

MindWipe 2

The Stories We Tell
and the Rivers We Are

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Dedicated, with love and thanks, to Diane.

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Three Deep Breaths

Let's start Part Two the same way we began Part One
— with three deep, conscious breaths.

Breath one: Stop whatever you're doing and breathe in. Sit up straight with your feet on the floor. Breathe out when you're ready. Don't rush it.

Breath two: Let the world slow down. Everything else can wait. Be here now.

Breath three: [nothing]

The Internal Checkup

Spend a minute taking stock of yourself.

Start with the physical. Are you warm or cold? Tired or awake? Does any part of your body ache? How are you sitting (or standing, or lying)? Are you comfortable? How's your breathing? Is it slow or fast, labored or smooth? Are you hungry or thirsty? Don't do anything to change these conditions right now; just observe them.

Now consider your mental state. Are you feeling stressed? Is your mind cluttered? Noisy? Chaotic? Is your mind moving quickly or slowly? Are you feeling happy or sad or angry or calm? Are you worried about something? Again, don't try to change your mental state. For now, just notice what's going on in your head.

Doing a quick internal checkup from time to time can

help you recognize states of being that are healthy or not. Then you can figure out what causes these states, and take steps to change the unhealthy and continue the others.

You Are a River

(A Series of Rivers, Actually)

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus famously said: “You cannot step twice into the same river.” Rivers are constantly changing because the water is always flowing.

New water comes down from the mountain. Leaves drop in and flow along. Different fish swim around.

The same is true for everything: The wall beside me is slowly and constantly changing because of time, wind, air, rain, and exchange of electrons. Fruit ripens and, if uneaten, rots. Paper is changed when we write on it.

It’s also true for people. Every human being is constantly changing — we age, we get sick, we get well, our nails get long, we cut them, we brush our teeth, we take food in, and we expel waste. These changes can be dramatic, but

usually they are minor. Most of the time we don't notice them and they don't affect us in big ways. Nevertheless, they do affect us.

The human mind is likewise in a constant state of change. Some days we wake up feeling great, while others start with clouds of discontent. Sometimes we can find clear reasons for these states of mind, but often we cannot. Brain chemistry plays a large role, and some folks take medicine to help regulate the flow of neurotransmitters. But external events also play a big role: difficulty at school or work; relationships; and the myriad highs and lows of everyday life.

Some people say that *everything* about us is always changing; others say that some bits are permanent. I'll let you make up your own mind about that, but I've seen people change in dramatic ways. I've watched myself change constantly. You've probably seen yourself change, too. Suffice it to say that humans are always capable of change, and that change is an inevitable part of our internal (and external) lives.

How much can we control this change? This is an open question. Some people insist that they are supreme masters of their own fate, whose successes and failures are entirely their own doing. (A few pathetic folks claim ownership of their successes, while blaming failure on other people.) Some people take the opposite position and insist that every success or failure is the whim of fate. The truth is usually somewhere in the middle. As the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, every human needs “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, / Courage to change the things I can, / And wisdom to know the difference.”

My father used to say: “If you can’t do anything about it, don’t worry about it.” This is good advice, but the wisdom of that “if” makes it difficult to implement. How do we know? If we *can* do something about a problem, we *should*, right? And if we don’t, what does that say about us? Don’t we become ineffective, passive, weak? Who wants to be those things?

Most people seem fixated on being maximally effective.

Strength and proactive attitudes are prime virtues of our day, especially because we live in a culture of self-reliance and rugged individualism. Nothing, these people believe, could be worse than being passive in the face of hardship. But consider the flip side. Can you keep the rain from falling? What sense does it make to apply superglue to a broken bone? Can we force winter to go away and speed up the arrival of spring?

Not that we don't try. I remember, many years ago, waiting 30 seconds for a website to load. Now if it's not up in five seconds, I click that reload button because obviously *something has gone wrong, and I can fix it* by hitting that button again. Same with the elevator door-close button, or the button on the crosswalk. (The elevator is an interesting situation: In most cases, they are "placebo buttons" which do nothing. The Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 requires elevator doors to stay open long enough for folks with crutches or wheelchairs to move through.) In the 21st century, most people need to work on the "accept the things I cannot change" part of the equation.

Here's the trick: The more you learn to accept the things you cannot control, the more calm and level-headed you will be when you need to take action. Lots of people get this twisted; they think that if they stay tense and coiled, they'll be ready to strike at a moment's notice. Mostly, though, they get irritable and frustrated, and they make life more difficult for the people around them. Even if their extreme vigilance helps them react decisively to an extra 10% of problems, how many other problems do they create by ignoring the subtler needs of their friends and family? If I'm always ready to fight people who look at me wrong, how many positive encounters am I eliminating before they even appear?

As with all things, the key is balance. Smart people know how to "code-switch": speak and act in the best way for each situation. As Langston Hughes said in his poem "Motto": "I play it cool / I dig all jive / That's the reason / I stay alive / My motto / As I live and learn / Is dig and be dug in return". As a teacher, I have to be firm and serious with one group of students, and then — just ten minutes later —

lighthearted and playful with another. I have to be professional and formal with the administrators in my school, but casual and humorous with my wife. These changes take effort, and sometimes they're difficult. But accepting the inevitability of constant change is a good place to start, because it will help you stay mentally flexible.

And here's the crazy part: Sometimes we can't make the change, because we try to step into the same river over and over.

Step Into A Different River: The Stories You Tell Yourself

One of the most appealing myths of life is the story of the unchanging self. We like to think we're the exact same as we were in the past. Given all the chaos and change around us, it's comforting to think that at least we are stable and constant. If we accept the inevitability of change within us, it's common to ascribe it to constant growth — we get better all the time. Depressed or self-loathing individuals tend to do the opposite; they believe they can't do anything right, and they are getting worse all the time. But our lives are much more complicated than any of these simple stories.

We might break it down more honestly and realize that

we have good and bad days. When I have a good day, I feel like the king of the world who does nothing wrong. When I have a bad day, I feel like a total bonehead who can't do anything right. But even these are massive oversimplifications. In each case, it's just a story that I tell myself. I'll goof something up on my best days, and do something well on the worst. That's just how life is. In 1961, after he lost his wife to cancer, CS Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed*:

One never meets just Cancer, or War, or Unhappiness (or Happiness). One only meets each hour or moment that comes. All manner of ups and downs. Many bad spots in our best times, many good ones in our worst.

As The Dude says in the Coen Brothers' 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*: "Strikes and gutters. Ups and downs."

Accepting this constant ebb and flow can be exhausting. Therefore we search for stories that will make sense of the chaos. We tell ourselves tales to provide an illusion of consistency. These stories offer a comforting narrative arc: "I may be having trouble now, but soon my luck will turn and I'll be on the road to success."

In basketball, a player doing well might be described as having “hot hands”. He’s sinking baskets, so pass the ball to him. But a series of studies from 1985 suggest that “hot hands” is a myth. It’s a comforting story, especially if we’re playing the game. Who wants to think: “My teammate is having a statistically significant rate of success that may or may not continue, given the thousand stochastic factors that go into every attempt to score”? It’s much easier to think: “She’s on a roll!”

And the opposite is also true. Anger — even self-loathing — is actually comforting, *because it fits the narrative*. It’s easy to think: “I’m terrible at this game and I’ll never get better.” It’s more difficult to think: “I’m terrible at this game right now, but with hard work and determination, I can get better over time.” As a teacher, I see every day how frustrating it is for students to try something new and fail. By the time they reach high school, some students realize it’s easier to give up right away than experience the frustrations of defeat. As Homer Simpson told his kids in Episode 1F16 (“Burns’ Heir”): “You tried your best and you failed

miserably. The lesson is: Never try.”

The same is true of sadness, and self-loathing, and other negative emotions. We cling to these sensations because they're better than having no framework for our lives. It's easier to believe in a negative story than sort through the complicated reality, which is a mix of positive and negative.

The magic of mindfulness is that it gives us the freedom to step into a new river whenever we need to. Clinging to a particular story is an exercise in self-delusion. Once we accept the inevitability of change, letting go of anger becomes much easier. Maybe I'm on a losing streak right now, but this too shall pass. Of course it works the other way, too — when I win over and over, I have to be ready for the moment when I lose again. Because of course at some point, I will. This way of thinking breeds humility when we lose and gratitude when we win.

At the same time, there is value in a positive mindset. We can gain real benefits from believing in ourselves, and pumping ourselves up before a test, game, contest, or job

interview. The paradox is that we must accept the artificial nature of these stories. They are helpful fictions.

It's also true that skill is a real thing: We get better at the things we do, so long as we practice and learn from our mistakes. And yet the story of our improvement is never simple or straightforward. We might spend months thinking that we're getting better, only to realize later that we've made no progress at all. Or, conversely, we might feel as though we're merely treading water — or moving backward — when in fact we're moving toward the goal without realizing it.

Whether related to competition, art, talents, school, work, or relationships, this process of oversimplification is appealing but self-defeating. A skillful mindset accepts the complexity of life and allows a present condition to be just that: the condition of the present, which will — sooner or later — give way to a different condition. We might tell a sensible narrative later, when we have time to look back with honest complexity. But that's different from clinging to a story about our selves in the present.

You are a complicated individual who is always changing. Therefore, do yourself a favor. The next time you feel frustrated, or angry, or sad, or impatient, or envious, or full of yourself, or humorless, or joyless, stop and say to yourself: "Time to step into a different river."

The Trouble with Self-Definition

Because you are always changing, knowing yourself can be difficult. (Then there's the whole question of "Who is it that's trying to understand your self", but that's a different conversation. Sort of.) Yet knowledge of self is one of the most important journeys a human can take. Look at the river you are right now. What kind of water is in it? What stuff is missing, and why? What kind of healthy water would you like to add? What kind of toxic water would you like to get rid of?

Many people weave intricate tapestries of delusion to hide their true selves from themselves. They tell fanciful stories about who they would be under ideal conditions; or who they *probably* are, deep down. Other folks sidestep the

question entirely, secure in the belief that their surface identity is close enough. (It's not.)

In Chapter 5 of Lewis Carroll's classic 1865 novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice comes upon a hookah-smoking caterpillar who challenges her on a deep level. "Who are you?" he asks, a question that is simple on the surface but boiling with complexity. When most people are asked this question, they give a name or a job title. These are clues to our identities; they are parts. By no means are they complete responses.

Alice doesn't bother with those stumbles; she tries total honesty: "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present — at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." The caterpillar derides her confusion for a bit, and again asks: "Who are you?" Alice retorts: "I think you ought to tell me who YOU are, first."

"Why?" asks the caterpillar, and the poor girl cannot respond. She is stumped.

Alice's dilemma reflects the difficulty every person has

understanding their true self, in the midst of constant change. Of course, most of us aren't "always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits". Nevertheless, we are always changing. Grasping our true selves, therefore, is like reading the label of a record while it's being played.

In desperation, Alice tries to gain some understanding of her self by defining herself over and against someone else — in this case, the caterpillar. Again, this is a common trap of human self-image. We seek categories and foils because it's easy to create a self as "not-other". If you've never broken the law (or never been caught, at least), you can pride yourself on not being a criminal. If you were born in the United States, you can think of yourself as being a US citizen, not a foreigner. People who are well-off give thanks that they are not among the poor.

