Best of LessWrong: November 2015

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5. Dark, not colorless

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Stop trying to try and try

Imagine a graduate student of mathematics as they interact with a professor, attempting to understand something in the professor's area of expertise. They're working hard to wrap their head around the basic formalism. They're in "learning mode" — they're a student in the presence of a master, expected to try to understand the math but not necessarily expected to succeed. Even if they're doing quite well, they're still reminded of how math is big and they are small; they encounter wide swaths of knowledge that they do not yet have, and often feel humbled. They use their tools tentatively, aware that they may be using them inappropriately, and wonder when they'll become a master.

Now imagine the same student tutoring an undergraduate in linear algebra, a topic they know quite well. Now they're in "teaching mode." Math is still large; the graduate student is still small; but the context is very different. The focus is no longer drawn repeatedly to all the things they don't know yet — but it's not drawn to all the things they *do* know, either. The focus simply isn't on them, or their abilities. It's on the undergrad. The grad student, in the back of their mind is not thinking "wow math is so large I don't know enough yet I'm not sure I'll ever know enough", and they're *also* not thinking "wow I know so much this is great!" — they're thinking about how to help the undergrad understand a complex concept.

I think that many people who are in learning mode expect that mastery feels like learning mode, except that instead of feeling like they know very little, they feel like they know quite a bit. By contrast, I think mastery looks much more like teaching mode — it looks like someone operating in a context where their knowledge and their skills are not the focus, but are just unconscious assumptions in the background.

Consider the grad student in teaching mode. Their approach to answering questions in teaching mode is very different than their approach in learning mode. That's not because all the questions they encounter in teaching-mode are simple — if you've ever been a tutor you know that tutors are commonly asked questions they can't answer in the moment. Rather, they approach questions differently because context is different. When the professor asks them questions, they're Expected To Do Their Best; when the undergrad asks them questions, they're just expected to answer.

In the first case, they're expected to try; in the second case, they're assumed capable, an assumption that fades into the background.

I describe this model because I think there is an analog of these two modes when it comes to "trying" to achieve any task — and today, I'm going to talk about trying.

My advice is simple: notice when you're expected to try, and consider reframing. It's much harder to solve a problem when you're Expected To Do Your Best than it is to solve a problem when you're immersed in various subtasks, with the assumption that you're going to solve the problem buried implicitly and unconsciously in the context.

For example, consider exercise. Many people find it much easier to exercise in a context where the exercise is in the background rather than the foreground. Imagine someone who plays recreational soccer, sprinting up and down the soccer field up till the brink of exhaustion. Now imagine them not playing soccer, but just trying to sprint

up and down the field up to the brink of exhaustion. They probably push themselves a lot less in the latter case. If "sprint up and down the field a lot" is the main goal, then at each possible stopping point, part of them starts trying to convince the rest that they've exercised enough for the day, and they must spend willpower to continue. In a soccer match, by contrast, the focus is elsewhere. They aren't constantly pinging themselves with explanations of how they've done enough sprinting for today. They aren't generating reasons why it's OK to stop here. They're trying to *score a goal.* Getting exercise is a background assumption, not a conscious choice.

Switching contexts such that your actual goal is in the background rather than the foreground — such that pursuing it is not a conscious choice that you need to reaffirm every time you find a stopping point — is a powerful tool.

This is not novel advice, of course, but it is perhaps a generalization over a few different common types of advice. As another example, consider two people trying to become friends on purpose (perhaps for romantic reasons). I conjecture that it's much harder for people to become friends on purpose than to become friends accidentally while pursuing some other endeavor.

If they're trying to become friends on purpose, then they're constantly asking themselves, "are we friends yet?", and like the grad student asking themselves "do I understand all of mathematics yet?", the answer will never be an unresounding "yes". They would do better to switch to a context where they're not constantly checking whether they're friends yet, and are instead just *being friends.*

This model suggests that it's much more effective to alter the context such that neither party is regularly checking the depth of the friendship, but such that a strengthening bond is the implicit background assumption. (This suggests one reason why online dating feels more socially awkward than going on a date with someone you met in some other context.)

For a third (somewhat silly) example, imagine that I woke up one morning and said "I'll try to run MIRI well today." (MIRI, the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, is an organization I run.) If I did this, I'd be in trouble. How does one run a research institute? What would my next actions be? Things that seem plausibly like what people-who-run-institutes-well would do? Things that seem defensible to the board of directors? I have no idea how to "try to run MIRI."

