would look as mean as it does now, studded with metal like a pit bull's collar. The large plant boxes have metal guards placed at irregular intervals across their tops, and

plant boxes have metal guards placed at irregular intervals across their tops, and this, in addition to the wear caused by the skateboarders, produces a dismal impression of poor design, resentment and badly executed afterthoughts. It gives the area, which was supposed to be beautified by the sculpture and vegetation, a generic industrial/prison/mental institution/work-camp look of the kind that appears when builders and public officials do not like or trust the people they serve.

The sheer harsh ugliness of the solution makes a lie of the reasons for its implementation.

Success and Resentment

If you read the depth psychologists—Freud and Jung, for example, as well as their precursor, Friedrich Nietzsche—you learn that there is a dark side to everything. Freud delved deeply into the latent, implicit content of dreams, which were often aimed, in his opinion, at the expression of some improper wish. Jung believed that every act of social propriety was accompanied by its evil twin, its unconscious shadow. Nietzsche investigated the role played by what he termed ressentiment in motivating what were ostensibly selfless actions —and, often, exhibited all too publicly.166

For that man be delivered from revenge—that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms. The tarantulas, of course, would have it otherwise. “What justice means to us is precisely that the world be filled with the storms of our revenge”—thus they speak to each other. “We shall wreak vengeange and abuse on all whose equals we are not”—thus do the tarantula-hearts vow. “And ‘will to equality’ shall henceforth be the name for virtue; and against all that has power we want to raise our clamor!” You preachers of equality, the tyrant-mania of impotence clamors thus out of you for equality: your most secret ambitions to be tyrants thus shroud themselves in words of virtue.

The incomparable English essayist George Orwell knew this sort of thing well. In 1937, he wrote The Road to Wigan Pier, which was in part a scathing attack on upper-class British socialists (this, despite being inclined towards socialism himself). In the first half of this book, Orwell portrays the appalling conditions faced by UK miners in the 1930s:167

Several dentists have told me that in industrial districts a person over thirty with any of his or her own teeth is coming to be an abnormality. In Wigan various people gave me their opinion that it is best to get shut of your teeth as early in life as possible. ‘Teeth is just a misery,’ one woman said to me.

A Wigan Pier coal miner had to walk—crawl would be a better word, given the height of the mine shafts—up to three miles, underground, in the dark, banging his head and scraping his back, just to get to his seven-and-a-half-hour shift of backbreaking work. After that, he crawled back. “It is comparable, perhaps, to climbing a smallish mountain before and after your day’s work,” stated Orwell. None of the time spent crawling was paid.

Orwell wrote The Road to Wigan Pier for the Left Book Club, a socialist publishing group that released a select volume every month. After reading the first half of his book, which deals directly with the miners' personal circumstances, it is impossible not to feel sympathy for the working poor. Only a monster could keep his heart hardened through the accounts of the lives Orwell describes:

It is not long since conditions in the mines were worse than they are now. There are still living a few very old women who in their youth have worked underground, crawling on all fours and dragging tubs of coal. They used to go on doing this even when they were pregnant.

In book's second half, however, Orwell turned his gaze to a different problem: the comparative unpopularity of socialism in the UK at the time, despite the clear and painful inequity observable everywhere. He concluded that the tweed-wearing, armchair-philosophizing, victim-identifying, pity-and-contempt-dispensing social-reformer types frequently did not like the poor, as they claimed. Instead, they just hated the rich. They disguised their resentment and jealousy with piety, sanctimony and self-righteousness. Things in the unconscious—or on the social justice–dispensing leftist front—haven't changed much, today. It is because of of Freud, Jung, Nietzsche—and Orwell—that I always wonder, "What, then, do you stand against?" whenever I hear someone say, too loudly, "I stand for this!" The question seems particularly relevant if the same someone is complaining, criticizing, or trying to change someone else's behaviour.

I believe it was Jung who developed the most surgically wicked of psychoanalytic dicta: if you cannot understand why someone did something, look at the consequences—and infer the motivation. This is a psychological scalpel. It's not always a suitable instrument. It can cut too deeply, or in the wrong places. It is, perhaps, a last-resort option. Nonetheless, there are times when its application proves enlightening.

If the consequences of placing skatestoppers on plant-boxes and sculpture bases, for example, is unhappy adolescent males and brutalist aesthetic disregard of beauty then, perhaps, that was the aim. When someone claims to be acting from the highest principles, for the good of others, there is no reason to assume that the person's motives are genuine. People motivated to make things better usually aren't concerned with changing other people—or, if they are, they take

aren't concerned with changing other people – or, if they are, they take responsibility for making the same changes to themselves (and first). Beneath the production of rules stopping the skateboarders from doing highly skilled, courageous and dangerous things I see the operation of an insidious and profoundly anti-human spirit.