While legal status, nationality, and class are elements of each person's identity, they are not the only elements, or even primary elements, of who we really are. Think of it this way: Would Alice be the same person if she had never met

the caterpillar? Well, yes and no. (Mostly yes.) The caterpillar changes her, but he does not define her. Therefore she is foolish for trying to understand herself by demanding that he identify himself. You are who you are, regardless of who the person is sitting next to you.

Society changes us, but it does not define us deep down where it matters most. This is why Dave Pelzer can survive the wretched abuse he endured as a child and emerge as a kind, compassionate person. It's no surprise that many people follow Henry David Thoreau's example of using nature as a refuge for self-discovery. Sometimes we have to get away from other people to discover our true selves.

For some of us, this process is involuntary. We have trouble making friends as young people, so we're forced to confront our selves at an early age. Paradoxically, this can make us stronger adults. Those of us who must dig through the fake layers early in life and unearth our true selves can create a stable foundation for future turmoil. (At least I did.) Of course that's not much solace, I know, for a frustrated and isolated teenager.

Society's impact on us is so powerful that many people allow themselves to be changed in order to gain acceptance. We keep quiet when we should speak up. We wear things that aren't comfortable. We "go along to get along". Often this is innocuous, but sometimes it's dangerous to ourselves or others. The more time you spend being someone you're not, the harder your life will be when you decide to shed the masks and costumes. This is a struggle many LGBTQ people are familiar with, and it's a central theme in Jordan Peele's 2017 social thriller movie *Get Out*. And there's a tricky shadowland between code-switching and lying to yourself.

The character Charlie Willoughby offers some help in Richard Linklater's 2016 movie *Everybody Wants Some!!*. Discussing their alienation from the rest of the team with a fellow pitcher, he explains: "We're weird, man! We're different! And the trick is, you can't fight it. You gotta accept it. Just be weird, you know? And when you do that, you bring who you are, never who they want. And that, my friend, is when it gets fun." Of course doing this will make

some people look at you differently. You may be mocked or ridiculed. In the end, you must decide which is more important to you: Being accepted by society, or being true to yourself.

People are Complicated: How Compassion Flows from Mindfulness

The biggest oversimplified story we tell is one of “good people” and “bad people”. It’s a comforting concept, because we put ourselves immediately into the “good people” category. Some of us consider people of different ideological backgrounds, or religious faiths, or geographical locations, to be “bad people”.

There may be a few humans who are pure good, and some who are pure evil. But for 99% of humanity, things are much more complicated. Therefore the story concept of good vs. bad people is silly at best and dangerous at worst.

I used to teach in a school where one teacher spoke constantly of “good kids” and “bad kids”. She believed that

the “bad kids” were incapable of working hard or learning the material. But each year I spend as a teacher, I become more convinced that there are no “good kids” and “bad kids”. Every student is a mixture of both. Some kids are belligerent and obstinate, sometimes for good reasons and sometimes not.

Of course, most teachers who speak of “good” and “bad” kids will, when pressed, explain that they honor the potential in every student, and there’s no doubt that a shorthand can be helpful. “Timmy is a jerk” is simpler and more succinct than “Timmy exhibits regressive behaviors that are counter-productive for our classroom environs, and yet I believe that his beautiful soul can be reached soon, if we can convince him to step into a different river.” When teachers have only 24 minutes to eat lunch, conversational shortcuts make perfect sense. But we should still avoid such simplistic thinking, because it tends to bleed into our “real” mindsets. The more a teacher thinks of students as “good” and “bad”, even with a footnote containing those deeper, more complex, sentiments, the more dominant that binary

will become in the mind. The teacher who oversimplifies students in this way will — perhaps without realizing it — be kinder to the “good” kids and less patient with the “bad” kids, regardless of context. The ultimate irony, of course, is that the so-called “bad” kids need our compassion and patience the most.

I am not naive in discussing all of this. Some kids will *never* open up to a teacher, and some kids purposely try to make life difficult for everybody else in the room. (I had a student once who told me that was his purpose in my classroom.) But that doesn't make them bad people. It just means they're not dealing with their problems in a healthy way. The same is true of all — or nearly all — people who do bad things.

The biggest danger in thinking of the world in oversimplified terms is that it allows us to disregard the needs and suffering of those we put into the category of “other”. The more different we feel from *those* people, the easier it is to convince ourselves that their pain is less important or less real. But as the Italian writer Cesare

Pavese wrote in his journal (later published as *This Business of Living*): “You cannot insult a man more atrociously than by refusing to believe he is suffering.”

Mindfulness can help us avoid this trap. Compassion flows from mindfulness, because appreciating each moment breeds a sense of satisfaction that helps us think clearly. When you can recognize thoughts and mind states that arise within you without judging them, you can learn to see yourself as you really are. Eventually you can do the same for other people.

Mindful people accept the reality of their lives as complex and multifaceted. They find ways to let go of the yearning for control over everything, to ease the desire to force the world into their own narratives. They are able to forgive themselves, and find ways to become better.

Being compassionate toward other people requires the same letting go, but it’s difficult. We want our friends to love what we love. We want strangers in traffic to understand that we’re in a hurry. We want other people to behave in specific ways. We tend to focus on the worst things “bad”

people have done, and the best things “good” people have done. We ignore the good actions of “bad” people, and vice versa.

Once you accept the deeply complex nature of other people, you can forgive their shortcomings and acknowledge the reality of their suffering. This is why the 17th century Japanese teacher Bakei Yōtaku said: “The true human ideal is to show kindness to those who are foolish, and help those who are evil.” When you regard people as they really are, you will realize that cruel or foolish behavior is almost always motivated by unhealed wounds or trauma. You need not abandon your own need for protection and respect, but you can let go of the petty squabbles and power struggles so common to our social worlds.

Of course, power struggles sometimes make the question of motivations irrelevant. It doesn't matter to me whether Adolf Hitler was a good person deep down. He was trying to exterminate my Jewish ancestors, and had to be stopped. Accepting the complexity of human motivations doesn't change the fact that at certain points, some people

will be on the other side of the barricades. It can be tough to balance the humanity of other people with this occasional situational opposition.

But fighting with compassion is not a contradiction in terms. As a believer in the power of nonviolent action to change people, I always hope I can reason with enemy mindsets. I try to resist the temptation to think of my ideological opponents as “the enemy”, because that’s a quick path to oversimplification and demonization. I have adjusted some of my views over the years, thanks to different perspectives and new information. I strongly believe other people can do the same. Mindfulness can help us remember our shared humanity, even when great distance separates us. (That distance can be political, social, cultural, or physical.)

Mindfulness can also help you communicate clearly. You can reflect on your methods of communication, and figure out ways of speaking and writing that are more effective. There is no compassion without real listening, and no one listens well while multitasking.

Your biggest enemy here is your ego. The more priority

you give to your pride and need for attention, the less consideration you will give the needs of others. One reason many people have trouble listening is because we often devote more attention to thinking (and planning our reactions) than hearing the words being said by other people.

Of course it works the other way, too. Both patterns are cyclical. The more effort you devote to appreciating other people and honoring their humanity, the less noise your ego will make. As the saying goes, the best way to do something nice for yourself is to do something nice for somebody else.

The trick is to do the right things in the right ways, and for the right reasons. (If no one ever says “Thank you”, will you still do it?) We must recognize, too, that not everybody sees an action in the same way. I remember reading a story from a homeless man selling newspapers. A woman on the subway gave him a dollar but refused the paper he was selling (in which he had written an article). She thought she was being nice, but he didn’t want charity. He was furious

when she walked away, and her ego kept her from understanding how her supposedly kind act caused more anger than joy.

As with all matters related to mindfulness, your mileage may vary. I have noticed a definite increase in my own compassion during the years I have practiced mindful living, and others have told me the same thing about their practice. But it's not a silver bullet, and this cultivation of compassion takes time. Be patient and be kind to yourself.

The Honor Puzzle: Nobody Wants to Be a Sucker

Another big mistake people make when considering their rivers is convincing themselves that nothing is more important than to avoid being duped. Many people think the whole world is “out to get them”, and they have to do whatever is necessary to avoid being a sucker. Of course there are charlatans and hustlers around every corner. But it’s easy to fudge the balance and let suspicion take over your life — which easily turns to hostility. Which can easily ruin friendships and relationships. What might have started as a right-minded intention to protect loved ones from harm can actually slam a wall between you and them. More to the point, it can turn you into a sour, nasty person.

The British TV game show *Golden Balls* is a good

example. (The podcast *Radiolab* told a fascinating story about it in 2014.) In the final segment of each program, two players engaged in a dialogue to figure out what to do with a cash jackpot. Each player received a ball marked “split” and one marked “steal”. If both players played the “split” balls, they shared the jackpot. If both played the “steal” balls, neither player got anything. If one played “split” while one played “steal”, the “stealer” got all the money and the “splitter” got nothing. (This is a version of a classic philosophical puzzle known as The Prisoner’s Dilemma.) Players would talk beforehand, each promising that they would play the “split” ball and explaining the importance of honor. They often spoke about being “a good person”.

But then, once the played balls were revealed, someone usually played the “steal” ball. Why? Because they didn’t want to risk being a sucker. If they were naive and played “split” while the other person played “steal”, they got nothing. Therefore if they played “split”, the worst outcome was that neither person got anything. “I might lose out, but so will the other person.” Nobody wants to be a sucker.

What would our world look like if we showed the same concern about treating people like suckers? What would your life look like if — every time you were tempted to act out of fear for being a sucker — you recognized that thought pattern and paused to think twice? How often would you act differently?

Does it bother you to take advantage of other people? For many folks, it does not. It's a cruel world, they think, so why shouldn't I exploit a situation, even if it hurts someone else? Take video games. Some people will exploit glitches or use sketchy strategies to give themselves an edge. Is this behavior against the rules? Sometimes. Are they likely to get caught? Not really. Is it dishonorable? Absolutely.

This conflict is at the heart of many samurai movies. (My favorite is Jim Jarmusch's 1999 film *Ghost Dog*.) The hero tries to fight with honor, while the bad guy uses dishonorable tactics to gain an edge. Will he sink to their level, or somehow find a way to persevere? Or will he experience death before dishonor?

Honor is a strange concept in 2017. Who cares about

honor anymore? In a world where so many people lie, cheat, and steal, it's bizarre to hear someone talk about living honestly and treating people with respect. Most people think of honor as some naive concept from a bygone age.

In the 11th episode of the fourth season of the cartoon show *Doug* ("Doug's in the Money"), the main character discovers an envelope full of money. He finds the owner and returns it, while enduring endless mockery for doing the right thing. His friend Skeeter offers a lesson in honorable individuality when Doug asks: "Do you think I'm weird?" "Yeah," Skeeter says, putting a straw in his milk. "But who says there's anything wrong with being weird?" He then drinks the milk through his nose.

Like Doug, I've been ridiculed for trying to live with honor. Nevertheless, I persist. As the character Hopha says in the 1998 movie *Slam*: "We start off fighting, we' gonna go out fighting. But *how* we fight *is* the fight." Again, it's a question of what is important to you: Being like everybody else, or doing the right thing? Especially if you're sure no one else will find out, why not take the candy from the

baby? Most of my students believe that cheating is okay, so long as you don't get caught.

