

Treasure Map:

A Guide to the Riches Hiding in Plain Sight

Matthew Lie-Paehlke

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Dear Reader,

Michel de Certeau calls reading ‘poaching in the King’s woods.’ The author is the ‘king,’ the woods are his ‘property,’ but the reader is a skillful poacher who will fell game that the author has never seen or even scented. The best part of a book may well be something the author never intended -- the way it reminds you of your own childhood or allows you to dream of unusual futures. With this in mind, I have not laid out a perfect formal garden, instead I have stocked these booklets with wild game and delectable mushrooms. Little hints. Small exercises and activities. Pungent and fleshy tidbits for you to plunder and make use of. Nudges towards a better life.

I am not a guru and I am not perfectly content. I get caught up in bad moods, bad news and bad habits just like everyone else. But I have spent time identifying habits and ideas that I am certain are good so that I could stock these booklets with a bounty of herbal teas and tonics to help you get through your own dark days.

Each booklet will ask you to actually do things: to take a moment to breathe deeply or write a list or ride a bicycle. Some of these activities are meant to be done as you read, others between booklets. Please give them a try. I say this as someone who has skimmed through the exercises in almost every single workbook I have ever done because ‘yeah, yeah, yeah, I get the idea.’ If anything, you should do the opposite here: skim through my ponderings and spend your time on the activities, getting in touch with the heft and texture of the real world.

Modern society has us all sketching out endless to-do lists and then checking things off in a frenzy. We have created an impressive web of abstractions for ourselves – money and contracts, manners and formalities, grading systems and health codes and calorie counts and digital performance metrics – but all of it is meaningless if we forget to check in on the rich, black soil of materiality. The perfectly placed hues of a patch of flowers. A fragrant heap of chopped basil. Other living, breathing human beings. These booklets will take you nowhere if you rush to the end in search of some perfect phrase or formula. The treasure I am trying to share with you is simply living in your own neighbourhood, using your own body to see and smell and listen to all the wonderful things that are right there in front of you.

Think of these booklets as a set of post-it-notes to block out time in your calendar just for slowing down and looking around. It doesn’t matter so much if you agree with any given paragraph. Treasure Map is a big leafy canopy of ideas designed to shade you from all the other distractions and annoyances in your life. Each booklet is a quiet place where you can go and forage and experiment with new habits and ways of being.

I don’t know what you will find in this forest, but I sincerely hope it will be nourishing and restorative.

Happy poaching,

Matt Lie-Paehlke

A Reader's Guide to Treasure Map

This guide will suggest destinations within walking distance of your home to pair with each booklet so you can plan how and when to read each one.

Booklet One is about **Breathing**. You should read it **in a comfortable place in or near your home**. You will be asked to decorate an **illustration of lungs** to remind you to breathe deeply from your belly. The colouring card was sent along with the ebook as a printable PDF.

Booklet Two will help you practice **Being Where You Are**. Unsurprisingly, you don't have to go anywhere. Find a **spot in or near your home where you can look out on your neighbourhood**. You will be asked to write a list of good things you already have access to. Your homework will be to take the time to properly appreciate one of those things.

Booklet Three is about **Riding a Bike**. Ideally, you will **plot a short, pleasant bike ride** and read the booklet at the furthest point from your home on that route. Although this booklet is nominally about bicycles, it is actually about movement, space and the body and you can benefit from it no matter how you locomote. Skoot, skate, push a walker, roll a wheelchair, hop, skip, jump, pogo stick.

Booklet Four is about **Tasting Subtle Flavours** and sensory experience more broadly. Read it at a **site of modest beauty** close to your home – perhaps a favourite flower bed or a remarkable building. Follow your tastes rather than searching out conventional beauty. If you really like moss, then sit next to some moss and spend some time studying its intricate knitting.

You will be asked to intentionally explore your peripheral vision and engage with your senses in other simple ways. Your homework will be to attend to a chore or errand, but to pay close attention to what you see, smell, feel and hear while you do it.

Booklet Five will ask you to **Stop Competing** and determine your own values. In particular, it will ask you to take notice of when you are judging the world by some external standard. Read it in the quietest place you can think of -- a forgotten corner of a park, an empty courtyard or your own backyard. What grows in that quiet place? Where do you want to go, after you stop running in the race?

Your homework will be to do something selfless.

Booklet Six is about **Pursuing Meaning Directly** by crafting personal rituals. If there is a **place near your home which you head to out of habit**, go there. If you can't think of a place that you head to habitually,

then select a spot that will make for a nice weekly walk. Many people already have private rituals – a regular Sunday meal, a weekly walk for a lottery ticket, an oft-repeated route for putting the baby to sleep – but don't think of them as 'rituals.' Booklet Six will encourage you to name and cultivate these rituals. Your homework will be to start a simple annual ritual.

Booklet Seven is about **The Good Wound**. It considers all the suffering that surrounds us and asks how we can possibly carry on in a world that is so broken. When you read it, if you're strong enough, you may as well go and **sit somewhere that hurts**. A place which reminds you of some loss or tragedy. Together we will try to find some meaning in the inevitability of loss. Your homework will be to reach out to another human being in whatever form works best for you, perhaps to right some wrong or simply to offer support or consolation.

Booklet Eight draws together some ideas about 'better living' during and **After the Pandemic**. It looks at the connections between individual choices and systemic forces and highlights the way in which shocks create opportunities for change. Read it in a **place where you can imagine the type of future that you want to see for your neighbourhood**. Maybe near some small sliver of that better world already exists in your neighbourhood. You might read this booklet near a local church, a new bike lane, an independent bookstore or a community garden. If not, go somewhere that is ripe with potential like a vacant lot or empty storefront.

Your homework will be to start building a better world by helping someone meet their basic needs.

Booklet Nine is nominally about **Trees** but it is also about growth and degrowth more generally. It is about nourishing the things we love and allowing toxic habits and social practices to die back. **Read it sitting under the biggest, leafiest, most beautiful tree** within walking distance of your home. Go out and pay homage to that gentle giant.

Your homework will be to grow or tend a plant of some kind. Depending on the season and your living situation, that might mean ordering seeds for next spring, getting a succulent for a windowsill or volunteering in a community garden.



BOOKLET 1
Room
to breathe

Booklet 1: Room to Breathe

The very first thing you have to do in order to build a better life for yourself is to...

((stop))

The winding path of this treasure map begins here in a quiet place in your home. Before going anywhere, we must remember how to stay still.

Slow your breathing, lift your eyes from the page and look around the room. Now look again.

A c t u a l l y l o o k around you.

Notice the saturation of the colours.