More about Chris

My friend Chris, whom I wrote about earlier, was possessed by such a spirit—to the serious detriment of his mental health. Part of what plagued him was guilt. He attended elementary and junior high school in a number of towns, up in the frigid expanses of the northernmost Alberta prairie, prior to ending up in the Fairview I wrote about earlier. Fights with Native kids were a too-common part of his experience, during those moves. It's no overstatement to point out that such kids were, on average, rougher than the white kids, or that they were touchier (and they had their reasons). I knew this well from my own experience.

I had a rocky friendship with a Métis kid, Rene Heck,fn1 when I was in elementary school. It was rocky because the situation was complex. There was a large cultural divide between Rene and me. His clothes were dirtier. He was rougher in speech and attitude. I had skipped a grade in school, and was, in addition, small for my age. Rene was a big, smart, good-looking kid, and he was tough. We were in grade six together, in a class taught by my father. Rene was caught chewing gum. "Rene," said my father, "spit that gum out. You look like a cow." "Ha, ha," I laughed, under my breath. "Rene the cow." Rene might have been a cow, but there was nothing wrong with his hearing. "Peterson," he said, "after school—you're dead."

Earlier in the morning, Rene and I had arranged to see a movie that night at the local movie theatre, the Gem. It looked like that was off. In any case, the rest of the day passed, quickly and unpleasantly, as it does when threat and pain lurk. Rene was more than capable of giving me a good pounding. After school, I took off for the bike stands outside the school as fast as I could, but Rene beat me there. We circled around the bikes, him on one side, me on the other. We were characters in a "Keystone Cops" short. As long as I kept circling, he couldn't catch me, but my strategy couldn't work forever. I yelled out that I was sorry, but he wasn't mollified. His pride was hurt, and he wanted me to pay.

I crouched down and hid behind some bikes, keeping an eye on Rene. "Rene," I yelled, "I'm sorry I called you a cow. Let's quit fighting." He started to approach me again. I said, "Rene, I am sorry I said that. Really. And I still want to go to the movie with you." This wasn't just a tactic. I meant it. Otherwise what happened next would not have happened. Rene stopped circling. Then he stared at me. Then he broke into tears. Then he ran off. That was Native-white relationships in a nutshell, in our hard little town. We never did go to a movie

together.

When my friend Chris got into it with Native kids, he wouldn't fight back. He didn't feel that his self-defence was morally justified, so he took his beatings. "We took their land," he later wrote. "That was wrong. No wonder they're angry." Over time, step by step, Chris withdrew from the world. It was partly his guilt. He developed a deep hatred for masculinity and masculine activity. He saw going to school or working or finding a girlfriend as part of the same process that had led to the colonization of North America, the horrible nuclear stalemate of the cold war, and the despoiling of the planet. He had read some books about Buddhism, and felt that negation of his own Being was ethically required, in the light of the current world situation. He came to believe that the same applied to others.

When I was an undergraduate, Chris was, for a while, one of my roommates. One late night we went to a local bar. We walked home, afterward. He started to snap the side-view mirrors off parked cars, one after the other. I said, "Quit that, Chris. What possible good is it going to do to make the people who own these cars miserable?" He told me that they were all part of the frenetic human activity that was ruining everything, and that they deserved whatever they got. I said that taking revenge on people who were just living normal lives was not going to help anything.

Years later, when I was in graduate school in Montreal, Chris showed up, for what was supposed to be a visit. He was aimless, however, and lost. He asked if I could help. He ended up moving in. I was married by then, living with my wife, Tammy, and our year-old daughter, Mikhaila. Chris had also been friends with Tammy back in Fairview (and held out hopes of more than friendship). That complicated the situation even more—but not precisely in the manner you might think. Chris started by hating men, but he ended by hating women. He wanted them, but he had rejected education, and career, and desire. He smoked heavily, and was unemployed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he was not of much interest to women. That made him bitter. I tried to convince him that the path he had chosen was only going to lead to further ruin. He needed to develop some humility. He needed to get a life.