I must confess that I used to think this way, too. I had been trained to make grades my top priority, and while the fear of getting punished prevented me from cheating in big ways, I once received an A for an essay I wrote about Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, despite the fact that I never read the book. I simply listened to what other people said, threw in a bunch of academic jargon, and babbled my way through. My students today insist that it wasn't really cheating, but I do consider it an act of intellectual dishonesty. I was lying to my teacher. Today I regret writing that essay, and I use it as an example of how not to think or act. I realize that the school system in which I was raised shares the blame, since it bred such a fanatical fixation on scores. But this, really, is no excuse. We are each responsible for our choices, regardless of the circumstances that encourage us this way or that.

Besides, I believe that we reap what we sow. In 1972 James Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street*: "People pay

for what they do, and still more for what they have allowed themselves to become, and they pay for it, very simply, by the lives they lead." Those who live lives of dishonor, cheating people around them, tend to be miserable. The American anarchist writer Elbert Hubbard agrees, writing once in his notebook: "If you err it is not for me to punish you. We are punished by our sins, not for them."

I experienced a startling example of exactly this point while writing this book. Recently while riding my bike, another cyclist zoomed past me and came to a stop at the red light I was approaching. This guy was a hardcore rider: skin-tight suit, water pouch on the back, fancy professional bike. He maneuvered himself in front of me, confident that he would leave me in the dust as soon as the light changed. How rude is that? What kind of jerk assumes he deserves to get ahead of me, and cut me off?

I'll show him! When the light changed, I let him take off and then set myself to passing him. I pushed myself hard to keep pace and find a spot to race around him. My legs started to hurt and my anger kept rising as he got further

and further ahead. Catching him was a lost cause, but I couldn't let it go. It's the principle of the thing, right? There's *principalities* involved!

After five blocks, however, I realized the stupidity of my mindset. No longer was I having a pleasant ride home on a lovely summer afternoon, enjoying jazzy hip-hop in my headbuds. Suddenly I was in a futile playground battle against somebody I never met — and would never see again — for a prize that did not matter even a little bit. Jazzy hip-hop was now the wrong soundtrack. I should have been listening to some caustic death metal. I had allowed this person to transform my entire experience for five blocks. How foolish for me to give him that power!

When I realized the folly of this thinking, I stopped pedalling and smiled as he vanished into the distance. Was he a jerk? Maybe. He did a jerky thing. I could have said something, but there wasn't much time, and it was noisy, and what would it have achieved? Once I accepted that the only injury was a minor slight to my ego, I could let go of my anger. I took a deep breath and restarted my pleasant ride

home on a lovely summer afternoon, enjoying jazzy hip-hop in my headbuds.

Some folks might look at this situation and say: “Eric is a chump. He let that other guy walk all over him. That makes him a feeble, weak child.” But I refuse to let such toxic people define me or my choices. I know where I find meaning and strength, and it has nothing to do with beating other people in bicycle races. If other people think less of me, fine. I enjoy the peace of mind I can acquire by letting go of such nonsense.

Coming to a real knowledge of self — and becoming the people we want to be — can be a lonely process. Those of us who sell compassion and honor won’t get as many buyers as those who sell fear and conflict. There is, however, a material gain to be found: When you live an honorable life and show compassion toward others, the relationships you develop will be more authentic and rewarding. You will eventually connect with other honorable, compassionate people. And that, my friend, is when it gets fun.

A Bell

Take three deep breaths.

Do it right now, before you do anything else.

Boredom Is a Gift. Stop Running from It.

Although boredom can feel like torture, it's actually a gift. For most of human history, people have been so busy hunting for food, or gathering it, or working in the fields, or digging in mines, or laboring in factories, that they didn't have a chance to get bored. Right now there are billions of people all over the world who wish they had the leisure time that brings boredom into our minds.

The problem in the 21st century is that we believe — as the music group EBN once said — “entertainment has become a necessity”. We deserve to be amused every minute of every day, and the second the entertainment stops, we don't know what to do. We whip out the cell phone and race furiously into it. Our compulsion for entertainment makes

our tolerance for boredom smaller all the time; the more you run from boredom, the less you'll be able to deal with it.

Consider the child who never learns to shrug off a minor injury, training himself into a low pain threshold.

Instead, when you start to feel bored, stop. Take three deep breaths. Do a quick internal checkup. Think about something pleasant you recently experienced, and consider something you're looking forward to in the future. Give thanks for some small good things in your life. (Right now I'm thankful for the mug of raspberry tea I'm drinking.)

Finding the right balance can be tricky. I am addicted to my cellphone, as most people are, and especially to podcasts. When I'm walking my dog, or driving to work, I enjoy hearing folks talk about current events or philosophy or video games. This is a minor form of multitasking.

However, sometimes during the summer, when the house is empty, I will listen to podcasts while I shower. I can't bear the thought of not being entertained during those ten minutes. If a podcast ends halfway through my shower, I'm suddenly in a nightmare situation where nobody is

talking. The only sound is the shower water and the thoughts in my head. As Homer Simpson said in Episode AABF07 (“Wild Barts Can’t Be Broken”): “Turn something on — I’m starting to think!”

But this lack of distraction is actually a good thing. It’s useful. I can practice being mindful. I can hear the water. I can feel it on my skin. I can take a few deep breaths. I can give thanks for hot running water and indoor plumbing.

Moments of boredom allow us to hit the pause button in our hectic high-speed lives. Finally! We can ignore all the beeping and the buzzing and the tapping and the swiping and the driving and the walking and the talking and the drama and the chaos. We can take take a moment to just be. The present is a gift.

Besides, ours is an infinitely remarkable world, filled with possibilities for wonder and growth and fun. I haven’t really been bored in years, because there are always a billion things I want to do. In Season 2, Episode 5 of his show *Louie*, the comedian Louis CK tells his daughter:

“I’m bored” is a useless thing to say. I mean, you live in a great, big, vast world that you’ve seen none percent of.

Even the inside of your own mind is endless; it goes on forever, inwardly, do you understand? The fact that you're alive is amazing.

There are books to read and movies to watch and songs to hear and pictures to draw and games to play and skills to learn. Make some art. Dig a hole. Plant a tree. Go somewhere new. Give thanks. Breathe.

The less you run from boredom, the more you'll appreciate moments of idleness, and the more useful they will become.

The Mixed Blessing of Social Media

In his 1992 book *Technopoly*, the American social critic Neil Postman begins by noting: “It is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has a one-sided effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that.” The internet was still in its infancy when that book was published, but I can think of few others that strike with such prophecy at the complicated impact high tech stuff has on our lives. Anyone seeking to strike a balance between life and technology should read it.

With regard to social media like Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging, the blessing is extremely mixed. Everybody knows about the benefits, from political movements to family connection. At the same time, more negative effects are

showing up in research every day. Sherry Turkle has written an important book called *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. (If you're in a rush, check out her 2012 TED Talk "Connected, but alone?") We have more difficulty paying attention. We multitask constantly, even when it's dangerous or rude. Some kids, she reports, are physically unable to stop themselves from checking their phones.

What follows, then, are some reminders and tactics I have used to remain mindful while negotiating my own crazy world of social media. Your mileage may vary.

Social media is powerful, hard to compare with anything that has come before. This power can cause tremendous pain. When the comedian Jen Kirkman blocked me on Twitter — it's a long, boring story; suffice to say I made a dumb joke that didn't work — I was crushed. I can't imagine how tough it must be for teens today who get bullied online. At least when I was a young socially awkward kid, the torment stopped when I got home. My computer was a safe haven, not a portal for more hostility.

And I enjoy the privilege of being a guy; women like actor Leslie Jones and cultural commentator Anita Sarkeesian have endured atrocious harassment through social media.

On the other hand, the power of social media can be glorious and good. I do a video game podcast with two buddies in the United Kingdom. Even though we've never met IRL, our years of online discussions have made us good friends. Interacting with celebrities on social media can also be great fun. In 2014, I made a silly joke on Twitter about the show *Derzk*, created by British comedian Ricky Gervais. When he tweeted a smiley-face emoticon in response, I exploded with euphoria. He didn't just "favorite" my Tweet, do you understand? He took the time to write out a colon and close-parenthesis. It's odd how much delight that gave me, and it says a lot about how social media can warp our perspectives.

Several years later, I can state without reservation that being blocked by Jen Kirkman and getting a smiley-face from Ricky Gervais have affected my life in the exact same way: not much at all. The one made me sad for a month, and

the other made me happy for a week. Those emotions have worn off now, and I have no fear or desire to capture them again. Of course it's nice to get recognition from folks on Facebook or Twitter — especially people you respect, and it's super-nifty to have a positive interaction with someone famous you'll never meet in real life — but those platforms can quickly become a kind of game, where everybody strives to out-clever each other with wordplay, insults, and memes. The make-believe points we earn (sometimes called “egoboo”, a great little word which fits perfectly into a mindset of mindfulness) are just as meaningless as my high score in *Galaga* at the 2017 Midwest Gaming Classic.

Your digital life is just one small part of who you are. If someone posts a toxic comment on an Instagram photo, that hurts. It's foolish to pretend it doesn't. But how big of a deal is it, really? It's just one obnoxious person lashing out, probably because they are unhappy about something that has nothing to do with you. It's different when it becomes bullying or harassment — confronting an army of haters is tough to do alone. But when it's small-scale, we all have the

power to step back and keep jerks from controlling our lives.

As always, the highs and lows of social media cannot be separated. If you measure your happiness according to how many likes and comments and retweets you get, then you will suffer more if reality doesn't match your expectations.

One useful tactic here is to turn off notifications for everything except direct communication. Facebook likes to make your phone jingle every time somebody likes your status update. Twitter will chirp at you every time you get a "favorite". But these constant notifications will do two things to your mind. First, they will train you to visit those sites every chance you get, to learn more about what the beep or buzz was hinting at. Just as Pavlov's dog drooled when it heard the bell, your mind will be drawn obsessively toward the app or website. This can assault your ability to pay attention and control how your mind works.

Secondly, and perhaps more painfully, the silence that passes without any such notification is a form of negative feedback that will eat away at you. Every second that goes by is the world telling you: "Hey! Nobody thinks you're

interesting or fun or funny.” Who needs that?

Instead, allow your phone to buzz or jingle only when someone sends you a text, or direct message. You’ll still get the important stuff, and everything else can wait. That way, when you do visit Facebook — after class, or in the evening, when you can give it your full attention — you’ll have a bunch of notifications waiting for you. (Hopefully.) Once you decide when and where to dip in the pool of social media, you will control it, instead of letting it control you.

Another problem social media causes is the sense of FOMO: “Fear Of Missing Out”. When we see other folks posting about good times, parties, vacations, and excitement, it’s easy to feel like our lives are less enjoyable. In fact, a 2014 article in the *New York Times* cites a research study on the subject:

The authors of a University of Michigan study speculate that what drives that outcome is social comparison. Other people post flattering photographs and funny comments while your own life just feels so dull.

In my own life, I’ve come to realize that this desire to be somewhere else is universal. When I’m at home playing

video games, part of me wonders: “What if I were having tea with a friend?” When I’m having tea with a friend, part of me wonders: “What if I were writing?” When I’m writing, part of me wonders: “What if I were playing video games?”

