The School of Life

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I. Introduction

- We are not individually much cleverer than the average animal, a heron or a mole, but the knack of our species lies in our capacity to transmit our accumulated knowledge down the generations.
- The slowest among us can, in a few hours, pick up ideas that it took a few rare geniuses a lifetime to acquire.
- Our energies are overwhelmingly directed toward material, scientific, and technical subjects and away from psychological and emotional ones.
- Much anxiety surrounds the question of how good the next generation will be at math; very little around their abilities at marriage or kindness.
- We devote inordinate hours to learning about tectonic plates and cloud formations, and relatively few fathoming shame and rage.
- Starting in Europe in the eighteenth century and spreading widely and powerfully ever since, Romanticism has been deeply committed to casting doubt on the need to apply reason to emotional life, preferring to let spontaneous feelings play an unhampered role instead.

- ❏ Emotional intelligence remains a peculiar-sounding term, because we are wedded to thinking of intelligence as a unitary capacity, rather than what it actually is: a catch-all word for what is in fact a range of skills directed at a number of different challenges.
- ❏ We are all astonishingly capable of messing up our lives, whatever the prestige of our college degrees, and are never beyond making a sincere contribution, however unorthodox our qualifications.
- ❏ The emotionally intelligent person knows that love is a skill, not a feeling, and will require trust, vulnerability, generosity, humor, sexual understanding, and selective resignation.
- ❏ The emotionally intelligent person awards themselves the time to determine what gives their working life meaning and has the confidence and tenacity to try to find an accommodation between their inner priorities and the demands of the world.
- ❏ The emotionally intelligent person knows how to hope and be grateful, while remaining steadfast before the essentially tragic structure of existence. The emotionally intelligent person knows that they will only ever be mentally healthy in a few areas and at certain moments, but is committed to fathoming their inadequacies and warning others of them in good time, with apology and charm.
- ❏ For most of human history, emotional intelligence was —broadly—in the hands of religions. It was they that talked with greatest authority about ethics, meaning, community, and purpose. It was they that offered to instruct us in how to live, love, and die well.
- ❏ When belief went into decline in northwestern Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, many commentators wondered where humanity would—in an increasingly secular future—find the guidance that religions had once provided.
- ❏ One answer—hesitantly and then increasingly boldly articulated—came to the fore: culture. Culture could replace scripture.
- ❏ With this idea in mind, an unparalleled investment in culture followed in many ever-less faithful nations. Vast numbers of libraries, concert halls, college humanities departments, and museums were constructed around the world with the conscious intention of filling the chasm left by religion.
- ❏ Culture has not in any way replaced scripture. Our museums are not our new cathedrals. They are smart filing cabinets for the art of the past. Our libraries are not our homes for the soul. They are architectural encyclopedias.
- ❏ The intensity of need and the emotional craving that religions once willingly engaged with have not been thought acceptable within the contemporary cultural realm.
- ❏ Michel de Montaigne's Essays (1580) amounted to a practical compendium of advice on helping us to know our fickle minds, find purpose, connect meaningfully with others, and achieve intervals of composure and acceptance.
- ❏ As children, when someone asked our age, we might have said, "I'm four", and added, with great solemnity, "and a half." We didn't want anyone to think we were only four. We had traveled so far in those few months, but then again we were modest enough to sense that the huge dignity of turning five was still quite far away.

- In other words, as children, we were hugely conscious of the rapidity and intensity of human development and wanted clearly to signal to others and ourselves what dramatic metamorphoses we might undergo in the course of our ordinary days and nights.
- It would nowadays sound comic or a touch mad for an adult to say proudly, “I’m twenty-five and a half” or “forty-one and three-quarters”—because, without particularly noticing, we’ve drifted away from the notion that adults, too, are capable of evolutions.
- The focus is on what grades have been achieved, what career has been chosen and what progress has been made in the corporate hierarchy. Development becomes largely synonymous with promotion.
- In an ideal world, we might have in our possession maps of emotional progress against which we could plot our faltering advance toward more sustained maturity.
- The contemporary education system proceeds under two assumptions about how we learn. First, it believes that how we are taught matters far less than what we are taught.
- Second, the education system assumes that once we understand something, it will stick in our minds for as long as we need it to.
- It was the philosophers of ancient Greece who first identified these problems and described the structural deficiencies of our minds with a special term. They proposed that we suffer from akrasia, commonly translated as “weakness of will,” a habit of not listening to what we accept should be heard and a failure to act upon what we know is right.
- It is because of akrasia that crucial information is frequently lodged in our minds without being active in them, and it is because of akrasia that we often both understand what we should do and resolutely omit to do it.
- There are two solutions to these fragilities of mind that a successful emotional education must draw upon: The first is art; the second is ritual.
- We are so used to understanding the purpose of art in Romantic terms, as the fruit of individual artistic genius, that we forget that for most of history art had a plainer and more direct purpose: It was a tool of education. The point of art was to render tough or knotty lessons easier to absorb; to nudge our recalcitrant minds toward accepting ideas that we might nod along to but then ignore if they were not stated in especially varnished and graceful terms.
- Christianity, for example, devoted so much attention to art (architecture, music, painting, etc.) not because it cared for beauty per se, but because it understood the power of beauty to persuade us into particular patterns of thought and habits of the heart.
- Our problem isn’t just that we are in the habit of shirking important ideas. We are also prone to forget them immediately even if we have in theory given them our assent. For this, humanity invented ritual.
- Ritual can be defined as the structured repetition of important concepts, made resonant through the help of formal pageantry and ceremony.
- Ritual takes thoughts that are known but unattended and renders them active and vivid once more in our distracted minds. Unlike standard modern education, ritual doesn’t aim to teach us anything new; it wants to lend compelling form to what we believe we already know. It wants to turn our theoretical allegiances into habits.

- ❏ The best rituals don't so much impose upon us ideas that we are opposed to but take us back to ideas that we are in deep agreement with yet have allowed to lapse: They are an externally mandated route to inner authenticity.
- ❏ A good "school" shouldn't tell us only things we've never heard of before; it should be deeply interested in rehearsing all that is theoretically known yet practically forgotten.
- ❏ The single greatest enemy of contemporary satisfaction may be the belief in human perfectibility. We have been driven to collective rage through the apparently generous yet in reality devastating idea that it might be within our natural remit to be completely and enduringly happy.
- ❏ There can wisely be no "solutions," no self-help, of a kind that removes problems altogether. What we can aim for, at best, is consolation—a word tellingly lacking in glamour. To believe in consolation means giving up on cures; it means accepting that life is a hospice rather than a hospital, but one we'd like to render as comfortable, as interesting, and as kind as possible.
- ❏ Basic sanity should also be assumed to be beyond us. There are too many powerful reasons why we lack anything like an even keel. We have complex histories, we are heading toward the ultimate catastrophe, we are vulnerable to devastating losses, love will always leave us wanting, the gap between our hopes and our realities is always going to be unbridgeable.
- ❏ In the circumstances, it makes no sense to aim for sanity; we should fix instead on the goal of achieving a wise, knowledgeable, and self-possessed relationship with our manifold insanities, or what can be termed "sane insanity."
- ❏ The sane insane among us are not a special category of the mentally unwell; they represent the most evolved possibility for a mature human being.
- ❏ Melancholy is not rage or bitterness; it is a noble species of sadness that arises when we are properly open to the idea that suffering and disappointment are at the heart of human experience. It is not a disorder that needs to be cured; it is a tender-hearted, calm, dispassionate acknowledgment of how much agony we will inevitably have to travel through.
- ❏ We can, in melancholy states, understand without fury or sentimentality that no one truly understands anyone else, that loneliness is universal and that every life has its full measure of shame and sorrow.
- ❏ The melancholy know that many of the things we most want are in tragic conflict: to feel secure and yet to be free; to have money and yet not to have to be beholden to others; to be in close-knit communities and yet not to be stifled by the expectations and demands of society; to explore the world and yet to put down deep roots; to fulfill the demands of our appetites for food, sex, and sloth and yet stay thin, sober, faithful, and fit.
- ❏ The task of culture is to turn rage and forced jollity into melancholy. The more melancholy a culture can be, the less its individual members need to be persecuted by their own failures, lost illusions, and regrets.
- ❏ Simplicity should never insult our intelligence; it should remind us to be nimble in our understanding of what intelligence comprises.

- ❏ We need to be sophisticated enough not to reject a truth because it sounds like something we already know. We need to be mature enough to bend down and pick up governing ideas in their simplest guises. We need to remain open to vast truths that can be stated in the language of a child.

II. Self

Strangers to Ourselves

- ❏ We suffer because there is no easy route to introspection. We cannot open a hatch and locate “ourselves.” We are not a fixed destination, but an eternally mobile, boundless, unfocused, vaporous specter whose full nature can only be retrospectively deduced from painfully recollected glimpses and opaque hints.
- ❏ We pay a very high price for our self-ignorance. Feelings and desires that haven’t been examined linger and distribute their energy randomly across our lives. Ambition that doesn’t know itself re-emerges as panic; envy transforms itself into bitterness; anger turns into rage; sadness into depression.
- ❏ It is logical that Socrates should have boiled down the entire wisdom of philosophy to one simple command: “Know yourself.”
- ❏ The more closely we introspect, the more we start to appreciate the range of tricks our minds play on us—and therefore the more we appreciate the extent to which we will continually misjudge situations and the feelings they provoke.
- ❏ We are notoriously bad judges of distances, wildly misreading how far away a distant island or mountain might be, and easily fooled in our estimations by small changes of light and moisture in the air.
- ❏ Our sense of time is highly inaccurate, influenced chiefly by the novelty or familiarity of what happens rather than by strict chronological duration. We desire excessively and inaccurately. Our sexual drives wreak havoc on our sense of priorities. Our whole assessment of the world can be transformed according to how much water we have drunk or the amount of sleep we have had.
- ❏ We take the first steps toward maturity by determining some of the ways in which our emotional minds deny, lie, evade, forget, and obsess, steering us toward goals that won’t deliver the satisfaction of which we’re initially convinced. A readiness to mitigate the worst of our everyday foolishness contributes to the highest kind of emotional intelligence of which we may ever be capable.
- ❏ Maturity involves accepting with good grace that we are all—like marionettes—manipulated by the past. And, when we can manage it, it may also require

that we develop our capacity to judge and act in the ambiguous here and now with somewhat greater fairness and neutrality.

Knowing the Past

- ❏ Even if we were sensitively cared for and lovingly handled, even if parental figures approached their tasks with the highest care and commitment, we can be counted upon not to have passed through our young years without sustaining some form of deep psychological injury—what we can term a set of "primal wounds."
- ❏ Across the long summers and winters of childhood, we are intimately shaped by the ways of the big people around us.
- ❏ Children are equally helpless before the distinctive theories of the parents.
- ❏ Children can't go elsewhere. They have no extended social network. Even when things are going right, childhood is a gentle open prison.
- ❏ Yet because we are reluctant historians of our emotional pasts, we too easily take our temperament as our destiny.
- ❏ Communication patterns are beset by comparable childhood legacies. When something is very wrong, children have no innate capacity to explain its cause. They lack the confidence, poise, and verbal dexterity to get their points across with the calm and authority required.
- ❏ They tend to experience dramatic overreactions instead: insisting, nagging, exploding, screaming.
- ❏ Or else excessive under-reactions: sulking, sullen silence, avoidance.
- ❏ We may be well into middle age before we can shed our first impulses to explode at or flee from those who misunderstand our needs, and more carefully and serenely strive to explain them instead.
- ❏ It is a complicating factor that our imbalances don't cleanly reveal their origins, either to our own minds or, consequently, to the world at large.
- ❏ And because the sources of our imbalances escape us, we miss out on important sources of possible sympathy. We are judged on the behaviors that our wounds inspire, rather than on the wounds themselves.
- ❏ We make our lives tougher than they should be because we insist on thinking of people, ourselves and others, as inept and mean rather than, as is almost invariably the case, primarily the victims of what we have all in some ways traveled through: an immensely tricky early history.
- ❏ It seems crushing and, from certain perspectives, plain daft to suppose that our personalities might remain forged by incidents that unfolded before our fifth birthday.

Self-Deception

- ❏ It is part of the human tragedy that we are natural self-deceivers. Our techniques are multiple and close to invisible:

- ❏ We get addicted. Not necessarily to heroin or whisky, but to everyday innocuous activities that attract no alarm or suspicion. We are hooked on checking the news or tidying the house, exercising or taking on fresh projects at work.
- ❏ We are addicts whenever we develop a manic reliance on something—anything—to keep our darker and more unsettling feelings at bay.
- ❏ We lie by being very cheerful.
- ❏ We lie by attacking and denigrating what we love but haven't managed to get.
- ❏ We lie through a generalized cynicism, which we direct at everything and everyone so as to ward off misery about one or two things in particular.
- ❏ We lie by filling our minds with impressive ideas that blatantly announce our intelligence to the world but subtly ensure that we won't have much room left to rediscover long-distant feelings of ignorance or confusion upon which the development of our personalities may nevertheless rest.
- ❏ We deploy knowledge and ideas that carry indubitable prestige to stand guard against the emergence of more humble but essential knowledge from our emotional past.
- ❏ We lie by pretending that we are simpler than we actually are and that too much psychology might be nonsense. We lean on a version of robust common sense to ward off intimations of our own awkward complexity. We imply that not thinking very much is, at base, evidence of a superior kind of intelligence.
- ❏ We need to tell ourselves a little more of the truth because we pay too high a price for our concealments. We cut ourselves off from possibilities of growth.

Emotionally Healthy Childhood

- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, someone will put themselves profoundly at our service. If as adults we have even a measure of mental health, it is almost certainly because, when we were helpless infants, there was a person (to whom we essentially owe our lives) who pushed their needs to one side for a time in order to focus wholly on ours.
- ❏ They interpreted what we could not quite say, they guessed what might be ailing us, they settled and consoled us. They kept the chaos and noise at bay and cut the world up into manageable pieces for us.
- ❏ They did not, all the while, ask that we thank them, understand them, or show them sympathy. They didn't demand that we enquire how their days went or how they were sleeping at night (they weren't much). They treated us like royalty, so that we would later on be able to submit to the rigors and humiliations of an ordinary life. This temporarily one-sided relationship guaranteed our eventual ability to form a two-sided kind.
- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, we're given the benefit of the doubt. We are assessed by what we might one day be, not by exactly what we are right now. Someone is on hand to put the best possible spin on our behavior. Someone is kind.

- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, the relationship with our caregiver is steady, consistent, and long-term. We trust that they will be there tomorrow and the day after. They are boringly predictable.
- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, we aren't always required to be wholly good boys or girls. We are allowed to get furious and sometimes a bit revolting—at certain points to say "absolutely not" and "because I feel like it."
- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, our carer isn't jealous of or competitive with us. They can allow themselves to be overtaken and superseded.
- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, the child learns that things that break can be fixed.
- ❏ Bakhuysen wanted us to feel proud of humanity's resilience in the face of apparently dreadful challenges. His painting implies that we can all cope far better than we think; that what appears immensely threatening may be highly survivable.

Ludolf Bakhuysen, Warships in a Heavy Storm, c. 1695

- ❏ Importantly, in an emotionally healthy childhood, plenty goes wrong. No one has staked their reputation on rendering the whole story perfect.
- ❏ The carer does not see it as their role to remove every frustration.
- ❏ In an emotionally healthy childhood, the child can see that the good carer isn't either entirely good or wholly bad and so isn't worthy of either idealization or denigration.

