



*A Reason for  
Living*

LAURENT GRENIER



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INSPIRATIONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL NONFICTION

*To my parents and friends,  
and everyone else  
who has helped me grow  
into a life-loving writer.*



## **WARNING**

I have striven to write factually and truthfully. My memory and my intellect, however, are not infallible. All I can certify is that my autobiography corresponds with my life as I remember it, which is not a guarantee of absolute objectiveness as regards the people and the places I describe. To avoid conflicts, I have named none of them.

The scientific part of my book is trustworthy to the extent that I have written it meticulously on the basis of reliable sources, though science never ceases to progress. It mostly contains general data that are verifiable in comprehensive encyclopedias. The remaining and more specialized data can be verified in university textbooks that deal with the specialties relevant to them. As for the philosophical part of my book, necessarily imperfect despite my concentrated and educated efforts, I venture the opinion that it is worthwhile.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to everyone – family members, friends, and acquaintances, and professional editors – who went over this book when it was still but a manuscript and helped me give it a final polish. Having said this, I accept full responsibility for the finished product.



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## INTRODUCTION

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*“My diving accident was a misfortune that deprived me extensively of my life’s meaning. It was also a chance to discover a deeper and truer reason for living.”*

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In a way, I can identify with those who died and came back to life. I am speaking of those whose hearts stopped beating for a few minutes, while their brains remained strangely alive, in an altered state of consciousness, before their hearts started beating again somehow. Many of these people have revealed what they “lived” during these deadly moments. They apparently saw their corpses as if with other people’s eyes, from a vantage point of a spiritual nature above their physical selves, which lay horribly inanimate beyond their control. Similarly, at the time of my diving accident, when I was still under water and in need of rescue, I looked at my paralyzed limbs as though they no longer belonged to me. It seemed that I was dead, yet conscious, reduced to nothing but a dreadful sight and a powerless will.

My diving accident has something else in common with the near-death experience of the people in question. I remember bits of my past rushing through my mind, like a largely edited videotape played in fast forward: images of my childhood, bathed in my mother’s love, and of my adolescence, dominated by my fascination with girls, sports, and motorcycles. I quickly reviewed my life until the last minute, when I dove in the shallow end of a friend’s pool and hit my head on the bottom without losing consciousness, though with the force of my plunging 220 pounds.

I was almost drowning when my friend noticed my inert body in the water and rushed to my rescue. He grabbed me under the arms and lifted me partly above water into the warm light of the sunny day, 2 June 1974, date of my second birth, which he midwived. I was heavily built, like a football player, yet as helpless as a newborn child. I was in shock, gasping, delighted to be alive, thanks to my friend, and alarmed by my dead limbs. My neck was broken; and so was my life I came to believe months later, placed in a dreary nursing home, with a gloomy diagnosis: The paralysis was irreversible and made unattainable practically everything I had enjoyed or pursued in the past. Years of

misery were to follow – years of pain, frustration, and despair, during which I became insomniac and suicidal.

I am writing this on 25 February 1998. Almost twenty-four years have elapsed since my diving accident, which I regarded initially as a curse. Today I consider it a blessing in disguise, despite the hell I have suffered because of it. This new outlook is my greatest victory on life's battlefield – a mental victory over the apparent absurdity of my reality, as I entertained desires whose satisfaction was an impossible dream. My physical condition has essentially not changed; in fact it has worsened in one respect. The ninety pounds of muscle mass I lost as a result of paralysis I have not regained, because the paralysis has remained; plus I have developed an acute and generalized chronic pain. Still and all, I look favorably on my existence to the extent that I have found purpose and happiness in it.

My diving accident was a misfortune that deprived me extensively of my life's meaning. It was also a chance to discover a deeper and truer reason for living. Why live? See what my answer is. I trust it will help you live a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

Before I introduce this answer in detail, let me expand on its painful origin and strenuous development, which are the shadows accompanying its light. In the following pages, by degrees, I will show you the stages of my evolution. This evolution begins in darkness, after my deathlike experience and my "second birth," which opened a new life, markedly different from my old one. At first, I equated this difference with loss. It meant nothing good to me – nothing but grief – inasmuch as I wished everything had stayed the same. Then, after much time and many follies, I acknowledged the value of my situation, fraught with limitations, but also pregnant with opportunities. I grasped these opportunities and started to enjoy my new life.

It now occurs to me that my diving accident has yet something else in common with the near-death experience of those I mentioned earlier. Some of them have reported an uncanny succession of events: Their departure from the world was heartrending before they agreed to let go, guided by a luminous figure toward a blissful afterlife in a city of light. Then they abruptly returned to the world with a heightened awareness of their earthly mission, a greater commitment to life and to love. Likewise, after the accident, I mourned the loss of my previous situation; but I learned to do without it and struggled to know, with the help of various luminaries, the foundation of happiness, beyond my former knowledge of it. In the end I recovered my love for life. Better still, I increased and secured it with a sense of purpose that is independent of circumstances, save my brain's integrity. I aimed to be

## Introduction

worthy by living courageously and generously, within my limits, no matter what they are.

Dear reader, my friend, welcome to my book, which I hope will interest and benefit you greatly. I wish you every happiness!



# DENIAL

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*“What is considered unlivable is spontaneously considered unbelievable. Doubt is maintained until the burden of proof is overwhelming, and sometimes beyond this critical threshold, in which case denial becomes mental illness.”*

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I shook my head, left and right, over and over. I could not accept that, after seventeen years of faithful service, my limbs were disobeying my commands. Only my head obeyed. I wanted it to set a good example and get the rest to follow suit. The rest stayed at rest; my mind resembled a shouting master among defiant slaves. Or were my limbs simply asleep? Again I shook my head, left and right, fiercely, as if to intimidate or waken them, so they would resume their service. In vain. My neck was broken, and my spinal cord damaged. The more I shook my head, the more I worsened the injury. Denial and violence were not only useless; they were harmful.

An ambulance was called. Shortly thereafter, I arrived at the hospital. I was put in traction, with two prongs screwed into the sides of my skull and hooked to a wire and weights by means of a metal piece straddling my head. Until I felt the pain from that procedure, performed with a mild, local anesthetic, nothing seemed real. I saw what was happening, but I refused to look at the significance of it. My eyes, like water, merely reflected the outside world, while my mind remained calm, deep down. I said to myself, “This is just a bad dream, not worthy of my attention. Soon I’ll wake up and everything will return to normal.”

This wishful thought could not withstand the painful reality of a doctor screwing two prongs into the sides of my skull. My attitude changed, only superficially: “All right, I’m really injured, enough to warrant this procedure. I’m healthy, though, and stronger than most people. Besides, the doctor appears to have the situation well under control. In a few weeks, maybe less, I should recover and get back into the swing of things, with a pair of scars and lots of stories to tell.”

The next day, in the intensive care unit, I received numerous visitors: my loving parents and friends, and other people who liked me – students and teachers from my school, where I was popular because I showed a blend of powerful build and kind disposition. The word was

out: I would never walk again. Everyone knew the facts, everyone except me, who heard nothing, or something without listening. None of my visitors ventured to burst my bubble with a pointy realism. Tears were shed out of my sight, for fear of damping my morale. Smiles even prevailed on faces and concealed the underlying sadness, sometimes ambiguously, disturbingly, when the sadness overflowed. “Don’t worry,” I insisted, “I’m going to be fine,” and I rounded off this rosy picture with a bit of wit. My optimism was not encouraging, and my jest not amusing. What is worse, they were pitiful, as they stemmed from my blindness to the ugly truth and were sure to wither.

A few days later, I was moved to a room on the neurology ward. I was there in the ghastly company of a comatose patient – a road accident victim whose head and hands were extensively bandaged. The room itself was old and bleak. Its walls and ceiling were yellowish, as if they had been white long ago.

The doctor came to my bedside. His reputation had preceded him. It was rumored he was at the top of his profession and downright honest. I respected his high standing and feared his straightforwardness. He explained my injury, its severity and irreversibility (the spinal cord, once damaged, does not repair itself), and concluded without more ado, “You’ll never walk again. I’m sorry.”

I understood his words. Their meaning, however, did not make sense to me. Either he was wrong – despite his expertise as an eminent neurologist, he was human and hence fallible – or my life had become absurd: I was permanently deprived of the freedom to do what I desired to do for my happiness. This second alternative was unbearable. In an effort to dismiss it, I questioned the doctor’s statement with stubborn skepticism. I wanted this man to admit that his science was not a godly omniscience, or that he had reasons to think what he did, but also to doubt it. The implicit “think” was the chink in his statement – the humanness of it, by which it could be faulted. Thoughts never completely mirror their objects. They are reflections that proceed from the brain and rely on the senses for information, brain and senses being limited, one in intellectual capacity, the others in perceptual range. They are an imperfect representation of things, based on experience, not an absolute reproduction of what these things really are.

I reveled in the difference between knowledge and reality, like two overlapping circles where the first one is smaller than the second. This difference implied a margin of ignorance, in proportion to which there was room for unexpected phenomena – miracles that would be regarded as natural once the laws behind them had been discovered. Possibly there was room for my full recovery.

I urged the doctor to concede that such a recovery was conceivable, if we allowed for unknown forces, which faith could awaken. "Extraordinary things do happen, but...." To that restriction I was deaf. I desperately needed to trust I would walk again, and this need overrode the pressure to credit the doctor's prediction, which was the most probable. The reason for my attitude exceeded reason. My heart held the balance of my judgment and made it tilt to the most desirable opinion, which was the least tenable. Such was my weakness, a common human fault: What is considered unlivable is spontaneously considered unbelievable. Doubt is maintained until the burden of proof is overwhelming, and sometimes beyond this critical threshold, in which case denial becomes mental illness.

I exploited the supposed imperfection of the doctor's prediction. This imperfection was like a hole in the ground beneath a fence; I enlarged it forcibly until I could escape the prison of this prediction. In plain English, I indulged in fantasy under the pretext of an expanded rationality. Again I was hopeful and cheerful, though less than before and with difficulty. The doctor figured I was not ready for the truth and he had wasted his time. He left with a mix of compassion and frustration in his eyes.

A month went by; I stayed put. My condition was not improving, except for a negligible return of sensation here and there, below my chest, and of motion in my arms. It was even deteriorating in one visible respect: My muscles were melting away and the ugly truth was more and more uncovered, like a soiled lawn in the spring as the snow disappears. I was unwilling, however, to abandon my dream, which I thought was the profound reality of my soul, as opposed to the apparent reality of my life. I clung to every fact, every claim, that seemed to reveal, behind this cruel appearance, some likelihood of mercy, of happiness restored at last. I began to regard my negligible improvements as steps in a significant recovery process that required time and patience.

Regularly, when I lay awake on my back and had no one attending or visiting me, I tried to move my fingers and toes to prove I was on the mend. Sometimes they twitched after a few tries. I was delighted at first; then I grew disillusioned. Often they twitched before I tried to move them, or after countless tries. Likewise, rain falls naturally without a rain dance, but a rain dance will always end with a rainfall if danced long enough. My efforts were futile. Nevertheless, I repeated them, day in day out, until I clearly distinguished between coincidence and consequence. The twitches in my fingers and toes were no more a function of my will than a rainfall depends on the dance of a sorcerer. They were involuntary, of a spastic nature, related to my paralysis. As

for the feeling in my body, below my chest, it was still poor at best. All in all, my negligible improvements in sensation and motion remained negligible as weeks passed. The doctor had warned me that I would never regain my physical sensibility and mobility beyond the limits of near quadriplegia. Now it was harder to challenge his words. My personal experience was consistent with them, contrary to my wild expectations.

One day, as despair was creeping into my heart, a jolly young man entered my room. He had been hospitalized for some time and was now discharged, though he still wore a plastic collar that supported his mending neck. He was visiting patients on the ward to say goodbye to them and wish them good luck. He walked to my bedside and inquired about my condition. I gave him a brief account of my diving accident and bitterly quoted the doctor, who had stated that I would never walk again. “Bullshit!” the young man exclaimed. “Look at me. I broke my neck in a car accident. He told me that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. I proved him wrong, didn’t I? This bloody doctor! He thinks he knows everything. Don’t let his prediction get you down. Don’t give up! Once you stop fighting, you start dying.” I was stunned and exhilarated. These words were exactly what I wanted to hear, from someone whose point of view mattered most to me – someone who had broken his neck and was back on his feet, against a dark prognosis.

Again the pursuit of my dream seemed reasonable, though extravagant from a conservative standpoint. But was it really so or was it grossly unrealistic, given my injury, which might be worse than that of the young man to a critical degree? I dared not consider this question, let alone answer it with investigative determination. A few troubling images and ideas, however, managed to slip into my consciousness: I saw myself shaking my head, left and right, over and over, and fiercely at that, thereby harming my spinal cord more gravely as I lay paralyzed; I thought of my condition that had come to a standstill after minimal progress. Quickly I brushed off these mental intruders. I could not bear having them spoil a perfect moment of pure optimism.

“Are you doing physiotherapy?” the young man asked me with the glowing look of a Christian enthusiast who strives to convert you. “Exercise and perseverance are what saved me. Remember, don’t give up!” These were his last words before he left. His message was delivered; his mission, accomplished. He had made me a believer for the simple reason that I reveled in his revelation. It catered to my soul, longing for an able body. To me, paralysis was death, and recovery resurrection. I was a born-again dreamer. What about the reality of my condition, which was obvious to everyone but me? Hush! It was taboo as far as I

was concerned. I did not know how to live it; I did not want to believe it.

Nevertheless, my faith in willpower and physical therapy was wavering. For weeks already, a physiotherapist had treated me every afternoon. He had stimulated my limbs through a variety of movements, without any improvement in my mobility, though I had tried to participate actively in his efforts. Something was missing that prevented me from obtaining better results. What? Did I have to try harder, over a longer period? Or was I lacking the means to achieve my end, no matter how hard and long I tried?

In my view, faith can awaken unknown forces, but not inexistent ones. It cannot make possible what is impossible. The power of faith is proportional to the forces of nature, some of which are known, whereas the others are unknown and cause phenomena that are considered supernatural. Personally I fail to see how faith could actually move mountains, given our human limitations.

Some people believe they can do anything, despite the fact that they cannot. Among them are people who believe they can fly like birds. If they were left alone and free, they would jump off a roof and flap their arms, which would bring about a highly predictable outcome: death or severe injuries. They live in mental hospitals.

“Exercise and perseverance are what saved me. Remember, don’t give up!” This message of salvation kept coming back to me, gnawing at my common sense like waves at a rocky shore. It was unforgettable and irresistible against the prospect of an everlasting hell. It might also be inapplicable, as “me” was not I. The young man’s condition was similar to mine in that he had broken his neck, but similarities may hide differences of great consequence. Such differences would explain my extremely poor results. They would imply that my injury was truly severe and irreversible.

I refused to think of this possibility, yet I sensed it, and that weakened me. I needed to find another possibility, compatible with the words of the young man, which incited me to trust I could recover. And I found one, the thought of which strengthened me. I derived it from rehabilitation stories I had collected here and there, and garbled sometimes, unconsciously, to make them agree with my wishes. They amounted to hearsay about people who had been disabled by an accident and rehabilitated by months of physiotherapy in a specialized clinic. Time and patience were apparently of the essence, more than I had previously imagined; but I could accept that, for lack of a short and easy way out. I was eager to be released from the hospital and admitted to a rehabilitation facility, where physiotherapy would gradually restore

my physical abilities, I hoped. This release and this admission were near.

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Since the beginning of my hospital stay, my parents and friends had blessed me with their affection. Faithfully, they had risen to the occasion and brought sunshine into my life. I am grateful for their kindness and kinder for this gratitude. Love is like heat, absorbed and diffused. The one you give has its origin in the one you receive, firstly from the people who are the closest to you. No civilization can blossom without the affection of parents and friends nurturing its human roots. The more a child grows in a hostile family and neighborhood, the greater the risk of this child developing grim assumptions about others and behaving in society as wild beasts do in the jungle – that is, savagely. Of course such a behavior, when perpetrated, inspires further hostility. I know of no worse self-fulfilling prophecy.

Before my diving accident, I had fallen in love with a girl at school. I had intended to approach her for a date. Then June 2 arrived, a watershed in my life: I hit my head against the bottom of a pool and my neck broke. I lost everything, save a number of caring souls who accompanied me in the twilight zone, where I was physically dead and spiritually alive.

Somehow – through a friend of mine, I presume – this girl was apprised of my feelings toward her. Along with everyone else at school (the news that I was incurably disabled had spread like fire in a dry forest), she was aware of my condition. She came to my bedside, for reasons that still escape me to a large extent. I simply assume she followed her heart and her heart was good. After a week or two of regular visits, one thing led to another; we kissed. She became my girlfriend. She figured she could make a pleasant difference in my painful existence, and she did, many times over. I never thanked her enough for that.

I remember a tropical evening at the height of June, in my hospital room. She was cooling my forehead with a wet facecloth. I shut my eyes and envisioned the river where I swam every summer, near the cottage my parents rented. “When I’m myself again, or well enough to go to the cottage, I’ll bring you there and we’ll swim together in the river. It’s beautiful, you’ll see, perhaps sometime in August. Cross your fingers.” She did not; she knew my situation was hopeless. Instead, she held my hand and told me, delicately, “Don’t hope for too much.” Soft realism. She avoided lying while sparing me the truth. My dream was unscathed, only tempered. I planned to skate with her on the canal not

far from my house the next winter. She looked at me with sadness, and smiled. Quietly, she waited for me to come back to earth, at my own pace, while I lagged behind in the clouds.

It did not occur to me that she was aware of my reality but open to my love nonetheless. All along I thought she was staying at my side with a future in mind that resembled the past, or differed from it by this fact alone: We would enjoy each other's company in numerous activities. To me, my condition was a parenthesis of paralysis in my normal life – an unfortunate interruption that I hoped would soon be followed by a resumption of my happiness. To her, this condition would never end, except on my dying day. Yet, there she was, lovely and loving. I am filled with wonder at the goodness of her heart.

A month later, the sun turned the brick hospital into an oven. Once more, she cooled my forehead with a wet facecloth. Close friends of mine often relieved her – friends of great kindness and faithfulness. This time, however, after weeks of stagnation, as opposed to the progress from disability to recovery I had wished for, I was rather disillusioned. I spoke neither of swimming, sometime in August, nor of skating, next winter, as I considered the one impossible and the other improbable. Everyone concluded I was finally beginning to face reality. Then came the jolly young man. Again I became hopeful. With noble intentions, he had retarded my awakening to the truth. I felt illuminated; I was in fact blind with fancy.

A nurse took it upon herself to remedy my setback before my transfer to the rehabilitation facility, which was scheduled for a week after. She stepped into my room and leaned against a rail of my hospital bed. "May I speak to you?" she asked with an overdone kindness that foreboded unpleasant words. My chest tightened. "Yes, sure." Her gracious manner obliged. I agreed to listen to what I could not admit. Her message was simple: You wait for your injury to heal as much as possible; this takes a number of months; and you deal with your paralysis in the most realistic and positive way for the rest of your life. In short, you adapt to your reality. Easier said than done, but you must do what you must do. You still have plenty to look forward to. "What, damn it! What do I have to look forward to?" I screamed inwardly while remaining polite. I thanked her and she left.

She had shattered my hopes, like windows in the dead of winter; I was cold depressed. Hurriedly, I patched them with the young man's retort (which contradicted the doctor's statement): "Look at me. I broke my neck in a car accident. He told me that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. I proved him wrong, didn't I?" I went over these words in my head, again and again, and little by little they lifted my

spirits. Nevertheless, the nurse had cast a persistent chill over me. The young man was an oddity, and I feared that my life would follow an abnormal but ordinary course, in keeping with standard predictions – a downward course into hell.

My parents were too old to care for me at home, and my girlfriend still had her youth to live. In all likelihood, the former would place me in an institution and the latter would leave me if my paralysis proved incurable. Suffering, boredom, and loneliness would be my lot, I reckoned, despite the enduring affection of my parents and friends. I had an ace in the hole, however, to beat my fear, enough to carry on. This ace was a lingering trust in my physical nature, which was exceptionally strong in everyone's view. I speculated that my life might follow an extraordinary course and return to normal. It had to!

The question was whether it could. Free will is always confined in limited power, which may not permit the fulfillment of an important want. At best, our efforts bring us dignity and success. They never make us attain perfection, though – every success is open to progress. Religion and wisdom help us accept the shortcomings of reality, either with the prospect of bliss after death or with an approach to life that is conducive to serenity.

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Today, as I sit in my wheelchair, writing this overview of essential matters, I am in a position to affirm that my life could not return to normal and probably never will, barring a scientific breakthrough capable of reversing nervous damage and muscular atrophy, or the disabling effects thereof – an unlikely event during my lifetime, despite recent medical advances. My paralysis matches the prognosis that the doctor and the nurse had unveiled to me, to no avail. My clinging to the past had a pull with my way of handling information and viewing the future. I was largely impervious to the untoward obvious. Those who pride themselves on their honesty should also concern themselves with this principle: The effectiveness of honesty depends on a person's willingness to face the truth, which may conflict with this person's desires and provoke denial.

In such a case, how can one promote this willingness, despite this conflict? The answer to this question could prove useful to anyone who seeks to be effectively honest with people in denial. Ultimately, it could benefit these people, whose denial is contrary to their best interest. I go on the assumption that truth, or the conformity of thought to reality, is the sine qua non of vital efficacy. Health, pleasure, successful careers,

and harmonious relationships require that we know the needs and capabilities of our nature, and the workings of the world. The absence of this knowledge leads to accidents, illness, suffering, failure, and death. Therefore, the first object of our desires should be truth, or the knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. Why then are people often unwilling to face it?

I believe there are two reasons for this unwillingness. Firstly, the desire to know the truth, which originates in the desire to live happily, spontaneously degenerates into the desire to be right, to avoid the insecurity and shame associated with error and ignorance, and also to avoid the effort to learn. Thus fear, pride, and laziness are obstacles to the pursuit of truth and happiness. People are unlikely to admit they are wrong when they are, unless they possess courage and humility. Whoever takes their good to heart should help them develop these virtues.

Secondly, the truth may be known from experience about a happy way of life. The desire to know the truth then turns into the desire to see the truth last. Mental inertia becomes the law, proportional to the force of attraction exerted on the mind by this happy way of life. Any upheaval that breaks the status quo is denied: "I can't believe it; this can't be happening." Reality is deemed unreal because it no longer tallies with the desired truth. Denial can therefore be regarded as a deviant process that conforms facts to ideas, instead of the opposite. Reason is overthrown and emotions reign, as one strives to prove reality wrong to spare oneself the loss of a happy way of life and the pursuit of another, this loss and this pursuit being associated with grief, strain, and doubt, or even despair.

To help a person acknowledge an undesired truth about a radical change in reality, one has to couple honesty with wisdom to heighten this person's awareness of the human capacity for adaptation. This capacity is best illustrated by the example of people who have suffered a terrible misfortune and progressively discovered a new outlook and a new happiness, more enlightened and satisfying than the old ones. In addition, one has to stimulate the will of this person, who is left with a formidable challenge: to start her or his life over. Lastly, this heightened awareness and this stimulated will may weaken at times, calling for reinforcement. All in all, against the unwillingness to face the truth, the effectiveness of honesty is always difficult and uncertain.

What precisely could the doctor or the nurse have said or done to help me come to terms with my paralysis? "You still have plenty to look forward to." Plenty of what? The nurse meant well, but as far as I could tell, her words meant nothing. I had no concrete idea of what was

the content of these abstractions. Had she talked about young men like me who had adapted to their reality in attractive ways to which I could relate, her message might have registered more usefully. Better still, had she introduced me to such young men, who could serve as my role models inasmuch as I could identify with them and they lived happily, she might have increased my ability to accept my condition. Roughly the same observations apply to the doctor, who told me what the problem was with regard to this condition, without saying a word about how I could deal with it.

Of course I recognize that doctors and nurses have many responsibilities. They should not be burdened with additional ones that exceed their resources of time and energy. Other professionals, such as social workers, and family members or familiars can assume these additional responsibilities. The point of faulting the doctor and the nurse, commendable in their own right, was to explore one of the means of rendering their honesty more effective. Among these means was moral support, which encouraged me to face up to the difficulties. I received some in abundance from those who were the closest and dearest to me – namely, my loving parents, girlfriend, and best friends.

A nonhuman factor that can influence the outcome of honesty is time. My personal experience vouches for the importance of this factor. At first, I denied the doctor's prediction; but after weeks of stagnation, I admitted that my condition might never progress beyond the limits of near quadriplegia. This prediction gained yet more credibility as I kept verifying it: I was hit by the facts of my paralysis again and again; my idea of recovery was breaking down.

Finally, despite my inclination to deny it, the truth was winning. It was settling in my mind and preparing me to think about the ways of adjusting to it. Indeed, before I could be interested in learning how to handle this truth, I had to be convinced of it. This conviction required that I view my reality as real.

The realness of it was increasingly undeniable, though unbearable, as it durably resisted my wishes. Nevertheless, my state of denial was not nearly over. After my encounter with the jolly young man, I indulged in the belief that my recovery was still possible, but that the time needed for it was longer than I expected. Once more I assumed that my reality was unreal, or that it resisted my wishes only temporarily. In the end, however, my fanciful ideas would forever yield under the facts.

In brief, toward someone who has suffered a radical change in reality, honesty cannot be effective without waiting until she or he has experienced this change enough to think it is real and without helping

her or him find enough adaptability and courage to accept it. Therefore, this effectiveness entails an honest person making a firm resolve to wait for the right moment and be helpful. This resolve may falter because of such adverse tendencies as selfishness, hastiness, laziness, and thoughtlessness. It takes an exceptional person – generous, patient, brave, and wise – to be effectively honest with someone who is unwilling to face the truth.

In all fairness I should add that the act of being honest is in itself worthy. The doctor and the nurse, who tried to promote my knowledge and acceptance of my paralysis, made the effort to deal responsibly with a human tragedy, which pointed to the frailty of their own mortal existence. They showed a blend of conscience, nerve, and realism. This was indicative of their general attitude and behavior as people of awareness and merit.

First, they recognized that reality often resists a person's wishes, at worst insuperably. In my opinion, this resistance is a central problem from which every suffering derives. It supports the belief in an outside reality, distinct from the person's self. That is, this self does not merely create reality. If it did, reality would conform to all its wishes. Such is obviously not the case. Second, for their own good and that of others, within their capabilities, the doctor and the nurse endeavored to overcome the resistance of reality and made this endeavor their dignity. My paralysis was insuperable. They knew and accepted that, and hoped I would do the same, thanks to their honesty. Unfortunately, I could not.

As long as my dream fed on extravagant beliefs and survived the repeated assaults of my reality, the truth would seem inapplicable to me or questionable and be untimely. Most importantly, because I equated paralysis with a conscious death, I would escape the truth until it became inescapable. When would it become so? Not yet awhile. The mind is hard to imprison; it can break out of a painful truth through the smallest doubt.

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I have a big brother – my only sibling – whom I hold very dear. He has studied abroad, from the age of seventeen, and has continued living there after his studies. He is brainy and goodhearted. He is also bookish, versed in Ancient Greek and Latin, and several modern languages, plus in literature, philosophy, mathematics, and science. During his teens and his twenties, he was happy to read all night in bed and sleep through much of the day. Once, he returned to Canada to

visit the family and said to me, "I should be the one who broke his neck." This was a couple of years after my diving accident. My doubt had run out. I could no longer imagine I would eventually regain the mobility and the strength I had lost. All that remained was my soul confined in a purgatorial body, nearly as inert as a corpse.

Sometime before, a Christian acquaintance of mine had persuaded me to attend the rally of a faith healer who claimed that God worked miracles through him. I was wheeled in... and wheeled out. Many had been present, who suffered from various afflictions. Few had been "healed," mainly people on crutches. Not a single paralytic had walked out of her or his chair. I felt dejected and puzzled. Assuming God is loving and almighty, why is the world imperfect, often tragically? Could this assumption be false? Now I believe God is loving, but mighty within limits. I wonder at the manifestations of beauty, strength, intelligence, and happiness in the world, next to deplorable examples of the opposite. To me, these manifestations show that God's might, though limited, is great indeed.

"I should be the one..." These words are planted in my memory. Occasionally they crop up in my consciousness, and again I am moved by my brother's compassion and generosity. He realized that my paralysis afflicted me terribly. Until I broke my neck, I had enjoyed an active life, and my physique had been my source of pride. He, on the other hand, took pleasure in reading books and built his self-esteem on his intellect.

My mother once told me about a winter afternoon at the bottom of a hill where she and I went tobogganing. I was three years old. I grabbed the rope and insisted on dragging the toboggan up the hill. The climb was awkward, as I sank in the snow and was heavily clothed; but I was a proud and husky boy, eager to overcome this physical challenge. I delighted in breaking the resistance that reality opposed to my human strength. I felt powerfully alive. The closer I came to the top of the hill, the more I found my life meaningful: I had a goal and the capacity to achieve it. I was struggling and puffing, however. My mother reached for the rope. "Here, my darling, you have done very well, congratulations! I will help you now." I turned toward her and frowned. "No! I can do it!" And I pressed on, almost as wide as I was tall in my thick snowsuit, with the snow up to my calves. My mother patiently stood by. Just a hop before the top, I halted, looked at her, and smiled. She smiled back and applauded. Three more steps, and "hurrah!" I was the king of the hill.

My mother and I sat on the toboggan and let gravity do the rest. We slid and bounced. A swarm of flakes hovered around us and tickled

our faces. Suddenly, they blinded us as the toboggan got out of control after hitting a bump near the bottom of the hill. It veered and toppled; we rolled in the snow, screamed, and laughed. We felt intensely and joyously alive for the danger we had feared, during a split second, and the harm we had been spared. We stood up and shook the snow off our clothes. The fun was over.

Again I grabbed the rope and proceeded to repeat my earlier conquest. One laborious step, then another, then yet another, I trudged unswervingly. "Are you sure, my darling, that you can again..." I thought I could. What is more, I loved to think I could. When I felt tired and was tempted to quit, this gave me additional strength to carry on and discover at last with satisfaction that indeed I could. "Hurrah! Hurrah!" Up and down, up and down the hill; up was a mill and down was a thrill; up and down, up and down the hill. I spent an hour of extreme pride and joy.

Throughout my youth, I have sought to experience, time and again, the same happiness. Only the means to this end changed as I grew older. The bigger and stronger I became, the greater the physical challenge I chose to overcome.

At twelve years of age, I worked as a delivery boy for a grocery store. I once climbed a staircase to the third floor, with a fifty-pound sack of potatoes on my left shoulder and a somewhat heavy paper bag, containing various foods and other provisions, in my right arm. The client was a frail old lady in a housecoat, waiting at her door. When she saw me, her eyes widened. She tottered in my direction and offered to relieve me of the paper bag. "No, no, please don't; I'm all right. Thank you." So far as I was concerned, her helping me was out of the question. She insisted, in vain. "My God!" she exclaimed, "You are some big and strong boy." I smiled so much that my face hurt.

My top memories of youth and physical power date from the year before my diving accident, when I was between sixteen and seventeen years old. I was at my biggest and strongest then.

First memory: I go to a bar where the owner of a bodybuilding club, a muscular man in his early thirties, has improvised an arm wrestling competition. I defeat everyone, including him. "Bartender," he shouts, "give a beer to the winner; I'm paying." Thereupon, he begs me to enter his club. "You have amazing potential. With proper training you could grow into a champion heavyweight bodybuilder." I have only taken a sip of beer, but I am already drunk with pride.

Second memory: I am unloading a truck that is laden with a number of extra large flour bags, each weighing a hundred pounds. From inside the truck a second worker is dragging the bags to me, with

difficulty, and I heave them to a chute, which opens into a hotel kitchen. After a minute, I suggest that this worker take a break and let me continue on my own. "Are you sure?" he asks. "Yes," I answer, "I'm sure. Don't worry, I love this." He looks at me as if to say "You're crazy" and laughs. "Go for it, then." And I finish the job single-handedly. I feel mighty and euphoric, light as a feather, though my body is rock hard.

Third memory: I am riding a cross-country motorcycle in the woods, on a sandy path that is trodden by horseback riders during the day. It is now the evening. I am alone and free, zooming along the straights, throttling down then up as I wheel in then out of turns, skidding here and there, and using my legs to recover myself. The motorcycle and my body – which combine horsepower with manpower – form a very powerful mobile whole, and my mind is in control. Every time I want to veer into the woods and ascend or descend a slope, or halt and lift the motorcycle over an obstacle instead of skirting it, merely for the sake of feeling my own strength, I do it freely. Likewise, every time I want to execute a wheelie or, when I have fallen off the motorcycle, muscle my way back on the saddle and try again, or jump on a neighboring segment of the path slightly below the one I am riding on, I do it freely. My hair, floating loosely in the wind, bears witness to this freedom. I am as delighted as I am disheveled.

Fourth memory: A friend of mine and I are cycling from the city to a distant lake in the country. I am traveling on an old and heavy one-speed bike, loaded with a big box, full of food, clothes, and other utilities, on the luggage rack. My friend – who can hardly look at me without laughing – inquires, "Will you make it there on that rig, with all that stuff?" He is traveling on a new, superlight, ten-speed racer and is only carrying a small packsack, which contains little more than a bathing suit and a towel. "We'll see," I retort. And I get there first. In truth, I was slower uphill, on the paved road; yet, some fifty kilometers later, we took a dirt road and I forged into the lead, while he slackened his pace to spare his racer on the gravel and the bumps. "So what is it you were saying?" I asked with a grin as I straddled my bike on the lakeshore.

Fifth memory: I am playing handball (in this case, a game like indoor soccer, except it is played with the hands and a smaller ball). Suddenly, one of my teammates collapses on the floor and howls with pain after an opposing team member has kneed him in the groin. Outraged, I explode into overpowering plays and score fourteen times. My coach, my teammates, and my team's supporters in the stands, even some opposing team members and their coach who wishes I were on his side, give me the thumbs up, pat me on the back, applaud, shout "bravo!" or congratulate me on my performance. I get a taste of stardom.

Sixth memory: I am walking to my home along a snowy street, after school. I notice a small car stuck in the snow at the street corner ahead of me. Its wheels are spinning. The driver gets out of the car, looking frustrated and helpless. I dash toward him. "Here, I'll give you a shove." He thanks me, then returns into his car and steps on the gas while I push. To no avail. His tires and my boots are slipping. I bend my knees and straighten my back, after I have spread my legs, and grasp the rear bumper. One deep breath; I lift the car, without warning, one foot to the right. The car bounces and lunges, and halts a little further. The driver, once more, gets out of it, visibly stunned. "Gee, thanks. I can't believe you lifted the darn thing. Wow! You are some powerhouse." The dark afternoon, which depressed me earlier, now seems rosy.

Seventh memory: My school's custodian requests my physical assistance. A little boy is unable to open his locker because his combination lock has jammed, and he insists on having me force the lock. In his eyes and those of other children at school whom I have helped on occasion, I am a brotherly giant with remarkable strength. And God knows I delight in that image! At once I follow the custodian to meet the little boy, who is waiting by his locker. I inspect his lock, which is cheap and defective, and clutch it with both hands. The custodian looks doubtful. "Should I fetch a crowbar?" CRACK! I turn around and smile. "I don't believe it will be necessary." The lock has split apart in my hands after I have wrenched it forcefully. The custodian and the little boy gape, as if I were the eighth wonder of the world. I am on cloud nine.

In hospital, I cherished these memories and shuddered at the thought of an endless paralysis. My physical abilities had been an obvious asset, and I had banked on them as my primary means of enjoying life, or more precisely, of feeling pleased, capable, useful, and loved. Like a landowner who turns his trees into a profitable lumbering business, while he never taps the gold vein beneath, deep in his soil, I had never exploited my intellectual resources, which lay beyond my wealth of muscles, in the depth of my being. In fact, I had exploited them minimally: I had studied as little as possible and hardly ever read or reflected on life.

Overall, prior to my diving accident, I was rich in muscular power and basic sociability, and poor in knowledge and thought. I had to lose everything to develop the rest, which was not physical. I am alluding to the mind, as opposed to the body whose dimensions in space have nothing to do with essential matters. It took me years to realize that the true worth of people is measured by the scope of their nobility and wisdom.

## Denial

What is an ignoble and unwise individual? A monster, who is even more monstrous if mighty. Might comes third after nobility and wisdom. It is only instrumental in making them useful. It has no value in itself, apart from its availability. It can be unused, used properly, or misused. Strength is a form of might I possessed in abundance. I have very little of it left, yet I consider myself a better person than I ever was.

## BITTERNESS

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*“Only with a complete loss of hope would sorrow reach its height and begin its transformation into resignation. Only with time and vitality would this resignation mature into satisfaction, as it would include, besides a submissiveness toward an impossible dream, a willingness to live as happily as possible within the confines of reality. Only then would the bitter fruit of sorrow truly be ripe and finally become sweet.”*

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At the close of summer, I was admitted to the rehabilitation facility. It was my last hope – a frail hope near lost, like a sickly horse I lashed with a shred of remaining faith. I believed the chances of my recovering through “exercise and perseverance” were slim, but not nil. Actually, after the doctor’s statement and the nurse’s intervention, following two months of repeated efforts and defeated expectations, my reason to think I would walk again, thanks to months of rehabilitation, was unreasonable. It was a semblance of legitimate reason, a treason of the mind in favor of the soul. Had I looked into the young man’s case and that of the other accident victims whose recoveries had encouraged me, I would have discovered that my case was significantly different, though similar in some respects. My injury, unlike the young man’s and the other accident victims’, was severe and irreversible.

As weeks passed, it became more difficult to deny the severity and irreversibility of my injury. Nothing supported and nobody shared my fantastic hope. It was weakening under a swarm of facts and words that stung me bitterly. My physical reality remained essentially the same, despite the physiotherapy. It was still terribly lame. As for the professionals – the doctor, the nurses, the orderlies, the therapists, and the social worker – attending me, they tried to change me from an ill-adjusted dreamer into a well-adjusted realist.

They echoed the doctor and the nurse at the hospital, but the means they used to achieve their end were more elaborate and practical, and consequently more effective. They explained at length my paralysis and the related dangers – urinary tract infections and pressure sores in particular – plus the precautionary measures designed to avert these

dangers. They taught me to eat and type with hand straps and various attachments, among other skills. They introduced me to the programs, services, and institutions that provided physically handicapped people with assistance, transportation, care, and housing. They arranged for my admission to a new school that was wheelchair accessible (my old one was not). They did all that and then some.

I heard every affirmation and followed every order. I grew more aware and adapted. My progress, however, was only superficial. Without, I toed the line; within, I bucked along the way. I kept hoping for a miracle and moping, as it was put off indefinitely. In my view, a happy paralytic still appeared to be as empty a concept as that of a bladeless knife without a handle. It cut no ice with me.

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One fall afternoon, around five o'clock, I received a tray containing various drinks and dishes: a glass of cranberry juice, a milk carton, a bowl of watery soup, a yellowish salad plus a serving of Kraft dressing in another bowl, a plate of overcooked carrots and peas with a tough piece of meat soaked in gravy, and a cube of Jell-O in a saucer. I had selected them from a paper menu whose appearance was enhanced by fancy names (like those listed on the menu of a distinguished restaurant) – misleading names. The actual supper was a travesty of gourmet cooking.

An orderly sat me up in bed. I pulled a face as he struggled to cut the meat, after setting the tray on a table in front of me. "Think of the people who are dying of starvation," he said. "You're lucky; you have enough to eat. Be thankful!" I found no comfort in this platitude. My life was better than that of the people who were starving, but I could not view it favorably. I suffered a kind of hunger, different from the pain caused by a lack of food – a hunger for the happiness I had lost and might never regain. "Here is your hand strap with your utensils," the orderly added, once he had finished cutting the meat. I gave him a dirty look. He knew what it meant: "Go to hell and eat shit, then we'll see how lucky and thankful you feel!"

In fact, I felt lucky in one respect: I received much assistance from many. My parents, girlfriend, and friends were most supportive. They lightened the weight of my suffering and prevented me from crumbling under it. They visited me regularly, if not every day. They often invited me to dinner, at their homes or a restaurant. Sometimes, they spiced my evening with a movie, a concert, or a party. My male friends lifted me in and out of my wheelchair; they carried me up and

down stairs. “You want to go there; we’ll get you there” was their motto. Two of them even included me in their amateur rock group, no matter how limited I was. I sang and my voice soon turned faint, as I became winded and dizzy due to my reduced lung capacity. I also played drums, holding the drumsticks with Velcro straps and tape, and swinging them left and right, slowly, weakly, while I tired quickly.

In short, my parents, girlfriend, and friends persistently tried to offset the depressing effect of my condition through enjoyable activities. And when my eyes seemed overcast – when my silence appeared fraught with a pent-up cry, like thunder looming amid a dark cloud – they recognized my grief and responded with every bit of humor and wisdom they could muster, and with kindness above all. My face brightened, despite the enduring gloom in the deep recesses of my heart.

I still regarded my disability as a terrible stroke of bad luck. It never occurred to me that I was less a victim of my circumstances than a victim of my attitude toward them. Surely these circumstances were tragic as they rendered my past happiness impossible in the present. The worst tragedy, however, was my failure to appreciate the abilities that had survived my diving accident, while I grieved over those that had not. These surviving abilities enabled me, with time and effort, to attain a new happiness, more intellectual and spiritual than physical, more human, in comparison with the old one. Humans differ from animals in their knowledge and their conscience – their notion of what is true, desirable, and just, and their decision to conform to this notion, which brings them effectiveness, joy, and dignity.

The image of birth springs again to mind. After a long period of well-being inside the uterus, the fetus is thrust out of this familiar and favorable environment. It cries and cries, as though life in the outside world were a death before death. Ejection leads to dejection. Fortunately the helpless newborn usually benefits from the solicitude of reliable adults, primarily the parents. It is fed and amused, among other necessities and frivolities. It is loved, or cared for with kindness and tenderness.

At the age of nearly eighteen, I was like this newborn: dejected, almost as helpless, yet benefited by the care of others. Unlike it, though, I got limited relief, never complete satisfaction, from everything people did to please me. No one had the power to make me happy. I needed to feel capable and useful, and nothing that was done for me could give me this feeling, which was essential for my happiness. I had the ambition to succeed in play, work, or other activities to experience pride, whereas a newborn has no concern for self-realization and self-respect. It only has desires that can be fulfilled by caregivers.

Anyone who wishes to be helpful should always remember that adults and teenagers, and even children who love to try their abilities in various occupations, hate to feel helpless. They may proudly refuse help when they need it, or deny its importance and stay ungrateful when they receive it. What is worse, they may rebuff an offer of help, as if it were an insult, or gruffly accept it and show resentment while it is performed.

It takes humility to welcome help and express gratitude heartily. And it takes delicacy to prevent an offer of help from being downright humiliating, though it is willy-nilly humbling. People are truly generous when they reduce their help to a minimum, at the expense of their pride, to spare that of someone else. Better still, they excel in generosity when they give emphasis to the other's strong points, as opposed to the weak ones that necessitate help, and provide the former with an opportunity to prove themselves and command respect.

Lots of people in my life were great helpers, such as my close friends, who never let me down, and my occupational therapists, who always kept me up and doing. My thankfulness, however, was mixed with bitterness. The help I got reminded me of my disability and was both useful and painful. It could not compensate for my loss of mobility. Rather, it intensified my desire to function normally, as ably and freely as I did before when my body was totally operational and at my command. I craved the impossible. Others could be full of goodwill and do their best, they could not help frustrating me. "Your attitude stinks," the orderly observed. "Because my situation is rotten," I objected. It was bad indeed, but my attitude was worse.

To tell the truth, I generally hid my bitterness. I believed thankfulness alone was worthy of being shown to those who strove to please me, though their efforts invariably fell short of my high wishes. I also was afraid of alienating them, since my life would become even more miserable if they turned indifferent or hostile. Nevertheless, I was often demanding and sometimes impatient, while I refrained from disrespect. I guess I was less ill-tempered and more right-minded than the quadriplegics who had a chip on their shoulder and flew off the handle each time their every whim was not humored at once. They verbally abused their helpers, over and over, and so cuttingly that some of these helpers eventually left in tears and never returned.

Those who stayed had learned how to cope. They felt sympathy for these enraged quadriplegics whose winged dreams were trapped in paralysis. The rage, aroused by the entrapment, or rather by the victims' unwillingness to resign themselves to this loss of freedom, was vented on the helpers, who could not free these victims or perfectly comply

with their will. These helpers had a right to be at peace with themselves insofar as they tried hard to prove helpful. They had a right to be concerned yet detached about this rage, which exceeded their power to help. They could only hope it would gradually subside, as does the rage of a wild bird put in a cage. The bird grows more and more tame with time, until it finally adapts to captivity and resumes singing.

Does this song hold the essence of earthly contentment, which involves confinement? I am alluding to the confines of reality, especially narrow in the case of extensive paralysis, like a small cage between a bird and the infinite sky.

Where there is life there is hope, as they say. All I hoped for was my recovery; consequently, the less I believed it was possible, the less I perceived this saying as true. I did not see that life is an opportunity to make the best of things when we cannot better them. It is rarely so bad that this best amounts to nothing good. It is usually worth living, though its value is often concealed by pain and strain, during a search for meaning that resembles a treasure hunt.

Only when this value is discovered can we feel altogether lucky to be alive and thankful toward everyone and everything that helps us live or makes our life possible. Gratitude and worship begin with the understanding that we depend on others and the world around us, and proceed from God or the principle of all; but never are they greater than when happiness adds a warm feeling to this cold understanding.

Gratitude and worship are least present in the heart of unhappy individuals. Such individuals are naturally reluctant to fault themselves for their unhappiness, or have a tendency to cast the blame on whatever beings or things bear a relation to them. Fortunately, they often resist this tendency, as they recognize its perversity. Although life comes with many strings attached – many determining factors, internal or external – humans are not mere puppets in the hands of circumstances. They may suffer, but they have the power to react against their suffering, unless they are mentally and physically incapacitated in the extreme. The more they passively claim to be the victim of a bad situation, the more they are an undeclared accomplice to it, for lack of struggling to better it or make the best of it. They can take responsibility for their so-called fate, within limits that vary from one person to the next and change with time. As a rule, through persistent efforts, they can succeed in life – in such areas as health, work, love, and friendship.

Sometimes we hear about people of extraordinary courage, honor, and generosity who strike us with admiration, and shame. Of course, if we assume that we are ordinary mortals of inferior character and that, as a result, the example of these people is inapplicable to us,

we avoid this shame and the effort to surpass ourselves. We may believe, however, that we have the ability and therefore the duty to follow this example and rise to excellence. Extraordinary people, after all, may be ordinary ones who have developed a conscience of the highest order and a will to match.

Are these demigods only human indeed – subject to common temptations that threaten to lead them astray, yet committed to live and love as luminously and vigorously as possible? Can we and should we model our life on theirs? I dare say yes, though I admit I am flickering and lagging behind these shooting stars.

Everything considered, our existence pivots on a single fact: To gain wisdom, happiness, and nobility – which constitute a trinity of values that amount to one good as our fundamental purpose – we have to struggle for them. Life is a battle, and a tough one at that, against the numerous evils of the world; I vouch for the truth of this popular image. Yet, this image overstates the outside evils, portrayed as enemies we combat, while the worst evil is a seducer inside us by the name of laziness, which loves easiness. The right way is a hard way. But then, a battle without struggle is a victory without glory. Pride is our prize.

What about defeat? Twenty-four years after my diving accident, as paralyzed now as I was then, despite my struggle for recovery, I understand this concept quite well. I also know that being defeated is never tantamount to losing the battle, except when it means death or such a severe disability that life is hopelessly reduced to coma or agony. Generally, if we suffer a defeat on one front, we can enjoy a victory on another.

Let us contemplate a second popular image, which complements the first: Life is a journey. Here our fundamental purpose takes the form of a destination. The beauty of this destination is that we can travel to it in a multitude of ways. We may choose one of them and always use it. We may even regard it as the only way that truly suits us. In fact, our situation is open to change and we are capable of acquiring new habits that can become our chosen way, our second nature, as did our old habits. Therefore, if an irreversible change in our situation renders our habits impossible, it is an obstacle marking the end of a way that was our life until then, but it is also an opportunity to start afresh and gain wisdom, happiness, and nobility through different habits. We may die, in a sense, and live again.