Everything we do has pluses and minuses, and our minds naturally focus on the negative of now, compared to the positive of then. Mindfulness, therefore, can help us deal with the FOMO nonsense, by highlighting the positive of here and now. With practice, it gets easier to let go of the “what if” and “who else”. Then I can enjoy the tea *and* my friend more fully. I can put in two full hours of writing without letting my attention drift to video games or other things.

The other thing to keep in mind with social media is a similarity to advertising. In commercials, the actors and models aren’t really doing the things they appear to be doing. That family isn’t actually having a dance party on a camping trip. They’re not even a family! It’s a bunch of actors *pretending* to have a dance party in order to sell SUVs. Everything in advertising is designed to be aspirational; it’s a

perfect image that you're supposed to yearn for. If you aspire to be like the cool dude in the shoes, or the hot lady in the swimsuit, then you're more likely to buy the shoes or the swimsuit.

In a way, we're all doing something similar with social media. If the party's really so much fun, then why stop to take a picture? Tell me you've never smiled in a photo when you weren't actually happy. Some people arrange their food differently before posting a snapshot of their dessert on Instagram. We crop out silly hand gestures and post only those photos that hide our flabby bodies. (Yes, I've done both of those things.) Social media offers us a keyhole into the rooms of other people's lives, and there's lots of stuff we can't see. We're advertising the best bits of our lives in the hope of collecting some egoboo.

Therefore, when you find yourself staring wistfully at an advertisement or social media feed, and you feel low because your life seems dull or pitiful by comparison, say the word "aspirational" out loud. It's a good way to remind yourself that you're not seeing real life. Cool people partying

on the beach? Aspirational. Exciting road trips to exotic places? Aspirational. Talking puppies playing in the sprinkler? Aspirational. Say it with a flourish, like a spirit on your shoulder reminding you of an important secret.

Then, if you want to party on the beach for real, round up some friends and make it happen. Go to an exotic location in the real world. Play with some puppies in the sprinkler. Notice how different the actual experience is from the aspirational advertisement.

A Dispatch from the Ego War

In the first *MindWipe* book, I included a chapter called “The Little Hater and the Swollen Head: Confronting the Ego”. At the end, I wrote: “The ego is a more complex monster than I can really help you with.” In the year since I wrote those words, I’ve been fighting with my ego a lot, and I’ve got some reflections to share. (Of course it’s my ego that’s telling me anybody wants to read about this stuff. It’s a neverending rabbit hole.) I don’t feel qualified to comment on the human ego in general; I can only reflect on my own struggles, and I hope these reflections can help other people.

The ego tells us all sorts of stories, and we must be deeply suspicious of them. The ego’s stories will convince us to avoid self-improvement and prevent us from stepping into

new rivers. The ego wants you to believe that you are always the same river, with the same water all the time. Your ego wants to sell you a simple story into which you can fit all the negative or positive stuff that shows up in your life. Your ego tells bedtime stories designed to put your real self to sleep.

My ego has had quite a year. It's been gorged with success. Two of my poems were published in a local compilation, and an article I wrote was recently accepted by the *English Journal*, a prestigious publication from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This has given me a huge boost of confidence, affirming as it does that the literary world accepts the validity of my work.

This is not a small matter: Every person who writes seriously believes their work is decent. We need confirmation from other sources to help us figure out if we're correct, or merely trying to convince ourselves of a fantasy. When Mr. Burns calls him a geek in Simpsons episode 1F16 ("Burns' Heir"), Milhouse replies: "But my mom says I'm cool." No writer — no person, really — wants to labor under

this sort of delusion.

My wife and I recently celebrated our 10th anniversary. This was also a boon to my ego, for obvious reasons. Being in such an incredible, satisfying, stable relationship is a profound source of strength and calm in my head.

The publication of the first *MindWipe* book has itself swelled my ego. (How ironic that my ego is boosted by a book attacking the ego and offering to help people deal with it.) I hosted a launch party attended by friends and former students. I sold many copies, and got excellent feedback. Of course I self-published the book, and haven't done any real advertising for it. Therefore I'm not really paying attention to sales numbers or marketing strategies. I just want to get the book out there, in case those tips can help others.

But my ego has been bruised in the past year, too. I have been trying without success for three years to get two other books published. The steady stream of impersonal rejection emails — and total silence in many cases, which also means “no” — is a painful way to start my day. If the

approval of the NCTE confirms that I kinda know what I'm doing as a writer, the constant rejections feel like a confirmation of the opposite.

Other creative endeavors have met with similar indifference. I applied to participate in a local exhibition pairing writers with artists to design work for city buses, but I was rejected. I've posted some music online and gotten only a few mild reactions. I've shared poetry in various forms and heard lukewarm feedback. These experiences haven't been terrible, but neither have they felt like a fair reward for all the creative effort I've put in.

Even in the realm of teaching mindfulness, I've struggled with ego issues. I run a workshop at my school which, in the last year, has generated zero student interest. I also run a companion workshop in the community, and attendance is sparse there as well. I'm delighted to work with the folks who show up, but the little hater says: "If you were better at this, you'd have lots more people here." On the other hand, I recently led a workshop for teachers about "Mindfulness and the Growth Mindset" which was well-

attended and well-received.

Again, the irony here is not lost on me. I am trying to ignore the part of my brain that says I should measure my self-worth by how many people come to learn about mindfulness from me. (Especially when plenty of students have taken copies of my book, which suggests they're interested.) But no one does meaningful work without feeling deeply invested in the outcome. When I teach an English class well, I feel as though I'm serving my purpose on the planet, and my ego swells with every kind note from a former student thanking me for the course.

With regard to mindfulness education, the practice is part of the cure. When I am mindful, I can remind myself that it's really not about me. The real frustration comes when I see so many young people suffering from depression and anxiety, but no one willing to give our meetings a try.

I have to accept that my life is filled with blessings, and my ego's suffering is merely the result of reality not meeting my expectations. I expect to have my brilliant writing accepted right away by a swarm of agents and publishers,

stabbing each other in order to be first to offer me a contract. So when the reality is different — even though it's no different from most other writers trying to get published — I get frustrated and sad. My writing is a deep part of who I am, so when it gets rejected I feel as though I have been rejected. (My life used to be filled with rejection when I was a young man in the dating world. Now that I'm married, I don't get that kind of rejection. Fortunately, publishers and agents are ready to fill the void.)

Mindfulness helps me deal with the suffering caused by my ego. It doesn't help me get published (although the *MindWipe* books might help boost my profile), so the external reality isn't changed. But if I can manage the expectations and accept the complicated nature of the process, I can suffer a little less. The journey will be long and difficult, but if I keep stepping into new rivers, maybe I can be a little happier along the way.

Five Reminders About Happiness

There may be no more elusive concept than human happiness. People around the world get crazy paid promising sure-fire ways to be happy, but many of us feel more alienated and frustrated than ever.

Everybody has good and bad days, and some of us have the blues more than others. It's hard to tell if depression is actually increasing around the world, or if we're just now starting to identify problems that we used to call by other names. Of course pharmaceutical companies offer their own brands of happiness, and they stand to benefit from more clinical diagnoses. On the other hand, some people would not get vital help (even life-saving treatment) without medical attention. So as always, we must

resist oversimplification.

My four decades on the planet have taught me a few things about happiness and sadness — and how they go together. As the 1993 film *Shadowlands* reminds us: “The pain now is part of the happiness then. That’s the deal.” Here, then, are five things I’ve come to understand about what happiness means and where to find it.

#1: External reality does not dictate your internal reality.

If you’re wealthy and successful, you can still be miserable. And poor people can find happiness. As the British rapper Lowkey said in his 2011 song “Too Much”: “You don’t need a fortune to be fortunate.” A student trapped in a class she hates can find ways to be happy despite the restrictions on her movement. When I was stuck in boring classes as a student, I drew comics to have a good time. As an adult, I use cross-stitching to find happiness in moments of downtime.

Of course, it’s hard to be happy when you’re living in poverty. As the Oakland rapper Boots from The Coup said in the 1998 song “20,000 Gun Salute”: “Can’t have inner

peace without having a piece.” We must never accept the possibility of happiness in poverty to make us accept the injustice of poverty in a world of plenty.

But after a certain point, more money does not bring more happiness. In 2010 the economists Angus Deaton and Daniel Kahneman published a study which found that happiness tends to level off after people earn a salary of \$75,000 per year. Many people believe that money will solve their problems, and once they realize they still have problems despite earning a comfortable living, they get desperate.

I have always been comfortable, money-wise. I was raised in an upper-middle-class suburban home with two loving parents, plenty of food, warmth, and stability. Therefore it's been easier for me to find happiness than people who had to watch their parents get divorced. Or go to bed hungry. Or suffer abuse as a child. The river I am is powerfully affected by the environment upstream. If barrels of toxic waste are spilling into my river, the fish in me are going to get sick.

But it's not an all-or-nothing situation. Our external realities influence our states of mind, but they do not totally control them. We must recognize the ways in which our thinking is affected by external realities, but recognize also our own ability to step into new rivers. Some of the most positive, joyful people our world has ever known — Dave Pelzer, Thich Nhat Hanh, Maya Angelou — have endured unbelievable suffering and hardship.

Rejecting the misery other people try to breed in your mind is one of your most powerful weapons in life. The hardest thing about dealing with nasty people is not letting them turn you into one of them. It's not easy, and it's not quick, but I believe we all have the power to release toxicity and turn toward peace of mind. Sometimes we can help others do the same.

Even if you cannot forgive the people who have wronged you (and I urge you to forgive as much as possible), you can let go of the fury and rage before they consume you. Your hatred will not save you. It will only make you bitter and unhappy.

You must decide what kind of person you want to be.

#2: Enjoy the small nuggets of happiness.

Denis Leary was correct when he said in a 1992 comedy show: “Happiness comes in small doses, folks.” A cup of tea can bring happiness. A sunrise or sunset. A joke or interesting story. The smile of a loved one. Seeing a butterfly. A plate of your favorite food. One day of sunshine after a week of rain. We often take these small things for granted, choosing instead to fixate on all the things we don’t have. Some of us think: “Once I have [my dream job / a million dollars / an attractive spouse / a slim physique / a fancy car / etc], I’ll be happy.” In fact, these days when I recognize my mind tilting toward this trap, I make fun of it. When I see an advert for a cool new video game, I’ll say: “I’m gonna buy that game as soon as it comes out. *Then* I’ll be happy.” Mocking the tendency in my own head helps me keep it all in perspective.

Sometimes we search for happiness in thrilling experience, especially when we cling to exciting happy memories. But as CS Lewis wrote in 1952:

It is simply no good trying to keep any thrill: that is the very worst thing you can do. Let the thrill go—let it die away—go on through that period of death into the quieter interest and happiness that follow—and you will find you are living in a world of new thrills all the time.

But if you decide to make thrills your regular diet and try to prolong them artificially, they will all get weaker and weaker, and fewer and fewer, and you will be a bored, disillusioned old man for the rest of your life. It is because so few people understand this that you find many middle-aged men and women maundering about their lost youth, at the very age when new horizons ought to be appearing and new doors opening all round them.

It is much better fun to learn to swim than to go on endlessly (and hopelessly) trying to get back the feeling you had when you first went paddling as a small boy.