- ❏ The child accepts the faults and virtues of the carer with melancholy maturity and gratitude—and in doing so, by extension, becomes ready to accept that everyone they like will be a mixture of the positive and the negative.
- ❏ Self-love is the quality that determines how much we can be friends with ourselves and, day to day, remain on our own side.
- ❏ When another person frustrates or humiliates us, can we let the insult go, able to perceive the senseless malice beneath the attack, or are we left brooding and devastated, implicitly identifying with the verdict of our enemies?
- ❏ At work, do we have a reasonable, well-grounded sense of our worth and so feel able to ask for (and properly expect to get) the rewards we are due? Can we resist the need to please others indiscriminately? Are we sufficiently aware of our genuine contribution to be able to say no when we need to?
- ❏ Around others, how ready are we to learn? Do we always need to take a criticism of one part of us as an attack on everything about us? How ready are we to listen when valuable lessons come in painful guises?
- ❏ Can we patiently and reasonably put our disappointments into words that, more or less, enable others to see our point? Or do we internalize pain, act it out symbolically or discharge it with counterproductive rage?
- ❏ How risky is the world? How readily might we survive a challenge in the form of a speech we must give, a romantic rejection, a bout of financial trouble, a journey to another country, or a common cold?
- ❏ How close are we, at any time, to catastrophe? Of what material do we feel we are made?
- ❏ Will new acquaintances like or wound us?
- ❏ Do we, overall, feel the world to be wide, safe, and reasonable enough for us to have a legitimate shot at a measure of contentment, or must we settle, resentfully, for inauthenticity and misunderstanding?

Therapies

- ❏ Most of what we are remains a secret to the world, because we are aware of how much of it flouts the laws of decency and sobriety we would like to live by. We know that we would not last long in society if a stream of our uncensored inner data ever leaked out of our minds.
- ❏ That said, kindness is not merely pleasant. Knowing that we have someone on our side is designed to lend us the courage to face up to experiences we normally evade. In a sufficiently calm, reassuring, and interested environment, we can look at areas of vulnerability we are otherwise too burdened to tackle.
- ❏ We can dare to think that perhaps we were wrong or that we have been angry for long enough; that it might be best to outgrow our justifications or halt our compulsion to charm others indiscriminately.
- ❏ It's one of the structural flaws of these minds that it is immensely hard for us to think deeply and coherently for any length of time. We keep losing the thread. Competing,

irrelevant ideas have a habit of flitting across the mental horizon and scrambling our tentative insights.

- ❏ Every now and then, consciousness goes entirely blank.
- ❏ From the start, the therapist will use a succession of very quiet but significant prompts to help us develop and stick at the points we are circling. These suggest that there is no hurry but that someone is there, following every utterance and willing us on. At strategic points, the therapist will drop in a mission-critical and hugely benign “do say more” or an equally powerful “go on.”
- ❏ Therapists are expert at the low-key positive sound: the benevolent, nuanced “ahh” and the potent “mmm,” two of the most significant noises in the aural repertoire of psychotherapy that together invite us to remain faithful to what we were starting to say, however peculiar or useless it might at first have seemed.
- ❏ The active listener contains and nurtures the emerging confusion. They gently take us back over ground we’ve covered too fast and prompt us to address a salient point we might have sidestepped; they will help us chip away at an agitating issue while continually reassuring us that what we are saying is valuable.
- ❏ They’re not treating us like strangely ineffective communicators; they’re just immensely alive to how difficult it is for anyone to piece together what they really have on their minds.
- ❏ Therapy is built on the understanding that we will not be able to transmit our key experiences in one or two self-contained blocks. We live in time and have to decode ourselves at different periods. Things emerge, sometimes very slowly, over months.
- ❏ The origin of the voice of the inner judge is simple to trace: It is an internalization of the voices of people who were once outside us. We absorb the tones of contempt and indifference or charity and warmth that we will have heard across our formative years.
- ❏ Sometimes a voice is positive and benign, encouraging us to run those final few yards. But frequently the inner voice is not very nice at all. It is defeatist and punitive, panic-ridden and humiliating. It doesn’t represent anything like our best insights or most mature capacities.
- ❏ A good internal voice is rather like (and just as important as) a genuinely decent judge: someone who can separate good from bad but who will always be merciful, fair, accurate in understanding what’s going on, and interested in helping us deal with our problems. It’s not that we should stop judging ourselves; rather that we should learn to be better judges of ourselves.
- ❏ Part of improving how we judge our lives involves learning—in a conscious, deliberate way—to speak to ourselves in a new and different tone, which means exposing ourselves to better voices. We need to hear constructive, kindly voices often enough and around tricky enough issues that they come to feel like normal and natural responses, so that, eventually, they become our own thoughts.
- ❏ We need to become better friends to ourselves. The idea sounds odd, initially, because we naturally imagine a friend as someone else, not as a part of our own mind. But there is value in the concept because of the extent to which we know how to treat our own friends with a sympathy and imagination that we don’t apply to ourselves.

- ❏ The good friend is compassionate. When we fail, as we will, they are understanding and generous around our mishaps. Our folly doesn't exclude us from the circle of their love.
- ❏ People don't just sometimes fail. Everyone fails, as a rule; it's just we seldom know the details.
- ❏ The hopefulness lies in the fact that we already possess the relevant skills of friendship, it's just that we haven't as yet directed them to the person who probably needs them most: ourselves.
- ❏ What sort of person, then, might we be after therapy, if the process goes as well as could be hoped? Evidently, still—quite often—unhappy. People will continue to misunderstand us; we'll meet with opposition; there will be things it would be nice to have that will be out of reach; success will come to people who don't appear to deserve it, and much that's good about us won't be fully appreciated by others. We'll still have to compete and submit to the judgment of others; we'll still be lonely sometimes; and therapy won't stop us having to watch the people we love pass away, and falling ill and eventually dying ourselves. Therapy can't make life better than it truly is.
- ❏ A key feature of the defenses we build up against our primal wounds is that they are rigid and so limit our room for maneuver. For example, we may have very distinctive but unfortunate characters we go for in love; or we can't be touched in certain places; or we feel we have to be constantly cynical or else insistently jolly. Our sense of who we are allowed to be and what we can do is held prisoner by the shocks of the past.
- ❏ We can develop a sad but realistic picture of a world in which sorrows and anxieties are blindly passed down the generations. The insight isn't only true with regard to experience; holding it in mind will mean there is less to fear. Those who wounded us were not superior, impressive beings who knew our special weaknesses and justly targeted them. They were themselves highly frantic, damaged creatures trying their best to cope with the litany of private sorrows to which every life condemns us.
- ❏ In "philosophical meditation," instead of being prompted to sidestep our worries and ambitions, we are directed to set aside time to untangle, examine, and confront them.
- ❏ Key to the practice is regularly to turn over three large questions. The first asks what we might be anxious about right now.
- ❏ A philosophical meditation moves on to a second enquiry: What am I upset about right now?
- ❏ What we call depression is in fact sadness and anger that have for too long not been paid the attention they deserve.
- ❏ The third question to consider within a philosophical meditation is: What am I ambitious and excited about right now?
- ❏ We each face calls, triggered by chance encounters with people, objects, or ideas, to change our lives.
- ❏ Something within us knows far better than our day-to-day consciousness permits us to realize the direction we need to go in in order to become whom we could really be.

A more normal normality

- ❏ Our picture of acceptability is very often way out of line with what is actually true and widespread. Many things that we might assume to be uniquely odd or disconcertingly strange about us are in reality wholly ubiquitous, though rarely spoken of in the reserved and cautious public sphere.
- ❏ The misunderstanding begins with a basic fact about our minds: that we know through immediate experience what is going on inside us, but can only know about others from what they choose to tell us—which will almost always be a very edited version of the truth. We know our somewhat shocking reality from close up; we are left to guess about other people's from what their faces tell us, which is not very much.
- ❏ Ideally, the task of culture would be to compensate for the failings of our brains. It should assist us to a more correct vision of what other people are normally like—by taking us, in realistic and sensitive ways, into the inner lives of strangers.
- ❏ Novels, movies, and songs should constantly be defining and evoking states of mind we thought we were alone in experiencing but that belong to the typical lot of humankind. We should put down the average novel wondering, with relief, how the novelist had come to know so much about us. We should begin to understand that an average stranger is always far more likely to be as we know we are—with all our quirks, fragilities, compulsions, and surprising aspects—than they are to resemble the apparently "normal" person their exterior implies.
- ❏ Traditionally, boys were not allowed to acknowledge that they felt like crying and girls weren't allowed to entertain certain kinds of ambitions. We might not have such obviously naive prohibitions today, but other, equally powerful ones have taken their place. We may have picked up covert but forceful indications that no decent person could be enthusiastic about making money or unable to cope at work, tempted by an affair or still upset over a break-up.
- ❏ The way to greater honesty follows some of the techniques evident from the rehabilitation of the people who commit crimes. We must reduce the shame and danger of confession. We need a broader, more reassuring sense of what is common.
- ❏ Of course it is normal to be envious, crude, sexual, weak, in need, childlike, grandiose, terrified, and furious. It is normal to desire random adventures even within loving, committed unions. It is normal to be hurt by "small" signs of rejection, and to be made quickly very insecure by any evidence of neglect by a partner. It is normal to harbor hopes for ourselves professionally that go far beyond what we have currently been able to achieve. It is normal to envy other people, many times a day, to be very upset by any kind of criticism of our work or performance, and to be so sad we regularly daydream of flight or a premature end.
- ❏ The journey to self-knowledge needs to begin with a better map of the terrain of normality.
- ❏ A breakdown is not merely a random piece of madness or malfunction; it is a very real—albeit very inarticulate—bid for health and self-knowledge. It is an attempt by one part of our mind to force the other into a process of growth, self-understanding and

self-development that it has hitherto refused to undertake. If we can put it paradoxically, it is an attempt to jump-start a process of getting well—properly well—through a stage of falling very ill.

- ❏ A breakdown isn't just a pain, though it is that too of course; it is an extraordinary opportunity to learn.
- ❏ There were things we needed to hear inside our minds that we deftly put to one side; there were messages we needed to heed, bits of emotional learning and communicating we didn't do, and now, after being patient for so long, far too long, the emotional self is attempting to make itself heard in the only way it now knows how.
- ❏ A crisis represents an appetite for growth that hasn't found another way of expressing itself. Many people, after a horrific few months or years of breakdown, will say, "I don't know how I'd ever have got well if I hadn't fallen ill."
- ❏ Our crisis, if we can get through it, is an attempt to dislodge us from a toxic status quo and constitutes an insistent call to rebuild our lives on a more authentic and sincere basis.
- ❏ It belongs, in the most acute and panicked way, to the search for self-knowledge.

II. Others

Kindness

- ❏ At its most basic, charity means offering someone something they need but can't get for themselves.
- ❏ Charity involves offering someone something that they may not entirely deserve and that it is a long way beyond the call of duty for us to provide: sympathy.
- ❏ In cases of financial charity, the gifts tend to go in one direction only, from the rich to the poor.

Losers and Tragic Failures

- ❏ For a long time, around success and failure, the rhetoric tends to be upbeat. We hear about resilience, bouncing back, never surrendering, and giving it another go. But there's only so long this kind of talk can go on. At some point, the conclusion becomes inevitable: things won't work out.
- ❏ Where does responsibility for success and failure lie? Nowadays, the answer tends to be: squarely with the individual concerned. That's why failure isn't just hard (as it has always been**; it is a catastrophe. There is no metaphysical consolation, no possibility of appealing to the idea of "bad luck," no one to blame but oneself. Suicide rates climb exponentially once societies become modern and start to hold people profoundly responsible for their

biographies. Meritocracies turn failure from a misfortune to an unbudgeable verdict on one's nature.

- ❏ We trust that the world is more or less just, and that, the odd exception aside, people will secure roughly what they deserve. Those who are condemned and broken did something wrong; those who succeeded worked hard and were good. The status of a person has to be a more or less reliable indicator of their effort and decency.
- ❏ In ancient Greece, another rather remarkable possibility—ignored by our own era—was envisaged: You could be good and yet fail.
- ❏ To keep this idea at the front of the collective imagination, the ancient Greeks developed a particular art form: tragic drama. They put on huge festivals, which all the citizens were expected to attend, to act out stories of appalling, often grisly, failure: People were seen to break a minor law, or make a hasty decision, or sleep with the wrong person and the results were ignominy and death.
- ❏ Yet what happened was shown to be to a large extent in the hands of what the Greeks called "fate" or "the gods." It was the Greeks' poetic way of saying that things often work out randomly, according to dynamics that simply don't reflect the merits of the individuals concerned.
- ❏ Tragedy is the sympathetic, morally complex account of how good people can end up in disaster. It attempts to teach us that goodness is seldom fairly rewarded or error paid for in commensurate ways.
- ❏ We do not inhabit a properly moral universe: Disaster at points befalls those who could not have expected it to be a fair outcome, given what they did.
- ❏ Kindness is built out of a constantly renewed and gently resigned awareness that weakness-free people do not exist.
- ❏ One of the fundamental paths to sympathy is the power to hold on, in the most challenging situations, to a distinction between a person's overt unpleasant actions and the more pitiable motives that may underlie them. Pure evil is seldom at work. Almost all our worst moments can be traced back to an unexotic, bathetic, temptingly neglected ingredient: pain.
- ❏ People are bad, always, because they are in difficulty. They slander, gossip, denigrate, and growl because they are not in a good place.

Politeness

- Frank people believe in the importance of expressing themselves honestly principally because they trust that what they happen to think and feel will always prove fundamentally acceptable to the world.
- In this sense, the frank person sees themselves a little in the way we typically see small children: as blessed by an original and innate goodness.
- Tellingly, we don't usually think that the strictures of politeness apply to the very young. We remain interested to hear about whatever may be passing through their minds and stay unalarmed by their awkward moments, infelicities, or negative statements.

- The frank person taps into just this childlike optimism in their uninhibited approach to themselves. Their trust in their basic purity erodes the rationale for editing or self-censorship.
- The polite person, by contrast, proceeds under a grave suspicion of themselves and their impulses. They sense that a great deal of what they feel and want really isn't very nice. They are indelibly in touch with their darker desires and can sense their fleeting wishes to hurt or humiliate certain people.
- Paradoxically, the polite person who is pessimistic about their own nature doesn't in fact end up behaving horribly with anyone. So aware are they of their own dislikeable sides, they nimbly minimize their impact upon the world.
- It is their extraordinary suspicion of themselves that helps them to be—in everyday life—uncommonly friendly, trustworthy and kind.
- The frank person operates with a charming, unconscious assumption that other people are at heart pretty much like them. This can make them very clubbable and allows them to create some astonishing intimacies across social barriers at high speed.
- For their part, the polite person starts from the assumption that others are highly likely to be in quite different places internally, whatever the outward signs.
- The frank person works with an underlying sense that other people are internally for the most part extremely robust. Those around them are not felt to be forever on the verge of self-doubt and self-hatred. Their egos are not assumed to be gossamer thin and at perpetual risk of deflating. There is therefore understood to be no need to broadcast constant small signals of reassurance and affirmation.
- The frank person assumes that everyone's ego is already at least as big and strong as it should be. They are even likely to suspect that if you praise someone for the little things, you'll only inflate their self-regard to undue and dangerous proportions.
- Yet the polite person knows that we take a lot of ourselves into our jobs and need to find respect and a form of love from them as much as we need cash.
- The polite person also cares passionately about spreading kindness, love, and goodness on a mass scale, but they are cautious about the chances of doing so on any realistic time horizon.
- The frank person has a high degree of confidence as to their ability to judge relatively quickly and for the long term what is right and wrong about a given situation.
- This is what gives them the confidence to get angry with what strikes them (immediately** as rank stupidity, or to blow up bridges with people they've become vexed with, or to state a disagreement emphatically and to call another person stupid, monstrous, or a liar to their face.
- The polite person is much more unsure on all these fronts. They are conscious that what they feel strongly about today might not be what they end up thinking next week.