Now imagine instead that I woke up and said "I'm going to glance at my MIRI priority list, update it if today happens to be Monday, and then identify MIRI's biggest bottleneck and work on it directly." Now I'm in business, and might do something useful with my day.

Notice the difference. In the second case, I'm not asking myself whether I can run a research institute. I'm not asking myself *how* to run a research institute (though "study the strategies of people who ran other successful institutes" does occasionally get to the top of my priority list). I'm assuming myself capable — not consciously, but as a background assumption. I'm not assuming *success* — either I can run a research institute or I can't, the jury's still out on that one — but my capability is not the focus of my attention. I fret about much more practical things, like the tone to strike in a fundraiser announcement post, or how to prioritize paper-writing versus novel research. I'm never "trying to run MIRI;" I'm just working on the next top-priority task.

This, I think, is one of the main distinctions between "trying to try" and "actually trying".

Trying to try to run MIRI would *feel like* just trying to run MIRI — it would feel like thinking about what it takes to run an institute and reading books about running institutes and worrying whether the board of directors thought I was doing a good job and so on. From the inside, I'd probably think I was trying very hard to actually run an institute.

Actually trying to run MIRI feels very different from the inside. It doesn't feel like trying to make an institute run, it feels like trying to get all the most important emails handled while not letting administrative duties suck up my day. It feels like struggling to prioritize three important tasks that can't all be done. Actually trying to run MIRI does not feel like trying to run MIRI, it feels like a never-ending stream of smaller tasks.

I think many people imagine the difference between trying to try and actually trying involves something like Additional Effort or Additional Willpower. It's easy to imagine someone trying to try to (say) cure aging. Maybe they flounder around a bit and talk about how they want to join a biology startup, or start a biology startup, or get a biology degree, all while really deeply wanting to find some way to cure aging. It's also easy to imagine that the person "actually trying" to cure aging is doing something similar, but with more determination and a bit of pixie dust that makes things work out. The actually-tryer does the same things, but for them, the startup works through dint of sheer willpower; or they get a biology degree while winning so many accolades that they get to set up their own laboratory.

This isn't how I imagine "actually trying." It's not trying-to-try with extra gusto. Actually trying looks like solving small subproblems, with the more ambitious target no longer the focus of attention, but rather a background task. Actually trying to cure aging doesn't look like a person getting a biology degree with *especially grim determination*, it looks like Aubrey de Grey wading through a mountain of mundane tasks while scraping together enough money to keep SENS running.

(SENS is currently fundraising, by the way.)

If you want to solve hard problems, stop trying to solve the hard problem directly. Change the context such that that's a background assumption: all your actions are going to be pointed roughly in the direction of solving-the-problem; what next? What's the next thing that needs doing? Work on *that.*

This is perhaps simple advice, but I myself have found it useful in the past. Many years ago, when I was in high school, a friend of mine came back from college having joined a fencing team. He wanted to show me some of the basics, so he tossed me a sabre, and we had at each other. We crossed swords a few times, and he said something along the lines of "Nate, the goal isn't to hit my sword, the goal is to hit *me*."

It's an obvious thought, a simple thought, and a thought I had failed to think. After that, I wasn't trying to fence, I was trying to *hit him.*

Or consider the scene in The Matrix where Morpheus tells Neo "Come on, stop trying to hit me and hit me!" — at which point Neo's blows grow more intense, until he gets a fist past Morpheus' defenses. I suspect that many people watching that scene imagine Neo turning on the "try harder," pouring more effort into his punches and harnessing his frustration. When I watch the scene, I imagine a little bit of that, but

mostly I imagine a similar mental shift to my "don't bang swords together; strike the enemy" mental shift — I imagine Neo had mostly been throwing out a bunch of martial arts moves that had recently been uploaded into his brain, in attempts to see if any of them worked against Morpheus, and that when Morpheus said "stop trying to hit me and hit me" Neo thought "oh yeah, I'm not supposed to be deploying martial arts moves and monitoring whether I'm fighting well enough, I'm supposed to be *hitting Morpheus*," and that his brain shifted from the "expected to try" gear to the "competence assumed" gear.

I think many people solve problems more effectively in the "competence assumed" gear," when they're not fretting about whether they can solve problems because they're too busy fretting about very specific actionable subproblems.

So if you want to tackle big problems, my advice is this: If you ever find yourself saying "I'm currently trying to solve [problem]", be wary. This is doubly true if you're Expected To Do Your Best.