Which colour stands out most?

Now breathe. Breathe in. ((Hold it.)) Breathe out.

How long have you lived here? What was your favourite moment here in this space?

Now sit for a moment. Listen to each breath passing in and out of your lungs.

Now that you're settled in, let's talk. You probably already have what you need to be happy, but it has all been buried under the rubble of modern life: debts, home repairs, toxic people, traumas you haven't had time to process. Those problems all have different solutions and I won't pretend to have answers for them. But slowing down and breathing deeply will make you a better problem solver.

It will help you cope with those problems you can't actually solve. It will also allow you to properly attend to all the blessings and pleasures that we too often allow to rush right past us.

Our culture pressures us to accomplish more things more quickly. But if we don't know where we are going, speed is worse than useless – it's dangerous.

In the past [due to an extreme heat alert cooling centres will be open] week, how much time did you spend doing things that [the Dow is down 12%] you enjoyed and how much time did you spend unjamming [7 new emails] the photocopier of modern society?

If a plant [the stock market is up 10%] is crowded, it can't grow to its full potential. Gardeners [3 friends liked your post – [click here](#) to see who they are] thin their plants to give them [you have been selected for a free cruise] room to breathe. But [traffic is backed up on the 401 eastbound] everything about our society crowds in on us.

This booklet [9 tricks doctors hate] is designed to help you get in touch with your lungs and [product recall: iceberg lettuce may contain salmonella] diaphragm – but staying in touch will be hard, because [expect gas prices to rise over the long weekend] our churning, burning, 24-7 society never lets us [are you financially prepared for retirement] take a breath.

We keep getting interrupted.

Let's turn off our phones and try that again.

In the past week, how much time did you spend doing things that you enjoyed and how much time did you spend unjamming the photocopier of modern society?

If a plant is crowded, it can't grow to its full potential. Gardeners thin their plants to give them room to breathe. But everything about our society crowds in on us.

This booklet is designed to help you get in touch with your lungs and diaphragm. There are no blinking ads in the margins. You can move at your own pace.

Slower breathing can help you control the rhythm of your day. What do you want to absorb into yourself and what would you like to simply disperse into the atmosphere? Inhale what nourishes you and exhale distractions.

When you are ready, you can move to the next section and really begin to breathe.

Your breath comes in through your nose, pours down your windpipe, swelling your torso and belly before flooding the most distant provinces of your body with good, rich oxygen.

And then it rushes back out like a turning tide, carrying away all the toxins and anxieties, leaving your inner shore clear and tranquil.

Let's take some time to work on the quality of our breathing together.

Put one palm on your chest and one palm on your belly.

As you breathe, the hand on your belly should move more than the hand on your chest.

Once you are sure you are breathing mainly from your belly, slow each inhalation and exhalation. This is called diaphragmatic breathing. Feel your belly expanding and contracting. Feel the oxygen enriching your blood. Feel your mind settling down.

Now I'm going to ask you put down whichever device you are using to read these words. Sit in this room, in your home, and breathe for two or three minutes – or longer if you so desire. Pick the book up again when you are ready.

Welcome back.

You probably feel a benefit from just that small amount of measured breathing. There are many breathing exercises in many different traditions. If you would like to, you can seek out more information and find a set of breathing exercises that work for you. Or you can develop your own practice by simply paying more attention to the rhythm of your respiration.

As a teenager, I made the discovery that my breathing helped me cope with my self-doubt and mood swings. But I forgot this lesson. As a young adult, yoga taught me that same lesson again. But I forgot. When I had a health scare and started reflecting on what lessons I might want to leave for my daughter breathing was at the top of the list. And yet, I still forget. Again and again and again. I forget and then I remember. I forget and then I remember. Exhale. Inhale.

There is nothing innovative or insightful about asking people to 'breathe deeply.' I have seen that exact phrase on Lululemon bags. The trick is *remembering to breathe* amidst all the traffic reports and heat alerts.

Your homework will be to design and post a reminder to breathe from your belly. You can either design your own reminder or use the illustration which has been provided. Along with this ebook, you also received a printable PDF with three small illustrations of human lungs. Cut them out. Find some markers or colored pencils. And, when you're ready, choose one and colour it in. Notice your breathing while you work. Feel the texture of the paper. Watch the colors slowly spread across the surface of the paper.

((Inhale))

((Exhale))

When you are finished colouring and breathing, find a place to put the card –stick it to your cellphone, post it on your fridge or slip it into your bathroom mirror. Put it somewhere where you will see it every day and check in with the rhythm of your breathing each time you do.

Breathing allows the world to move through us, even when we are still. Breathing at a steady pace will help you settle into your body and 'Be Where You Are' – which is the topic of the next booklet.



Booklet 2: Be Where You Are

Would you rather be somewhere else right now?

Does simply reading that question make you enjoy being where you are a little bit less?

I don't feel good about asking you such a cruel question. I have asked it only to highlight in a visceral way how damaging comparisons can be to our happiness.

We live in a culture of comparison, an endless array of choices and options which inevitably leave us second guessing ourselves. What if I got that other job? What if I had a pool? What if ...?

Other booklets will come at this problem from other angles, examining how to find value in the present moment and how to stop competing and start living by your own standards – but this booklet asks you to be where you are.

To see what is right in front of you.

To stop looking wistfully over at the next valley.

I am not asking you to *accept* your environment as it is – in fact, our tendency to dream of a completely different reality is often what prevents us from fixing our own situation – I am only asking you to *be where you are*.

Pleasure comes from appreciating the fine details of our experience, but hypotheticals are always vague. We can kind of imagine the pool we might build, but we can't actually feel the water lapping against our skin. And worse still, as we try to picture this abstract alternative, the world right before our eyes becomes washed out.

So take a moment to notice your surroundings:

Look for three colours that you enjoy.

Listen for two different sounds and tease them apart.

What can you feel with your toes?

Hopefully, you feel a little more grounded now, a little more present. Perhaps calmer.

So why do we always feel scattered and out of place? Why are we so rarely focused on what is right in front of us? Because our society constantly asks us to make comparisons. Limited time offers. University rankings. Top ten lists. All designed to make us compare one experience to another, instead of just enjoying an experience for what it is.

Much of this pressure to compare is economic. The economy thrives on comparison. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the rise of money as a “general equivalent” allowed wealth and work, which once had sensory, symbolic meanings, to be tallied numerically. A shift from a qualitative culture to a quantitative one makes comparisons easier. We actually can compare apples to oranges – if they both have a price. If someone is willing watch our children for a lower price than someone else is willing to pay us for our skills, we can increase our savings. Many people today have even been convinced that this is a ‘good deal,’ that growing our savings outweighs raising our own children.