Diplomacy

- Diplomacy is an art that evolved initially to deal with problems in the relationships between countries. The leaders of neighboring states might be touchy on points of personal pride and quickly roused to anger; if they met head on they might be liable to infuriate each other and start a war.
- Diplomacy was a way of avoiding the dangers that come from decisions taken in the heat of the moment.
- Diplomacy is the art of advancing an idea or a cause without unnecessarily inflaming passions or unleashing a catastrophe. It involves an understanding of the many facets of human nature that can undermine agreement and stoke conflict, and a commitment to unpicking these with foresight and grace.
- Knowing the intensity of the craving for respect, diplomats—though they may not always be able to agree with others—take the trouble to show that they have bothered to see how things look through foreign eyes.
- Frequently, what is at stake within a negotiation with someone is a request that they change in some way: that they learn to be more punctual, or take more trouble on a task, or be less defensive or more open-minded.
- The diplomat knows how futile it is to state these wishes too directly.
- In negotiations, the diplomat is not addicted to indiscriminate or heroic truth-telling. They appreciate the legitimate place that minor lies or omissions can occupy in the service of greater truths. They know that if certain local facts are emphasized, then the most important principles in a relationship may be forever undermined.
- At the same time, the diplomat understands that there are moments to sidestep direct engagement. They do not try to teach a lesson whenever it might first or most apply; they wait till it has the best chance of being heard. At points, they disarm difficult people by reacting in unexpected ways.
- The diplomat succeeds by being a realist.
- Diplomacy seeks to teach us how many good things can still be accomplished when we make some necessary accommodations with the crooked, sometimes touching, and hugely unreliable material of human nature.
- There's a financial aspect to the dichotomy too. Kind people do not seem well cut out to win in the game of capitalism. Business success appears to demand an ability not to listen to excuses, not to forgive, not to be detained by sentiment.
- Semi-consciously, kindness also seems incompatible with sexual desirability. Being erotic appears to be connected with a degree of heedless disregard and selfishness. We want our friends to be nice, but appreciate our lovers as a touch dangerous.

Charm

Shyness

- ❏ Shyness may seem like an ingrained, almost natural disposition, but it is at heart a highly treatable condition provoked by a set of somewhat misfounded ideas about ourselves and our position in the world.
- ❏ At the heart of the shy person's self-doubt is a certainty that they must be boring. But, in reality, no one is ever truly boring. We are only in danger of coming across as such when we don't dare (or know how** to communicate our deeper selves to others.
- ❏ When we dismiss a person as boring, we are merely pointing to someone who has not had the courage or concentration to tell us what it is like to be them.
- ❏ But we invariably prove compelling when we succeed in detailing some of what we crave, envy, regret, mourn, and dream.
- ❏ The interesting person isn't someone to whom obviously and outwardly interesting things have happened, someone who has traveled the world, met important dignitaries or been present at critical geopolitical events. Nor is it someone who speaks in learned terms about the great themes of culture, history, or science. They are someone who has grown into an attentive, self-aware listener and a reliable correspondent of their own mind and heart, and who can thereby give us faithful accounts of the pathos, drama, and strangeness of being them.
- ❏ The gift of being interesting is neither exclusive nor reliant on exceptional talent; it requires only honesty and focus. The person we call interesting is in essence someone alive to what we all deeply want from social intercourse: an uncensored glimpse of what life looks like through the eyes of another person and reassurance that we are not entirely alone with all that feels most bewildering, peculiar, and frightening in us.

Vulnerability

- ❏ We put so much effort into being perfect. But the irony is that it's failure that charms, because others so need to hear external evidence of problems with which we are all too lonely: how un-normal our sex lives are; how arduous our careers are proving; how unsatisfactory our family can be; how worried we are pretty much all the time.
- ❏ Revealing any of these wounds might, of course, place us in great danger. Others could laugh; the media could have a field day. That's the point. We get close by revealing things that would, in the wrong hands, be capable of inflicting humiliation on us.
- ❏ Friendship is the dividend of gratitude that flows from an acknowledgment that one has offered something very valuable by talking: the key to one's self-esteem and dignity.
- ❏ It's deeply poignant that we should expend so much effort on trying to look strong before the world when, all the while, it's really only ever the revelation of the somewhat embarrassing, sad, melancholy, and anxious bits of us that renders us endearing to others and transforms strangers into friends.

- ❏ One of the most acute questions we ask ourselves in relation to new friends and acquaintances is whether or not they like us. The question feels so significant because, depending on how we answer it in our minds, we will either take steps to deepen the friendship or, as is often the case, immediately make moves to withdraw from it so as to spare ourselves humiliation and embarrassment.

Warmth

- ❏ Both warm and cold characters may be equally full of goodwill and ache with an inward desire for closeness. At stake is a guess about what is going on in another person. From a touching modesty, the coldly polite believe in appearances. They trust that the outward respectability, composure, and self-possession of those they encounter must be more or less the whole truth about them. They believe that people are as much in need, and as sane, as they indicate they are on the surface: that is, they believe that they are fine.
- ❏ The warm, on the other hand, make a well-founded guess that those they encounter, despite the observable initial evidence, are not what they seem. They may look adult and composed, but the truth will be reassuringly more complicated.
- ❏ The warm know themselves well enough to walk past the surface presentation and assume that their own stranger selves will have echoes in the lives of others.
- ❏ The warmly polite person knows that beneath the competent surface everyone is clumsy, frightened, desirous, and fascinatingly unbalanced—and they bring this knowledge to bear in every encounter, whatever its outwardly forbidding nature.
- ❏ This knowledge prevents the warm person from being, at points, overfriendly or cheerful. They do not equate friendliness with a relentlessly upbeat tone. They know how much is sad and anxious in everyone. They don't want to flatter us in ways that could raise the cost of revealing anything more despairing or confused. They leave the door open for a possible need to admit at pretty much any point to something highly shameful. They seem permanently ready to travel with us to the darker, more panicked sides of our minds.
- ❏ The good teaser aims to reform us, not through lectures, but by encouraging finely administered tart jokes at our surface selves.
- ❏ One of the largest questions we can ask ourselves, one that directly points us to the areas of our nature we should like to reform, is: What would I like to be teased about?

The Good Listener

- ❏ Being a good listener is one of the most important and enchanting life skills anyone can have. Yet few of us know how to do it; not because we are evil but because no one has taught us how and—a related point—few have listened sufficiently well to us. So we come to social life greedy to speak rather than listen, hungry to meet others but reluctant to hear them. Friendship degenerates into a socialized egoism.
- ❏ The good listener knows that we'd ideally move—via conversation with another person—from a confused, agitated state of mind to one that was more focused and (hopefully** more serene.

- ❏ The good listener takes it for granted that they will encounter vagueness in the conversation of others. But they don't condemn, rush, or get impatient, because they see vagueness as a universal and highly significant trouble of the mind that it is the task of a true friend to help with.
- ❏ The good listener knows we benefit hugely from encouragement to elaborate, to go into greater detail, to push a little further. We need someone who, rather than launch forth, will simply say two rare, magic words: "Go on."
- ❏ A key move of the good listener is not always to follow every byway or subplot introduced by the speaker, for they may be getting lost and further from their own point than they would wish. The good listener is always looking to take the speaker back to their last reasonable idea, saying, "Yes, yes, but you were saying just a moment ago …" or "So, ultimately, what do you think it was about?" The good listener is, paradoxically, a skilled interrupter.
- ❏ When we're in the company of people who listen well, we experience a very powerful pleasure, but too often we don't really realize what it is about what this person is doing that is so welcome.

Calm

Pessimism

- ❏ A pessimist is someone who calmly assumes from the outset, and with a great deal of justification, that things tend to turn out very badly in almost all areas of existence. Strange though it can sound, pessimism is one of the greatest sources of serenity and contentment.
- ❏ Our degree of satisfaction is critically dependent on our expectations. The greater our hopes, the greater the risks of rage, bitterness, disappointment, and a sense of persecution. We are not always humiliated by failing at things; we are humiliated only if we first invested our pride and sense of worth in a given achievement and then did not reach it.
- ❏ "With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure no humiliation. So our self-esteem in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do," wrote the psychologist William James. "It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities … thus:

$$\text{Self Esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Expectations''}}$$

- ❏ The problem with our world is that it does not stop emphasizing that success, calm, happiness, and fulfillment could, somehow, one day be ours. And in this way it never ceases to torture us.

- ❏ We aren't overwhelmed by anger whenever we are frustrated; only when we first believed ourselves entitled to a particular satisfaction and then did not receive it. Our furies spring from events that violate a background sense of the rules of existence.
- ❏ So we must learn to disappoint ourselves at leisure before events take us by surprise. We must be systematically inducted into the darkest realities—the stupidities of others, the ineluctable failings of technology, the eventual destruction of all that we cherish—while we are still capable of a relative measure of rational control.
- ❏ Anxiety is not a sign of sickness, a weakness of the mind, or an error for which we should always seek a medical solution. It is mostly a hugely reasonable and sensitive response to the genuine strangeness, terror, uncertainty, and riskiness of existence.
- ❏ Anxiety deserves greater dignity. It is not a sign of degeneracy, rather a kind of masterpiece of insight: a justifiable expression of our mysterious participation in a disordered, uncertain world.

The need to be alone

- ❏ Unless we are alone, we are at risk of forgetting who we are.
- ❏ We need to be alone because life among other people unfolds too quickly. The pace is relentless: the jokes, the insights, the excitements. There can sometimes be enough in five minutes of social life to take up an hour of analysis. It is a quirk of our minds that not every emotion that impacts us is at once fully acknowledged, understood, or even truly felt. After time among others, there are myriad sensations that exist in an "unprocessed" form within us.
- ❏ Perhaps an idea that someone raised made us anxious, prompting inchoate impulses for changes in our lives. Perhaps an anecdote sparked off an envious ambition that is worth decoding and listening to in order to grow. Maybe someone subtly fired an aggressive dart at us and we haven't had the chance to realize we are hurt. We need quiet to console ourselves by formulating an explanation of where the nastiness might have come from.
- ❏ Unless we've had time alone, we can't be who we would like to be around our fellow humans. We won't have original opinions. We won't have lively and authentic perspectives. We'll be—in the wrong way—a bit like everyone else.
- ❏ The point of staring out of a window is, paradoxically, not to find out what is going on outside. It is, rather, an exercise in discovering the contents of our own minds.
- ❏ If we do it right, staring out of the window offers a way for us to be alert to the quieter suggestions and perspectives of our deeper selves.
- ❏ Plato suggested a metaphor for the mind: Our ideas are like birds fluttering around in the aviary of our brains. But in order for the birds to settle, Plato understood that we need periods of purpose-free calm.
- ❏ The potential of daydreaming isn't recognized by societies obsessed with productivity. But some of our greatest insights come when we stop trying to be purposeful and instead respect the creative potential of reverie.

- ❏ Window daydreaming is a strategic rebellion against the excessive demands of immediate, but in the end insignificant, pressures in favor of the diffuse, but very serious, search for the wisdom of the unexplored deep self.

Nature

- ❏ We are encouraged to imagine that we can, with time, create exactly the lives we desire, around our relationships, our work, and existence more generally. This hopeful scenario has been the source of extraordinary and unnecessary suffering.
- ❏ We will never be fully understood by others; we will always be burdened by primordial anxiety; we will never fully know what it is like to be someone else; we will invariably fantasize about more than we can have; we will realize that in key ways we cannot be who we would wish.
- ❏ Sometimes we respond quite negatively to encounters with things that are much larger and more powerful than ourselves. It's a feeling that can strike us when we are alone in a new city, trying to negotiate a vast railway terminus or the huge subway system at rush hour, and we sense that no one knows anything about us or cares in the least for our confusion. The scale of the place forces upon us the unwelcome fact that we don't matter in the greater scheme of things and that what is of great concern to us doesn't figure at all in the minds of others. It's a crushing, lonely experience that intensifies anxiety and agitation.
- ❏ There's another way an encounter with the large-scale can affect us—and calm us down—that philosophers have called "the sublime."
- ❏ The sublime drags us away from the minor details that normally and inevitably occupy our attention and makes us concentrate on what is truly major.
- ❏ The encounter with the sublime undercuts the gradations of human status and makes everyone—at least for a time—look relatively unimpressive. Next to the mighty canyon or the vast ocean, even the celebrity or the CEO does not seem so mighty.
- ❏ Things happen on the scale of centuries. Today and tomorrow are essentially the same.
- ❏ Your existence is a small, temporary thing. You will die and it will be as if you had never been. I could sound demeaning. But these are generous sentiments when we otherwise so easily suffer by exaggerating our own importance. We are truly minute and entirely dispensable.
- ❏ In the late eighteenth century, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant thought "the starry heavens above" were the most sublime spectacle in nature and that contemplation of this transcendent sight could hugely assist us in coping with our travails. Although Kant was interested in the developing science of astronomy, he saw the field as primarily serving a major psychological purpose.
- ❏ Although we've made vast scientific progress since Kant's time, we haven't properly explored the potential of space as a source of wisdom, as opposed to a puzzle for astrophysicists to unpick.

- ❏ The sight has a calming effect because none of our troubles, disappointments, or hopes have any relevance. Whatever happens to us, whatever we do, is of no consequence from the point of view of the universe.
- ❏ The more calm matters to us, the more we will be aware of all the very many times when we have been less calm than we should. We'll be sensitive to our own painfully frequent bouts of irritation and upset.
- ❏ Furthermore, it is a psychological law that those who are most attracted to calm will almost certainly also be especially irritable and by nature prone to particularly high levels of anxiety.
- ❏ Typically, lovers of something are not the people who already possess it but those who are hugely aware of how much they lack it—and are therefore especially humble before, and committed to, the task of securing it.

III. Relationships

Getting Together

Beyond Romanticism

- ❏ Romanticism is deeply hopeful about marriage. It tells us that marriage could combine all the excitement of a love affair with all the advantages of a settled and practical union.
- ❏ Along the way, Romanticism has conceptually united love and sex. It has elevated sex to the supreme expression of admiration and respect for another person. Frequent, mutually satisfying sex is assumed to be not just pleasurable but the expected bellwether of the health of a relationship.
- ❏ Romanticism has proposed that true love must mean an end to all loneliness. The right partner will, it promises us, understand us entirely, possibly without our needing to speak very much; they will intuit our souls.
- ❏ Romanticism believes that choosing a partner is a matter of surrendering to feelings rather than evaluating practical considerations.
- ❏ For most of recorded history, people had fallen into relationships and married for dynastic, status, or financial reasons. It was certainly not expected that, on top of everything else, one should love one's partner. But for Romanticism, a sound couple should be pulled together by an overwhelming instinct and will know in their hearts—after a few pleasant weeks and some extraordinary sensations in bed—that they have found their destiny.
- ❏ Romanticism manifests a powerful disdain for practicalities and money. It has taught us to feel that it is cold, or un-Romantic, to say that we know we are with the right person

because they make an excellent financial fit or because we gel over bathroom etiquette and attitudes to punctuality.