If you find yourself saying "well I'm trying to solve aging, but it's a big problem, so I'll likely fail," then stop in your tracks. Not because of the underconfidence — aging *is* a big problem and you *will* likely fail to solve it — but because you're sprinting up and down the field when you'd be better off playing a game of soccer.

If you approach a big problem with Intent To Try, then at every plausible stopping point part of you will be trying to convince you that you've done enough. And thus, at every plausible stopping point, you'll need to spend willpower to continue. Find a soccer game instead — some way to focus your attention on useful object-level tasks, with the pursuit of the important goal turned into an implicit unconscious background assumption so deeply ingrained in your plan that you can hardly see it any more.

As for how you make or find the soccer games, that's a discussion for another day. For now, my generic suggestion is to (a) generalize from the above examples and (b) imagine someone who's "playing soccer" with respect to your task or problem, and ask yourself what they might be doing. The key is to make the pursuit of your goal implicit, and spend your focus on the subproblems.

There is no try

This is a linkpost for https://mindingourway.com/there-is-no-try/

Ok, so "try" is actually a pretty useful concept; there's a reason we have a very short word for it in the English language. Nevertheless, I have found it quite useful to occasionally spend a few weeks refusing to use the word "try" or any of its synonyms, at least when talking about myself, and especially when thinking about myself to myself.

This is a quick and easy way to put success in the background, as discussed last week. For example, compare these two responses to "what are you doing?"

> *I'm trying to solve this math problem.*

versus

> *I'm pursuing a promising line of inquiry on this math problem. If it doesn't lead anywhere, I have two others to pursue next. If all three are fruitless, I'll ask for help.*

For the first person, "failure" is either first or second on the list of things they expect to happen next: they're trying to solve the problem, and either they'll solve it, or they'll fail. If they fail, they can say "well, I tried", and move on. And because failing and moving on is such a prominent option, they must struggle against it each time they pause; they are like the person trying to sprint up and down a soccer field as much as they can, rather than the person playing soccer.

The second person, who does not have 'try' in their vocabulary, is forced to say what specific actions they are actually taking — and now, failure on the entire problem is much further down on the list of possible outcomes. Failure at this particular line of approach just drops them into the next line of approach. They're more like the person playing the soccer game, getting exercise ("trying to solve the problem") without that idea explicit in their mind. This sort of mindset, I find, is often helpful.

Imagine that I'm in the middle of flossing my teeth, when someone knocks on the door and asks what I'm doing. I wouldn't answer "trying to floss," I'd just answer "flossing" — unless I had been interrupted so many times that I was beginning to doubt my ability to complete the task. When we're sure of our ability to complete a task, we don't describe ourselves as

"trying", we just *do it.* I don't get up every morning and try to dress myself, I just get up and dress myself.

Whenever you can honestly say that you are *doing*, rather than *trying*, then I suggest you do so — but often this is only honestly possible when you're quite confident in your own ability to succeed.

(Some self-help books and professionals advocate *always* saying that you are "doing" rather than "trying," but this often seems dishonest to me: when I'm trying to win a race, and I'm currently in tenth place, and you ask me what I'm doing, I have a hard time saying "winning a race" with a straight face.)

When removing 'try' and its synonyms from your vocabulary, you may find that you can't honestly say you're "solving a math problem," because you have no idea whether you'll succeed. And saying you're "working on a math problem" is only slightly better; it's mostly just using "working" as a synonym for "trying."

In these cases, if you want to remove the word 'try', I suggest not finding a near synonym, but increasing the granularity of your descriptions. Don't say "I'm trying to solve this math problem," say "I'm transforming the problem into a programming problem so I can see it from a different angle", or "I'm gameifying the problem so that my intuitions can get a better handle on it," or "I'm producing random algebraic manipulations of this equation in desperate hope that one of them happens to be the answer," or "I'm staring at the problem waiting for my gut to say something for enough time to pass that I can give up without losing face." Describe what you're doing on the level of granularity where at each step you describe, it would be silly to say you were "trying" at that step, in the same way it would be silly to say that you wake up and try to dress yourself — describe your actions on a level of granularity where each step is definitely something you're *doing*, rather than *trying*.

Often, when I get down to the level of granularity where I'm doing rather than trying, I find that I'm doing something pretty silly — as in, I'll start out by saying "I'm trying to write the opening paragraph of this paper", and then I'll notice the word 'trying', and I'll introspect a bit and rephrase a bit and I'll eventually figure out that I was doing was "sitting in front of a screen holding the subject of the paper in my head waiting for my gut to figure out what to write" or something along those lines. With that description given, it's much easier for me to say "aha, my gut doesn't know what to write first; I'll make an outline on a whiteboard or some other place that feels non-committal."