Pricing everything means that anything could just as easily become something else. This pushes our society towards meaninglessness. We forget the crisp crunch of the apple and the sweet sting of the orange.

But it goes beyond shopping – this tendency towards pricing and comparing is even more pervasive for investors. Most investors only look at the bottom line – they are often unaware of all the beneficial uses and moral costs that are tallied there.

Investors want to trade one thing for another as smoothly as possible to maximize their returns.

We hear the pundits calling for a ‘flexible labour market.’

What does that mean though?

It means that you probably won’t develop close social ties at work. It means that you should be willing to abandon a craft you have spent your life developing and learn a new skill. It means that if your hometown has no jobs, you should pack up and leave.

Economic geographers write about the ‘friction of distance.’ The ‘friction of distance’ impedes the investor’s search for instant exchange. They study the difference between absolute distance and relative distance in terms of both cost and time. Air travel reduces relative distance. Computer technologies reduce relative distance.

Modern society is designed to make everywhere the same place all at the same time.

Investors aim to conquer time and space in search of ‘frictionless’ exchanges.

But time and space are where we live.

A frictionless world would be empty of sensory experience.

The ‘friction of distance’ is the specificity in which meaning is forged. Being where you are means appreciating your neighbourhood, your city and your local environment. It means delighting in seasonality. It means never pretending that the weather doesn’t exist.

Shipping things across the world over night; building highways to rush us through a once-great city in a matter of minutes; designing franchises that can be replicated anywhere; flattening hills for residential developments; flying to the tropics in the winter — all these modern practices reduce ‘friction,’ but they also obliterate reality.

Think for a moment about the joy of a snow day — a very particular day, encapsulated in cold. Why do we invest so much money and fuel into clearing our roads as fast as possible? Why can’t we just stay home once or twice a year? Especially when so many of us dread the repetitiveness of our careers, the endless sameness that swallows up years of our life and leaves nothing but an RRSP in exchange.

Just take a snow day when nature asks you to.

Be where you are.

Make hot chocolate. Read a book.

In Spain, it is hot. In the heat of the afternoon, people take a siesta. They don’t deny their environment. But siestas cause ‘friction’ for tourists and global companies. Why is everything closed? Why can’t we video conference at 2:00pm?

Because people are *being where they are*.

Being where you are means delighting in the seasons instead of denying them.

Seasonality is good for your soul, because it puts you in touch with the world, but it is also good for the planet because it will reduce your energy usage.

In the summer, make a chickpea salad for dinner and give your oven a rest. In the winter, bake cookies or root vegetables, knowing that your oven is taking some of the strain off your gas furnace. Ignore those flavorless imported tomatoes and save yourself for the joy of local heirloom tomatoes. Respecting seasonality intensifies the pleasure of eating. Waiting for certain delicacies makes them that much more glorious when they finally arrive.

Perhaps the most absurd denial of seasonality is our insistence that indoor temperatures should be 22 degrees all year round — such that people are too hot in the winter and bring sweaters to the movies in the summer. Use your furnace, use your air conditioner — but let the temperatures fluctuate with the seasons. Enjoy the coziness of sweaters in the winter. Wipe your brow with a damp cloth in the summer. Keeping your home a little cooler in winter and warmer in summer will allow your body to acclimatize to the season and make going outside less startling. The weather will no longer be your enemy. You may even begin to see it as the endless cycle of rejuvenation that it is.

Why do people always want to escape the city where they live? Certainly, we all need a break from time to time, but we shouldn’t train ourselves to associate our hometown with drudgery and allow ourselves the slow pleasure of holidays only in distant places.

Learning to treat yourself to staycations is an important part of being where you are.

Taking a staycation at home or in a nearby hotel will layer your daily life with pleasant memories. Last winter, my wife and I spent a few days downtown at the Royal York Hotel; we ate out and pampered ourselves and swam in their pool, enjoying the contrast between the steamy pool and the frigid streets.

Now, whenever I'm at Union Station, I see the hotel and recall that vacation fondly. Those pleasant memories have wormed their way into my own city in a way that memories of a tropical vacation never could.

Appreciating what your hometown has to offer instead of comparing it to Vienna or Tokyo helps to create a rich sense of place. If we spent as much time learning to love where we live as we did planning 'getaways' we would all be much happier.

Let's take a moment to plan an 'itinerary.' I'm going to ask you to make two lists. The first list will tabulate things and places inside your home that give you pleasure or keep you safe and healthy. Look especially for things that are so familiar you typically overlook them. Do you have beloved CDs gathering dust or intriguing books you've never read? Having safe, clean running water is a miraculous luxury and not one that is distributed as evenly as it should be, so take a moment to be grateful if life-giving liquid streams from your taps. If you have a quiet, comfortable place to sit or lie down – acknowledge it in this list. If it is hard for you to see these 'basics' as blessings than it is especially important for you to practice being where you are – because our cultural of comparison has tainted your relationship with your own home. If you lack some of these essentials, perhaps it will provide some small comfort to know that other readers are shifting their gaze from the glitz and glamour that has distracted them and beginning to see the world more clearly. Being where you are also means seeing those in need instead of looking away. Booklet seven will focus on acknowledging pain and adversity, but for now let us work to build our strength by mapping the bounties we have access to.

Our second list will be nearby destinations that offer up moments of satisfaction – preferably places you can walk or bike to. A park, a trail, a friend's home or a public library. A beloved tree or your own garden. Or maybe there is something more idiosyncratic – a piece of graffiti or architecture that appeals to you, a spot with a nice echo. You might also include the site of a beautiful memory, some hallowed ground where you can have a good soak in the past.

Take your time on these lists. Let your mind wander. Ideally, you will post the lists somewhere visible to keep all those small pleasures front of mind. You can write these lists on a scrap of paper or use the worksheets included in your printing package. You can write your lists now and return to the text when you are done or you can right them as part of your 'homework' after you are done reading.

Being where you are is more than just turning your attention to the good things close at hand.

Being where you are means responding honestly to situations instead of avoiding them or splitting your attention. We often fail to live up to our own expectations because we are tired and choose the easier, but worse, option. We keep scrolling the internet when we should sleep. We eat frozen food and let our vegetables rot. Being where you are means recognizing the defining aspect of a situation. If you are tired, acknowledge your exhaustion and sleep. If you have vegetables that you don't want to waste – acknowledge that you will feel better in the long run if you put the effort in now and make that salad.