Be that as it may, the more our habits are old and dear to us, the more we grieve over this end and recoil at this start. Only with a pioneer spirit – which must be awakened against our long having settled into these habits – can we discover a new, satisfying way. Only with courage

and time can we learn to accept the change. Spontaneously we deny it or aim to reverse it, unless it is undeniably real and irreversible. In this case, the feeling of loss is immediate. I picture a young man who has lost his legs in a car accident. In other cases, there is room for denial or false hopes. We fight the truth obstinately, desperately, and surrender to it at last when it captures us inescapably.

Into the third month of my rehabilitation, I had not quite reached that point of surrender. I hung on for dear life to my hope of recovering, which was now frailer than ever. My persistent failure to recover had weakened this hope further, and there was an increasing risk that it would break and let me fall into despair. In my view, dominated by an unrealistic goal, the progress I made was insignificant. I suffered disappointment after disappointment, despite my perseverance in every part of my therapy.

I was still unable to eat properly, even with a hand strap and a swivel utensil. My mobility and strength had increased from virtually nothing, on the day of my diving accident, to little more, half a year later. I had some muscular activity in the shoulders and the arms, though none in the triceps and almost none in the wrists, and that was all. My hands drooped and trembled when I strained to raise them to my mouth over and over.

Nevertheless, the orderly insisted I eat on my own. “Stop complaining and try again. Practice makes perfect.” I sat in bed, frustrated and humiliated, with my swivel spoon attached to my hand strap, and a towel – a bib of sorts – hanging from my neck. The orderly knew what practice makes in the early stages: a perfect mess! After a number of clumsy and laborious attempts at spooning up the soup, the bowl was near empty, and so was my stomach. The towel was soiled extensively with spillage. I was both fed up and underfed.

Following the soup, I sucked the cranberry juice and the milk through a straw with a welcome ease. I still had the salad, the main dish, and the Jell-O to wrestle with. I gazed at these opponents one by one. In the left front corner of my tray, the salad appeared formidable. It was slippery with Kraft dressing and I was poorly geared up for the match. I had failed to switch from my swivel spoon to my swivel fork, which would have given me a better fighting chance, but was unwieldy. I had dropped it on the floor while the orderly was tending a patient in another room. “Too bad!” I said to myself, “Let’s get this fight over with.” And I won, by a dirty trick: I chased the pieces of lettuce, tomato, radish, and cucumber that escaped from me – sometimes landing on the tray, sometimes on the towel – until I caught them between my free hand and my swivel spoon, and heaved them into my mouth.

I also won, by the same dirty trick, against the main dish. Actually, I lost in part. As my free hand was trying to hold the spoon steady, to prevent the peas from spilling, it slipped. The spoon sprang like a catapult and showered peas on my roommate: a stroke victim in his eighties who sat for supper on the edge of his bed, with his back turned to me. "Huh," he uttered, after a pause. He felt his head, then the sheet around him.

The orderly walked in. "What's wrong, pop?" (The old man showed him a pea in his shaky right hand. His left hand lay paralyzed by his side.) "You spilled a few peas, I see. Oh, watch it! One, two, three peas behind you, and another on your pillow! Good grief, still more peas, here, there, and everywhere! Please stay put while I clear up this mess." (The old man was now muttering incoherently.) "What did you say? Peas, none on your plate. Well, of course. They all went on your bed! Anyway, don't worry. You'll do better next time."

I knew what my roommate was attempting to say. He could not have spilled peas on his bed, since he had none on his plate to start with. I was the culprit. I was also guilty of not confessing the truth. Why? I had a poor excuse: I saw humor in the misunderstanding that my silence permitted; hence I overlooked my dishonor in this silence. I laughed inwardly at the expense of my roommate, who felt confused, shamed, and wronged.

I have since wondered what drives people to laugh at farcical situations that are humiliating or painful to others. Is it risibility plus detachment or malice? I think so. In other words, people laugh firstly because they perceive these situations as ludicrous and secondly because they are oblivious or insensitive to the suffering of those involved, or they gloat over it.

Sometimes the others, who are laughed at, laugh as well. They may suffer and cry within, while they appear to take everything in stride and make fun of themselves. Or their feeling of dignity may be so strong, their ability to cope so effective, and their sense of humor so keen that they are unshaken by their humiliation or their pain and can joke about it.

Through the years, I have met such remarkable persons, who had much experience and wisdom. When their situation turned rather bad, they said, "I have seen worse," and they kept cheerful. To them, a trouble that was not disastrous was petty, a mere inconvenience not worthy of a single tear. They did not indulge in wistful, wasteful thoughts either. They simply dealt with things in the most favorable way. I admire their no-nonsense attitude toward life, which can prove messy. I imagine

their motto: Don't whine, nor cuss; tackle the muss and clear it up, or grin and bear it!

All in all, they were well-adjusted realists who believed detriment and merriment can coexist when the former leaves room for something that makes life worth living, loving, despite everything. The secret is balance: The worse the detriment, the better this something must be to compensate for it and bring merriment. Great achievers are often great sufferers who had the will and the ability to redeem their condition with a profound dignity and joy in the pursuit and attainment of a high goal. Other great sufferers, of lesser will and ability, either lived passively and bitterly or killed themselves. In short, suffering enervates the weak and motivates the strong. Yet, beware! The strong may be weak at first and yield to morbid temptations or contemplate suicide for some considerable time; but at last they discover and develop the strength beneath their weakness, like a seed that lies in the parched soil of a neglected pot and needs the care of a flower lover to grow and bloom, and generate wonder.

The orderly stepped toward my bedside after he had helped my roommate. "What about you, lad; how is your supper coming along?" The towel hanging from my neck was covered with food stains, and I still had peas in my plate plus Jell-O in my saucer. "Okay, I suppose; I gave it my best shot." I smiled as I thought of the old man – my accidental target – who sat on the bed next to mine. The orderly smiled back without understanding my pun. "It wasn't too difficult, I gather."

Suddenly, he cast his eyes on the towel, which resembled the bib of a messy child. "The towel, hmm, yea. Ha ha! Forgive me for laughing. At least you managed on your own. That's a good thing. Where is your swivel fork? Oh! There, on the floor. Have you finished eating?" (I nodded.) "No more peas, no Jell-O?" (I shook my head.) "So be it." He took the towel – which he made into a ball – and the tray, then left the room. "It wasn't too difficult," easy for him to say. I felt like answering, "Try to eat with your feet and you'll get some idea of what a piece of cake it was!"

I chafed under his misjudgment and his mockery. My pride was hurt, like that of my roommate earlier. Poetic justice. My head resounded with the orderly's laugh: a slap in my face that woke me up to my condition after a moment of thoughtless humor. A once powerful and confident young man, I was now as helpless and diffident as a baby trapped in a highchair and unable to eat properly on its own. I measured the gap between these two situations – a gap so huge I could never clear it to return to things as they were before, save with the help of a miracle. My faith in the possibility of such a miracle was withering,

while my sorrow was ripening: a bitter fruit, embittered by the taste of ridicule.

Only with a complete loss of hope would sorrow reach its height and begin its transformation into resignation. Only with time and vitality would this resignation mature into satisfaction, as it would include, besides a submissiveness toward an impossible dream, a willingness to live as happily as possible within the confines of reality. Only then would the bitter fruit of sorrow truly be ripe and finally become sweet.

I was a long way from this advanced stage in maturation. I was still a dreamer, though I realized more and more that my idea of recovery, which had fueled my rehabilitation effort since the beginning, was nothing but a vapor, a fantastic goal never to be reached. I was not ready yet to despair of recovering, especially since paralysis depressed me beyond measure, despite the love and the care I received. In short, my standpoint on paralysis was at a standstill. I believed an able body is indispensable to a satisfying life.

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During her summer vacation my girlfriend had visited me almost daily. Now, in winter, she was often busy attending classes at school or doing her schoolwork at home. Her visits were fewer and farther between. The fact remained she had not left me, even though I was paralyzed like on the day of my diving accident, after several months of physiotherapy, first at the hospital, then at the rehabilitation facility. Her enduring love both rejoiced and puzzled me. Ever since we started our relationship, I assumed that the true object of her affection was the athlete I was before my neck injury, not the paralytic I became. Thus it appeared to me this affection could only withstand the rigors of my paralysis as long as she trusted I would eventually recover. Actually, she knew I was paralyzed for life but nonetheless agreed to be my girlfriend. Why? For love of my personality, whatever that meant to her, besides the pleasure she took in feeling desired and needed? For fear of compounding the suffering from my broken neck with that from a broken heart? Probably for all of these reasons plus other ones that are beyond me.

Anyway, I was afraid of losing her. I begged my body for a sign that it was on the mend to reinforce her attachment to me, which I believed was compromised by her weakening faith in my future recovery. This recovery was in my view a resurrection that might follow my partial death, or might not. My distrust was growing more and more difficult to undo, threatening to turn into a Gordian knot.

One afternoon, my physiotherapist gladly observed that my exercises had proven useful. My pushing and pulling against her muscular resistance, while she held my wrists, had strengthened my arms and shoulders. I was now ready for heavier exercises. That is to say, I was likely to succeed in pushing or pulling the minimum weight of five pounds on the exercise apparatus she wanted me to try. Mounted on a wall, it comprised two pulleys in the grooves of which ran two ropes that were tied to weights at one end and clips at the other. She hooked me to this apparatus by means of the clips plus two leather bands buckled around my wrists and equipped with metal rings.

Sitting in my wheelchair, with my brakes on and my back turned to the wall, I extended my arms forward, one by one, against the weights. Much to my surprise, I was doing this exercise effectively, in a way that suggested the use of my triceps, which were supposed to be inactive. "Do you think my triceps are waking up?" I nervously asked my physiotherapist. Her eyebrows formed two question marks out of true. "I don't know. You're probably relying on your shoulder muscles alone, but it sure looks like your triceps are also involved to some degree. Let me check." She handled the back of my arms, one after the other, throughout their extension. "I feel nothing. Well, actually. Hmm. No, not really. It's hard to tell right now. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll take the time to assess your triceps accurately by having you try a number of specific exercises. This afternoon, unfortunately, I won't be able to. I must leave in a few minutes."

All I chose to keep in mind from her doubtful words was a single heartening phrase: "It sure looks like your triceps are also involved." I dreamed of this involvement, and my freedom to believe in it was a function of her uncertainty, which was a lack of definite restrictions on her perception of my disability. I depended on her for an answer, as my own sensitivity to the muscular activity in my arms was indistinct and inconclusive. In itself, my ability to extend my arms forward effectively proved nothing, but allowed of two opposite interpretations. One was improbable and desirable; the other was probable and undesirable. Either my triceps were waking up or they were not, in which case my shoulder muscles were doing all the work. My choice of the first interpretation was arbitrary and opportunistic: I abused a doubt to think what I pleased.

A question arises. Are beliefs not often the children of ignorance and fantasy? Consider the heavenly view of the world that young souls entertain at the height of their innocence, when their youth has been surrounded by love and filled with happiness. Hear their laughter. Dreams expand in a vacuity of knowledge like a laughing gas and induce

the blindest, the purest joy. Ignorance is bliss, as they say, because it spares us the mental restraints associated with knowledge (which reveals the limits of reality and hence the impossibility of our fantasies). It is the ultimate playground where the mind can build castles in the air, create a wonderland, and live delightedly in this kingdom of reverie. It paves the way for the reign of error, as it leaves us to believe whatever we like. Everything that is desirable is realizable, if not real, until we find evidence to the contrary. Santa Claus eventually dies of our old age – when we are no longer so young, so green, that we are easily fooled by a tall story.

In truth, however wise we may be, we are still at risk. We spontaneously indulge in fantasies about the world here below, which is never totally known, or the beyond, which is unknowable. We are always tempted to believe that our health, our relationships, our career, or any other part of our life, will be wonderful, or that our death will not be an end, but a passage from here to a paradisaical hereafter. This temptation is irresistible for many when they discover a charismatic fortuneteller or spiritual leader who professes this belief, which remains unproven nonetheless. Our believing is then the result of ignorance and fantasy, plus faith.

An example of self-deceit that concerns young idealists and betrays their warm-blooded aspiration for perfect love is the illusive passion they often experience toward attractive members of the opposite sex whom they little know. By perfect love I mean a complete and durable harmony at every level – physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual – between two lovers. It involves friendship to a high degree, as the words “girlfriend” and “boyfriend” suggest. While it includes lust, it transcends and transfigures it.

Pop songs are common vehicles for this ideal, which entices many young souls. I am thinking of young men in particular, who are usually quick to fantasize about pretty young women and fall madly in love with them, or rather with a fantastical image of them. This quickness is typical of their ardent and imprudent youth. It needs nothing more than a few smiles and nods, a few gracious words of agreement, to make these young men imagine they have found a soul mate, as they pour out their inner self – their sense of what is good, true, right, or sacred. A few auspicious signs and, voilà, they take the pretty young women for dream girls and are besotted with them! A few misleading signs, in fact. Every charm hides a cause for alarm.

If, in the struggle for survival and happiness, society is a cure for individual limitations (an imperfect cure to be sure, with side effects), it is also a pill hard to swallow. Civility is a smooth sugar coating that

eases the swallowing. Give thanks to those who phrase their discontentment with delicacy and embellish it with a compliment and an encouragement. No nagging, no gagging. Sometimes civility excludes honesty and amounts to well-meaning or self-serving hypocrisy. It turns into servility through a mix of kindness and weakness, or through pure selfishness. One way or another, some people are fooled, kept in the dark, while they should live wisely, in the light of knowledge. They are denied truth: the opportunity to conceive of their true situation and achieve their true purpose.

Young men, among the fantasizers I referred to earlier, are often lured by the social graces of pretty young women. The poor fish take the hook and eventually discover they have made a mistake, like many others in the same boat. The dream girls were ordinary maidens or vixens who first behaved and talked infinitely sweet, and later proved lovable in a limited way or revealed their sour temper.

A long intimacy is a good test of a couple's true nature. It always strips relationships of the silky appearance they sometimes have initially, when seduction overrides every other consideration. This appearance is superficial and deceptive like the outer layers of an onion. Once it is removed, after a succession of changes that marked a gradual return to naturalness, conflicts arise. The truth is uncovered; tears are shed.

Many young fantasizers part from their lovers at this point. They embark on another relationship until the next disillusion, the next dissolution, then embark on another relationship, and so forth. They do the same in other areas of life, starting this or that with high expectations and quitting upon the first difficulties, time and again. They never settle for less than perfection; they never build anything to speak of.

Some of these fantasizers stop this nonsense after a number of disappointments and finally change into brave realists. Their bravery distinguishes them from other disenchanting souls who give up hope to give in to laziness with a clear conscience. These defeatists confuse their attitude with realism and suffer nullity or mediocrity rather than fight for excellence, which is possible, unlike perfection. In their view, humans are in their element only when fantasizing, like fish when swimming. In fact, humans – who are adaptable – are closer to amphibians than to fish. They can come back to earth without dying of frustration, and even better, with a chance to live happily, thanks to a blend of struggle and resignation that yields joy and serenity.

Brave realists know and accept the conditions and limitations of happiness. They think it all the more precious as it has a high cost

and is bound to be lost sooner or later. They also understand that although one may indulge in a fickle existence for a while, one must eventually commit and apply oneself to a particular relationship, study, or career, in spite of imperfections and difficulties, if one wishes to achieve something worthy of mention. Nothing good can come from a search for better that always leaves one thing for another.

Like a young fantasizer who has sustained disillusion after disillusion, yet insists on hoping against hope because he cannot cope with reality, I had suffered many disappointments and still presumed on every promising experience or encouraging statement to imagine a brighter prognosis than the permanent paralysis others predicted and I dreaded. My presumptions, however, were mingled with apprehensions. My lack of significant physical improvements, despite months of physiotherapy, spoke volumes. No matter how desperately I wished my future recovery were certain, I knew it was highly improbable. I threatened to fall into a bitter realism while I clung to a frayed hope.

I sat between two extremes. I had neither the optimism of lighthearted innocents, whose rosy outlook is pure wishful thinking, nor the pessimism of those who have undergone several hardships and always expect the worst, though life is seldom gloomy in every way and at all times. I was wiser, still foolish, in dire need of a positive realism made of truth, acceptance, and courage.

After a final series of arm extensions, my physiotherapist unhooked me from the exercise apparatus and left. "It sure looks like your triceps are also involved"; I repeated this phrase inwardly, again and again, to cancel my recurring doubt. I did instinctively what various leaders of the past have artfully done in their propaganda against people's critical minds. I obstructed my judgment with a questionable but seductive idea stubbornly reiterated. I brainwashed myself.

My girlfriend visited me later that afternoon. I had not seen her for a few days. We kissed and hugged, and inquired after each other. I was anxious to tell her the tale of my new beginning: "I lifted weights today, for the first time since my accident. I wish you had come earlier to watch me. My triceps are finally waking up, I believe." Her eyes widened with surprise, confusion, disbelief. "Are you sure?" I flinched and faltered for a second, then spoke assertively: "I do believe they are, and my physiotherapist does too. She's supposed to test them tomorrow, to double-check." Deep down I was aware that I had stretched the truth, and my girlfriend was no fool. She showed a faint enthusiasm that barely hid her embarrassment. "Great! I guess you can't wait for tomorrow. Call me afterward to let me know what she said."

Her visit was short and bittersweet. She pushed me to the TV room and left within half an hour. "I'm sorry, Laurent, I must be going. I have a lot of schoolwork." There was now, in the room, nobody except me. I kept watching television without paying attention to it. I was lonely and uneasy. Her disbelief had aroused my own doubt, repressed until then, like a flood that a dike has blocked and a breach released. Two phrases from my physiotherapist had poured into my consciousness, phrases I had previously heard but ignored: "You're probably relying on your shoulder muscles alone.... I feel nothing." Oppressing phrases. This "nothing" weighed a ton.

"Help!" I cried within as my heart was sinking, and my memory threw other phrases to me by way of a life buoy: "Well, actually. Hmm.... It's hard to tell right now." Again I could breathe; everything was open. Better still, the word "sure" (in "it sure looks like your triceps are also involved") came back into view – solid ground at last! My physiotherapist had pronounced this word and it had encouraged me. Was this encouragement a mirage? Looks can be misleading. On the whole, there was only one sure thing: She thought from what she saw that my triceps might be waking up. To think, what does it prove? That someone is? Indeed she was, but what? Possibly right, probably wrong.

I craved reassurance. I strove to detect muscular activity at the back of my arms as I propelled my wheelchair little by little, with great difficulty, using the knobs that projected from the push rims. These knobs were a special feature that suited my partial quadriplegia. I was unable to grip regular push rims and press down on them, both inward and forward, as paraplegics do when they wheel themselves, because they have normal upper bodies. I merely applied my palms to the knobs and pressed forward. Muscles were tensing in my shoulders and my arms. My deltoids? Surely. My biceps? No doubt. My triceps? Maybe, maybe not. Certainty eluded me, however fiercely I chased it.

A middle-aged woman entered the TV room as I was going round in circles. She walked up to me and smiled. "Would you like some help?" I was doubtful, frustrated, and anxious, and there was nothing I needed less than an offer of assistance that reminded me of my disability, persistent and worse, permanent in all likelihood. "No, thank you." I struggled to turn and push my wheelchair toward the television while she stayed close to me, embarrassed and puzzled. My maneuver was all the more awkward as the floor was carpeted. She hesitated, then laid a hand gently on my shoulder. "Don't be afraid to say yes. My husband had a stroke a while ago and is also in a wheelchair. I'm used to helping him." I knew she meant well, but all I wanted was to be left alone. "I'm

OK, really. Thanks again.” And ugly words came to my mouth, which I never let out: “Now, please, get lost.”

She stepped over to a chair and sat on it to watch television. She seemed uncomfortable and discontent. I had robbed her of a good deed. The question is how good was this deed if I had no use for it? Tooth and nail I had pursued my goal at a funeral pace, and nevertheless I had attained it. I was near the television and facing it. I suppose she did not understand my obstinate and desperate will to prove to myself I was not altogether and forever helpless. Her intention was good, but then what value has the action of someone who is kind yet blind to the true needs of another? It has none, though kindness commands respect and forgiveness, inasmuch as it is genuine, accidentally useless or harmful, as opposed to superficial and essentially careless.

I wonder if she was ambitious of personal importance, enough to ignore my eagerness for self-sufficiency. Was she a mother at heart, looking for the child in everyone, including her husband who had become dependent? Was her motherly love – charitable and compassionate, but tainted with motherly pride – egotistic and condescending? Was her offer of assistance even selfish, falsely altruistic, as she indulged her desire to feel useful against my desire to feel capable?

Mothers and motherlike others, beware! Overprotection contributes to infantilism and worthlessness. Your children or those you make your children need to be mothered, not smothered. Be measuredly present, self-effacing, though helpful, and they shall be self-sufficient to the extent of their abilities. Help them be what you want yourself to be: capable and useful. Help them live proudly; help them give themselves actively and successfully to what they love, unless of course it is depraved or wicked. Be available, that is all, when everything else is unfavorable. True altruism is sometimes a pure abstention that amounts to a complete passivity or a simple encouragement. You can do more by doing less, and too much is just as bad as not enough. It may cause resentment instead of gratitude.

In fairness to the woman mentioned above, I should acknowledge the legitimacy of her concern toward me when she entered the TV room. I should even acknowledge the legitimacy of her insistence, after I had declined her offer of assistance. I was oddly positioned, away from the television, and awkwardly struggling to maneuver my wheelchair. It was reasonable for her to assume I needed assistance, but was afraid to inconvenience her. It was kind of her to act on this assumption with persistent solicitude.

The fact remains she was wrong and troublesome. I wanted to move by my own efforts, if laboriously, and alone, to avoid feeling self-conscious. Her presence was importunate from the moment she walked in. I should say it was so to my mind, given my antisocial and uncompromising attitude. I aspired to self-reliance as much as I was disabled – that is, extremely.

What an irony! The less we have the things that are conducive to well-being, the more they are in the forefront of our consciousness and seem precious to us, whereas if we have them we often take them for granted to the point of failing to appreciate them. Accordingly, we are in the best frame of mind to enjoy these things when, deprived of them, we are in no position to enjoy them.

Can we not correct this absurdity with some wisdom? Yes we can, thank God! I dare this commandment: If you lead a happy life, of which you may be to some degree unmindful, never let a day pass without reflecting on the life of misery you could be leading instead. Imagine having lost everything and everyone you love. You will be happier for the realization that you are spared this misery.

I, unlike those who know happiness, felt rather miserable. I craved physical independence, now that I had very little of it. This craving was evocative of a ravenous dog gnawing on a bone and growling at anyone who approaches. It had alienated the woman in the TV room. Inwardly, I had rebuffed her as she had threatened to rob me of pride and hope. She had sensed this rebuff under my ambiguous exterior of unsociableness tempered with politeness. My smile had fangs.

The truth is that my hostility toward her essentially betrayed a nonacceptance of my paralysis. She may have been somewhat help-minded to a fault, thereby aggravating my sense of physical loss; by and large, however, she had treated me – the paralyzed young man I was and hated to be – reasonably and kindly. Had I viewed my condition favorably, as an opportunity to attain a new happiness, not as an obstacle to the return of my old one, I would have reacted differently to her intervention. Although I still would have insisted she let me manage on my own, for the sake of feeling alive, capable, and free, I would have been calm and friendly, as opposed to angry and more curt than courteous.

I find great enlightenment in this ordinary truth. Things that happen to us are merely the occasion for our feelings and responses, whose primary cause is our outlook. This mental interface between us and the world is the realm of liberty where we can indulge in foolishness and suffer the consequences, or strive for wisdom and enjoy its benefits. Either we fall into bitterness, shame, and misery or rise to serenity,

pride, and contentment, depending on whether we refuse or accept what is unchangeable and tolerate what is bad and changeable or struggle to improve it. We have the choice.

Of course the reality of this alternative is not simply black and white. It is full of difficulties and subtleties. How can we be sure something is unchangeable? When do we stop hoping and trying? What, as humans of limited power, should we struggle to improve among the infinite number of things that are clearly bad and changeable? Where do we draw the line? The answers are determined by our common sense and our knowledge, our values and our individual preferences. They are seldom free of gray areas. Yet we must choose with great strength of purpose, on the basis of what appears most reasonable or desirable.

Something stands out that is unchangeable without the shadow of a doubt: On one's own, one cannot improve everything that is bad and changeable, no matter how much one struggles to make the world better for oneself and others. Our social life is a collective effort. We contribute to the public good and depend on other useful members of society. This exchange of services, based on common interests, defines solidarity and unites the human community. We may pride ourselves on our contribution; we are always humbled by our dependence.

A principle emerges: Do your best to contribute and may others do the rest. Be proud of this best and you shall be humble without shame as you depend on this rest. What if your efforts, though great, have yielded poor results? No matter, from a moral viewpoint! Your principal merit is courage in the pursuit of usefulness, which may elude you despite everything. Besides, as long as you are alive, conscious, and capable to whatever extent, your best is not your best unless it lasts. With time, failure shall give way to success in one form or another.

As for me, moral pride was a small consolation that could not offset the deplorable humbleness of my condition. I was still paralyzed and dependent to a considerable degree, as if I had undergone months of physiotherapy almost in vain. There was no recovery in sight, save a remote possibility of muscle awakening. Altogether, half a year plus had elapsed of persistent efforts and obstinate dreams: images of physical fitness and prowess, of a future in athletics, as a phys ed teacher and sportsman, of motorcycle rides and lovemaking, of fatherhood and children looking up to me, a tower of strength, a fount of playfulness and tenderness, images of joy, which had yet to become reality. They were imprisoned in my head, inescapably it seemed, though I had heard stories of impossible escapes that had proven possible.

I recall my scheme in the TV room. I was striving to break loose from my misery, gray, so gray, like concrete walls and steel bars. I was

propelling my wheelchair to all appearances; in fact, I was digging a tunnel. The woman was no more welcome than a prison guard.

The tension remained between her and me. We watched television to avoid eye contact, notwithstanding the show was a bore. She probably felt out of place while I wished she were elsewhere. In my heart I knew my attitude was blameful; I had a guilty conscience. Her behavior had been sweet if embittering. I undertook to break the ice: "Would you mind trying the other channels to see what else is playing?"

The TV was a sizable black-and-white model with unwieldy knobs and dials. Once, alone in the room, I had battled for some time to change the channel and had lost. Both my hands were chafed and the channel selector had not budged. "You damn heap o' shit!" I had exclaimed, glaring at the TV. The true object of my anger and insult, however, was my body, dead for all intents and purposes.

My request for the woman's help was sunshine to her motherly soul. A smile bloomed on her face. "I will gladly do that," she replied. "Just tell me when to stop." And she changed the channel, one after the other, with a pause between changes to permit viewing. How easily she turned the channel selector! A forefinger and a thumb, holding the flat part that protruded diametrically and perpendicularly from this rotatable disk, plus a flick of the wrist, and round it went!

I marveled enviously at this feat, which was rather trivial and tedious to her eye. She performed it mechanically, day in day out, again and again, at home or at the rehabilitation facility. Nevertheless, more than many, still not enough for her own sake, she was aware of the precariousness and preciousness of her physical integrity, thanks to her husband who was hemiplegic, and now thanks to me who was in a predicament comparable to his, only worse.

She came full circle from the boring show to every other show, which appeared equally boring, to the boring show again. "No luck," I sighed. "Thank you for trying." She, in turn, was disappointed at her failure to find an entertaining show, or rather at the impossibility of pleasing me, who was displeased with her presence, despite her goodwill. She raised her eyebrows and smiled with a pout, lopsidedly. "I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful." Her regret was calling for comfort and I was at a loss for comforting words. A cliché sprang to my weary mind: "It's the thought that counts." I resorted to this convenient food for the soul as to a mass-produced frozen dinner that one thaws and heats in a microwave oven, and serves without further ado. She was hardly cheered.

"Are you sure there is no show you would rather watch?" she asked, hoping to prove helpful after all. I looked on every show as a

bore, because I took no interest in anything but my triceps, possibly though improbably waking up. "I'm sure, thank you. Feel free to choose whatever you want." I left the channel selection to her, out of indifference and politeness, and necessity. As far as I was concerned, the channel selector, which she could turn easily, presented a serious difficulty all the same. I hated to think that my inability to budge it was due to helplessness. "It would be nice if they bought another TV with more manageable knobs and dials. These are too small and too stiff."

She first thanked me for my courtesy, and after going over the channels and agreeing with my complaint about the TV chose another boring show. She then returned to her chair. She seemed deep in thought, searching for something appropriate to say. She finally spoke: "Maybe, if you found out who's in charge and complained to this person, things would improve. A rehabilitation facility, of all places, should have a television that suits the needs of disabled people!" What she said made sense, yet she had missed the point of my complaint. I blamed my failure to manage the knobs and dials on their smallness and stiffness to avoid facing my paralysis; she deemed these knobs and dials inadequate for people like me, given their paralysis. Her kind realism was bad news. For all her good intentions, she could not help upsetting me.

I wished she would leave or at least be quiet. Instead she talked on. She sought to impart every positive view she could muster, about her husband, me, and disabled people in general, whose disability included an ability to adapt themselves to it. Perhaps she figured that if she could not push my wheelchair or turn the channel selector to any avail, she might be able to lift my spirits. I was hardly responsive: a few words, now and then, to be polite. I was holding back my growing impatience. Someone else who enjoyed physical integrity was telling me that paralysis and happiness are compatible! How so, I wondered with utter skepticism? I saw nothing but a rhyme. I guess my spirits were too heavy to lift.

At long last she left, saying goodbye and giving me her best. She rejoined her husband, who was a patient of the rehabilitation facility and had required some nursing care. I was weary of shows and speeches, and eager to retrieve my initial frame of mind, centered on the restoration of my physical integrity, not on my resignation to paralysis. I resumed my push, straight toward the door. I was paying close attention to the muscular activity in my arms and getting ready to exit as quickly as possible if someone again intruded. My biceps and deltoids were tensing; my triceps.... I had a failing grip on their condition, slippery like wet soap. Suddenly, in the hallway that adjoined the TV

room, the linoleum floors resounded with footsteps. A woman walked in; I wheeled out.

The next day, with much anxiety after a sleepless night, I took the elevator and went to physiotherapy on the ground floor. My room was on the top floor: the seventh. The other floors had rooms for mental patients; they were devoted to psychiatry. Was this building a Tower of Babel, where I aimed for the seventh heaven and fell terribly short of it? Was I a fool among fools, who harbored illusions? Was I coming down to earth, where one is struck by reality and stripped of pipe dreams?

When I arrived at the exercise room, the physiotherapist was waiting for me. Together with an aide, she transferred me onto a mat. She then positioned me in different ways and asked me to extend my arms. She made sure, each time, that I could use neither my deltoids nor gravity, only my triceps. After repeated failures, she concluded, "I'm sorry, Laurent, your triceps are inactive, which is consistent with your level of neck injury." This inactivity killed me, and her conclusion was a nail in my coffin.

How could my hope survive this setback and revive my desire to go on? So far my mind had upheld its dream, though with increasing difficulty, against every disappointing statement or fact. It had escaped the constraints of reality, no less challenging than handcuffs and shackles, plus a straitjacket, in a trunk wrapped and secured with chains and locks, yet this time everything was tighter and this masterly double-jointed wizard seemed trapped. Was my mind condemned, after all, to misery and bitterness, for life? No, it could not bear this thought! It exhausted its tricks and just wriggled out of its corner, feeling weak and knowing that despair would follow if the constraints were further narrowed.



## DEATH WISH

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*“I am proud that I mustered enough forbearance and fortitude in my divided soul to resist committing cruelty and suicide. I am also humbled by the temptation that almost debased and destroyed me. Is there a threshold beyond which I would have criminally or lethally snapped? Are souls comparable to planks that vary in flexibility, from one type of wood to another, and can bend under pressure up to a point, then break?”*

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Bad as things were, they got worse. A short while after my setback, I met a patient in the hallway, a scruffy young man with long stringy hair and a patchy beard – the victim of a car accident, or more precisely, of his drunken driving. He was also paralyzed, but completely disillusioned, lying on a stretcher, face down, with a pillow under his chest and a sheet over him below the waistline. He could not sit in a chair, due to pressure sores on his buttocks.

“That stupid bitch,” he exclaimed, as I wheeled by him toward my room down the hall. The head nurse had just reprimanded him because he had made loud and offensive comments to other patients, to visitors, and to the staff. I stopped and listened, a bit shocked. “What happened to you?” he asked. I feared that his reaction to my answer might be disagreeable and answered anyway, to avoid the awkwardness of dodging his question. “In other words, you’re fucked,” he remarked with a cynical laugh. “I know the final result of this goddamn game: Shit wins; you lose. Welcome to hell.” I shuddered. “No way! I don’t want to stay like this.” He looked and sneered at me, as though I was a gibbering idiot. “Life is not about what we want but what we get, and all we get is shit. Wake up and smell it, buddy boy.” I did and it made me gag. I badly needed a change of air. “Goodbye.”

In retrospect, I was somewhat of an idiot, but not for failing to view life as shitty throughout. Eight years of darkness passed before it dawned on me that happiness does not require any specific circumstances or the satisfaction of any specific desires. It remains attainable as long as one can survive and experience pleasure, dignity, and usefulness in some way or other. It may be lost and found again, despite an extreme and irreversible change of situation. For that, one

must awake to one's adaptability. To be more precise, one must awake to one's primary nature, which is the power to acquire new habits, behind one's second nature, which is a number of old acquired habits. Furthermore, with courage, one must apply this adaptability to the pursuit of happiness.

Of course there are exceptional cases of infinite suffering and absolute despair that are truly absurd. Death is then presumably a sensible choice, assuming it offers a complete and permanent relief. The exception, however, is not the rule. In all other cases, life is more favorable: If joyless, it is hopeful, like birth that represents a difficult passage from a familiar and pleasant type of existence to a strange one, both menacing and promising – worth living. I am backing my contention with contentment, though I know from experience what pain is in every sense of the word. Don't people usually prefer life to death?

The scruffy young man showed neither joy nor hope. He appeared to have no reason for living, except the fear of dying. Now, this fear could not suffice as an incentive to live unless it dominated his suffering and despair, which were an incentive to die. Was it a strong natural mindset that the concept of sin and damnation reinforced? Were the suffering and despair tempered with a faint belief in adaptation and happiness, which he brutally denied but secretly entertained? This second possibility, I think, is first in veracity. There was more to his fear than an instinctive repulsion for death and perhaps a religious deterrent. It included an intriguing doubt about the so-called absurdity of life, a disturbing doubt at that, since a life with meaning, as opposed to one without, does not justify resignation and idleness, let alone suicide.

All in all, his fear of dying implied the fear of losing his life, which he valued in some measure and yet depreciated, because he also wished he were detached from it and hence freed from its difficulty. Life is like a diamond, as hard as it is precious. It has a cutting rule that divides the soul: Struggle and distress are the price of happiness. Resist the temptation to do nothing, which spares you the effort to achieve something good and the risk of losing it. Take up the challenge; rake in the pride!

Dear readers, my friends, am I just preaching, in your eyes, or truly reaching you? I am especially concerned about those among you who have sustained a tragedy and whose desire to live still hangs in the balance, dangerously countered by a desire to die, under the burden of suffering. I know this ambivalence; I have felt it for many years, far too many. I hope my message carries enough weight to help you lean toward life. May you find the wisdom to accept your loss and the courage to

exploit the rich potential that remains, instead of wallowing in regret, miserably, passively, or contemplating death. May you learn to smile again at the present, which is a present indeed, worth unwrapping – now, not later. Why wait? Life is short and sometimes even shorter than expected. Haste it, don't waste it!

I remember the nurse who approached me before my transfer from the hospital to the rehabilitation facility. Her message was along the same lines as mine today: Adapt to your reality. Easier said than done, but you must do what you must do. You still have plenty to look forward to. I remember also my negative response, which I had kept to myself to spare her feelings: "What, damn it! What do I have to look forward to?" I did not believe in happiness within the limits of paralysis, and consequently I could not accept these limits. Actually, I did not care to believe in this strange happiness, because I had no inclination to engage in a difficult adventure to discover it. I just wanted to resume old habits, which was comparatively safe and easy. In short, my disbelief was infected with cowardice and laziness. The scruffy young man and I shared these weaknesses. Two individual cases, one universal law: Faith in life and the courage to live are interdependent.

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I imagine a time machine. I board it and travel to the past, a quarter century ago when I was at the hospital, a few minutes prior to the nurse's intervention. There I am, at forty-two years old, slimmed and grayed with a brush cut, a moustache, and a goatee, to visit me, at seventeen years of age, as much of my muscles has turned to fat and I wear long dark brown hair down to my shoulders, but none on my face.

I introduce myself (by a false name) to the nurse and tell her I intend to talk to the patient, soon to be discharged, Laurent Grenier. I summarize my life and my philosophy of life to her. Finally, after wondering at my providential coming, she agrees with me that I should intervene in her place, though she might follow up my effort with one of her own. My purpose – to encourage realism and adaptation to reality, plus courage itself, toward happiness – is the same as hers, while the differences in condition and experience between us are in my favor. I have a better chance of getting my message across, given my paralysis and my athletic youth, not to mention the features I have in common with this patient, such as my prominent nose. All prospects of imitation begin with a process of identification.

The principle is simple: The more two people believe they have comparable potentials, the more they consider the realizations of one

realizable by the other. They estimate their potentials by their assets, physical, mental, or social, which determine their power to make wishes come true. Among these assets, courage is of paramount importance, since it can turn things around from a miserable existence, without the advantage of extraordinary abilities, to a prosperous life marked by great contentment and distinction. Conversely, cowardice and laziness can transform the good fortune of a gifted person, born with a silver spoon in her or his mouth, into the wealthy unhappiness of a contemptible idler.

In my time travel scenario, I – a once troubled adolescent who has developed into a serene adult – visit me – this troubled adolescent who has yet to develop into this serene adult. Here the process of identification should happen to perfection: We are both the same individual, only at different times. This restriction, however, is not insignificant. The passage of time from adolescence to adulthood corresponds to a progressive change in appearance, personality, and situation. Twenty-five years of differentiation raise doubts about the concept of identity. How can the individual I was before this differentiation be the same as the individual I am after it? Is this “I” – a pronominal invariant that represents two distinct stages in my development – merely verbal? “My,” referring to whom? Me in the past and me in the present? Me always? Do “I” and “my” somehow transcend time and the changes related to it? What is the substance of this timeless “me”?

On learning the etymology of the words “adolescent” and “adult” (which derive from *adolescens*, “growing up,” and *adultus*, “grown up”: the present participle and the past participle of the Latin verb *adolescere*, “to grow up”), an answer to this riddle came to me in the form of a metaphor. A flower’s capacity for growth, inherent to every cell of its living matter and dependent on its genetic code, is a constant. It is inseparable yet distinct from the ever-changing manifestation of this capacity, as the flower grows. Thus a flower is always and never the same. The contradiction is only apparent because the two opposite statements concern two different aspects of the flower: its uniform potential and the gradual actualization of this potential. Similarly, from our first cry to our last breath, we change on the physical and mental planes, and experience a diversity of selves, while our genetic identity remains what it was in the beginning and continues to determine the structure and functions of our body: head, trunk, and limbs.

Actually, plants and humans may encounter such mutagens as radiation or ultraviolet rays and sustain mutations to a small or large group of cells, or to the entire organism. In a word, they sometimes

change genetically, and the change is often detrimental or lethal. My father, who smoked cigarettes for most of his life and died of lung cancer, is an example of this. Tar in tobacco is a carcinogen: a kind of mutagen.

Be that as it may, the distinction between genotype, usually stable, and phenotype, constantly changing, is still valid. Genetically, I am probably the same at forty-two years old as I was at seventeen years of age, though I am certainly different, physically and mentally. This difference is not absolute – the adult I am somewhat resembles the adolescent I was. We share the same disability, to which at forty-two I am well adjusted, and comparable memories, up to the age of seventeen (I say comparable, not identical, because I don't remember my distant past as I did when I was close to it). We also have similar features. Twenty-five years of growing older account for the dissimilarities. All in all, the adolescent I was can identify in some measure with the adult I am, as we meet and converse during my imaginary visit.

If only he, the other me, twenty-five years my junior, could know he is I, potentially! Despite his limitations, he has the power to be happy. Unfortunately, he will not know he is I, potentially, until he has exercised this power and experienced happiness. This ignorance represents a handicap, which compounds his disability, whereas this knowledge would constitute an asset. It would motivate him to exercise this power with confidence. Instead, ignorant of himself, as he enters a new life, he is diffident and reluctant, like on the day he was born. His potential, his happiness to be, which remains to be fulfilled and thereby discovered through courage, is nonexistent to him.

How can he find the courage to pursue and attain this happiness, in which he does not believe for lack of knowing it is possible? Maybe my question needs revision. How can he believe in this happiness, enough to find the courage to pursue and attain it, without knowing it is possible? Here, by knowledge, I mean what one learns about oneself from personal experience. Yet, one may apply to oneself what one learns from the experience of others, inasmuch as one identifies with them. This information, applied to oneself, is an object of faith and is subject to doubt. It is a mediocre substitute for knowledge (as defined above). It proves invaluable nonetheless when it generates hope and a willingness to live.

I remember a prediction I made before my diving accident, regarding my future: "I will never be the image of my father." He was a reputable journalist and author, and a great humanist in every sense of the word – deeply concerned with the welfare of humans and well versed in the humanities; namely, the classical languages, Greek and Latin, together with liberal arts like philosophy, literature, and biology. He

spent most of his time reflecting, or debating with other intellectuals, or observing nature, or reading and annotating, or typing, with numerous dictionaries, books, periodicals, and newspapers around him. He did no sport except angling and rarely caught anything besides the objects of his musing, as he abstractedly held his fishing rod. He lived to learn, meditate, and inform. Whatever pleasures he could draw from the physical dimension of his life were bottom of the list. His body was primarily a support system, plus a means of exploration and expression, for his superior mind.

As for me at seventeen, when I was a 220-pound athlete, fascinated with girls, sports, and motorcycles, and uninterested in studies, I was the opposite of my father. I regarded his lifestyle as lifeless. It never occurred to me that he felt much alive in his largely cerebral way, and even to a greater extent than I did, since the knowledge of life enhances the experience of it. Was it my life that was dull, after all? I was too busy living to concern myself with acquiring wisdom, which is an infinite source of enlightenment and wonderment. My noisy laugh was to my father's quiet smile as a flashy trinket is to a refined jewel.

My big brother – actually smaller than me though my senior by nine years – was another story. As brainy as I was brawny, he was an excellent high school teacher while I was a mediocre high school student. Classical languages, literature, and philosophy were his specialty; modern languages (like German and Russian), mathematics, and science his hobby. When he came to visit the family in Canada (he had studied abroad from the age of seventeen until he had graduated, and had taught there afterwards), he and our father often engaged in lively discussions, which bored me to death. Their arguments were quite above my head. I was too ignorant and stupid to follow them, I supposed, and could not help but reach this conclusion: Only my brother had inherited our father's intelligence and warranted the saying "like father like son."

At seventeen, after my diving accident, I still believed that nature (from my mother's side in particular, given her superior genetics with respect to physical strength, not to mention other advantages such as artistic talent) had endowed me with an exceptionally powerful physique – which was now reduced to very little – and not much else. As far as I could gather, this "very little" plus "not much else" did not add up to anything worthwhile. My life was death to me and I dreamed of a miracle, a restoration of the past in the present, a sort of resurrection. I was not prepared to completely identify with a forty-two-year-old paralytic whose mind made me think of my brother and my father, and to pursue his intellectual goal, which I found unappealing and unattainable.

My time travel scenario, which appeared promising at first, though fictional, proves ineffectual and disappointing in the end. Despite a unique blend of sound message and fortunate circumstance, the adult I am could not bring the adolescent I was to a healthy attitude, favorable to happiness within the limits of his condition. The timing was wrong no matter how right I acted. Like the nurse's intervention, mine was premature – that is, the adolescent I was had to mature through years of adaptational changes, introspective inquiries, academic ventures, and creative efforts before his identification with the adult I am could be complete. Only then would he consider my words relevant to his world. He would hear them again in his memory, and this time he would see his future in my present. He would believe in his potential, beyond his experience of it. This would constitute a victory over his partial ignorance. Yet, after everything had been said and believed, everything would remain to be tried and achieved. The struggle for self-realization would resume at a higher level of awareness and demand a great amount of resolve.

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I was astray, a manner of lost soul, when the nurse at the hospital attempted to save me. She could not succeed. Actually, nobody could. I was too deep in ignorance, cowardice, and laziness. After her failed attempt to convert me to realism and optimism, I kept adoring the past and wishing for its return, while suffering from paralysis, which I equated with hell. Months rolled by and nothing really progressed, except I was increasingly depressed.

The scruffy young man, who added negativity to my life after the physiotherapist's negative conclusion, was another wet blanket. Then came the social worker who said I would soon move to a nursing home because the rehabilitation facility could do no more for me, or words to that effect, which dampened my hope even further. I was close to tears.

Shortly after, I had supper at my parents' with my girlfriend and some of my best friends. Following dessert, my girlfriend suggested she and I stay at the table and have a talk while everyone else has gone into the living room. She was excessively polite, clearly uncomfortable. I prepared myself for something bad, and the worst befell. It shook me so much that it broke me, and I wept, and sobbed, like an abandoned child, despite every effort I made to save face. I would be her friend from now on, nothing more – nothing better than a stranger, to my way of thinking. Her flame had gone out and I was dead chilled.

I did not sleep, that night. I cried irrepressibly until morning, as discreetly as I could. My sorrow, however, was still manifest. Nurses and orderlies came to my room during their rounds and gave me their sympathies. I was at a loss to explain why I sorrowed over this breakup to such an extreme degree. Somehow it had brought me to realism and pessimism, and changed my depression into desperation. It was a turning point where everything had turned black. I looked ahead and saw nothing, a future with no future but an endless repetition of my dark present. No light whatever at the end of the tunnel. How could I possibly have the will to live now all my hopes had died? I was permanently confined in paralysis and buried in suffering. Death, not life, as in my years of happiness, suddenly made sense.

Later than usual that morning, an orderly transferred me into my wheelchair. Having heard about my painful and sleepless night, he showed no surprise or disapproval when I asked him to cancel my appointments. I was scheduled for physiotherapy before lunch and occupational therapy in the afternoon. I thanked him for his understanding and expressed my intention of retiring to the recreation room – empty in the morning, as a rule – at the west end of the hall. “I have a lot on my mind; I just want to be alone and take the time to think.” He agreed again, then left. To tell the truth, after rising late, I wished I could disappear early below the horizon of life. In plain words, I just wanted the freedom to die.

Next to the recreation room was a long stairway that people rarely used during this part of the day. It was sometimes used by visitors in the evenings and by staff members at the beginning or the end of their shifts, around seven in the morning, three in the afternoon, or eleven at night. I pushed my wheelchair slowly toward it, close, closer, and still closer, very slowly, attracted yet frightened by the steep flight of steps that reached down to a far landing. I pictured myself falling head first into the stairs. I speculated with pleasure that my fall should kill me and admitted with fear that it might not. Could it prove nonlethal, only detrimental, and add a tragedy to my misery? Would I live to regret it, more crippled and distressed than ever? I sat near the stairway, feeling frustrated in the extreme as I despaired of truly living if I resolved to pursue my existence and of surely dying if I attempted to commit suicide. I execrated my limits, so narrow that I was reduced to a line of suffering, it seemed: No temporal happiness or eternal rest; I was incapable of everything, nothing included.

I rolled to the recreation room and paused there for a while, perplexedly, wretchedly, then proceeded to the TV room in search of

diversion and oblivion. I watched television throughout the afternoon, stupefied by soap operas and game shows.

In the early evening, my mother brought me some treats and stayed for a few hours. She had baked a dozen whole-wheat muffins, sweetened with honey and raisins. Their taste was enhanced by pieces of walnuts, among other savory ingredients. Downright delicious, all the more as I had skipped the three meals of the day, save a bite or two at supertime. With the force of her maternal love, my mother was pulling me up from the depths of despair, using a strong hook: gustatory pleasure. I could not help enjoying her homemade treats and the comforting warmth of her affection, ever so generous and tender.

I was dazed by this break in the apparent absurdity of my existence – this manner of breach that revealed, in vivid contrast with gloom, a stream of sunshine, a moment of cheer, which stimulated me to look at everything else that deserved a smile: meaningful things like loyal friendships and joyous gatherings. I was ashamed for having planned to kill myself. How could I give up and let down, besides my friends and other people who had been supportive, the very woman who had given birth and devoted herself to me, or had fought and suffered countless battles and pains for me in the course of many years?