One evening, it was Chris's turn to make dinner. When my wife came home, the apartment was filled with smoke. Hamburgers were burning furiously in the frying pan. Chris was on his hands and knees, attempting to repair something that had come loose on the legs of the stove. My wife knew his tricks. She knew

that had come loose on the legs of the stove. My wife knew his tricks. She knew he was burning dinner on purpose. He resented having to make it. He resented the feminine role (even though the household duties were split in a reasonable manner; even though he knew that perfectly well). He was fixing the stove to provide a plausible, even creditable excuse for burning the food. When she pointed out what he was doing, he played the victim, but he was deeply and dangerously furious. Part of him, and not the good part, was convinced that he was smarter than anyone else. It was a blow to his pride that she could see through his tricks. It was an ugly situation.

Tammy and I took a walk up towards a local park the next day. We needed to get away from the apartment, although it was thirty-five below—bitterly, frigidly cold, humid and foggy. It was windy. It was hostile to life. Living with Chris was too much, Tammy said. We entered the park. The trees forked their bare branches upward through the damp grey air. A black squirrel, tail hairless from mange, gripped a leafless branch, shivered violently, struggling to hold on against the wind. What was it doing out there in the cold? Squirrels are partial hibernators. They only come out in the winter when it's warm. Then we saw another, and another, and another, and another, and another. There were squirrels all around us in the park, all partially hairless, tails and bodies alike, all windblown on their branches, all shaking and freezing in the deathly cold. No one else was around. It was impossible. It was inexplicable. It was exactly appropriate. We were on the stage of an absurdist play. It was directed by God. Tammy left soon after with our daughter for a few days elsewhere.

Near Christmas time, that same year, my younger brother and his new wife came out to visit from western Canada. My brother also knew Chris. They all put on their winter clothes in preparation for a walk around downtown Montreal. Chris put on a long dark winter coat. He pulled a black toque, a brimless knitted cap, far down over his head. His coat was black, as were his pants and boots. He was very tall, and thin, and somewhat stooped. "Chris," I joked. "You look like a serial killer." Ha bloody ha. The three came back from their walk. Chris was out of sorts. There were strangers in his territory. Another happy couple. It was salt in his wounds.

We had dinner, pleasantly enough. We talked, and ended the evening. But I couldn't sleep. Something wasn't right. It was in the air. At four in the morning, I had had enough. I crawled out of bed. I knocked quietly on Chris's door and went without waiting for an answer into his room. He was awake on the bed, staring at the ceiling, as I knew he would be. I sat down beside him. I knew him

very well. I talked him down from his murderous rage. Then I went back to bed, and slept. The next morning my brother pulled me aside. He wanted to speak with me. We sat down. He said, “What the hell was going on last night? I couldn’t sleep at all. Was something wrong?” I told my brother that Chris wasn’t doing so well. I didn’t tell him that he was lucky to be alive—that we all were. The spirit of Cain had visited our house, but we were left unscathed.

Maybe I picked up some change in scent that night, when death hung in the air. Chris had a very bitter odour. He showered frequently, but the towels and the sheets picked up the smell. It was impossible to get them clean. It was the product of a psyche and a body that did not operate harmoniously. A social worker I knew, who also knew Chris, told me of her familiarity with that odour. Everyone at her workplace knew of it, although they only discussed it in hushed tones. They called it the smell of the unemployable.

Soon after this I finished my post-doctoral studies. Tammy and I moved away from Montreal to Boston. We had our second baby. Now and then, Chris and I talked on the phone. He came to visit once. It went well. He had found a job at an auto-parts place. He was trying to make things better. He was OK at that point. But it didn’t last. I didn’t see him in Boston again. Almost ten years later —the night before Chris’s fortieth birthday, as it happened—he called me again. By this time, I had moved my family to Toronto. He had some news. A story he had written was going to be published in a collection put together by a small but legitimate press. He wanted to tell me that. He wrote good short stories. I had read them all. We had discussed them at length. He was a good photographer, too. He had a good, creative eye. The next day, Chris drove his old pickup—the same battered beast from Fairview—into the bush. He ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the front cab. I can see him there, looking through the cracked windshield, smoking, waiting. They found his body a few weeks later. I called his dad. “My beautiful boy,” he sobbed.

Recently, I was invited to give a TEDx talk at a nearby university. Another professor talked first. He had been invited to speak because of his work—his genuinely fascinating, technical work—with computationally intelligent surfaces (like computer touchscreens, but capable of being placed everywhere). He spoke instead about the threat human beings posed to the survival of the planet. Like Chris—like far too many people—he had become anti-human, to the core. He had not walked as far down that road as my friend, but the same dread spirit animated them both.