- ❏ Romanticism believes that true love should involve delighting in a lover's every facet, that it is synonymous with accepting everything about someone.
- ❏ The idea that one's partner (or oneself) might need to evolve and mature is taken to be a sign that a relationship is on the rocks: "You're going to have to change" is a last-ditch threat and "Love me for who I am" the most noble of cries.
- ❏ We can also state at this point that Romanticism has been a disaster for love. It is an intellectual and spiritual movement that has had a devastating impact on the ability of ordinary people to lead successful emotional lives.
- ❏ Our strongest cultural voices have, to our huge cost, given us a very unhelpful script to apply to a hugely tricky task. We have been told, among other things, that:
    - ❏ We should meet a person of extraordinary inner and outer beauty and immediately feel a special attraction to them, and they to us;
    - ❏ we should have highly satisfying sex, not only at the start, but for ever more;
    - ❏ we should never be attracted to anyone else;
    - ❏ we should understand one another intuitively;
    - ❏ we don't need an education in love (we may need to train to become a pilot or a brain surgeon, but not a lover—we will pick that up along the way, by following our feelings**;
    - ❏ we should raise a family without any loss of sexual or emotional intensity;
    - ❏ our lover must be our soulmate, best friend, co-parent, co-chauffeur, accountant, household manager, and spiritual guide.
- ❏ Knowing the history invites another, more useful idea: We were set an incredibly hard task by our culture, which then had the temerity to present it as easy.
- ❏ We need to replace the Romantic template with a psychologically mature vision of love we might call Classical, which encourages in us a range of unfamiliar but hopefully effective attitudes:
    - ❏ that it is normal that love and sex do not always belong together;
    - ❏ that discussing money early on, up front, in a serious way is not a betrayal of love;
    - ❏ that realizing that we are rather flawed, and our partner is too, is of huge benefit to a couple in increasing the amount of tolerance and generosity in circulation;
    - ❏ that we will never find everything in another person, nor they in us, not because of some unique incapacity, but because of the basic operations of human nature;
    - ❏ that we need to make immense and often rather artificial-sounding efforts to understand one another because intuition will never be enough;
    - ❏ that practicalities matter—so, for example, there is special dignity around the topics of laundry and domestic management.

Choosing a partner

- ❏ The originators of the idea of free choice in love certainly imagined that their bold suggestion would bring to an end the sort of unhappy relationships previously brokered by parents and society.
- ❏ But our obedience to our instincts has, very often, proved to be its own disaster. Respecting the special feelings we get around certain people in nightclubs and at train stations, at parties and on websites appears not to have made us any happier in our unions than a medieval couple shackled in marriage by two royal courts keen to preserve the sovereignty of a slice of ancestral land. “Instinct” has been little better than “calculation” in underwriting the quality of our love stories.
- ❏ Adult love emerges from a template of how we should be loved that was created in childhood and is likely to be connected to a range of problematic compulsions that militate in key ways against our chances of growth.
- ❏ Far more than happiness, what motivates us in relationships is a search for familiarity—and what is familiar is not restricted to comfort, reassurance, and tenderness; it may include feelings of abandonment, humiliation, and neglect, which can form part of the list of paradoxical ingredients we need to refind in adult love.
- ❏ We might reject healthy, calm, and nurturing candidates simply on the basis that they feel too right, too eerie in their unfamiliar kindness, and nowhere near as satisfying as a bully or an ingrate, who will torture us in just the way we need in order to feel we are in love.
- ❏ Our honest reactions are legacies that reveal our underlying assumptions about the kind of love it feels we are allowed, and are perhaps not an especially good guide to personal or mutual happiness.
- ❏ Rather than aim for a transformation in the types of people we are drawn to, it may be wiser to try to adjust how we respond and behave around the difficult characters whom our past mandates that we will find interesting.
- ❏ Our problems are often generated because we continue to respond to compelling people in the way we learned to behave as children around their templates.
- ❏ For instance, maybe we had a rather irate parent who often raised their voice. We loved them, but reacted by feeling that when they were angry we must be guilty. We got timid and humble. Now if a partner (to whom we are magnetically drawn) gets cross, we respond as squashed, browbeaten children: We sulk, we assume it’s our fault, we feel got at and yet deserving of criticism.
- ❏ Many of us are highly likely to end up with somebody with a particularly knotty set of issues that trigger our desires as well as our childlike defensive responses.
- ❏ The answer isn’t usually to shut down the relationship, but to strive to deal with the compelling challenges it throws up with some of the wisdom we weren’t capable of when we first encountered these in a parent or caregiver.

A. Partner’s tricky behaviour	B. Childlike response	C. More adult response
Raising voice	"It's all my fault"	"This is their issue. I don't have to feel bad."
Patronizing	"I'm stupid"	"There are lots of kinds of intelligence. Mine is fine."
Morose	"I have to fix you"	"I'll do my best, but I'm not ultimately responsible for your mindset - and this doesn't have to impact on my self-esteem"
Overbearing	"I deserve this"	"I'm not intimidated by you"
Distracted, preoccupied	"Attention-seeking "Notice me"	"You're busy, I'm busy, that's ok**

- ❏ The crux is whether we can move from interpreting behavior as a sign of meanness to viewing it as a symptom of pain and anxiety.
- ❏ We will have learned to love when our default response to unfortunate moments is not to feel aggrieved but to wonder what damaged aspects of a partner’s rocky past have been engaged.
- ❏ Annoying characteristics almost always have their roots in childhood, long before our arrival. They are, for the most part, strategies that were developed for coping with stresses that could not correctly be processed by an immature mind.
- ❏ An overcritical, demanding parent might have made them feel as if being disorganized and untidy was a necessary rebellion, a crucial assertion of independence against a threatening demand for compliance. A watchfulness around social status might have been the outcome of a succession of bankruptcies in a father’s business during adolescence. An avoidant personality might have resulted from an early unbearable disappointment.
- ❏ We are ready for relationships not when we have encountered perfection, but when we have grown willing to give flaws the charitable interpretations they deserve.

- ❏ A charitable mindset doesn't make it lovely to be confronted by the other's troubles. But it strengthens our capacity to stick with them, because we see that their failings don't make them unworthy of love, rather all the more urgently in need of it.

The Longing For Reassurance

- ❏ There are sweet moments, early on in relationships, when one person can't quite work up the courage to let another know just how much they like them.
- ❏ Our culture has a lot of sympathy for this awkward and intensely vulnerable stage of love.
- ❏ However, the assumption is that the terror of rejection will be limited in scope and focused on one particular stage of a relationship: its beginning. Once a partner is finally accepted and the union gets under way, the assumption is that the fear must come to an end.
- ❏ But one of the odder features of relationships is that, in truth, the fear of rejection never ends. It continues, even in quite sane people, on a daily basis, with frequently difficult consequences—chiefly because we refuse to pay it sufficient attention and aren't trained to spot its counter-intuitive symptoms in others. We haven't found a winning way to keep admitting just how much reassurance we need.
- ❏ The trigger to insecurity can be apparently minuscule. Perhaps the other has been away at work for unusual amounts of time; or they were pretty animated talking to a stranger at a party; or it's been a while since sex took place. Perhaps they weren't very warm to us when we walked into the kitchen. Or they've been rather silent for the last half an hour.
- ❏ Instead of requesting reassurance endearingly and laying out our longing with charm, we have tendencies to mask our needs beneath some tricky behaviors guaranteed to frustrate our ultimate aims.
- ❏ Within established relationships, when the fear of rejection is denied, two major symptoms tend to show up.
- ❏ First, we may become distant—or what psychotherapists call "avoidant." We want to get close to our partners but feel so anxious that we may be unwanted, we freeze them out: We say we're busy; pretend our thoughts are elsewhere.
- ❏ We could get involved with a third person, the ultimate defensive attempt to be distant—and often a perverse attempt to assert that we don't require a love we feel too vulnerable to ask for.
- ❏ We grow into avoidant patterns when, in childhood, attempts at closeness ended in degrees of rejection, humiliation, uncertainty, or shame that we were ill-equipped to deal with.
- ❏ Or else we become controlling—or what psychotherapists calls "anxious." We grow suspicious, frantic, and easily furious in the face of the ambiguous moments of love; catastrophe never feels too far away. A slightly distant mood must, we feel, be a harbinger of rejection; a somewhat non-reassuring moment is an almost certain prelude to the end.
- ❏ Small children sometimes behave in stunningly unfair and shocking ways: They scream at the person who is looking after them, angrily push away a bowl of animal pasta,

immediately discard something you have just fetched for them. But we rarely feel personally agitated or wounded by their behavior.

- ❏ It's very touching that we live in a world where we have learned to be so kind to children; it would be even nicer if we learned to be a little more generous toward the childlike parts of one another.

Love and Education

- ❏ To love someone is, according to Romantic philosophy, quite simply to love them as they are, without any wish to alter them.
- ❏ When a partner finds you shy at parties, they don't laugh; they are sweet and take your tongue-tied state as a sign of sincerity. They're not embarrassed by your slightly unfashionable clothes because, for them, it's about honesty and the strength to ignore public opinion. When you have a hangover, they don't say it was your own fault for drinking too much; they rub your neck, bring you tea, and keep the curtains closed.
- ❏ But there is another, more workable and mature philosophy of love available, one that's traceable back to the ancient Greeks. This states that love is an admiration for the good sides, the perfections, of a person. The Greeks took the view that love is not an obscure emotion. Loving someone is not an odd chemical phenomenon indescribable in words. It just means being awed by another for all the sorts of things about them that truly are right and accomplished.
- ❏ So, what do we do with what we perceive as their weaknesses, the problems and regrettable aspects? The Greek idea of love turns to a notion to which we desperately need to rehabilitate ourselves: education. For the Greeks, given the scale of our imperfections, part of what it means to deepen love is to want to teach—and to be ready to be taught. Two people should see a relationship as a constant opportunity to improve and be improved. When lovers teach each other uncomfortable truths, they are not abandoning the spirit of love. They are trying to do something very true to genuine love, which is to make their partners more worthy of admiration.
- ❏ We should stop feeling guilty for simply wanting to change our partners and we should never resent our partners for simply wanting to change us.
- ❏ The good teacher knows that timing is critical to successful instruction. We tend automatically to try to teach a lesson the moment the problem arises, rather than when it is most likely to be attended to (which might be several days later).
- ❏ And so we typically end up addressing the most delicate and complex teaching tasks just at the point when we feel most scared and distressed and our student is most exhausted and nervous.
- ❏ We should develop a cult of optimal timing in addressing tricky matters, passing down from generation to generation stories of how, after years of getting nowhere with impulse-driven frontal assaults,

- Somewhere in the early years of the defensive person there will have been a sense of grave danger about being in the subordinate position, which would have inspired a flight into claims of hyper-competence.
- It is the task of all parents to criticize their children and break bad news to them about their wishes and efforts. But there are rather different ways of going about this. The best form of pedagogy leaves the child at once aware of a need to improve and with a sense that they are liked despite their ignorance and flaws.
- When teaching and learning fail, we enter the realm of nagging.
- Nagging is, in essence, an attempt at transferring an idea for improvement from one mind to another that has given up hope. It has descended into an attempt to insist rather than invite, to coerce rather than charm.
- Lamentably, it doesn't work. Nagging breeds its evil twin, shirking. The other pretends to read the paper, goes upstairs and feels righteous. The shrillness of one's tone gives them all the excuse they need to trust that we have nothing kind or true to tell them.
- We nag because we feel that our possession of the truth lets us off having to convey it elegantly. It never does. The solution to nagging isn't to give up trying to get others to do what we want. Rather, it is to recognize that persuasion always needs to be couched in terms that make intuitive sense to those we want to alter.
- Rather than reading every grating lesson as an assault on our whole being, we should take it for what it is: an indication, however flawed, that someone can be bothered, even if they aren't yet breaking the news perfectly.
- The only fault is to reject the opportunity for education if it is offered, however clumsily. Love should be a nurturing attempt by two people to reach their full potential, never just a crucible in which to look for endorsement for the panoply of present failings.

The Importance of Sex

- To start the list, here are just some of the unpalatable truths that stir in our minds:
    - it's very rare to maintain sexual interest in only one person, however much one loves them, beyond a certain time;
    - it's entirely possible to love one's partner and regularly want to have sex with strangers, frequently types who don't align with our ordinary concerns;
    - one can be a kind, respectable, and democratic person and at the same time want to inflict or receive very rough treatment;
    - it's highly normal to have fantasies about scenarios one would not wish to act out in reality and that might involve illegal, violent, hurtful, and unsanitary aspects;
    - it may be easier to be excited by someone one dislikes or thinks nothing of than by someone one loves.
- Proust's argument is that defilement during sex isn't what it seems. Ostensibly, it's about violence, hatred, meanness, and a lack of respect. But for Proust, it symbolizes a longing to be properly oneself in the presence of another human being, and to be loved and accepted by them for one's darkest sides rather than just for one's politeness and good manners.

- ❏ Sex in which two people can express their defiling urges is, for Proust, at heart an indication of a quest for complete acceptance. We know we can please others with our goodness, but (suggests Proust** what we really want is also to be endorsed for our more peculiar and dark impulses. The discipline involved in growing up into a good person seeks occasional alleviation, which is what sex can provide in those rare moments when two partners trust one another enough to reveal their otherwise strictly censored desires to dirty and insult.
- ❏ Defilement therefore has meaning: It is a surprising way of trying to improve a relationship. It's not an act of sabotage or a denial of love. It's a deeply curious but, in its own way, very logical quest for closeness.

Affairs

- ❏ An affair is a love—or sexual—story between two people, one of whom (at least) is ostensibly committed to someone else.
- ❏ Once an affair has been uncovered, we often ask—in the position of the betrayed, pained party—when it began. Pinpointing the precise moment promises to shed light on its motivations and on possible ways to prevent any further such calamities in the future.
- ❏ This kind of detective work feels obvious, but it overlooks a complexity: The start of an affair should not be equated with the moment when two straying people meet.
- ❏ The affair pre-dates, possibly by many years, the arrival of any actual lover.
- ❏ It is common to ask when a cataclysmic event such as, for example, the French Revolution began. A traditional response is to point to the summer of 1789, when some of the deputies at the Estates General took an oath to remain in session until a constitution had been agreed on, or a few days later when a group of Parisians attacked and broke into the Bastille prison.
- ❏ But a more sophisticated and instructive approach locates the beginning significantly earlier: with the bad harvests of the previous ten years; with the loss of royal prestige following military defeats in North America in the 1760s, or with the rise of a new philosophy in the middle of the century that stressed the idea of citizens' rights.
- ❏ At the time, these incidents didn't seem particularly decisive; they didn't immediately lead to major social change or reveal their solemn nature. But they slowly and powerfully put the country on course for the upheavals of 1789: They moved the country into a revolution-ready state.
- ❏ Unending busy-ness, neglect, shaming, ownership, flirting, one too many arguments, lack of tenderness, erotic disengagement

How to Spot a Couple Who Might be Headed for an Affair

- ❏ Having arguments does not, in itself, say very much about the likelihood of a relationship disintegrating.
- ❏ A number of qualities are required to ensure that a couple know how to argue well. There is, first and foremost, the need for each party to be able to pinpoint sources of discomfort

in themselves early and accurately: to know how to recognize what they are unhappy about and what they need in order to flourish in the couple.

- ❏ One might need to wait until some of the surface tension has dissipated; perhaps the next morning can do just as well. One needs a background confidence not to have to blurt out every objection in a panicked diatribe or shout a wounded feeling across the room when the other is themselves too upset to hear it. One needs to know how to formulate one's complaints into a convincing, perhaps even humorously framed point that has a chance of winning over its target.
- ❏ It matters in all this that one both feels attached to the partner and at the same time has an active impression that one could walk away from them were matters ever truly to escalate. Feeling that one has options, does not therefore have to cling, and deserves good treatment ensures that one's voice can be measured and that the status quo will remain manageable.