I needed to explain the despair that had blinded me to the favorable aspects of my life, such as her loving presence. However greatly I valued them, they were eclipsed by my disability: a huge obstacle that stood between me and most of happiness, and appeared both immovable and insurmountable. Never would I find a woman who could fall in love with me and to whom I could make love. I had lost my attraction, my strength, and my virility. Never would I experience again the pride and the joy I had experienced before, through athletics, manual labor, or other activities, when I was physically capable and active. My life was over, I had come to believe, and death was a logical choice to complete this end.

I talked and my mother listened, respectfully, painfully, until I had done justifying my weakness to abate my shame. It was now my turn to be all ears. My mother had a personal story to tell and a practical lesson to teach. She reminisced about her youth when she was sixteen, rebellious against the stuffy atmosphere of her convent school and the backward values of her social environment: A woman's role was to grow into a housewife, or into a spinster and a clerk, or into a nun.

Her defiant attitude had an obvious origin. She was under the spell of two aunts on her mother's side, colorful characters of stupendous talent and outrageous humor who had a thrilling lifestyle. They were the talk of the town, and of nearby and faraway towns. Their name had

spread like a wave that enlarges beyond the point of impact between a pond and a stone. Their nonconformist and derisive way often shocked people, while their musical prowess never failed to bewitch them. One of the aunts was a pianist and organist, a prodigy who had become a virtuoso by the age of eleven and was then performing regularly at a basilica. The other aunt was a vocalist who, in her early youth, after little training, already sang masterly. Both were free spirits, forerunners of feminism, always willing to ridicule the authority of the Catholic Church and of Canadian society, which were narrowly orthodox and patriarchal.

They were my mother's role models, who gave her an example of intellectual freedom and artistic success that liberated her from the conventions and motivated her to set her sights high. She herself had musical talent; she took piano lessons. She also was intelligent, eager to learn and understand things, and prone to question them. She wished to complete school and further her education at university, unlike most young women in the late Thirties. She dreamed of an award-winning pianistic career and of a stirring life, filled with exciting trips and interesting people. Raising children, plus shopping and cooking for everyone, and cleaning everything, as her mother did for the family (which included four girls and three boys), did not appeal to her in the least. Neither did staying single and earning a living through secretarial work, or entering a nunnery.

One of her brothers, eight years her senior, was a music enthusiast and connoisseur she revered. Critical to a fault, he often put her down, without realizing he was undermining her confidence. The more he criticized her piano playing, the more she doubted her musical talent. She eventually grew so diffident that she could no longer play piano except when she was alone in a closed room and worse, preferably in an empty house.

One day, the brother in question took her by surprise as she was proudly improvising an accompaniment for a folk melody. "If you like this rubbish," he declared, "then you are not a musician!" She virtually gave up piano and sank into depression.

At the convent school, her behavior, which already left something to be desired, began to suffer. Punishment followed punishment; the Mother Superior stepped in. Although my mother's defiance had gotten out of control and called for a stringent disciplinary measure, according to the sisters, the Mother Superior opted for persuasion, not repression, to keep her in line.

She reprimanded my mother and endeavored to instill the virtue of obedience in her rebellious mind. She argued that happiness, on earth

and in heaven, depends on the acceptance of one fundamental truth: Our human condition is a burdensome collection of necessities and duties that command us to act sensibly and honorably, or else. Disobedience – freedom in the truly unrestricted sense of the word – is an evil temptation that leads to hell. We can choose between a lifetime of dedication to what is wholesome and right, and the opposite, which gives suffering and guilt until an early death and forever afterward. In sum, we are not really free since there is only one good choice. To make this choice is to practice the virtue of obedience and earn our well-being, our self-respect, and ultimately our salvation. Rectitude is servitude. A master at living is a happy slave.

The Mother Superior finally dismissed my mother with a closing injunction: “Go off, my child, and do not disgrace yourself by resisting God’s will, but comply with it and be worthy.” What she meant by “God’s will” was clear – clearly questionable in my mother’s view: “Behave yourself!” Was that really God speaking through the nuns’ mouths? Was it truly his will that she have aspirations and doubts that could not be fulfilled or entertained? Why should he give something, then ask to give it up? My mother was baffled and incensed. Not only did her behavior not improve but it worsened.

At Mass, one morning before class, on the way to her seat from Communion, she blatantly chewed the Host with a mischievous grin while strutting down the aisle. An old sister almost fell to the floor in a faint; the other sisters turned livid and stared wide-eyed as they exclaimed their shock or simply gaped. My mother, they figured, was the devil incarnate. She was hustled to the Mother Superior and, after a heated deliberation that involved the parish priest, was expelled permanently from the convent school through the nearest door.

Now all she had desired – an advanced education and a distinguished career as a concert pianist, with stimulating travels and encounters – was reduced to a hopeless fancy. She was very much alive and yet she felt empty and heavy, as though she had lost her vitality. Is human death not first and foremost a silence of the soul, when everything that made one tick is gone, however strong the heart may beat? And what makes one tick if not one’s desires and the sense that they can be satisfied? Without hope, my mother’s will to live had collapsed like a marionette whose strings have been severed.

One day, shortly after her expulsion from the convent school, she walked to the river that flowed by the town where she lived. It was about one kilometer across and had a swift current. All alone, she sat on the bank and gazed at the flowing water, while she reviewed her existence and explored her future. Suddenly she stood up and jumped

in the river, fully clothed, as a vagrant would jump on a passing train bound for God knows where. She swam and swam, far into the current, to the end of her strength, intent on letting herself drown.

Submerged and breathless, she found herself face to face with death. It then came to her in a flash that her suicidal act was a dreadful mistake. Exhausted though she felt, she got her second wind and battled for daylight, for life, for a second chance. Her survival instinct was now overriding her foolish reason, and she emerged at last. Gasping for breath, she frantically breasted the current toward the bank. "Help! Help!" she cried, after a series of valiant strokes. Her strength had completely run out against the mighty river, ever so heartless. She began to sink beneath the waves, into the eternal night, like an evening sun that was never to rise again.

An unhoped-for piece of luck saved the day. A hand grabbed her by the hair, then by one arm. Before long, she was recuperating inside a rowboat and collecting her wits in the company of two men. They had been angling leisurely when they caught sight of my mother wrestling to free herself from the river's grip. One pulled hard at the oars and the other reached out quickly to rescue her. And they succeeded! I am immensely thankful they did, for her sake and mine, not to mention that of her family, of my father and my brother, and of everyone else who has benefited from her presence.

"Laurent," my mother concluded, "be careful not to look on the black side of things. As surely as your existence is dark with despair, there is light here below you have yet to see, not with your eyes, but with your mind: the light of wisdom, which is necessary to find happiness. Beware of the blindness that accompanies youth. It is your worst handicap and you shall overcome it by degrees as you grow older, wiser and happier, more enlightened. Be patient; be brave. There is a world to be discovered, without and within you, beyond what you know – a world that is worth discovering. True, perfection is nowhere on earth to be enjoyed. Life is full of difficulties and impossibilities, which can discourage us from living, but it is full of opportunities as well. May you learn to love it as I did, though I was quite convinced I could not and almost killed myself for this error."

Her words touched my heart and lifted my spirits. Still I wonder how effective they truly were. A gnawing death wish shadowed me for the following years, until I was in my mid-twenties. The fact remains, however, I never committed suicide. Why? Because of fear, which is a natural attitude toward death? Because of pride, to avoid the shame of running away from things and leaving behind the people who loved me and whom I loved? Because of pleasure, since my life did not merely

amount to suffering after all? Because of hope, even though there was no prospect of my recovering? Yes, yes, yes, yes, and my mother had something to do with this hope.

She had urged me to reassess my perception of my reality. The darkness of this perception did not belong to my reality but to me, the perceiving subject, as opposed to the object perceived: my reality itself, brighter by nature than I could see in my blindness. That was her lesson, and the doubt she had cast on my perception of my reality had given me hope, a vague and persistent feeling that I could pass over my pessimism and look forward to my future. Happier days lay ahead, possibly far ahead, in the light of a wisdom hard to get and long in coming.

Meanwhile, the fact that my existence was not really dark did not change the fact that it appeared dark. It even was dark to all intents and purposes, except I thought uncomprehendingly that perhaps I failed to see the light. "What is wisdom?" I kept asking myself with frustration. I was tempted to regard this source of happiness as an illusory goal that fooled me into living. How on earth could I rejoice at paralysis? All I felt was grief over the loss of everything I loved, save my family and friends. Just as my despair was blind, my hope was in the dark.

My mother had set an excellent example whose relevance to my situation could be questioned, but not entirely denied. She had survived her shattered dreams and surmounted more than her share of difficulties. Her health and her family had been a cause of much distress. She had contracted tuberculosis during her teens and recovered imperfectly. Then one day in her forties, after a lengthy and debilitating series of pneumonias, she had one lobe of a lung removed. As for my father, God rest his soul, he was as big a spender and drinker as he was a refined gentleman and a learned intellectual. Childrenwise, my mother's life was no sinecure either. My awkward age had lasted years, and I was now paralyzed and suicidal to boot.

How did she manage to love life, despite her disillusion and tribulations? What did she know or believe (some wise insight or outlook) that could help me live happily and that I should learn? Often, when she visited me, I challenged her intellect with such questions, which were so puzzling and pressing to me. She answered as best she could, unaware that I would be ready for her answers only years later.

She was a freethinker – not a philosopher, but a perceptive and reflective woman who was independent and intelligent, full of get-up-and-go and very down-to-earth. In her opinion, the purpose of life was life itself. It was not the afterlife of the Christian faith, which ultimately,

and dangerously, places this purpose in death, regarded as a chance for the good to resurrect and go to heaven.

“What is this heavenly afterlife?” she wondered with an incredulous expression. “A blissful survival of the spirit, or simply a misnomer, a myth, so improbable, so incredible, that one has to forgo the use of one’s reason to believe it?” She considered the dependence of the mind upon the body, particularly the brain, the alteration of which always alters the mind proportionally. Head injuries are a tragic example of that. How could the destruction of our cerebral matter not imply the annihilation of our inner self: perceptions, feelings, thoughts, memories, wishes, dreams, etc.? This destruction is a characteristic of death – that is, the final stage of tissue death through physical decay, as opposed to clinical death, which corresponds to a heart failure and permits, for a while after its occurrence, an altered state of consciousness. Whatever lay beyond life bore no resemblance to it and did not concern my mother as a living and conscious being.

Furthermore, it did not appeal to her, even in the unlikely event that the heavenly afterlife should be real. A purely spiritual state of infinite satisfaction might leave a lot to be desired after all. What if this lot was life? What if souls in their incorporeal felicity, ever so invariable, carefree, and effortless, suffered from a lack of sensualness, of diversity, of suspense, of merit, and fantasized about living? My mother had caught a glimpse of this irony on the threshold of death. Never had she wanted to live as strongly as when she was dying. Damn despair! Damn folly! It had driven her to suicide, though in truth her situation was not hopeless and she was desperately attached to life. How astray she was led by her very self, dreadfully misguided: at odds with her own interest! She had much rather take up the lively challenge of this world than give herself up to the deadly repose of the next.

Her encounter with death had been a vitalizing eye-opener. Above all, it had awakened her instinct of self-preservation like a guard dog that had dozed off. This symbolic animal had barked, growled, and bared its teeth, then pounced on death. With the help of two good Samaritans who had witnessed the incident and chosen to intervene, it had chased death away after my mother had foolishly invited this merciless killer to the body that housed her life.

Survival comes first in the natural order of things, before any other objective can be pursued. She had discovered this necessity, this imperative duty to herself, who had a loathing for death. Having said that, survival was not enough as a basic requirement. Good health was a second must that she increasingly recognized, since she also loathed pain and illness. Besides, just as life is an essential condition for all

human experiences and realizations, good health is indispensable for living fully. The less one is healthy, the less one has vitality for pursuing a higher purpose, such as prosperity and usefulness to others.

The Mother Superior was correct in maintaining that my mother had to learn the virtue of obedience, seeing that the human existence is filled with needs and obligations that call for this virtue. Yet, as if she possessed the absolute truth or embodied the will of God, her idea of these needs and obligations lacked tolerance. It left my mother no room for her rebellious idea of them. She had the capacity and the desire to form this idea through her own thinking and to conform her behavior to it. This was first and foremost a matter of freedom and happiness, not of divine truth, which the human mind can never know to perfection. Being unable to lead one's life according to one's idea of how it should be led is sheer misery.

The liberal society is superior to all others precisely because it acknowledges this fact and only restrains people when they prove seriously harmful. Unlimited freedom would destroy freedom, since it would permit a total disrespect for it. This sort of paradox is a common oddity among idealists who consider principles in the absolute and are therefore in contradiction with the relativity of life. Freedom relates to individuals who live with other individuals and cannot harmoniously do so without a minimum of mutual respect.

Unlike the Mother Superior and the other sisters at the convent school, my mother was a nonbeliever who claimed the right to express her skepticism freely. As she grew up, her stance on Christianity remained skeptical. She identified God with the universe and trusted ideas on condition that they agree with facts. She regarded the satisfaction of our physical needs as good, even sacred, an integral part of our nature, both human and divine. Only the excessive satisfaction of any one of these needs, to the detriment of other and possibly more important aspects of our existence, was bad. As for morality, she justified it on the basis of solidarity alone. Love others as yourself because others are as much you as yourself: You and the social circumstances that are the cradle of your civilized life are one and indivisible, like a plant and its roots. No mystery, no revelation, just common knowledge. People helping people is a natural phenomenon that stems from a proverbial understanding: United we stand; divided we fall.

In sum, mutual aid implies a mutual benefit and love is a function of gratitude. I am referring to the giving form of love, as opposed to the taking form of it, which is strictly a function of self-interest. Also, I mean by gratitude a thankfulness that may exceed the limits of any particular instance of receiving and become a generous disposition

toward humanity at large. In that case it is transfigured, seemingly independent of the recognition that one owes much to many; it is elevated to kindness.

What about the unfortunates of this world, who have lived in such miserable and abusive conditions that suffering and resentment, not joy and gratitude, fill their hearts? Wretchedness is not conducive to happiness and evil breeds evil as much as good breeds good.

There are exceptions, however. Some who suffer extremely harsh circumstances end up wonderfully happy and kind. Likewise, some who are blessed with an unusually favorable environment behave pitifully. For reasons that boggle the mind, they turn advantages into misery; they stay selfish and ungrateful, despite their debt to society. They, like the unfortunates described above, either have no sense of love (the giving form of it) or conceive of this noble idea with great difficulty. They view the Christian dictate – to love one another – as a moral drudgery that only the human justice and the threat of hell plus the prospect of heaven can convince them to undertake. Their “love” has then nothing in common with true love but appearances, is a self-serving by-product of fear and hope. It is unreliable. The fear or the hope fails, the “love” falls.

My mother found shocking the religious notion that people can be damned for their sins, which may be attributable in part, if not in large measure, to adverse external causes or inborn character faults. Not that people should have the right to commit any crime with impunity. Evildoers, however deserving of compassion they may be, are still guilty of evil-doing and punishable by law. They must be incarcerated for the sake of others.

Of the many ideas my mother entertained, one was particularly intriguing as far as I was concerned: the idea of adaptability. At eighteen, before my transfer to the nursing home, I deemed it impracticable or only applicable to more fortunate individuals. In fact, it was practicable or applicable to me, no matter how unfortunate I considered myself. It took me ten years to understand this fully, which just shows, much to my humility, though my predicament can account for some of the lag, I am a bit slow on the uptake!

Today I concede without reservation that the absurdity of my reality was an illusion that my adaptation to this reality could dispel. The lack of meaning was a want of awareness. What I failed to see was the flexibility of my nature. More than an individual (in terms of my habits), I was a human being capable of shaping and reshaping my individuality in accordance with my changing situation. Except for my basic needs, all of my desires were acquired, not innate, and changeable.

A change had become necessary, as my old desires had proven unsuited to my new reality.

It follows that the meaning of life is not dependent on a particular way of life, but on the conformity of one's way to the present possibilities. Similarly, a door key is not useful in itself, but in relation to a lock that it opens because it matches it. The key to happiness therefore consists in having our desires match our reality. We are locked out of happiness when we refuse to do this and fiddle in vain with the wrong key – that is, the key to misery.

Needless to say, our reality is not limited to what we live now. It includes our potential for future progress. In the event of serious trouble, we should use whatever rightful means we have to remedy it. Thus wise people must be distinguished from defeatists or lazy proponents of the status quo. When faced with a problem that badly frustrates them, they never admit defeat unless they have struggled to resolve this problem and have failed, time and again, to the point of despair. At that point, their failure notwithstanding, they find dignity in that they have tried their best. They draw serenity from their resignation and look for contentment elsewhere.

I for one had striven to recover from my diving accident, without avail; I had become desperate. I also was proud of my relentless, though fruitless, efforts. I did not accept my lot, however. In my heart of hearts, persistently, despondently, I wished it were different, or the same as before this accident. I longed for the impossible. I was a far cry from tranquility and not nearly at home with the idea that, severely incapacitated, I still had it in my power to be happy.

My attitude was to improve with time – and what a long time! This book is meant to expedite this type of improvement in others. Its main feature is the limited wisdom I have acquired through the years and attempted to impart successfully in the context of my personal experience.

I have often wondered what use my words will be. If some know intimately what I am saying, will they not judge it a redundancy? If others are ignorant about it, will they not feel as though I am speaking in a foreign tongue? Maybe my words can usefully reinforce the awareness of the initiates and incite the noninitiates to develop theirs. Maybe there are hybrids, neither fully in the know nor completely in the dark, to whom my words can be particularly useful. From reading my book, these semi-initiates could increase the clarity and the range of their awareness, and so its practical value. A partial state of ignorance and confusion is a weakness that conduces to escaping the truth, without which life is barren of effectiveness and satisfaction.

It should be noted that adaptation is not only a matter of wisdom. Paradoxically, it also depends on the opposite of awareness: oblivion – a so-called memory defect that may very well be one of the most valuable functions of the mind. After an irreversible change of situation, one cannot embrace the present if one does not let go of the past. Now, what could be more favorable to this detachment than oblivion? Nothing, admittedly, though another crucial factor must come into play. It consists in discovering a new opportunity for happiness, to which may contribute an improvement in condition within the limits of the new reality. Since the factors in question work slowly, letting go of the past takes time. Patience and courage are of the essence to achieve this detachment, which completes the commitment to embracing the present.

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On my way to the nursing home, at the end of February 1975 (nine months after my diving accident), I remembered my past joys all too well. For the most part, I hated my situation and my foreseeable future. My reconciliation with life was not in the offing.

A gray stone building against a white backdrop of clouds and snow, the nursing home looked so grim and so cold, so inhospitable, that I choked with horror and anguish. I was about to enter a twilight zone, between the world of the living and that of the dead – a place of degeneration, which followed fitness and usefulness, and preceded decomposition. It stood on a mound like a monumental and hollow gravestone. Kept there were people, not yet deceased, who had ceased to belong: miserable souls in limbo whose disabled bodies, of no earthly use, remained above ground until burial day.

However ugly this building was on the outside, it was uglier on the inside. Back to the wall in the entrance and facing the front door, an oversized plaster statue of the Virgin Mary, robed in dingy shades of sky blue and golden yellow, silently greeted newcomers with open arms. Her face, deadly pale, was lackluster and cracked into the bargain, similar in freshness to the wall, which seemed gray from old age. To be fair, her presence nevertheless exuded harmony: Her pathetic expression fitted perfectly the pitiful setting.

Following my look around, I reported my arrival to the receptionist. A friendly woman in her fifties, brightly dressed, escorted me to the second floor. She smiled awkwardly as I observed and smelled the premises in consternation. Ugliness had reached a new high, and the stench of feces and urine pervading the corridors, not to mention

the stench of vomit emanating from the dining room, made me feel nauseous.

The walls were dirty white and chipped in places. I saw no concern for aesthetic quality, no pictures anywhere, save a cheap reproduction that was not worth a glance, near the nursing desk. As for the residents, most of them sat in wheelchairs and wore frumpy clothes, often buttoned up or put on clumsily, if not carelessly. They were aged, gloomy, decrepit, and senile, though they probably had been capable and respectable individuals, glad to be alive, in former times.

An old one-legged man, tied up in a rickety wheelchair, was shouting regularly at the top of his voice and frothing at the mouth, while wriggling forcefully and stamping his foot. He was stationed – though hardly stationary, despite the parking brakes on his chair, which the staff had applied – within sight of the nursing desk, beside other men in a comparable predicament, except they were not as noisy and restless.

One of them swung his upper body to and fro in a perpetual motion and mumbled to himself incessantly. In jest, an orderly occasionally grabbed his shoulder and broke his rhythm as he walked by him. The old man came to a dead stop and kept quiet momentarily, like the pendulum of an antique clock that had been halted. He then resumed his swinging and mumbling by force of a senseless will. His life was reduced to living the passage of time.

I was to wait for the head nurse. “May I call you Larry?” she asked me, after we had met and introduced ourselves. Frankly, I am not fond of nicknames, which sacrifice the musicality of names to convenience. They are typical of our modern times, based on utilitarianism: preoccupation with utility above all. Past cultures were sticklers for beauty, which explains why today we can marvel at a superb heritage. What will present cultures leave to their descendants? More often than not, it will be old things that were not beautiful but useful and are replaced, not treasured.

“Yes,” I replied to the head nurse. She could have called me Dick for all I cared. Did American soldiers in the Vietnam jungle chafe at mosquito bites when they stepped on a land mine and had their legs blown off? Of course not! You do not complain about an itch when you suffer agonizing pain, whereas a cozy existence may turn you into a whining fussy spot. Such is the crazy law of luck and unhappiness it would be smart to violate: The more fortunate you are, the more you risk bellyaching over trifles and feeling disgruntled despite your good fortune.

The question arises as to how lucky we are and happy we should be. Lucky, in comparison with what? A state of total misery and despair? I suppose so. Take for example the victim of a disastrous earthquake who is bereft of everyone and everything he loves, and destitute of assistance, while he is in agony, bleeding to death and powerless, amid the ruins. Although this example cannot remedy our troubles, serious or petty, it can help us put them into perspective. Things are good in some measure if they are not bad in the extreme, and we should rejoice at that, just as we may wish to improve these things, possibly open to improvement.

Smile, dear reader, you have grounds for joy and hope, notwithstanding your troubles, unless the worst has befallen you. I assume, with relief, this is not the case, since you are reading my book. Besides, a smile is so much nicer than a scowl!

At eighteen, I was not a motivational writer, but a suicidal teenager who scowled more than he smiled, I must confess. It takes a long time and hard work to master the art of living, even in the best-case scenario, and I was a slow learner, not devoid of laziness, in tough circumstances.

“Hang on in there!” I now say to you. The greater the difficulty, the greater the merit once this difficulty is overcome. A beautiful smile, truly serene, is a most admirable masterpiece when it prevails over a situation many would deem pitiful. The picture of Saint John of The Cross springs to mind. He achieved enlightenment and bliss, and composed sublime poetry in a dungeon. This illustrates that contentment is largely independent of a person’s state of affairs, or is this person’s doing from within. Beatitude is an attitude.

The head nurse took me to my room. A ceiling neon tube, white and cold as frost, shed a glaring and chilling light on the impersonal decor: a chrome mirror, which overhung an enamel washbasin, plus two steel hospital beds with nightstands to match. They were all solid and functional, and relatively clean, but antiquated, partly damaged, and unsightly. You would have thought they had been salvaged from a dump. Also, hooked on the wall, halfway between my bed and that of my roommate, and above them by three feet, was a plastic statuette of Christ. The holy man was nailed to his cross, as he was on Calvary between the two thieves. I felt innocent, yet crucified.

Beside my roommate’s bed was a window. It overlooked a flat roof, covered with gravel and snow, and an asphalt courtyard, half snowed in, half cleared of snow, and three-quarters enclosed by the rear of the stone building. Under a cloudy sky, this gray and snowy exterior was in keeping with the metallic and whitish interior, dreary,

deadly, more wintry than winter. Add to this a nagging coolness and dampness in the air and you will understand why I shivered, body and soul.

Minutes, like moist sand, trickled away ever so sluggishly in my glassy solitude. The head nurse had left and my roommate was absent. The bleakness of the place continued to chill me, both literally and figuratively. "What was the point of bringing me here?" I asked myself. "A one-way trip to the cemetery would have made more sense!"

Suddenly, I heard a disturbance in the corridor. Someone was clattering along in a wheelchair and uttering incomprehensible cries, sometimes low-pitched, sometimes high-pitched, for mysterious reasons. As he passed by, he looked in at my door and noticed me, a newcomer to the floor. "Whaheeeeeee! Whaheeeeeee!" he shrieked in excitement. He burst into my room, propelling his wheelchair with one leg and stretching out one arm toward me. He was monstrous, hemiplegic, and demented – the victim of an accident that had seriously disfigured and crippled him, and caused him extensive brain damage. I shrank back in horror, cornered and defenseless. "Hold on, Charlie; don't get carried away," an orderly shouted, as he grabbed the handles of the man's wheelchair and forced him out of the room, despite his vehement protest. The orderly was tall and strong, and good-humored. "Don't worry," he said to me with a laugh, "he's harmless." I was stunned out of my wits.

Soon after, my roommate made his entrance. He was an overweight and downhearted quadriplegic in his mid-forties who rode an electric wheelchair and led a futile existence. He had suffered a severe neck injury in a car accident. A once humorous, sporting, and successful man, sociable and popular with women, he was still friendly, but unpleasant for his depressing bitterness and cynicism. He spent most of his time teasing the other residents, chatting with orderlies, sipping decaf at the coffee shop, eating junk food between meals, and listening to the radio or watching TV.

He and I were two rarities among a handful of younger individuals who were severely disabled, yet contrasted markedly with the common residents of this home for the living dead. Overwhelmed by distress, I stared at my roommate. "How do you cope with this hellhole?" "Poorly at best," he answered point-blank. "I simply pray for my release from this hellhole, as you say. If I'm lucky, I will soon be struck down by a fatal heart attack, or some other form of mercy killing attributable to fate," he snickered. "Residents never leave here unless they're on a stretcher, under a white sheet. Sorry for being frank, but hey! That's the way the cookie crumbles. The entrance to the building

is essentially just that, a means of entering, at least for those who come to live here. Once you get in, you can't get out, except to return. Death is the only true exit." Again, I was at a loss for words, for joy, for hope. I felt nothing but emptiness, an immeasurable and infinitely painful void.

My roommate excused himself and took off. I stayed behind, alone in the room, and watched the light bouncing off the walls like a trapped bird gone mad. Home bitter home. I'd had my fill of misery. I shut my eyes and put my hands over my ears to keep it from pouring in, but I could not keep it from pouring out. I cried until the bottomless well ran dry.

That evening, my mother and a few close friends of mine, on a rescue mission, ventured into my quarters. I was dying of sorrow – in need of intensive tender loving care. Hugs, kisses, words of endearment and encouragement, and wit to boot, nothing was missing in their rescue kit. Given the gravity of my condition, they insisted I go upstairs with them to the auditorium, where a tombola was under way, a record of folk music was playing, and refreshments were served. The coordinator, a young woman, bubbly and anxious to please, was laboring to bring life to the old crowd that was largely out of it, flat as stale ginger ale. She waltzed up to me and gave me a warm welcome. It reminded me of an overdone sales pitch for a low-grade product one has no desire to buy. I felt terribly out of place. I also knew a rebuff would be uncalled-for. She had a good heart and did her best. I commanded my face to smile and heaved a hollow "Thanks."

In the days that followed, my roommate introduced me to a woman on the fourth floor, a bedridden polio victim in her thirties. She was by far the youngest of the female residents, and the fittest mentally speaking, while she was the most physically disabled, at war with an army of ills. Her words were an endless tale of woe: bedsores, surgeries and complications, diseases, and more pain in her undersized, deformed, crippled, and scarred body than my roommate and I could imagine. It appeared she was a chronic complainer, just as she was a chronic sufferer. In fact, she was not a complaining victim of circumstance; she was a boasting war hero. She was a valiant soldier in a gruesome battle, lost on virtually every front except one: survival. No loving relationship, no successful career, and not much in the way of pleasant occupations, survival was indeed her only significant victory, her only pride. It was all she enjoyed, not counting a little leisure and pleasure, and some friendly interactions, predominantly with the staff. I both pitied and admired her.

During the time I spent, or rather did, at the nursing home, I saw her twice. I had mixed feelings about her. Impressed, depressed, rattled, and baffled, I felt all that and more in her presence. She was a disturbing enigma. She had no life to speak of, besides her ailing breath, and yet she fought for it tooth and nail. Why? Because she was a true warrior, I suppose. Her life was a battle; the battle was her life. Everything boiled down to a matter of honor. And how honorable she was! This made the core of her woeful happiness. Her smile was a victory flag that she put up on her face, before another brush with death, or any evil jeopardizing the remnants of her health, caused her to grimace. She would combat the enemy, then win back her bare minimum by a narrow margin and smile once more. "There, Grim Reaper, you miserable killer; you thought me dead; well, think again!" She would turn the scythe on this Hydra and behead it; and soon the head would grow back. The war never ends until the warrior dies.

For most of my teens, before my diving accident, my physical health and strength had been a considerable and reliable asset I had taken for granted and invested freely, often recklessly, in the things I valued. Examples of them were sports and motorcycles, love and intimacy with the opposite sex, and protective brotherliness toward children. I expected that an athletic career and a large family would eventually be counted among my prized realizations. This would supposedly have completed my happiness.

In my view, only with everything I enjoyed or anticipated did my life have a meaning. Without it, my life was meaningless. It was reduced to survival, which could satisfy animals, but not humans, normally filled with desires and aspirations on top of their instincts.

How was the stricken and bedridden polio victim – a born survivor – different from an animal? So far as I could see the difference was minimal, but there is more to humans than meets the eye. Their human nature relates preeminently to the ideas and ideals that underlie what they say and do, and concern their mind, as opposed to what they say and do, which belongs to the material world and could be mimicked by a futuristic robot. As for the woman in question, she was every bit as human as the best of us, a reasonable being who had her own brand of beliefs and principles by which she lived her life. The fact remains she survived for the sake of surviving, though she also benefited from a few pleasurable extras: having the odd goodie, listening to the radio or watching TV, and interacting amicably with her favorite staff members or such rare visitors as my roommate and me – nothing to write home about. Her family? She had a sister in a predicament similar to hers, an equally brave soul hospitalized elsewhere. They could have been test-

tube babies for all I know. I never heard of their parents, let alone other relatives.

My situation, which was intolerable to me, would no doubt have been acceptable to them. It contrasted painfully with my past happiness, whereas the two sisters had suffered from an extreme physical disability and resided in a nursing home ever since childhood. Their entire existence had been practically on a level with a dog's life, however human and admirable they were; I was nearly at the height of my powers when my fortunes took a dive, and the higher you are, the harder you fall.

"Why live?" This question was in the forefront of my mind as I was stuck for an answer and had an urge to die. Philosophical questioning often starts with an existential void that one is desperate to fill with meaning. Today I am thankful, not resentful, for the query that accompanied my misery. It was no less a blessing than it seemed a curse. Ignorance constitutes a deadly vacuity that is also a vital place for mental impregnation and gestation through learning and thinking – a womb from which wisdom is born.

This whole process takes time and includes suffering, like the conception, development, and birth of a child, only worse. It ends at the beginning of a new process of maturation. Sages forever strive to be at one with truth. Their ideal – which they pursue earnestly but never achieve to perfection – is to grow into supreme human beings whose knowledge and behavior coincide with the nature of things and their earthly mission: with life and love.

My suicidal thoughts showed I was off course. I never acted on them, however, which proves I was not completely adrift. I was torn between the desire to slash my wrists and the duty to be an honor to my blood. That I resolved this dilemma honorably instead of the opposite is a bit of a miracle. Like a fakir who lies, unharmed, on a bed of nails, I survived thanks to a delicate balance that consisted in staying clear of death while leaning toward it. My conscience had much to do with this delicate balance. So did my family, my friends, and many others, such as the two sisters. Their caring presence, supportive and enlightening words, or commendable example, encouraged me to continue with the business of living and being worthy, enough for me to go through hell without killing myself.

This "enough" left a lot to be desired. I was still convinced happiness was a wonderful idea that no longer applied to me; that was my foolishness. I was always tempted to break out of my disabled body, my maximum-security prison of flesh and bones; that was my weakness. I often partied to forget or daydreamed in bed, with my eyes shut and

my ears covered. I needed a life holiday, and my suicidal thoughts were the closest I came to resting eternally.

As I strayed from the right path, in the wasteland of morbid reveries, I soon discovered I was sinking into quicksand. The longer I wallowed in these reveries, the harder it became for me to drag myself from them. I was losing the battle for want of fighting it. My enemy was twofold and insidious; it infiltrated my very soul. It was my foolishness and my weakness. With all the energy I could muster, I had to combat and defeat it. Nothing could give me confidence in my ability to live happily but the experience of happiness, which I had yet to attain through repeated efforts. To avoid these efforts indefinitely would create an impression of emptiness and perpetuate my misconception that I was devoid of this ability.

Fortunately, I did not carry this avoidance to such deadly extremes. The word “deadly,” I believe, is again appropriate. If ignorance is a lack of awareness, avoidance is a lack of activeness, and life without awareness or activeness is nothing much or nothing at all. Anything that draws one away from the business of living and being worthy – such as drugs, alcohol, distractions of all descriptions, and sleep when the intent is oblivion, not to mention the idea of killing oneself – is a means of escaping, a little death, and death itself is the ultimate escape.

I was in an in-between state, average some would say, unsatisfactory I would add, neither giving up the struggle nor living up to my potential. I attended school during the week, two or three hours at a time. The school had a reputation for good education, especially in the arts, and was wheelchair accessible. The principal and the vice-principal, the secretaries, the teachers and the students, everyone was friendly and helpful as a rule. I wished I were somewhere else and things were different nonetheless. I was self-conscious about my disability as I labored awkwardly to push myself here and there, and was frequently rescued by charitable souls who felt sorry for me. I was much obliged for their assistance, and humiliated.

A year and a half before, after a game of handball, a phys ed teacher had raved about my athletic build and asked me to join his school – the most modern and best equipped one in town – and his first-rate phys ed program. I had accepted enthusiastically and registered with success. My life had taken an exciting and promising turn. There were great opportunities ahead, in my favorite areas of interest, pretty girls included. I could hardly wait to start the next school year. Then June came and everything went awry. In a split second my neck snapped. My plan fell through and my morale hit a record low.

I remember something I liked about the school I attended, besides the kind people who worked or studied there (some of whom, among the students, became dear friends of mine): For the time I was there, I was not at the nursing home. I hated this ghastly and ghostly place, with the exception of a few golden-hearted orderlies who stood out like glittering jewels on a decaying corpse.

A change of roommate had made matters worse. The quadriplegic in his mid-forties, depressing but friendly, even funny at times, had been replaced by a ninety-two-year-old man who was cross with everyone and about everything. He was able-bodied, despite his age, and totally out of his mind.

From morning to evening he threw fits, which alternated with naps. He was particularly active and restive at night. He bellowed commands and curses, and howled the names of his daughters, and was in fact so restless that the orderlies tied him down. Once, he wriggled out of his ties. He stood on his bed and shook it until he threatened to fall on mine, stark naked and raving mad. I shouted and waited, and shouted and waited, and waited, and shouted again for help, more crippled than ever because of fear. Only one orderly worked nights on the entire floor. He was gloomy and lazy, and answered to a single nurse. The nurse was a spinster, half-witch, half-zombie, close to retirement, who could not have cared less. She arrived at long last, accompanied by the orderly, and complained: "Stop the fuss and go to sleep." I felt like throttling her!

On my return from school, I usually went to bed and shut the world out as much as possible. My roommate, meanwhile, sat inside the room in a heavy armchair, to which he was attached. Occasionally I retired to the auditorium, provided it was empty. I parked my wheelchair in the corner farthest from the door, in the same way as a motorist parks his car near the screen at a drive-in. I watched the inner show of my wandering thoughts, with my eyes closed. I even blocked my ears by pressing my hands to them, every time the noise from outside the auditorium badly hindered my diversion. My arms got tired; I became frustrated. In the end I snapped out of my daydream. I had supper to eat and schoolwork to do. Why I satisfied this need and fulfilled this duty I did not clearly understand. Life had somewhat more meaning than death somehow.

My will to live was weak, yet strong enough to prevent me from committing suicide. There was a perpetual tug of war between this will and my desire to die, and my soul hung in the middle. It hovered around the point of equilibrium, which was also a point of racking tension. Now and then it shifted dangerously towards death, without ever passing

the point of no return. My will to live avoided defeat, though it failed to eliminate the threat of defeat. It never truly won; it simply never lost.

As I further probe my memory, I reach a darker conclusion: I did not decide to survive so much as hesitate to die. My life was on trial for absurdity and was spared the death sentence because its guilt could not be proven beyond all reasonable doubt. Indeed, my mind resembled also a tribunal, and the defense lawyer had only just managed to sway the jury in favor of an acquittal.

I resented this ruling, which doomed me to suffer. In this doom, however, there was room for maneuver to seal my fate differently. If I could not in all conscience put an end to my life, I could increase my risk of dying – which was part and parcel of my effort to live – by a devious means: negligence, in the guise of boldness. The deviousness of this means was subtle, unrecognizable, or appeared indistinctly in the fatal accidents I imagined with restrained pleasure, but I make no mistake about my survival. It implied extra luck in addition to my scruples.

I tremble at the thought that millions of people suffer enough to entertain a death wish. Perhaps it is as common a component of the psyche as suffering is a widespread phenomenon among humans. I suppose it is normally counterbalanced by the appetite for life, which joy and hope can whet, but is it ever overturned? Probably not, at least not for long, and that worries me. Could numerous instances of big-risk-taking be death-wish-related? Overeating, smoking, speeding, every human deed that is potentially lethal, including war, may be symptomatic of a death wish, all the more pernicious as it is usually denied or concealed behind other motives.

Why do people insist on denying or concealing it? Because they are rightfully ashamed of it! Think of the insanity: Without their knowing and approving it, their death wish may harm them and aggravate their suffering, in which case it would intensify, then probably harm them again and aggravate their suffering, and so on and so forth until it destroyed them. Is it not imperative that they break out of this vicious circle? Should they not humbly recognize their self-destructive weakness in the face of suffering? Should they not fight this weakness with every bit of strength they can gather, in the name of all the things that matter to them? May they spare themselves the shame of wrecking the very life that makes all these things possible, not by a devious means that disguises a self-inflicted tragedy as a cruel twist of fate, but through their courageous and generous effort to live and love in spite of difficulties! As the particular individuals they are, their existence is their one and only opportunity to experience and contemplate the awesome

and fleeting beauty of the world, and prove worthy. May they grasp this opportunity before it slips away from them! They will die soon enough.

Some of them may disagree. I know how disgusted with life and tempted by death one can be. This knowledge almost killed me. I also know one can learn to love life and commit oneself to it. This second knowledge reveals the nature of the first one, which is in fact a state of ignorance and foolishness. I speak from experience and endorse this proverb: Every cloud has a silver lining. Misery contains a possibility of happiness.

Allow me to qualify this statement. Life is rarely desperate. One can usually bring about the changes that are favorable to contentment, if one strives for them. These changes may concern mostly one's attitude toward a difficult situation that is largely unchangeable. A smile is a sunlike wonder reminiscent of a dandelion that can blossom and multiply on practically barren ground despite countless rigors.

True, my journey from misery to happiness was detestable and interminable, but I can honestly say it was worth it. I am bursting with life and love. My writing to you is a manifestation of this life, an expression of this love. I hope it will not leave you cold.

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A fortunate turn of events showed I was not as doomed as I thought: I moved to a group home for the disabled after one wretched year and a half at the nursing home. The group home was an actual house! My room was a single bedroom with a window and a door that opened onto a backyard! Some female friends of mine had even thumbtacked a few scenic posters and a fishnet on the walls to enhance its appeal. I was no longer surrounded by ugliness, decrepitude, senility, and death.

The oldest resident, wheelchair-bound due to a car accident, was a neighborly man in his early forties. He was overwhelmed by gloom and yet, as a rule, for the sake of pride and humor, his only visible side had the brightness of a full moon. The youngest resident was a seventeen-year-old girl on crutches, a victim of congenital defect and stunted growth. She was shy and polite, faintly sweet like watered down fruit juice, and barely present, the pensive shadow of a beautiful dream that walked invisibly before her.

My situation looked good in comparison with my past predicament, but everybody knows that appearances can be deceptive and things can get worse before they get better. The group home was

the initiative of a somewhat ill-advised though well-meaning social worker, married with children, who could not devote much time to management. She acted jointly with professionals in the medical field who had no experience in this type of venture and little availability. The helm was mostly in the hands of the nursing staff, a woman in her mid-twenties, rather unwise but endearingly goodhearted, who answered to a man in his mid-thirties, a strapping bully whose superior strength and tyrannical character had been mistaken for nursing and managerial skills.

During the two years that he occupied this senior position, he exercised his strongarm tyranny over me. I brought out the worst in him as I was rebellious and the care I needed was demanding. My health had gradually deteriorated: bladder problems, bowel problems, skin problems, distressing and confining in the extreme, plus excruciating pain. I was going through hell, especially since he tormented me. I was downcast and downtrodden. Everyone in the house knew about the abuse; no one spoke out for the fear he instilled in them. My suffering and my death wish were at their height. I wanted to kill myself; I wanted to kill him. Never did I come closer to being a murderer and a suicide.

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Flashes of memory stream into my consciousness. They take me back thirty years plus. I was a boy then, a newcomer to a poor and tough neighborhood. My parents, of moderate means and daring to a fault, had decided to move there after my father had accepted an editing job in the federal government. They had taken a lease on a low-rent brick house, which was also run-down, covered in filth, and littered with trash. I do not mince my words: Previous tenants had been pigs that got along with bugs and rats.

“The house has potential,” my mother had said to reassure me, seeing that I was aghast at its sordid aspects. Its one redeeming feature, besides its solid construction, was a large woody front yard, neglected, allowed to become a large dumping ground, as weedy as it was woody, but potentially attractive and pleasant, to be sure.

My mother was a hard worker with a great deal of stamina, creativity, and tastefulness. She mastered the art of doing wonders with little money. After three months of intense labor – which for the first week involved a carpenter and two garbage collectors plus two dump trucks – the house was transfigured, quite presentable, even nice, much to my amazement. It now contrasted sharply, cuttingly, with the slums at the rear of the house and on the left of it. On the right was a school

and at the front, across the street, was a nunnery on a large piece of land. My parents had conveniently focused their attention on these establishments, as if the good education and good disposition of their teachers and sisters could shield us from the evils of the slums.

Needless to say, they did not. Violence was rampant in this neck of the woods and I was elected punchbag with only one dissenting vote: mine! At the root of this violence was malevolence, which grows from resentment, after one has been subjected to mistreatment. As much as my family projected an image of distinction, the neighborhood boys were malevolent and violent toward me. To them this image of distinction was an act of humiliation; their feelings were hurt and it was natural for them to hurt me. Of course it is a lot worthier to elevate oneself than to abase someone else. It is also a lot harder, and nature spontaneously levels everything the easy way. Moral excellence relates to culture, is an acquired trait, by virtue of which a human is courageous and just, worthy of praise.

One winter evening, I was crossing the field next to the rink where I had played hockey, when a gang of hoodlums encircled me like a pack of wolves. There were six of them, one of whom – a weakling who always relied on others to feel powerful – lived three doors down, east of my house, across the back street. The leader stepped forward and turned around with a snicker. “Hey shithead, come and kiss my ass.” I was tempted to kick it, not kiss it. “No thanks. Please let me go; I don’t care for trouble.” As I was finishing my sentence, one of the boys lunged toward me from behind and shoved me forward. I dropped my hockey equipment and braced myself to fight and suffer. I was big for my age, but big is small when outnumbered by six to one.

Again the leader took the initiative; the fight was on. With several thrusts, punches, and kicks, I repelled my assailants momentarily, until I was knocked and wrestled to the ground. Fists and feet hit me everywhere, nonstop, from all directions. Suddenly I heard a menacing shout and everyone slipped in a last blow before fleeing. A brave and kind man had caught sight of their misdeed and chosen to intervene, armed with a hockey stick. I was hurt but saved.

A few days later, still aching all over, I saw the weakling, alone by his house – his hovel to be exact, which was covered with old imitation brick, torn in places, and infested with cockroaches, rats, and woodworms. His face was bruised and wet from weeping, as he screamed with rage, “Fucking bastard, fucking bitch, fucking life, fuck, fuck, fuck!” My anger was now tempered with compassion. I unclenched my fists, prompted by a desire to spare him. I could not demean myself to add

pain to his pain, already so excessive that it overflowed in streams of tears and curses.

His father was an illiterate and idle drunkard who collected welfare and spent considerable time and money at the tavern. At home, slouching in an armchair, he forever watched TV and drank beer or liquor. When grossly intoxicated, he sometimes vomited before reaching the bathroom and, without cleaning up his mess, fell unconscious on his bed, the armchair, the floor, or wherever. He was also vulgar and brutal. He often battered his son and his wife, and heaped insults on them.

His wife was an abusive and sluggish woman who had grown obese from attempting to fill her inner void with chips, cookies, and pop. Day after day she wore the same tattered nightgown and constantly found reasons for bawling out her son and swiping him. She drove him insane, then used this insanity as another reason for persecuting him.

These two loathsome and pitiful parents rendered his life at home unbearable. He usually roamed the streets with fellow-sufferers from similar – miserable and violent – backgrounds. Together they ganged up and took their resentment out on other kids such as me. My aggressors, first, were victims.

My insight into the origin of violence came to me at that time and has never left me. I saw then and still see a victim in every aggressor. Some say there is such a thing as gratuitous violence, committed by individuals whose youth was favorable to all appearances. Violence for the sake of violence, an exercise in brutality at the expense of others, without provocation, past or present? I beg to differ.

Appearances are not a valid means of assessing someone's youth, whose favorableness or unfavorableness is a subjective, not objective, matter. Circumstances have no value in themselves, but in relation to people who consider them favorably or not. Attitude is here the only relevant concept. Also, brutality cannot be exercised at the expense of others unless these others are viewed heartlessly as expendable. This heartlessness is greatly suspicious, unlikely to belong to someone who regards humans with favor, thanks to a feeling of solidarity, of mutual benefit.

In my opinion, aggressiveness is triggered by hostility, without which it is dormant: a mere potentiality incapable of harm. It may include an abnormal sensitivity or intellect that intensifies or alters someone's perception of the environment. The fact remains hostility, as perceived by someone who feels painfully antagonized and proportionally victimized, is always a factor. Therefore, aggression cannot be dissociated from victimization, not only that of the victims

but also that of the aggressors. These aggressors are victims of their sick minds or of the ill treatment they have endured. They deserve compassion, besides indignation.

They are liable to a punishment that ought to be effective and exemplary, not vengeful. Vengeance and violence are one and the same thing. Both are resentful and harmful. Both are reprehensible. The harm inflicted does not remedy the harm suffered; it simply compounds one harm with another, and invites yet another harm. It lengthens the chain of savagery from  $x$  (a frightening number of savage links) to  $x+1$ , potentially  $+2$ ,  $+3$ ,  $+4$ , etc., instead of breaking it and helping to free humanity from it. There is no worse slavery than savagery. The best course is to make every effort to get over a wrong and forgive it, while bringing the wrongdoer to justice.

In sum, justice should not serve to avenge people. It should serve to prevent crime and protect the public, by intimidating or incarcerating those who are a menace to others except under threat or behind bars. It should never push the severity of this mandate to the point of cruelty, in which case it would be a perversion of justice, an ominous sign of barbarity. On the contrary, it should be a jewel in the crown of civilization and foreshadow the coming of a better humanity, more consistent with its true nature and purpose – in a word, more humane.

The difference between severity and cruelty is radical yet subtle; it must be emphasized. Cruel law enforcers delight in the punishments they inflict and readily overstep the mark. They are vicious and blameworthy, like the criminals they punish. Law enforcers who are severe, but not cruel, administer punishments reluctantly or regard them as a necessary evil they would gladly forgo if they could. They deplore the criminal element in society and strive to neutralize it through intimidation, or incarceration as a last resort, and preferably through reformation, a fundamental change of the criminal mind for the better. Their ideal, as unattainable as it is elevated, is the supremacy of justice without the institution of justice: no threats, no prisons, only people who deeply understand and freely exercise the principle of justice.