He stood in front of a screen displaying an endless slow pan of a blocks-long Chinese high-tech factory. Hundreds of white-suited workers stood like sterile, inhuman robots behind their assembly lines, soundlessly inserting piece A into slot B. He told the audience—filled with bright young people—of the decision he and his wife had made to limit their number of children to one. He told them it was something they should all consider, if they wanted to regard themselves as ethical people. I felt that such a decision was properly considered—but only in his particular case (where less than one might have been even better). The many Chinese students in attendance sat stolidly through his moralizing. They thought, perhaps, of their parents' escape from the horrors of Mao's Cultural Revolution and its one-child policy. They thought, perhaps, of the vast improvement in living standard and freedom provided by the very same factories. A couple of them said as much in the question period that followed.

Would have the professor reconsidered his opinions, if he knew where such ideas can lead? I would like to say yes, but I don't believe it. I think he could have known, but refused to. Worse, perhaps: he knew, but didn't care—or knew, and was headed there, voluntarily, in any case.

Self-Appointed Judges of the Human Race

It has not been long since the Earth seemed infinitely larger than the people who inhabited it. It was only in the late 1800s that the brilliant biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-95)—staunch defender of Darwin and Aldous Huxley's grandfather—told the British Parliament that it was literally impossible for mankind to exhaust the oceans. Their power of generation was simply too great, as far as he could determine, compared to even the most assiduous human predations. It's been an even shorter fifty years since Rachel Carson's Silent Spring ignited the environmental movement.168 Fifty years! That's nothing! That's not even yesterday.

We've only just developed the conceptual tools and technologies that allow us to understand the web of life, however imperfectly. We deserve a bit of sympathy, in consequence, for the hypothetical outrage of our destructive behaviour. Sometimes we don't know any better. Sometimes we do know better, but haven't yet formulated any practical alternatives. It's not as if life is easy for human beings, after all, even now—and it's only a few decades ago that the majority of human beings were starving, diseased and illiterate.169 Wealthy as we are (increasingly, everywhere) we still only live decades that can be counted on our fingers. Even at present, it is the rare and fortunate family that does not

on our fingers. Even at present, it is the rare and fortunate family that does not contain at least one member with a serious illness—and all will face that problem eventually. We do what we can to make the best of things, in our vulnerability and fragility, and the planet is harder on us than we are on it. We could cut ourselves some slack.

Human beings are, after all, seriously remarkable creatures. We have no peers, and it's not clear that we have any real limits. Things happen now that appeared humanly impossible even at the same time in the recent past when we began to wake up to our planet-sized responsibilities. A few weeks before writing this I happened across two videos juxtaposed on YouTube. One showed the Olympic gold medal vault from 1956; the other, the Olympic silver medal vault from 2012. It didn't even look like the same sport—or the same animal. What McKayla Maroney did in 2012 would have been considered superhuman in the fifties. Parkour, a sport derived from French military obstacle course training, is amazing, as is free running. I watch compilations of such performances with unabashed admiration. Some of the kids jump off three-storey buildings without injury. It's dangerous—and amazing. Crane climbers are so brave it rattles the mind. The same goes for extreme mountain bikers, freestyle snowboarders, surfers of fifty-foot waves, and skateboarders.

The boys who shot up Columbine High School, whom we discussed earlier, had appointed themselves judges of the human race—like the TEDx professor, although much more extreme; like Chris, my doomed friend. For Eric Harris, the more literate of the two killers, human beings were a failed and corrupt species. Once a presupposition such as that is accepted, its inner logic will inevitably manifest itself. If something is a plague, as David Attenborough has it,170 or a cancer, as the Club of Rome claimed,171 the person who eradicates it is a hero —a veritable planetary saviour, in this case. A real messiah might follow through with his rigorous moral logic, and eliminate himself, as well. This is what mass murderers, driven by near-infinite resentment, typically do. Even their own Being does not justify the existence of humanity. In fact, they kill themselves precisely to demonstrate the purity of their commitment to annihilation. No one in the modern world may without objection express the opinion that existence would be bettered by the absence of Jews, blacks, Muslims, or Englishmen. Why, then, is it virtuous to propose that the planet might be better off, if there were fewer people on it? I can't help but see a skeletal, grinning face, gleeful at the possibility of the apocalypse, hiding not so very far behind such statements. And why does it so often seem to be the very people standing so visibly against prejudice who so often appear to feel

obligated to denounce humanity itself?