"Try" is a useful word, but saying that you're "trying" to do something is a *high level description*, and it can often hide some very silly behaviors, like "sitting around staring at the problem waiting for enough time to pass that I can give up without losing face."

Occasionally, I tell people who come to me for advice that "try" is a fine and useful word, but saying that you're trying is something that *other* people get to say about *you*, not a thing that you get to say about yourself. *Others* get to say "they're trying to save that person's life," but *you* only get to say "I'm performing chest compressions while thinking back to remember my CPR training."

This isn't always the most useful advice; there is, after all, a reason why 'try' is such a short word. There are many situations where it's quite useful to communicate something like "I'm trying to prove this lemma; can you help?", and there are many other cases where it can be useful to use the word 'try' even when thinking about yourself to yourself. Nevertheless, there is a helpful sentiment buried in the above advice, and I have often found it useful to cash out my "try"s.

As such, I recommend, as an exercise, spending a few weeks refusing to use the word 'try'. This can help you train yourself to notice the difference between "trying" as in taking

intelligent, concrete, fruitful actions; versus "trying" as in waiting for enough time to pass that you can safely say "well I tried."

This probably isn't what Yoda *actually* meant by "there is no try." Nevertheless, I like to imagine Luke nodding and saying "Oh, right; there is no try. I will close my eyes, relax, let the force flow through me, focus my mind, concentrate on a mental image of my X-wing, and then will it to lift, with no regard for its actual mass." That's the level of granularity at which you can tell whether a cashed-out "try" is a pre-emptive excuse for failure or an intelligent attempt to succeed.

Transmute guilt into resolve

This is a linkpost for https://mindingourway.com/transmute-guilt-i/

A friend of mine came to me and said that he cares about his immediate friends, and he cares about humanity in the abstract, but he has trouble caring for most people. They seemed too shallow, too bitter, too spiteful to be worth an effort.

He'd been a sixth grade teacher, so I asked, "What about when they were eleven? Were they worth an effort then?"

"Yes," he answered adamantly. Or, most could still be salvaged at eleven, though there are some that you'd need to get to even earlier, if you wanted to save them from the shallowness and the learned helplessness and the death of curiosity.

"So then we live in a world that mishandles its youth, that turns them from bright children full of potential into empty shells. What are your feelings about that process, and the people subjected to it?"

His answer, more or less, was "A bit of anger, a bit of nothing-I-can-do-about-it, and a bit of victim-blaming, which I don't endorse."

Those last two emotions are very interesting: Why assure yourself that there is nothing you can do about the problem, if you don't care about the people who are harmed? Why assure yourself that it is their fault, if you stop caring about people once they are lost?

These seem like defense mechanisms, to me — defense mechanisms my friend generated unconsciously, because it was too painful look at bitter shallow adults and see lost mistreated eleven-year-olds.

Most of the time, if something is hurting you, I recommend making it stop. There is one exception, though.

Imagine walking past a beggar on the street. They're dirty and downtrodden; weathered but not much older than you. They ask you for change as you pass by.

This causes a certain type of pain in people — enough pain that most people develop some sort of coping mechanism. Some people pretend they didn't see or hear the beggar. Some give an apology, some make up an excuse about not having any money. Some shove their hands in their pockets and drag out some spare change, so that they may discharge their moral duty.

Other people cope with cynicism or bitterness — the sight of a beggar reminds them of the failings of the hated out group, the people who voted for the Wrong Political Party in the local elections. Still others cope with a wave of guilt, shorting out the pain, because the guilt seems easier to bear.

My suggestion, this week, is notice that impulse. Notice the impulse to look away, to ignore, to make an excuse, to assure yourself that there's nothing you can do, to blame the hated out-group.

Resist the impulse, and acknowledge the pain. Sit with the pain. Don't excuse yourself from it, don't tell yourself a story about how there's nothing you can do or about how your attention and effort can be better spent helping other people elsewhere. That may be true, but it's another coping mechanism, and it also shorts out the pain.

Instead, I suggest sitting with the pain, and transmuting it into resolve.

There are many people for whom guilt is the right response, when ignoring a beggar. If you're not doing anything to leave the world nicer than it was when you found it, if you're not doing anything to help your fellow human beings, if you're not doing anything to shape the grand story of Humanity as it plays out all around you, and if you *want* to be helping, then guilt is a healthy reminder that you've betrayed some part of yourself.