Impossible as this supremacy is, it is usefully pursued. The institution of justice can become less and less necessary for the manifestation of justice, which can become more and more customary. This progress depends on the wisdom and willpower of its proponents who make it their duty to educate, assist, and encourage potential followers. It also presupposes that these potential followers take an active part in this endeavor. They cannot be actual followers unless they welcome this education, assistance, and encouragement, and display intelligence and determination of their own.

How much can we collectively be civilized – that is, mutually respectful and helpful, in the knowledge that this high goal can unite our wills toward a common good of colossal proportions? In other words, what is the ceiling of our possible civilization, which implies responsibility and solidarity, an elevation of life to love? Nobody knows the limit, so none should be set but the sky!

Generally, in a loving environment, human beings show humanity as naturally as fruit trees give fruit in the summer. Love is to these beings as sunshine is to these trees. It helps them grow into what they are meant to grow into (unless their nature is flawed from the start, which is an exception to the rule): beautiful and bountiful creations, as opposed to ugly and puny aberrations. Yet, beware of love; it can be possessive and manipulative, selfish and devilish! Yes, some angels have horns, unnoticeable at first sight under their pretty hair; their paradise is hell.

True love is in the image of God (by God I simply mean the fundamental cause of everything. It brings us into existence and, within the limits of its might, supports us in our quest for fulfillment). It is a desire to nurture, not to capture. Under its divine rule, one always has the other's best interests at heart. No one, however, should be supportive to the point of being an accomplice in someone's oppressive or destructive acts of egocentricity, folly, or injustice. These evils should not be loved and served; they should be hated and combated.

Hate is legitimate toward them, whereas the people who embody them are worthy of love because they exceed them by their ability to do good. They are indeed greater than the sum of their evil ways; they include the power to improve them. Therefore hate is directed at these ways, and love at this power: It promotes the people's ability to do good. What if a person who is oppressively or destructively egocentric, foolish, or unjust never responds to this love? In that case it is lost and the life of this person shamefully amounts to a waste of soul.

By a stroke of luck, my parents were bright and warm people who helped me blossom into a joyful and respectful individual. Their love was true and so was the love of many others who took part in my life. I was also lucky enough to be a good seed. I was a strong and healthy boy, extremely lively and moderately clever, cheery and gentle-natured, though impatient and self-assertive. In my eyes, until my family moved to the poor and tough neighborhood, civility was the norm among the members of society; it made sense. Barbarity, on the other hand, was a stupefying rarity. The abused weakling gave me an understanding of barbarity – which was common in this neighborhood – and replaced my stupefaction with commiseration.

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Years later, at the group home, my anger toward the strapping bully was softened with sympathy. I believed that his strongarm tyranny was the symptom of a coarse nature envenomed by a harsh life. I did not know of the predicament or mistreatment he had suffered, except his marriage was a fiasco. I just assumed he had been at the mercy of various trials and was hungry for domination.

Admittedly, humans are not merely a product of circumstances and cannot rightly use them as an excuse for their cowardly or wicked acts. They have the freedom to make an honorable choice no matter how unfavorable their circumstances are. Yet the difficulty of making this choice should not be overlooked. It is proportional to the unfavorableness of these circumstances. At worst, the honorable choice requires such a noble spirit that it can only be expected from heroes and saints. One can safely conclude that circumstances are extenuating to the extent that they are unfavorable, though they cannot serve as an excuse.

One Saturday afternoon, a schoolmate of mine visited me at the group home. He was a sharp and witty young man, always neat and dressed to the nines, with good manners and good looks, a successful womanizer who was also ambitious and hardworking. He wore gold jewelry – a necklace, a bracelet, and a ring – and had a heart to match, mixed with a sort of gangue. He kindly stood by those he held very dear or in high esteem, but his stance toward ne'er-do-wells and evildoers was unforgiving. He was principled with a vengeance, easily incensed and goaded to violence by offensive and aggressive individuals who did not know better than to cross his path and his wrath.

Strangely enough, almost paradoxically, he worked part-time for a jeweler in a Mob-infested district of the city. The jeweler supposedly conducted a legitimate business, but he appeared shady to me. With him people paid one way or another, and the other was brutal. I suspect he was a loan shark who sometimes used force to recover his money. He had employed a troglodyte as a collector whose powers of persuasion depended on his brawny build and a baseball bat. Cash or crash. My schoolmate considered that clients who shirked giving what they owed were lowlifes who got what was coming to them.

I confided in him about the strapping bully; my anger was verging on the murderous despite my sympathy. He was prompt to declare, "For five hundred bucks, just say the word and this son of a bitch is going to wish he'd never been born." I am not sure what most

shocked me, his offer or my temptation to accept it. I felt dangerously empowered by the brute strength at my disposal. Would I take vengeance on my persecutor, now that I could? I had the money in the bank, and a check could be written in next to no time; I had the "OK" on the tip of my tongue. I stared confusedly at my schoolmate, without saying a word, let alone the word that would bid the troglodyte to strike. My heart was a battlefield, and the forces of darkness were armed to the teeth against my army of scruples and apprehensions that fought tooth and nail.

I pictured the scene: One evening, the strapping bully is putting out the garbage; suddenly the troglodyte pounces on him and thrashes him with a baseball bat. I shuddered to imagine his fright, his distress, and his rage. After I had prided myself on being strong yet gentle when I was able-bodied, how could I degenerate into a disabled, vicariously powerful, monster of cruelty? I could not bear the thought of me degenerating so. "No, forget it! It would only make things worse. Thanks anyway." "I respect your decision," my schoolmate replied. "If you ever change your mind, you know what to do."

For months, which added up to some infernal time in excess of a year, I made representations upon representations to a rehab doctor, my only contact in the board of directors that had authority over the group home. He had difficulty believing that my complaints were free of dramatization, all the more since no one else had dared to complain. I simply told the facts as I saw them. There was no need to dramatize; they were bad enough in themselves. The problem is that a bad situation, being disturbing, is readily denied until it becomes absolutely obvious. The doctor, a man of science and conscience, was no exception. He spontaneously watered down my bitter accounts, which he found hard to swallow, and feebly reproached my persecutor, who then changed into a retaliator. Things went from bad to worse.

Frustrated, angered, and depressed, I was again tempted to accept my schoolmate's offer. Despite my efforts to sink this temptation, it kept surfacing in my consciousness like a balloon always bobbing up after having been submerged. Also, recurrently, suicide was on my mind; I fantasized about putting out a contract on myself. Since the troglodyte was willing to harm people for money, I assumed (I never ventured to ask my schoolmate to confirm this assumption) he was willing to kill them for more money. A plain I-pay-and-you-slay unlawful arrangement and I would no longer be dead miserable; I would finally be dead dead: still dead but rid of my misery.

One gray and windy November afternoon, I was looking out through the dining-room window while waiting to go to bed, disgusted

with life and the man who made it worse. For the second time that day, my urinary catheter was obstructed and I had a headache; my pants were drenched in urine due to intermittent leakage around the catheter. Outside, the trees were almost bare. Their remaining leaves fluttered like butterflies trapped in sap and struggling for freedom. Some of them struggled free and flew off into space. I was envious of their airy flight, though it had grim implications. They were falling to the ground and dying in the process. Their escape was their death.

“November sucks,” someone once lamented. Unhappy people are disheartened further by its usual dismalness, whereas happy ones are glad to be alive whatever the weather. Their happiness is a place in the sun throughout the year and every clear day is merely a bonus. I can identify with these happy people as surely as I could identify with these unhappy ones some twenty years ago. I hate to think I nearly ruined my chances of basking in this happiness. I did not have to die to fly from misery like a butterfly from entrapment; I had to grow out of this misery by improving my attitude and my situation. Within my limits, an unsuspected liberation was in the making. My prison was a cocoon.

Greatly to my relief, the strapping bully was eventually dismissed for abusing his power. I guess the doctor and the other board members finally realized that the countless times I had been mistreated – forced to sit or lie indefinitely in my own urine or excrement, or in excruciating pain, while being mocked by this bully or exposed to the curiosity and embarrassment of whoever happened to be around, to name but a few instances of distress and mortification – were no pieces of fiction for their entertainment.

Although I freed myself from mistreatment without recourse to cruelty, I am shamed by the thought that I often came close to having recourse to it. I would have badly crippled and embittered a man whose tyranny had not called for such savagery and could be toppled by civilized means. I was particularly seized with shame a few years later when this man drove me to a shopping mall. He was then divorced from his wife and working as a bus driver for the handicapped. His amiable and reserved manner toward me betrayed a pang of conscience; I felt sorry for him. In the end he said goodbye to me and I wished him a good day.

I understand now that keeping on the straight and narrow can be like walking a tightrope. The greater the difficulty of staying the course, the greater the risk of falling. I am proud that I mustered enough forbearance and fortitude in my divided soul to resist committing cruelty and suicide. I am also humbled by the temptation that almost debased and destroyed me.

## Death wish

Is there a threshold beyond which I would have criminally or lethally snapped? Are souls comparable to planks that vary in flexibility, from one type of wood to another, and can bend under pressure up to a point, then break? I believe so, though souls are different in that they can develop their flexibility and reduce the pressure to which they are subjected. Attitudes and situations can be changed. This possibility of change, however, is not unlimited. Sometimes life is infinitely and insuperably grim; sometimes people are unreservedly and unavoidably ferocious. In such extreme cases even the best of us would choose death or violence as a last resort, and who could blame them?



## POETIC INSTINCT

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*“My laments were an outlet for grief in the same way as a cry is an outlet for pain. Their poetic nature came second to their cathartic function. They released emotional tension as instinctively as a cry does.”*

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At the rehabilitation facility, I wrote as part of my occupational therapy. Writing meant nothing to me at first – that is, nothing more than the act of typing on an electric typewriter. It was only an exercise, designed to improve my condition, and an off-putting exercise at that. It put me off because the many aids I needed to perform it brought out my disability. “What do you want me to type?” I asked my occupational therapist unenthusiastically. “Whatever crosses your mind, Laurent,” she answered, hoping liberty would stimulate my creativity. My mind went blank. It was a bad start to my writing career.

She was a lovely and kindly young woman whose heart-warming smile was so sought-after she could have smiled for a living. She had reinforced each of my wrists with a plastic splint that covered part of the hand and forearm. To this splint she had attached a short rubberized stick that projected downward from the palm. She had also placed each of my arms into a jointed metal apparatus that supported the elbow with a rest and secured it with straps. This entire setup enabled me to type, awkwardly, laboriously, at a snail’s pace, but in the end a trail of words testified to my relative success.

During most of my six-month stay in the rehabilitation facility, I exercised in this manner about twice a week for half an hour. I grew a little stronger, which dispensed with my need for the jointed metal apparatus. I began to like the typing exercise above all others. However disabled I was, I had acquired the ability to use the typewriter more or less effectively, if slowly, to write what I pleased. I never stopped wishing this ability were clear of disability and I could type faster, by my own unaided efforts, yet for the half-hour I spent typing or thinking about what to type I felt rather free. This made a welcome change from the desperately confining aspects of my life. While I was in God’s power for better or worse – and mostly for worse to all appearances – I had control over my thoughts and over their expression by means of the typewriter.

This opened the doors to my own brand of creation, issued from my mind and seemingly not restrained by the laws of nature, except for its physical manifestation, which was difficult, but not impossible.

When I left the rehabilitation facility for the nursing home, I had very little to show for my creative efforts. They had resulted in pages of personal matters, sometimes prosaic, sometimes poetic, a mix of blah-blah-blah and nitty-gritty, written for the sake of writing or to loved ones. Save a few treasured passages, everything had landed where it belonged: in the trash can. Actually, even these passages were of questionable value. I had not been entirely honest for feeling self-conscious – inhibited by my notion that what I wrote could or would be read and by my sense of image that proceeded from my sense of pride. Seldom had I revealed my true state of mind, which comprised frustration, depression, and apprehension. I had guarded against pity with a brave front: plenty of good humor and positive attitude; virtually none of the opposites.

One of the rare times I had revealed my true state of mind was when my girlfriend had broken up with me. This painful event had precipitated my awakening to my incurable paralysis; I had lost my dream together with my love. Never before had reality been so detestably real. Only then and later, especially at the group home, had my brave front broken down. I had written numerous laments of greater truth and value than my previous attempted prose or poetry.

My laments were an outlet for grief in the same way as a cry is an outlet for pain. Their poetic nature came second to their cathartic function. They released emotional tension as instinctively as a cry does. Social expectations had inhibited this release until my emotional tension had overthrown this inhibitor. This overthrow implied an overflow of emotional tension, plus another factor: The inhibiting effect of the social expectations had diminished as I had reached the conclusion that my laments were excusable, given the loss of nearly everything I loved. My grief had finally come out, which had brought on some relief.

To help you conceive of this relief, picture a steam engine with a boiler, a piston, and a safety valve. Now regard the steam in the boiler as my energy (maintained thanks to fuel, oxygen, and water), the piston as my means of action, and the safety valve as my ability to blow off steam when my means of action is thwarted and my frustration resembles a pressure buildup that cannot be contained. Like a safety valve this ability includes a resistance to blowing off steam, which in this case relates to my inhibition, my desire to live up to social expectations. This resistance is limited and varies according to my level of inhibition. It is defeated as soon as my frustration exceeds this level,

which represents a critical threshold. Steam is then blown off – that is, I vent my frustration.

The term “frustration” is appropriate to every form of suffering that occurs against one’s will and despite one’s efforts to achieve the opposite (this excludes any masochistic suffering, which is deliberate and perversely viewed as pleasurable). My grief – aside from being a feeling of loss – was a sense of powerlessness that frustrated me. I had lost my physical abilities and my girlfriend for lack of the power to restore the former and keep the latter.

To vent my frustration through my laments was to release this emotional tension in a powerful act of expression. This release provided relief because this act of expression constituted an act of compensation. For as long as it lasted, it satisfied my need for power, without which life is doomed to misery or death. When it stopped, my sense of powerlessness returned and again frustrated me. Such was my redeeming attribute: While I was frustratingly powerless as regards my loss, I had the satisfying power to grieve expressively.

Some time ago, my mother reminded me about something I wrote at the age of fifteen. It amounted to nothing much: three little words that were charged, however, with a lot of displeasure. She had walked into my bedroom as I was getting ready to meet my friends outside, one summer afternoon. “Laurent, your bedroom is an absolute shambles. I am counting on you to tidy it up ASAP! And by the way, did you forget that today you are supposed to vacuum the dining room and living room rug? This is pretty well your only responsibility in this house, besides taking care of your own room. Please carry it out before you leave.” The sun was shining; my friends were waiting; I was in the mood for outdoor fun and games, most certainly not for household drudgeries. But there was a but. She had authority over me and I was to obey. Reluctantly and hastily, I discharged my duty, after scribbling a naughty note in my homework book: “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Later that day, my mother emptied my wastepaper basket and indulged her curiosity toward a suspicious piece of paper – a page I had torn from my homework book and crumpled into a ball. “Ha ha ha!” was her reaction, which she kept to herself until some time ago. Fortunately, she had a good sense of humor.

What she failed to know was the nonverbal way of venting displeasure I had resorted to. Plunk, slam, thud, snap, trundle, bump: my actions had spoken for themselves, but she had heard nothing from the basement where she had been busy doing the laundry. I had shown the jumble of my personal belongings, my bedroom door, the vacuum, and the furniture who was the boss. As if they cared! The thing is, I did.

Thus another act besides that of expression could compensate for my want of freedom to do as I pleased: the act of domination. This act depended on my power to control something or someone. It could take different forms according to my various opportunities to exercise this control, which could be described as power channels that I could select for the purpose of dominating. This purpose was a matter of compensation, of tit for tat as it were. I found pleasure in domination as much as I found displeasure in subjection.

The form of domination I had selected was objectionable. It was abusive, almost destructive, rather than constructive or at least inoffensive. If the vacuum and the other objects I had manhandled in the course of cleaning could have denounced me to my mother, she probably would have changed her tune from “ha ha ha!” to “hey hey hey!” Her good sense of humor did not predispose her in the least to humoring the bad temper of a hefty young man who took it out on things and was in danger of taking it out on people. In fact, although I sometimes erred through objectionable forms of domination over inanimate objects (and I even confess to some acts of vandalism during my youth), I was not prone to aggress or oppress the living, neither humans nor animals. This was my saving grace.

One of my acts of vandalism is holding my attention. It was on the borderline between an act of expression and an act of domination. Heftier than ever, in my seventeenth year, I was frustrated with the authority of my school, whose most zealous representatives were disciplinarians who specialized in academic force-feeding. I admired their knowledge and despised their methods. In fairness to them, they shared the blame with me, who was undisciplined and unwilling to learn. The dry subjects they taught were out of their league against the young lovelies of the school that I would gladly have opened like a textbook to bury myself in them.

Downstairs, in the boys' locker room, I picked an unused locker and punched its metal door out of shape. With my powerful punch, I had impressed my frustration in the metal, and this impression was expressive of this frustration. In other words, one could understand I had given vent to it from the dent I had made. One could misunderstand this, however, and attribute the dent to an accident. A mark is always a sign open to interpretation and misinterpretation. It follows that an act of domination that leaves an impression on something is also an act of expression that may be ambiguous. It is a precursor to art. To think that my display of frustration and power could have developed into an inspired sculpture exhibition! Unfortunately, I had a big punch but no hunch that I could use it artistically. Ignorance is miss.

I acquired this hunch years later when, stripped of my physical power, I could no longer deliver a big punch except verbally. My expression of grief slowly grew from a complaint to a lament through the cultivation of a poetic style that gave it literary value. Likewise, the expression of pain can slowly grow from a cry to a tune through the cultivation of a melodic style that gives it musical value. The change was mainly formal (I say mainly, not strictly, because my attention to form had an amplifying and clarifying influence on content), and yet it made a fundamental difference in my way of living the act of writing. I experienced relief as I had before, but now pride was part of the experience.

I recall the last words of a gloomy poem I composed at the age of twenty-four: “My blood circulates in my chains.” I still viewed my paralysis and the torment that accompanied it as a prison and a torturer. Escape and suicide were my lingering temptations and recurring themes. Nevertheless, a new purpose had emerged from the depths of my soul. I was a born-again poet; writing had finally brought me forth, after a lot of verbal discharge. Among my best efforts was the gloomy poem. It appeared in a poetry book – which a university press had published – and was included in an anthology.

My grief as a lament made enjoyable reading. It was respectably pitiful, a heartache elevated to an art form. As for my grief in itself, it seemed less absurd since it prepared the ground for this meaningful elevation. It had become, more than steam I could blow off, a source of inspiration. Thanks to this source, my largely desertlike existence often yielded poetry for a fleeting spell of creative pleasure. Expiration alternated with inspiration as in breathing, except the latter resumed hours or days later. As soon as I stopped writing, I started to die. I was back in limbo and could do nothing but hope for a resurrection. By good luck, it eventually happened. My poetic talent meant everything to me. It was a philosopher’s stone that enabled me to transmute ugliness into beauty. I was an artist, a manner of alchemist. My life was leaden; my words were golden.

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The poetry book and the anthology mentioned above were the peak of my career as a poet, which a long and difficult ascent had preceded. During my hellhole period at the nursing home, my poetic efforts were few and far between. They resulted in a handful of wordy scrawls, often idealistic and flowery, a contrasting product of wistful and wishful thinking, and sometimes empty, a worthless though

precious exercise in poetry. I no longer had a typewriter. At first, I labored to handwrite my poems by means of a plastic splint (with a built-in pen) that I slipped onto my thumb and index. I soon gave up this writing method, which was extremely slow, and set out to mouthwrite my poems – that is, write them faster by mouth. My teeth were my fingers. This reminded me of dogs, familiar quadrupeds that use their teeth to carry things. My pride survived, however, this humbling resemblance. It was saved by the fact that I talked, not barked, among other distinctly human traits.

Many factors adversely affected my creativity. My trips in a special bus to school and back home, my courses, and my assignments (though I was spared a lot of writing and was mostly tested orally), all this was time-consuming. More often than not, my obligation to study took priority over my desire to compose poetry.

To tell the truth, I had plenty of free time. That I spent much of it uncreatively showed evidence of frivolousness, laziness, and cowardliness. I usually preferred to take my mind off things, or to daydream, rather than to express myself through poems. The satisfaction I could derive from achieving this expression seldom induced me to try. The deterring elements were the difficulty of trying and the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of my efforts.

A poem – assuming one is concerned about writing beautifully – is indeed no cinch. It requires a poet who is talented, skilled, and determined. My poetic ability was fickle; my grammar and style were faulty; my will was faint. I lacked the courage of my creative desire. This lack was not absolute. Now and then, when I felt compellingly inspired, I resisted my temptation to trifle – which amounted to taking the easy way out – and endeavored to compose a poem. I had to repeat this endeavor, over and over, to grow more capable and confident, less discouraged by the challenge at hand, or rather at mouth.

I am afraid young individuals similar to the young man I was then are not a rarity. The prospect of success turns them on; effort and the risk of failure turn them off. The contradiction is apparent, and the result predictable: Since effort and the risk of failure are essential for success, the avoidance of them precludes this success. Of course everyone knows this. The trouble is that many refuse largely to accept it. This is proof that knowledge is powerless in itself; it needs a strong will to be effective. Young individuals, who know the rules of success, can be failures inasmuch as they fail to accept these rules. Wisdom includes this acceptance (the exclusion of which is thus foolish). It must be distinguished from knowledge. Wise people are also brave people who put their knowledge into practice and become successful for that

reason. The obvious holds good in every way: Life without courage is like a bird without wings; it cannot take off.

Why is it hard to want both the end and the means? Precisely because the means are hard, not to mention the fact that they are hazardous, you might answer. If you are right, then why do some actually thrive on this hardness and hazardousness? The key to this mystery is their attitude: They regard these opposing elements not only as obstacles but also as opportunities for merit and excitement. Just as they were young once, spoon-fed and sheltered from the evils of the world, they eventually outgrew their attachment to easiness and developed a taste for challenge. In conclusion, what characterizes them is their maturity, by contrast with the infantilism of others.

Between these two extremes there is a mediocre compromise, partly mature, partly infantile. It consists in taking charge of one's life while taking the easy way out. Small principles, small realizations, far below one's potential for greatness, they are poor excuses for wisdom and success. Potential, that is the operative word. There can be greatness in apparent smallness and smallness in apparent greatness; the truth resides in the great or small actualization of one's potential, whatever it is.

How does one discover what it is? By making the effort to actualize it in the ever-renewed and multifaceted act of living. This entails that one push oneself hard, at the risk of going too far. Measure is an empty abstraction for anyone who has never exceeded it. Limits should be experienced, not invented. This experience demands a serious and courageous commitment to greatness. Steer clear of frivolousness, laziness, and cowardliness; do not fall prey to them as I did so many times. They are strong temptations that can assume the form of a cunning philosophy that is unique to losers. Beware of this snare. Life is a demanding character test; come death, you will have ample time to rest!

Nostalgic for the old days at the rehabilitation facility when I wrote anyhow about anything, I once conveniently believed in spontaneous writing as a guarantee of genuineness. Fortunately I was foolish yet not a complete fool. After some denial, which involved some nonsense in justification of my foolishness, I admitted sullenly that my sacrosanct pursuit of genuineness was in fact a vile indulgence in idiocy. There is nothing spontaneous about the intelligent conception and intelligible expression of one's true self, which is everything but simple. It is a tissue of desires, feelings, ideas, and memories, caught in a whirl of interactions between the mind and the world. Either one goes to great

lengths to elucidate and formulate the truth about oneself, and one hits the bull's-eye, or one talks bullshit – please forgive my language.

Some people shine at off-the-cuff speeches, as though they were so brilliant they could avoid saying idiocies when forced to be spontaneous. Make no mistake; their brilliance is merely one side of the equation. They have spent years polishing their manner of thinking and speaking, while their knowledge expanded through learning. Their spontaneity is studied. It is a product of numerous rehearsals, like the performance of an actor. Nothing great ever comes easily to anyone, including those who are the most gifted among us. Superior luck is not human greatness, only a steppingstone toward it. The stone is given; the stepping is done by the sweat of one's brow and is made of a million steps, uphill. To work one's way up to greatness is comparable to conquering Mount Everest, the highest peak of the Himalayas. It is an outstanding achievement with a sense of pride to match.

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A proverb engages my attention: All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. A great life will grate on the soul for its severity if it denies an adult the freedom to be a child occasionally. Holidays are holy days whose futilities wholesomely air the musty atmosphere of our necessities and duties. They degenerate into folly when someone elevates them to a lifestyle, in which case the rules of success are broken by an excessive break.

I have been working on this book since 4:30 a.m., not counting a few round trips to the bathroom and the kitchen, and it is 3:30 p.m. The sun is bright on this breezy mid-April afternoon. 18 degrees Celsius. I go out for a breather, wearing sun lotion and a light sweater, among other things. So long! Life is not only a demanding character test; it is also a refreshing pleasure fest. Thank God!

I am back, all the more disposed to be an industrious man since I have lazed in the sun – sheltered from the breeze by an outside wall – like a sluggish lizard. Right from the start I knew my regression to this reptilian state had to end eventually; I was not willing to waste some 200 million years of evolution. “Eventually is not now,” I said to myself, determined to put my humanity on hold for a while and forget about everything, save my simple enjoyment of basking in the sunshine. Obliviously, deliciously, I gave myself up to the warm charm of the golden goddess. It then became increasingly difficult to stop ideas from pouring into the intellectual vacuum my recess had created. I looked at my watch: 4:30 p.m. My mind was pushing for work. “Enough fun in

the sun!” I returned to my computer keyboard and began to write this paragraph.

On the way back from my brief vacation, in the immediate vicinity of my apartment building, I passed a little old lady, hunched and wizened, and visibly confused. She was equipped with a walker and accompanied by her daughter, like an infant by her mother. The roles were reversed: Her daughter was mothering her, now that she had sunk into her second childhood. The little old lady was an old little girl. She reminded me of the aged at the nursing home who led a life of dependence, futility, and idleness, similar to the life they led when they were very young. They had come full circle.

Much to my relief, I am not reduced to such extremities, at least not yet. At the tender age of 43, I still have all my marbles and my life is in full swing. Actually, I am ten years older than my age, according to authorities on the ageing process in quadriplegics. Since the average life span for Canadian men is about eighty years, with a gradual decline in physical and mental health that begins at twenty and may reach alarming proportions during the last five years, I should live another twenty-two years or so without suffering a disastrous increase in disability. On reflection, this is a conservative estimate. My heredity and my lifestyle are above average, thanks to a favorable blend of good luck and sound judgment. I should probably raise the figure of twenty-two years or so by a few years.

A probability, of course, is not a certainty. There is a wide range of dreadful possibilities that could play havoc with my plans for the future. The risk of falling victim to a disease or an injury is always in the air. I feel young and healthy, brimming with vitality within the narrow and painful confines of my body, but frail nonetheless, like a crystal glass in the middle of a cramped and bustling party room where people are drunk and clumsy. Dreams can come true, or be shattered.

What if today is my last day? Time is slime; it could slip from my grip. How do I deal with that? I bank on the present, which is a chance to follow my aspirations and experience contentment or, at the very least, dignity. In contrast to my doubt about the future, I am certain that I am alive and free to invest my energy in something useful or pleasurable, worthy of doing. In short, whether I live tomorrow or not, I can enjoy this freedom today, or put it to good use. When I die, I want self-respect, not self-reproach.

I use the specter of death, which is looming over my life, as an incentive to make the most of my current situation. I am resolved to live fully, at once. There is no time for delay. Besides, if a resolution to live fully is not effective immediately, it cannot be taken seriously. It is

a vague desire whose vagueness presages an indefinite postponement. I do not count on later to redeem a wasteful now. Later is now or never. I mean, the resolution to live fully is either effective immediately or likely to be postponed indefinitely; also, the present is our sole opportunity for dignity and contentment: The future – which may happen or not – can only exist as a present. Happiness is a matter of urgency. I am as keen as my life is chancy.

I consider myself a realist, neither an optimist nor a pessimist. I hope for the best and prepare for the worst, while I do all I can and think of everything that could go wrong. I am capable, despite my disability, and vulnerable. These two factors carry weight and my future hangs in the balance. I acknowledge the probability in my favor without ignoring the risk that threatens to ruin my chances. Toward these contrasting possibilities I adopt a mixed attitude, made of commitment and detachment.

My commitment implies a dedication to my purpose, day in day out. This purpose is to serve my life force that has become a love force through solidarity and spirituality. It includes a long-term literary goal, which I pursue because I am hopeful that I will achieve it. I am a perfectionist, a slow writer as a result, but I work long hours and will probably complete this book in a year or two.

My detachment implies a resignation to the fact that, no matter what I do, my future is uncertain. I may fail to complete this book due to circumstances beyond my control. I accept this possibility by tempering my desire to succeed with indifference. If worst comes to worst, I can go without this success. It is desirable yet not indispensable.

My motto is straightforward: I try my hardest to achieve my purpose, and come what may. In the event that I lose the means of trying, I will let go of this purpose. What I cannot achieve is none of my concern; I leave it in the care of others. This attitude follows the natural order of things. We humans carry the torch for life during the time that we are alive and capable; then a new generation takes over.

There is no denying that letting go of one's purpose before it is achieved is difficult though necessary when this achievement is impossible. I have formerly grieved for several years over the death of my hefty self. I was long in awakening to the life that remained, and finally I grasped the opportunity for happiness it offered. My body is still a place of suffering; but mostly it is a place of meditation and worship, where I deepen my sense of mission and joyfully apply it to the act of living. My hefty self was only a part of me after all, and not the best one at that. I rose from its ashes. Having said this, I am not in a hurry to bury another dream.

Had I already grown old and made a significant contribution to literature and philosophy, in the form of many useful writings, I would think and act differently. No doubt I would continue to write, health permitting, and hope to finish whatever I was working on. In all likelihood, however, I would slow down and take in stride the fact that death always has the last word.

As a rule, the more successfully one has lived, the more peacefully one will die. Success is what crowns the effort to achieve one's purpose. It is a measure of courage and efficiency, which combine the joy of succeeding with the dignity of trying. It is also a measure of luck. A great career or family is the sort of achievement that testifies to a successful life. Topped with great friendships and pleasures, it makes a sweet memory cake, frosting and cherry included, that can add a smile to a dying breath.

At 43 (or 53, corrected age), I feel as if I were a young man, living on a land of extreme fertility that has yet to be exploited fully. I have wasted years lamenting my fate. I was seemingly in exile on a barren land, save a poetry patch that hardly made up for the rest like a bunch of flowers for the ugliness of a shanty. I discovered ultimately that what I regarded as barren was in truth extremely fertile, though crowded with stones and weeds.

Faintheartedly at first, but more and more resolutely afterwards, I have cleared and cultivated this land to harvest the fruits of wisdom and share them with others effectively. Only in the last few years has my labor begun to produce the desired effect. I know, I am slow and not getting any younger, while a lot remains to be done. The tortoise, whose pace resembles mine, is my role model. It has a fabled reputation for putting the hare to shame in a distance race, thanks to its endurance and perseverance. I shall till the soil every day of the week, from the early morning to the late evening, and trifle on occasion but a little; and perhaps, with luck, I will eventually reap!

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Looking back on it, I think that my initial lack of discipline as a budding poet related in part to a lack of passion. Poetry was not truly my vocation then. It was a compensation whose verbal nature entailed a problem of form that deterred me from writing in the majority of cases.

At the rehabilitation facility, my sensitivity to this problem was low while on the increase; I wrote rather carelessly and hence with relative ease. At the nursing home, however, I had passed this stage

and entered another, more discouraging than appealing, which presented the challenge to write beautifully. My act of expression had evolved from a spontaneous release of emotional tension into a writing effort that yielded pride as a reward for poetic beauty. I was both the agent and the victim of this evolution, a poet by nature in spite of myself. Rarely did I take the trouble to compose a poem – even in free verse, which was my favorite style – except when a powerful inspiration eased this composition.

Ironically, the passion that can neutralize the repulsion for difficulties depends on the effort to overcome these difficulties. The irony resides in the circularity of this principle – which applies to all areas of activity, including poetry: One must make the effort to overcome difficulties to achieve success and feel capable, and one needs this achievement and feeling to have a passion for making this effort. How can one enter this circle without this passion? In other words, how does one resolve the quasi-contradiction according to which one cannot passionately start the effort to overcome difficulties before it has ended successfully?

If difficulties are deemed insurmountable, mistakenly or not, the repulsion for them is absolute. In that case, nothing will motivate the effort to succeed, except an outside authority that can dictate this effort, or an outside influence that can generate faith and stimulate courage. In every other case where the seriousness of the difficulties is open to doubt, one may try one's luck with mixed feelings.

Assuming one tries, the result of this effort will constitute additional self-knowledge that will inform one's future choices. A positive outcome will act as a positive reinforcement that emboldens one to try again, with increased confidence and reduced hesitation; a negative outcome will do the opposite. Should one refuse to try one's luck, this would slow one's progress, but not necessarily stop it. Confidence can be increased and hesitation reduced by degrees, through a series of baby steps that can eventually lead to triumph. All in all, people have more than one trick up their sleeve to succeed in life, though they cannot escape the necessity of achieving success to develop a passion for the difficult task of living.

As regards poetry, success may be achieved in a roundabout and gradual way. Take a young educated man who has a sense of imagery and a desire to express himself. While his education has prepared him for the written expression of his feelings and thoughts, this sense and this desire together drive him to write poetically, though he has no pretensions to composing a poem. This first step is a manner of kickoff that gets the ball rolling. He becomes aware of his poetic ability within

the limits of his poetic writing. What is more, he catches a glimpse of the poetry that is a blur in this writing and could emerge from the prose like a landscape from the fog. His potential as a future poet is thus faintly discernible. It assumes the form of an inkling whose haziness will progressively dissipate as further poetic efforts are made successfully. In the end the young man sees himself as a young poet. He is eager to grapple with the difficulties of writing poetry because he is confident that he will overcome them and delight in this achievement.

At 19, I was this young man at an earlier stage in his poetic development. A stubborn diffidence obstructed my growing confidence. I could hardly vanquish my ingrained prejudice against myself, based on years of academic mediocrity – excepting athletics, which were my forte. In my eyes, I had always been the complete opposite of my father and my brother, who had a superior gift for intellectual matters, especially philosophy and literature. They had a powerful intellect; I had nothing much, it seemed, after losing my powerful physique. This negative outlook, however, was under review. My modest writing experience, which involved some measure of reflection, together with my decent grades at school, added a new dimension to my self-image. My father and my brother were still light-years ahead of me, but I no longer considered myself their complete opposite, just a far lesser fellow mind.

I was in a dark situation, between two sunny extremes. One had set; the other had not dawned. I had once enjoyed writing because I was master of my words. This had somewhat consoled me for my physical reality, to which I was a dejected slave. Now I knew, to my great displeasure, that my mastery was illusory. I could not possibly have a command of my art unless I learned and obeyed the rules of success pertaining to this art. Great poets are talented, courageous, and knowledgeable servants of the poetic muse. Whereas their courage and their knowledge are acquired, their talent is innate. It gloriously complements these acquisitions, which otherwise would produce a labored compliance of the language with principles of truth, style, and grammar. I had a dubious poetic ability and some serious poetic efforts to make. I grimaced at this assessment. My child's play had changed into a man's work, and I was reluctant to grow up.

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An external factor – one difficulty too many – was working against me. The nursing home was a hurly-burly hellhole. It often assailed my senses so overwhelmingly that I was incapable of turning

my thoughts inward, despite my stratagems to cut myself off from this dreadful source of distraction, or rather of destruction since it destroyed my inner life. As a rule, it improved after bedtime: 11 p.m. Enrobed in darkness, because the sun was away and most of the lights were off, it appeared less hideous. It also got quieter, not so much in my room, where my roommate was often louder by night than by day, as on the floor in general. Fortunately there were times when the old man quieted down, between bouts of rambunctious insanity, while every other resident was on his best behavior: asleep. This outer tranquility restored my inner life and favored the writing of poems. I was usually forbidden to write during these fortunate times, however, for fear that I would disturb my roommate.

Or was it for another reason, such as spitefulness or closed-mindedness, as opposed to considerateness? My roommate was almost blind, and the curtain that could be drawn to divide our room could largely block the luminance of the small neon light at the head of my bed. He was almost deaf as well, and the rustle of my paper, as I inscribed or handled it, ranged from barely audible to faint. Nevertheless, the night nurse (the spinster, half-witch, half-zombie, close to retirement, who luckily for me was replaced on weekends by a more tolerant nurse) insisted that I had no business keeping late hours to write poetry while my roommate was trying to rest. Of course I disagreed and was inclined to disobey.

One weeknight, at 10:30, the noise tide had already ebbed to a great extent. The old man was lying nearly silent and still, only grumbling and fidgeting at intervals, softly, feebly. He had shouted himself hoarse and fought to the point of exhaustion against the two orderlies who were tying him down for the night. I politely asked one of the orderlies, a kind and sensible man, to hand me my pad and pen, then close the curtain between my roommate and me, and switch on my light. "Sure!" he said with a smile, and he suited the action to the word. I thanked him and began to write in a burst of feverish creativity. I felt prodigiously inspired and knew I would hate myself if I missed this opportunity.

Forty-five minutes passed in the blink of an eye. I had wrapped up a short strophe and jotted down a few ideas. There was no poem in sight. It was still in me for the most part, waiting to be composed. I could almost taste it, but it flowed out of me through my pen as slowly as a cask of wine would empty through a tiny faucet. I was increasingly nervous. I could not bear the thought of the night nurse catching me out and stopping me in midstream. I pressed ahead at top speed, which in my case, as in that of a tortoise, is a strenuous crawl. My jaw, my neck, and my shoulder soon grew sore. I laid my pen on the bed and

relaxed for an instant, then hastened to grab.... “Oh no! Shit!” My nervousness had ironically provoked what I dreaded. My pen had rolled off the bed and I was now at the mercy of the night nurse who started at 11 and ran the show thereafter until seven the next morning.

Before sending an SOS, I prepared for a confrontation with her. I hoped to make a good case for my late flight of poetry and sway her in favor of it. My roommate was evidently not disturbed by it. He was dead to the world, though he was likely to awake shortly and raise hell. A storm always brewed in his clouded mind and eventually broke out. There was no way of stopping this outbreak, short of putting him to sleep. The matter was beyond my control and subject to the law of senility, as inflexible as the law of gravity. Countless nights of my doing nil and his going berserk proved this assumption, and tonight would be no exception. My poetic activity would have nothing to do with his storming at everyone and everything, just as my wishes had no effect on the weather.

It remained for me to make the nurse see reason. I wanted her to pick up my pen and let me carry on where I had left off. To increase my chances of winning my case, I intended to stress that my poetic activity was of great importance to me. An unborn poem is comparable to a fetus that would die and poison the mother if it were forced to stay in the womb when it needs to come into the world. Actually, an unborn poem is but a brain wave that is frailer than a fetus. It is either delivered promptly or lost bitterly. How could this argument meet with an unfavorable response from the nurse, especially since it was obvious that the old man, nearly deaf and blind, and presently asleep, did not care one way or the other?

I called for assistance and rehearsed my plea while waiting. By the time the nurse arrived I was no less ready for this plea than a first-rate actor for a premiere. “Please, hear me out,” and I performed brilliantly. Well, I thought so. For the minute I spoke, the nurse kept mute and impassive, like a wax figure. She looked down at my pen and left it on the floor. This was the ultimate manifestation of her sluggish and devilish power: playing dead instead of living up to my expectations. She turned on her heel and walked away. She did not even bother to switch off my light! I was stunned and infuriated. “What’s your problem? Christ, I’m not asking for the moon. Please, hand me this pen, for heaven’s sake!” I protested to no avail.

Some two hours later the orderly – who was doing his rounds – entered the room. I had a bitter story to tell. “I’m sure it gives this old witch a kick to transform my life into shit,” I concluded, hoping to set the orderly against her and get my way at long last. “I don’t make the

rules,” he replied servilely, as he turned me onto my other side with the dispassionate attitude of a cook flipping burgers in a fast-food restaurant. He then switched off my light and slunk out. My pen was still on the floor.

To this day, I see nothing that can justify the nurse’s behavior, though I can think of reasons that explain it. I differed from her usual patients in that, a lot younger, I led a more active life, while I was more physically disabled. I occasionally went out and returned late, during her shift. I then required special care that exceeded the routine to which she was accustomed. She resented my difference precisely because it involved extra work, not to mention the fact that I was critical of her indolence. The less she had to do, the better she felt. I suppose that in her eyes an ideal work night would have been a workless one or even less, a night of deep sleep.

Maybe she lacked energy and forever dragged herself from one chair to another, between the moment she tore herself away from her bed and the moment she flopped down on it. Pale and overweight, she reminded me of a weakly porter carrying excess baggage. Maybe she was disenchanted with life and dead, in a sense, of weariness. What beat in her chest was all the heart she had. She displayed no eagerness, no kindness. Her soul appeared to have left her like a hungry sparrow an empty birdhouse.

Why had she chosen to be a nurse initially? My guess is that she had hoped to meet and marry a doctor, a father figure, who could have supported her. This guess is uncertain, yet I adopt it since it agrees with my observations and helps me understand her, whom I do not hate, only pity. Similarly, although Newton’s theory of gravitation is metaphysical and cannot be proven (it was brought into question by Einstein’s theory of curved space where acceleration replaces gravitation), it is widely used because it is based on experience and makes the movements of matter in the universe comprehensible.

Here the nurse, whose deplorable behavior has aroused my interest, is under consideration. However hard I try, I cannot imagine she was once vibrant and benevolent, to say nothing of her looks, which were mediocre and could not possibly have been great in the past. Then what was she like in her younger days? Was she lymphatic and egocentric, a plain girl without ambition, except she dreamed of marrying a prosperous man who would be willing to provide for her? I am afraid so.

At fifty-nine, she was still single and forced to provide for herself, contrary to her hopes. Never had she considered nursing her vocation, in the noble sense. This nobility does not exclude monetary concerns

(after all, one cannot give oneself to anything without the means to live), but it transcends them in the name of solidarity or godly love, as opposed to self-interest. It entails one helping others for the sake of being useful, not only for the purpose of making money. The nurse showed no high-mindedness. She had made a shallow career choice with an ulterior marriage plan that had miscarried. She now practiced nursing out of necessity, to earn a living, and wished she were already retired, free to indulge her selfish inclination toward leisure. In short, her business of caring for the elderly and the disabled was strictly business, not a matter of caring. If she actually cared somehow, this sweet emotion was no more noticeable than a pinch of sugar in a barrel of water.

I shudder at the thought that many resemble her in spirit. To them work is not a gratifying opportunity to do good, but a necessary evil they would gladly forgo if they won or inherited a fortune. It is just a livelihood, a vital drudgery. Its meaning is the paycheck and the value it has in terms of service to their community is indifferent or very subordinate.

Their calculating and uncaring attitude is recognizable. Whereas people who heartily act in the interest of others are gracious, they are perfunctory. At best, in establishments that demand courtesy from employees, their behavior is irreproachable, albeit artificial. “Can I be of assistance? Here you are. Will there be anything else? You’re welcome” – no genuine attempt at pleasing, just a vapid exercise in politeness and efficiency that follows a procedure and arouses a feeling of satisfied indifference as would a serving of plain noodles. They do the minimum that is required of them, to maintain their employment, and gladly do nothing provided they get paid all the same. They never miss a break. Come the end of their working day, they rush out before the first second of the next hour has passed. They live for their time off and dream of a permanent vacation, as though leisure were the essence of happiness.

What about the dignity of making oneself useful, which is the antipode of this levity? What about love – I mean the desire to live usefully in the service of others? This desire builds on gratefulness, with a view to worthiness. I start from the assumption that love is a characteristic of people who appreciate living in society, thanks to a combination of positive attitude and relatively favorable social environment. To sum up, the more they love life, in company with others who take part in their life, the more they love others.

Now, feeling this love is one thing, acting upon it is quite another, which needs courage. Actually, a lack of courage would not only render this love inactive but also tend to destroy it in order to avoid shame.

The mind is a double-edged thinking tool that can cut its way in and out of truth by means of veracious statements or specious arguments. Love may be denied despite every reason for loving. Therefore, courage is a rich trait of character without which love is unable to flourish, neither as an emotion nor as an action. Of course, where laziness and cowardliness have rotted or stunted love, dignity – which stems from the act of loving – is but a potential bloom. May courage be cultivated! I hate to think the soul has such a capacity for beauty and yet can remain undeveloped, morally retarded, as ugly as a shriveled growth that an earnest gardener could have transformed into a heavenly rose.

On reflection, courage should be valued above all other virtues, since it constitutes the necessary condition for developing them. It is not a sufficient condition, however. It is capable of nothing by itself while everything depends on it. Courage is the force that can raise life to joy and joy to love and love to dignity, insofar as the human nature aspires to these difficult heights, though it is always tempted to go for the easy and low option. This nature is indeed dual. People are forever torn between their lofty aspirations and their base temptations. Their choice to honor these aspirations or surrender to these temptations determines their moral status, admirable or pitiable.

Admittedly, the more you are afflicted with misery, the harder it is for you to lead a courageous and honorable existence. It is not surprising that children who grow up in miserable circumstances sometimes display miserable attitudes and behaviors once they are adults: low self-esteem and under-achievement, resentment and aggressiveness, alcoholism and drug addiction, vagrancy and crime, among others. These attitudes and behaviors deplorably impact the other members of society who are worried, troubled, harmed, or perverted by them. The problem is clearly cancerous. I hope the future will bring effective social measures to better assist these children in their pursuit of happiness and worthiness. Benefactions, family allowances, subsidized housing, free health care and school education, together with scholarships, are present solutions that rely on private charities or government policies and call for improvements through greater creativity and generosity.

Bearing in mind the deplorable impact that the children of misery can have on society, as they sometimes grow into failures, misfits, or outlaws, I feel compelled to underscore the utilitarianism behind this generosity. Just as these children arouse compassion, they are a cause for anxiety in everyone who is aware of this possible impact. Their welfare is actively sought, both for their sake and that of society at large whose interests are at stake. Likewise, employers who care about their

employees, while caring about their business, always offer them the best possible working conditions. These employees are joyful and grateful as a rule, which ensures a superior efficiency and loyalty on their part. Good spirit is good profit.

Some dream of equal opportunities for everyone. Will this dream someday become a reality? Everywhere in the world, it meets with inequality – between those who are born lucky and those who are not, relatively speaking. Is it a lost cause? I believe so, though I am a firm believer in progress. Even a welfare state with the most extensive social assistance could only reduce this inequality, not eliminate it.

What if it resorted to communism to reduce this inequality further? History suggests that a communist regime would prove ruinous, economically and psychologically, in the long run. The equal sharing of resources among people, imposed on them by a centralized government regardless of their respective contributions to the common good, is an untenable and unviable totalitarian approach. In a word, it is an absurdity. Democratic societies, on the other hand, leave much to be desired, but are certainly the most satisfactory to date. They are based on freedom, talent, chance, and merit, while including a safety net for those who have fallen off the high wire of health and success. Things merely have to improve. The status quo is a steppingstone to brighter days.

Forget perfection, which is deadly and imperfect after all: an illusion. However bright the future may turn out, it will not be without shadows. Unhealthy, unwise, unsuccessful, unhappy, and unkind adults will keep bringing children into the world. Assuming these children will benefit from improved relief measures, they will nevertheless suffer from a difficult youth, lacking in the material and spiritual advantages luckier children enjoy. Like their previous counterparts, they will be confronted by the challenge of growing into the opposite of their parents – that is, into healthy, wise, successful, happy, and kind adults. None but the strong will overcome. Only they will appreciate the divine justice that counterbalances the problem of inequality: The less luck people have at the start, the more merit they have in the end if they make a success of their life. This principle is universal and timeless; it is applicable here and now. May the objects of our compassion fill us with admiration as they rise from their woes to become our heroes!

This victory against the odds is an extreme. I can think of a second extreme, as pathetic as the first is heroic. Contrary to expectations, some people born of goodhearted and well-to-do parents are miserable individuals. They are insatiably selfish and shockingly ungrateful, so infantile and spineless that play and rest are their sole

ambitions. Did they have a weak character to start with? Did their parents kill them with kindness and spoil them rotten? Is that why they have no soul?