I am guilty of violating this tenet all the time. I love the thrill that comes from winning video games, so I play them fanatically. Still, I try to recognize the folly of my addictions, and step away from the games every now and then.

I also suffer from frustration when I can't find a publisher. I yearn for the recognition and, yes, the attention that will likely come with that happy event. But in the meantime, I

focus on the positive impact my self-published work has created: the people who have been helped by *MindWipe*, and the awesome photos of friends around the world reading my collection of stories *This Ain't What You Rung For*.

Mindfulness breeds happiness by teaching us to appreciate the small nuggets of happiness, rather than chasing stuff, or thrills. If you can discover a moment of happiness in a cookie, you have much easier access to it than someone who believes happiness can only come from a \$3,000 Rolex™ watch, or an elaborate skydiving expedition.

See how quickly you can find a small nugget of happiness. You can start by just taking three deep breaths. Sometimes putting the world on pause is a source of happiness all by itself. Drink some water and give thanks for it. Eat a cookie. Watch a funny video on the internet. Look at a picture of someone you love. Listen to a great song. Read a favorite poem. Play a fun game. Look at a pretty flower. Watch the sun set. Watch the traffic go by, and give thanks that you're not in a rush. Send a note to a friend.

#3: Happiness is not the presence of euphoria. It is the absence of suffering.

We never appreciate what we have until it's gone, unless we make a conscious effort to count our blessings in the moment. Consider the characters in dystopian stories who revel in the simple pleasures of real butter (*V for Vendetta*) or lotion (*The Handmaid's Tale*).

Many people think of happiness as something that comes from positive sensations or a rush of joy. They seek out those elevated sensations and — as noted — develop an addiction that blinds them to other forms of happiness. True happiness does not come from those jolts of positivity. It comes when we escape suffering.

The first day of vacation is always the best day. The evening before a three-day weekend brings us such relief and joy because we are free from the stress of school or work. After enduring hunger for a long time, a simple cracker can feel like a grand meal. The first day of spring frees us from the icy harshness of winter.

There is no way to permanently escape suffering, of course, physically or mentally. Some foolish people believe that winning the lottery, or becoming famous, will end their

suffering once and for all. They eventually realize how foolish this mindset is, and wind up with a new pain of failed expectations, along with all the other suffering they must deal with. Happiness is only possible because of suffering, ironically enough. Without the one, we would never be able to appreciate the other.

Mindfulness can help us find happiness when we accept the inevitability of suffering, and then let go of it. We can appreciate the absence of some suffering in this moment, even if we must endure other forms. Once you accept that happiness will not last, you can appreciate it more while it's around.

#4: Do not measure your happiness against the happiness of other people.

It's tempting to think about our happiness — or lack thereof — in comparison with other people. Some people have more tangible things like money, clothing, or friends. Other people have intangible things like talent, confidence, or style. Thinking that your ability to be happy comes from measuring up to someone else's levels is just another trap.

Think about it this way: Suppose you have 100 friends on Facebook. Some of these might be coworkers, some family members, and some distant acquaintances. Perhaps you look at someone with 200 friends, and think: “They must be happier than I am.” How much sense does this make? Maybe they have 150 people on their list who barely even know them. If you have 100 good friends and they have 150 distant friends, who’s in the better situation? Numbers alone never tell us much.

Numerically speaking, somebody on Facebook has the most friends. Imagine thinking: “That’s the happiest person on earth.” What is the quality of those friendships? I can tell you from personal experience that very often the most nurturing, important friendships are the most difficult to create and sustain. I can also tell you with certainty that plenty of people who have all the numerical artifacts of happiness — wealth, fame, etc — suffer from depression and anxiety just like everybody else. Therefore we must avoid the trap of comparison-happiness. We must figure out for ourselves where true happiness lies, and then do the work to

get it.

This is why nature is so important. It's common to look at another person and think: "I wonder what it's like to be that guy. I bet he's happier than me." You can easily invent a scenario (probably without much accuracy) in which he's doing great and you're miserable by comparison. Instead, look at a tree and try this: "I wonder what it's like to be that tree." If nothing else, just enjoy the beauty of nature.

#5: Don't fixate on those above you in the pyramid of happiness.

In the mythical pyramid of human material happiness, you're probably doing okay. If we were to look at physical well-being — food, health care, leisure time, education, money — we could create a pyramid where a few people live at the top and lots of people live on the bottom.

Unfortunately, most of us spend our time looking at those who have more than we do. This is a superb recipe for misery and discontent.

According to the UN Millennium Project, 2.7 billion people live on two dollars a day. Assuming you're not one of

them, your external reality could easily be worse. In a world of 7.4 billion people, that automatically puts you in the top 64% of humanity.

Chances are, you've got lots of other things to be thankful for as well. Loving family members, access to tasty food, transportation options, entertainment of all kinds, education. There are surely people who envy the abundance in your life. This should not make us feel guilty, but we should be thankful for all the great stuff we have, rather than obsessing about those things we don't have.

Naturally, I'm guilty of this misguided thinking. I look at authors on TV or the radio and fume with envy. But when I look at the pyramid of happiness, I remember how much awesomeness I have in my life. How many people — including some of those authors on TV I'm so jelly of — wish they had a stable, joyful relationship like mine? How many people wish they had a job like mine, which brings real satisfaction and sense of purpose? How many people wish they had my awesome good power to make words go good on page? Chances are, you have some stuff other

people want, and they have some stuff you want. Let go of the comparisons, be thankful for what you've got, and work for what you want without clinging to it.

A Bell

Take three deep breaths.

Do it right now, before you do anything else.

This Too Shall Pass (And That's Okay)

Everything is temporary. When I first realized this, as a child, I was devastated. You mean my mom and dad won't be around forever? When I was 16, my dad died and I learned how painful that truth was. A few years later I dove into some philosophies about the transitory nature of all things, and I came to realize that it's okay. (The industrial techno band Cyberaktif gave me an early taste of this philosophy with their 1990 song "Nothing Stays".)

Some people believe there are a few everlasting things: human souls, platonic ideals, the Eighth Dynamic, etc. I'll let you make up your own mind about these things; however you feel, there's no doubt that much of what we love will someday be gone. Friends move away, dishes break, clothes

wear out, stuff gets lost, good times give way to sadness.

When I started writing Wikipedia articles in 2007, I became friends with a remarkable woman named Adrienne. She taught me how the systems worked, where to find reliable sources, and how to provide the necessary depth. She helped me write over a dozen Featured Articles, and once gave me a “Ruby Pen” award for my copyediting work. She was gracious, funny, demanding, and awesome. Then she had an accident while rock climbing and died.

Three days earlier, by pure coincidence, I had found a YouTube clip from the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. He explains how a cloud becomes rain, and although we might still want the cloud to be in the sky, we can be grateful for the continuity of the water as liquid on the ground.

Thus it is with all things. My father lives in me, through me. Adrienne exists in my online work and writing style. My buddy Evan, who passed in 2006, is still in my music collection. He was a superb drummer. The chair I had in college made it into a novel I wrote, so it still exists

somewhere, even if the original is in a landfill somewhere.

And even if things don't live on after they're gone, it's okay that they don't last forever. My lunch today was delicious, but then I finished eating and it was gone. It was lovely while it lasted. College was fun, but then it was time to move on and get a job and start my teaching career. Summer is great, but school will start again soon.

Here's the trick: The more you accept the passing of good things, the easier it will be to recognize the passing of bad things. If you cling to delicious food, you will be disgusted and frustrated by sub-par food. The more you hold on to your precious leisure time, the more you will resent the work you have to do.

Instead, be here now, wherever and whenever that is. Enjoy good things while they happen, and recognize — and accept — the bad.

Then let go.

Let Go of Your Body Ego

I tend to suck in my gut when I'm in public, because I'm ashamed of my belly. I eat too much cheese and chocolate, and I don't exercise enough. That's all there is to it. This summer I'm doing a decent job of eating less and exercising more. But it's a very very slow process. I can't wave a magic wand and go back to my beanpole college physique. (I ate lots of crap back then too, and didn't exercise, ever. My metabolism changed. It happens.) Every time I look at another guy, I think one of two things: "I wish I was skinny like him", or "I'm glad I'm not as fat as *he* is."

This is a terrible way to think, and it's entirely the result of my body ego. Just as we each have a "little hater" (thanks again to Jay Smooth from illdoctrine.com for that concept) filling our heads with negative feedback,

we each have a body ego which screeches at us about how physically atrocious we are.

The body ego isn't concerned with your health. It wants you to compare yourself constantly to people on the street, and advertisements in magazines, and photos on social media, and famous people on TV. The body ego obsesses about gray hair and double chins and male pattern balding and varicose veins. The body ego makes us ashamed of how we look, and makes some of us hate our bodies altogether. The body ego makes food into a minefield, leading some of us to anorexia or bulimia.

The body ego is different from your actual body, because your body is a river just like your mind. You might not be happy with your body right now, but it can and will change. Your body ego seeks to maintain a single image of your body, trapped in one state — either close to the ideal or far from it. But in truth, your body changes every day. When I eat a big meal, my belly grows. When I do sit-ups and eat less, it shrinks.

For some people the body ego does harm through

positive feedback, tricking you into thinking you're better than other people because you're closer to the ideal body. Of course you'll never get there, because those ideal bodies are created with digital editing and plastic surgery and a billion other tricks. And it's all done to sell the false promise of happiness through a better body. Nobody ever sold diet pills to people who are happy with how they look.

This problem is plenty bad for guys, but it's even worse for women. The National Eating Disorder Association reports that 20 million women and 10 million men suffer a serious eating disorder at some point in their lives. The appearance of women has always been judged with special harshness in our patriarchal society, compared to men. Older men are often considered distinguished, and big guys are sometimes called "teddy bears". Middle-aged women are considered "past their prime", and big women are often discussed with disgust, mocked for their undesirability. Older men regularly get roles in movies, while older women are virtually banned from the entertainment industry. Movies and TV shows will often cast an older or fatter man

in a love story with a woman who is much younger or skinnier. These things have a powerful impact on our body egos.

Some parts of our society — and especially the internet — make the problem worse by pretending to show concern for the health of other people. The social website Reddit recently banned a forum called “FatPeopleHate” after its members engaged in a campaign of harassment against overweight people. Many of those users claimed they were trying to highlight how unhealthy it is to be overweight or obese. Elsewhere on the forum, people regularly cheer for those who post before-and-after photos of their weight-loss journey. (This is a common pattern on all social media.) All of this stuff only makes the problem of body ego worse.

There is a vital distinction between health and body ego. Nobody ever judged my moral habits when I was a skinny college student. People joked about my steady diet of Taco Bell™ and Mountain Dew™, but somehow there was an assumption that I took care of myself, because I was slender and lithe. That positive assumption back in the day

was every bit as erroneous, foolish, and cruel as the negative assumptions people make about me today.

Besides, if you really care about my health, then you should also care about my mental health. And I've got news for you: Hating on my body will never help me, ever. Mentally or physically. Shame and hatred and guilt have never helped anybody without causing much more suffering and negative side effects along the way.

If you really care about the health and well-being of other people, you must be compassionate and patient with them. You must understand the daily struggles they experience with regard to the body ego. You must understand that sometimes unhealthy food actually helps us deal with the body ego, even though we realize consciously that exercise is a better weapon.