This is why my "replacing guilt" series began by addressing the listless guilt, all those months ago. Sometimes, guilt is a reminder that you're not doing what you think is right, and those reminders can be valuable.

But most of the guilt-motivated people I know don't match that pattern. Many of them are dedicating their lives to making the world a better place, and they can do far more good by focusing their attention on their work and their health than they can by worrying over one beggar in the street, or over a thousand starving families that they can do nothing to save. They berate themselves for not needing less rest, for not being able to do the psychologically impossible, for not being as smart or as productive or as wealthy or as kind as those around them.

I say: Yes, the beggar suffers. Yes, a thousand families starve. The world is hurting.

And yes, there are others who are doing more than you to help. Some are smarter, some are more productive, some were born wealthier, some are kinder, some are less psychologically fragile, some have a stronger will.

But none of these are reasons for guilt. Guilt was made for us, not us for it. Guilt is useful only insofar as it helps you wrest yourself from the wrong path. If you're already walking the path you want to walk, if you're working on becoming kinder, or more generous, or psychologically stronger, or wealthier, or smarter, if you're already moving as fast as you can given your current constraints, then the fact that the world is still hurting and you aren't strong enough to fix things yet is no reason for guilt.

Rather, it's a reason for *anger,* at a world where nobody is evil but everything is broken. It's a reason for *resolve,* to push yourself as hard as is healthy and sustainable but no harder.

But it is not a reason for guilt, once you are doing what you can, in full light of the fact that you are still only mortal.

There are dozens of opportunities to transmute guilt, or awkwardness, or not-my-problem into resolve, each day.

Notice the disabused middle-aged woman who has to sacrifice a part of her soul working a job at Starbucks in order to earn her right to survive. See the madman yelling across the street, while everyone else reflexively struggles to ignore or unsee him. See a morbidly obese person avoid the stares of onlookers as they struggle with

self-loathing in a civilization that filled its cheapest foods with poisons that ravage bodies.

Some people ignore these painful parts of the world. Others try to unsee them. Others try to distance themselves, by poking fun at those who are deemed "pathetic."

I suggest seeing them, and remembering. Remember that there may come a time when humanity will move the very stars to ensure that no mind suffers as much as a first-world beggar does today. Remember that, beneath all the mental callouses that allow you to write fellow human beings off as unsalvageable, the reason you won't help them is not because they aren't worth helping, but because there are too many other things that need doing first.

So notice your impulse towards guilt. Notice your impulse to ignore. Notice your impulse to distance yourself from people you don't want to acknowledge. Notice your impulse to assure yourself that it's not your fault, that there's nothing you can do, that you can't help them because it's cheaper to help other people suffering just as much abroad.

Then stop following those impulses. See the dark world. Acknowledge the pain, and remind yourself that we live in a universe *worth changing.*

Remind yourself that you're a part of the grand human story, and that when our children's children's children hear about the amount of suffering we had to pass over in combat of greater evils, they will shed tears.

The count of people we have to leave behind can be a persistent source of pain. But don't let it be a persistent source of *guilt.* Instead, let it be a reminder that the universe is vast and uncaring, and that our job here is unfinished.

The best you can

This is a linkpost for https://mindingourway.com/best-you-can/

In fiction, protagonists narrow their focus until the difference between success and failure on their specific task seems like the difference between victory and defeat. Batman attempts to solve the mystery while ensuring that nobody dies; meanwhile, children in Africa suffer from Malaria. The crew in The Martian spends billions of dollars worth of capital to save one man; capital that could have been spent curing diseases.

Real people run a risk of duplicating this error, if they try to find the very best action available.

It's easy to paralyze yourself if you try to do the "right thing." There's always more uncertainty to be had. There's always more information you could gather. It's hard to become confident that you're doing the right thing. This can lead to paralysis, and persistent inaction.

It's much easier, I think, to stop asking "is this action the right action to take?" and instead ask "what's the best action I can identify at the moment?"

Sometimes, the best action you can identify is "search for more alternatives." Sometimes, it's "study more" or "learn more." Sometimes, it's a specific action. The nice thing is that "what's the best action I can find in the next five minutes?" always has a concrete answer. If you search for that, instead, you won't get paralyzed.

Spoiler alert: you can't find the "actually best" action. Insofar as there *is* an "actually best" sequence of motor outputs your brain could produce, it's a mad convoluted dance that leverages butterfly effects to reforge the world overnight. You're not going to find the "best action." And the best action you *can* find is exactly what it sounds like — the best action you're able to find.