Over-optimism about relationships

- ❏ Fragile couples, paradoxically, tend to be very hopeful about love. They associate happiness with conflict-free unions. They do not expect, once they have found the person they unwisely see as The One, ever to need to squabble, storm out of a room, or feel unhappy for the afternoon.
- ❏ When trouble emerges, as it inevitably does, they do not greet it as a sign that love is progressing as it should but as alarming evidence that their relationship may be illegitimate and fundamentally flawed.

Being out of touch with pain

- ❏ Fragile couples tend not to be good detectives with regard to their own sufferings. They may be both unhappy and yet unsure as to the actual causes of their dissatisfactions. They know something is wrong in their union, but they can't easily trace the catalyst.

Shame

- ❏ A shamed person has fundamental doubts about their right to exist: Somewhere in the past, they have been imbued with the impression that they do not matter very much, that their feelings should be ignored, that their happiness is not a priority, that their words do not count.
- ❏ Once they are part of a couple, shamed people hurt like anyone else, but their capacity to turn their hurt into something another person can understand and be touched by is recklessly weak.
- ❏ Shamed people will sulk rather than speak, hide rather than divulge, feel secretly wretched rather than candidly complain. It is frequently very late, far too late, by the time shamed people finally let their lover know more about the nature of their desperation.

Excessive Anxiety

- ❏ Complaining well requires an impression that not everything depends on the complaint being heard perfectly. Were the lesson to go wrong, were the other to prove intransigent, one could survive and take one's love elsewhere. Not everything is at stake in an argument. The other hasn't ruined one's life. One therefore doesn't need to scream, hector, insist or nag. One can deliver a complaint with some of the nonchalance of a calm teacher who wants listeners to learn but can bear it if they don't because information can always be conveyed tomorrow, or the next day.

Excessive Pride

- ❏ One has to feel quite grown up inside not to be offended by one’s own more childlike appetites for reassurance and comfort. It is an achievement to know how to be strong about one's vulnerability.

Hopelessness about dialog

- ❏ Fragile couples often come together with few positive childhood memories of conversations working out: Early role models may simply have screamed and then despaired of one another. They may never have witnessed disagreements eventually morphing into mutual understanding and sympathy.
- ❏ None of these factors means there will automatically be an affair, but they are generators of emotional disconnection that contributes to an all important affair ready state.
- ❏ It will be the result of identifiable long-term resentments that a couple, otherwise blessed and committed, lacked the inner resources and courage to investigate.

The Role of Sex in Affairs

- ❏ Why is sex so nice? One possible answer, which can sound a little odd, is: because we have advanced tendencies to hate ourselves and find ourselves unacceptable. And sex with a new person has an exceptional capacity to reduce feeling like that.
- ❏ A long-term relationship can all too easily enforce a sense that we are neither very admirable nor worthy. Management of family life, of cleaning rotas, of finances, and of relations with friends and in-laws can contribute to an impression that one is fundamentally troublesome and undeserving of sustained notice. The mood around us is fractious and ungrateful. "Not you again** may be the implicit message one receives upon entering any room.
- ❏ In the context of an affair, everything changes. We can be unlaced and carefree.
- ❏ What we may be doing is slipping off another’s top or inviting them to release our trousers, but what all this means is that another human has -exceptionally- chosen to find us worthy.

- ❏ The crucial, active element in an affair isn't really the physical sex per se: it's the sense of closeness, the warmth, the shared liking for which physical sex provides the occasion.

How to Reduce the Risk of Affairs

- ❏ The best way to stop their being tempted to sleep with someone else is not, therefore, to reduce their opportunities for contact; it is to leave them free to wander the world while ensuring that they feel heard by and are reconciled with their partners. It is emotional closeness, not curfews, that guarantees the integrity of couples.
- ❏ To guide us in our restorative complaints, we might consider the following range of prompts:

I sometimes feel frustrated with you when:

- ❏ It provides us with an opportunity to do something very rare: level criticism without anger. And it's a chance to hear criticism as more than an attack, to interpret it for what it may truly be: a desire to learn how to live together with less occasion for anger.

I'd love you to realize that you hurt me when …

- ❏ We're carrying around wounds that we have found, understandably and inevitably, hard to articulate.
- ❏ The problem is that when they fester, the currents of affection start to get blocked and soon we may find that we flinch when our partner tries to touch us.

One of the hardest things for you to understand about me is

- ❏ We end up lonely because there is something important about who we are that our partner appears not to grasp or, so we can conclude, does not even want to take on board. But this lack of interest is rarely malevolent; it is usually more the case that there hasn't been a proper occasion for exploration.
- ❏ The feeling that one person knows another is the constant enemy of long-term couples.
- ❏ We are changing all the time, we're no longer who we were last month, and we can struggle to explain our own evolutions and needs even to ourselves.

What I'd love you to appreciate about me is …

- ❏ We don't want untrammeled praise, merely the odd moment when we can tell our partner what we feel is worthy of appreciation, maybe a little more appreciation than we have until now spontaneously received.

Where I'm unfulfilled in my life …

- ❏ The longing for an affair can arise from a sense that the world more generally has not heard us, that we have been abandoned with career anxieties, or lag behind our peers in terms of achievement and assets.
- ❏ We should dare to spend less time banning our partners from having lunch with strangers or traveling alone, and more time ensuring that they feel understood for their flaws and confusions, and appreciated for their virtues.

Dealing with Problems

Arguments

- ❏ An average couple will have between thirty and fifty significant arguments a year, "significant" meaning an encounter that departs sharply from civilized norms of dialog, would be uncomfortable to film and show friends, and might involve screaming, rolled eyes, histrionic accusations, slammed doors, and liberal uses of terms like "asshole" and "dickhead."
- ❏ The first is that our Romantic culture sentimentally implies that there might be a necessary connection between true passion and a fiery temper. It can seem as if fighting and hurling insults might be signs, not of immaturity and a woeful incapacity for self-control, but of an admirable intensity of desire and strength of commitment.
- ❏ We argue badly and regularly principally because we lack an education in how to teach others who we are. Beneath the surface of almost every argument lies a forlorn attempt by two people to get the other to see, acknowledge, and respond to their emotional reality and sense of justice.
- ❏ A bad argument is a failed endeavor to communicate, which perversely renders the underlying message we seek to convey ever less visible.
- ❏ Some of the reason why we argue so much and so repetitively is that we aren't guided to spot the similarities that run through our arguments; we do not have to hand an easy typology of squabbles that could be to domestic conflict what an encyclopedia of birds is to an ornithologist.

The Interminable Argument

- ❏ We keep arguing because we never manage to identify and address the key issue we're actually cross about. Irritability is anger that lacks self-knowledge.
- ❏ We may, furthermore, not have grown up with a sense that our dissatisfactions ever deserved expression. Our parents might have been too anxious, too vulnerable, or too bullying to allow much room for our early needs. We might have become masters in the art of not complaining and of accepting what we are given as the price of survival and of protection of those we loved. This doesn't now spare us feelings of frustration. It simply makes us incapable of giving them a voice.

The Defensive Argument

- ❏ We often operate in romantic life under the mistaken impression—unconsciously imported from law courts and school debating traditions—that the person who is "right" or has the stronger case should, legitimately, "win" an argument. But this is fundamentally to misunderstand the point of relationships, which is not so much to defeat an opponent as to help each other evolve into the best versions of ourselves.
- ❏ When we're on the receiving end of a difficult insight into our failings, what makes us bristle and deny everything isn't generally the accusation itself (we know our flaws all too well**; it's the surrounding atmosphere.
- ❏ We know the other is right, we just can't bear to take their criticism on board, given how severely it has been delivered.
- ❏ We start to deny everything because we are terrified: the light of truth is shining too brightly. The fear is that if we admit our failings, we will be crushed, shown up as worthless, required to attempt an arduous, miserable process of change without sympathy or claim on the affections of the other.
- ❏ Plato once outlined an idea of what he called the "just lie." If a crazed person comes to us and asks, "Where's the ax?" we are entitled to lie and say we don't know, because we understand that if we were to tell the truth they would probably use the tool to do something horrendous to us.
- ❏ That is, we can reasonably tell a lie when our life is in danger. In the same way, our partner might not literally be searching for an ax when they make their accusation, but psychologically this is precisely how we might experience them—which makes it understandable if we say we simply don't know what they are talking about.
- ❏ People don't change when they are gruffly told what's wrong with them; they change when they feel sufficiently supported to undertake the change they—almost always—already know is due.

The Spoiling Argument

- ❏ There is a kind of argument that begins when one partner deliberately, and for no immediately obvious reason, attempts to spoil the good mood and high spirits of the other.

The Pathologizing Argument

- ❏ There are arguments in which one person gets so upset that they start to behave in ways that range far beyond the imagined norms of civilized conduct: They speak in a high-pitched voice, they exaggerate, they weep, they beg, their words become almost incoherent, they pull their own hair, they bite their own hand, they roll on the floor.
- ❏ There's a moment when the calm one may turn and say, "Since you are mad, there's no point in talking to you." The awareness—in the raging lover's mind—that, as they rant and flail, they are ineluctably throwing away all possibility of being properly attended to or

understood feeds their ever-mounting sense of panic: They become yet more demented and exaggerated, further undermining their credibility in the discussion.

- ❏ Hearing their condition diagnosed as insane by the calm one serves to reinforce a suspicion that perhaps they really are mad, which in turn weakens their capacity not to be so. They lose confidence that there might be any reasonable aspect to their distress that could, theoretically, be explained in a clear way if only they could stop crying.
- ❏ On the other side of the equation, the person who remains calm is automatically cast, by their own imperturbable nature and subtle skills at public relations, as decent and reasonable.
- ❏ But we should bear in mind that it is at least in theory entirely possible to be cruel, dismissive, stubborn, harsh, and wrong, and keep one's voice utterly steady. Just as one can, equally well, be red-nosed, whimpering, and incoherent, and have a point.
- ❏ We need to keep hold of a heroically generous attitude: Rage and histrionics can be the symptoms of a desperation that sets in when a hugely important intimate truth is being blatantly ignored or denied, with the uncontrolled person being neither evil nor monstrous.
- ❏ We can stay calm with almost everyone in our lives. If we lose our temper with our partners, it is likely because we are so invested in them and our joint futures. We shouldn't invariably hold it against someone that they behave in a stricken way; it isn't (probably) a sign that they are mad or horrible. Rather, as we should have the grace to recall, it is just that they love and depend on us very much.

The Absentee Argument

- ❏ There are so many ways in which the world wounds us. At work, our manager repeatedly humiliates and belittles us. We hear of a party to which we were not invited. A better-looking, wealthier person snubs us at a conference. We develop a skill that turns out not to be much in demand in the world; some people were with at college setup a hugely successful business.
- ❏ Our hurt, humiliation, and disappointments accumulate—but almost always, we cannot possibly complain about them to anyone. Our managers would sack us if we told them how we felt. Our acquaintances would be horrified by the depth of our insecurities.
- ❏ No one gives a damn about an admirable company that has hurt our feelings through its success. There is no way to take out our distress on geopolitics or economic history or the existential paradox that we are required to make decisions about our lives before we could possibly know what they will entail.
- ❏ We cannot rave at the cosmos or at the accidents of political power. We need, most of the time, simply to politely swallow our hurt and move on.
- ❏ But there is one exception to this rule: We can rant and moan at a person who is more reliably kind to us than anyone else, a person whom we love more than any other, a blessed being who is waiting for us at home at the end of every new grueling day…

- ❏ Unfortunately, we don't always tell our partner that we are causing problems because we are sad about things that have nothing to do with them; we just create arguments to alleviate our distress.
- ❏ We are mean to them because our boss didn't care, the economy wasn't available for a chat, and there was no God to implore. We reroute all the humiliation and rage that no one else had time for on to the shoulders of the one person who most cares about well-being.
- ❏ We tell them that if only they were more supportive, were less intrusive, made more money, were less materialistic, were more imaginative or less naive, less fussy or more demanding, more dynamic or more relaxed, sexier or less obsessed with sex, more intelligent or less wrapped up in the world of books, more adventurous or more settled, then we could be happy. Our life would be soothed and our errors redeemed. It is, as we imply and occasionally even tell them, *all their fault*.
- ❏ This is, of course, horrible and largely untrue. But enfolded within our denunciations and absurd criticisms is a strangely loving homage. Behind our accusations is an inarticulate yet large compliment. We complain unfairly as a tribute to the extent of our love and the position the partner has taken in our lives.
- ❏ We pick a fight with them over nothing much, but what we are in effect saying is: *Save me, redeem me, make sense of my pain,, love me even though I have failed.**
- ❏ The fact that we are blaming our partner in ridiculous ways is a heavily disguised but authentic mark of the trust we have in them.
- ❏ We must be civilized and grown up with everyone else, but with one person on the planet, we can at points be maddeningly irrational, utterly demanding, and horribly cross, not because they deserve it, but because so much has gone wrong, we are so tired, and they are the one person who promises to understand and forgive us. No wonder we love them.

The Argument of Normality

- ❏ Being in a relationship, even a very good one, requires us constantly to defend our preferences and points of view against the possibility of a partner's objections.
- ❏ In a pure sense, what is "normal" shouldn't matter very much at all. What is widespread in our community is often wrong and what is currently considered odd might actually be quite wise.
- ❏ But however much we know this intellectually, we are profoundly social creatures; millions of years of evolution have shaped our brains so as naturally to give a great deal of weight to the opinions of those around us.
- ❏ When it comes to personal life, we have no sound idea of what is normal, because we have no easy access to the intimate truths of others. We don't know what a normal amount of sex really is, or how normal it is to cry, sleep in a different bed, or dislike a partner's best friend. There are no reliable polls or witnesses.
- ❏ We are the beneficiaries of some extremely rare eventualities and it is the height of ingratitude to claim to be a friend of the normal when most of what is good in our lives is the result of awesomely minuscule odds.

The Parental-Resemblance Argument

- ❏ In one side of our brains, we are aware of a range of negative qualities we observed in our parents that we sense are intermittently hinted at in our own personalities. And we are terrified.
- ❏ At moments of weakness, we find ourselves replaying just the same sarcastic or petty, vain or angry attitudes we once felt sure we would never want to emulate.

The Argument from Excessive Logic

- ❏ It seems odd at first to imagine that we might get angry, even maddened, by a partner because they are, in the course of a discussion, proving to be too reasonable and too logical.
- ❏ An excessively logical approach to fears discounts their origins and concentrates instead on why we shouldn't have them, which is maddening when we are in pain. It's not that we actually want our partner to stop being reasonable; we want them to apply their intelligence to the task of sensitive reassurance. We want them to enter into the weirder bits of our own experience by remembering their own.

The No-Sex Argument

- ❏ The absence of sex matters so much because sex itself is the supreme conciliator and salve of all conflict, ill feeling, loneliness, and lack of interest. It is almost impossible to make love and be sad, indifferent, or bitter.