I have seen university students, particularly those in the humanities, suffer genuine declines in their mental health from being philosophically berated by such defenders of the planet for their existence as members of the human species. It's worse, I think, for young men. As privileged beneficiaries of the patriarchy, their accomplishments are considered unearned. As possible adherents of rape culture, they're sexually suspect. Their ambitions make them plunderers of the planet. They're not welcome. At the junior high, high school and university level, they're falling behind educationally. When my son was fourteen, we discussed his grades. He was doing very well, he said, matter-of-factly, for a boy. I inquired further. Everyone knew, he said, that girls do better in school than boys. His intonation indicated surprise at my ignorance of something so self-evident. While writing this, I received the latest edition of The Economist. The cover story? "The Weaker Sex"—meaning males. In modern universities women now make up more than 50 percent of the students in more than two-thirds of all disciplines.

Boys are suffering, in the modern world. They are more disobedient—negatively—or more independent—positively—than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-university educational career. They are less agreeable (agreeableness being a personality trait associated with compassion, empathy and avoidance of conflict) and less susceptible to anxiety and depression,172 at least after both sexes hit puberty.173 Boys' interests tilt towards things; girls' interests tilt towards people.174 Strikingly, these differences, strongly influenced by biological factors, are most pronounced in the Scandinavian societies where gender-equality has been pushed hardest: this is the opposite of what would be expected by those who insist, ever more loudly, that gender is a social construct. It isn't. This isn't a debate. The data are in.175

Boys like competition, and they don't like to obey, particularly when they are adolescents. During that time, they are driven to escape their families, and establish their own independent existence. There is little difference between doing that and challenging authority. Schools, which were set up in the late 1800s precisely to inculcate obedience,176 do not take kindly to provocative and daring behaviour, no matter how tough-minded and competent it might show a boy (or a girl) to be. Other factors play their role in the decline of boys. Girls will, for example, play boys' games, but boys are much more reluctant to play girls' games. This is in part because it is admirable for a girl to win when competing with a boy. It is also OK for her to lose to a boy. For a boy to beat a

competing with a boy. It is also OK for her to lose to a boy. For a boy to beat a girl, however, it is often not OK—and just as often, it is even less OK for him to lose. Imagine that a boy and a girl, aged nine, get into a fight. Just for engaging, the boy is highly suspect. If he wins, he's pathetic. If he loses—well, his life might as well be over. Beat up by a girl.

Girls can win by winning in their own hierarchy—by being good at what girls value, as girls. They can add to this victory by winning in the boys' hierarchy. Boys, however, can only win by winning in the male hierarchy. They will lose status, among girls and boys, by being good at what girls value. It costs them in reputation among the boys, and in attractiveness among the girls. Girls aren't attracted to boys who are their friends, even though they might like them, whatever that means. They are attracted to boys who win status contests with other boys. If you're male, however, you just can't hammer a female as hard as you would a male. Boys can't (won't) play truly competitive games with girls. It isn't clear how they can win. As the game turns into a girls' game, therefore, the boys leave. Are the universities—particularly the humanities—about to become a girls' game? Is this what we want?

The situation in the universities (and in educational institutions in general) is far more problematic than the basic statistics indicate.177 If you eliminate the so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs (excluding psychology), the female/male ratio is even more skewed.178 Almost 80 percent of students majoring in the fields of healthcare, public administration, psychology and education, which comprise one-quarter of all degrees, are female. The disparity is still rapidly increasing. At this rate, there will be very few men in most university disciplines in fifteen years. This is not good news for men. It might even be catastrophic news for men. But it's also not good news for women.

Career and Marriage

The women at female-dominated institutes of higher education are finding it increasingly difficult to arrange a dating relationship of even moderate duration. In consequence, they must settle, if inclined, for a hook-up, or sequential hook-ups. Perhaps this is a move forward, in terms of sexual liberation, but I doubt it. I think it's terrible for the girls.179 A stable, loving relationship is highly desirable, for men as well as women. For women, however, it is often what is most wanted. From 1997 to 2012, according to the Pew Research Centre,180 the number of women aged 18 to 34 who said that a successful marriage is one of the most important things in life rose from 28 to 37 percent (an increase of more than 30 percentfn2). The number of young men who said the same thing declined 15 percent over the same period (from 35 to 29 percentfn3). During that time, the proportion of married people over 18 continued to decline, down from three-quarters in 1960 to half now.181 Finally, among never-married adults aged 30 to 59, men are three times as likely as women to say they do not ever want to marry (27 vs 8 percent).