When my daughter was younger, I would pick her up from preschool every day and bring her home on the subway. But the subway was less fun than the sandbox and I, with a distracted look on my face and bits and pieces of my PhD still bouncing around in my head, was less engaging than her young friends. She resisted. She would hide or pretend she didn't see me, she would run off as we walked towards the

gate and I, already in a rush to get home and make dinner, would get frustrated, cementing my position as the fun-ruining father.

The solution turned out to be taking a few seconds and a deep breath *before* I entered the playground to put away my other thoughts and remind myself that I was about to be with my daughter. When I was engaged, when I took a moment to see what she was building and to guide her more playfully into the next phase of the day, things went smoothly. And the reverse was true as well. When I took a moment, while walking to my office, to remind myself that she was safe and happy in her preschool, I was better able to focus on my work when I sat down at my desk.

At the time, I saw this as a challenge unique to parenting. I often felt as though work made me a worse parent and parenting made me a worse academic. I felt as though I was split between two worlds – but the divisions within us are more nuanced. Our lives have more than two facets. There are a million reasons we might get carried away from the present moment. Reminding yourself to *be where you are* will help you to bring your full self to each situation.

When my daughter and I are butting heads, if I remind myself to be where I am, I am able to accept that we are having a clash and work through it instead of trying to rush past it. As a result, I am better able to hear her out and soothe her frustrations. If I am sitting on my porch, looking at the clouds and I begin to feel that fidgety desire to check social media or the news, reminding myself to *be where I am* is a way of remembering that the internet will still be there later.

For this one moment, it is enough to just feel the heavens passing above me.

Your homework for this week is to choose one item from the list of good things in your home and take some time to give it the appreciation it deserves. This might mean listening to an old CD from start to finish. It might mean finally starting a book you've always meant to read. It might mean cooking a meal while paying close attention to the smells and sounds and textures of chopping and stirring and simmering. Or it might mean something much more personal that I wouldn't have a chance of guessing in a million years. The only thing I ask is that you really do try to be where you are during this experience. If you're listening to a favourite CD, don't go on your phone while you're listening – turn down the lights, stretch out on floor, stare at the ceiling and let yourself bathe in the full sonic experience.

In the days and weeks ahead, whether those hours are pleasant or trying, I hope that you are able to find the presence of mind to be where you are.

The next booklet is a little less demanding. It only asks that you dust off your bike and go for a ride.

Sources and Further Reading

The 'friction of distance' is discussed in Coe, Kelly and Young's text 'Economic Geography: A Contemporary Introduction' but the term is widely used.

In their books Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari take some of Karl Marx's insights into the dangerous effects of currency (the 'general equivalent') and capital and apply a psychological lens to them. The discussion of comparison in this booklet is, in part, inspired by their

work. Their books contain other useful ideas but their literary style is nearly impenetrable. Give them a whirl if you enjoy your texts as thick and thorny as bramble patches.

*Although the phrase 'be where you are' is one that I crafted for my own use – initially while thinking about staycations and the environmental damage caused by air travel – it is not a particularly original pattern of words. It appears in love songs in quite the opposite sense – as a plea to be where **you** are. But it also appears with pretty much the same meaning as an apocryphal quotation from the Buddha on inspirational internet graphics. While Buddhism is about being in the moment, the Buddha never spoke these words. Instead, they appeared in a 1996 book by psychologist Jack Kornfield introducing Buddhist mediation practices to a Western audience. Although I've never read the book, the phrase my well have wandered out of it, through the world and into my ears.*



Booklet 3: Motion (a bike ride)

My daughter learned to ride a two-wheeler without training wheels this summer.

I can still see the moment, when we wheeled out onto an open stretch of path for our first long ride. As she rushed ahead, she cried out:

“This
is
sooo
much
fun!”

On that ride, my daughter experienced a pure joy which adults rarely experience because we struggle with being where we are. But it is possible for adults to feel that same joy as well.

Riding a bicycle feels almost like flying under your own power. You point the wheel where you want to go and your momentum carries you there. The design of a bicycle is profoundly elegant. The gears turn the vertical power of your legs into endless circles and the wheels turn those circles into long, luxurious lines. The resulting feeling is like surfing on the purity of Newtonian physics.

Unlike a car, a bicycle has very little negative impact on your neighbourhood or the environment and it makes you healthier, instead of less so.

But there’s another difference which may not be as obvious from just one ride. A car, with its climate-controlled bubble and portable entertainment system, makes the journey feel like limbo, a sort of purgatory between point A and B. One that is either so quick that its unnoticeable or so slow that it feels like a punishment. But a bicycle connects you to the places you are passing through, you feel the wind and smell the grass, you can smile at your neighbours and they can see the smile on your face. Walking and cycling let you see the gardens, the little shops and unusual trees just around the corner from your home. If you go for regular strolls, your relationships with the people in your neighbourhood will gradually evolve from glances to nods to full blown conversations and maybe even friendships.

Cultivating things takes time and cultivating the place where you live is no different. If you drive off in the morning and roll into the garage each night you will have a home, but not a neighbourhood.

There is a man who lives a few blocks away who I wave to and often chat with, sharing tips about gardening or commentary on the news. We have this micro-friendship only because he bikes to the grocery store instead of driving. If he came in a car, the very same man would have been one more anonymous vehicle making our block smoggy and dangerous for toddlers.

Driving doesn’t only limit your own interactions with our neighbours, it actually inhibits other people from developing relationships in the areas you pass through.

The book *Liveable Streets* presents research on local friendships. Researchers interviewed people about how many friends and acquaintances they had on their block and then compared those connections to the volume of traffic. The results are striking. The more traffic there is on a given block the fewer relationships people have with their neighbours. And perhaps even more striking is the fact that on the busiest streets people have almost no relationships with people on the other side of the road. Traffic, like a dangerous river, isn't worth crossing just for idle chitchat.

Cars help us overcome the 'friction of distance' – but in doing so, they remove us from the places where we live.

An airplane is something else entirely. It completely annihilates space. A plane teleports you across the world so fast that your body literally does not know if it is day or night. An airplane crosses political and cultural boundaries with such ease that you can arrive in an unfamiliar place in a state of total ignorance. On a train, you feel the landscapes you're passing through and you go slowly enough that you get at least a creeping suspicion of the progression of time zones. You slow down in each small town as well, reminding you that the world is not just a collector's set of gleaming capitals.