Pessimism

- ❏ For many of us, love starts rapidly, often at first sight: with an overwhelming impression of the other's loveliness.
- ❏ This phenomenon—the crush—goes to the heart of the modern understanding of love. It could seem like a small incident, a minor planet in the constellation of love, but it is in fact the underlying secret central sun around which our notions of the Romantic revolve.
- ❏ A crush represents in pure and perfect form the essential dynamics of Romanticism: the explosive interaction of limited knowledge, outward obstacles to further discovery and boundless hope.
- ❏ We wouldn't be able to develop crushes if we weren't so good at allowing a few details about someone to suggest the whole of them. From a few cues only, perhaps a distant look in the eyes, a forthright brow or a generous wit, we rapidly start to anticipate an intense connection and stretches of happiness, buoyed by profound mutual sympathy and understanding.
- ❏ What prevents us from loosening our grip on love is simply a lack of knowledge.
- ❏ The cure for unrequited love is, in structure, therefore very simple. We must get to know them better. The more we learn about them, the less they will ever look like the solution to our uneasy lives.

- ❏ When we spot apparent perfection, we tend to blame our spectacular bad luck for the mediocrity of our lives, without realizing that we are mistaking an asymmetry of knowledge for an asymmetry of quality: We are failing to see that our partner, home, and job are not especially awful, but rather that we know them especially well.
- ❏ Romantic culture takes no interest in the myriad challenges that fall within the realm of the "domestic"; a term that captures all the practicalities of living together, extending across a range of small but vital issues, including who one should visit at the weekend, when to take out the trash, who should clean the stove, and how often to have friends over for dinner.
- ❏ From the Romantic point of view, these things cannot be serious or worth the attention of intelligent people. Relationships are made or broken over grand, dramatic matters: fidelity and betrayal, the courage to face society on one's own terms, or the tragedy of being ground down by the demands of convention. The day-to-day minutiae of the domestic sphere seem entirely unimpressive and humiliatingly insignificant by comparison.
- ❏ When a problem has high prestige, we are ready to expend energy and time trying to resolve it.
- ❏ This has often happened around large scientific questions. It was entirely understood that mapping the human genome would be enormously difficult, as is the puzzle of artificial intelligence. This respect leads to an unexpected but crucial consequence. We don't panic around the challenges, because we understand the difficulty of what we are attempting to do. We are a lot calmer around prestigious problems.
- ❏ It's problems that feel trivial or silly but nevertheless take up large sections of our lives that drive us to heightened states of agitation.
- ❏ Such agitation is precisely what the Romantic neglect of domestic life has unwittingly encouraged.
- ❏ Its legacy is overhasty conversations about the temperature of the bedroom and curt remarks about which news program to watch: matters that can, over many years, contribute to a critical erosion of our capacities to love.
- ❏ At certain points in history, artists have attempted to correct the distribution of prestige.
- ❏ In the seventeenth century, the Dutch painter Pieter de Hooch specialized in portraying high-status, interesting-looking people engaged in domestic chores. He wanted to show the relevance of such activities to having a good life and to convey that these were not in any way degrading or unworthy tasks.
- ❏ Domestic preoccupation isn't really a sign of the death of love.
- ❏ It's what awaits us when love has succeeded.
- ❏ We will only be reconciled to the reality of love when we can accept without rancor the genuine dignity of the ironing board.
- ❏ The idea of happy coupledom taps into a fundamental picture of comfort, deep security, wordless communication, and our needs being effortlessly understood that comes from early childhood.

- ❏ The love we received from a parent can't ever be a workable model for our later, adult, experience of love. The reason is fundamental: We were a baby then, we are an adult now—a dichotomy with several key ramifications.
- ❏ Our parents were intensely focused on caring for us, but they knew and wholly accepted that we wouldn't engage with their needs.
- ❏ Our responsibility was blissfully simple: All we had to do to please them was to exist.
- ❏ We are sorrowful not because we have landed up with the wrong person but because we have, sadly, been forced to grow up.
- ❏ Love begins with a hope of—at last—being able to tell someone else everything about who we are and what we feel. The relief of honesty is at the heart of the feeling of being in love.
- ❏ Keeping secrets can seem like a betrayal of the relationship. At the same time, the complete truth eventually appears to place the union in mortal danger.
- ❏ The lover who does not tolerate secrets, who in the name of "being honest" divulges information so wounding it cannot be forgotten, is no friend of love. Just as no parent should ever tell a child the whole truth, so we should accept the ongoing need to edit our full reality.
- ❏ Wiser societies would be careful never to stigmatize the act of compromise. It is painful enough to have to do it; it is even more painful to have to hate oneself for having done so.

A Modest Argument for Marriage

- The essence of marriage is to tie our hands, to frustrate our wills, to put high and costly obstacles in the way of splitting up, and sometimes to force two unhappy people to stay in each other's company for longer than either of them would wish. Why do we do this?

One: Impulse is Dangerous

- ❏ Marriage is a giant inhibitor of impulse set up by our conscience to keep our libidinous, naive, desiring selves in check. What we are essentially buying into by submitting to its dictates is the insight that we are (as individuals** likely to make very poor choices under the sway of strong short-term impulses.
- ❏ To marry is to recognize that we require structure to insulate us from our urges. It is to lock ourselves up willingly, because we acknowledge the benefits of the long-term: the wisdom of the morning after the storm.
- ❏ It is a very unusual marriage in which the couple don't spend a notable amount of time fantasizing that they aren't in fact married.

Two: We Grow and Develop Gradually

- ❏ At their best, relationships involve us in attempts to develop, mature, and become "whole." We often get drawn to people precisely because they promise to edge us in the right direction.

- ❏ It can take years of supportive interest, many tearful moments of anxiety, much frustration, until genuine progress can be made.

Three: Investment Requires Security

- ❏ Many of the most worthwhile projects require immense sacrifices from both parties, and it's in the nature of such sacrifices that we're most likely to make them for people who are also making them for us.
- ❏ Marriage sets up the conditions in which we can take valuable decisions about what to do with our lives that would be too risky outside its guarantees.
- ❏ What we are correctly now focused on is the psychological point of making it hard to throw in the towel. It turns out that we benefit greatly (though at a price** from having to stick with certain commitments, because some of our key needs have a long-term structure.
- ❏ The point of marriage is to be usefully unpleasant—at least at crucial times. Together we embrace a set of limitations on one kind of freedom, the freedom to run away, so as to protect and strengthen another kind, the shared ability to mature and create something of lasting value, the pains of which are aligned to our better selves.

IV. Work

The Dangers Of The Good Child

- ❏ The good child isn't good because, by a quirk of nature, they simply have no inclination to be anything else. They are good because they have been granted no other option, because the more transgressive part of what they are cannot be tolerated. Their goodness springs from necessity rather than choice.
- ❏ The good child has been deprived of one of the central ingredients of a properly privileged upbringing: the experience of other people witnessing and surviving their mischief.
- ❏ Grown up, the good child typically has particular problems around sex. They might once have been praised for their purity. Sex, in its necessary extremes and ecstasies, lies at the opposite end of the spectrum.
- ❏ At work, the good adult also faces problems. As a child, it was enough to follow the rules, never to make trouble and to avoid provoking the merest frustration.
- ❏ Almost everything interesting, worth doing or important will meet with a degree of opposition.
- ❏ Every noble ambition has to skirt disaster and ignominy.
- ❏ Being properly mature involves a frank, unfrightened relationship with one's own darkness, complexity, and ambition. It involves accepting that not everything that makes us happy will please others or be honored as especially "nice," but it can be important to explore and hold on to it nevertheless.

- ❏ The desire to be good is one of the loveliest things in the world, but in order to have a genuinely good life, we may sometimes need to be (by the standards of the good child) fruitfully and bravely bad.
- ❏ In well-meaning attempts to boost our confidence ahead of challenging moments, we are often encouraged to pay attention to our strengths: our intelligence, our competence, our experience.
- ❏ But this can, curiously, have awkward consequences. There's a type of underconfidence that arises specifically when we grow too attached to our own dignity and become anxious around situations that seem in some way to threaten it. We hold back from challenges in which there is any risk of ending up looking ridiculous, but these of course comprise many of the most interesting options.
- ❏ In a warm tone, he reminds us that everyone, however important and learned they might be, is a fool. No one is spared, not even the author. However well schooled he himself was, Erasmus remained—he insists—as much of a nitwit as anyone else: his judgment is faulty, his passions get the better of him, he is prey to superstition and irrational fear, he is shy whenever he has to meet new people, he drops things at elegant dinners. This is deeply cheering, for it means that our own repeated idiocies do not have to exclude us from the best company.
- ❏ Looking like a prick, making blunders, and doing bizarre things in the night don't render us unfit for society; they just make us a bit more like the greatest scholar of the Northern European Renaissance.
- ❏ The works of Bruegel and Erasmus propose that the way to greater confidence isn't to reassure ourselves of our own dignity; it's to live at peace with the inevitable nature of our ridiculousness. We are idiots now, we have been idiots in the past, and we will be idiots again in the future—and that is OK. There aren't any other available options for human beings.

Impostor Syndrome

- ❏ Faced with hurdles, we often leave the possibility of success to others, because we don't seem to ourselves to be anything like the sorts of people who win.
- ❏ When we approach the idea of acquiring responsibility or prestige, we quickly become convinced that we are "impostors," like an actor in the role of a pilot, wearing the uniform and delivering authoritative cabin announcements while being incapable of starting the engines.
- ❏ The root cause of impostor syndrome is an unhelpful picture of what people at the top of society are really like.
- ❏ We feel like impostors not because we are uniquely flawed, but because we can't imagine how equally flawed the elite must necessarily also be underneath their polished surfaces.
- ❏ Impostor syndrome has its roots far back in childhood—specifically in the powerful sense children have that their parents are really very different from them.

- ❏ This childhood experience dovetails with a basic feature of the human condition. We know ourselves from the inside, but others only from the outside.
- ❏ The solution to the impostor syndrome lies in making a leap of faith and trusting that others' minds work basically in much the same way as our own. Everyone is probably as anxious, uncertain, and wayward as we are.
- ❏ In eighteenth-century England, an admiral of the fleet would have looked deeply impressive to outsiders (meaning more or less everyone), with his splendid uniform (cockaded hat, abundant gold** and hundreds of subordinates to do his bidding. But to a young earl or marquess who had moved in the same social circles all his life, the admiral would appear in a very different light.
- ❏ Through acquaintance, the aristocrat would have reached a wise awareness that being an admiral was not an elevated position reserved for gods; it was the sort of thing Sticky could do.
- ❏ The other traditional release from underconfidence of this type came from the opposite end of the social spectrum: being a servant. "No man is a hero to his valet," remarked the sixteenth-century essayist Montaigne – a lack of respect that may at points prove deeply encouraging, given how much our awe can sap our will to rival or match our heroes. Great public figures aren't ever so impressive to those who look after them,
- ❏ Automatically grasp the limitations of the authority of the elite. Fortunately, we don't have to be either of them to liberate ourselves from inhibiting degrees of respect for the powerful; imagination will serve just as well.

Fame

- ❏ Fame seems to offer very significant benefits. The fantasy unfolds like this: when you are famous, wherever you go, your good reputation will precede you.
- ❏ People will think well of you, because your merits have been impressively explained in advance.
- ❏ You will receive warm smiles from admiring strangers. You won't need to make your own case laboriously on each occasion.
- ❏ When you are famous, you will be safe from rejection. You won't have to win over every new person. Fame means that other people will be flattered and delighted even if you are only slightly interested in them.
- ❏ They will be amazed to see you in the flesh. They'll ask to take a photo with you. They'll sometimes laugh nervously with excitement. Furthermore, no one will be able to afford to upset you.
- ❏ When you're not pleased with something, it will become a big problem for others. If you say your hotel room isn't up to scratch, the management will panic. Your complaints will be taken very seriously. Your happiness will become the focus of everyone's efforts. You will make or break other people's reputations. You'll be boss.
- ❏ The desire for fame has its roots in the experience of neglect and injury. No one would want to be famous who hadn't also, somewhere in the past, been made to feel extremely

insignificant. We sense the need for a great deal of admiring attention when we have been painfully overexposed to deprivation.

- ❏ Perhaps our parents were hard to impress. They never noticed us much, as they were so busy with other things, focusing on other famous people, unable to have or express kind feelings, or just working too hard.
- ❏ There were no bedtime stories and our school reports weren't the subject of praise and admiration. That's why we dream that one day the world will pay attention.
- ❏ What is common to all dreams of fame is that being known to strangers will often be the solution to a hurt. It presents itself as the answer to a deep need to be appreciated and treated decently by other people.
- ❏ One wants to be famous out of a desire for kindness. But the world isn't generally kind to the famous for very long. The reason is basic: the success of any one person involves humiliation for lots of others.
- ❏ To sum up, fame really just means that someone gets noticed a great deal, not that they are more intensely understood, appreciated, or loved.
- ❏ The wise person knows that their products require attention. But they make a clear distinction between the purely practical needs of marketing and advocacy and the intimate desire to be liked and treated with justice and kindness by people they don't know.
- ❏ A healthy society will give up on the understandable but erroneous belief that fame might guarantee that truly valuable goal: the kindness of strangers.

Specialization

- ❏ The big economic reason why we can't explore our potential as we might is that it is hugely more productive for us not to do so. In The Wealth of Nations (1776), the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith first explained how what he termed the "division of labor" was at the heart of the increased productivity of capitalism. Smith zeroed in on the dazzling efficiency that could be achieved in pin manufacturing, if everyone focused on one narrow task (and stopped, as it were, exploring their Whitman-esque "multitudes"): One man draws out the wire, another straights it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on is a peculiar business; to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, all performed by distinct hands. I have seen a small manufactory where they could make upwards of forty-eight thousand pins in a day. But if they had all wrought separately and independently, and without any of them having been educated to this peculiar business, they could have made perhaps not one pin in a day.
- ❏ Adam Smith was astonishingly prescient. Doing one job, preferably for most of one's life, makes perfect economic sense.

- ❏ Marx agreed entirely with Smith's analysis: specialization had indeed transformed the world and possessed a revolutionary power to enrich individuals and nations. But where he differed from Smith was in his assessment of how desirable this development might be.
- ❏ In a pointed dig at Smith in The German Ideology (1846), Marx wrote: In communist society … nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes … thus it is possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner … without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.
- ❏ Part of the reason why the job we do, as well as the jobs we don't get to do, matters so much is that our occupation decisively shapes who we are.
- ❏ The primary school teacher treats even the middle-aged a little as if they were in need of careful shepherding; the psychoanalyst has a studied way of listening and seeming not to judge while exuding a pensive, reflective air; the politician lapses into speeches at intimate dinner parties.
- ❏ Every occupation weakens or reinforces aspects of our nature.
- ❏ There are jobs that keep us constantly tethered to the immediate moment (ER nurse, news editor); others that focus our attention on the outlying fringes of the time horizon (futurist, urban planner, reforester).
- ❏ Certain jobs daily sharpen our suspicions of our fellow humans, suggesting that the real agenda must always be far from what is overtly being said (journalist, antiques dealer); others intersect with people at the candid, intimate moments of their lives (anesthetist, hairdresser, funeral director).
- ❏ In some jobs, it is clear what you have to do to move forward and how promotion occurs (government employee, lawyer, surgeon), a dynamic that lends calm and steadiness to the soul, and diminishes tendencies to plot and maneuver; in others (television producer, politician**, the rules are muddied and seem bound up with accidents of friendship and fortuitous alliances, encouraging tendencies to anxiety, distrust, and shiftiness.
- ❏ By giving a large part of one's life over to a specific occupation, one necessarily has to perform an injustice to other areas of latent potential.
- ❏ Whatever enlargements it offers our personalities, work also possesses a powerful capacity to trammel our spirits.
- ❏ Compared to the play of childhood, we're all leading fatally restricted lives. There is no easy cure. As Adam Smith argued, the causes don't lie in some personal error we're making. It's a limitation forced upon us by the greater logic of a competitive market economy.
- ❏ But we can allow ourselves to mourn that there will always be large aspects of our character that won't be satisfied. We're not being silly or ungrateful. We're simply registering the clash between the demands of the employment market and the free, wide-ranging potential of every human life.
- ❏ There's a touch of sadness to this insight. But it is also a reminder that this sense of being unfulfilled will accompany us in whatever job we choose: We can't overcome it by switching jobs. No one job can ever be enough.