The truth is that I *am* overweight. I *should* exercise more. But that's my struggle. Let me fight it however I need to. Consider this: If I use fancy words and you don't understand them, am I justified in ridiculing you? "Hey, man, I'm just trying to show you that I care about your

intellectual health. It's so sad how our society tells people that it's okay to not read. Hating on stupid people will encourage them to read more books." See how ridiculous that sounds? Teaching for 17 years has taught me that people change their behavior for lots of different reasons, and it usually only happens when they feel supported and positive. And it takes a long time.

Or consider how obnoxious it would be for me to harass or ridicule people who drive SUVs. I ride my bike as often as I can, and recently invested in an electric car. We're going to install solar panels on our roof soon. Does this give me the right to debase individuals who drive large vehicles? Will that help them see the light or change their ways? Of course not.

I've always had a tough relationship with my body, because it's never been what I want it to be. My body has always been too slow for sports, too awkward for teenage dating, and now too fat for going shirtless in the summertime. I've often thought I'd be perfectly happy if I could put my brain in a robot. I've spent years and years

improving my brain, and I would be much healthier physically if I devoted half as much time to improving my body. Alas, it's just not my thing.

Exercise can help us fight the body ego, but it's a tricky mixed blessing. Working out can help us adjust the water in our physical rivers. Of course when you are addicted as I am to instant messages, fast food, and high-speed internet, accepting the slow results of exercise can be tough. Sometimes exercise feels like a leap of faith, and it's easy to think about all the time and trouble I could save if I didn't bother. But I know that it's good to be healthy. The trick, as always, is to do the right thing, for the right reasons, when the wrong thing is so much easier.

Fortunately, too, exercise releases endorphins in our brains, which can help us feel better in the short term. This is why doctors often recommend physical exercise to those who suffer from depression or anxiety. Just like mindful meditation, exercise gives us some control over our lives. We can fight the flab and build muscle when we exercise, but we've got to make sure we're doing it for the right reasons.

Just as we should not read books to feel superior to others, we should not exercise to appease the body ego.

In an ideal world, I would fight the body ego by saying “To hell what other people think” and wearing whatever I want. But it’s not that simple. Maybe it is for other people, but not me. My body ego is a powerful beast, and it never goes away.

As with the mind ego, you gotta just let it go. When I find myself sucking in my gut, I let my breath out and try to step into a different river. I remind myself that people probably aren’t judging my appearance, because they’re usually preoccupied with their own lives. I remind myself that the surface is less important than substance.

We’ve all got to find ways to love ourselves, even as we push ourselves to become better. We all deserve to be comfortable in our own skin, and confident enough to step into new rivers. We should all read books, exercise regularly, eat healthy, and make smart choices. But the first step in loving the real you — physically and mentally — is letting go of the ego.

Resist the Abyss: The Meaning of Life Explained*

*Well, my life.

The epic poem *Beowulf* is a classic of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, told orally for years before being written down around 1000 CE. It celebrates the victories of the hero Beowulf over the monster Grendel, his monstrous mother, and a dragon. In 1971 the American author John Gardner published *Grendel*, which tells the same story from the monster's point of view. Gardner's fan-fiction takes on a tremendous variety of philosophical challenges.

When I taught AP English several years ago, I got to dig through these challenges with my students. To my

surprise, one student agreed with the dragon's nihilistic point of view and challenged me to explain why the dragon is wrong. How, he asked, can I possibly believe that meaning exists in a universe as cruel and random as our own? I spent a few days writing the following essay, and in the years since, many people have found it useful. You don't need to know the original poem or Gardner's novel to understand this section, but you should definitely read them at some point, because they are interesting and important.

Monsters and The Abyss

In his 1886 book *Beyond Good and Evil*, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." Let's keep that in mind as we prepare to confront the dragon.

The dragon in *Grendel* personifies hedonistic nihilism — the bleak mindset that says we have nothing worth living for except the mere satisfaction of our own selfish pleasure. He knows all and sees all. (Or so he says.) This, of course, is

"what makes [him] so sick and old and tired". He is forever "unimpressed"; he derides everything around him, especially the "lower minds" trapped in the "Dark Ages", a phrase he himself believes to be meaningless. He barks at Grendel to "BE STILL!", even when the poor "monster" merely asks why guarding gold is a worthwhile goal.

Worst of all, he recognizes Grendel's feeble state of mind and nurtures the despair. His eye becomes Nietzsche's abyss. Early on, Grendel says: "I felt as if I were tumbling down into it—dropping endlessly down through a soundless void. [The dragon] let me fall, down and down toward a black sun and spiders, though he knew I was beginning to die." The spiders on the black sun return at the end of chapter nine, bookending "[a] void boundless as a nether sky". Soon afterward Grendel succumbs, relieved, to the man with "blinding white wings [who] breathes out fire"; it is Beowulf, death manifest in dragon form.

The dragon's rejection of meaning and Grendel's embrace of death are inextricably linked. In his landmark 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus begins with

this: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Whether Grendel actually commits suicide is open for debate, but for now we'll accept "voluntary tumble into death" as evidence enough. Without a clear purpose, or various forms of meaning to which we may align ourselves, a person's existence becomes as capricious as flipping a coin. "I therefore conclude," Camus decides, "that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions".

From his earliest moments of conscious thought, Grendel attacks these questions. Alas, the only person he can ask — aside from the "large old shapes with smouldering eyes" — is his mother. And when he does, "Her fat lips shake. 'Don't ask!' her wiggling claws implore. (She never speaks.)" In true existentialist form, then, Grendel is left alone and adrift in an unfathomable universe, forced to make his own sense of the "meaningful patterns that do not exist". He must ascertain, if he can, what meaning there might be for his continued existence.

His predicament is bad enough, but it's made even worse by the humans he observes. "It was their confidence,

maybe," he explains, "their blissful, swinish ignorance, their bumptious self-satisfaction, and, worst of all, their hope." Nothing is more odious to a person without hope than observing someone who has it.

By the end, it's clear that Grendel has lost all hope, and given up on finding any. This question of hope, then, is key to assessing the value of meaning, and therefore rescuing souls of despair from the nightmare of self-harm and self-obliteration. Because the dragon so gleefully burns hope out of Grendel like an acidic parasite, he is public enemy number one in this matter. While I respect the dragon's macrocosmic perspective, I wage endless war against his cynicism and despair, for the sake of humanity.

Before proceeding, allow me to be clear: This matter is intensely personal for me. I have lost good friends to suicide, and I feel a crushing kinship to those humans of all backgrounds who have traveled to the deadly caverns of nihilism. I've been there, and I have breathed deeply that foul stench. Climbing out is painful and difficult, but it's worth doing. As they say, it gets better.

Phony Observation and Crackpot Theories

Like Holden Caulfield in JD Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Grendel is disgusted by the world around him. Both characters are driven by a passion for truth and authenticity, and find nothing but shallow dishonesty around every corner. The world is "full of phonies", as Caulfield says.

For Grendel the problem is more basic: The world around him is brain-dead, moving without thought like the sun which "spins mindlessly overhead". The ram, the bull, the stars — they are mechanistic, as predictable and autonomic as clocks. Zombies, robots. The same is true about Grendel's mother; she is protective, yes, but driven solely by her instincts. Even the humans, he decides, are viral forms, insects: Hrothgar's warriors are "hornets" who slavishly obey "orders the king has forgotten to cancel".

Most people live in this shallow mechanistic world; they are unable or unwilling to explore the depths of our existential predicament. If we wish to be generous, we might say they are like the deer: they "can make [...] no delicate

distinctions", which becomes "their happiness". Perhaps they are chained in Plato's cave, ignorant to the truth and filled with bliss as a result. Perhaps they have tried wading into the waters of philosophy in the past, but find the torrents too terrifying.

Or perhaps we should quote Henry David Thoreau, who writes in *Walden* that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation". Perhaps their lives are so difficult that digging into Nietzsche's abyss is simply unthinkable. If we wish to be less generous, we can call them cowardly — willfully ignorant of the painful truths around them. Perhaps, like the soma addicts of Huxley's *Brave New World*, they choose a life of fleeting pleasures over the hard work of reality (which torments and tears at John in that text).

Whatever the cause, a huge majority of people live in this mechanical mindset, and they offer no worthwhile discourse to Grendel (or any of us). They are the ones who accuse us of "thinking too much" and tell us constantly to "lighten up". (In a rare moment of ego, I will point out they are the ones who read two paragraphs of this essay and

discard it with a shriek of "TLDR".) They flee from reality with the help of drugs like cannabis, alcohol, television (ironically, sometimes with so-called "reality" television), and soma. Like the deer in *Grendel*, they "see all life without observing it", making no distinction between a child dying slowly of starvation and a blooming flower in the garden.

The rest, Grendel quickly learns, are fanatically attached to "crackpot theories". They throw themselves into spinning webs of "magnificent, golden [...] lies" (referring to poetry), or they fiddle with the "fiction of consent" for "a monopoly in [...] legitimate violence" (as in state politics). They search for "sweet fantasy [in a] blessed soul" (religious devotion), or they dive headfirst into the abyss with a lifelong examination of philosophical minutiae, such as Kant's deontological ethics — whatever those are, and regardless of the fact they could never explain them to a normal person in a million years, much less apply them to any human's life.

The Brotherhood of Crackpot Theories wants to obtain The Truth because they believe it will provide The Answer

to the questions of life, the universe, and everything. Much like the computer in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* insists The Answer is "42". Therefore it is not enough to use such theories for purposes of exploration or dialectic; these theories must become — as Arthur Miller says in *The Crucible* — "the candle that would light the world".

Thus we find Grendel, trapped between a horde of robots on one side and swarms of theory-worshipping crackpots on the other. I know how he feels, because I experienced a deep crisis of despair myself when I reached my early 20s. Having spent years learning about the depths of global human misery, I was stunned to see so many people indifferent to those horrors. Did they not know, or did they not care? Even worse, I began to think I could never have any impact on the world. Which crackpot theory might prevent genocides like the Nazi Holocaust, or the African Slave Trade?

So it's good for Grendel to ask these questions, and — like us — he must find his own meaning, his own answers. As Chinua Achebe writes in his 1987 novel *Anthills of the*

Savannah: "[W]hatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism." Grendel's quest for answers is beautiful.

The great sadness is that he has no one but the dragon with whom to speak.

A Fire-Breathing Scornful Leer

The dragon avoids the mistakes of mindless mechanism. He sees everything and observes it. No shallow brute moving like a robot, he has wrestled with all of Grendel's questions and many others as well. Even better, he recognizes and rejects the crackpot theories of the humans, amused endlessly by their pathetic attempts to impose an absurd order on their stochastic lives. As a result he has become "infinitely weary, sick of Time", jaded and exhausted by the foolish stumblings of "lower minds".

Although he clearly sees Grendel as a lower mind ("Nothing interests you but excitement, violence!" he cries), he offers to reveal the truth "about Time and Space" from his

supposedly omniscient perspective. He runs through a half-hearted litany of points made by philosophers like Lao-Tzu (on connectedness), Ludwig Wittgenstein ("a limited set of various types of things"), Socrates (on frustrating established order), and Baruch Spinoza (on importance and monism). At the end of it, he reaches this edifying conclusion: "Meaningless, however. These jugs and pebbles, everything, these too will go. Poof! Boobies, hemorrhoids, boils, slaver".