Being where you are means being present when you travel and thinking about the systems that make your motion possible. When we travel, we aren't just passing through a series of points, we are activated large social systems which spread out even farther than our journey may carry us. A bicycle is fairly simple, but we shouldn't forget the mining and manufacturing, the distribution and economic systems that brought it into our possession. When we move, we should also consider the political and cultural legacies that help or hinder that movement. Free movement is not something we forge for ourselves with courage and will power. It is, like most types of freedom, the result of mutual understanding and systems of sharing both conscious and unconscious, legal and cultural. It depends on the political will to create safe bicycle infrastructure. It depends on the stories that people tell about people who look like me. In Canada, we should be particularly aware of the enduring colonial systems which aid the movement of some and entangle others. In my case, I benefit greatly from the fact that people are not irrationally threatened by a white man on a bicycle. When I have my daughter in my cargo bike, I notice an even greater level of deference and good will.

So, a quick review: riding a bicycle is fun, it's good for you and it connects you to your neighbourhood. But a simple bike ride is also dependent on complex social and economic systems which do not benefit everyone equally and which may be invisible to you when they are working in your favour.

This booklet was quite short – but it could have been even shorter. I probably could have just asked you to go for a bicycle ride without reading anything at all. The bicycle, like dancing or walking or cooking or gardening, speaks for itself. It embeds us in the world in all its glorious detail and activates our lungs and heart and a thousand chemical processes. If these booklets have a benefit, most of it will be in the actions and activities they recommend. I have asked you to do things both within booklets and as homework in order to rough up the boundaries between what we know and what we actually do.

Unless you are very young or have just moved to a new home, most of your daily habits were likely set a long time ago. Some can be traced back to your parents, others are determined by the social and material world around you. You might choose the type of bread you like, but you probably shop at the closest grocery store to your house. Most of us are busy enough that we barely have time to give a book the attention it deserves – and the moment we close the cover it is largely forgotten.

As the son of two teachers, raised to love books and logic and evidence, it took me longer than it should have to accept that facts and arguments rarely influence people's behaviour. Fine words about the benefits of bicycles aren't likely to turn you into a cyclist, but getting a good ride under your belt might.

Our minds do not control our bodies in any straightforward way. Our beliefs don't have much influence on our behaviours. In fact, more often than not, our daily behaviours will determine what we believe. If you enjoyed your bike ride today, or if you are already an avid cyclist, you will likely find this booklet convincing. If you found your ride disagreeable, or if you didn't go at all, your mind will turn up all sorts of good reasons to doubt my claims.

I don't say this to defend what I have written. Only to make sure that we are on the same page. These booklets contain a set of experiences, a collection of new behaviours to try on for size. The words themselves scarcely matter, except to create a frame of significance and novelty for the experiences so they stand out amongst the many, many other experiences you might have on any given week.

Giles Deleuze, in his work on Spinoza, writes that "The mind is an idea of the body." Look at the elegant circularity there. In English, we can interpret this sentence to mean either that the body has an idea which is the mind; or that the body is an idea within the mind. Or perhaps both. The way this sentence tucks each meaning safely inside the other has, for me, been enough to resolve this frustrating paradox in a single harmonious note. When I first read that sentence, I imagined an envelope: its interior is our mental world and its exterior is the physical body but they are both made from a single piece of paper. On one side of the eyeball is physical light and on the other is the visual field but the eyeball connects these two worlds rather than separating them.

Your mind is an idea of the body. Your physical actions are the contents of your thoughts just as much as your thoughts determine what you will do.

All that's left to do now is to hop on your bike and ride home, feeling the full immensity of the world rushing through your peripheral vision as the wheels spin beneath you.

The next booklet is about mindfulness – about forging a less disjointed relationship between mind and body.

Sources and Further Reading

Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: practical philosophy*. City Lights Books.

I'm not certain that I have interpreted Deleuze's remarks on the mind exactly as he intended them, but the interpretation I have shared in this booklet has been very useful for me.

Donald, A., Gerson, M. S., & Lintell, M. (1981). *Livable streets*. Berkeley.



BOOKLET 4
Tasting
subtle flavours

Booklet 4: Tasting Subtle Flavours

How long could you spend looking at a landscape or city block before you stopped discovering new things? Is there a limit? With the shifting of the sun throughout the day and the undulations of our own moods and memories, perhaps not. It may well be that every experience is bottomless.

Let's take some time to explore our visual field together. Focus your gaze on something directly ahead of you and then, without moving your eyes, focus your mind on the edges of your peripheral vision. Is there any movement there? What are the most distant objects or colours that you can see on the right and on the left? What about the bottom or the top of your visual field? Once you have explored the perimeter of your visual field return your attention to whatever is right in front of you and then allow your attention to expand. Can you take it all in at once? Does it feel different from your typical gaze?

Intriguingly, depression and anxiety can impact our visual world, reducing our peripheral vision. 'Tunnel vision' is very real. When my daughter was a toddler, she had a potentially fatal allergy to eggs and dairy. She also loved to touch things and put her hands in her mouth. As you can imagine, this caused extreme and nearly constant anxiety for my wife and I. The moment she passed her final food test and the allergist declared her allergy gone my field of vision expanded ten or twenty percent. I mentioned this to my wife and she said she was having the exact same experience. When we are under stress, our vision tends to narrow into a tight spotlight focussed on exactly the thing that is giving us stress.

Although I haven't encountered any research showing that consciously expanding your peripheral vision will reduce stress, I have found that the activity I just shared with you is soothing, even empowering. For a short time after I finish, the world feels a little more beautiful and expansive.

Mindfulness doesn't necessarily mean meditation – though it could. Mindfulness means being present in the moment. Consciously drawing our attention to our visual field is a form of mindfulness. We can be mindful of the food we are eating, the people around us, the sound of the ocean or a forest or a city. Mindfulness means appreciating sensations. It means realizing that we can have more satisfying experiences just by paying closer attention to simple things than we ever could from a frenzied holiday or an ear-shattering concert extravaganza. Advertisers tell us we need bigger, brighter, louder – but we are not evolved for that, we are evolved to taste subtle differences between berries and delight in the tiny little feet of a bird hopping about in the branches above.

One day last summer, trying to stretch the bottled apple juice we had purchased for my daughter, I filled a jug with tap water, threw in a few mint leaves and some of the wild strawberries that had invaded our garden then added ice and about an inch of apple juice.

What a sensation.

It was cool and pure and quenched my thirst, but there were also these tiny threads of flavour, little minuets dancing just outside of certainty. People go gaga over expensive wine for the very same reason — subtle scents and flavours that force you to pay attention. But we can achieve the same effect with less. Crush a sprig of lavender between our thumb and forefinger. Drink in the patchwork of luminous hues created by the windows of an apartment building at night.