Perhaps the night nurse had an inbred weakness that an overprotective and overindulgent father had aggravated. Parents who are helpful to excess are no better than neglectful ones, especially when a child is predisposed to do nothing. The nurse manifested this predisposition beyond measure. I hypothesize that, formerly a sluggish and pampered little girl, she had never really grown up. She resented her adulthood, which required her to be independent and useful to others, as opposed to dependent on her parents and purely self-centered. This hypothesis is consistent with my assumption that she chose to be a nurse in the hope of meeting and marrying a doctor, a father figure, who could support her. It fits my observations with a certain degree of probability that excludes certainty.

I know of a school where sexy women learn the art of winning the love of rich men to live off them in style. Their looks are their hooks and they can reel in the common fish; but this time they are aiming for the big catch and they need a lot of leverage, besides a lot of cleavage, to get what they want. They must graduate from virtual prostitutes, who trade their charms for wealth, to con artists who can pass themselves off as dream girls. Upon graduation, their appearance is a polished and alluring masquerade; they are ready to angle. Their sexiness is enhanced by fashionable means. They appear sweet, educated, and principled, despite their true – egocentric, shallow, and unscrupulous – nature. A wedding is in the offing with a rich fool.

Sad to say, the nurse had been short on sex appeal and her personality had been flat, in all likelihood. I cannot begin to picture her as a captivating charmer, a magnet for men, notably doctors, who earn big money. Anyway, her marriage plans had fallen through. She was reluctantly working for a living. This reluctance was less attributable to the nature of her work than to her attitude toward work in general. She fantasized about leading a life of leisure.

Rumors were circulating that she had chosen the graveyard shift on a geriatric ward, in preference to other – more demanding – nursing positions, with the intention of doing practically nothing at the most. The problem is that I made her job difficult now and then. She hated that and was correspondingly hateful to me, in a way that was dreadfully efficient. With minimum effort, she obtained maximum result: I was dead furious. Women, by nature, are more refined than men psychologically, and when resentment is compounded with this

refinement, they can get under your skin and suck the marrow out of your very bones.

Today, almost twenty-five years after the nurse robbed me of creative satisfaction and left me to suffer my helplessness, I have the luxury of pitying her, while considering this unforgettable experience with detachment. I did not have this luxury at the time. One cannot ponder compassionately on the suffering of another if one is engrossed in one's own suffering caused deliberately by this other. Hatred is the dominant emotion then. It proceeds from self-love, an instinctive desire to promote or protect one's physical and moral welfare, which may be jeopardized by adversaries or adverse circumstances.

The ability to love others depends on the fulfillment of this self-love. As long as someone opposes this fulfillment, she or he is regarded as an enemy. The more unfavorable the opposition, the more aggressive one is toward this enemy whose feelings come a poor second to one's own. The nurse is now reduced to an unpleasant memory, essentially harmless since I have grown detached from my past suffering that many years of happiness have redeemed. She is no longer an enemy I hate, just a lonely and unhappy woman I pity.

Moreover, I respect her. True, she was malicious on occasion and indolent as a rule, but the fact remains she earned an honest penny. She managed to keep her job, which proves that her performance was up to the nursing home's standard. Mind you, it also proves that this standard was rather low. Quality of care aside, I give her credit for providing a service to the community in exchange for her livelihood.

Some people are so base that they stop at nothing to enjoy an easy life. Their reluctance to work and their appetite for money – which testify to their lazy and selfish materialism – are a contradiction they resolve illegally, with a complete disregard for the interests of others.

By contrast the nurse was an upstanding citizen, if round-shouldered, morally speaking. Her upright behavior lacked in elevation of attitude. It seemed to be a product of social conditioning, which links right with reward and wrong with punishment, and therefore shapes someone's life on the basis of self-interest, through hope and fear. Perhaps her behavior was also a product of religious conditioning, which is akin to social conditioning, except the reward and the punishment are not of this world: It encourages rightness in a roundabout fashion, not by ennobling people, but by enticing or intimidating them into appearing noble. It is merely a stopgap, far from ideal but a lot better than nothing.

Real nobility is another matter altogether. It feeds on its own intrinsic value, as a rightful cause that ought to be served with diligence.

Whether it will be rewarded, here below or in the beyond, is a question really noble individuals consider irrelevant, though they are not insensitive to the idea of reward. Their purpose is to live bravely, wisely, fairly, and kindly for the sake of worthiness. Tribute, wealth, and heaven are dispensable pleasures that may or may not crown the delight they take in this purpose. Likewise, whether a lack of nobility on their part would be punished, here below or in the beyond, is a question they consider irrelevant, though they are not insensitive to the idea of punishment. They are noble unconditionally, even in situations of unrestricted liberty, when they could behave ignobly with impunity and do not believe in hell. Unbraveness, unwiseness, unfairness, and unkindness are negative options that offend their sense of right. Accordingly, they shun them.

By right I mean what is true to life and the pursuit of health and happiness, true to solidarity and the ability to sympathize with others and assist them, and ultimately true to God. Here God is regarded as the universal principle, and particularly as the principle of life. Its essence can be described as love for the good reason that it gives every life form – including the human species – the opportunity to live and the capacity to develop and flourish. This gift is assuredly a sublime proof of love.

What about suffering and death? In my opinion, they do not indicate a lack of divine love but a limit to the divine power behind this love or a failure of the beings vested in this power to use it successfully. Therefore, God should be thanked for its love and forgiven for the limit to its power, just as loving parents are forgiven for their shortcomings. In addition, humans should always aim to make the most of the divine power vested in them. True braveness, wiseness, fairness, and kindness, which constitute real nobility, are the measure of excellence.

The nurse showed no sign of real nobility. Her upright behavior was a mediocre formality: She toed the line at a crawl, in an unthinking and unloving way. This formality even slipped at times, yet safely – that is, she turned awful while staying lawful. I maintain, however, that she deserved some respect. Notwithstanding her mediocrity and her spells of malicious nonsense, she was above crime.

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During the following months at the nursing home, after the night when the nurse hatefully thwarted my creative purpose, I virtually stopped composing poems. Was I justified in acting so? Was my situation unfavorable to such an extent that I could hardly exploit my

poetic talent? The answer is no. I was faced with serious difficulties, not impossibilities. Instead of overcoming them, I generally used them as excuses to spare myself the effort to exploit this talent. Why did I want to spare myself this effort? This question takes me back to an idea previously examined: the lack of passion. I could only acquire the passion for writing poetry through repeated poetic successes, which I could only achieve through repeated efforts at writing poetry. In the interim, I was diffident and hesitant, easily discouraged by difficulties, especially serious ones.

I had an alibi into the bargain: my schoolwork, which had increased and was a priority. Together with the hurly-burly that prevailed day in day out at the nursing home and the curfew that forbade me to leave my light on and keep busy during the quieter hours of the weeknight, it provided me with a reason to largely drop poetry. Although this reason had some legitimacy, it covered a shameful weakness. I was copping out, as writing had changed from a liberating verbal exercise into a daunting literary labor. Had I not lacked passion – namely, confidence and determination – I would not have wallowed in defensible evasions: two excuses and an alibi. I would have searched for ways of exploiting my poetic talent in spite of everything. I say I would have done that because I eventually did, at the group home, after I had acquired the passion for writing poetry.

The group home was also a very noisy place in the daytime, only nicer, with the exception of the strapping bully who tyrannized me for two years and rendered my life more distressing than ever. Its most attractive feature, as far as I was concerned, was my single room. I was free to stay active there past the bedtime of the other residents, provided I did not make too much noise. I no longer had a good excuse for not writing at night.

By contrast with this new freedom, I was a prisoner of my disability, now worsened and compounded with a tyranny. A number of problems – especially incontinence and low sitting tolerance – narrowed the range of my activities. They also augmented my care needs, while I loathed dealing with the strapping bully. This had an additional confining effect on me. When I was not at school, I usually kept to my room, curtains closed. I spent most of my time in bed. Weekends, I dozed or brooded by day, or otherwise pattered the morning and afternoon away, with or without the radio on. I studied or watched TV in the evening, unless I was on the phone or received a visitor, my mother or a friend for example. I scarcely ever went out. At night, the silence was propitious for intellectual matters. I often did my homework then. Occasionally, I composed poems until the wee hours.

Another problem aggravated my situation and stimulated me to adopt a half-nocturnal, half-diurnal lifestyle: insomnia. My chronic pain had redoubled. Again and again it reached horrible proportions, as though I had been skinned and rolled in salt by a torturer, who also was stabbing me in the stomach and twisting the knife in the wound. On the first few occurrences of this torture, I called an ambulance. I feared that I might be suffering from an acute organic disorder. Such was not the case, however, according to the physician who examined me. I felt relieved yet puzzled, unconvinced, still worried.

With time I learned to disregard the pain to avoid the trouble and the embarrassment of an unnecessary round trip to the emergency. There was nothing to worry about – that is, nothing measurable or life-threatening. On two occasions, I was prescribed a broad-spectrum antibiotic, which I could have obtained through my family doctor. I was predisposed to bladder infections and inflammations because of my urinary catheter. Actually, my bladder condition was chronic; it died down and flared up in waves.

How could this minor evil cause me sheer hell? The disproportion between the two was a cruel aberration. It obscurely derived from my neck injury. My spinal cord was damaged, which somehow resulted in a sensory derangement that was uncomfortable at best and unbearable at worst. The bladder condition acted as a trigger, even when it did not require medication. I had the alternative of enduring the pain or treating it with narcotics that would transform me into a zombie. Painkillers were brain killers. I chose to abstain from this death. My body was dead enough already.

Everyone has a breaking point. I reached mine when my bladder, chronically infected and inflamed, began to go into spasms, which made matters worse still, more painful and troublesome. In dire need of relief, I phoned my family doctor. He recommended me to take Valium: an antispasmodic as well as a mild tranquillizer. I agreed to his recommendation; he wrote the prescription. I started with five milligrams per dose, which I soon doubled, then tripled, and later quadrupled, seeing that I responded poorly to the drug and developed a tolerance to it. One evening, after months of disappointing results, I popped fifty milligrams – ten pills in one gulp – to no avail; I just felt a bit drowsy. The next day, I flushed the rest of the pills down the toilet. I was back at square one.

By the time I resigned myself to my suffering, as the Valium proved useless and I was unwilling to take a stronger drug that would stupefy me, my attitude toward this suffering had changed favorably. Part of this unwillingness was due to this change, which I will explain

below. The remainder of it was due to my ingrained aversion to substances that fuddle the mind. Hashish and marijuana were readily available at school and through some of my old friends who smoked them, yet I was adamant in my choice to be clean. There were a few exceptions. When I lived at the rehabilitation facility or at the nursing home, I sometimes partied and indulged in alcohol, which is a drug, so to speak. Now that I lived at the group home, it was rare for me to go out and get inebriated. Anyhow, I had never been in the habit of drinking to forget. The mere idea of alcoholism put me off.

My father had something to do with that. Without a doubt, he was one of the most brilliant, learned, articulate, and refined gentleman I have ever known. He was an alcoholic nevertheless. His conversation, which was remarkable when he was sober, was reduced to a pitiful slur when he was intoxicated. It may sound absurd, but I am grateful to him for this fault, not to mention his numerous qualities that still inspire affection and respect in me. My phobia about alcoholism and similar addictions is a healthy neurosis.

The truth is that beyond these few pitfalls lie an infinity of other ones, which may appear totally different, though they are essentially the same. Anything can be a means of avoiding problems. The means is variable; the end is immutable. Escapism is what it is whichever form it assumes and all manner of distractions – including serious occupations that act as diversions – can serve its purpose. Physically, these distractions may be healthier than drugs and alcohol; mentally, however, they are equally unhealthy if abused – that is, used to the point of leaving the problems indefinitely unsolved. In that case, precious time one could spend working toward a solution is persistently wasted or wrongly utilized.

“Indefinitely” and “persistently” are the operative words here. It is good practice to take one’s mind off things now and then. Likewise, an occasional break from work is a sensible interlude of relaxation where one recharges one’s batteries in preparation for another period of exertion. This good practice turns bad when it oversteps the mark and falls into the trap of escapism. Happiness is then nothing but a bitter dream, whose bitterness is diluted with various evasions. Dignity and joy are desired, not felt; their absence is a crying shame. We humans have problem-solving abilities that enable us to achieve fulfillment within the confines of our reality, unless these confines are so narrow that they exclude every possibility of contentment. At this rare and wretched extremity, there is only room for a single pleasant emotion: serenity, through acceptance.

In retrospect, I was in no position to criticize my father. I was frequently under the influence of distractions. I drowsed and daydreamed, and vegetated in front of the television or beside the radio, as I watched or listened to whatever was playing, among other ways of escaping from my reality. I must say, though, in my own defense, since frequently is not always, that I was not an out-and-out escapist. Neither was my father, for that matter. He was a fine journalist and author by all accounts and a good provider to his family. As for me, I fared well at school and wrote the odd poem. I was a decent son and friend, I reckon. To put it simply, it is not that I did so badly, but I could have done a whole lot better.

Let us return to the favorable change mentioned above. It was twofold. First, after I had realized that my pain, however severe it was, did not arise from a grave disorder, I bore it with less difficulty. Part of the distress generated by pain consists of anxiety, which relates to the function of pain as a warning sign. The more this function is impaired and this sign discredited, the more pain loses its relation to danger and can be ignored, while it remains painful.

In my case, this relation was not entirely lost. My pain had some bearing on my bladder condition, though it was terribly disproportionate to this condition, because of my damaged spinal cord. It was also remotely connected with my skin's sensitivity to physical pressure. It was particularly excruciating when I was sitting in my wheelchair, which is one of the reasons why I preferred to lie in bed. Somehow the feeling of pressure from sitting was worse than that from lying. This feeling was illusory to a large extent, but real nonetheless. The bones in my buttocks seemed to pierce my flesh on a seat of live coals. "It's mostly my nerves," I kept repeating inwardly. This horrible torture was just a magnified and distorted reflection of the normal pressure to which I was subjected. Unfortunately, my repetitions never managed to completely rid me of my anxiety. They only brought me a qualified relief.

The second, most important, aspect of my favorable change in attitude toward my suffering was the result of a creative and palliative process that could be called poetic recycling. Two months after I had moved to the group home, I had shown some of my recent poems, together with the best of my earlier efforts, to my father. He in turn had shown them to one of his younger colleagues, an effervescent woman in search of young authors. She was a literature enthusiast who had created a small home-based publishing house. Her response – spurred on by my father's endorsement, for which I will be forever thankful – had been a dream come true: She was much interested. A collection of my poems, in the form of a booklet, had appeared three months later,

just before Christmas. I was not a mere dabbler or scribbler anymore; I was a published young poet!

Written by this woman's literary advisor, there was a short introduction to me and my poems on the outside back cover of this booklet. Among other words of extravagant praise, I was dubbed "an athlete of the soul." Deep down, beneath the pleasure I found in being complimented, I knew I was partly undeserving of the compliment, and this knowledge made me feel uneasy.

Sometimes it takes a misconception to awaken to the true nature of a thing. In itself, the one does not reveal the other; but the further it is from this other, the more it shocks the mind into correcting it. This shock may start with a glimpse of the truth and end in a clear awareness of it, provided this glimpse is followed by reflection. Personally, I was reluctant to explore my weaknesses, yet they were too obvious for me to deny. I was lagging and panting behind the exaggerated image of my life effort described as athletic.

In all likelihood, extravagant praise was used to encourage me and promote sales. The promotional aspect of it came as no surprise. Hype is common practice. As for the praise in terms of encouragement, it was consistent with the attributes of the literary advisor, an amiable woman in her sixties who was also an author. It reflected well on her and bore less relation to whom I actually was than to whom I was potentially. It was wishful thinking with some figures of speech.

The exaggeration that portrayed my life effort as athletic was a special extravagance for which I was partly responsible. It echoed my own poetic idealism. On the whole, I projected an image of inner strength and positive attitude, whereas behind this facade I was depressed, half attached to life and half tempted by death. I most often refrained from revealing my true state of mind to spare myself shame. Not that I simply lied to save face, but that I mainly told the truth about my ideal, as opposed to my reality. I wished I were firm in purpose, well-adjusted, and cheerful. It took me eight years to really feel the happy things I wrote.

Adverse circumstances contributed to this lag. When my booklet appeared, they had become particularly unfavorable and were continuing to deteriorate. My poetry started to be truer to my reality. Part of this increase in truthfulness was due to this rise in unfavorableness, like a river in flood that causes a weak dam to collapse. Another reason for the increase was my new official status as poet. My poems had merit by virtue of their form – namely, their poetic style (euphony, imagery, and the like). The more I believed in this merit, the less I was self-conscious about letting my negative feelings and leanings

act as content. This form was capable of transfiguring and redeeming this content. Similarly, I agree to humble myself by exposing the pitiful side of my personal experience insofar as this side is a backdrop for my philosophy of life, which I proudly convey in the hope that it will prove useful. In short, my pride is what enables me to show humility.

The contradiction is only apparent. Neither this pride nor this humility concerns the totality of my being. Similar to the two opposite sides of a cloth, they coexist. The extent of the one determines the extent of the other, which therefore indicates the extent of the one. As a rule, people who display a sincere willingness to criticize or mock themselves, or more exactly certain aspects of themselves, past or present, are people who possess great self-worth, given their pursuit and achievement of success in various areas that matter to them. This self-worth is an inner richness that gives them the luxury of displaying this willingness, in a genuine and serene manner. Without it, people blatantly lack this willingness or bitterly fake it. If they conceal this bitterness, they create the impression that they possess great self-worth. To all appearances, they retain their composure amid criticism and mockery, in the same way as a good boat maintains its stability in turbulent waters. Actually, their heart is sinking.

At twenty, I was disgusted by my situation, more gravely than ever. In compensation, I had acquired a stronger taste for poetry. My poetic successes – together with encouragements, from my father among others who believed I was a born poet, and the publication of my poems – had heightened my confidence in my poetic abilities and hence strengthened this taste. I now went on frequent and passionate bouts of poetry writing, mostly by night.

These bouts eventually led to complications, as I wrote with my mouth for hours on end, time and again, while lying on my side. I experienced a discomfort that was similar to the one I had experienced before in the course of writing, only more annoying. My shoulders had developed chronic bursitis and my neck was growing regularly sore or stiff, but neither of these nuisances nor my other pains and troubles stopped me from composing poems. I sometimes even proceeded with this activity in the daytime. The group home was noisy then, despite my closed bedroom door. I wore earplugs, or used my radio to cover the noise with sound, or simply coped. One way or another, I pursued my poetic goal. As you may have guessed, there is a moral to this story: Passion is traction to press on through difficulties.

Poetry was no pastime as far as I was concerned, though it was not my livelihood. It was a virtually unpaid but crucial business that I managed with restless intensity. It consisted in recycling the major part

of my life, which had turned to garbage and was nauseating me to death. This garbage amounted to a heap of misery. It was worthless in itself – even less than worthless, a cause of suffering – but valuable as a source of inspiration. It was the primary product that could serve to create my own brand of commodity: an enjoyable, if depressing, collection of poems.

This recycling was a stopgap. While it gave some meaning to my life on a poetic level, it made no difference for all practical purposes. My situation was not remedied in the least, though it was somewhat redeemed by my laments, which deplored it poetically. On the one hand, this verbal redemption was beneficial; on the other hand, this benefit had its limitations. I derived a fringe satisfaction from it. In my view, happiness remained an unrealizable dream to a large extent. I was still down in the dumps: insomniac, distressed, and suicidal.

Be that as it may, I never acted on my death wish and I know for certain that poetry contributed to this restraint. It proceeded from my natural need to work off my frustrations in a verbal way, open to stylistic refinements – such as euphony and imagery – and thematic developments. I call this natural need my poetic instinct. Through it, the objects of my suffering were destined to become the subjects of my writing. This process implied an advantage: My painful emotions or sensations could be of value as the matter of worthwhile creations that could give some enjoyment to me, their author, and whoever read them. It revolutionized my perception of my suffering, without altering the fact that I suffered.

This takes me back to my initial point. I had no solutions to end my misery – nothing that could improve my condition or ensure my adaptation to it. One of the problems was my negative attitude. I wallowed in nostalgia, fantasy, and self-pity, instead of focusing thankfully on the favorable aspects of my life: the roof over my head and my single room, my means of subsistence and entertainment, my accessible school with congenial people, staff and students alike, in a country reputed to be among the most civilized and charitable ones in the world, besides my loving family and friends, and my freedom to study, think, and write.

Furthermore, this negativity was marked by complacency, to the extent that my career as a poet, which aimed at glory, fed on my misery. It foreshadowed a morbid future. The more I would master my art, the more I would be its slave, miserably glorious. What had started as a compensation had changed into a vocation that paradoxically thrived on everything that harrowed me. Thus, my wallowing in nostalgia,

fantasy, and self-pity was attributable to a negative attitude that was complacent to boot.

Unwholesome attitude aside, there is no denying that my situation was troublesome. First, no medical treatment had been effective against my physical ills, except for antibiotics every time I had an acute bladder infection. These ills tortured me day in day out. Second, my representations to the rehab doctor were making no headway. The strapping bully was continuing to tyrannize me. The combined effect of these two adverse factors alone was terribly harsh. Foe plus woe equals double trouble.

Upon the death of a female friend of mine, whose friendship I cherished, my low spirits lowered. She was an attractive woman in her forties, with a strong will, a tender heart, and a gentle manner. She had two daughters who were my schoolmates, two lovely girls I loved dearly. The younger one was pretty and reserved, as delicate and exquisite as a fine watercolor. The older one had a more robust constitution and character. She was quite beautiful. Her blue eyes in particular were stunning, as if they had been painted by a master who had prepared for this work of art with a hundred sketches.

Although I knew my place and never crossed the line of friendliness in her company, I had composed a few odes on her, which were so fervent they appeared ambiguous. She had gradually distanced herself from me. As for her little sister, who in my heart was also my little sister, she had done what a girl normally does to her big brother as soon as she dates boys: She had partly detached herself from me. It was the beginning of the end. The mother went into a coma, as a result of a stroke, and died shortly after; her daughters' distance and detachment toward me worsened in the extreme. My grief was triple. I had lost the woman whose friendship I cherished and her two girls, whom I loved dearly.

My laments began to include elegies. Just as my life was largely the distressing opposite of my wishes, my career as a poet was slowly blooming. I had resigned myself to this crude assumption: "Poetry, like plants, thrives in shit."

At school, I showed a lively interest in literature, with a view to developing my writing skills. I once entered a provincial poetry contest and won the second prize. Additional ego boost: I was received into a society of writers. I met there some influential people who looked on me as a gifted young poet. One of them was a university professor and author who was a specialist in poetry, a man of great humanity whose recommendation helped me obtain a grant from a provincial arts council. Among the people in question were also the director of a public

library – which comprised a sizable auditorium – and the artistic director of a theatre who invited me to give poetry recitals in these establishments. All in all, as a young poet, I was promising well.

The fact remains my everyday life was predominantly blue, in the throes of my troublesome situation and unwholesome attitude. My taste of success, which warranted the hope that I had a future in poetry, together with a morsel of pleasure, not to mention my repugnance for a shameful death, barely sustained my will to live. Deep down, under my complacent negativity, I hungered for serenity and contentment, and was proportionally cold, polite but unsociable. The little warmth I had I gave to those who were the closest and kindest to me.

At the group home, I had the reputation of being a gloomy loner. As often as possible, I got high on inspiration, like certain depressives on amphetamines. Admittedly, inspiration was a better upper than these drugs, in that it was creative as opposed to medicative. I used my gift for poetry to redeem my suffering with enjoyable verses, instead of popping pills to lift my mood. One could go so far as to claim I was on the right track: Within the bounds of my poetic writings, I turned my life to good account. This brought me some satisfaction and aroused the interest of some poetry lovers, though my poems were usually depressing. Nevertheless, the compensatory nature of this account proved that my life remained problematic, a source of unresolved tension that I released poetically.

I had yet to resolve this tension by acquiring and putting into practice a philosophy of life favorable to serenity and contentment. This philosophy would advocate a total acceptance of my physical and mental limits, which included the possibility of me surpassing myself, plus a maximum promotion of my life and that of others toward happiness. It would also advocate a maximum protection of the environment, which is to humanity as the trunk is to the head: a vital complement. My words would then act, not as a vehicle for my self-pity and my self-centered quest for poetic redemption, but as a tool crafted with dignity and love, and intended for anyone who wished to attain or maintain a salutary way of thinking and living.



## HAPPINESS

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*“Over the years, I have improved my situation and especially my attitude, whose negativity was the most unfavorable and improvable aspect of my life. In so doing, I have discovered my true richness. Nature has endowed me with an adaptable capacity for happiness within the limits of my changeable reality.”*

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At long last, the strapping bully was dismissed. I felt relieved, yet annoyed with the management whose screening process had hardly improved. The new head nurse was a likable but unlikely replacement, an extremely goodhearted and equally overweight woman in her late forties, with a red and blotchy complexion that spoke volumes. As the day grew darker, it became increasingly unsafe to light a match in the immediate neighborhood of her breath. Lonely, if outgoing, she was in the habit of pickling her sadness in rum. This habit sealed her fate. A year or so after she had started to work at the group home, she met her death in a car accident. Drinking and driving were a dangerous mix she had dared to try one time too many.

Owing to better luck, or better judgment, or both, the selection of nursing staff began to yield better, albeit imperfect results. The young female nurse who was hired initially was an exception. Despite her rashness and other youthful shortcomings, she never deserved to be fired. She kept her position and improved with time, like a good wine. In sum, the nursing I received was on the upswing. My situation otherwise remained the same, except I had done with school and took two courses in literature at university. On occasion I missed classes, due to bladder problems or some other health-related cause, but nonetheless managed to get good grades, as I did when I was in school. I spent a high percentage of my existence in my room and in bed, and composed poems mostly by night and along dark lines, which is tantamount to saying that my lifestyle and my outlook on life had essentially not changed. I was in a rotten rut.

For years I had tapped my blues and filled pages with images of distress and death. This source of inspiration was slowly drying up. I composed fewer and fewer poems, despite my effort to stimulate my creativity with the works of numerous poets, among other artistic

stimuli. To be honest, I was growing weary of my lamentations, no matter how much I varied their expression. Likewise, although you may prepare pasta in many appetizing ways, if you eat it for breakfast, lunch, and supper, day in day out, chances are the sight of pasta alone will eventually make your gorge rise. In any case, after a while I got sick of rehashing my old jeremiads. More fundamentally, my wretched mindset, which made me look on the dark side of things, was sickening me. It was sinfully negative and all the less bearable since it was not lightened anymore by a poetic redemption.

This marked a turning point in my existence. While I felt that poetry was a thing of the past for me, I still had a notion that I had a future as a writer. I glimpsed the possibility of a novel or a series of short stories, though I was at a loss to figure out what it would be about. All I knew is that I was not to waste so much as another droplet of ink on my previous obsession with fantasy, escape, and death, which I had poetically exploited ad nauseam.

My life had to start afresh, with a reformed mentality, otherwise it had to end. I could no longer live for the chance to express my refusal to live; I'd had enough of this insane paradox. If I really hated life and wanted to die, then the logical step was to put myself out of my misery. If, on the contrary, I did not really hate life and want to die, despite this misery, then the logical step was to deepen the reasons that encouraged me to live and search for other ones by perfecting my art of living. The alternative was black and white. It demanded a clear-cut attitude toward life: No in-between; either opt out of it or be committed to it.

The fact that I was still alive after years of lamentation demonstrated that I preferred life to death in spite of everything. I now, belatedly, had to be consistent. It is absurd to persist in living, on the one hand, and insist that life is nothing but gloom and doom, on the other hand.

The absurdity is flagrant when this negative outlook is expressed in literature or another meaningful and satisfying art form. A writer who portrays his life as utterly detestable, while clinging to it for the love of his art among other things, is writing nonsense. Does he refuse to acknowledge and strengthen this love – which is a love for life within the bounds of this art and these other things – for fear of losing his urge to write, since he draws his inspiration from his pretended hatred of life? Nonsense once again! He could equally draw his inspiration from his love for life, presently suppressed but waiting to be acknowledged, strengthened, and communicated to others. Every art form is precisely that: a form into which any content may be artistically displayed. It is a

beautiful receptacle for all manner of feelings and thoughts, just as a colorful and graceful pitcher adds beauty to whatever liquid it contains.

I was agog to make a fresh start and begin a new page. For this purpose, I needed spiritual guidance and intellectual nourishment. I aspired after a wiser approach to life and a better background in literature that would be favorable to happiness and literary success. I had come to a dead end, feeling lost and weary, like a misguided pilgrim who has landed, after a protracted and grueling journey, in some ungodly corner of the world. I was trying to find my way and the means of reaching my destination. I was looking for my true home, away from the strange place I had once called my home. I was looking for myself – not for my lost and weary self, a blind root pushing through the soil, but for my self-realization, a blossoming of my soul in the sun of my enlightened mind, which is what I mean by my true home.

I read books on Western and Eastern wisdom, novels by classics and modern authors, plus articles and treatises on novelistic techniques, within the framework of my university courses or not. Reading was as necessary to me as breathing. I also wrote essays and made the odd attempt at writing stories. I was advancing on the infinite path of knowledge and skill, where perfection is never in sight. My advancement was modest, yet useful and promising.

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With the teachings of such great minds as Epictetus and Buddha acting as catalysts, a number of ideas were starting to crystallize in my brain and revive my spirits. They were helping me adjust to my reality.

First, the one feature that sets life on Earth apart from a paradise is suffering. It poses a problem for humanity and calls for a solution. This problem relates to human desires, the satisfaction of which is often difficult and uncertain, if not impossible, and always transient, in need of renewal; it is doomed to end sooner or later in death.

One extreme way of solving this problem is to kill these desires by detaching oneself from their objects, while providing the body with minimum care, or to simply kill oneself. This detachment consists in regarding these objects as illusory or vain. It proceeds from a defeatism or a mysticism. In cases where life offers possibilities of fulfillment in the accomplishment of pleasurable activities and honorable duties, this detachment is premature or suspicious. Like suicide in such cases, it may indicate a morbid disposition, marked by laziness and cowardliness.

The opposite of this extreme way is the foundation of modern civilization. It implies a stubborn attachment to the objects of one's

desires, such as good health, pleasure, mutual love, and success. It also implies a stubborn effort to satisfy these desires. Now, this effort cannot be effective without a knowledge of the world, humanity included, or the workings thereof. It generates and ultimately meets the need for science, in the broadest sense of the word, and technology, which is the art of making the laws of nature serve human interests. Furthermore, it produces a feeling of dignity, notwithstanding the errors and the failures that are indicative of fallibility. This feeling belongs to people who go to great lengths to achieve their earthly purpose – in a word, people who abide by this principle: Strive to thrive. It is unique to a courageous life, ever struggling against difficulties and changing, never boring. In comparison, a life of peaceful idleness or an afterlife of restful bliss (by definition as desireless, effortless, painless, and changeless as a mineral) is deadly: a consummate tedium.

Had our ancestors collectively preferred to renounce worldly happiness rather than to pursue it, because this pursuit is inseparable from suffering, humanity would be ancient history preserved in dirt. It would be a fossil for no one to see – no one except various critters that, unlike humans, would not have lost their will to live for good or ill and could be dubbed, for that reason, superior animals.

This advocacy of a courageous life, however, ought to be qualified. In the unlikely event that one should be utterly incapacitated by an illness or an injury and overwhelmed with distress, without the slightest prospect of future recovery and contentment, the renunciation of one's goals and perhaps even of one's existence would be a reasonable option. It indeed appears that a stubborn attachment to the objects of one's desires and a stubborn effort to satisfy these desires would be painfully useless and hence more foolish than brave if this satisfaction is not in any way possible. Similarly, there are times when the bravest warriors have to admit defeat and rely on their honor to peacefully leave this world through their bleeding wounds. Supposing their final exit is excruciatingly prolonged, a fellow warrior may be right to expedite it at their request, since a sure but lingering and agonizing death seems terribly absurd.

I was certainly not in such a desperate situation. Yet, some detachment was required inasmuch as my present, due to an irreversible physical deterioration, did not permit the continuance of my past to which I was much attached. After years of tears, mostly written, not shed, I had to let go of a big part of me that had died. No more nostalgia and self-pity, I'd had my fill of this insanity to the point of nausea. My reality included many favorable aspects; it was high time I thought positively!

This mental discipline was arduous, albeit imperative. The confinement to my body, ever so limiting, paining, and troubling, still bore heavily on me (this was my handicap in the race for happiness), but it no longer weighed me down. My soul was becoming more athletic, more consistent with a compliment I had once received and not deserved from an amiable lady, author of the introduction on the outside back cover of my first poetry book. I was eager to make peace with my life and, even better, to love it for everything that had survived my partial death and could be turned to advantage. I was shifting my attitude in the same way as a driver switches from the brake to the accelerator. I was forging ahead, if lagging behind the pros, the masters of joy. This earned me a consolation prize: I was the belated and elated winner of a new lease on life.

In the process of refining my love for life, I later discovered that another type of detachment was required. While my past was lost, my future was uncertain. It depended not only on my own efforts, whose effectiveness was imperfect, but also and largely on external factors that were beyond my control. These factors had limited predictability or reliability insofar as the natural laws and the human principles that governed them could not entirely be known or trusted. In short, my future depended on both pluck and luck. It might happen according to plan, or it might not. These were two possibilities, no matter what I did. I could hope for the realization of the one and had to cope with the other. If I neglected or failed to acquire this skill, my existence would always be haunted and somewhat paralyzed or otherwise perturbed by fear. This would be counterproductive, since perturbations do not foreshadow a good outcome.

I could coat my fear-infested mind with optimism, like a worm-eaten table with paint. I could not eliminate my fear this way though, as deep inside my common sense would keep feeding it. My fear would therefore gnaw at me, whether I acknowledged it or not. I would feel anxious without pretence of the opposite or behind a facade of overdone confidence: a stained yet transparent window to any shrewd observer.

The path to peacefulness was that of realism and acceptance. This was a difficult path, no doubt, but then so was the path to happiness that crossed it. I could either overcome difficulties or avoid them, which would shamefully amount to a standstill in hell. My choice was made. I had resolved to take reality as it came and make the best of it. Part of this resolution involved the acceptance of a risk: It was possible that my future would not happen as planned, though the probability was that it would. To accept this risk meant detaching myself from my plans for the future, while I stayed attached to them and continued striving

to realize them. At first sight, this was contradictory and unfeasible. A more thorough examination, however, would dispel this illusion. The secret was to regard my plans for the future as desirable, not as indispensable.

Like every discovery, this one revealed a truth that concealed another. How was I to do what I had to do? The answer to this question would help me deal with the uncertainty of my future. To be precise, I was no more shielded against a misfortune than I had been before my diving accident. I was a born athlete then, with a healthy sex drive and a strong paternal instinct; I was a born writer now, with neither the power nor the will to impregnate a woman. What would I be later if some new misfortune forced me to redefine my purpose in life? Was I a born other things that I did not know? Was I simply a born human who had the potential to adopt many different ways of being that were contingent on circumstances?

This definition agreed with my experience. I was adjusting to a major change, which I had previously deemed a calamity, and could repeat this feat in all likelihood. I therefore had to distinguish between two natures in me – namely, a second nature made of numerous habits and a first nature able to acquire these habits among an infinity of others. My fundamental purpose in life was at the level of this first nature; it was unspecific: I ought to promote happiness in myself and others to the best of my ability. The form of this promotion and the extent of this ability depended on my situation and would vary with it, which was changeable. As for the change in my situation, it would involve me as an agent or not. It might be natural, due to a physical process like aging, or accidental, owing to poor judgment or bad luck, or intentional, for the sake of progress or variety. Whatever the reason, the solution to changeability was adaptability.

At worst, the change in my situation would result in death. How could I accept this possibility, which threatened to rob me of future happiness? Could I find enough consolation in the recollection of my past happiness to reach peacefulness? Although this consolation could facilitate this peacefulness, it could not generate it. Still young, I felt rather unfulfilled. I was in no position to look back on a wise, pleasant, and successful life; I could only look forward to it.

After fulfillment, the satisfaction of having courageously striven for it was the next best thing. This satisfaction was unique in that my will had absolute control over it. Provided I agreed to take great pains to make the most of my situation, I could experience it every minute that I was awake and for the rest of my existence. It was the foundation of happiness, a dignity upon which fulfillment was built. It was also

favorable to peacefulness, as it aroused a feeling of irreproachability. Yet, like the memory of my former pleasures that testified to the fact that I had not only suffered but also enjoyed life, it left something to be desired: the very fulfillment at which I aimed.

Much of the future happiness I hopefully envisioned was geared to serving people. To accept the possibility of a premature death entailed a detachment toward the prospect of making myself useful. What if this possibility became a reality? The world that had done without me for millions of years would continue to do so. I was potentially important in the service of others but nonetheless dispensable. This dispensability justified my detachment, whereas this potential importance warranted my commitment to actualize it. Its eventual actualization was the main feature of the happiness I hoped for. I remained attached to it, however convinced I was that the end of my life would not remotely be the end of the world.

This attachment fed my will to live, which was organically linked to my instinct for survival like my brain to my heart, but was infinitely more intellectual and spiritual than physical. My days of sensual delight were long gone. My body was now an endless torment, save the occasional treat that never freed me from my suffering. I endured it in the name of high goals, whose achievement required some degree of physical capability. Come my loss of this body, at my death, I knew that despite my love for life my soul would cry inwardly with relief, "Good riddance!" My torment, after all, had a valuable function, which was familiar to old people, often plagued by disability, illness, and pain: It would help me die peacefully.

The fact remains, still young, I was attached to the idea of fulfilling my potential and had difficulty accepting the risk of dying before my time. How could I overcome this difficulty and attain peacefulness? How could I struggle for self-realization cautiously yet fearlessly in the face of this risk? My former pleasures, my dignity, my dispensability, and my torment could not tip the scales in favor of this ideal, though they carried weight. I was short by one reason to hold my life dear without fear.

A deeper understanding of my nature provided me with this reason. More than a mortal creature of habit, capable of adaptation in a changeable situation, I was a transitory human form of the eternal and divine force that was the creator of the creation. This force was both immanent in this creation and transcendent to it, which evolved continuously and never entirely manifested the creative potential of its creator at any point in its evolution.

This evolution was the frame of reference in the measure of time. Without it, time would vanish into a perpetual and immutable state of being. With it, there was a perpetual transformation that offered the possibility of a past and a future, in contrast to the present. This past and this future were a past present and a future present, no longer or not yet in existence, since the present and the state of being were one and the same thing. Therefore, evolution was a perpetual present in perpetual transformation and time – which related to this evolution and varied according to the different rates of transformation throughout creation – was nothing in itself. There was only the eternity of a divine force that gradually, and hence always partially, manifested its creative potential through the evolution of its creation.

In sum, I was a united trilogy of selves: 1) a secondary changeable self, which was a habitual way of thinking and acting, 2) a primary mortal self, which was a human mode of being able to acquire or renounce a habitual way of thinking and acting, and 3) an ultimate eternal self, which was the divine principle behind and beyond my human mode of being. I say “beyond,” considering that it was, as it always had been and would be, common to all things in the universe. This ultimate eternal self was to my primary mortal self and to my secondary changeable self as the sea is to a wave and to a form of this wave in progress.

I pictured myself on my deathbed and explored the meaning of my final instant. The end of my human mode of being was no more significant to my ultimate eternal self than the end of a habitual way of thinking and acting to my primary mortal self. My human mode of being finished; the divine principle behind and beyond it continued, capable of other human modes of being for as long as humanity lasted. Upon the extinction of this species, it would still continue, capable of other – similar or different – creations.

My existence was divine first and foremost. It included and exceeded my personal life, which was an infinitesimal aspect of it. I had lived, was living, and would live countless other lives besides the one I called my life, countless opportunities for happiness that put my future, possibly premature, death in perspective and turned it into an acceptable fatality. The wave came and went, preceded, accompanied, and followed by an infinity of waves that added immeasurably to its short-lived beauty. I now had every reason to die peacefully, before my time or not. My last words would be easy to remember: “Waive the wave and see the sea!”

My detachment toward my future was compatible with my commitment to pursue happiness, in a spirit of goodness, for the remainder of my life. Actually, it was integral to this commitment. It

was a logical refinement, given the nature of my life and my determination to love it. This love meant loving my life as it was, with its impossibilities and its uncertainties, and despite the hard part of it. I had to go through this hard part as through a peel to get to the rest, the pulp, which was worth savoring.

Is the word “despite” not essentially the same as the word “spite,” which is a variation of the former and signifies ill will? Is this ill will not akin to hate? How could a genuine love be mixed with hate? This was a contradiction in need of resolution. I had to purify my attitude or maximize its positiveness. I had to love my life not despite the hard part of it, as opposed to the rest that was worth savoring, but because of this hard part as well, which entailed laboring to succeed in what mattered to me. This laboring contributed pride to the pleasure of this savoring. It made this pleasure, more than a pleasant emotion experienced passively without merit like a feeling of warmth under the sun, a gratifying sense of victory in return for courage and skill. “Forward!” I cried. I was determined to love life unreservedly, peel and pulp, until I had extracted all the good, all the juice, from this bittersweet and godly fruit.

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Besides my passion for philosophy and literature, which helped me develop into a wiser man and a better writer, I was interested in art. This interest had really started toward the end of my gloomy poetic period when, bored with gloom as a source of inspiration, I was groping for a means of stimulating my creativity. Before then, I had skimmed through a few books on art and composed by mouth various drawings; but never had I studied and written about art, and collected original prints. Hung in metal or wooden frames on my bedroom walls, these prints were magic windows that opened into the mindscapes of talented artists. They refreshingly added a spiritual dimension to the flat reality of these walls.

By the time I turned twenty-five I had transformed my bedroom into a private gallery. I had also transformed it into a private listening room, equipped with a quality and powerful stereo system. My taste for music was plain to see and hear. It was expensive, like my interest in art. After providing for my priority expenses, such as food, housing, books, and stationery, I spent most of my spare money on improving or expanding my print or record collection, or my stereo system. It was obvious I inclined toward self-indulgence, which extended to binging on my favorite foods every so often. This was symptomatic of my

deficiency in self-realization. I knew I was on the right track; I felt good about that. Yet single and somewhat lonely in the obscure and cold atmosphere of my dawning career as a reformed author, I was still a long way from success. No thrill and no frill could take away that chill.

I have since theorized about the dynamics of this self-indulgence. 1) Pleasures and pastimes or hobbies, 2) career, and 3) friendly or loving relationships: These are three distinct areas of gratification that are closely connected nonetheless. It is the same with three communicating vessels. The level of water in any of these vessels is relative to the level of water in the other vessels. Lower the water here; the water rises there. Likewise, the amount of gratification people want to derive from any of the aforesaid areas depends on the amount of gratification they derive from the other ones. If their career and their friendly or loving relationships are not very gratifying, they will want their pleasures and pastimes or hobbies to be extremely gratifying by way of compensation. This is one possible scenario among many. It corresponds to my case at the age of twenty-five. I had my family and my friends, but neither a sweetheart nor a spouse, let alone children. As regards my writing career, I felt unfulfilled while striving for fulfillment and fell back on fillers, alternate enjoyments, that failed to fill the void.

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After years of distressing and restricting bladder problems that caused occasional blockages in my catheter and incontinence, my urologist suggested that a bigger catheter, less liable to blockages, be surgically inserted into my bladder through my lower abdomen. In desperation I accepted his suggestion, which was the lesser of two evils.

A while later I was admitted to hospital and operated on. Among the nurses who cared for me, one stood out against the dark days of my stay in hospital like a huge star outshining all others. She was extremely kind and gentle, and rather pretty. Her diligence and patience at answering my every question and meeting my every need were exquisite. I was thankful for this soldier of love on my side as I battled to keep a positive attitude in the face of difficulties. The oversize catheter that projected from my underbelly pained, repulsed, and troubled me. Furthermore, it worried me that my urologist had a reputation as an experienced surgeon who often took on hard cases and sometimes got poor results.

Back home, I suffered some inconvenience, but no real complications. Better still, I enjoyed a liberating improvement. As my

urologist had predicted, blockages in my catheter became rare. My problem of incontinence was partly solved.

In the two years that followed, I enjoyed other liberating improvements. From my heavy wheelchair with a foam cushion I changed to a light wheelchair with an air cushion that markedly increased my balance, my mobility, and my sitting tolerance. During the summer, I started to push myself regularly around the neighborhood. As a result, my strength and my endurance increased. I ventured out further and further, which was not far. Within my narrow if widened physical limits, I moved weakly, slowly, and awkwardly like an aged turtle, yet I felt alive and free, even athletic. A trip to the shopping mall, under a kilometer from home, and back was nothing short of a trek that I completed laboriously, victoriously, with an exhilaration that was reminiscent of the good old days. Along the way, inclines too small to be called hills were big challenges that I proudly overcame. My life was taking a turn for the better. I was on a roll.

One day, I heard of a government-funded organization that provided round-the-clock nursing for twenty-five disabled adults in two apartment buildings. It was extending its services to a third building and receiving applications for twelve vacant apartments. After careful consideration, not to mention some concern and hesitation, I resolved on applying. The reply was prompt, delightful, and scary: "Congratulations!" I was accepted and my apartment would be available to me a few weeks later. Meanwhile, I prepared for the move and the new life ahead of me. Beyond all the hows and wherefores of moving, my goal was to reduce my need for assistance by every possible means and thereby maximize my independence. I had the floor plan of the apartment and the guidance of an occupational therapist. When the time came to act, I was ready and waiting.

This apartment was a third liberating improvement that crowned the two others. On the sixth floor, it afforded a scenic view. The balcony looked out over a busy road and adjacent streets, a woody stretch of land, a river a kilometer away, and mountains far off. Provided the windows and the balcony doors were shut, I only heard a fluctuating hum that peaked exceptionally when a wailing ambulance or fire truck zoomed by. This hum was silence to my ears, compared with the din that used to fuddle my brain daily at the nursing home and at the group home. I felt as if my thoughts were fish that had been washed ashore and deprived of oxygen, but had managed to wiggle back into the sea. At long last I could think effectively by day, all the more as I controlled the thermostat. I was no longer chilled by the comfort of others whose sensitivity to the cold was lower than mine. As for the nursing staff, it

was young, fit for the job, cordial, and frequently jocund to boot. On the whole, things were on the upswing. Luck had befriended my life.

To show the full extent of its friendliness, I must go back to my first weeks at the group home after my surgery. Contrary to the proverb, the rather pretty nurse who had been extremely kind and gentle toward me was out of my sight but not out of my mind. I had fallen under her spell, and owed her a debt of gratitude. I wrote to her an affectionate and thankful letter, which I sent to the hospital with a "Please forward." She was quick to answer it, quite amiably. The countdown to love had begun. Three letters later, not counting hers, we met. Two meetings later we kissed. One kiss later we kissed again, and again. The future held for us plenty of sweet etceteras.

She was a twenty-seven-year-old divorcee with two adorable little girls. To her credit, she valued the soul much above the body. She coped with my disability, which entailed numerous limitations and difficulties, in the name of the personality traits she loved about me. Yet these limitations and difficulties eventually took their toll. She grew colder and colder, despite her enduring kindness and gentleness; I became more and more aloof, though I still cared for her. In the end, her tenderness disappeared without trace and I left her with composure. Almost three years had passed and I was ready to move on. No denial, no bitterness, I just acknowledged and accepted the obvious: Our romantic relationship had sizzled then fizzled. Luck was an unreliable friend.

It failed me temporarily in another respect. The breakup was compounded by a breakdown. Occasional blockages in my catheter, which related to bladder infections and caused incontinence, were no longer a thing of the past. They had returned with a vengeance. Fortunately, a new and remarkable urologist, to whom my case had been entrusted, soon operated on me. He closed the stoma in my lower abdomen with sutures and surgically opened the sphincter of my bladder. The object of this procedure was to permit the switch from a super-pubic catheter to a condom catheter, which was significantly better than the other, both aesthetically and practically. The switch passed off without a hitch. I was back on track.

To my delight, an incredible lucky break followed this happy turnaround. One sunny midsummer afternoon at a neighboring riverside park, I caught sight of a beautifully unique young woman. She wore a fetching sky-blue outfit with a matching beret, from which spouted a stream of dark hair. Lying face down on the grass, she was reading a book. Casually yet gracefully, she sometimes raised and swayed her feet, which seemed to bob curtsies to the passing folks. My heart

stumbled on them and I fell for her. She had more presence than everyone else combined.