- ❏ Yet, as with work, specialization brings advantages: It means we can focus, bring up children in stable environments, and learn the disciplines of compromise. In love and work, life requires us to be specialists even though we are by nature equally suited for wide-ranging exploration.
- ❏ Whatever we do, parts of our potential will have to go undeveloped and have to die without ever having had the chance to come to full maturity—for the sake of the benefits of focus and specialization.
- ❏ Nowadays, fortunately, we've loosened old highly restrictive definitions of what a "real" man or a "real" woman might be like, but there remain comparably strict social taboos hemming in the idea of what a "real" artist is allowed to get up to.
- ❏ The philanthropist has been imagined as a person who makes a lot of money in the brutish world of commerce, with all the normal expectations of maximizing returns, squeezing wages, and focusing on obvious opportunities, and then makes a clean break. In their spare hours, they can devote their wealth to projects that are profoundly non-commercial: The patient collection of Roman coins, Islamic vases, or modern sculptures. But philanthropists know that if they ever took an art-loving attitude to their businesses these might suffer economic collapse. Instead of making big things happen in the real world, they would become mere artists who make little interesting things in the sheltered, subsidized world of the gallery.

Consumer Society

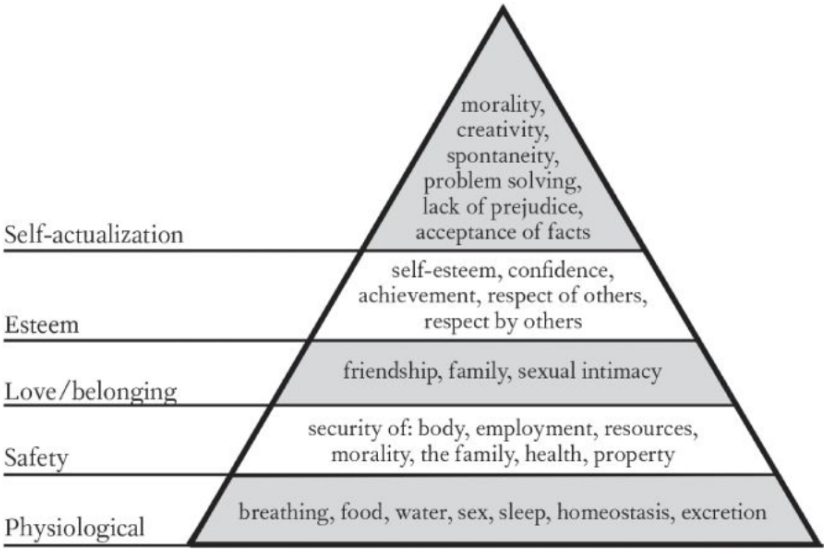
- ❏ The one way to generate wealth, argued Mandeville, was to ensure high demand for absurd and unnecessary things. Of course, no one needed embroidered handbags, silk-lined slippers, or ice creams, but it was a blessing that they could be prompted by fashion to want them, for on the back of demand for such trifles workshops could be built, apprentices trained, and hospitals funded.
- ❏ Mandeville shocked his audience with the starkness of the choice he placed before them. A nation could either be very high-minded, spiritually elevated, intellectually refined, and dirt poor, or a slave to luxury and idle consumption, and very rich.
- ❏ In his essay "Of Luxury" (1752), the philosopher David Hume repeated Mandeville's defense of an economy built on making and selling unnecessary things: "In a nation, where there is no demand for superfluities, men sink into indolence, lose all enjoyment of life, and are useless to the public, which cannot maintain or support its fleets and armies."
- ❏ One of the most spirited and impassioned voices was that of Switzerland's greatest philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Shocked by the impact of the consumer revolution on the manners and atmosphere of his native Geneva, he called for a return to a simpler, older way of life, of the sort he had experienced in Alpine villages or read about in travelers' accounts of the native tribes of North America.
- ❏ In the remote corners of Appenzell or the vast forests of Missouri, there was—blessedly—no concern for fashion and no one-upmanship around hair extensions.

Rousseau recommended closing Geneva's borders and imposing crippling taxes on luxury goods so that people's energies could be redirected toward non-material values.

- ❏ However, even if Rousseau disagreed with Hume and Mandeville, he did not seek to deny the basic premise behind their analyses: it truly appeared to be a choice between decadent consumption and wealth on the one hand, and virtuous restraint and poverty on the other. It was simply that Rousseau—unusually—preferred virtue to wealth.
- ❏ The parameters of this debate have continued to dominate economic thinking ever since. We re-encounter them in ideological arguments between capitalists and communists and free marketers and environmentalists. But for most of us, the debate is no longer pertinent.
- ❏ We simply accept that we will live in consumer economies with some very unfortunate side effects to them (crass advertising, unhealthy foodstuffs, products that are disconnected from any reasonable assessment of our needs, excessive waste …) in exchange for economic growth and high employment. We have chosen wealth over virtue.
- ❏ The one question rarely asked is whether there might be a way to ameliorate the dispiriting choice, to draw on the best aspects of consumerism on the one hand and high-mindedness on the other without suffering their worst consequences: moral decadence and profound poverty. Might it be possible for a society to develop that allows for consumer spending (and therefore provides employment and welfare) yet of a kind directed at something other than "vanities" and "superfluities"? Might we shop for something other than nonsense? In other words, might we have wealth and (a degree of** virtue?
- ❏ In his The Wealth of Nations, Smith seems at points willing to concede to key aspects of Mandeville's argument: Consumer societies do help the poor by providing employment based around satisfying what are often rather suboptimal purchases.
- ❏ Smith was as ready as other Anglophone economists to mock the triviality of some consumer choices, while admiring their consequences.
- ❏ All those embroidered lace handkerchiefs, jeweled snuff boxes, and miniature temples made of cream for dessert were frivolous, he conceded, but they encouraged trade, created employment, and generated immense wealth, and could be firmly defended on this score alone.
- ❏ However, Smith offered some fascinating hopes for the future. He pointed out that consumption didn't invariably have to involve the trading of frivolous things.
- ❏ He understood that humans have many "higher" needs that require a lot of labor, intelligence, and work to fulfill, but that lie outside capitalist enterprise as conceived by "realists" like Hume or Mandeville: among them, our need for education, for self-understanding, for beautiful cities, and for rewarding social lives.
- ❏ The ultimate goal of capitalism was to tackle "happiness" in all its complexities, psychological as opposed to merely material.
- ❏ The reform of capitalism hinges on an odd-sounding but critical task: the conception of an economy focused around higher needs.

Higher Needs, A Pyramid, And Capitalism

- ❏ The idea that capitalism can give us what we need has always been central to its defense.
- ❏ More efficiently than any other system, capitalism has, in theory, been able to identify what we're lacking and deliver it to us with unparalleled efficiency. Capitalism is the most skilled machine we have ever yet constructed for satisfying human needs.
- ❏ Yet, despite its evident successes, consumer capitalism cannot in truth realistically be credited with having fulfilled a mission of accurately satisfying our needs, because of one evident failing: We aren't happy.



- ❏ The true destiny of and millennial opportunity for consumer capitalism is to travel up the pyramid, to generate ever more of its profits from the satisfaction of the full range of "higher needs" that currently lie outside the realm of industrialization and commodification.
- ❏ Capitalists and companies are seemingly—at least semi-consciously—aware of their failure to engage with many of the elements at the top of the pyramid, among them friendship, belonging, meaningfulness, and a sense of agency and autonomy. And the evidence for this lies in a rather surprising place, in one of the key institutions for driving the sales of capitalism's products forward: advertising.

The Promises of Advertising

- ❏ When advertising began in a significant way in the early nineteenth century, it was a relatively straightforward business. It showed you a product, told you what it did, where you could get it, and what it cost.
- ❏ Then, in 1960s America, a remarkable new way of advertising emerged, led by such luminaries of Madison Avenue as William Bernbach, David Ogilvy, and Mary Wells Lawrence. In their work for brands like Esso, Avis, and Life Cereal, adverts ceased to be in a

narrow sense about the things they were selling. The focus of an ad might ostensibly be on a car, but our attention was also being directed at the harmonious, handsome couple holding hands beside it. It might on the surface be an advert about soap, but the true emphasis was on the state of calm that accompanied the ablutions.

- ❏ Patek Philippe is one of the giants of the global watchmaking industry. Since 1996, they have been running a very distinctive series of adverts featuring parents and children.
- ❏ In one example, a father and son are together in a motorboat, a scene that tenderly evokes filial and paternal loyalty and love. The son is listening carefully while his kindly dad tells him about aspects of seafaring. We can imagine that the boy will grow up confident and independent, yet also respectful and warm. He'll be keen to follow in his father's footsteps and emulate his best sides. The father has put a lot of work into the relationship (one senses they've been out on the water a number of times** and now the love is being properly paid back.
- ❏ The advertisement understands our deepest hopes around our children. It is moving because what it depicts is so hard to find in real life. We are often brought to tears not so much by what is horrible as by what is beautiful but out of reach.
- ❏ Father – son relationships tend to be highly ambivalent. Despite a lot of effort, there can be extensive feelings of neglect, rebellion, and, on both sides, bitterness. Capitalism doesn't allow dads to be too present. There may not be so many chances to talk. But in the world of Patek Philippe, we glimpse a psychological paradise.
- ❏ The real crisis of capitalism is that product development lags so far behind the best insights of advertising.
- ❏ Since the 1960s, advertising has worked out just how much we need help with the true challenges of life. It has fathomed how deeply we want to have better careers, stronger relationships, greater confidence. In most adverts, the pain and the hope of our lives have been superbly identified, but the products are almost comically at odds with the problems at hand.
- ❏ To trace the future shape of capitalism, we have only to think of all our needs that currently lie outside commerce. We need help in forming cohesive, interesting, benevolent communities.
- ❏ Our higher needs are not trivial or minor, insignificant things we could easily survive without. They are, in many ways, central to our lives. We have simply accepted, without adequate protest, that there is nothing business can do to address them, when in fact, being able to structure businesses around these needs would be the commercial equivalent of the discovery of steam power or the invention of the electric light bulb.
- ❏ In the ideal future for consumer capitalism, our materialism would be refined, our work would be rendered more meaningful, and our profits more honorable.
- ❏ Advertising has at least done us the great service of hinting at the future shape of the economy; it already trades in all the right ingredients. The challenge now is to narrow the gap between the fantasies being offered and what we truly spend our lives doing and our money buying.

Artistic Sympathy

- ❏ There is one important move we can make that might start to reduce some of the sting of inequality. For this, we need to begin by asking what might sound like an offensively obvious question: Why is financial inequality a problem?
- ❏ There are two very different answers. One kind of harm is material: not being able to get a decent house, quality health care, a proper education, and a hopeful future for one's children.
- ❏ But there is also a psychological reason why inequality proves so problematic: because poverty is intricately bound up with humiliation. The punishment of poverty is not limited to money, but extends to the suffering that attends a lack of status: a constant low-level sense that who one is and what one does are of no interest to a world that is punitively unequal in its distribution of honor as well as cash.
- ❏ Poverty not only induces financial harm but damages mental health as well.
- ❏ A sketch of a solution to the gap between income and respect lies in a slightly unexpected place: a small painting hanging in a top-floor gallery at London's Wallace Collection called The Lacemaker, by a little-known Dutch artist, Caspar Netscher, who painted it in 1662.
- ❏ The artist has caught the woman making lace at a moment of intense concentration on a difficult task.
- ❏ Were the artist, Caspar Netscher, to be working today, his portrait would have been equivalent to making a short movie about phone factory workers or fruit pickers. It would have been evident to all the painting's viewers that the lacemaker was someone who ordinarily received no respect or prestige at all.
- ❏ And yet Netscher directed an extraordinary amount of what one might call artistic sympathy toward his sitter. Through his eyes and artistry, she is no longer a nobody. She has grown into an individual, full of her own thoughts, sensitive, serious, devoted—entirely deserving of tenderness and consideration. The artist has transformed how we might look at a lacemaker.
- ❏ Netscher isn't lecturing us about respecting the low-paid; we hear this often enough and the lesson rarely sinks in. He's not trying to use guilt, which is rarely an effective tactic. He's helping us, in a representative instance, to actually feel respect for his worker rather than just know it might be her due.
- ❏ His picture isn't nagging, grim, or forbidding, it's an appealing and pleasurable mechanism for teaching us a very unfamiliar but critically important supra-political emotion.

- If lots of people saw the lacemaker in the way the artist did, took the lesson properly to heart, and applied it widely and imaginatively at every moment of their lives, it is not an exaggeration to say that the psychological burden of poverty would substantially be lifted.

V. Culture

- We may not be used to conceiving of ourselves in these terms, but the labels Romantic and Classical, so often alluded to up to this point, usefully bring into focus some of the central themes of our lives and help us to gain a clearer picture of the underlying structure of our enthusiasms and concerns.

Intuition vs. Analysis

- Romantics are especially aware of all that lies outside rational explanation, all that cannot neatly be summarized in words.
- The impulse to categorize and to master intellectually is for Romantics a distinct form of vanity, like trying to draw up a list in a hurricane.
- We should more often be guided by our instincts and the voice of nature within us.
- We should respect and not tinker with emotions, especially as they relate to love and the spiritual varieties of experience.
- We need to fall silent—more frequently than we do—and simply listen.
- Sometimes the best way to honor the ineffable is through unclear language and obscure modes of expression.
- Classicists like order.
- They reach for their notebooks during emotional tempests.
- Reason is the sole tool we have available to defend ourselves against primeval chaos.

- ❏ Classicists know a lot about feelings and intuitions. They have had plenty, often very powerful ones. They just don't respect them. The last thing they are now inclined to do with an emotion is surrender to it.
- ❏ They have committed too many follies to think that following their hearts might be an idea. They know that not all the mysteries can be explained, but they are committed to giving it a shot. They don't think that love breaks if you examine it too carefully. They favor clear modes of expression (even about rare and evanescent emotions, like reflecting on the Centaurus A galaxy or looking into a partner's eyes) and a crisp, minimal language that an intelligent twelve-year-old could understand.

Spontaneity vs. Education

- ❏ Romantics don't like schools. The best kind of education comes from within. The most important capacities are in us from the start.
- ❏ We don't need to learn how to love, how to be kind, how to die … Formal learning kills every topic of study. We need to learn to listen to the voice inside us, which will provide us with all we need.
- ❏ There is no greater exemplar of spontaneity than children, and Romantics look upon them with particular tenderness and respect. They are not beasts to be tamed, but gods to be heard. We knew, back then, what mattered. It was school that corrupted us and made us lose our way, which is why it is from the mouths of the very young that we hear truths and sensibilities that the most so-called intelligent adults will have forgotten. To the romantic, it will always be a child who points out that the emperor is wearing no clothes.
- ❏ Those of a Classical temperament don't necessarily respect the education system as it stands—there is so much that could be improved—but the abstract idea of education seems essential and the bedrock of civilization.
- ❏ We didn't forget how to live; we just never knew, as no one is ever born knowing. Children aren't any more noble than adults, they just have a particularly hard time containing themselves. The purpose of education is to pass down one or two painfully won insights so that not every generation needs to repeat the same desperate errors.