Relentless competition has pushed our society in the opposite direction. Packaged foods have more and more seasoning every year, as though it were an arms race. Have you ever tried Sweet Chili Heat Doritos? It's like being punched in the eye. Eating foods with too much salt and sugar can dull your senses, making it harder to appreciate the subtle flavours that really make food magical. Instead, take simple, humble tap water and add a few slices of cucumber or a splash of juice and be amazed at how perceptive you really are.

I have often thought about a phenomenon I call "infinite resolution." As we steady ourselves and pay closer and closer attention to the world more and more is revealed to us. And this effect doesn't ever seem to stop. The longer we look, the more we see.

One realm where 'infinite resolution' is particularly apparent is in craft, skill and connoisseurship. I've been breakdancing for twenty years: practicing, watching other dancers, watching videos of myself practicing, dissecting my movements to see how I can improve them. Now, when I watch people dancing, I see things that others don't. I can see whether a lightning-fast move was done with one or two hands, I notice the intricacies of footwork, I can trace the lines of flight. Just from watching, I can *feel* how much weight and pressure must be on a hand or foot, how fast the kick must be. This is because I have slowly wired big clumps of neurons to come alive when I watch dancing.

Any skill is like this: music, cosmetics, cooking, video games, bird-watching.

Any craft or hobby that you put sufficient time into will increase the resolution of the world, adding details to your experience that are invisible to others. All this happens within you, weightlessly, without leaving any footprints. This intensification of experience is a magical kind of consumption: it increases satisfaction and pleasure from exactly the same resources.

But you have to pay attention to realize these benefits. A video game can be a waste of time you participate in half-heartedly or it can be a puzzle that unlocks skills you never knew you had. Fight game enthusiasts count the frames of video in every punch and kick — something I might never even have guessed was possible. Speed-runners delve deep into a game's programming to unlock glitches which might shave a millisecond off their time. Our capacities as human beings haven't been fully explored and almost any pocket of existence can teach us about ourselves if we study it intently enough.

Most experiences offer many layers of texture, but usually we barely even register the first layer because our minds are elsewhere. Mindfulness is the chemical compound which reveals these invisible inks.

The simplest way to increase your mindfulness in any given moment is to check in with your senses. This will quiet the distracting chatter of your thoughts, which always try to carry you off to some other place, usually somewhere frustrating or annoying.

If you find yourself caught up in distant worries, notice and quietly name four things you can see, three things you can hear, two things that you can feel and one thing that you can taste or smell. We did a similar activity in the booklet on being where you are. I'm asking you to do it again, because that is how we turn ideas into habits. How we move from knowing what is good for us, to actually doing it on a regular basis. *So take a moment now to check in with your senses.* After performing this activity, you will often find your senses heightened and your experiences more satisfying for the next few minutes. This same technique can temporarily alleviate anxiety and is often taught by therapists.

An even faster trick that works for me is to simply ask myself — where are my feet? And suddenly there they are, pressed against the earth, bearing my weight; aligned above them are my bones and muscles, my flesh and skin, my spine and lungs and heart, my throat and sinuses and skull and brain and eyes — all of my body, together, connected and deeply embedded in this world.

We are going to check in with our senses one more time now — but I'd like you to take your time with it. I suggested that you should read this booklet in a place that you find pleasing or beautiful, so let's take advantage of that. First, I'm going to ask you to breathe from your belly, as we practiced in the first booklet, until you feel satisfied. Secondly, I'm going to ask you to appreciate something in your visual field until you are satisfied. If there is some source of gentle movement, leaves rippling in the wind for example, that is an excellent choice. Third, I will ask you to do the same with your other senses. Listen to the sounds around you and choose one to focus on. Feel the ground or a patch of grass or the texture of your own clothing. Is there a smell? Is there something within reach that you can taste? Engage your senses to your satisfaction and then we will talk again.

I've written these modest tasks as a list:

1. Breathe.
2. Look.
3. Listen.
4. Feel.
5. Smell and/or taste.
6. Finish reading the booklet.

Your mindfulness will never be perfect, but it doesn't have to be. I have never been able to maintain a state of mindfulness for very long, but even a short burst of deep engagement with my senses can bring a lasting boost to my mood and energy levels. Truly being present also makes ordinary moments more meaningful and beautiful.

But mindfulness isn't always an option — first we must prepare a space for it.

If our basic needs are not met, if we are unsafe or facing some trauma, mindfulness is a pipe dream. Most likely though, you at least have access to brief pockets of safety and relative tranquility. And those pockets are the perfect place to sow the seeds of mindfulness and bind your mind and body more closely to those moments of calm that do exist in your life.

Sometimes preparing space for mindfulness requires us to say no to other things. If we are too busy, pulled too many ways, mindfulness is very difficult to achieve. Consistently overbooking yourself can leave you jittery and unable to relax – in a state of constant alertness that will take some time to climb down from.

Multi-tasking is the enemy of mindfulness. The difference between keeping one eye on my daughter as if it were an errand or task and really engaging with her while she is at play is profound. Mindfulness works hand in hand with minimalism. We often seek out more and more in order to stimulate ourselves, but if we cultivate our ability to pay attention, we can find just as much stimulation in considerably less. And because this is a skill that we so rarely practice, there is a lot of low-hanging fruit still to be picked. For most people, you will find better gains in happiness if you put more effort into appreciating what you already have and less effort into obtaining more money and things.

Why this obsession with more? Partly it is advertising, partly it is ‘keeping up with the Joneses,’ but it is also vicious cycle that feeds itself. Once we start looking for that next thing, we are less rooted in the present and that depletes our appreciation of our current surroundings. People often seek out ‘more’ because they have failed to notice the life they already have and are trying shock themselves ‘awake’ with something rare or extreme or luxurious. We go out drinking at a loud and crowded club because it provides a ‘rich’ experience which fills our perceptual field – but our perceptual field is always full. We simply have to slow down until we can sense subtle gradations like the thin threads of flavour in a glass of water.

Consistently using too much salt will make it hard to discern more subtle flavours.

Drinking too much will give you a hangover.

Travelling too much will leave you numb to the gradations and undulations of your own hometown. A creek may seem dreary if we compare it to Niagara Falls, but it can be truly spectacular if we allow it to be its own world filling our senses to the brim.

So many of our vices achieve acceleration or amplification at some future cost. Some in our society even live by the peculiar motto ‘Live fast. Die young.’ Consumer debt gives us what we want right now, but we must pay for it later, with interest. Corporate debt forces companies to prioritize expansion over everything else, preventing them from settling into a sweet spot where they provide jobs and meet the needs of their community in a healthy and skillful way. Adventure travel. Extreme sports. Shock humor. The media’s frenzied race to tell a story ‘first’ instead of telling it well.