The dragon, therefore, is an embodiment of late-20th-century rationalist fundamentalism. There's no point to any of it; we're all doomed. If nuclear war doesn't obliterate us all, then climate change will. If we start terraforming other planets, then religious extremists will find a way to exterminate everyone. And then we'll all be dead, just a cloud of ashes drifting in a cold, indifferent universe.

In this context, the constant echo Grendel hears of "Why not?" makes perfect sense. If there's no point, then why not smash the faces of one's enemies? Why not engage in fraud on Wall Street in order to line one's pockets with

the life savings of elderly people? Why not dump toxic waste into the oceans? Why not live in perfect luxury now, satisfying every hedonistic desire, regardless of how it's done? Why not take "the most criminal acts" and convince the world they are "heroic and meritorious deeds"? Why bother trying to live a good life?

Indeed, when Grendel makes his one furtive attempt to take a moral stance — "Let them find some other 'brute existent', whatever that is. I refuse." — the dragon mocks him with acerbic contempt. "'Do!' he said leering scornfully. 'Do something else, by all means!'" In other words, it's a pitiful game, nothing more than a "challenge", like gathering rare stamps. Or, in the dragon's case, finding gold and sitting on it. His advice is the same as the advice from Grendel's mother: "Don't ask!"

The dragon's attitude is identical to that of The Architect in *The Matrix*. Both characters personify a worldview that pretends to the crown of omniscience. Both claim to know everything and, therefore, declare the actions of their counterparts as meaningless. Like Creon in *Antigone*,

like Macbeth in the Scottish play, like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, like Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World*, the dragon's ego is shuffling constantly to balance a supposed omniscience with a supposed omnipotence. And as with most of those texts, the worst tragedy befalls someone else.

Why the Dragon is Wrong

First of all, the dragon is himself attached (though perhaps not fanatically) to a "crackpot theory" of his own. Sitting on gold is as meaningless as anything else, and yet he clearly cares very much about it: "Never never never touch my things," he cries. Well, why not? The only answer we get is: "BE STILL!"

More to the point: **The dragon is wrong about the meaninglessness of all life because such a claim is an objective assessment, and — according to his own philosophy — there's no value in such statements.** If the dragon is correct (as I believe he is) that "there is no absolute standard of magnitude", then how can one assume to call anything meaningless? Meaningless to whom? Meaningless by what standard? If knowledge is relative,

then how can anyone discuss meaning objectively?

I don't have an answer for Grendel (or anyone else) to the question "Why are we here?" that is objectively true, because I don't believe in an objective truth. (If you do, based on religious or Ayn-Randian doctrine, I respect you and envy you a little. But I disagree with you.) I can't give you *the* truth.

Nevertheless, I have *a* truth, which is at violent odds with the dragon. In the years since my early-20s moral crisis, I have come to find deep meaning in my own existence, and the existence of others. I will share it here, in the hope that it might help others find their way out of the deadly caverns of nihilism.

My truth is this, in the words of Alice Walker:

Resistance is the secret of joy (and meaning). I languished in my youthful cauldron of angst and despair because I didn't yet understand and appreciate the incredible significance of courageous people — working alone and together — who have changed our world for the better. I didn't realize I could be one of those courageous people. I

believed the absolute standard of magnitude was focused squarely on the overpowering potency of evil, and that no force could ever match it (much less overcome it). And like the dragon, I was wrong.

My truth is the story of Harriet Tubman, a black woman born into the apocalyptic horrors of chattel slavery in the United States. As a child she was whipped when the white baby under her care cried, and she was not allowed to spend time with her own mother, who worked in "the big house". Her head was smashed apart when she was a child by a white man. Still she endured, and found the incredible courage to escape her bonds. However, she quickly realized she was not free while her family was still enslaved. So she found even more incredible courage and returned thirteen times to rescue 70 other slaves. (For more information I recommend the Featured Article on Wikipedia about Ms. Tubman.)

My truth is the story of Treblinka, a death camp established by the Nazis and dedicated to the eradication of Jewish people from the Earth. Instead, a group of Jewish

prisoners revolted, set the camp ablaze, killed the guards, and secured escape for a lucky few. (Fittingly for this discussion, the first thing they had to do was prevent their fellow prisoners from committing suicide, which was common, since the time and manner of their death was the one thing prisoners could control. For more information I recommend Jean-François Steiner's 1967 book *Treblinka*.)

My truth is the story of East Timor, which for 25 years suffered under a murderous occupation by the armed forces of Indonesia — supported economically, diplomatically, and militarily by the United States. I have been fortunate to be involved personally in that nation's victorious struggle for peace and self-determination. The strength I have drawn from their courage now overwhelms any piddling shadows of evil or despair from my heart. (For more information I recommend the Good Article on Wikipedia entitled "Indonesian Occupation of East Timor".)

My truth goes on and on, through the centuries of human history and including examples from every nation, every race of people, every gender and sexuality. People like

Harvey Milk, Mohandas Gandhi, Steve Biko, Dorothy Day, Mother Jones, Subcommandante Marcos, Emmeline Pankhurst, Winona LaDuke, Judi Bari, and countless others have shown us a path of hope, based on neither mechanistic mindlessness nor crackpot theories. If we summon the courage to follow in their footsteps, we can find meaning for ourselves and others.

Two questions must be answered:

1. Can we make things better for humanity?
2. What role will I play?

As to the first: I believe we can, but I recognize this as a leap of faith (even though I base it on historical evidence). My belief clashes with the words of Red Horse in *Grendel*, but that's okay. (We need not align ourselves with a cranky Machiavellian. He'd get along well with Henry Kissinger.) The Universal Justice he mocks is vivified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, defended by Amnesty International and countless others.

Joseph Asagai in Lorraine Hansberry's beautiful 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* says it better than I ever could. When Beneatha insists that "there isn't any real progress, Asagai,

there is only one large circle that we march in", he explains that history is, in fact, a line:

It is simply a long line — as in geometry, you know — one that curves into infinity. And because we cannot see the end, we also cannot see how it — changes. And it is very odd, but those who see the changes — who dream, who will not give up — are called idealists ... and those who see only the circle — they call each other the "realists"!

Call me what you like. I see the line.

As for the second question: This is where Grendel's refusal to be the brute existent for the humans is a beautiful moment of hope. (Alas, the dragon snuffs it out with all speed.) This moment — like Neo's choice to stand up and continue fighting in *The Matrix* — is the anomalous victory of the human spirit over the void of nihilism. It may very well be "meaningless" in the "grand scheme of things". But that's irrelevant. It's meaningful to us. And it can provide powerful opportunities to make change happen.

If and when the dragon disagrees, that's his choice. But *it is* a choice, and a sad one at that. He therefore receives my compassion and pity.

In conclusion, Mr. Dragon, I will thank you to stop leering scornfully at those who stand up for their own good judgment, stop hollering at people who ask "why", and stop infesting others with your crackpot theories about being still and sitting on gold.

10 Things Video Games Have Taught Me About the Mind

The final section of this book explains a few things I have learned about myself and other people while playing video games. Please read on, even if you don't play such games. I'm confident these ideas will be useful to everybody, because they reflect things about many aspects of our lives.

And if you don't play video games — take another look. The world of interactive digital entertainment has exploded in recent years. It's not just *Pac-Man* and *Grand Theft Auto* anymore. There are as many different kinds of video games as there are different kinds of movies. You like movies, don't you?

#1: Multitasking breeds irritation.

When I'm playing a video game, my wife will sometimes talk with me. Instead of pausing the game and giving her my full attention, I will often continue playing. Sometimes this is because I'm playing online, and pausing is not an option. Sometimes I just don't feel like interrupting the flow of the game.

When the game gets intense during these moments, I'm likely to think: "She's distracting me. Why can't she understand how important this game is, and wait until I'm done?" But it is my choice to multitask instead of being fully present for the discussion. So what sense does it make for me to be upset with her?

Although we think of multitasking as a necessity, it is actually a choice. We must own the irritations that come with it.

#2: Small victories can be helpful.

Lots of people say things like "It's just a game". This is a glib dismissal of the incredible value we gamers find in video games. Of course it's not limited to video games;

plenty of people say “it’s just a song” or “it’s just a movie”, as if those art forms don’t also have incredible power and value.

On the other hand, plenty of gamers take their amusements too seriously. We hurl controllers. We scream. We shout obscenities. We let a defeat on the virtual battlefield ruin our days. This is why it’s so important to play games mindfully.

The victories in video games are relatively small and insignificant. No one really cares if I win or lose a round of *Call of Duty*. The world isn’t a better place if I score a goal in *Rocket League*. Nothing actually changes when I clear the final level of *Super Meat Boy*.

And yet I have come to understand that these things are not completely meaningless. Achieving a small victory in a virtual contest can help turn the tide of a difficult day. If the world feels like hot garbage from the moment I wake up until the moment I get home, it can feel pretty darn comforting to win a game.

Again, this isn’t limited to video games. Crossword puzzles, poker, knitting, musical performance, or even (ugh)

physical exercise can offer the same rush of achievement. It's easy to think that such things are self-satisfying, and they are. But that doesn't make them worthless.

Doing real things in the real world is important, and we should never allow virtual accomplishments to take the place of quality relationships or positive work in our communities. But along the way, we have the right to enjoy some small virtual victories as well.

#3: Do not cling to your rank. It is a strange attractor, not a fixed point.

Some of my favorite video games are competitive multiplayer contests, which give each player a rank based on performance. My favorite multiplayer game these days is *Rocket League*, in which crazy vehicles bump a huge ball into the goal. It's soccer with rocket-cars.

Recently I reached the Gold 1 level for the first time ever. This was a huge rush, a feeling of profound accomplishment after months of languishing in the Silver ranks. After three more games, however, I dropped back to Silver 3. I was crushed, and I began telling myself a story

about how I didn't belong in the Gold ranks. Tasting the flavor of Gold made my frustration with a life in Silver more acute. I began to feel despondent, like I hadn't improved and probably never would.

I quickly realized, however, that I was being silly. My rank in *Rocket League* is not a fixed point, to which I am forever destined to return. Instead, it is a strange attractor — a scatter-graph of points in which I swirl constantly. Over time, this cluster has indeed moved upward. A little. I have since grabbed the Gold ring many times, and as of this writing my current rank is a solid Gold 1. I've even gotten close to Gold 2.

This is another example of the rivers of our lives. Constantly changing, without a simple story to soothe us. I'm not the best *Rocket League* player of all time, nor am I the worst. I'm not tremendous, nor am I atrocious. I have good games and bad. Strikes and gutters, as The Dude says. Ups and downs. I abide.

Thus it is with everything. The more you cling to a single "rank", whether formal or informal, the more you will

suffer when reality does not match the story you are telling yourself. You may grow sour and surly when you are denied the rank you “deserve”. If, however, you learn to accept your rank as a strange attractor, a shifting flow of ever-changing waters, you can make peace with it. You will be happy when it rises, and you will realize it’s not the end of the world when it drops.

#4: You cannot win every game, but you can always play well and be positive.

Many of us cling also to the thrill of victory. Truth be told, this is the main reason I play so many online games. As noted earlier, a few victories on the field can take the edge off a crappy day, and make a good day even more awesome.