Suddenly she lifted her head and glanced around the park. As our eyes met I smiled at her and she smiled back at me. I was rolling along on an asphalt path close by. It was very tempting to strike up a conversation with her and veer off the path in her direction, but the grass made this plan barely practicable and I was shy of imposing myself on her. I pushed on toward an adjoining boardwalk, which bordered a sandy beach.

The next thing I knew, she was in front of me. I felt stunned. There stood the European beauty who had swept me off my wheels. A simple “hi!” would have enchanted me. Instead she greeted me with a compliment on my smile! I bridled my excitement. “Thanks. Yours isn’t bad either, to say the least.” Quite honestly, it was dazzling and the rest was in keeping. I could not imagine she had risen from her cozy reading spot under a lush maple in order to approach me on the boardwalk with this compliment. My guess was that she had gone for a stroll to stretch her legs and enjoy the surroundings, and had come across me; she then had stopped and flattered me by way of friendliness, considering I had paid her a welcoming smile shortly before.

I chatted with her for a bit and set her free to resume her stroll. “I suppose I should get going and let you carry on. It was lovely to talk with you.” “What’s the rush?” she asked. “Why don’t you join me at the place where I was earlier? I’ve left my things there.” At this point it occurred to me that I had been discreet to a fault. My excess of self-effacement toward her was proportional to my lack of self-confidence, particularly as regards my physique. I was afraid of disturbing her because I did not believe she could be interested in me, both as a mind and as a man, whereas I was very attracted to her. This disbelief crippled me more than my disability. It nearly cost me an extraordinary and wonderful experience to live, remember, and tell.

I resembled a gambler who wagers nothing for fear of losing his stake and consequently has no chance of winning anything. Of course there are ventures that are more legitimate and promising than others, and hence more worthy of one’s endeavors. Betting on roulette numbers, for example, and borrowing to bet again and again in spite of one’s losses, while neglecting one’s family and other important aspects of one’s life, is plainly insane. This is not the sort of gamble I had forborne. I had taken a fancy to a glamorous, voluptuous, quick-witted, strong-willed, and warm-hearted young woman – in a word, a knockout – and had thrown in the towel even before attempting to rise to the challenge, which admittedly was chancy.

The game, however, was not over. I had an opportunity for a second shot at the title, so to speak. She had insistently sought my company. In all probability, she was just angling for Platonic love, as opposed to me who stewed in lust and infatuation. Yet, she could not possibly be unaware that the situation was delicate. Like it or not, when women are foxy, men (heterosexual men to be exact) are randy, though more often than not this randiness is unwelcome and held back by the shackles of propriety. In making friendly overtures, she threatened to lead me on. To remove this threat, if indeed she was just angling for Platonic love, not a romantic relationship, she would level with me sooner or later. It only remained for me to accept her invitation and determine the nature of her intentions. In concrete terms, what would I risk by going for it? An investment of time and energy? Big deal! It was worth a try. And what if I failed? A “no” from a goddess is not the end of the world!

My attitude toward the risk of failure was under review. I had caught myself out in fear and cowardice. The one ought to be neutralized and the other remedied. To neutralize my fear – which deterred me from chancing my luck, thereby hindering my pursuit of success – I had to draw on my intellectual resources: my adaptability in the event of change and my positive outlook on death. This adaptability enabled me to succeed in a variety of ways. If I failed in some way, it would imply that I had not done my best and could do better next time, enough to succeed, or that I had exceeded my capabilities, in which case I could not hope to succeed in this way. I would, however, be able to succeed in other ways, unless the worst had happened and I was reduced to dying. My positive outlook on death would then help me accept this tragedy, which would concern my mortal self alone. My eternal self was capable of life and success through a multitude of other beings.

My path was mapped out. It was difficult to tread, but clearly preferable to the easy one that led nowhere. The more I could take the risk of failure and death in stride, thanks to the adaptability and the positive outlook in question, the more I could pursue and achieve success during my life, because fear would no longer interfere with my desire to try. Not that I should be reckless of danger. To act fearlessly should not amount to being foolhardy. After all, success was my goal, as opposed to failure and death, which might shamefully result from a lack of caution. I ought to be fearless and cautious at the same time – that is, I ought to accept the fact that I might fail or die, while I tried my hardest to succeed. This endeavor, whatever its outcome, favorable or not, was my dignity. I had to make it for everything that mattered to

me, including the young woman whose radiant beauty and vibrant personality magnetized me. I would thus remedy my cowardice.

“Sure! That sounds great!” was my answer to her invitation. This time I was game for an adventure. I was not about to miss my turn again. I bet on me and it paid off. Three hours of conversation interspersed with laughter, we clicked and the rest went broadly like clockwork: supper at my apartment and an evening of limited intimacy. She was as captivating, bright, effervescent, delectable, and inebriating as champagne. I gave myself to pleasing her and lapped up every sign of pleasure she showed.

The next day and the day after and so on, we again saw each other. What made this class charmer, this humdinger of a lass, become my girlfriend? In my view, our affair was somewhat of a wonder that was a credit to her. She rightfully claimed that people’s appearance comes a poor second to their personality, like a package to the product it contains. Nevertheless, quite legitimately, she preferred an attractive package to the opposite, while she valued quality products. Her former boyfriend, a successful businessman, was a massive bodybuilder with a bazooka for a phallus. To be brutally frank, it is not I, with my water gun and my atrophied body, almost as impotent as Jell-O, who could physically measure up! Mind you, I dare say I was a master at pleasing with the tongue – not the tongue I spoke you will have guessed with either shock or amusement. Be that as it may, after five months, she bowed out of the relationship. I uttered a few proud and vehement words to save face, and felt ultimately foolish.

I also felt serene. Her leaving me had been in the cards since I started to date her. There was no way I could keep up with this sensually charged phenomenon. Our spells of affection, tenderness, and lust were a far cry from the twosome erotic lovefests she fantasized. Every day that I saw her was a day of romance I had hardly foreseen. After a month of daily wonderment, I already deemed myself inordinately blessed. Our relationship was living on borrowed time and I was waiting to say my farewells. Four months later, when she gave me the axe, I lost my head for a minute, nothing more. Even better, I gladly recovered my meditative tranquility, favorable to my philosophical work. I had found my calling some two years before in the writing of a book on “vital efficiency,” which was my own brand of wisdom. This book was finished, though in need of revision.

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My readings aside – concerned with philosophy, to say nothing of science, in which I had developed a lively interest – one mental discipline was instrumental in acquiring the insights necessary to write about the human nature: self-observation. This discipline yielded self-knowledge that was relevant to this nature inasmuch as my individuality was human and my humanity universal. The verification of this relevance was to be performed first by myself, who could compare my thinking with that of experienced and educated minds before being published, then by readers, who no less than writers were the gatekeepers of truth.

Just as researchers, in pursuit of objectivity, tested the hypotheses of other researchers by means of their own experimentation, knowledge, and reasoning, readers could support or challenge my statements on the basis of their personal experiences, studies, and reflections. These experiences and related reflections, like this experimentation and related reasoning, were of prime importance since they constituted a direct and intelligent grasp of reality, indispensable to the evaluation of theoretical thinking. Moreover, since time immemorial throughout the world, the direct and intelligent grasp of reality had been the heart of knowledge, without which studies could never have existed for want of a content. It even was the raw material behind the fanciful aspects of primitive knowledge, which included an array of projections, such as the act of ascribing human characteristics to universal forces.

Having said that, no one could know everything firsthand, from facts versus from statements. This was especially true as regards history and science. Their objects of study usually belonged to the distant past and were treated by historians who relied on a variety of olden archives and chronicles, or they belonged to the present but were often small or far in the extreme, open to observation by scientists who had special instruments like microscopes and telescopes at their disposal. By contrast, in the field of philosophy, with particular reference to generalities derived from common realities, there was no excuse for subscribing blindly to the affirmations of others. One had the freedom, even the duty, to investigate them both empirically and rationally to estimate their level of conformity or applicability to these realities. In the end, one had to use one's own judgment and form one's own opinion, which was bound to disagree in some ways with other ones. Human limitations and fallibility were a source of relativity and oppositions.

I practiced what I preached. My book bore witness to that. While I was grateful to thinkers for their gift of thought, I never took this gift at face value. In my view, it was a precious opportunity to meditate

freely on serious issues. Sometimes the conclusions I reached were in keeping with those of the thinkers; sometimes they were not, in which case I questioned my conclusions. These thinkers were great minds who had profound reasons for choosing their way of thinking. Their ideas should not be dismissed lightly. Yet I reserved the right to differ after careful consideration. It was my contention that humility amounts to imbecility when it leads to thoughtlessness and credulousness.

One day, during a discussion about the human nature, a bookish individual asked me where I had read what I said. I ad-libbed an answer that became my catch phrase in similar circumstances: “Life is in life before being in books!”

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Religion, notably Christianity, is another matter. The faith in heaven and hell, and in God as the omnipotent and omniscient creator and ruler of the universe has always posed a problem for me. The other aspects of Christianity are less problematic in my eyes. Except the fundamentalists who insist on taking the entire Scriptures literally, modern Christians adopt a revisionist attitude toward the Genesis in the light of science. This attitude portrays the Genesis as a myth – redolent of other myths from different civilizations – designed to instruct humans allegorically in the creation of the world and the evolution of humanity.

Of special interest to me is the story of Adam and Eve. I find it insightful to a degree and quite imaginative, though questionably negative and sexist, and shockingly cruel. I picture a father who places a bowl of candies on a table and forbids his two children, an innocent girl and an innocent boy, to help themselves to these tempting sweets while he is gone. He then permits a congenial, mischievous, and persuasive neighbor to sway the girl in favor of disobeying him and goading the boy to the same disobedience. Finally, once the “sin” has been predictably committed, he curses his two children and leaves them homeless, reduced to surviving on the street. A father of that ilk would be a disgrace to the human race. How can he be deserving of the attribute “divine”? To my mind, this sadistic representation of God is not faithful to its model, but a product of twisted fancy. In all fairness, however, I have to acknowledge that this ancient representation, sadism aside, contains some elements of truth. Likewise, there are some elements of reality in a cubist painting bordering on the abstract, which involves a rather fanciful choice of forms and colors.

God, in the Genesis, is first and foremost the creative and ruling force of the universe. As such, it is unspecific and uncontroversial. People of different philosophical or religious persuasions recognize with one accord that the universe is as it is because it has the power to be so. This power can be called God, in the unspecific sense of the word. It provides a legitimate answer to the ultimate question, which is twofold: “Why is there a universe instead of nothing, on the one hand, and why is there order in it instead of chaos, on the other hand?” Essentially, it is a cause that accounts for the existence and the nature of everything, while its presence remains totally unaccountable. There is no point in trying to elucidate this mystery since, to this end, one would need to postulate another cause that would itself be unaccountable, and so on ad infinitum. Consequently, the cause that gives the universe the power to exist and evolve, according to laws, is best described as a prime and timeless cause that can be ascertained through its manifestation in the form of changing things and beings, but never explained.

The oneness of this prime and timeless cause is implicit and indisputable. The subatomic constitution of all compound things – atoms, molecules, cells, and multicellular organisms – testifies to that. They are invariably composed of elementary particles such as protons, neutrons, and electrons, which justifies the root “uni-” (meaning “one”) in “universe.” This scientific truth and the big bang theory, combined with the theory of cosmic evolution, suggest that everything originates in a primordial state of matter that consists of elementary particles and dates back to some fifteen billion years ago. They confirm the biblical assumption that man comes from dust, just as after death he returns to dust.

The synergetic parts of every organic whole, which refer to its complex structure and multiple function, also testify to the oneness of the prime and timeless cause. Humans – the most evolved organisms on earth – are remarkable examples of organic wholes. Their nature is intricate but united. This can be intimately verified. The mind, often torn between conflicting desires and ideas, is always aspiring to resolve these conflicts. Greater than the sum of its psychological and intellectual parts, it is a mental whole that comprises an arbitrating self. All in all, the human nature represents a point of convergence where the cardinal aspects – inanimate, animate, material, and spiritual – of the universe meet and act as a single entity. It convincingly manifests the oneness of God, regarded here as the prime and timeless cause that accounts for the existence and the nature of everything.

At the top of the food chain, humans belong to a series of organisms interrelated in their feeding habits and dependent on the

soil for their atomic constituents. They and animals feed on animals and plants. Plants feed on this soil. Their roots are the vital link between the inanimate world and the animate one, which form the two opposite and complementary sides of the same world. The animate side appears to be an organic whole, like a giant flower whose stem, leafage, and head would be the plants, the animals, and the humans, rooted in dirt and reaching for the stars.

Humans are the leaders of this quest. Their mission is to strive for the highest possible degree of wisdom, contentment, solidarity with others, and harmony with the environment, which would bring the divine – one, prime, and timeless – cause to its greatest possible effect on earth. This maximum is necessarily imperfect, since perfection is unattainable, a utopian state of affairs, inconsistent with the dynamics of life. From childhood until death, the human condition is a succession of challenges that entail a continuous test of will against laziness, ignorance, suffering, egocentricity, malevolence, and wastefulness, among other evils. This test is a thrilling, sometimes overwhelming, opportunity to show and feel dignity. It gives a distinct and rugged beauty to life, and includes the risk of things turning ugly.

Without a doubt, the global situation is light-years away from the best possible one. Humanity is overgrown and often weak under temptation. It threatens to fall and die for the most part, if not totally. Can there be truth in the Book of Revelation, which predicts an apocalypse and a new beginning? Personally I do not consider it a sure prediction but a serious warning that may decide humanity to clean up its act instead of waiting for widespread destruction to teach it a lesson.

The new beginning, according to the Book of Revelation, involves a favorable intervention of God through a second coming of the Messiah: Jesus Christ. Like the first coming of this savior, prophesied in the Old Testament, the second is to assist humanity in defeating the evils that plague it. This assistance, as a result of divine intervention, contrasts markedly with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise by way of punishment for a sin they have been lured into committing. God is now portrayed as a loving father. In my view, this portrayal is far more realistic than the previous one, imbued with sadism. Despite its anthropomorphic nature, which I find questionable, I believe it to be essentially true.

My belief is primarily factual and additionally based on reasonable extrapolations. While I acknowledge the dark side of the earth, figuratively speaking, I marvel at the bright side of it: everything that radiates order, fullness, peace, or fulfillment. I firstly consider the animate world, particularly humans, animals, and plants, whose power

to live rouses enthusiasm in me more than that of such microscopic organisms as bacteria. Humans for a start, throughout prehistory and history, in extremely diverse circumstances that included extremely diverse opportunities and difficulties, have collectively demonstrated a superior ability to survive, multiply, and flourish. Countless children have thrived and rejoiced at being alive, under loving parents. Countless adolescents have grown into exemplary adults, cherished and esteemed by their respective families and communities. Some have even blossomed into legendary figures, celebrated for their extraordinary qualities and accomplishments – women and men who epitomize the most honored values of humanity: courage, efficiency, wisdom, and nobility.

Among those who have risen to happiness and respectability, many have once fallen into depression and shame. The dark side and the bright side of humans are generally reversible: The one can become the other and vice versa. The source of brightness is an enlightened and spirited philosophy, true to the values mentioned above – an intangible sun. The mind can turn toward or away from it. It is comparable to the moon in that it is capable of revolution.

My comparison, however, can be faulted inasmuch as the mind and the moon are not identical, if comparable. It hides significant differences. The reversibility of one's position on life – in terms of one's receptivity or lack of receptivity to the philosophy in question – ranges from possible to very improbable, not to say impossible. The gravest and rarest determining factor is insanity. This factor excepted, the possibility of this reversibility is relative to one's character above all. The people most unlikely to change their position on life for the better are the worst among us. Conversely, the people most unlikely to change their position on life for the worse are the best among us. Between these two extremes, improvements and deteriorations are very conceivable.

I recall watching some time ago a stunning interview between a TV host and an AIDS victim. The victim was a woman in her early thirties to whom the doctors had given about two years to live.

"AIDS is the best thing that ever happened to me," she declared. By her own account, she had wasted her life until then, in complete disarray and debauchery. "I was a loser and a druggie, always doped out of my skull and partying hard. When I heard I was HIV positive and sure to die within a few years, I figured I had outdone myself in the worst possible way. I cried with anger, sorrow, fear, and shame. Somehow I came to my senses as I hit rock bottom. I had let everyone down, starting with me; I had to straighten myself out before it was too late. I went into detox and received counseling. I joined various AIDS-

related support groups and organizations. I eventually became a committed advocate of AIDS prevention in schools and other venues, such as community centers. This advocacy was not only about condoms and sterile needles. It addressed the issue of lifestyle and values. I did not intend to moralize. I was just there to encourage young people to not do as I did. I had waited for death to be on my doorstep before trying to set my house in order. This was a terrible mistake. My turnaround should have been a lot earlier; it would have been that much better. You might say that for the first time in my life I had a mission and a message. Now here I am on television, as a role model. Incredible! Some two years ago I was a black sheep. In another two years or so I am fated to die, but I have learned to cope with that. Actually, I have never been happier!"

At the age of twenty-nine, I could have identified with this woman. I had turned my life around, so much so that my diving accident, which had seemed catastrophic at the beginning, appeared providential in the end. As surely as it had driven me to despair, a feeling of absurdity that had almost killed me, it had prepared the ground for my meaningful and satisfying existence. First, I had somewhat redeemed this feeling through a worthwhile effort that consisted in expressing it poetically. I had then vanquished it by gaining a profound sense of purpose as a philosophical writer. My life was circumscribed with disability and pain, and *prima facie* detestable, yet filled with a potential that was worthy of my love as it provided a means of attaining happiness.

At seventeen, before my diving accident, I had only actualized a fraction of this potential. The sole characteristic that set me apart from the average teenager was my exceptionally strong build, which I enjoyed with pride in sports and other physical activities. Perhaps I should add that this exceptionally strong build was unthreatening to people as a rule, owing to my gentle disposition. Outside of that I was nothing special; if anything, I was a little slow and extremely lacking in self-discipline. Whatever intellectual skills I later acquired by dint of hard work were a delightful surprise to myself and everyone who cared about me. I had improved in these regards out of all recognition.

In retrospect, my happiness had been twelve long and difficult years in the making, and it was worth every one of them. I remembered my youth as an ordinary mind, from which at a slow pace I had intellectually developed beyond all expectations. I also remembered the innumerable times when I had yielded to my weaknesses in the face of difficulties or contemplated killing myself, though I had not been really willing to put this plan into action. Altogether, my memory forced me

to be humble. I was capable of excellence and deserving of respect, but my abilities and my efforts were not superhuman.

My knowledge of others ties up with my personal experience. On countless occasions, I have met or heard of decent people who were glad to be alive, though their nature was not advantaged by genius or other exceptional qualities and their situation had never been especially favorable. Many of them had even encountered, and ultimately overcome, great adversities and inequities. They had risen by degrees to the rank of highly meritorious people. In other words, having been tested severely, they deserved special credit for managing to be decent and glad to be alive.

Am I embellishing the truth? Is only a small minority made up of extraordinary individuals able to suffer greatly from a combination of natural or human causes (such as an illness, a handicap, a divorce, the loss of a loved one, a want of employment, a state of privation, an injustice, an assault, a war, an earthquake, a flood, or a tornado) without committing suicide or lapsing into a life of bitterness and dishonor until death? If this is the case, I cannot begin to understand how humanity has survived some five million years of evolution, frequently punctuated by considerable ills, and has created a number of imperfect yet admirable civilizations, partly in harmony, partly in conflict with one another, and totaling more than five billion souls. In my opinion, it is the other way around: A large majority made up of ordinary individuals is able to suffer greatly from a combination of natural or human causes without committing suicide or lapsing into a life of bitterness and dishonor until death.

All in all, humans are liable to experience a variety of afflictions, but they are commonly endowed with a capacity for happiness and respectability. There is no guarantee, however, that they will exercise this capacity at all times and to the maximum, whatever happens. Depression and shame remain a possibility, which increases with the severity of their afflictions and the difficulty of living up to the values that are necessary for their happiness and respectability: courage, efficiency, wisdom, and nobility.

Living up to these values is never easy, even under extremely favorable circumstances. It requires an effort of will. To make or not to make this effort is the question, central to the human existence. This question is difficult in proportion to the weight of suffering that bears on humans, while their dignity hangs in the balance. The more burdensome this weight, the more tempting it is for them to take the easy way out. The fear of losing their dignity, however, is a strong deterrent. There is no greater loss than that of dignity, save the loss of

life itself. Yet, the easy way out is a very powerful temptation in extremely unfavorable circumstances. Giving up instead of living up to the values mentioned above is then deplorable but understandable. Excruciating circumstances are extenuating ones.

Amazingly enough, despite the burden of suffering that is oppressive to many, the incidence of moral collapse – in the form of errant ways like carelessness, vagrancy, and crime, often accompanied by alcohol or drug abuse to fuddle the conscience – is small in comparison with the incidence of worthy behavior. Furthermore, a moral collapse is remediable, except when the person concerned shows an inveterate or congenital weakness, or a mental illness that is beyond cure. On the whole, dignity can be lost and regained.

As for those who resist quitting the struggle for worthiness, they rarely do their best. In many instances their spirit is tainted with some degree of indulgence in laziness, cowardliness, ineffectiveness, foolishness, selfishness, and meanness. It has the grayness of dawn. Even those who shine like a late morning sun have a shadow of imperfection at their heels. In short, humanity has yet to fulfill its potential. While there is much courage, efficiency, wisdom, and nobility in the world, much happiness and respectability, there could be a whole lot more. The key to this rise is an effort of will.

With an eye to alleviation, prevention, and reformation, part of this effort ought to be charitable toward the needy and other stricken people who are at risk of a moral collapse or have abandoned themselves to such errant ways as carelessness, vagrancy, crime, and alcohol or drug abuse. Charity makes sense from a Christian viewpoint, centered on selfless love, and also from a utilitarian viewpoint, which gives the greatest good of the greatest number as the purpose of human conduct. Prosperous people have a vested interest in helping their wretched counterparts who constitute a potential or actual menace to society.

The attempt made at reforming those who err is their second chance to lead an honorable life. They may grasp this chance or waste it. Such is the lot of reformers: Their undertaking can come to nothing. Incidentally, everyone else is in the same boat. The risk of failure is integral to the possibility of success. It implies a number of difficulties to surmount, which are an opportunity for grit and merit.

As for brutal and hardened criminals, impervious to the idea of reformation, they are public enemies of the worst sort. They deserve condemnation and imprisonment, but not cruelty, though there is a great temptation to return their inhumanity by imposing on them an inhuman penalty. This temptation is a barbarous desire to inflict suffering for the sake of revenge. Any civilization worthy of the name

makes it a point of honor to resist it. Unlike lesser civilizations, it shows no cruelty while strictly enforcing the law – which is derived from moral precepts and intended to protect the public against immoral characters by threatening to deprive or depriving these characters of their freedom. It thus avoids the contradiction of a justice that is the image of the crime it condemns.

In summary, humans as a rule are capable of happiness and respectability through courage, efficiency, wisdom, and nobility; but this capacity is difficult to exercise, especially in unfavorable circumstances. A relatively small group of individuals fails to exercise it altogether. Within this group, some fail because they are incapable of this happiness and respectability. They are exceptions of an insane or deficient nature that admits of no cure whatever. Like helpless animals or wild beasts, they have to be treated with special care or caution. At worst, they have to be permanently institutionalized or incarcerated. Their existence then resembles that of a caged ruminant or predator in a zoological garden. Not only do they share with them the state of captivity, but their inability to rise above their basic instincts or base impulses is animalistic or beastly. They are at the low end of the human spectrum, which ranges from zero to hero.

The failure to attain happiness and respectability through courage, efficiency, wisdom, and nobility is an inherent risk of human life, which includes the possibility of success in attaining this happiness and respectability. Either all the elements necessary for success – namely, a certain amount of good fortune and good will – are present or they are not and failure ensues. The worst fortune imaginable is a gravely insane and deficient nature, compounded by extremely unfavorable circumstances. The unfortunate few with such a nature in such circumstances are the most pitiful souls among us, whether they are inoffensive or dangerous, and fit for an asylum or a penitentiary.

Failure is similar to death in that it is peculiar to the individual alone, as opposed to the divine – one, prime, and timeless – cause of which the individual is a single – imperfect and mortal – human incarnation. This divine cause has been, is, and will be capable of life and success through other human incarnations, past, present, and future.

Much consolation and hope can be drawn from this truth, which forces one to reconsider this obvious fact: Irrespective of time, all of humans are humanity. This fact portrays humans as a group of individuals that together constitute humanity. There is another way of looking at it. People taken separately and people taken collectively are one and the same thing in terms of their fundamental divinity that is

their fundamental identity. Anyone's life extends to everyone's life, which includes the ability to live happily and respectably. For this gift of ability we ought to thank God, which can safely be defined as a divine – one, prime, and timeless – cause that is loving as well, in the sense that it shows love by being good to us.

This additional attribute is manifest in animals and plants. Over a period of approximately one billion years for the animals and three billion years for the plants, they have evolved from single-celled organisms into complex life forms and divided into a multiplicity of species, in water, on land, and in the air. Everywhere they have thrived one way or another, thanks to their creator, otherwise known as God, the divine – one, prime, timeless, and loving – cause that has endowed them with the means to this happy end.

By identifying oneself with animals, to the extent that they are equipped with senses and a nervous system, one can readily suppose they possess some form of sentience, which enables them to feel good when they live well. This supposition is crucial, since the loving goodness of the divine cause could not matter to them and hence have any meaning for them if they could not experience it through a feeling of well-being. Likewise, a person's loving desire to please could not appeal to an insentient object that is incapable of pleasure. To an object of this sort, lovingness would be equivalent to nothingness.

What about animals like sponges, without senses and a nervous system? What about plants, in a comparable situation? There is no reason to doubt that these animals and plants are sentient in their own primitive way. They are composed of various tissue cells that share with sensory cells and nerve cells – present in the senses and the nervous system of evolved animals – many fundamental characteristics: several organelles that perform metabolic activities plus a nucleus that contains the genetic material, enclosed by a semipermeable membrane. These sensory cells and nerve cells stem from a single undifferentiated cell that has multiplied and developed into different specialized cells, which play all manner of structural and functional roles in the life of the organism. Essentially, they are living cells like the other living cells in the animal and the plant kingdoms. From their sentience it may be deduced that these other cells are sentient. There is no denying, however, that their complex organization of interconnected sensory cells, sensitive to various stimuli, and nerve cells, capable of receiving, transmitting, and retaining information, makes a radical difference. It raises their sentience to the level of a sophisticated experience, which combines a diversity of perceptions, feelings, and memories.

After first considering the animate world, I secondly consider the inanimate one, particularly solid inorganic compounds such as crystals, whose orderly form fascinates me. Crystals start existence as microscopic seeds and grow into larger bodies. They have a special status among nonliving things for their ability to reproduce their atomic structure, which is reminiscent of the DNA molecule in living organisms that can replicate itself. This replication is needed for cellular division and growth to occur.

Why do gases and fluids crystallize at low temperatures to begin with? Because the crystalline state at these temperatures is their attractor, the state toward which they naturally evolve? Is there more to this process than meets the eye? Is there an invisible inner side to it, an elemental impulse that determines from within the observable physical fact designated by the term crystallization? Put differently, do the atoms in the gases and the fluids somehow feel drawn to the crystalline state that is their attractor at low temperatures? Furthermore, do they somehow feel fulfilled upon the attainment of this attractive state? If not, if these feelings are merely a figment of my imagination, how can one explain the sentience of cells that are a live aggregate of molecules, which in turn are an organic aggregate of atoms? Something always comes from something and sentience, in my view, is no exception. Atoms are sentient and the divine love concerns them, though in a fashion that is inconceivably elemental.

Two superlative qualities that are attributed to God in the Genesis are infinite power and infinite knowledge. They are in the image of the finite power and the finite knowledge of man, only without limit. This anthropomorphic and hyperbolic way of representing God is unsubstantiated and misleading in my opinion. Even the “miracles” that are reported by the Bible and other sources are questionable or inconclusive. They are extraordinary events that may be a product of fancy and credulousness, in part or totally, or may have a natural, albeit unknown cause. To all intents and purposes, the infinite power and infinite knowledge of God appear nonexistent for lack of manifestation.

While I trust this appearance, I give the inspired writers of the Genesis the benefit of the doubt. There is a remote possibility that the two superlative qualities in question exist, though not manifestly for mysterious reasons that leave the door open to wild imaginings. An example of such imaginings is the myth of original sin, where the painful imperfection of the world is presumed to be a divine retribution against the sin of Adam and Eve. This example outrages me. I say “myth” and think “fallacy.” Yet I ought to stay open-minded toward its premise. The infinite power and infinite knowledge of God can neither be proved

nor disproved, since their existence – supposing they exist nonmanifestly – is beyond human experience. One can believe in them, if one so desires to the point of overlooking their extreme improbability. I myself am unwilling to make a leap of blind faith.

Judging from facts and credible statements based on facts, I regard the divine – one, prime, timeless, and loving – cause as mighty to an immense degree, but not as almighty. These facts and statements relate to its inanimate or animate manifestations and show its limited, if immense, mightiness. I do not question its omnipresence. By definition it accounts for the existence and the nature of everything. Moreover, outside the scope of the known reality, I do not question its fathomless potential, which adds transcendence to immanence. The knowledge of the past and of the present is not sufficient to know what the future holds, though it allows one to make knowledgeable predictions. I only question the omnipotence and omniscience of this divine cause, because no evidence or reasonable conjecture persuades me of their truth.

From the creative explosion marking the outset of the universe to our advanced human stage in evolution, some fifteen billion years have elapsed. This advanced stage refers to the natural abilities and the cultural realizations of our species. While these natural abilities have virtually not changed in the last hundred thousand years, these cultural realizations have progressed exponentially over the same period. The former depend on a biological memory – the genetic information that is stored in human cells and can be transmitted through reproduction. The latter depend on a social memory – the didactic information that is stored in human libraries and can be transmitted through education. Together these two memories and modes of transmission supply the necessary tools to perpetuate and ameliorate humanity. The problem is that humans rarely use these tools to the maximum. They reproduce very well; more than five billion people testify to that; but they could do better in every other respect, witness the many instances of weakness and wickedness that tarnish their image.

Having said this, their existence can never be perfect. The worthiness and especially the effectiveness of their efforts will always be limited and perfectible. Such is their human condition. They can achieve great things, thank God! Yet this greatness cannot be absolute, thank God again! This imperfection hides a sublime advantage that can only be fathomed and cherished by a life lover. It ensures the maintenance of a dynamic state in pursuit of fulfillment, which is essential for the act, the dignity, and the joy of living.

Conversely, the attainment of infinite health, strength, pleasure, wisdom, glory, wealth, and every other object of one's desires would amount to an infinite satisfaction that would kill these desires. This attainment is impossible because it is incompatible with life. Perfection and death go together like two inseparable lovers in a single tomb. They send a shiver down my spine. Who can look on death as the ideal of life? Perfection is fit for a stone. It may appeal to a wretchedly tired soul in dire need of a rest. Dead, however, would this soul not adopt the opposite stance after a lengthy bout of mineral tranquility? Would it not dream of having a second chance to live and love life?

Many may think the human condition could be better without being perfect. What is the meaning of this betterment, which bears no relation to the one that ought to be accomplished by human means within the limits of this condition? Do many wish God would increase these means or reduce these limits? For what purpose? To make life easier? Closer to death! Can they not see the beauty of the imperfection as it is? Can they not appreciate that the peak of human fulfillment entails a steep mountain to climb and the constant risk of falling?

Admittedly, it is hard not to lament one's challenging human condition while painfully struggling to rise to the challenge, especially if the difficulties are serious and numerous. Correlatively, it is hard then not to reckon that there is room for improvement in the creation. I for one have long indulged in this sort of lamenting and reckoning. With hindsight, I am now in a good position to size up my error. God was not to blame for my unhappiness at the time; my attitude was at fault. I had failed to realize that the extreme difficulties I was faced with were exceptional opportunities for spiritual development and enlightenment, just as an obstacle can keep ivy in the dark and become the instrument of its ascension to a superior place in the sun.

I do not regret having gone through years of foolishness and suffering. I count them as labor pains for the birth of wisdom and happiness. They accentuate the brightness of my later years inasmuch as their gloominess contrasts with it. This brightness is spiritual, a sense of purpose and serenity that transcends my physical disability and pain, which are incurably restricting and excruciating. My body has remained practically as it was, whereas my spirit has improved significantly. I resemble someone who is using the same glass, but has changed its content from a nauseous brew to a luscious nectar.

What if the worst had come to the worst? I could have lacked the means of turning my ill fortune to good account. Whether this lack would have been due to a mental disorder that was without hope or to

adverse circumstances that were without hope does not matter. The point is that my life would then have been hopeless, seemingly absurd. In fact, it would have had a meaning from a broader viewpoint portraying it as an unfortunate event in the life of humanity, capable of fulfillment. My individual existence is a minute aspect of my human existence. I look at myself past my ego and identify with the divine principle within me, which is common to all humans, to say nothing of everything else in the universe. I am fundamentally it and consequently us.

Still, life is too hard and too risky in the eyes of many. By contrast, others are such proponents of a virile existence, demanding great courage and giving great pride, that they are ready to leave the coziness of their home to scale Mount Everest and breast the elements for the sheer joy of conquering the summit. Whatever the perspective, the nature of things remains unchanged. There are rules, necessities and duties, and limits, possibilities and impossibilities. Until doom, one can accept them and make the best of them, much to one's pleasure and honor, or one can do the opposite and suffer the consequences. The choice between these two options is the very essence of freedom. Personally, I have no use for the second option: a self-inflicted misery that is without the slightest doubt a pitiable way of life.

The first option, on the other hand, is a pleasurable and honorable alternative that I find compelling, though uphill. It is applicable to any situation encountered in the course of one's living venture, provided one is not unfortunate to the point of being hopelessly unable to cope. The range of this applicability corresponds with the range of one's adaptability. It is normally considerable, despite the tendency to cling to old gratifying habits even after they have become impracticable or unsuitable, owing to a change of situation. One can be weaned from such habits onto new gratifying habits, in the same way as a baby can be weaned onto solids. The more the change is significant and one is reluctant to adapt to it, the more the weaning process is difficult and long in producing the desired effect. Again, the only option worthy of one's attention consists in taking things as they come and making the most of them, for one's sake and that of others. The reverse is foolish and harmful, a deplorable waste of humanity.

On the whole, the power to live in a well-adjusted and high-minded way and the freedom to choose this way in preference to the alternate, illegitimate, way are the foundations of the life one builds. The exercise of this power does not necessarily imply a principled resignation toward the status quo. One may be faced with a remediable evil that calls for a struggle to remedy it, effectively and rightly. In that

case, living in a well-adjusted and high-minded way entails accepting the need for this struggle and the means of waging it, and sparing no effort to attain one's end. Ills are a test of will, an opportunity to show dignity.

They are also an opportunity to probe and appraise one's inner resources. Over the years, I have improved my situation and especially my attitude, whose negativity was the most unfavorable and improvable aspect of my life. In so doing, I have discovered my true richness. Nature has endowed me with an adaptable capacity for happiness within the limits of my changeable reality. According to my observations, this capacity is not unusually great, compared with that of most people. I am even tempted to think it is somewhat lagging behind. Eleven years plus to adapt in triumph to my physical disability is no feat for the Guinness Book of World Records!

During that time, the riddle of life had more or less baffled me. Yet, laboriously, with the help of many books and much thought, I had managed by degrees to clear it up, enough to find a meaning to my life. This riddle is comparable to a mire: The slower you go through it, the deeper you get into it. Perhaps thinkers are commonly untalented in the art of living and their saving grace is their dogged determination to redeem this lack of talent by dint of studying the human soul. Amusingly enough, these untalented individuals are often perceived as gifted, once they have seen the light and reflected it with the numerous mirrors of an elaborate analysis, after a tentative and protracted search in the dark.

This sort of overcompensation is typical of people who experience difficulties in a certain area, but refuse to admit defeat. While some fare well in this area with a minimum of effort, they try hard to overcome these difficulties, with the result that they often fare better than the others. Their redeeming feature is their willpower in the face of their shortcoming, which they use as a reason to redouble their efforts, not as an excuse to throw in the towel. This is a recipe for a worthy success. They discipline and surpass themselves, and thus proudly turn things around.

My book on wisdom was a turnaround of that ilk. It was the happy outcome of my spirited and sustained reaction against the miserable outlook that had plagued me for years. As if it were an object hanging from an elastic cord, my heart could be stretched down to misery or up to happiness by force of a negative or positive attitude. Insofar as this cord was not weak and did not snap, my heart had reached a high in happiness that was proportional to the extreme low in misery it had previously reached. This high was not only subsequent but also consequent to this low. It had gained momentum to the extent that the

cord had been stretched down to misery. There I had developed an intense loathing for my negative attitude, which had then shifted to a resolutely positive one. This intense loathing was therefore the momentum that had helped my heart reach an extreme high in happiness.

I was in fact so enthusiastically committed to leading a solitary life as a philosophical writer that I could have regarded my diving accident as a token of providence. I could have, but I did not. Before this accident, I was very enthusiastically committed to going in the opposite direction, as I aimed to become a husband, father of many children, a teacher of physical education, and a competitive athlete. On the afternoon of 2 June 1974, had the six-foot strapping and foolhardy teenager that I was not attempted a breakneck dive in three feet of water, I would have gone in this direction and probably achieved my aim with the feeling that it was my destiny. Meanwhile, I would have been too wrapped up in this so-called destiny to imagine that a solitary life as a philosophical writer was a possibility included in my nature, let alone believe it was my calling ordained by God.

How many possibilities did my nature include initially, prior to my spinal cord injury, when I was able-bodied? Only the two described above? I hypothesize that there were a great many more. They related to my physical and mental abilities, which were capable of innumerable activities. I was obviously not without inclinations and limitations. Nevertheless, I was free to make a huge variety of decisions that could take me to a huge variety of situations, each having its advantages and disadvantages. I was also free to adopt a positive attitude rather than a negative one toward any of these situations. Furthermore, to be effective, this twofold freedom required an awareness of it plus a willingness to exercise it, which both could be acquired. In brief, my nature was initially a mine of possibilities, just as it was a mine of abilities.

Even now that I was severely paralyzed and had a proportionally limited range of options, my nature was rich. I was not ready, however, to exploit the part of this richness that was beyond the scope of my literary and philosophical career, not to mention the other aspects of my existence, such as my relationships with my family and friends. Why should I experiment with every possibility other than this engrossing career, which I could pursue instead? I did not care to change constantly, since changing so meant ruining my chances of ever bringing any of my possibilities to a high degree of realization. Only if my literary and philosophical career became infeasible for whatever reason would I consider a change. My essential purpose was to live and love one way or another, with all my strength.

The risk of me having to find an alternate means of serving my ideal was part and parcel of my reality. I was not shielded from danger, despite my cautiousness. If again I fell prey to a disabling misfortune, I would draw on my remaining abilities and struggle to attain somehow the happiness I had attained otherwise the first time. I would follow my own example as best I could. My diving accident had been a product of foolhardiness that appeared providential inasmuch as I had put it to good use, thanks to my adaptability, which was a credit to God. As long as I possessed this adaptability, I could exercise it over and over. It was simply a question of not allowing my will to fail me, though this interdiction was unquestionably difficult to enforce. It was ultimately a matter of worthiness.

In the unlikely event that a new misfortune should disable me so gravely that I would be hopelessly reduced to agony, I could only wish resignedly for a quick death. My individual life would end eventually, whereas the divine principle behind and beyond it would endure perpetually. In the years to come until old age, the risk of me having to resign myself to dying in agony was remote but nonetheless very real. Like the other and lesser risk, it was a sign of fallibility and vulnerability common to all humans. Also common to all humans – or rather most of them who were not extremely and irreversibly inapt – was the capacity for knowledge and efficiency that made life and love possible, if risky. It was left to these humans to put this capacity into practice, for their own benefit and that of others. It was left to them to show dignity.

Altogether, there is no evidence that humans are puppets in the hands of an almighty Providence that has planned their every action for the best and is executing this plan to perfection. They live a marvelous and dangerous adventure that can prove delectably sweet, then turn irremediably sour. No powers from above are pulling strings for them. Their God-given ability to live happily, which is limited yet considerable, comes primarily from within their physical and mental being, and complementarily from the world around them. They are people, not puppets. Their life is in their own hands for better or for worse.

There is no evidence either that humans are the children of an almighty Father who has forsaken them upon their first disobedience and will sometime intervene in their earthly business to cleanse it of all evils for eternity, thereby establishing a paradise. What is more, I have reason to believe such an intervention is absurd or in contradiction with the nature of life and hence would result in a deadly situation: a hell in the eyes of a life lover.

An inquiry into the origin of evil, which led me to an inquiry into the beginning of the universe, provided me with this reason. It is no accident that the one led me to the other. This origin and this beginning are one and the same thing. About fifteen billion years ago, totally contracted and presumably unified in the form of ultradense matter and ultrahot energy, the universe exploded into an infinity of particles, negatively or positively charged, or neutral. Thus started a universal evolution, accompanied by expansion and cooling. First a cloud of atoms like deuterium and helium formed from these particles. Then a swarm of galaxies formed from this cloud, which was similar to a gas that crystallizes at low temperatures. The Milky Way numbered among these galaxies and included the solar system. Within this system, Earth offered ideal conditions for the creation of life, unlike such planets as Mercury and Pluto whose composition and place in relation to the sun were unfavorable to this creation.

These ideal conditions, from a vital point of view, were bad conditions as far as the tendency of matter toward inertia was concerned. An example of matter that manifested this tendency was water, which covered the whole of the earth originally, save a number of volcanic islands. In a closed system, without any external source of energy (mechanical, thermal, or other) to disturb its liquid state at rest, it remained inert. The ocean, however, was not remotely a closed system. Four billion years ago, it was exposed to a variety of adverse forces that defeated its natural purpose. Meteorites, ultraviolet radiation, and lightning – from outer space, the sun, and the atmosphere of the earth respectively – bombarded it, and it was also assailed by volcanic eruptions – coming from the mantle (under the crust) of the earth.

The violent opposition between this ocean and these forces was a distant consequence of the initial explosion that had caused universal division. There could be no opposition without this division, which was the result of this explosion. The universe had become multiple as soon as it had begun, though it had remained fundamentally one in terms of its divine – one, prime, timeless, loving, and mighty – cause. It had taken the form of a multiverse, where everything was an open system that interacted with the outside.

This interaction could amount to a violent opposition. The love manifested by the divine cause for the benefit of one thing and the love manifested by this same cause for the benefit of another thing would then be antagonistic and unilaterally or mutually detrimental. From the perspective of the one or the other, the divine manifestation of love that is beneficial to the detrimental antagonist would be tantamount to an evil manifestation of hate. In fact, it would be a divine manifestation

of love, except it would benefit this antagonist to the detriment of this one or this other. It would have failed to achieve harmony for lack of being inclusive instead of exclusive.

With respect to the ocean and the forces mentioned above, this failure was par for the course. It opened the door to evil in its primitive form, before the advent of life on earth. This evil – this cause of detriment – was a function of antagonism between things that were violently opposing because their purposes were incompatible and their natures uncompromising. It was not a separate entity that could be eliminated while preserving the integrity of the universe. It was consubstantial with God, the divine – one, prime, timeless, loving, and mighty – cause whose universal manifestation was in effect a multiverse, characterized by frequent and violent oppositions between the scattered things that composed it.

In these oppositions, matter aimed at inertia but was disturbed by external sources of energy (mechanical, thermal, or other). One solution to this problem of disturbance was resistance. Through a mix of randomness and necessity, some superior arrangements of atoms were found and retained. Likewise, famous discoveries are a product of trial and error, plus intelligent purpose, that is committed to social memory. A particularly superior arrangement of atoms was tungsten, a metal that was incredibly resistant to all sorts of stresses. For example, it could withstand up to 3410 degrees Celsius before passing from the solid to the liquid state.

There was another solution to the problem in question. This one was so revolutionary, so extraordinary, that it compels me to worship its divine author. While the maintenance of a physical structure could be ensured by resistance, which relied on solidity and provided a static form of stability, it could be ensured by a process called life, seemingly contrary to inertia, but actually serving the same essential goal. This process was a dynamic form of stability that depended on the ability to regenerate and reproduce itself indefinitely. It turned sources of disturbance, such as ultraviolet radiation and volcanic eruptions, into means of sustenance, hence this anagram of the noun “evil” (referring to an agent of destabilization that could become an agent of vitalization): the verb “live.”

It is reminiscent of the “cells” that form in a pot of water heated rapidly from below to boiling point. These “cells” are small ordered sections of the liquid with a predictable behavior pattern. They use the heat that keeps the water in a state of nonequilibrium to maintain their lively structure.

Life originated in strife, like an ever-renewed spark between two forever-colliding stones. It appeared in the ocean by turning every evil to good account. Meteorites transported from outer space and lightning produced in the atmosphere of the earth the carbonic compounds that changed this ocean into an organic soup. These compounds acted as the building blocks of cells.

According to fossil evidence, archaebacteria, unicellular organisms, are the most ancient life form. Almost four billion years ago, they lived near volcanic hot water vents and used the chemical energy stored in hydrogen sulphide, among other molecules energized by these vents, to synthesize their constituents. About a billion years later, cyanobacteria, other unicellular organisms, used solar energy to carry out their metabolic activities. Thereafter, all the improvements that marked the stages of evolution from the simplest life form to the most complex and intelligent one – namely, humans – amounted to a single advantage: the ability to better harness the forces of nature for the purpose of perpetuating life.

Humans are handy bipeds with large and convoluted brains who, collectively, are capable of advanced knowledge and technology. They can live together and manage the planet in a spirit of justice and conservation, with a view to long-lasting and high-quality living. What they can do to promote a global civilization of the first order and what they do, however, are often two different things. They are free to effect this worthy promotion or defect from it, though their sense of right and wrong and their fear of the law restrict this freedom with varying degrees of effectiveness. There is no necessity forcing their compliance with a rule of conduct. God leaves the decision to them. They merely ought to fulfill their duty instead of evading it, which will bring them dignity. More precisely, while pursuing happiness, they each are required to show fairness toward others and help humanity be the wise master, not the cancer, of the earth.

This requirement can be rationalized selfishly or not. Those who regard the world as nothing more than a social and natural means to their individual end can also regard the protection of this world against any sort of injurious or ruinous abuse as sensible. Even so, the worst of them neglect to prove consistent, especially if their negligence does not immediately and painfully impact on their existence. As for the best of them, they have a conscience, based on a grateful awareness of their dependence on society and nature, and religiously follow it.

Some enlightened minds do not look at the world solely from the viewpoint of their lower self, otherwise known as their ego. They look at it from the viewpoint of their higher self as well: the divine –

one, prime, timeless, loving, and mighty – cause of which everything is a particular form, nonliving or living. Christ was such a mind. He incarnated to the best of his human ability the love of this divine cause. If he was not the only son of God, he was certainly one of God's most luminous and prodigious incarnations. Through his acts and his words of pure love the warm light of truth was seen and felt as through clear glass.

I am nonetheless very doubtful about the part of his teachings that promises a heaven to the righteous and a hell to the wicked. This promise implies that the spirit of a person can survive the physical death of this person and experience pleasure or pain in the beyond as it did here below, except that this pleasure or this pain would be infinite by way of retribution for righteousness or wickedness. Aside from finding this retribution monotonous or outrageous, I find this survival outside the realm of the living as unbelievable as it is unverifiable. Worse still, it is contrary to common observations, according to which the body, particularly the brain, and the spirit are the two complementary aspects of a single being. Serious brain injuries and the profound character changes associated with them are counted among these observations.

Even the near-death experiences reported by some are intriguing but inconclusive, precisely because they are not death experiences. One can describe them as altered states of consciousness at the limit of life before really passing away, which presupposes a complete and irreversible deterioration of the body tissues, including the brain tissue.

What about the claim of "mediums" that they have the power to communicate with the dead? Within the framework of a scam designed to exploit the credulity of certain people, especially grievers with an appetite for spiritualism, it is scandalous. At best, it is extremely suspicious. All in all, like the alleged omnipotence and omniscience of God, the alleged permanence of the spirit separately from the body cannot convincingly be proved. Conversely, it cannot convincingly be disproved. Dissenters are only acquainted with the realm of the living and hence cannot pretend to know that the realm of the dead is void of spirits. They should present themselves as skeptics who view the afterlife as a transcendent idea open to doubt and blind faith.