Fossil fuels work in the same way, accelerating human activity, allowing us to travel anywhere and build faster and taller while causing untold damage to future generations. They let us accomplish more things more quickly. But, as I mentioned in the first booklet, if we don’t know where we are going, speed is worse than useless – it’s dangerous.

Luckily, we aren’t forced to choose between boredom and danger; between shades of grey and blinding light. Mindfulness unlocks the bounty of modest experiences. The ‘weightlessness’ of this intensification means that these experiences take less of a toll on our minds and bodies and the world at large. If you learn to fully explore your own sensory experience, you can have everything you want without damaging yourself or your surroundings.

The hobbies and activities I mentioned above aren't always harmful. There are millions of people who drink alcohol or go rock climbing in a healthy and mindful way. In this same booklet, I spoke about the startling discoveries to be made by intensively exploring a single video game – but in my own life I have had a tendency to abuse video games and social media to the point where they are damaging rather than beneficial. We must remember to ask: 'is this hit of pleasure worth the future cost?' Am I still learning something from Twitter or has this become a compulsive search for stimulus? Am I still having fun or is it making me angry? Am I noticing the subtleties of this moment or am I overstimulating myself because I have already dulled my senses?

Mindfulness and 'being where you are' are two sides of the same coin. Mindfulness will help you appreciate what you have. Limiting your options will give you the space to be mindful. My wife and I don't own a car. Some of our friends don't understand how this is possible with a young child. Raising a child without a car means that we can't do everything. But limiting our options often results in better decisions. Sometimes we say no to a birthday party because it's simply impossible to get there and back in time for bed – but I have never regretted the quiet hours spent with my daughter playing board games or at a park. The only thing I have regretted is not being fully present at the park.

Let's look at one last example that ties all these ideas together: the leaf blower. The leaf blower is an 'improvement' on the rake. It is more expensive, louder, more polluting and it breaks more easily.

It is, however, a little bit faster.

A leaf-blower burns gasoline and makes an angry, urgent sound in order to accelerate ordinary manual labour into a hurried blur — but working with your hands is rewarding if you do it mindfully. More than anything else, digging into the materiality of the world — the smell of soil, the way a nail sinks into wood, the sound of onions sizzling in a pan — is what makes life satisfying. And yet, we are always trying to make these tasks go more quickly or passing them off to someone else.

There's a Zen koan that I remember, but cannot find in any of my books, so I offer this apocryphal recreation:

A young monk asks the master, "What is Zen?"

The master tells him to finish raking the leaves before asking such an impertinent question.

The monk goes back to his chore, raking as fast as he can, eager for his chance to ask again.

When he finishes raking the grounds of the monastery, he asks again: "What is Zen?"

The master says: "Zen is raking leaves."

The riches of this world are always right there in front of us. The challenge is to slow our mind and modulate our perceptions so that they register without being washed away by some worry or yearning or past indulgence. Instead of rushing through tasks or passing them off to others like hot potatoes, we must learn to experience them fully. The gentle rustling of the leaves, the soothing emptiness of a well-swept patch of ground, the pleasant fullness of a heap of raked leaves.

The homework for this booklet is to do a chore mindfully. This could be something you've been putting off like cleaning out a room or it could be something you do every day like washing the dishes. It could even be something as simple as taking a shower. It should be something physical, rather than an online task, and you should give yourself enough time to do it at a moderate pace instead of rushing through it.

Before you begin, take a moment to steady your breathing and make yourself present in your body. Then, while you work, try to remain in touch with your senses. If you get distracted or start thinking about something else, don't beat yourself up, simply return your mind to your task whenever you happen to notice. Mindfulness takes time to cultivate and trying to be 'perfectly' present in the moment can create its own host of problems. You don't have to be mindful at all times or perfectly present in any given moment.

As with other claims made in this book, I'm not suggesting a profound transformation or a revelation, just a habit that is moderately effective. Mindfulness probably won't change your life, but if you sometimes try to be more mindful, you will probably be somewhat more satisfied with your life. That is a very mild claim, but it has a very sweet flavor if you take the time to drink it in.



BOOKLET 5
Stop
competing

5: Stop Competing

Last year, my daughter went to a birthday party at one of those arcades with games that spit out paper tickets for trinkets. We had fun, but when we tallied up, we discovered we only had enough for some worthless lumps of plastic – until I saw that one of those lumps was a jumping frog.

And it jumped far!

My daughter loved it and she showed it off with pride.

If you compare this frog to more expensive toys, it might seem worthless. But if you play with it, if you press it and watch it leap, if you try to jump it from one table to another or into a cup, it provides hours of kinetic fascination.

But as I buckled her into our cargo bike, she noticed that a friend had even more plastic goo-gaws.

"Why did he get three things and I only got one?"

I tried to explain to her that someone else probably got even more than he did and someone else got more than that person. If we try to compare ourselves to others we will inevitably make ourselves miserable.

Instead, focus on the toy frog that you have in your hands. On its texture and heft, on the way it makes us feel, on the way it leaps through the air in a delightful arc.

Sometimes it feels as though we are pre-programmed to measure ourselves against our peers.

At work, we chase the sales leader or nervously review a coworkers CV. On social media, we compare likes and follower counts. At home, we compare our old car to the neighbour's new sedan.

Sometimes we win these comparisons and feel a little spark of triumph. Sometimes we lose and get dragged down by a pound of self-doubt. But there is a more insidious problem here – the more we compare ourselves, the more we become just a height rather than a full body rich with tones, textures, sensations and density. All our comparisons and contrasts are fundamentally empty. They are a criss-cross of chalk marks that stop us from seeing our selves and the world.

You are not a weight, a resume or a pile of possessions.

You are a human being. An immeasurable symphony. An endless sea of feelings and memories.

Everything you have ever seen or known or felt in this wide, wide world is a thought within your mind, a feeling within your soul. All of it exists again inside you. How would you even begin to measure that?

‘Not competing’ doesn’t mean you must accept your lot in life. It doesn’t mean trying to be happy about things that make you miserable. It means evaluating and improving your life based on your own feelings and perceptions. You might need a new home if you feel cramped or trapped or unsafe – but the size of your neighbour’s home has no bearing on that decision.

When you decide to stop competing, you may also start to wonder why our society is built around competition, when cooperation makes us so much happier.

‘Not competing’ means sharing and sharing is restorative. First of all, it feels good. But it also simplifies our lives and strengthens the fabric of our communities. Sharing lets us spend less time maintaining our possessions. How many lawn mowers do the people living on one block actually need? Sharing insights and skills allows us to develop new and stronger social connections.