Who decided, anyway, that career is more important than love and family? Is working eighty hours a week at a high-end law firm truly worth the sacrifices required for that kind of success? And if it is worth it, why is it worth it? A minority of people (mostly men, who score low in the trait of agreeableness, again) are hyper-competitive, and want to win at any cost. A minority will find the work intrinsically fascinating. But most aren't, and most won't, and money doesn't seem to improve people's lives, once they have enough to avoid the bill collectors. Furthermore, most high-performing and high-earning females have high-performing and high-earning partners—and that matters more to women. The Pew data also indicate that a spouse with a desirable job is a high priority for almost 80 percent of never-married but marriage-seeking women (but for less than 50 percent of men).

When they hit their thirties, most of the top-rate female lawyers bail out of their high-pressure careers.182 Only 15 percent of equity partners at the two hundred biggest US law firms are women.183 This figure hasn't changed much in the last fifteen years, even though female associates and staff attorneys are plentiful. It also isn't because the law firms don't want the women to stay around and succeed. There is a chronic shortage of excellent people, regardless of sex, and law firms are desperate to retain them.

The women who leave want a job—and a life—that allows them some time. After law school and articling and the few first years of work, they develop other interests. This is common knowledge in the big firms (although it is not something that people are comfortable articulating in public, men and women alike). I recently watched a McGill University professor, female, lecture a room full of female law partners or near-partners about how lack of childcare facilities and "male definitions of success" impeded their career progress and caused women to leave. I knew most of the women in the room. We had talked at great length. I knew they knew that none of this was at all the problem. They had nannies, and they could afford them. They had already outsourced all their domestic obligations and necessities. They understood, as well—and perfectly well—that it was the market that defined success, not the men they worked with. If you are earning $650 an hour in Toronto as a top lawyer, and your client in Japan phones you at 4 a.m. on a Sunday, you answer. Now. You answer, now, even if you have just gone back to sleep after feeding the baby. You answer because some hyper-ambitious legal associate in New York would be happy to answer, if you don't—and that's why the market defines the work.

The increasingly short supply of university-educated men poses a problem of increasing severity for women who want to marry, as well as date. First, women have a strong proclivity to marry across or up the economic dominance hierarchy. They prefer a partner of equal or greater status. This holds true cross-culturally.184 The same does not hold, by the way, for men, who are perfectly willing to marry across or down (as the Pew data indicate), although they show a preference for somewhat younger mates. The recent trend towards the hollowing-out of the middle class has also been increasing as resource-rich women tend more and more185 to partner with resource-rich men. Because of this, and because of the decline in high-paying manufacturing jobs for men (one of six men of employable age is currently without work in the US), marriage is now something increasingly reserved for the rich. I can't help finding that amusing, in a blackly ironic manner. The oppressive patriarchal institution of marriage has now become a luxury. Why would the rich tyrannize themselves?

Why do women want an employed partner and, preferably, one of higher status? In no small part, it's because women become more vulnerable when they have children. They need someone competent to support mother and child when that becomes necessary. It's a perfectly rational compensatory act, although it may also have a biological basis. Why would a woman who decides to take responsibility for one or more infants want an adult to look after as well? So, the unemployed working man is an undesirable specimen—and single motherhood

unemployed working man is an undesirable specimen—and single motherhood an undesirable alternative. Children in father-absent homes are four times as likely to be poor. That means their mothers are poor too. Fatherless children are at much greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse. Children living with married biological parents are less anxious, depressed and delinquent than children living with one or more non-biological parent. Children in single-parent families are also twice as likely to commit suicide.186

The strong turn towards political correctness in universities has exacerbated the problem. The voices shouting against oppression have become louder, it seems, in precise proportion to how equal—even now increasingly skewed against men—the schools have become. There are whole disciplines in universities forthrightly hostile towards men. These are the areas of study, dominated by the postmodern/neo-Marxist claim that Western culture, in particular, is an oppressive structure, created by white men to dominate and exclude women (and other select groups); successful only because of that domination and exclusion.187

The Patriarchy: Help or Hindrance?

Of course, culture is an oppressive structure. It's always been that way. It's a fundamental, universal existential reality. The tyrannical king is a symbolic truth; an archetypal constant. What we inherit from the past is willfully blind, and out of date. It's a ghost, a machine, and a monster. It must be rescued, repaired and kept at bay by the attention and effort of the living. It crushes, as it hammers us into socially acceptable shape, and it wastes great potential. But it offers great gain, too. Every word we speak is a gift from our ancestors. Every thought we think was thought previously by someone smarter. The highly functional infrastructure that surrounds us, particularly in the West, is a gift from our ancestors: the comparatively uncorrupt political and economic systems, the technology, the wealth, the lifespan, the freedom, the luxury, and the opportunity. Culture takes with one hand, but in some fortunate places it gives more with the other. To think about culture only as oppressive is ignorant and ungrateful, as well as dangerous. This is not to say (as I am hoping the content of this book has made abundantly clear, so far) that culture should not be subject to criticism.