I am among those who doubt. In my opinion, the realm of the dead is incomparable to the realm of the living or is unknowable. Of course, with reference to this unknowable realm, nothing known is not nothing, but something unknown. It is a mysterious transcendence that belongs to the unmanifested potential of God. It reminds me of the mysterious transcendence that belongs to the unmanifested potential of a living person. So far as I know, no one has ever ventured to suggest

that this unmanifested potential has a spiritual reality in the beyond. It then appears that whatever a living person does not live anymore, presently, or yet, and does not even remember or imagine, is spiritually dead. Now, there is a fine line between this conclusion and the supposition that a person who no longer lives is both physically and spiritually dead.

Assuming I am right, what positive way of thinking can one adopt to cope with the idea of a complete death as a person: a reduction of one's body and spirit to a mysterious transcendence that belongs to the unmanifested potential of God? My answer to this question is meant to offer sufficient consolation to be an effective means of coping.

God, or the divine – one, prime, timeless, loving, and mighty – cause, is the supreme creator in the universe, capable of an infinity of different creations. Among them are humans, the supreme creatures on earth, capable of an infinity of different habits. Since the beginning of humanity, they have lived countless lives, and chances are they will live countless others. They each have a temporal individuality that contrasts with the eternal divinity that has created them. This temporal individuality is their lower self, whereas this eternal divinity is their higher self. One dies; the other lives on. This death is no more significant to the eternal divinity than a change of habit to the temporal individuality. It normally happens after many years of life, which gives humans enough time to bring many practicable dreams to fruition by dint of considerable efforts. Besides ending the earthly stay of these humans, it is an opportunity for a fresh start (the old, who have a tendency to settle conservatively in their ways, make room for the young, who inject new life into humanity). It is a factor of diversity and progress.

I wonder at the creative power of my higher self, the eternal divinity that has created everything in the universe. My individual experience is a multifarious yet infinitesimal aspect of the divine experience of this higher self. This divine experience includes the human experience, which is staggeringly rich. It is composed of multitudinous individual experiences that are multifarious in themselves and differ from one another. I am a life lover fascinated by this richness, notwithstanding the misery that often accompanies it. Further, I have an aversion to the idea of an afterlife, where one's spirit survives the death of one's body and experiences a perpetual bliss or torment. In my eyes, hell is an unspeakable abomination for its eternity, and heaven is an ineffable ennui for the same reason.

Be that as it may, heaven is a common fantasy. Why? Because people often do not examine this visionary idea at length and in depth, enough to lose interest in it and increase their taste for life? I suppose

so, with some reservations. Perpetual bliss in the afterlife has none of the features that make life uniquely desirable – no change, no variety, no sensualness, no challenge, no excitement, no success, no pride, and no worth as a caring and useful member of the human community, since one cannot be of service to blissful souls who by definition have no needs. The alluring thing is, it also has none of the features that make life uniquely difficult and unbearable at times – no problem adapting to new situations, no suffering, no stress due to social responsibilities, no inner conflicts or moral dilemmas, no worries, no discouragement, no failures, and no shame. People may desire to rid themselves of this second set of features, while neglecting to ponder the implications of this riddance, which is necessarily that of the first set of features as well. The two sets form an organic whole. They either abide together or vanish together. Likewise, eliminate the water and you annihilate the fish.

By delving further into the issue of heaven, it occurs to me that the term “afterlife” is a misnomer. Perpetual bliss is a deadly state that is poles apart from life. If I am correct in thinking that sentience is a universal property of matter, heaven is less suggestive of a living human than of a dead star – one that has exhausted its nuclear energy and collapsed into a superlatively dense, massive, and stable celestial body. This dead star epitomizes the heavenly peace that matter can achieve when allowed to satisfy its tendency toward inertia. Is this tendency dormant in living humans, who after all are material, to say nothing of their spiritual side? Can it awaken and generate a death wish when life is deemed exceedingly difficult or even unbearable? Can this death wish assume the form of a fantasy that is the blissful antipode of life? My answer to these three questions is yes.

A fourth question haunts me. Will matter throughout the universe eventually satisfy its tendency toward inertia and achieve a heavenly peace? In other words, are dead stars the forerunners of a dead universe? In that case, life would be an awesome creation destined nonetheless for extinction. It would belong to an intermediary stage in the evolution of the universe, between an ultrahot stage and an ultracold stage – both unfavorable to life – that would mark the birth and the death of this universe through explosion, expansion, and cooling. This intermediary stage would be likely to last billions of years.

Although the notion that life belongs to such a stage is valid according to modern cosmology, it is conceivable that the universe will never die, or will always pulsate: alternately expand and contract like a living heart, only forever. Life would then disappear sometime in the very distant future but reappear during another intermediary stage, and

would keep disappearing and reappearing thus indefinitely. The deciding factor as to whether this perpetual cycle will take place is the force of gravitation, proportional to the mass of the universe distributed among a myriad of material objects. If this mass is sufficient, this force will cause the universe to stop expanding at one point and begin contracting until a new explosion, which will launch a new expansion, followed by a new contraction, and so on ad infinitum.

Considering the detectable matter in galaxies, the mass of the universe seems insufficient; but judging from a number of singular observations pertaining to the behavior of these galaxies, much of this mass may be of an obscure form called “dark matter.” Plausible examples of “dark matter” are neutrinos (elusive subatomic particles), brown dwarfs (starlike objects sometimes faint to the point of escaping detection), and black holes (stars so massive that their gravitational field precludes the emission of light). They may tip the scales in favor of a pulsating universe that forever alternates between expansion and contraction, and regularly comprises an intermediary stage, neither too hot nor too cold, that is favorable to life for billions of years.

This stage could not conceivably be favorable to life throughout the universe. In the current intermediary stage, the ideal conditions for the creation of life seem even rare, restricted to Earth and perhaps some other planets outside the solar system. Despite numerous scientific investigations, notably during the second half of the twentieth century, there is no conclusive proof of extraterrestrial life, let alone of extraterrestrial intelligence, though the hypothesis that such life and intelligence exist is credible.

Thousands of these investigations have been conducted by the American Air Force into various reports of unidentified flying objects or flying saucers, most of which were identified in the final analysis as aerial flares, aircraft, balloons, bright stars, meteors, satellites, and strange clouds. Approximately five percent of these reports were listed as unexplained, but assumed to involve conventional objects, for lack of evidence to the contrary.

Yet, the case was not nearly closed. Many scientists – like the exobiologist Frank Drake who investigated the possibility of extraterrestrial life, particularly of extraterrestrial intelligence – resolutely kept it open. One of their means of investigation was a radio telescope, in the hope of detecting intelligent signals from deep space. They met with repeated disappointments, while their search continued.

In sum, to date, terrestrial life forms with or without intelligence are the only factual ones; the others are conjectural or fictional. Of these terrestrial life forms, humans are the most evolved. Their existence is a

precious opportunity to understand and serve as effectively and happily as possible the divine – one, prime, timeless, loving, and mighty – cause that is the principle of everything in the universe, this existence included.

This opportunity is in truth a responsibility. Humans ought to gain maximum knowledge of this divine cause, whose love is paramount and intimately knowable in the form of a blessing: They are endowed with a capacity for happiness. Moreover, they ought to support this love by making every effort to attain happiness through solidarity with other humans and harmony with the environment.

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Chiefly with the help of a dear aunt of mine whose kindness and wisdom were a boon to me, I endeavored to improve my book on “vital efficiency,” which was my main way of serving God in the cause of love. This book – my first philosophical work – was not good enough for publication, though it promised well. My dear aunt was the one who truly awoke me to its shortcomings after perusing it at my request. I virtually rewrote it and resubmitted it to her, then revised it extensively and resubmitted it to her, then further revised it and resubmitted it to her, then revised it again and resubmitted it to her, then.... My head is spinning just thinking about it.

My father also had lent me a hand, a weak hand, however, as he was gravely, if secretly, ill. Some fifty years of heavy smoking had taken their toll. He was diagnosed as having lung cancer and was increasingly debilitated by his illness, but had sworn his doctor to secrecy and was showing poise in company, even with his family and familiars. He had led everyone to believe he suffered from emphysema and there was no need to worry. Things were under control, he maintained, while they were going downhill. His claim was in a sense truthful. He controlled his lung condition enough to conceal its extreme seriousness for the year or so it lasted, until the summer day when he collapsed and died, alone and helpless at his cottage, of lung failure. No warm and comforting presence had eased his suffering upon drawing his last breath, except that of the sun.

Several months before this fatal day, my brother – who lived in Guadeloupe and was on vacation at the time – had flown to Canada to visit our parents and me. The four of us, one evening at my apartment, ate supper and conversed afterward. Somehow my brother and I got caught in the crossfire between our parents. Our father had drunk too much wine and his words were littered with innuendos toward our mother, who was prompt to take offence at them and defend herself.

This friction was not new. Their marriage had a history of clashing wishes, painful misunderstandings, non-granted requests, and resentful compromises.

The coming of my brother and me in their life had marked a turning point. What had started as a happy-go-lucky reveling partnership had changed into a children-oriented institution with a call for security and stability. Our mother had reacted to this change in a radical fashion that had disconcerted our father. First she had loved him for the bohemian he was, a carefree intellectual – who was also noble, brilliant, scholarly, original, and witty, plus reasonably attractive into the bargain – with a profound disdain for materialistic values. Then she had adopted a reverse attitude: Her maternal instinct had rendered her anxious and converted her to these values, inasmuch as they appeared favorable to the fulfillment of her maternal role.

Although our father eventually grew more down-to-earth, he never again managed to be on a harmonious and affectionate footing with our mother. Raising children continued raising hell between them, while others had been closely united as lovers and had remained closely united as parents. Paradoxically, it had given them the temptation to leave one another and a reason for staying together. Now their marriage was an old habit comparable to a worn and tattered sweater that has roughly kept its shape, but practically lost its warmth.

At the age of seventeen, my brother left home to study abroad. To my understanding, the family tensions were the underlying motive force behind his decision. Our father was of the old school and considered that his paternal duties consisted primarily in acting as a provider and as an occasional discipliner, when our mother needed backup to enforce the law of reason. Never did he shirk these duties, as he was a man of honor. Yet, after work or on weekends, he frequented the taverns and drank to forget with drinking companions, often till late at night or worse, till early in the morning. He was wretchedly at odds with our mother, who in turn was racked with loneliness and anxiety. She devoted herself to her children with great, sometimes excessive, solicitude and could not help transmitting some of her anxiety to them. My brother was particularly distressed by these imperfections relative to our mother, whereas I was particularly distressed by the alcoholism of our father and the problems connected with it.

He and I (that evening at my apartment when we got caught in the crossfire between our parents) gently attempted to dissuade our father from provoking our mother, since it served no beneficial purpose, quite the contrary. It goaded her into countering with bitter retorts, thereby spoiling our family gathering further. Our attempt was a failure.

In the eyes of our father, who had often come under attack because of his drinking and was on the defensive to begin with, we were siding with our mother against him.

I took my brother aside and discussed with him the importance of redressing the situation. His next visit would be in two or three years and our sickly father might not be alive then. There was a risk that he would go to his grave believing we rejected him. Bearing this in mind, we insisted that we had great affection and respect for him, though – fault common to all humans, including our mother – he was not perfect. There was simply no point in stirring up trouble between him and her, as opposed to helping make our family gathering enjoyable.

Our insistence fell almost flat. He seemed rather unmoved by our declaration of filial love, presumably owing to the deep-seated sense that he was somewhat of a disappointment to us, me in particular who had conspicuously frowned on his drinking habit in the past. Actually, he was hardly receptive to cordial demonstrations of esteem from people in general, which likely signified that he was to a degree unhappy about himself. He greeted them with an awkward, self-deprecating smile.

At the end of the evening, when the time came for us to bid each other goodbye, I kissed and hugged him in a desperate effort to impress my filial love on him, and my brother followed suit. This desperate effort was of little avail. Our father was withdrawn and uneasy, if pleasant. Much to our regret, he died a lonesome death several months later.

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My father's tobacco addiction had long undermined his health and prematurely caused his death. It constituted a deplorable waste of life that reinforced my commitment to maintaining a wholesome lifestyle. Health is the basis for every human achievement, even when it is poor, in which case it provides a lot less vitality and longevity than when it is good. I pledged to do everything possible to be healthy to maximize my potential to live and love.

In fact, health is not just a matter of vitality and longevity; it is also a matter of sanity. A sound mind is a complement to a sound body. Furthermore, the one is dependent on the other. This dependence had dawned on me with dazzling clarity a few months after I had moved into my apartment and improved my diet. By then I had studied many health books. They had helped me define and meet my nutritional requirements much more wisely.

My body needed a balanced and moderate amount of carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, minerals, and vitamins to function well.

Correlatively, the foods containing these nutrients had to be properly chewed to aid digestion and absorption (this did not apply to fiber: a type of carbohydrate that the body can neither digest nor absorb). Proper chewing reduces foods to mush and proportionally increases the effect of the digestive juices on them or the availability of the nutrients that are ready for absorption. I thoroughly performed this simple chore, at the center of life.

To start with, carbohydrates are simple or complex sugars that I generally obtained from fruit, honey, milk products, beets, rutabagas, potatoes, legumes (beans, lentils, or peas), nuts, seeds, whole grains, and the bread, cereal, or pasta made from these grains. Simple sugars and digestible complex sugars serve as an energy source and participate in the synthesis of DNA and RNA molecules: the genetic information and the genetic messengers that enable the organism to regenerate and reproduce. Indigestible complex sugars, better known as dietary fiber, are capable of promoting the elimination of waste through the intestine. Refined foods are depleted of this fiber, without which constipation is a predictable outcome that bodes ill. Except on festive occasions, I resolutely avoided them.

Lipids include two main subdivisions: saturated, monounsaturated, or polyunsaturated fats (with a phosphoric component in some of them – i.e., in phospholipids versus triglycerides that are pure fats) and cholesterol, which is a singular fatty compound. Like simple sugars and digestible complex sugars, saturated fats and monounsaturated fats serve as an energy source. In addition, they contribute to the integrity of the body tissues. Polyunsaturated fats and cholesterol also contribute to this integrity and are used for a variety of vital functions involving the cardiovascular, digestive, endocrine, and immune systems.

A distinctive feature of polyunsaturated fats is their instability. When exposed to heat, light, or air, such as in processing, intense cooking, or prolonged everyday use, they can suffer damage and become harmful. In view of this fact, I was careful to eat the foods that contained them – for example, walnuts and seeds, and the oil extracted from either – in their most natural (unprocessed and if possible uncooked) form and fresh (unspoiled) state. When cooking was necessary, as in the case of fish or tofu, which numbered among these foods, I resorted to steaming or baking in preference to frying and proceeded with caution, while avoiding the pitfall of undercooking. I applied the same basic principles to the foods that contained monounsaturated fats, like peanuts, almonds, olives, and avocado, and the oil extracted from any of them, though these fats are less unstable than their polyunsaturated

counterparts. As for cholesterol, found exclusively in animal products, and saturated fats, found mostly in land animal products, they have a reputation for causing arterial blockage and organ dysfunction if consumed without restraint. I limited my intake of them by following a largely vegetarian diet where animal flesh was the exception, not the rule. Actually, I exercised restraint in my consumption of polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats as well. The opposite, like any lack of moderation, is a health hazard.

Now for proteins. They are various macromolecules that comprise a large number of amino acids (nitrogenous molecules that occur in twenty-two different forms). In the course of digestion, these macromolecules are broken down into these molecular components, which act thereafter as raw material or building blocks to produce new molecules or new macromolecules (polypeptides, smaller than proteins, or proteins) that suit our physiological needs in many areas: the metabolism, the blood, the mucous membranes, the skin and the tendons, the muscles, plus the endocrine, immune, and nervous systems. These molecular components act so if the body has enough carbohydrates and fats to satisfy its energy requirements. Otherwise, they are stripped of their nitrogenous part and mobilized into satisfying these requirements. This constitutes a waste of precious amino acids and a burden to the kidneys, in charge of eliminating the free nitrogenous part after the liver has transformed it into urea. As it happened, my main sources of protein – namely, legumes, nuts, whole grains, and the bread, cereal, or pasta made from these grains, together with milk products and eggs – were also rich in carbohydrates or fats. Here the fats that mattered were saturated or monounsaturated, whereas the polyunsaturated ones were not a favorable means of satisfying my energy requirements, given the many other important roles they played.

Lastly, minerals and vitamins are a group of some thirty substances that complement carbohydrates, lipids, and proteins. A deficiency in one of them can hamper a bodily function and jeopardize in so doing the health of an individual. Collectively, as precursors or components of useful agents, or as useful agents themselves, they assist in numerous processes: vision, nerve impulses and neurotransmission, muscle contraction, digestion and absorption, regulation of blood sugar and of the metabolic rate, respiration, energy production, regeneration and reproduction, formation and maintenance of bones and teeth, coagulation, protection against free radicals (noxious atoms or molecules), and immunity. My usual sources of carbohydrates, lipids, and protein already supplied me with minerals and vitamins, all the

more since they were unrefined. Refining is a terrible refinement that depletes fibers and nutrients in foods. Nevertheless, to make sure I got enough minerals and vitamins, I rounded off these usual sources with additional vegetables: carrots, radishes, cauliflower, red cabbage, green vegetables, leafy or non-leafy, garlic, and onions. I drank plenty of water to boot, though not during or immediately after meals lest I interfere with my digestion by flooding my stomach. Drinking water typically contains a minute quantity of minerals. Much more importantly, it has the ability to replenish the bodily fluids and cleanse the system of undesirable substances.

The best thing about my improved diet was that in a few months my state of mind had taken a turn for the better in a big way. Never before had I thought so clearly and felt so enterprising. I was brimming with vitality and soon became immersed in the writing of my book on “vital efficiency.” It appeared I was a lot more capable of rationalizing and embracing the challenge of leading a fulfilling life, because I was a lot more alive. My energy level had risen dramatically. I could sleep three hours, rest another two hours, and go about my business for the remaining nineteen hours. In conjunction with this rise, my morale was unusually high. Circumstances alone could not account for this boost. My relationship with my girlfriend (the extremely kind and gentle, and rather pretty nurse) was in the doldrums and on the brink of termination. My new apartment, on the other hand, was a significant improvement; but what changed for the better during the few months in question was primarily the condition of my body, which impacted my state of mind. I was vibrant with health, notwithstanding I still experienced bladder problems that somewhat weakened me on occasion. This health was both physical and mental. I had a vigorous and joyous sense of purpose that kept me going and especially writing.

Looking back on my youth, I feel compelled to acknowledge my mother as the founder of my wholesome eating habits. At home, junk food and other edibles of the sort, inferior nutritionwise, were a rarity. She purchased many foodstuffs from the health food store, among them brown bread. Coarse and crumbly, it made the most awkward and embarrassing sandwich bread imaginable. Her cheese, lettuce, and tomato sandwich – a delicious combination whose taste was enhanced by a layer of mayonnaise also purchased from the health food store – required extra skill. The goal was to put it in my mouth one bite at a time, not drop parts of it on the table or my clothes. Perhaps trying to handle a wet cake of soap with greasy rubber gloves would have been good practice for this tricky job. Anyway, I usually managed without

making a mess, except for crumbs, which were one of my trademarks at the school cafeteria.

Another one of my trademarks was the treat my mother occasionally added to my lunch. This treat, referred to as a granola bar, was an agglomerate of dried fruit, nuts, seeds, and rolled oats sweetened with honey. Unlike the common candy bars, it was visibly not from a regular grocery store. The same could be said of the crumbly brown bread that was the most noticeable part of my sandwich. No two ways about it, my lunch was odd. My schoolmates mocked it at times with some reservations, indicative of respect. The health food I lunched on was hardly laughable, judging by my imposing physique.

My mother had a catch phrase that motivated me to consume whatever meal she had prepared: "Eat this; it will help you have big muscles." I did not question her claim. Right from the start, she had evidently known what she was doing. Alive and kicking, I had strength to spare and weighed in excess of ten pounds at birth. I then eventually grew into a lean and powerful two-hundred-and-twenty-pound teenager. The facts spoke for themselves!

During the dark years that followed my diving accident, I deviated from my wholesome eating habits. This deviation was partly due to my limited control over my diet, as I lived in a hospital or a group home. It was also due to my reduced health-consciousness. Largely disgusted with life, I was proportionally hedonistic and suicidal. I sought consolation in gustatory pleasure at the risk of undermining my health. To be more precise, I often overindulged my fondness for fatty and savory foods or sweet ones, with the result that I gained weight and lost my edge – that is, part of my vitality. This loss was ominous. It took a wealth of vitality to accept and overcome the difficulty of attaining happiness. The more I was devitalized and consequently weak, the more I was likely to be daunted by this difficulty.

Devitalization was the worst form of impoverishment. In a state of weakness, it was tempting to deny that happiness was possible or worth the effort and choose the easy option: idleness and carelessness or death. I never gave in to this morbid temptation, but my overindulgence in fatty and savory foods or sweet ones caused my vitality to lessen and my depression to worsen, thereby reinforcing my hedonistic and suicidal tendencies. I had entered a vicious circle, or rather a downward spiral that led to hell.

Fortunately, before it was too late, I became disgusted with my way of life, as opposed to life itself. I was less a victim of circumstances than a fool who brought about his own misery, on account of his negative

attitude and self-destructive behavior. I began my uphill journey to wisdom and health.

My first step in the right direction took place at the group home and I quickened my pace after I had moved into my new apartment. I had plenty of peace and quiet there, which facilitated my intellectual development. I also had full control over my diet, as the planning of my meals was left to me and I managed to do my shopping plus my cooking. The neighborhood included two health food stores that were wheelchair accessible, besides a regular grocery store at street level, and the apartment was fairly well adapted to my special needs. I had no more excuse for persisting in the deviation that had aggravated my situation. At long last, I got back into the habit of eating wholesomely, which was a carryover from my youth. Even better, I improved on this habit by dint of studies in the health field. Self-discipline – a quality I lacked when I was young – was instrumental as well in this improvement. On festive occasions, however, I still allowed myself to feast off rich foods. My body was not totally unforgiving. It gave me enough leeway to savor with impunity a bit of foolishness. To put it simply, there was no need for fanaticism. A perfectly reasonable diet was unnecessary and therefore unreasonable.

How much foolishness could fit into a reasonable diet was a thorny question. The degree of tolerance to rich foods varies from one individual to another, according to the level of fitness and activeness of the individual. Be that as it may, no one can savor with impunity a lot of foolishness. To prove reasonable and enjoy good health, one ought to be foolish in moderation. An implicit benefit of this moderation is the prevention of excess weight: a health hazard that is alarmingly widespread in North America. For my part, I had discovered my limit by exceeding it to my detriment. I had then played safe by eating wholesomely as a rule, which entailed me eating the right amount of the right foods, no more and no less. I left the table after meals feeling nourished yet light, not bloated. In time, I learned to never overeat. Even when I broke my diet, I practiced self-restraint to avert the nauseating heaviness one incurs by gorging oneself. This nauseating heaviness rendered a feast unpleasant in the end, though pleasure had been avidly sought as the object of the feast.

I was aware that a pleasure cannot be infinite. What is more, I was glad that it cannot be so. Ironically, an infinite pleasure would be limiting in the extreme. It would amount to a single pleasurable experience that lasts forever and hence excludes the possibility of other pleasurable experiences. Infinity is incompatible with variety. This inherent limitation of the infinite had set me thinking. If variety is the

spice of life, then why fantasize about an infinite pleasure as though it were ideal? Such a pleasure cannot be as good as it is cracked up to be, seeing that it is lamentably exclusive. It would cloy with a distasteful overabundance of uniformity: a so-called pleasurable experience that admits of no other and is endlessly drawn-out.

Once the finiteness of a pleasure has been accepted, the difficulty of practicing self-restraint is almost overcome. There is a fine line between this acceptance and the willingness to end a pleasure before it degenerates into discomfort or suffering. I simply matched the extent of my indulgence with the extent of my ability to indulge without making myself sick. At no time did I tolerate jeopardizing my health, which was my greatest source of pleasure. What can be more pleasant than the sense of wellness that emanates from health and stimulates one to have a positive and dynamic outlook on life?

In the effort to be healthy, a reasonable diet is not everything. Fresh air and regular exercise ought to form part of this effort. There are two types of exercise; both require stretching, before and after, plus warmup and cooldown periods, to avoid injuries.

The first type of exercise is anaerobic, not dependent on the intake of oxygen. An example of anaerobic exercise is weightlifting. Done frequently, in vigorous workouts, it strengthens muscles and bones. The second and most beneficial type of exercise is aerobic, dependent on the intake of oxygen. An example of aerobic exercise is jogging. Done every day or a few times a week, for at least fifteen minutes (enough to markedly and sustainedly increase the activity of the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, responsible for delivering oxygen to the body tissues), it yields numerous health benefits. Besides strengthening muscles and bones, it raises endurance, improves the handling of stress, promotes good mood, boosts the immune function, reduces the risk of heart attack and stroke, and helps to prevent obesity together with disorders like diabetes and hypertension that often accompany this condition. In a nutshell, fresh air and regular exercise are important aspects of a wholesome lifestyle. They result in someone being stronger, feeling better, and probably living longer.

I for one was bent on obtaining this result, despite my stiff handicap. I aimed to be fit, even athletic, within my limits. I had started to pursue this aim at the group home by propelling my wheelchair around the neighborhood whenever the opportunity arose. Later on, at the apartment, I had continued this pursuit with a vengeance. I had submitted my remaining physical abilities to hard training, with a view to testing them. How far could I push myself, literally and figuratively?

How much could I roll back the frontiers of what I regarded as possible? I was curious to find out.

Since my neck injury, it always had been assumed that my happy days of athletic fitness were over. My spinal cord had suffered extensive and irreparable damage at the level of the fifth cervical vertebra. This was very high. Consequently, my physical limits were very narrow. I had partial use of the deltoids and the biceps in my shoulders and my arms respectively, plus a minute amount of extensor activity in my wrists.

What was the explanation for this consequence? This question called for some grasp of neuroanatomy. The brain controls the skeletal muscles via the spinal cord: a cord of nerve tissue housed in the spine, which is composed of vertebrae. This cord runs from the base of the skull to the second lumbar vertebra in the lower back. At different vertebral levels, in the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar region, it branches off to different muscles. The branches are motor nerves that connect the muscles to the cord. They serve to relay the motor commands of the brain – in the form of nerve impulses – to these muscles. When the spinal cord is severed at a particular vertebral level, every muscle whose motor nerve is connected to the cord below this level is paralyzed. More precisely, the motor commands of the brain cannot reach it and it remains inactive, unless it is shaken by a spasm, which is an abnormal and involuntary muscular contraction.

To better understand my condition, still partly mysterious to my mind, I delved further into the science behind it. I thus refined my picture of the nervous system, with relation to muscle control, or the lack thereof. The spinal cord can be viewed metaphorically as an electrical cord that conducts cerebral impulses and comprises numerous outlets located at various points between the head and the tail of it. Each outlet is wired by two or more nerve cells from within the cord at two or more contiguous vertebral levels, in the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar region. Skeletal muscles, like mechanical devices, are plugged into these outlets, in a particular order that corresponds with their particular location in the body.

A deltoid or a bicep is plugged into an outlet that is wired by two nerve cells from within the cord at the level of the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae. A wrist extensor is plugged into an outlet that is wired by three nerve cells from within the cord at the level of the fifth, sixth, and seventh cervical vertebrae. Given the extensive and irreparable damage that my spinal cord had suffered at the level of the fifth cervical vertebra, immediately below the nerve cells at this level, it came as no surprise that my deltoids, biceps, and wrist extensors were either partially or

minutely active. As for the skeletal muscles that were inactive – and sometimes spastic – in my body, they all shared the same characteristic: The outlets into which they were plugged were wired by nerve cells from within my spinal cord at lower vertebral levels than the fifth one in the cervical region. That is where my spinal cord was damaged extensively and irreparably, because nerve tissue cannot regenerate once it has suffered extensive damage.

On account of my very narrow physical limits, many had recommended I use an electric wheelchair, for the sake of mobility. It was a plain fact – especially at the beginning when, on a flat cement floor, I had the impression of laboring up a steep hill – that my mobility in a manual wheelchair was considerably restricted. Yet I could not bear the thought of me buzzing around in an electric wheelchair as though I were totally incapacitated. I hung on for dear life to my remaining physical abilities, like a disaster victim to the remnants of his treasured past. It was a question of feeling physically alive and capable, at least a little, which was better than nothing. My struggling along in a manual wheelchair afforded me this feeling, however trying it may have been.

In the summer of 1982, at the group home, I began to venture out on the quiet neighborhood streets, which were either flat or barely sloping. I had acquired a sporty manual wheelchair that was easier to push than my standard one. Almost two years later, in February, I moved into my new apartment. I had months of regular outdoor training under my belt; I was poised for the challenge ahead. And what a challenge it was! The driveway to the apartment building was partly on an incline; so was the busy road in front of this building; the shopping mall nearby was flanked by two long ramps; the side roads and the bicycle paths leading to the riverside park a kilometer and a half away included several hills; and there were other hills in the vicinity, some of which were quite big.

When spring arrived, I sprang outside. Well, in my mind I did and my body followed at a crawl like a large restive dog that a willful master has on a leash and muscles forward. The floor of my apartment and of the hallway onto which my apartment opened was covered with a short-pile rug that added to the difficulty of wheeling myself out. The rug, short-pile though it was, caused resistance. Just as it could absorb the impact of walking in some measure, it absorbed part of my driving force, enough to slow me down markedly. This was revealing. All my driving force was still nothing much, despite the exercise I had done before then. It was bound to take me a good deal of toil and trouble to climb the approximately twenty-foot and fifteen-degree incline in the driveway. The ramps by the mall and most of the neighboring hills were

another matter. They were more challenging for their greater size, in terms of length, or grade, or both. Either I could hardly dream of climbing them at that time or I simply could not.

Weather permitting, after my studies, which started early in the morning, I spent about an hour and a half in the mid-afternoon training hard. I laboriously pushed my wheelchair up the incline in the driveway, twice or thrice, then did a round trip to the mall for the purpose of exerting myself further, to say nothing of my shopping when I needed provisions or other commodities, and again laboriously pushed my wheelchair up this incline, twice or thrice.

Actually, I came to this regimen gradually. My first push up the incline was a lengthy battle that ended in victory, much to my delight. Some ten minutes had elapsed during which I had gained ground bit by bit and finally reached the top, though on a few occasions I had somewhat lost control of my wheels and rolled back, and had momentarily halted for a breather. I repeated this push after a round trip to the mall and called it a day. "Tomorrow," I said to myself, "I will do better." And I did. My wheelchair was my weapon that I handled more and more successfully against the incline, my merciless adversary that had the force of gravity on its side. A month later, the above regimen was effective. I was confident that I could fight tooth and nail a more uphill battle and win it.

One sunny mid-afternoon at the outset of summer, I met a young man in a wheelchair who lived in the same apartment building as me. He was bright and driven, and pleasant as well, if extremely competitive. Two years earlier, in a car accident, he had suffered a neck injury similar to mine, except his was lower, at the level of the sixth cervical vertebra. This gave him the advantage over me, to the extent that his upper body was more innervated and functional. Nevertheless, we agreed to exercise together outside when circumstances permitted. He also aimed to be fit, even athletic, within his limits, and used a sporty manual wheelchair. One difference in my favor: As opposed to his standard push rims that he was able to manage effectively, I had special push rims with oblique projections, without which I would have been virtually incapable of pushing my wheelchair. This difference did not even things up. While he led the way, I lagged behind and strove to narrow the gap between him and me.

Our first joint exercise venture consisted in climbing one of the ramps by the mall, which were rather long and steep. By the time I conquered the summit and claimed victory, after fifty minutes of strenuous advances and vexatious setbacks, he had twice yo-yoed up and down the ramp, by dint of vigorous efforts. A few minutes later,

bolstered with our proud success, we tackled the other ramp and again proudly succeeded. He had pushed his wheelchair up the first half of it, which was the steeper and hence the tougher of the two, then had pivoted on his wheels to watch my progress and cheer me on, while waiting for me. Once I had drawn level with him, he had resumed and completed his ascent. I could not keep up with this superior conqueror, yet I had battled my way to a second victory. Another grueling fifty minutes had passed. I was weary of exercise and hungry for supper. "Ciao, my friend, I'm off!"

During that summer, we daringly climbed almost every sizable and challenging hill in the neighborhood, west of the apartment building. Our climbing of the ramp at either side of the mall was only a steppingstone to further conquests. For a start, we attacked and conquered the scattered hills along the side roads and the bicycle paths that led to the riverside park.

This park was a delightful stopping place, accessible to walkers, cyclists, and people in wheelchairs alike, thanks to an asphalt path and a boardwalk. It comprised a well-groomed lawn, interspersed with benches, picnic tables, and litter baskets, in addition to luxuriant shrubs, conifers, and broad-leaved trees. It also comprised a well-kept sandy beach with a friendly café and clean washrooms. A multiethnic crowd of sunbathers and swimmers, watched by lifeguards, was dotted around it and the expanse of water before it whenever the sun was shining. This beach skirted a bay in a widened section of a river, which was strewn by day with sailboards and sailboats floating in the distance. Their sails formed a captivating kaleidoscope of multicolored triangles and quadrilaterals that shifted constantly on the glittering waves.

Most of the hills were downward in the direction of the park. This made the return trip a very uphill battle. I won it the first time by the skin of my teeth after an epic struggle that lasted two and a half hours. My brave companion in arms had long before hoisted his victory flag, so to speak, while I still fought the enemy and my strength was flagging. Anyway, I managed to crawl up the final hill. And what pleasure I took in turning around to look down on my vanquished enemy, prostrated at my feet!

Every day, for the rest of the summer, unless the weather was also against me, I set aside part of the afternoon to improve my performance on the battlefield: the hilly route from the park to my place. Sometimes my young friend accompanied me; sometimes he did not, owing to a previous engagement. Besides, he was partial to morning exercise, whereas I studied then. I usually went out past 3 p.m. with a view to returning home when the sun was beginning to wane. The hotter

the sun, the weaker I was, and I had no strength to waste, though I was getting stronger. I was also getting faster, since my speed increased in direct ratio to my increasing strength.

In mid August, on the way back from the park, I could conquer the hills and the rest of it in one hour and a half. This was still slow, no doubt. But then humans, on foot or on wheel, unmotorized, have always been slow relatively speaking, with varying degrees of slowness. For all their might, their speed is infinitely far from equaling the speed of light. I accepted my humanness that was particularly slow. I was behind my young friend, who was behind millions of others. Never mind that! I was ahead of myself for my progress. Even better, my motion was lightning by comparison with everything that was lifeless and motionless.

Last on the list of my conquests were two gigantic hills that had initially daunted me. Each was located in a street that adjoined the hilly route from the park to my place. My winning the battle against them constituted the high point of my summer training. Again the superior conqueror had outstripped me on the road to victory. He had alone defeated one of the two giants early in August.

As for me, I had resolved to pit myself against them after I had become sufficiently fit and armed to win. This was in late August. My wheelchair was now equipped with two knurled blocking devices that, once engaged, caught on the tread of the tires and prevented me from rolling backward, while allowing me to roll forward. "Let's fight it out!" I had cried inwardly at the sight of the first giant, closer to the park than the second one. And I had inched my way to the top in under one hour, despite my enemy's relentless opposition. A couple of days later, the second giant had likewise resisted my attack and failed to repel it. I could hardly believe that my body – which I had regarded as dead after my diving accident – had enough life in it to pull (perhaps I should say push) these victories off. I pleasantly surprised myself.

In November, I began to spend my days largely writing my philosophical book. This left me time to exercise indoors daily. I was determined to maintain the gain in fitness I had made through months of hard training outside. My young friend entertained the same determination. We entered a weekly exercise session in a new rehabilitation facility at the eastern end of the city, though we lived at the western end of it. The days of the week that we did not attend the exercise session, we sometimes got together at my apartment to lift weights: sand-filled double bags that weighed ten pounds and straddled the forearm, for short anaerobic exercises, or sand-filled triple pouches

that weighed two pounds and fastened around the wrist, for long aerobic exercises. Every other time, I exercised solo.

Half my exercise program involved two apparatuses of my own invention that a rehab engineer and a handyman friend of mine had made at my request. The first apparatus was a simple pulley system, mounted on one of my bedroom walls. The pulley was part of a hinged and padded board on which I rested my elbow to pull up a twenty-pound weight – sitting on the floor and attached to a rope plus a metal hook – with the aid of a leather wristband that included a metal ring. The second apparatus was a twofold spring system, anchored to my bedroom door. The springs extended beyond their anchorage point by about three feet and hooked on to the rear of my wheelchair, which I pushed to and fro against their resistance. Altogether, I was well geared up for a long winter of indoor exercise.

When the warm season came around, I was fit to rise to my old challenges. In company with my young friend or alone, I reclinced what I had climbed before – namely, the two ramps by the mall and almost every sizable and challenging hill in the neighborhood, west of our apartment building. I then climbed all the neighboring hills I encountered east of the apartment building, the majority of which were also sizable and challenging. Within a radius of nearly two kilometers, there was practically nothing else I could do, in the way of hill climbing, besides redoing what I had done. I was hungry and ready for a new, more arduous and adventurous, challenge.

One weekday late afternoon in June, on the way back from the mall, I met my young friend in the driveway. He was going to a restaurant, accompanied by his girlfriend, a rather pleasant and pretty young woman. “How about pushing ourselves across the city to the rehab this coming weekend, if the weather’s OK?” I asked. (The rehab meant the new rehabilitation facility, twenty-two hilly kilometers away from home.) “Are you game for that?” There and then, he appeared stunned, but in a second he recovered his composure. His swift turnaround reminded me of a cat that can fall belly up from someone’s hands and flip itself in midair to land on its feet. He looked at his girlfriend without saying a word and looked back at me. “Yes, I’m game.”

Sunday morning, we set course under our own steam for the rehabilitation facility. The weathercasters had predicted excellent weather conditions: partly sunny with a ten- to fifteen-kilometer-per-hour wind and a high of twenty-five degrees Celsius. Judging by appearances, they were right or not far wrong. Hurrah! We were all psyched up for the challenge ahead of us. The bulk of it amounted to five upward slopes whose size ranged from large to huge, plus a number

of ascents that were often lengthy but had a low gradient. Now and then, these upward slopes and ascents were compounded with a lateral slant. The same was true of the downward slopes. As for the rest of the way, it was slanting only laterally, if not completely even.

The lateral slants were very gentle as a rule. Yet, on paths, roads, or sidewalks that were uphill or longitudinally even, they slowed us down, me especially. They caused our wheelchairs to pull to the left or to the right, thereby reducing our ability to push ourselves forward in a straight line.

The downward slopes – now and then compounded with a lateral slant – were also awkward as far as I was concerned. To decelerate or steer my wheelchair, I did not simply use my hands like my young friend; I relied on brakes that were conveniently equipped with accessible and manageable handles, but were designed to make the wheelchair stationary, not to control its speed or its direction while it was in motion. They each consisted of a jointed metal assembly with a mobile and projecting flat metal piece that either remained slightly away from the tread of the tire or pressed directly against it depending on whether the handle was in the off or the on position. To safely operate them downhill, I needed to go slow. Had I recklessly ignored this need, I probably would have lost control of my wheelchair and accidentally braked abruptly as I went fast or collided with whatever object was in front of me. In either case, I would have been catapulted out of my seat, which would have been comical, were it not for the fact that it would have been detrimental or even fatal. I lacked the boundless resilience of cartoon characters.

Between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, the weather increasingly deviated from the prediction of the weathercasters. The sky turned perfectly clear, with the result that the temperature rose to about thirty degrees Celsius. This perfection was excessive and unwelcome. Until then some scattered clouds had intermittently screened the sun, which was no longer a warm companion in my eyes but a merciless opponent that was pummeling me. These clouds had served as my guard against it. Now my guard was totally failing me and there was only so much I could take. I easily overheated, as my body was unable to cool itself adequately. Why? I did not know. It just appeared that near quadriplegia and thermoregulation were mutually exclusive to a dangerous extent. There was not a single bead of sweat on me. I kept reminding myself that the sun would gradually tire of the match and finally leave the ring. Before it lost by default, however, I had to survive the hottest rounds. Fortunately, I did. I endured the incandescent hooks, jabs, and uppercuts without being knocked out, though my stamina was weakened.

This weakening entailed a slowing down on my part. Since the beginning of our trek, my young friend had been remarkably patient with me. He had frequently stopped and waited to give me a chance to catch up with him. This time, the situation was much different, not to say much worse. The temperature was higher and I was slower. I could not reasonably expect him to sit still and bake like a roast in the solar oven while I labored along at a snail's pace. At first, in the name of comradeship, he continued waiting for me regardless, but his will to persevere soon melted away in the inferno. To press on in this inferno was hard enough; to alternately pause in it for a spell and resume his effort was yet harder. Actually, it was more than he could bear. He apologized for being restless and wished me good luck, then proceeded without stopping toward the rehabilitation facility, which he reached almost two hours later. The sun had literally put the heat on him to stay on the move; I did not blame him for leaving me behind.

Little by little, I closed the gap between my destination and me. This gap extended east for two kilometers plus. It comprised a large upward slope and a huge one, plus two lengthy ascents of low gradient, together with a stretch of path, road, and sidewalk that was often slanting laterally, though it was longitudinally even. An Olympic marathoner would have closed it at a canter in under ten minutes. I, on the other hand, an athletic turtle that heat had reduced to the level of an athletic snail, closed it at a crawl in over four hours.

By the time I arrived at the rehabilitation facility, the sun had withdrawn, much to my relief, and darkness had settled over the city. Twelve and a half hours had elapsed between my departure from home and this arrival, during which I had covered twenty-two hilly kilometers. Not even two kilometers per hour on average! To tell the truth, I had made a number of "pit stops" along the way: one at a restaurant to have lunch, another at a convenience store to eat a snack, yet another at a garage because of brake problems, and several others here and there to relieve the pressure on my long seated and forever paining rump by lifting myself as much as I could with the help of my push rims. So my average may have been somewhat in excess of two kilometers per hour after all. Wow! I was quick as the wind – well, an extremely sluggish wind. My wheels certainly left no spin marks on the cement or the pavement.

I vividly remember the moment when, victorious at long last, I emerged from the semidarkness of the driveway that led to the rehabilitation facility. I was happily advancing into the well-lit open area that spread along the front of the building and preceded the porch. A greeting committee of sorts had attended my progress until this happy

moment. At either side of the driveway, a lineup of lampposts, spaced a short distance apart, had bowed and strewn the pavement with yellow petals of light by way of a respectful welcome.

A more heartwarming welcome followed this lifeless display of respect and hospitality that one could transfigure poetically without altering in the least its cold reality. My young friend – who had entered the rehabilitation facility close to three hours earlier – was patiently waiting for me with his girlfriend in the main entrance. As soon as they caught sight of me, they rushed to meet me at the door. They greeted me with a smile and complimented me on my perseverance. I thanked her and returned the compliment to him. He was rightfully proud of his trek across the city, which had been quite a struggle, though he probably would have completed it in half the time if I had not delayed him. I also prided myself on my performance, despite the fact that I had crossed the city very slowly, with great difficulty, or rather because of this fact. To travel with ease is one thing, to trek is another that makes reaching the destination all the more gratifying as this destination is hard to reach. Having said that, I was glad my trek was over for a plain reason that had nothing to do with merit: I was dead weary and ready for bed.

The following summer, I did not again set my heart on trekking across the city with my young friend. This joint athletic effort failed to suit him, given that he was way ahead of me, physically speaking. We still exercised together outside on occasion, around our neighborhood. My physical disadvantage was not a great inconvenience to him when he covered with me a short distance such as that between our apartment building and the riverside park. But if he covered with me, from start to finish, the long distance between our apartment building and the rehabilitation facility, that would be another story. My physical disadvantage would in that case entail his enduring hours of tedious or even onerous waiting. I had no intention of requesting him to go through such a bout of unpleasantness.

I ended up changing our trek across the city into a publicized marathon I undertook without him for the purpose of both testing my strength and raising money. I was determined to improve on my last performance and serve a charitable cause at the same time. I received periodically a disquieting letter from a reputable international nonprofit organization that did extensive relief work in the most destitute or stricken parts of the world. This letter solicited me for a donation. I sent none. Instead I raised money for this organization through my marathon.

Thanks to a team effort that involved some of my friends, numerous circulars were printed and mailed or handed to people, or posted on walls and stacked on shelves or tables at the rehabilitation facility and certain schools, community centers, and apartment buildings, plus a few placards were made and displayed in shopping malls east or west of the city. In addition, I prepared a press release and distributed it to local newspapers and radio or television stations, which I also contacted by phone. Meanwhile, every mid afternoon, I trained hard outdoors or indoors depending on the weather. Then, one semi-clear Saturday in June – on the date I had set for this event and which was subject to alteration in case it rained – I did my marathon. Moreover, I did it in nine hours, by contrast with the twelve and a half hours it had taken me the first time to cover the same distance – namely, the twenty-two hilly kilometers from my place to the rehabilitation facility. My average had increased to a breezy figure: a little short of three kilometers per hour, provided I left the “pit stops” out of my calculations. At that speed, I still had no problem keeping my cap on.

Besides the slightly cooler weather during this marathon, compared with the excessive heat that had slowed me down the year before, two improvements largely accounted for my increased average. Firstly, the rehab engineer who previously had made a pulley system at my request had rigged up my wheelchair with bicycle handbrakes according to my specifications. These specifications included some modifications that allowed me to use these handbrakes effectively. Secondly, in the course of the marathon, I had repeatedly covered my palms with chalk powder to double their traction on my push rims. On top of everything else, I had perhaps benefited from a small gain in strength I had made through daily exercise since my last trek across the city. At any rate, I had not been as slow in ascending the upward slopes and had descended the downward ones much faster. Likewise, I had done better on the even or partly so remainder of the way.

An intimate friend of mine – a muscular, bright, and altruistic man my age who loved to walk and talk – had kept me company. My marathon had afforded us a golden opportunity to spend some quality time together. He had walked beside or a bit ahead of me at a leisurely pace, especially when I ascended a slope. Everything changed when I descended one. On that special, magical, occasion I metamorphosed into a sprinting hare and gloated my way down the slope while he trotted behind me at the lesser speed of a ponderous mammal, with all due respect.

As a fundraising campaign, my marathon had yielded an extremely poor result: two hundred and fifty dollars, in the form of

checks, that donators had mailed directly to the charitable organization. I found this result all the more disappointing since I had invested in this campaign nearly a hundred dollars of my own money, besides a substantial amount of time and effort, to make it financially worthwhile. Some of my friends' time and effort had added to this investment. Yet the fact remained the money raised was not insignificant. Surprisingly enough, in many destitute or stricken parts of the world, two hundred and fifty dollars could serve to alleviate a lot of suffering.

Every summer, for six years, I redid my marathon. As before, my purpose was twofold: to test my strength by trekking across the city and to raise money in the service of the same charitable organization. On my best year, I raised four hundred dollars. Of course this was still an extremely poor result in comparison with the thousands or even millions of dollars yielded by more popular marathons, whose scale of fundraising operation and media coverage was considerably larger. From my viewpoint, however, which was that of an unknown who had chosen to use his athletic endeavor as a means of contributing financially to a particular charity, this result was disappointing but not discouraging. Aside from the fact that it was not insignificant (for the reason given above), it was quite respectable, as would be a four-hundred-dollar donation on the part of any unwealthy individual.

On a purely athletic level, my greatest marathon was my fifth and longest one. It was twice the length of my first marathon – that is, forty-four hilly kilometers long, from my place to the rehabilitation facility and back. Two new improvements had helped me work up the courage to undertake this double trek. I had changed my wheelchair for a lighter one that was somewhat easier to wheel. It had all the extra advantages of its predecessor, including the blocking devices for rolling uphill without ever accidentally backing up and the partly modified bicycle handbrakes for rolling downhill with an excellent control of the wheelchair. I had also created a design for fingerless leather gloves that would be fairly easy to put on and could perform the same function as chalk powder, only better. A professional seamstress – specialized in making garments for people with special needs – had agreed to make them and had succeeded beautifully. As a result of these two new improvements, I had reduced my one-way marathon time by two hours and hence increased my average wheeling speed to approximately four kilometers per hour. You saw me, then you did not. Admittedly, this “then” was still not very soon, especially when I ascended a huge slope.