You never have enough information to make a fully informed choice. You never have enough time to consider all the possibilities, or weigh all the evidence. You are always biased; your brain is compromised. The problem before you is too hard, and no matter what you do, a billion more people are going to die.

No matter what gambles you take, no matter how risky or cautious you are, you're trading off some possible futures against other ones. You can't save them all.

All you can do is look at your actions, and take the best one you can find.

It's easy for humans to zoom in to the game we think we're playing, and try to win *completely*, to solve the mystery without letting *anyone* die.

It's easier to remember to pick the best action you can find, rather than striving to do the "right thing," if you remember that people have already died; that the threshold has already been crossed. That we're not playing for a "total victory" any more, that we've already missed our chance at a "perfect score."

This is a battle we've already lost.

A hundred billion people have already died.

Rome fell. The barbarian hordes flooded through its gates. There were a thousand years of darkness.

We've already missed our shot at a total victory. Now we're just building the best future we can.

So don't get paralyzed looking for the right thing to do. Just find the best action you *can* find, and do that.

Dark, not colorless

This is a linkpost for https://mindingourway.com/dark-not-colorless/

The last arc of posts has been about how to handle a dour universe. Become unable to despair, learn to see the darkness rather than flinching from it, learn to choose between bad and worse without suffering. Learn to live in a grim world without becoming grim yourself, learn to hear bad news without suffering, and stop needing to know your actions were acceptable. Come to terms with the fact you may lose, use the darkness as a source of fuel, and let go of dreams of total victory. These are the tools I use to tap into intrinsic motivation, in a precarious world where the problems are larger than I am.

Where others see a hurting world and feel guilty for not doing enough to help it, I see a hurting world and feed my own resolve. Instead of feeling guilty for not working until I drop, I recognize the psychological impossibility and resolve to do everything I can *within* my mortal constraints. For me, at least, this internal drive is more robust and reliable than guilt motivation.

This brings us to the end of the penultimate arc of the "replacing guilt" series of posts, which I began many months ago, and takes us into the final arc. The first arc was about addressing the listless guilt that comes from ignoring a part of yourself that wants to be doing something more. The second arc was about eliminating the feeling of obligation, and fighting for something you care about *only because you care about it.* The third arc was about coming to terms with your limitations and learning to optimize *within* them, rather than feeling guilty because of them. This post concludes the fourth arc, about living in a dark universe and tapping into resolve instead of guilt.

The fifth and final arc is about what you do next. Once you've removed guilt and replaced it with intrinsic drive — both cold resolve and hot desire to *make the future bright* — what do you do next? What thought patterns allow one to turn these feelings into *actions*, rather than feelings of frustration and impotence?

I'll explore some of my answers to those questions in the coming handful of posts. But before then, I have one reminder I'd like to pass along.

Among all this talk of coming to terms with a dark and dour world, I ask you to remember that the world is *dark*, but it is not *colorless.*

I have seen many a friend attempt to see the dark world and then despair (for they are too small and the problems too large), and then confuse their sense of hopelessness with a sense of *meaninglessness.*

(The reasoning goes: "If the universe is so large, how can I matter? If the world is in such deep trouble, how can I make a difference? If all this were true, nothing would matter.")

So consider this a gentle reminder that a dark world is not a *lost* world. It is not a grey world, where everything is dead and there is nothing we can do. It is not a cold empty universe, from which nothing can be built. It is simply a *damaged* world, a *hurting* world, that is intolerable precisely because it could be so much better.

If you gazed upon a worthless universe, all cold and dead, the sight would likely not fill you with despair — because while there is no light, while there are no happy sapients living full lives, there is also no darkness: that universe is empty and dull. If you gaze upon our universe and despair, then, then that can only be because there is so much that is not right, but *could be.*

While our world is dark, it is still filled with color, and indeed many spots of light and even brilliance. Children laugh. Lovers meet. Right now, someone is just understanding one of the deep secrets of how the universe works for the first time, and their mind is filling with awe. Right now, someone is building a close friendship for the first time in a decade. Every day bears witness to a billion acts of love and kindness. This world is dark, yes — 150,000 people die every day — but it is not *lost.*

So don't let despair or hopelessness weigh you down. Instead, let them be a reminder: those are feelings you can only get from something worth saving. There are things here that are worth fighting for. If you begin to despair, then let that feeling be a reminder of what could be, and let everything that this world *isn't* be your fuel.

The world may be dark, but it's not colorless.