Honesty vs. Politeness

- ❏ There is too much hypocrisy already, say the Romantics. We are drowning in our lies and in our compromises. We must do everything to strip away the secrecy our society imposes on us. Authenticity is the highest form of morality. Politeness is a lid that we place upon our real selves to supress the truths that could free us.
- ❏ For the Classical person, politeness is the lid we generously place on our inner madness to stop hurting those we care for.
- ❏ Not being ourselves is the kindest thing we can do to someone we claim to love. To give others an uncensored view of our emotions, with their minute-by-minute vagaries and

compulsions, is sheer laziness or cruelty. We cannot possibly be good and entirely honest, nor should we try. Strategic inauthenticity is the mark of a kindly soul.

Idealism vs. Realism

- ❏ The Romantic is excited by how things might ideally be and judges what currently exists in the world by the standard of a better imagined alternative.
- ❏ Most of the time, the current state of society arouses intense disappointment and anger as they consider the injustices, prevarications, compromises, and timidity all around.
- ❏ By contrast, the Classical person pays special attention to what can go wrong. They are very concerned to mitigate the downside. They are aware that most things could be a lot worse.
- ❏ They feel we have deeply dangerous impulses, lusts, and drives and take bad behavior for granted when it manifests itself. They simply feel this is what humans are prone to. High ideals make them nervous.

Earnestness vs. Irony

- ❏ Romantics don’t believe in how things are. Their attention is fixed on how they should be. They therefore resist the deflationary call of ironic humor, which seems defeatist. They are earnest in their search for a better future.
- ❏ The Classical conviction is not that the world is a cheerful place, far from it; but rather that a cheerful mood is a good starting point for living in a radically imperfect and deeply unsatisfactory realm where the priority is to not give up, despair and kill oneself.
- ❏ Ironic humor is a standard recourse for them, because it emerges from the constant collision between how one would want things to be and how it seems they in fact are. They are proponents of gallows humor.

The Rare vs. The Everyday

- ❏ The Romantic rebels against the ordinary. They are keen on the exotic and the rare. They like things that the mass of the population won't yet know about.
- ❏ The fact that something is popular will always be a mark against it. They don’t much like routine, especially in domestic life, either. They are anxious about higher things being put under pressure to become “useful” or commercial. They want heroism, excitement and an end to boredom.
- ❏ The Classical personality welcomes routine as a defense against chaos. They would very much like good things to be popular. They don’t necessarily think that what is presently popular is good, but they see popularity as, in principle, a mark of virtue. They are familiar enough with extremes to welcome things that are a little boring. They can see the charm of doing the laundry.

Purity vs. Ambivalence

- ❏ The Romantic is dismayed by compromise. They are drawn to either wholehearted endorsament or total rejection.
- ❏ Ideally, partners should love everything about each other. A political party should be admirable at every turn. A philanthropist should draw no personal benefit from acts of charity. They feel the attraction of the lost cause. It is very important for the Romantic to feel they are right; winning is, by comparison, not such an urgent matter.
- ❏ The Classical person takes the view that very few things, and no people, are either wholly good or entirely bad. They assume that there is likely to be some worth in opposing ideas and something to be learned from both sides. It is Classical to think that a decent person might in many areas hold views you find deeply unpalatable.
- ❏ For a long time now, perhaps since around 1750, Romantic attitudes have been dominant in the Western imagination. The prevailing approach to children, relationships, politics, and culture has all been colored more by a romantic than by a cllassical spirit.
- ❏ Both Romantic and Classical orientations have important truths to impart. Neither is wholly right or wrong. They need to be balanced. And none of us are in any case ever simplu one or the other.
- ❏ But because a good life requires a judicious balance of both positions, at this point in history it might be the Classical attitude whose distinctive claims and wisdom we need to listen to most intently. It is a mode of approaching life that is ripe for rediscovery.
- ❏ Children have two advantages: They don't know what they're supposed to like and they don't understand money, so price is never a guide to value for them. They have to rely instead on their own delight (or lack of it) in the intrinsic merits of the things they're presented with, and this can take them in astonishing (and sometimes maddening) directions.
- ❏ There are two ways to get richer: One is to make more money and the second is to discover that more of the things we could love are already to hand (thanks to the miracles of the Industrial Revolution). We are, astonishingly, already a good deal richer than we're encouraged to think we are.
- ❏ Dutch countryside is filled with merits: It's quiet and solemn; it encourages tranquil contemplation; it's an antidote to stress and forced cheerfulness. These are things we might really need to help us cope with our overloaded and often inauthentic lives.
- ❏ We should develop the sort of confidence that emerges from understanding a basic fact of human psychology: that we're all very prepared to accept the less than perfect, if only we can be guided to appreciate it with skill, confidence, and charm.
- ❏ Zen philosophers developed the view that pots, cups, and bowls that had become damaged shouldn't simply be neglected or thrown away. They should continue to attract our respect and attention and be repaired with enormous care, this process symbolizing a reconciliation with the flaws and accidents of time intended to reinforce the underlying themes of Zen.

- ❏ The word given to this tradition of ceramic repair is kintsugi (kin meaning “golden,” tsugi “joinery,” so literally “to join with gold”).
- ❏ In Zen aesthetics, the broken pieces of an accidentally smashed pot should be carefully picked up, reassembled, and then glued together with lacquer inflected with a very expensive gold powder. There should be no attempt to disguise the damage; rather, the point is to render the fault lines beautiful and strong.

The beauty of resilience: a kintsugi bowl.

- ❏ Kintsugi belongs to the Zen ideals of wabi-sabi, which cherishes what is simple, unpretentious, and aged—especially if it has a rustic or weathered quality.
- ❏ Concepts like kintsugi provide case studies that teach us a useful kind of confidence. Things that might easily be thought unworthy of appreciation can, if described in the right way, emerge as deeply worth valuing.
- ❏ In public discussion we are often unhelpfully coy about the extent of our grief. The chat tends to be upbeat or glib; we are under awesome pressure to keep smiling in order not to shock, provide ammunition for enemies, or sap the energy of the vulnerable.
- ❏ We therefore end up not only sad, but sad that we are sad—without much public confirmation of the essential normality of our melancholy. We grow harmfully buttoned up or convinced of the desperate uniqueness of our fate.
- ❏ The German artist Anselm Kiefer is extremely forthright about the essentially sorrowful character of the human condition. Everything we love and care about will come to ruin; all that we put our hope in will fail. In a note accompanying his vast painting Alkahest, which is nearly four meters across, Kiefer writes that even “rock that looks as though it will last for ever is dissolved, crushed to sand and mud.”
- ❏ The dramatic scale is not accidental. It’s a way of trying to make obvious something that is often repressed and ignored: that dejection, sadness, and disappointment are major parts of being human.

Life is sorrow: Anselm Kiefer, Alkahest, 2011.

- ❏ The painting isn't about a relationship that didn't work out, a friendship that went wrong, a dead parent we never fully made peace with, a career choice that led to wasted years.
- ❏ Instead it sums up a feeling and an attitude: lonely, lost, cold, worried, frightened. And instead of denouncing these feelings as worthy only of losers, the work proclaims them as important, serious, and worthy.
- ❏ It is as if the picture is beaming out a collective message: "I understand, I know, I feel the same as you do, you are not alone."
- ❏ Kiefer's work is like a visual anthem for sorrow, one that invites us to see ourselves as part of the nation of sufferers, which includes, in fact, everyone who has ever lived.
- ❏ Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot described his painting The Leaning Tree Trunk as a souvenir or memory. It is filled with the idea of farewell. The moment will pass, light will fade, night will fall, the years will pass, and we will wonder what we did with them.

Our lives too will pass and fade:
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, The Leaning Tree Trunk, c. 1860–65.

- ❏ We can imagine ourselves as a series of concentric circles. On the outside lie all the more obvious things about us: what we do for a living, our age, education, tastes in food, and broad social background. We can usually find plenty of people who recognize us at this level. But deeper in are the circles that contain our more intimate selves, involving feelings about parents, secret fears, daydreams, ambitions that might never be realized, the stranger recesses of our sexual imagination, and all that we find beautiful and moving.
- ❏ Though we may long to share the inner circles, too often we seem able only to hover with others around the outer ones, returning home from yet another social gathering with the most sincere parts of us aching for recognition and companionship.
- ❏ Traditionally, religion provided an ideal explanation for and solution to this painful loneliness. The human soul, religious people would say, is made by God and so only God can know its deepest secrets. We are never truly alone, because God is always with us.
- ❏ What replaced religion in our imaginations, as we have seen, is the cult of human-to-human love we now know as Romanticism, which bequeathed to us the beautiful but reckless idea that loneliness might be capable of being vanquished, if we are fortunate and determined enough to meet the one exalted being known as our soulmate; someone who will understand everything deep and strange about us, who will see us completely and be enchanted by our totality.
- ❏ Yet there remains, besides the promises of love and religion, one other—and more solid—resource with which to address our loneliness: culture.
- ❏ The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, working in the middle years of the twentieth century, was fascinated by how certain children coped with the absence of their parents. He identified the use of what he called “transitional objects” to keep the memory of parental love strong even when the parents weren’t there. So a teddy bear or a blanket, he realized, could be a mechanism for activating the memory of being cared for, a mechanism that is usefully mobile and portable and is always accessible when the parents are at bay.
- ❏ Winnicott proposed that works of art can, for adults, function as more sophisticated versions of just these kinds of transitional objects.
- ❏ What we are at heart looking for in friendship is not necessarily someone we can touch and see in front of us, but a person who shares, and can help us develop, our sensibility and values, someone to whom we can turn and look for a sign that they too feel what we have felt, that they are attracted, amused, and repulsed by similar things. And, strangely, it appears that certain imaginary friends drawn from culture can end up feeling more real and in that sense more present to us than any of our real-life acquaintances, even if they have been dead a few centuries and lived on another continent. We can feel honored to count them among our best friends.
- ❏ The arts provide a miraculous mechanism whereby a total stranger can offer us many of the things that lie at the core of friendship. And when we find these art friends, we are unpicking the experience of loneliness. We’re finding intimacy at a distance.
- ❏ The friendship may even be deeper than that we could have enjoyed in person, for it is spared all the normal compromises that attend social interactions.

- ❏ They may not know of our latest technology, they have no idea of our families or jobs, but in areas that really matter to us they understand us to a degree that is at once a little shocking and deeply thrilling.
- ❏ Confronted by the many failings of our real-life communities, culture gives us the option of assembling a tribe for ourselves, drawing their members across the widest ranges of time and space, blending some living friends with some dead authors, architects, musicians and composers, painters and poets.
- ❏ The fifteenth-century Italian painter Andrea del Verrocchio (one of whose apprentices was Leonardo da Vinci) was deeply attracted to the Bible story of Tobias and the Angel. It tells of a young man, Tobias, who has to go on a long and dangerous journey. But he has two companions: one a little dog, the other an angel who comes to walk by his side, advise him, encourage him, and guard him.
- ❏ The old religious idea was that we are never fully alone; there are always special beings around us upon whose aid we can call. Verrocchio's picture is touching not because it shows a real solution we can count on, but because it points to the kind of companionship we would love to have and yet normally don't feel we can find.
- ❏ Donald Winnicott specialized in relationships between parents and children. In his clinical practice, he often met with parents who felt like failures: perhaps because their children hadn't got into the best schools, or because there were sometimes arguments around the dinner table, or the house wasn't always completely tidy.
- ❏ Winnicott's crucial insight was that the parents' agony was coming from a particular place: excessive hope. Their despair was a consequence of a cruel and counterproductive perfectionism. To help them reduce this, Winnicott developed a charming phrase: "the good enough parent." No child, he insisted, needs an ideal parent. They just need an OK, pretty decent, usually well-intentioned, sometimes grumpy but basically reasonable father or mother.
- ❏ The concept of "good enough" was invented as an escape from dangerous ideals. It began in relation to parenthood, but it can be applied across life more generally, especially around work and love.
- ❏ A relationship may be good enough even while it has its very dark moments.
- ❏ Similarly, a good-enough job will be very boring at points; it won't perfectly utilize all our merits or pay a fortune. But we may make some real friends, have times of genuine excitement, and finish many days tired but with a sense of true accomplishment.
- ❏ It takes a great deal of bravery and skill to keep even a very ordinary life going.

Gratitude

- ❏ The standard habit of the mind is to take careful note of what's not right in our lives and obsess about all that is missing. But in a new mood, perhaps after a lot of longing and turmoil, we pause and notice some of what has—remarkably—not gone wrong.
- ❏ Gratitude is a mood that grows with age. It is extremely rare to delight in flowers or a quiet evening at home, a cup of tea or a walk in the woods when one is under twenty-two.

- ❏ There are so many larger, grander things to be concerned about: romantic love, career fulfillment, and political change.

Wisdom

- ❏ Wisdom can be said to comprise twelve ingredients.

Realism

- ❏ The wise are, first and foremost, “realistic” about how challenging many things can be.
- ❏ Knowing that something difficult is being attempted doesn’t rob the wise of ambition, but it makes them more steadfast, calmer, and less prone to panic about the problems that will invariably come their way. The wise rarely expect anything to be wholly easy or to go entirely well.

Appreciation

- ❏ Properly aware that much can and will go wrong, the wise are unusually alive to moments of calm and beauty, even extremely modest ones, of the kind that those with grander plans rush past.

Folly

- ❏ The wise know that all human beings, themselves included, are never far from folly.
- ❏ The wise are unsurprised by the ongoing coexistence of deep immaturity and perversity alongside quite adult qualities like intelligence and morality.

Humor

- ❏ The wise take the business of laughing at themselves seriously. They hedge their pronouncements and are skeptical in their conclusions.

Politeness

- ❏ The wise are realistic about social relations, in particular about how difficult it is to change people’s minds and have an effect on their lives.
- ❏ They want, above all, things to be nice in social settings, even if this means they are not totally authentic. So they will sit with someone of an opposite political persuasion and not try to convert them; they will hold their tongue with someone who seems to be announcing a wrong-headed plan for reforming the country, educating their child, or directing their personal life.

Self-Acceptance

- ❏ The wise have made their peace with the yawning gap between how they would ideally want to be and what they are actually like.

Forgiveness

- ❏ The wise are comparably realistic about other people. They recognize the extraordinary pressure everyone is under to pursue their own ambitions, defend their own interests, and seek their own pleasures.
- ❏ It can make others appear extremely mean and purposefully evil, but this would be to overpersonalize the issue. The wise know that most hurt is not intentional but a by-product of the constant collision of blind competing egos in a world of scarce resources.
- ❏ The wise are therefore slow to anger and judge.

Resilience

- ❏ The wise have a solid sense of what they can survive. They know just how much can go wrong and things will still be—just about—liveable.

Envy

- ❏ The wise appreciate the role of luck and don't curse themselves overly at those junctures where they have evidently not had as much of it as they would have liked.

Success and Failure

- ❏ The wise emerge as realistic about the consequences of winning and succeeding.
- ❏ They don't exaggerate the transformations available to us. They know how much we remain tethered to some basic dynamics in our personalities, whatever job we have or material possession we acquire.

Regrets

- ❏ We will make some extremely large and utterly uncorrectable errors in a number of areas. Perfectionism is a wicked illusion. Regret is unavoidable.

Calm

- ❏ The wise know that turmoil is always around the corner, and they have come to fear and sense its approach. That's why they nurture such a strong commitment to calm.