In company with the intimate friend that had kindly accompanied me on my first marathon and my three subsequent ones, I began my fifth and longest marathon on a nippy and rather cloudy

morning in June, before dawn. I finished it sixteen hours later, after a rainy and cool mid morning, a clear and sweltering mid afternoon, and a welcome spell of ideal weather toward the end of the day.

Since I had covered the twenty-two hilly kilometers from my place to the rehabilitation facility in seven hours the previous summer, I had expected I would cover twice that distance in about fourteen hours, not in sixteen hours. Two additional reasons had convinced me that I was justified in expecting this: The outward and return treks were comparable in terms of challenge and I had physical endurance to spare.

The delay was due to unfavorable weather conditions and my unwise choice of trek wear. Besides a pair of jeans and light wool socks, I had worn a mere cotton T-shirt to avoid hampering my upper body movements with heavy clothing. Although this T-shirt had been appropriate in the sweltering mid afternoon, it had been unpleasantly insufficient during the nippy or cool morning hours, except at the beginning when the nip in the air had felt invigorating. My arms had become a bit stiff and awkward because of mild hypothermia, which had slowed me down as much as the weakening effect of the blazing sun afterward.

Needless to say, the rain had not helped matters, though luckily I had been spared the brunt of it in a building that comprised a few shops and restaurants. A cotton sweatshirt plus a nylon jacket (which I could have worn over my cotton T-shirt and removed at my discretion) would have been advantageous, if slightly inconvenient. Oh well, what is done is done. I behaved foolishly that day, but fortunately my foolishness only caused me some discomfort and a delay. It was an opportunity for learning a lesson – an opportunity that was typical of the human experience, I would add. You often learn at the university of life by suffering the consequences of your errors. Likewise, you often learn safely through hearsay, books, or other sources of secondhand knowledge, but not as effectively. The lessons for which you have suffered most are the best remembered ones. They are also the ones least liable to be ignored.

After my fifth and longest marathon, in anticipation of which I had trained harder than ever, the chronic bursitis in my shoulders worsened to an alarming degree. Before then, it had been faintly annoying at best, sharply troubling at worst, but in the teeth of it I had roughly managed to do what I wanted to do. Day in day out, from early morning until noon, I had studied or written in bed while lying on my side, which was hard on the shoulder that acted as my fulcrum. Every mid afternoon that the weather was favorable, I had pushed my wheelchair for several kilometers in my hilly neighborhood. Otherwise

I had exercised vigorously and extensively indoors. In sum, although the chronic bursitis in my shoulders had compounded the torture in the rest of my body with a nagging pain, whose intensity ranged from faint to sharp, it had not restricted my already limited physical freedom to the point of alarming me. It had been a stubborn nuisance, not a serious hindrance.

Things took a turn for the worse shortly after the aforesaid marathon. There had been signs of a deterioration in the condition of my shoulders, or more precisely of their bursas: fluid-filled sacs that are located close to joints and serve to minimize the friction between muscles or tendons and bones. These signs had warned me of a crippling eventuality. I had mainly shrugged them off and pressed on with my strenuous habits. I was used to my chronic bursitis worsening and improving alternately, without me altering these habits to any great extent. The snag was that this time it worsened more than usual and suddenly hit a new low in severity. My shoulders became so inflamed and sore that I was practically unable to do anything for an entire day. As the week progressed, the soreness and the restriction regressed. I gradually and moderately returned to my habitual outdoor or indoor exercises. My shoulders nevertheless left much to be desired. I felt a residual soreness that was reminiscent of the times when my chronic bursitis troubled me sharply, except it was sharper. The message was clear: I had pushed myself too hard.

My daily studying or writing in bed for several consecutive hours while lying on my side had been partly responsible for straining my shoulders. Because my sitting tolerance did not allow me to sit each day in my wheelchair from early morning until evening and since I was unwilling to idle away my daily time in bed, it had been impossible for me to eliminate this cause of strain. Yet I had reduced it by different means: a better lying position, combined with additional padding over my mattress, frequent stretches, and a regular switch from one side to the other.

The second and most injurious culprit straining my shoulders had been my excessive training plus my extra long marathon under largely unfavorable weather conditions. Moderation was imperative and therapy advisable. I underwent weekly ultrasounds for a couple of months in a clinic whose specialty was the treatment of sports injuries. This more or less restored my old self, with its familiar aches and pains to which I had grown accustomed. My attitude changed, however, this fortunate albeit imperfect recovery notwithstanding. I was only in my mid-thirties and had no desire to turn a hundred at the age of forty. After all, I aimed to be fit, not to cripple myself further. I did two more

one-way marathons and quit, though I still exercised regularly outdoors or indoors, with days of rest or limited exertion offsetting days of intense exercise. Charity begins at home, as they say.

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Once I had worn out my fingerless leather gloves, I visited the seamstress who had made them; I needed to replace this old pair with a new one. As I placed my order, she sadly informed me it might be the last time she could make gloves for me, or anything else, for that matter. Her business, which involved other seamstresses who specialized in making garments for people with special needs, was threatening to fold. The government had subsidized it yearly until now, but had decided to terminate this aid from the next fiscal year onwards. Budget cuts were a trend in Canadian politics at the time; the seamstress and her associates were subjected to it, much to their disappointment. Without government subsidy, they would be unable to continue offering custom-made garments at affordable prices to their clients, who constituted a small minority of people with special needs, many of whom lived on a small income.

The seamstress and her associates had not given up hope, though. In protest at the government's decision, they had launched a petition. So far, they had collected some twelve hundred signatures – mostly from sympathizers in the community, besides the clients themselves – and they were due to appeal against this decision in parliament a month later. They were clearly worried, if stubbornly hopeful. They kindly requested me to sign their petition and collect signatures, for the sake of everyone they served, me included. I felt compelled to grant both requests. I put down my John Henry and picked up ten petition sheets.

A week passed. I had collected a hundred signatures. I called the seamstress to report my result to her and inquire about the status of the petition at her end. She sounded a bit depressed, though she was thankful for my effort and cheered by it. Apart from the hundred signatures I had collected, the petition was in the doldrums and the final showdown was scheduled for a Tuesday, three weeks away.

What ought to be my next move? There were two choices open to me: I could tell myself that I had done my share and leave it to the seamstresses to collect more signatures in the hope of swaying the government from its decision to cut off their subsidy; or I could keep injecting new blood into their petition, which had become anemic after

a spell of vigor, and increase in so doing their chances of surviving the political trend that had brought on a series of budget cuts.

I was fond of these seamstresses, four goodhearted and hardworking ladies in their late forties or early fifties who provided a unique and valuable service for a small minority of people with special needs such as me and others like me that were challenged by an extensive physical disability. It was very tempting to lend them a hand and raise their spirits. Likewise, it was very tempting to regard the hundred signatures I had already collected as a perfectly honorable contribution to the advancement of their cause, which was also mine to a certain extent. The advantage in regarding these signatures so was that I would feel free to pursue my regular occupations – chiefly devoted to writing and studying, but all the same concerned with exercise or leisure for part of the afternoon and evening – without any further disruptions.

After a heated and protracted debate between me, in favor of yielding to the first temptation, and myself, in favor of yielding to the second one, I resolved to side with me against myself, who soon took his defeat in stride. For the nineteen following days before the deadline, I began to write or study even earlier in the morning than was usual for me and spent my afternoon and often part of my evening as well canvassing people for their signatures at target places in the city – namely, the rehabilitation facility, the main nursing homes, and all the hospitals.

During these nineteen days, I increasingly felt sympathy for telemarketers who repeat their sales pitch again and again, a staggering number of times, day after day, and every so often meet with a rebuff. If they phoned me, they got nowhere, but I took them there first class. They fell on a very padded “no thank you” and I helped them pick themselves up and move on to the next pitch. Luckily, people seldom turned their back on me when I approached them with my speech, short and to the point: The object of the petition was to save a unique tailoring business that catered for the special clothing needs of the physically disabled at affordable prices; this business had come into being and stayed alive thanks to a yearly subsidy from the government, which had recently decided to cut this subsidy off in the name of thrift, while it lavished money on many bureaucratic luxuries among other questionable expenditures. By Tuesday – the dreaded Tuesday when the seamstresses were to submit their petition in parliament – I had collected five thousand signatures.

The seamstresses, for their part, had collected by that Tuesday about eight hundred additional signatures, which had raised their total to two thousand signatures. Altogether, between them and me we had

collected seven thousand signatures. This represented a sizable lineup of endorsements to be reckoned with, we thought. How could the voice of all the signatories (in favor of a government subsidy for a financially dependent service that benefited a small minority of people with special needs) not carry a good deal of clout? The requested subsidy was well under \$100,000 per annum, a minuscule fraction of the taxpayers' money that could be used to maintain this service. Was it not the distinguishing feature of an advanced democracy that the majority and minorities alike could find representation in the government and satisfaction in the community?

That, in essence, was the seamstresses' way of thinking, which I shared with them. It implied a preference for a political solution to social problems that put certain citizens at such a disadvantage that they required assistance. Humanity was most civilized when charity was institutionalized, not only in the form of charitable organizations, but also in the form of governmental departments ruled by an elected political party and devoted to solving social problems. In that case, citizens who required assistance were not reduced to begging; they were entitled to this assistance. Charity was then a policy that revealed the superior collective consciousness of the people who supported a kind of government that was kind indeed.

Besides, everyone was a potential, if not actual, recipient of welfare. Good fortune and ill fortune were reversible opposites, except ill fortune was sometimes irreversible. A society that possessed an excellent infrastructure capable of helping its members deal with reversals of fortune was one that offered great security. Who were so healthy and wealthy, so self-assured and self-centered that they regarded such a social advantage as a social burden they did not care to carry? This burden was that of taxation, because security had a price. Who were ready to get rid of the tax for their wealth to wax? Obviously not those who leaned on this tax.

The seamstresses had the opportunity to declare their viewpoint when they lodged their appeal. The government official responsible for handling this appeal – a businesslike and courteous man wearing an elegant suit and tie – had a counter viewpoint that was not in absolute contradiction with theirs, but imposed an arbitrary and unfavorable limit on it. According to him, the government had intended to subsidize the special tailoring business conducted by the seamstresses only for the start-up years. It had expected this business to grow cost-effective and develop fundraising capabilities, and ultimately wean itself off its subsidy dependence. The same day, the petition was cast in the trashcan,

and two months later, the seamstresses had vacated their workplace. I never saw them again.

I was not sorry I had poured my energy into a lost cause – which I had wrongly considered a potential winner – like water into a broken glass. My thirst for success had remained unquenched, yet I had the satisfaction of having tried my hardest to succeed. Had I shied away from this effort, I would have been both thirsty for this success and hungry for this satisfaction. Perhaps the worst hunger pangs are those one suffers when one has failed to satisfy one's conscience, which requires that one do one's best to achieve what one sees as right. Perhaps also the greatest satisfaction is the one derived from meeting this requirement. One then succeeds on a moral level, though possibly to no practical avail.

To have this possibility become a reality in spite of oneself is to fail on only one count instead of two, and this count is second to the other. What could be more important than the moral stature of a person? Success in the practical sense is nevertheless the object one rightly pursues, especially since the earnest pursuit of it is a prerequisite for a clear conscience. Furthermore, it is a vital object. The total lack of it in every area of activity would amount to a fatal ineffectiveness. Although my vigorous attempt to reverse the government's decision ended in failure, I was not that ineffective, thank God! Alive and kicking – well, very much living – I can testify to this fact with a blend of pride and humility.

On reflection, my vigorous attempt to reverse the government's decision had a positive flip side, even on a purely practical level. If nothing else it had heartened the seamstresses. By showing spirit I had raised their morale. I had no illusions about the extent of this raise, however; it was very limited. Each day for three weeks, like a disciplined gardener, I had planted in their minds some hope and some cheer that had bloomed on their faces at irregular intervals in the form of smiles yet more fleeting than ephemeral flowers. Three weeks, that is all, until the dreaded Tuesday had proven dreadful. The frost of rejection had killed the hope and the cheer.

This transitory experience – which consisted of ever-renewed efforts for the sake of short-lived feelings of dignity and joy – can be viewed as an allegory of the human existence. Throughout this existence, every effort is the same in terms of this sake, though the goal toward which it is directed for this sake may vary. It is essentially a matter of principles. Whichever way one strives to attain well-being or help people attain it, one always aims at living up to these principles, in the service of oneself or others. Now, living up to them is a never-ending effort

until death. It has to be done time and time again, day in day out. One can resist the necessity of repeating this effort or one can rejoice over the opportunity to relive the feelings of dignity and joy. A preposterous idea springs to mind. What if women and men were to stop cutting or shaving the hair on various parts of their bodies because it keeps growing back? Things would get very hairy, literally and figuratively!

I was resolved to be in the swim – which entailed an ongoing exertion, except in times of rest when I could float on my back as it were – instead of letting myself sink into lethargy. I was also prepared for anything because anything, good or bad, could happen. Principles, goals, and efforts, these aspects of one's life are under the control of one's conscious self, but outcomes are another matter. They depend largely on circumstances that are outside this control. At best, success is probable, while failure remains a possibility. There is plenty of room for surprises. One can only hope they will not be unpleasant, or at least not insuperably painful or deadly. I myself tried my luck with caution in a spirit of adventure.

I recall witnessing an unforeseen and remarkable event. A week before the dreaded Tuesday, I was canvassing people for their signatures in a nursing home. I took the opportunity to visit an acquaintance of mine who lived on the fourth floor. Wheelchair-bound due to a car accident, he had been the oldest resident at the group home and was now a patient of the nursing home. When I arrived at his room, the door was closed. According to a nurse who worked on his floor, an orderly was tending to him and he would soon be ready to receive company. Meanwhile, I parked nearby.

In an armchair that was within view of my parking spot, though it was inside a room across the hall on my left, a tiny middle-aged man sat helplessly for his extreme disability and spasticity. He could not have been over four feet in height and sixty pounds in weight. He was in fact so undersized, deformed, and contorted, and oddly hairy to boot, he hardly looked human. What is more, he drooled profusely, which accounted for the bib that hung from his neck. Just for a moment, while he turned his gaze to his window instead of his doorway that opened onto the hall, I stared at him in shock. I then occasionally glanced at him with a strong but concealed aversion tempered with a profound compassion. It was all the harder for me to see him as human since he was incapable of speech. He brayed and grunted by way of self-expression. Judging from appearances, his intellect was terribly stunted, which added to his physical handicap and monstrosity. Never in my life had I laid eyes on such a horrific and pathetic sight.

Out of nowhere, a nurse in her early thirties appeared by his side. Dressed in white and wearing white shoes plus a white cap, she was a vision of neatness and loveliness. Not that she was the most physically beautiful woman imaginable. Her looks were the least of her assets for all her obvious charms – among them her silky blond hair, which was clearly genuine, her rather pretty face, her slim figure, and her gait that was exquisitely graceful and subtle. Her every coming and going was marked by an unearthly weightlessness that enthralled me.

However exceptional this attribute was, it did not actually look supernatural. One could say she was poetry in motion and leave it at that. I, on the other hand, kept wondering at her weightlessness. She walked as though she had invisible wings that fluttered swiftly like those of a hummingbird, enough for her to hover immediately above the floor while her feet shifted back and forth to maintain a semblance of walking. True, this object of wonder was a figment of my imagination as well as a visual perception of her gait. Nevertheless, it revealed her angelic nature with greater realism than if it had been restricted to this limited perception. It was a partly insubstantial bridge that led to the hidden side of the obvious. My mind could safely cross it. Likewise, a piece of down – driven by a faint breath of air – could pass without a hitch through a house of cards.

The more I observed the nurse, discreetly of course, out of decency, the more I realized that her loveliness was less before my eyes than beyond them. It made me think of a golden jewelry chest filled with jewels that are incomparably valuable and bright. She radiated beauty in the same way as the sun emits light – that is, by virtue of her whole being and to such a degree that I felt dazzled and enlightened. This whole was largely spiritual, whereas its material part, the body, was a mere interface between her divine soul and the world. She was love incarnate. No sign of repulsion and affectation, no sign of irritation and condescension, she showed nothing but affection and consideration to the man in her care. Her goodness was flawless.

Two aspects of her stand out in my memory: her hands and her voice. They belonged to her physical reality, which served as the instrument of her love. Soft and warm, ideally fit to bring comfort to others, they were balms. She could work magic with them, thanks to many tender actions and kind words. Moreover, she could work this magic in a short time. During the few minutes that she cared for the man, she transfigured him. His grimacing face loosened like a series of Gordian knots in the hands of a wizard and he smiled. Evidently, he knew he had been obliged by an angel with a heavenly touch and tone, and felt blessed. As for her, there is no doubt she was acutely aware of

his capacity for this knowledge and feeling. He could as easily sense and savor her love as he could bask enjoyably in sunshine. With regard to this capacity, he was normal and whatever beauty, power, or wisdom he lacked did not matter in the least; hence it was positively irrelevant.

He was also normal in a second essential regard. He could experience gratitude toward his benefactor and pride in the act of returning the favor as much as possible. Again there is no doubt the nurse was acutely aware of his capacity for this experience. Her love bore the stamp of that awareness. Apart from lavishing attention on him in the most caring manner, she found ingenious ways of stimulating his self-respect. She invited him to participate in her nursing effort, within the limits of what he could do, then offered her congratulations and thanks to him for his resolute, albeit restricted participation. He proved highly responsive and his beaming face testified that he was greatly appreciative of these congratulations and thanks.

All in all, this man had a rich psychological profile. On the one hand, he took pleasure in having his needs and desires satisfied. That is why he welcomed the love from whoever tended to them. On the other hand, he took pride in being useful to himself and the people with whom he felt solidarity. From the viewpoint of this twofold objective, which was presumably the thrust of his existence, he was no less human than the best of us.

Behind me, on my right, a door suddenly opened and the buzz of an electric wheelchair grew louder as it drew nearer to the hall. The acquaintance I had come to visit was ready to see me. We greeted each other and spent a few minutes updating our memories of one another. Part of this update concerned my recent involvement in the seamstresses' petition, which he had readily signed. Our conversation then veered toward a different and particularly attractive subject. I had been burning to broach it, while waiting for the right moment. "By the way, who is the lovely blond nurse that works on your floor? I noticed her a little earlier caring for a patient." "Oh yea," he answered with a smile, "I know exactly who you're talking about. She's a sweetheart, all right, a married sweetheart with children, I'm sorry to tell you. If it's any consolation, you're not the only one who finds her lovely. I think every man around here has a soft spot for her." The matter was closed. I settled for worship without courtship.

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Following my nineteen-day campaign to collect additional signatures, my afternoons and evenings became free once again. I

eagerly availed myself of this recovered freedom, which was an opportunity to devote myself further to my work and resume exercising on a regular basis. I was working on a second and extremely – perhaps even excessively – ambitious book that was supposed to lay the foundations for a religion of wisdom that built on experimental knowledge and critical thought alone, not on wishful thinking and blind faith. My first book had been refused by every publisher, however hard I had struggled to render it publishable. This was only a minor defeat in my crusade for truth and literary excellence (which I equated with an effective expression of ideas that was indispensable to philosophical success), and there was still plenty of fight left in me.

In preparation for my philosophical work, I had purchased numerous books and studied them one by one, day after day, for three years. Since the cost of these books totaled approximately \$7000 and I was short of money, I had sold my collection of original prints to get this amount and make the purchase. Different art galleries and an old friend of mine, who had some good contacts in the world of art, had been instrumental in this painful sale that was integral to a welcome tradeoff. My walls were now bare and deadly white, but my private library was rich in useful material that I could read or consult at my discretion.

I considered this advantage a priority, given my vocation as a thinker. Also, extra benefit, I soon associated the whiteness of my walls with freedom of mind, as opposed to death. This whiteness resembled that of a blank sheet, open to every meditative and creative possibility. By contrast, my framed pictures were both interesting and limiting, like windows that always gave the same view of things that never changed.

As I stared at my bare walls, I did not feel confined within them. I lost myself in their whiteness whose absence of appeal was a deceptive appearance beyond which I found myself. It seemed as though I had entered a void that was a vestibule between the physical universe and the mental one. Past this vestibule, I was in my infinitely varied mind that forever expanded as it experienced, learned, contemplated, or imagined new things from one day to the next. My walls could not stop me from breaking through them in this manner. They offered no resistance because they were nothing, or paradoxically a material expanse of nothingness. Actually, there was no point in staring at them. I saw my mind perfectly well with my eyes closed.

The numerous books I had purchased and studied in preparation for my philosophical work covered a variety of subjects: microphysics and astrophysics, and the natural sciences in between, plus psychology,

among other social sciences, and philosophy, especially ethics and metaphysics, besides epistemology. Some of these books were compendiums or popular works that served my purpose, though they usually summarized in less than three hundred pages a massive amount of information that could fill an entire section of a university library. My intention was to possess the main facts and ideas that formed the heart of the subjects they dealt with. I would still be ignorant of these subjects to a large extent, yet this heart could help me create an educated view of the world from a general perspective.

This view would include an investigation into its mode of creation. It would thus reveal its nature and its value in relation to truth, defined as the conformity of thought with reality. It would do so briefly within a preface acknowledging the mere humanness of my book. Only later would I carry my investigation into the mode of creation of my worldview much further.

To begin with, on a strictly individual level, independently of my interaction with the rest of humanity, what is my means of acquiring knowledge about the world? It is my ability to perceive, remember, conceptualize, and explain this world thanks to my senses and my brain, not to mention the nerves that convey information from the former to the latter. Inasmuch as my senses and my brain have limitations, compounded by those of my life in terms of my overall exposure to the worldly realities, this ability has a limited reliability.

Together with my brain, my senses can only perceive the part of these realities to which they are sensitive. This part includes such things as light waves, vibrations in the air, molecules, airborne or dissolved in a watery solution, temperature, physical contact, and damage to my body tissues. Moreover, the content of the perception is not really the things themselves. It is a psychological interpretation by my brain of the physiological reaction these things produce in my senses. This reaction is transmitted to my brain via afferent nerves. As for this interpretation, it takes the form of color images, sounds, smells, flavors, and sensations like cold, warm, touch, or pain. It can be viewed as the translation of a certain portion of the physical reality into the language of my sensitivity. If there is any true objectivity, it paradoxically has to survive the pure subjectivity of this language. How can this paradox be resolved? How can this survival be achieved?

A way of unriddling this riddle is to draw a comparison between the sensory elements of my consciousness and the video elements of a picture on a computer screen. Each video element relates to a software instruction that a graphics card translates into this element. Likewise, each sensory element relates to a minute aspect of the physical reality

that my brain translates into this element. From seeing the picture on the computer screen, what can I know about the software instructions behind it? Nothing? If this were the case, one could safely assume I am similarly incapable of knowing anything about the physical reality behind my consciousness. On the other hand, one would be at a loss to explain how I can orient myself in this reality according to my image of it – as though this image and it were one and the same – and live to wonder at this apparent absurdity.

In my opinion, from seeing the picture on the computer screen, I can know the main thing about the software instructions behind it. Admittedly, this knowledge cannot suffice to turn me into a computer programmer, capable of writing these instructions. To achieve this purpose, I would have much to learn – namely, the computer language that is used to express the diversity and the organization of the picture in the two-dimensional space of the computer screen. I am nevertheless able to understand and describe in my own words this diversity and this organization, which constitute the visible essence of this picture. The secret is to make the effort to get acquainted with this essence as it meets my eye. It is common to the picture and the software instructions behind it.

With respect to my consciousness, a similar conclusion can be reached: I am capable of knowing the main thing about the physical reality behind it, but only up to a point. My brain can be confounded or misled by the dynamic complexity of everything that is perceptible through my senses, though with time it can elucidate some mysteries, dispel some doubts, and rectify some errors. It can progressively discover the order that underlies this dynamic complexity, and likewise discover the nature of this progress, which is the endless pursuit of an impossible perfection.

This order is the main thing about the physical reality behind my consciousness. Present in the one and relatively apparent in the other, it can be expressed symbolically, by a mathematical language for example, in the same way as the diversity and the organization of a picture can be expressed by a series of two-dimensional Cartesian coordinates, combined with various figures. It contrasts with the form this physical reality has in itself, outside my consciousness. This form is imperceptible and hence unknowable. It is also secondary, just as the selection of a language comes second to the expression of facts.

Scientific content is above linguistic form. What matters most is that it be effectively expressed by the language that is selected. It can survive the faithful translation of this expression from one language into another. Different words in different languages that refer to the

same fact are interchangeable signs. “The world is round,” “la terre est ronde,” these two statements, one in English and the other in French, say differently the same thing. Their respective forms are as subsidiary as they are arbitrary. They contain the fact that the world is round like two different glasses water. The thirst for truth can be quenched with either container – that is, either language, English or French, or any other, for that matter.

I for one am a seeker after truth and know my limitations as such. My ability to succeed in this quest by my own unaided efforts – within the bounds of my individual experience and reflection alone – is especially narrow. This motivates me to make the most of my literacy, which gives me access to the minds of insightful and scholarly individuals through reading. Books are bridges between me and the rest of humanity, past and present, whose collective wisdom is huge.

The ones I have studied so far are many and very profound or informative. They are few, however, in comparison with all the excellent books I have never studied. Also, my capacity for learning and knowledge is restricted and fallible. This is not an unusual shortcoming. I have it in common with every other human, without exception.

This restriction and fallibility are good reasons for redoubling one’s efforts and being twice as cautious. The worst thing would be to regard them as good excuses for being lazy and careless, as if it were pointless to be otherwise. After all, they do not exclude the possibility of being knowledgeable to a certain extent or right, at least in part; they merely include the fact that one is always ignorant to some degree and the risk of being wrong. With extra efforts and caution, this possibility is maximized; this fact and this risk are minimized. The odds are more than ever in one’s favor.

Back in the days when I was writing my second book, I had faith in my ability, with some reservations. Although the absolute truth about everything was clearly beyond me, many important truths were within my grasp. The attainment of them required that I give of my best. This requirement was exacting, but I was poised for vigorous and scrupulous action. Day after day, as part of the book I was writing, I strove for these truths with an obstinate perfectionism, in spite or rather because of my incapacity to achieve perfection. I also strove for the effective expression of them with the same attitude. If I labored at my book until it seemed perfect, chances were it would be good, or even excellent, whereas if I set lower standards for myself, it would likely be mediocre, or worse. I aimed and hoped for this excellence, with a view to helping others live a more enlightened and fulfilling life. My dignity – which was the foundation of my happiness – depended largely on this hopeful

endeavor. It was tempered with humility. I was just a minuscule component of the social mechanism that served to advance the human cause.

Today, my striving for important truths continues. Some of them relate to the physical reality, or more precisely the part of it that is perceptible through the human senses, unaided or aided by such instruments as a microscope or a telescope. This part, divisible into smaller parts according to certain distinguishing features, is the subject of natural sciences. The main thing about it is the order that underlies its dynamic complexity, which includes an infinity of objects, together with the processes that involve them. This order survives the translation of this dynamic complexity into the language of the human sensitivity because it does not concern the objects in themselves, but the perceptible relationships between each other, or their perceptible changes in relation to one another. Consequently, the form these objects have in the human consciousness, as opposed to the form they have in themselves, outside this consciousness, does not matter.

To verify this statement, one can assign an arbitrary symbol to each sensory element in one's consciousness. One can then ascertain that this arbitrary assignment makes no difference as regards the order that underlies the dynamic complexity of this consciousness. For example, one can assign the letter "b" to a particular sound and the letter "a" to a particular sight that refers to the cause of this sound without altering the connection between these two sensory elements. On the contrary, one will have adopted a simple language that renders this connection more intelligible in the form of "if a then b."

Now, while the study of the human sensory experience, expanded by means of various instruments, gradually reveals the workings of the physical reality behind this experience, it consistently fails to explain why this reality works how it works. At best, it yields a multilevel description of things in the context of other things. This description relates things to themselves, at different observation levels, and to the things that constitute the necessary condition for their particular state of being. Still, it can never be regarded as an explanation thanks to which the why of the how is understood.

Firstly, although the circumstances that allow something to occur are often called its cause, the true cause of it has in fact nothing to do with this so-called cause. Something always occurs because it is by nature capable of occurring if the proper circumstances present themselves. This nature is inherent to this something, which is contingent on these circumstances.

I picture the universe swarming with elementary particles like protons and electrons during the first million years after the Big Bang. As it is expanding and cooling, the elementary particles eventually form hydrogen atoms. Why do they? Because of the expansion and the cooling? Certainly not, though this expansion and this cooling are indispensable circumstances for these particles to form these atoms. The true cause of this formation is within it, which manifests the divine creative power of the universe to an infinitesimal degree. This creative power is also capable of numerous other atoms, together with countless molecules, cells, and multicellular organisms that each depend on particular circumstances to become or remain a reality. It causes the elementary particles to begin forming hydrogen atoms at about three thousand degrees Celsius.

Secondly, at the macroscopic or microscopic level of things, the arrangement and the behavior of their constituents (such as crystals, roots, stalks, leaves, flowers, limbs, and organs, or particles, atoms, molecules, and cells) are not the alpha and omega of their existence, in given circumstances. These things fundamentally proceed from the divine creative power of the universe, which has made them from matter in a certain way, according to some purpose. As physical entities, their way of being can be observed and described, but not explained on the basis of their physical properties. In other words, the purpose behind these things is beyond the senses of whoever perceives them. This concerns humans and every other thing as well whose purpose is nonphysical, like the purpose that is peculiar to humans in the depths of their inner life.

Although I am wary of anthropomorphism, I work on the assumption that the former purpose is closely or remotely akin to the latter. This latter purpose is a pursuit of fulfillment by humans, who share with every other thing, animate or inanimate, a basic sentience. To them life, besides being a dynamic state, is also and preeminently a good – sometimes more potential than actual – that motivates them to live. It has a materiality, which can be perceived from without, plus a desirability, which can be valued from within.

One can draw a parallel between the physical workings of a thing, a plant for example, studied comprehensively with the aid of microscopes among other instruments, and the organization of an inspired work of art, analyzed thoroughly. However comprehensively these physical workings are studied, the thing remains apparently meaningless. Likewise, however thoroughly this organization is analyzed, the inspired work of art remains essentially mysterious. The mystery can be solved in some measure through empathy, by fathoming

as much as possible the inspiration of the artist who has created this work of art in a specific manner, open to analysis. This inspiration is the soul of this manner, which by itself would amount to nothing but an empty way of organizing elements of matter.

In conclusion, the main thing about the physical reality is not the main thing about reality as a whole, which also includes the nonphysical reality. It hides a second main thing that is the inner side of it, like a Russian doll that hides another doll that fits into it. This second main thing is first in importance. It is outside the scope of the natural sciences and within that of psychology and philosophy. Most of the truths I strive for relate to it, especially the part of it that pertains to humanity. The human mind has priority in view of my humanness and anyway is the only interiority that is familiar to me. The other interiorities are unknowable, if more or less imaginable, because they are not experienceable.

My imagination is particularly challenged with regard to the inner side of extremely primitive animals, plants, and inanimate things, which are hardly comparable to humans; its images in this regard are liable to be much more fancy than reality. It is a stopgap, for lack of a better, more reliable, mode of exploration, based on direct experience, like observation and introspection. Yet, with caution, I persist in resorting to it. At least, I venture to imagine that extremely primitive animals, plants, and inanimate things have an interiority of some description, or that somehow they feel drawn to whatever state is manifestly their attractor.

They and evolved animals, including humans, are creations of the same creative power. Given this common origin, it seems safe to assume there is a fundamental kinship between them, on a nonphysical level as well as on a physical level. One way or another, all things aim at a feeling of fulfillment. The achievement of this aim is proof that their creator, which has endowed them with a capacity for this achievement, is good to them – in a word, is loving, though this capacity has limits. In my judgment, the reason behind these limits is that this creator's power is immense, yet finite. This creator's love, on the other hand, is absolute toward every creation. Humans as a rule – unlike the other creations on earth – can, therefore must, understand it with great clarity and uphold it with great vigor. This entails them maximizing good in a spirit of conciliation and minimizing harm in times of unavoidable conflict. I cannot conceive of any higher truths.

After two years of assiduous writing, my second book was finished, but in need of revision. My dear aunt, who had devotedly helped me revise my first book, helped me revise this second one with

the same devotion. Her moral and intellectual support was to my young philosophical career as a prop is to a sapling. I had a deep-rooted feeling that I could succeed by dint of perseverance and my will to grow more proficient was rather unbending in itself, yet this support advantageously bolstered this feeling and this will. It was twofold, sometimes elating, sometimes exasperating: She praised my strong points and severely criticized my shortcomings for the purpose of redressing them. I was prompt to show her my elation and thank her for her praise. As for my exasperation, whenever I was weary of her severe criticism, it was usually muffled by the profound gratitude I felt toward her. I had not much in the way of encouragement and assistance besides her faith in me and her commitment to helping me realize my potential.

In fairness to the others who also obliged me – namely, my brother and my best friend, plus two other friends of mine – their input was useful. I was indeed appreciative of it. They had kindly agreed to read my second book and tell me their impressions. None of them had the time or the energy to do what my aunt did, which represented a considerable amount of work: She analyzed this book in detail and commented on it in writing, paragraph by paragraph. They were four goodhearted and highly educated men in their thirties or forties – one teacher, who specialized in ancient languages, literature, and philosophy, one lawyer, with a degree in philosophy, and two professors, who specialized in literature. They all had many responsibilities, professional, family, or other. By contrast, she was a widow in her sixties with a small private income and four grown children who lived independently. Thus she had ample leisure, in addition to her great generosity and her extensive knowledge, especially in philosophy and psychology, for which she had a passion.

For more than a year, I labored to improve my second book. Revision followed revision and, ironically, despite a multitude of improvements, I became displeased with this book. Each idea and the expression of it seemed right, yet it appeared I had presented my ideas the wrong way since collectively they failed to constitute a harmonious whole. I had to face the facts; my second book was a patchwork piece of writing that had to be rewritten entirely. Like my first one, on which I had come to look with disfavor, it was a good effort that unfortunately was not good enough to succeed, notwithstanding it included revisions galore. It was nothing more, but also nothing less, than a valuable learning experience.

“Take heart!” I shouted at myself inwardly. However frustrated I felt by my setback, I knew I was much further forward, knowledgewise

and skillwise, now that I had gone through years of studying, thinking, writing, and revising. There was no question of giving up. There was no easy way to my goal either. I still had to put a lot of work into getting my young philosophical career off the ground. After all, this was not surprising. It was in the natural order of things. Fledglings spent some time flapping their wings awkwardly before being able to fly. I resigned myself to this natural order. Success built on failures. I ought to be persevering.

To begin with, I took stock of the chief points in my two books. I intended to use them as the basis for a new book, free from the flaws that spoiled the old ones. I then hit upon the idea of salvaging the best passages from these old ones. They could be sorted by theme and gathered together to form a collection of thoughts. They could also be modified if necessary, in accordance with high philosophical and literary standards. Short or moderately long, possibly poetic, they would have to convey the essence of my views. Furthermore, their meaning would have to shine out of their words, in a concise and elegant fashion. My collection of thoughts could subsequently be expanded through the production of additional thoughts, in accordance with the same high standards. I pictured myself producing them with the utmost care and polishing them until they became translucent little gems.

I was much tempted by the challenge of encapsulating the pith of my philosophy in a series of such thoughts, which could take the form of philosophical poems. They would then resemble a melting pot where my previous career as a poet and my career as a thinker – which appealed to my soul in two different ways that had once appeared hardly reconcilable – would fuse into a single purpose. I was in fact so tempted by this challenge that I ended up devoting three years to meeting it as best I could. Again I was not alone. My dear aunt, plus a dear uncle of mine (a musician of great vitality and mental acuity who was also a professional reviser), together with my brother, my best friend, and some of my other friends, generously contributed useful criticism to my philosophical and poetic undertaking.

One day, I submitted a selection of my thoughts to the two editors of an excellent philosophical magazine, who were its founders and owners as well. To my delight, they published much of this selection. My aunt – a familiar of them and a subscriber to their magazine – had initiated the submission of my selected thoughts to them and was all the dearer to me as her initiative was the first step that had prepared the way for the publication of these thoughts, apart from a few exceptions. This publication, this ray of limelight, had come at a time when I was keenly desirous of positive reinforcement. More than ten

years had elapsed, during which I had been a laborious and obscure thinker whom publishers had repeatedly turned down.

A while later, the same two editors invited me to an interview that gave me ample opportunity to lay out the gist of my worldview. Their invitation and the publication in full of this interview, which was preceded by a complimentary introduction in the editorial and at the beginning of it, constituted the peak of my philosophical career. I knew I had merely climbed the first rung on the ladder of success and hence was not remotely in a position to rest on my laurels; I still had to plan for a marathon climb ahead; yet I considered this invitation, this publication, and this introduction a great honor, especially since I admired those who had made them. They formed a loving couple, a remarkable woman married to a remarkable man: two bright and scholarly humanists who tirelessly promoted the highest values of modern civilization. Their favorable presence in my life was a godsend, initially mediated by my dear aunt, an angel as it were.

One of the advantages I enjoyed thanks to them was free advertisement in their magazine for my Web site, which comprised numerous selections from my collection of thoughts. I had already been writing with a computer for about ten years and had created this site once the World Wide Web had grown popular. The means of creating a Web site had been relatively easy to find. In a spirit of solidarity – which I regarded as the most exciting aspect of the World Wide Web – many people had put them gratis at the disposal of everyone who had access to this international network of hypertext documents.

The use of these means, that was another matter. Among them were manuals on the Hypertext Markup Language, plus stocks of backgrounds, icons, and bars to enhance the appearance of documents encoded with this language, besides different software necessary for the transfer of such documents and video files from a personal computer to a server. Following the creation of my Web site, its registration in the many search engines and directories of the World Wide Web (so one could discover it in any of them by launching a search with certain keywords), that was yet another matter. Anyhow, the difficulty of doing all this, which was not complicated but inordinately tedious, was quite surmountable.

Within two months, I became the registered author of a philosophical and poetic Web site. Substantially, this site was words in a wide network of words that had been committed to computer by individuals whose abilities, interests, and opinions varied considerably. Their right to free speech was inalienable, though their words could sometimes appear grossly offensive. I supported tolerance because I

valued freedom, without which life would be a death before death. This support, however, was not unlimited. I believed tolerance had to end where criminal actions began, to avoid degenerating into a ruinous decadence. Admittedly, this limit was hard to define with precision. Any precise definition was open to debate, except that crimes such as assault and battery, rape, murder, robbery, and vandalism were unanimously deemed intolerable. All I could assert was that freedom should never be sacrificed on the altar of legal restraint unless it is terribly abusive.

I did not count the expression of apparently indefensible persuasions as an abuse of freedom. This expression was an opportunity to call one's conception of truth into question and either keep it with renewed conviction, after careful consideration, or change it. It was also a danger to children that their parents should strive to enlighten rather than blindfold, since the best protection against a possibly false statement was a sound judgment. The exercise of this judgment could amount to its suspension in the event of the children having insufficient knowledge to settle a question. Their only wisdom would then consist of caution. It could be summed up by a watchword: "Beware of the information you receive from suspicious sources on subjects you are unfamiliar with. Wait until you consult reliable documents or credible individuals about these subjects before you accept or reject this information." In short, the right to free speech and the need for critical thought were complementary.

On the World Wide Web, this right was unrestrained. I benefited from it like everyone else. There was no risk that my Web site would be forbidden or censored by a disapproving authority in the name of some dogma. It was fully accessible to a multitude of Web surfers from different countries. A few keystrokes and mouse clicks, while sitting at a desk, that was all it took these surfers to visit my Web site, no matter where they lived. I was ready to welcome them in and offer them my selection of thoughts by way of refreshment.

Despite my welcoming attitude and the easy access that Web surfers had to my Web site, I did not know what to expect, since I was just one among so many. My future on the World Wide Web seemed uncertain. Actually, it held for me a consolation after the publishers had refused my collection of thoughts, whose genre was supposedly not popular enough to be profitable. My Web site – which contained numerous selections from this unpublished collection – was eventually visited by thousands of people, according to a visit counter that was part of it.

Presumably, only a minority of these people had deeply reflected on my thoughts and appreciated them, whereas the remainder had paused momentarily over these thoughts with a superficial curiosity or had showed no interest in them and surfed by in haste. Some three hundred votes had been cast in their favor, according to a vote register that was also part of my Web site. In addition, I had received about a hundred and fifty emails from satisfied readers, who had gratefully offered their congratulations and given me encouragement. One of them – a bright and noble young man, a budding philosopher fresh from university – had become a friend of mine I sometimes corresponded with. In all probability, merely a fraction of these readers had derived a significant benefit from my thoughts, as opposed to those who had enjoyed them without a marked improvement in their attitude toward life.

A woman had thanked me for helping her regain the will to live. For some time she had been haunted by the temptation to kill herself. Assuming this favorable turnaround to be genuine and have indeed something to do with my thoughtful effort, it alone justified this effort. My career as a thinker could balance on the point of the number 1, provided this modest number stood for my substantial contribution to the wisdom of another. True, I aspired to a lifetime of service to the world that would prove very useful to many, but I could settle for one that would prove very useful to a single person, if I could not conceivably achieve more. This service would then have a rather limited usefulness and yet be worthy of my devotion. The attainment of a noble goal that is humble as well for its rather limited usefulness is a satisfying success that crowns the dignifying pursuit of this goal. Dignity is compatible with humility, and satisfaction with limitation.

The fact remains I pledged myself to work day in day out to make a wide-ranging and far-reaching positive impact on the world as long as I would deem it feasible. With this end in view, I began to question my last philosophical and poetic venture and explore alternative options, dissertational, novelistic, or other. The outcome of this venture had left something to be desired. I had met with the failure to publish, except in an excellent philosophical magazine, and a qualified success on the World Wide Web.

One evening, over dinner at a restaurant, my best friend and I discussed this venture and the alternative options I was exploring. He was my sounding board, an alter ego of great generosity, honesty, and sagacity who took these concerns to heart and spoke his mind with a lot of valuable insights. In his opinion, my recent piece of writing – which had been philosophical and poetic, but never narrative – lacked a vital

aspect of my thinking self: my personal experience, distinct from my thoughts. This experience, uncommon in certain respects and likely to arouse some interest, was a definite asset I had yet to exploit for my philosophy to come alive.

The exploitation of this asset entailed choosing a half autobiographical half philosophical option. I had explored this option hesitantly inasmuch as I was self-conscious about exposing my intimate memories, especially those relating to my physical disability since my diving accident. Was I to triumph over this self-consciousness and embark on a new venture where I would lay both my life story and my worldview open to negative reactions? I came to believe so. Besides the risk of such reactions, there was a probable advantage in embarking on this new venture. This advantage concerned the heart of my worldview (which was first and foremost a philosophy of life): courage. By illustrating my advocacy of this virtue with my own gradual progress from misery to happiness thanks to considerable efforts, I might well render this advocacy more intelligible, legitimate, and convincing.

After trying my hand at blending thoughts with childhood memories in an autobiographical opuscle, I endeavored to meet the supreme challenge that was awaiting me: the writing of an autobiographical and philosophical work that would thoughtfully retrace the stages of my physical, emotional, and intellectual evolution from my diving accident until a recent milestone in my existence. I was past my initial hesitation; better still, I was enthusiastic about this endeavor. It afforded me an opportunity to turn some twenty-five years of living and learning to good account for the benefit of others. Having said this, I did not know whether people – among my proofreaders, the publishers, the critics, or the public – would receive my autobiographical and philosophical work with favor upon my completing it and submitting it to them. Only time would tell. Meanwhile, I tried my utmost and hoped for the best, but was ready for anything.

In part, my utmost was my highest possible degree of grammatical and stylistic know-how. It required me to improve my English, with the help of grammars, style guides, and comprehensive dictionaries that put words in a multiplicity of contexts and gave a plurality of notes on usage. Save for the fact that I had written letters, thoughts, and other pieces of writing in English (such as a booklet on inner peace and a compendium of human physiology and nutrition, both unpublished), and despite the fact that I had lived all of my teenage and adult life in a predominantly English environment where I had spoken this language more than French, which was my mother tongue, my written works until then had been in French as a rule. My reasons

for writing my autobiographical and philosophical work in English were manifold. That English was the most widely used language in the world was one of them, though a book could always be translated from French into English. Another one of my reasons was a matter of personal preference. I had lived much of my life in English and had grown to love this language a lot. Some spiteful gossips might sneeringly say I had assimilated. Be that as it may, as regards the writing of my autobiographical and philosophical work, I felt more at home in English than in French.

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Around the time when I began to write the outline of my new work, I made friends with a woman in her early thirties. She was studying to be a nurse and had started working part-time for the agency that provided me and twelve other disabled adults with round-the-clock nursing. Her character seemed remarkable to me, whereas, physically speaking, I did not find her especially attractive.

Her looks improved in my eyes as I considered the person behind them, like a coral reef just beneath the surface of the sea. She projected an image of courage and integrity. The more it pervaded my mind and transfigured my perception of her outward appearance, the more she won my affections.

One evening that she was visiting me at my apartment, her friendly attitude toward me – which had grown more and more loving – finally ripened and we became lovers. I purposed to be a major force for happiness in her life, notwithstanding my physical limitations and my unwavering aspirations to honor my other commitments, pertaining to my work, my family, and my friends. This purpose was the heart of my love, which comprised a high degree of respect and an element of desire, as I considered her a mettlesome and principled woman who was moderately desirable.

By the third month of our romantic relationship, my flattering image of her had started to break down and lay bare an appalling reality. Until this regrettable start, she had effectively concealed from me the worst aspects of her personality, reminiscent of Dr. Jekyll who could metamorphose into Mr. Hyde and vice versa.

Because of my reluctance to give up on her, who seemed eager to amend her ways lest I should leave her, my awakening to her duplicity was slow, alternately progressive and regressive. Actually, her amendments were always delusive. She promised me the moon whenever I showed signs of utter disenchantment, but infallibly reneged

on this promise as soon as she was under the fantastic impression that she could take my love for granted.

Two unbelievable years of recurrent insanity and wickedness passed before it finally dawned on me with dazzling clarity that I had been enduring and forgiving to a fault. I could no longer cope with her stifling possessiveness, her crafty attempts to manipulate my feelings and my thoughts toward the satisfaction of her selfish desires at the expense of my ideals, her vehement arrogance, offensively condescending and opinionated, her fierce intolerance, and her frequent hysterics that lasted hours and sometimes reached frightening proportions, with wild fits of sobbing, screaming, and stamping, as though she were on the verge of flying into a violent fury. The flames of my love had died and no fiery masquerade could rekindle them. I had to break up with this deranged and cunning egocentric, this nightmare come true, without further delay!

My slow awakening to her duplicity did not end when I terminated my relationship with her and stopped hearing from her afterward (as she persisted in harassing me for some three months). Thanks to staggering revelations from a man she had profoundly embittered by deceiving and exploiting him, and defrauding him of thousands of dollars, it came abruptly to a nauseous climax thirteen months after the breakup in question. The man – a mere intimate friend of hers to what she had said – was her common-law husband!

Today, as I take stock of what I have lived and learned because of her, I reach the conclusion that she was a worthwhile aggravation. Not that I wish for another trying relationship with her or someone resembling her. Likewise, I do not wish for another disabling accident. But when all is said and done, this woman has enriched me considerably. Besides, I cannot deny that there were good times in addition to the bad ones. In sum, my past with her was an affair that degenerated into an ordeal, yet contained enjoyable episodes and has a happy ending as far as I am concerned.

I can say roughly the same thing about my past before her, in the sense that following my neck injury I gradually turned my situation – which appeared disadvantageous initially, with a few exceptions – to advantage. I would add that I am fortunate enough to have turned it so precisely because it was in fact advantageous, at least to the extent that it offered an opportunity for this advantage. One must beware of negative judgments with regard to one's situation. Good fortune can hide behind an appearance of bad luck. The problem, however, is that good fortune is useless without a strong will. Similarly, a fertile soil will

yield nothing but weeds unless one goes to a lot of trouble to cultivate it. And I am of the firm opinion that the harvest is well worth the trouble.

Then why do some fantasize about a life involving no effort? Idleness is unhappiness inasmuch as it is empty of dignity. My heroes are the most noble and least fortunate people of all, whose dignity is great because they had great difficulty in attaining their noble goals. I model myself on them while knowing I have been fortunate in comparison with them, despite the difficulties I have encountered since the day I was born. These difficulties – which I have surmounted by dint of considerable efforts and with the aid of relatively favorable circumstances – are the obstacles that have shaped my inner development and driven me to reach new heights of fortitude and wisdom, and ultimately of happiness.