Consider this, as well, in regard to oppression: any hierarchy creates winners and losers. The winners are, of course, more likely to justify the hierarchy and the losers to criticize it. But (1) the collective pursuit of any valued goal produces a

hierarchy (as some will be better and some worse at that pursuit not matter what it is) and (2) it is the pursuit of goals that in large part lends life its sustaining meaning. We experience almost all the emotions that make life deep and engaging as a consequence of moving successfully towards something deeply desired and valued. The price we pay for that involvement is the inevitable creation of hierarchies of success, while the inevitable consequence is difference in outcome. Absolute equality would therefore require the sacrifice of value itself—and then there would be nothing worth living for. We might instead note with gratitude that a complex, sophisticated culture allows for many games and many successful players, and that a well-structured culture allows the individuals that compose it to play and to win, in many different fashions.

It is also perverse to consider culture the creation of men. Culture is symbolically, archetypally, mythically male. That's partly why the idea of "the patriarchy" is so easily swallowed. But it is certainly the creation of humankind, not the creation of men (let alone white men, who nonetheless contributed their fair share). European culture has only been dominant, to the degree that it is dominant at all, for about four hundred years. On the time scale of cultural evolution—which is to be measured, at minimum, in thousands of years—such a timespan barely registers. Furthermore, even if women contributed nothing substantial to art, literature and the sciences prior to the 1960s and the feminist revolution (which is not something I believe), then the role they played raising children and working on the farms was still instrumental in raising boys and freeing up men—a very few men—so that humanity could propagate itself and strive forward.

Then her right ankle disintegrated. Her doctors wanted to fuse the large affected bones into one piece. But that would have caused the other, smaller bones in her foot—now facing additional pressure—to deteriorate. That's not so intolerable, perhaps, when you're eighty (although it's no picnic then either). But it's no solution when you're in your teens. We insisted upon an artificial replacement, although the technology was new. There was a three year-waiting list. This was simply not manageable. The damaged ankle produced much more pain than her previously failing hip. One bad night she became erratic and illogical. I couldn't calm her down. I knew she was at her breaking point. To call that stressful is to say almost nothing.

We spent weeks and then months desperately investigating all sorts of replacement devices, trying to assess their suitability. We looked everywhere for quicker surgery: India, China, Spain, the UK, Costa Rica, Florida. We contacted

quicker surgery: India, China, Spain, the UK, Costa Rica, Florida. We contacted the Ontario Provincial Ministry of Health. They were very helpful. They located a specialist across the country, in Vancouver. Mikhaila's ankle was replaced in November. Post-surgery, she was in absolute agony. Her foot was mispositioned. The cast was compressing skin against bone. The clinic was unwilling to give her enough oxycontin to control her pain. She had built up a high level of tolerance because of her previous use.

When she returned home, in less pain, Mikhaila started to taper off the opiates. She hated oxycontin, despite its evident utility. She said it turned her life grey. Perhaps that was a good thing, under the circumstances. She stopped using it as soon as possible. She suffered through withdrawal for months, with night sweating and formication (the sensation of ants crawling upside down under her skin). She became unable to experience any pleasure. That was another effect of opiate withdrawal.

During much of this period, we were overwhelmed. The demands of everyday life don't stop, just because you have been laid low by a catastrophe. Everything that you always do still has to be done. So how do you manage? Here are some things we learned:

Set aside some time to talk and to think about the illness or other crisis and how it should be managed every day. Do not talk or think about it otherwise. If you do not limit its effect, you will become exhausted, and everything will spiral into the ground. This is not helpful. Conserve your strength. You're in a war, not a battle, and a war is composed of many battles. You must stay functional through all of them. When worries associated with the crisis arise at other times, remind yourself that you will think them through, during the scheduled period. This usually works. The parts of your brain that generate anxiety are more interested in the fact that there is a plan than in the details of the plan. Don't schedule your time to think in the evening or at night. Then you won't be able to sleep. If you can't sleep, then everything will go rapidly downhill.