But losing need not be a catastrophe. I always have the ability to deal with setbacks in a positive way. When my teammate misses the ball, I can say “No worries. Stuff happens.” (It’s more difficult to forgive myself, but that’s part of the ego war.) When the game is over, I can say “gg”, short for “good game”. It’s a quick virtual handshake of respect between combatants online. I can make silly jokes

and try to lighten the mood. And when people don't find my jokes funny, I can make fun of myself and let it go.

I can also focus myself and try to play better. I can sit up straight, plant my feet on the floor, and take a deep breath before the next kickoff. I can recover quickly when I miss the ball, and figure out what my team needs in every moment. Recovery is especially important. It's not so important how often you miss. The important thing is how quickly you recover, learn from your mistake, and try again.

We can't win at everything we do. We're going to mess up. We're going to fail. We're going to get rejected when we try new things. But we can't lose all the time, and we can make the choice to be courageous and positive. Yeah, overly-bubbly people are horrible to be around, but wallowing in negativity and cynicism is the exact same thing in reverse. It's just another part of the trap.

Find the third way.

#5: You get to choose whether you will fight with honor, or not.

Like a lot of online video games, the community in

Rocket League is juvenile and toxic. Those who win will often insult and belittle their opponents, and those who lose will often hurl racial or sexual insults, while also blaming network problems, controller malfunction, and crappy teammates.

As always, the hardest part about dealing with difficult people is not letting them turn you into one of them. It's hard to endure such insults and toxicity without also wanting to dish some of it out when you can. But this is the cycle of the schoolyard bully. You are doing exactly the same nasty things other people have done to you. You are causing others to suffer as you have suffered.

Instead, live and play games with honor. If you make a mistake, apologize. If you hurt someone, explain why and do something to ease their suffering. Work hard to avoid causing pain the future. Learn from your mistakes. Do the right thing, even if it's more difficult.

If someone is trying to bait you, they win when you get angry. Remaining calm is very difficult in those situations, which is why it's so rare. But if you can train yourself to do

it — learn to recognize the feel of rage rising inside you, then take a breath and let go — it gets easier.

I've started using the following statements when I encounter nasty people online. Perhaps they will be useful to you in virtual or real-life situations.

- Before the game begins: "Have fun, people."
- Afterwards: "Good hustle, everybody."
- If we win: "You are worthy opponents, other team."
- If we lose: "We have been defeated by worthy opponents."
- When someone attacks or mocks me: "You seem upset. Do you wanna talk about it?" (They hate this. Be prepared for more insults.)
- If my teammate knocks the ball into our goal by accident: "Here, other team — have a pity goal. You're welcome."
- If I knock the ball into our goal: "Here, have a pity goal. You're gonna need it, once I remember how to play this game."
- When I play like crap: "I really have played this game before."
- Also good for that situation: "I'm only terrible

sometimes. Like daytime. And nighttime.”

- When I get really lucky and score a goal by accident:
“Hey, we all get lucky sometimes.”

Unfortunately, there’s so much toxicity online that some people think I’m being sarcastic when I use these statements of genuine good humor. But there’s nothing I can do about that. The best thing about using a positive approach is the number of people who respond with positivity and gratitude. It doesn’t take much to stand out as a force for good when everybody around you is being nasty. I’ve had people say things like “You made my day” and “We need more people like you in this game”.

The other unusual thing about my gameplay style is that I do not explode other cars on purpose. If you drive into another player in *Rocket League* with enough speed, you will make them explode. Sometimes people will attack you while their teammate tries to score. I consider this dishonorable, and I won’t do it. There’s a reason such behavior is illegal in soccer (or football, for those outside the US). Of course it’s not against the rules in *Rocket League*, and many people consider it a legitimate tactic. That’s their choice. I find it

childish and pathetic. Therefore I don't pack it in my toolbox.

As always, I know I won't make the world agree with me. But that's irrelevant. My choices are mine and mine alone. I would rather lose with honor than win with dishonorable tactics. You get to choose how you want to live your life, too.

#6: Some sad people will react to goodness with toxicity. Pity them.

Often when a new game begins and I say "Have fun", another player will — in a weak attempt to be funny, and without any awareness of their lack of originality — respond with: "No" or "STFU" ("Shut the [bad word] up"). If I'm nice to a nasty person during the game, they will often type "ez" if they win. The implication is that they won with ease, even if they only won by one point after four minutes of overtime.

Honorable people will always encounter this sort of nasty reaction to their positivity. (I'm blending two concepts here; you need not be overly positive to be honorable, but

for the sake of simplicity I'll use them interchangeably for a moment.) You cannot let this deter you.

Again, your best reaction is compassion and pity.

Perhaps that person has a good reason to be in a terrible mood. This doesn't make it right for them to be horrible toward you, but we've all lashed out at inappropriate times. As the French novelist Émile Zola wrote in his 1880 novel *Nana*: "Ought we not forgive others much, my friend, if we wish to be forgiven ourselves?"

#7: Everybody is nice to those who are nice first. The challenge is showing compassion to those who are cruel.

Often people will proclaim their good intentions and insist that they are always positive toward other people — at first. The second other people turn nasty or toxic, however, they respond in kind and trade insult for insult.

Being kind to those who are kind is not difficult. The trick, the challenge of the enlightened individual, is showing kindness to those who are *unkind*. Those who are hostile usually need our compassion the most. Think about a time when you were feeling bitter and nasty; didn't you want the

world to show you some tenderness in that moment?

Besides, as the aliens say in Rudy Rucker's 2003 novel *Spaceland*: "Killing kills the killer." You cannot pour poison on other people without splashing some on yourself, regardless of who started splashing poison first.

In fact, toxic people are, in a way, a blessing. They give us a chance to practice our mindful compassion. When a person is being nasty — provided they are not harassing you or posing any threat to your well-being, or people you care about — you have a unique opportunity to let grace flow through you. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*: "The quality of mercy is not strain'd, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven". You always have access to this gentle rain, and it can make your life better.

Of course it's easy to take this thinking too far. We must protect ourselves from exploitation if and when a person makes clear that they will never match your kindness with decency of their own. But there is an important difference between protecting yourself and sinking to the level of toxic children. Be sure you are taking the

appropriate path.

#8: Your hatred will not save you.

Watching the worst offenders get sucked into their own hatred is a truly horrifying sight. Cursing, insults, lashing out, ragequitting, screaming over the headset: These things are just pathetic. Nasty people cling to their hatred and double-down on their nasty mindsets.

Think about how miserable these people must be. Of course it might just be an act, but I've found that nobody is good at pretending online. They will often try to excuse their behavior with claims of "I'm just joking", but this is a smokescreen. Every joke reveals some truth about the joker.

Anger is inevitable, and we all get furious sometimes. But you must recognize it as an unusual occurrence, and learn how to let go of it. The worst thing you can do with anger is ignore it, because it will become part of your everyday identity. Then you will cling to your anger, because it is a deep part of who you are.

No one wakes up one day and decides to be a nasty, horrible person. It happens gradually over time, one brick of

self-righteous attitude on top of another. Eventually you have given yourself permission to be terrible toward everybody, and especially the people you care about most. Is that really the kind of person you want to be?

#9: Learn how to walk away from frustration (If you're not having fun, stop playing that game for a while.)

Let me illustrate this with a non-video-game example. I enjoy crossword and sudoku puzzles. However, I've learned over the years that the more difficult versions make me angry. I get mad and feel dumb when I don't know words in tough crosswords, and a difficult sudoku can easily become a tedious exercise in mechanical bookkeeping.

Therefore, I stick to easier puzzles. I do the crosswords in the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday newspaper, and only do the sudoku on Monday. If other people want to mock me for this choice, they can go right ahead. I choose a more leisurely path because I know it will make my life more pleasant. You do whatever puzzles make you happy.

Some people take on incredibly difficult challenges, thinking that the frustration and agony will be worth it when

they finally emerge victorious. Indeed, some claim, the victory is more glorious when the struggle is more horrible. Naturally, there is some truth to this. A tiny crossword for children will not be fun for me. But each of us must find the “Goldilocks” challenge — one that is not too easy and not too tough. Chasing a nearly-impossible task, refusing to give up when reason and good sense are telling you to walk away, is absurd. If nothing else, break the process down into smaller chunks, and tackle them one at a time. Take breaks and enjoy the small achievements along the way.

Games are supposed to be fun. If you’re not having fun — and here you must be brutally honest with yourself — then you’re playing them for the wrong reasons. Yes, a small victory can serve a positive purpose. But climbing Everest is not a small victory. It’s enormous. And if you lose friends or ignore responsibilities just to plant a flag at the top of a mountain, is it really worth it?

#10: Sometimes people change.

I will end with a remarkable true story.

A few weeks ago I was playing *Rocket League*, being silly

as always. After a few goofy comments in the chat, someone on the other team — let's call him Kyle — said "STFU". I snapped back with a joke: "Sorry your mute button doesn't work. I paid a lot of money for this keyboard and I'll use it all I want." He traded some more barbs and I played them off. He claimed I was using software to spam the chat. I explained that I type quickly because I'm a writer. I don't remember who won the game, because of course it doesn't matter now.

A half-hour later, Kyle and I wound up in the same game again. I didn't recognize his username, but he typed an apology into the chat. I was taken aback, but I said "No problem. Everybody makes mistakes." I've had a few situations like this, and I always enjoy the opportunity to be the bigger person. Then he sent me a friend request. This was unusual but not unheard of. I figured he needed some positivity in his life, so I took pity and accepted.

Then Kyle shocked me.

He sent a message right away, with a request. He had written a story, and he was frustrated by how lukewarm the

responses from his friends had been. (This is a common problem for serious young writers.) Would I be willing to read the story and offer some meaningful feedback?

I was amazed. I was delighted. I was flattered. I was speechless. Less than an hour ago, this young man was cursing at me and telling me to shut up. Now he was asking for my learned opinion on his creative work. He was taking a real risk by putting himself out there, and I was honored that I was worthy of his courage.

This was another confirmation of what I've always believed: The nasty people out there just haven't found what they're looking for. In another moment, they can be friendly and kind. You have something they want, and perhaps, if you try hard enough, they'll let you know what it is.

Final Thoughts

I did not expect to write this book when I finished the first *MindWipe*. The stuff in these pages has just bubbled up in my head, and I want to share it. I started scribbling on scrap paper and in notebooks, with the intention of writing a few posts online. Eventually I had enough for another book, and before I knew it, it was longer than the first.

Many other people are more qualified than I to teach you about mindfulness. Of course, that's true about writing and literature and all the other stuff I teach. Part of being a teacher, I suppose, is accepting the fact that you're good enough to teach the subject over which you have dominion. Another part of the ego war.

Our world is a stressful place, and it seems like it gets more stressful all the time. We each have a responsibility to

take care of ourself, de-stress, be mindful, search for truth, and help others find it. If this book has been useful in some way, please share it with other folks. As with the first, I'm making it available for the lowest possible cost. A free PDF will be posted on my website — www.just-text.org — which also has links and resources for mindfulness practice.

Whoever you are, and wherever you are on your journey of mindfulness, I wish you well. When you can, help others as you have been helped.

Gratitude

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- You, for taking my words seriously. Stop by www.fbsp.org and drop me a line.

A Bell

Take three deep breaths.

Do it right now, before you do anything else.