Shift the unit of time you use to frame your life. When the sun is shining, and times are good, and the crops are bountiful, you can make your plans for the next month, and the next year, and the next five years. You can even dream a decade ahead. But you can't do that when your leg is clamped firmly in a crocodile's jaws. "Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof"—that is Matthew 6:34. It is often interpreted as "live in the present, without a care for tomorrow." This is not what it means. That injunction must be interpreted in the context of the Sermon

on the Mount, of which it is an integral part. That sermon distills the ten "Thou-shalt-nots" of the Commandments of Moses into a single prescriptive "Thou shalt." Christ enjoins His followers to place faith in God's Heavenly Kingdom, and the truth. That's a conscious decision to presume the primary goodness of Being. That's an act of courage. Aim high, like Pinocchio's Geppetto. Wish upon a star, and then act properly, in accordance with that aim. Once you are aligned with the heavens, you can concentrate on the day. Be careful. Put the things you can control in order. Repair what is in disorder, and make what is already good better. It is possible that you can manage, if you are careful. People are very tough. People can survive through much pain and loss. But to persevere they must see the good in Being. If they lose that, they are truly lost.

Dogs, Again—But Finally, Cats

Dogs are like people. They are the friends and allies of human beings. They are social, hierarchical, and domesticated. They are happy at the bottom of the family pyramid. They pay for the attention they receive with loyalty, admiration, and love. Dogs are great.

Cats, however, are their own creatures. They aren't social or hierarchical (except in passing). They are only semi-domesticated. They don't do tricks. They are friendly on their own terms. Dogs have been tamed, but cats have made a decision. They appear willing to interact with people, for some strange reasons of their own. To me, cats are a manifestation of nature, of Being, in an almost pure form. Furthermore, they are a form of Being that looks at human beings and approves.

When you meet a cat on a street, many things can happen. If I see a cat at a distance, for example, the evil part of me wants to startle it with a loud pfft! sound—front teeth over bottom lip. That will make a nervous cat puff up its fur and stand sideways so it looks larger. Maybe I shouldn't laugh at cats, but it's hard to resist. The fact that they can be startled is one of the best things about them (along with the fact that they are instantly disgruntled and embarrassed by their overreaction). But when I have myself under proper control, I'll bend down, and call the cat over, so I can pet it. Sometimes, it will run away. Sometimes, it will ignore me completely, because it's a cat. But sometimes the cat will come over to me, push its head against my waiting hand, and be pleased about it. Sometimes it will even roll over, and arch its back against the dusty concrete (although cats positioned in that manner will often bite and claw even a friendly hand).

Across the street on which I live is a cat named Ginger. Ginger is a Siamese, a beautiful cat, very calm and self-possessed. She is low in the Big Five personality trait of neuroticism, which is an index of anxiety, fear and emotional pain. Ginger is not at all bothered by dogs. Our dog, Sikko, is her friend. Sometimes when you call her—sometimes of her own accord—Ginger will trot across the street, tail held high, with a little kink at the end. Then she will roll on her back in front of Sikko, who wags his tail happily as a consequence. Afterward, if she feels like it, she might come visit you, for a half a minute. It's a nice break. It's a little extra light, on a good day, and a tiny respite, on a bad day.

If you pay careful attention, even on a bad day, you may be fortunate enough to be confronted with small opportunities of just that sort. Maybe you will see a little girl dancing on the street because she is all dressed up in a ballet costume. Maybe you will have a particularly good cup of coffee in a café that cares about their customers. Maybe you can steal ten or twenty minutes to do some little ridiculous thing that distracts you or reminds you that you can laugh at the absurdity of existence. Personally, I like to watch a Simpsons episode at 1.5 times regular speed: all the laughs; two-thirds the time.

And maybe when you are going for a walk and your head is spinning a cat will show up and if you pay attention to it then you will get a reminder for just fifteen seconds that the wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it.

Rule 12: Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

P.S. Soon after I wrote this chapter, Mikhaila's surgeon told her that her artificial ankle would have to be removed, and her ankle fused. Amputation waited down that road. She had been in pain for eight years, since the replacement surgery, and her mobility remained significantly impaired, although both were much better than before. Four days later she happened upon a new physiotherapist. He was a large, powerful, attentive person. He had specialized in ankle treatment in the UK, in London. He placed his hands around her ankle and compressed it for forty seconds, while Mikhaila moved her foot back and forth. A mispositioned bone slipped back where it belonged. Her pain disappeared. She never cries in front of medical personnel, but she burst into tears. Her knee straightened up. Now she can walk long distances, and traipse around in her bare feet. The calf muscle on her damaged leg is growing back. She has much more flexion in the artificial joint. This year, she got married and had a baby girl, Elizabeth, named

artificial joint. This year, she got married and had a baby girl, Elizabeth, named after my wife's departed mother.