In academia, the competition is in publications and citations. ‘Publish or perish’ they say. Even as a student, if I don’t publish and present at conferences, my chances of landing a job are slim. This tallying of publications and presentations leads some academics to focus on the quantity of their output rather than its quality. So many supposedly intelligent people are burning the candle at both ends to churn out more and more. But does anyone seriously think the problem with the world today is that we don’t have enough information? In most fields, academics should be rewarded not for producing more new information, but for making old information more accessible.

Sometimes entire cities lose themselves to competition. How else can we explain the endless succession of cities going into debt to host the World Cup or the Olympics?

Toronto keeps trying to become a ‘world-class city’ before meeting the needs of the people who live there. We built an express train from downtown to the airport to make business travelers happy even while our public transit is collapsing.

We praise the tortoise for plodding on relentlessly without ever stopping and managing to win the race – but what about the hare’s nap? Shouldn’t we be applauding the hare for finding the time for a restorative nap in the middle of the day? Sleep, after all, will make you happier than a trophy will.

In the private sector, companies are pressured to grow, grow, grow, even though this often makes their products worse. Remember how useful Facebook was when it was just a way to pop in and see what your friends were up to? Now it has become a finely-calibrated machine for increasing your ‘engagement’ by manipulating your emotions and using it is a miserable and frustrating experience.

Imagine a world where a company like Facebook, with all its influence and clever engineers could focus on simply making the best possible social media platform, the one that benefited its users most. Perhaps they would design an interface that helped you spend less time logged in, instead of more. Yes, it would be a smaller company, with less employees – but those people would be doing work they could be proud of.

All this competition, all these races to nowhere, are simply wasting our time, preventing us from taking on the challenges that are actually important to us and those around us.

‘Not competing’ doesn’t mean slacking off or accepting mediocrity – it means evaluating your performance against your own standards. In school, not competing means taking an assignment

seriously, it means wrestling with tough ideas rather than parroting back the professor's viewpoint to get the easy A.

Look very carefully at the choices you are making and be certain that the work you are doing is about more than moving up in 'rankings' of one kind or another. Are you working to meet your material needs or to advance a cause you believe in? Or are you are mainly working for imaginary points of one kind or another?

Don't worry about how many plastic trinkets your friend got, just make your frog jump and watch it fly. That sudden pop of motion is a beautiful thing in and of itself.

I have asked you to read this booklet in a particularly quiet place to help dampen the clatter of external standards, but you will never be able to avoid them for long. To really 'stop competing' you'll have to start noticing which metrics are external and competitive and which come from within. Are you doing something because you're supposed to or because you want to? I'm not advocating any kind of selfishness or dereliction of duty here – quite often what we truly want to do is to help a friend or loved one, or even a stranger, but we are reluctant because our culture has conditioned to think that competition is natural and cooperation is deviant or unusual.

Take some time to soak in the silence around you. What do you hear in your heart when all the other voices are quiet? What is something you might do, not as a step towards some future goal, but because it is valuable in and of itself?

The next booklet is about pursuing meaning directly. It will help us find our footing in a world without the clear metrics of stock prices, publication history and social media engagement.

For now, let's just take a moment to slow down and breathe. Because we always see more clearly when we hold still.

Maybe you've been practicing your breathing, maybe not. Either way, place your hand on your belly, confirm that you are breathing from your diaphragm instead of your chest, and breathe until you are satisfied.

Your homework is to perform an act of kindness of your choice – make a donation, provide a listening ear for a friend, do the dishes for your parents, share your skills free of charge – do whatever makes the most sense at this moment in your life. Help someone else with no strings attached and see how it feels. Imagine what your life would be like with more cooperation and less competition. Imagine what a society which valued cooperation over competition might be like.

Take your time. The next booklet can wait.



6: Pursuing meaning directly

Once our basic needs are met and our most urgent problems are resolved, it can be difficult to know what we actually want. Contests and competitions are appealing, in part, because they narrow the vast array of options. It is easy to see if we are progressing down a given road, but difficult to know if we are on the right road. Comparing one road to another is, as they say, like comparing apples and oranges.

But, here's the thing, you probably know if you prefer apples or oranges.

To find real treasure, stop chasing after second-hand meanings in contests and consumer goods and start pursuing your own meanings directly. X marks the spot.

What does it mean to pursue meaning directly?

Many people try to find meaning by working through a social checklist of some kind: go to school, get a job, get a car, get a house, get a family. And yes, you might well find meaning that way. Your career could well turn out to be rewarding and family life is always rich with significance, but meaning arrives within moments, not checkboxes. Meaning is in the way you solve a certain problem at work or the time spent wading in a stream with your daughter.

The important thing to recognize is that you can make your life more fulfilling by pursuing these moments directly instead of waiting for them to pop-up as the by-products of other decisions.

What do I mean by meaning? As a term, it is so broad as to be, well, meaningless. So why not use the well-worn idea of the pursuit of happiness? For many, meaningful moments will be accompanied by feelings of contentment or happiness, but I am using the word 'meaning' *because* of its breadth, because I don't know what you value or prioritize. It is quite possible, for example, to prioritize a certain moral code and end up satisfied that you have done the right thing in a given situation without being happy about the outcome. Standing up for what you believe can produce a meaningful moment even though it might not be pleasant. Meaningful experiences can be pleasurable and pleasurable experiences can be meaningful, but they are not always the same.

Precisely which moments make life meaningful?

This is a terrifying question because we worry that we will not find an answer. But ignoring this question fuels compulsive consumption and propels our pursuit of distraction.

Instead of panicking when you face this question, study those moments when you have actually felt fulfilled, as few or as plentiful as they may be. What was the character of these moments? What was your state of mind when they occurred?

Achievements, for example, are often meaningful – we are typically most satisfied when we have just accomplished something – but not always, sometimes achievements come and go with no impact at all.

The first thing to realize about meaning is that it is not a stable substance. You might set your sights on a career goal and arrive there only to feel miserable. Meaning is more like a chemical reaction – we can predict many of the ingredients, but a certain magic of temperature and fluid dynamics is necessary to make it coalesce. Meaning is itself a metaphor or a rhyme, the resonance in a moment that seals its value for all time. Real meaning courses through your mind and body and makes you feel more alive, more certain of your identity. Sometimes you feel it looking at the sky or reading a poem or smelling a simmering stew. But you could also do all those same things and feel nothing at all.

Meaning must be cultivated in order to flourish.

That might mean making sure you have a few moments to yourself before you start your day so you're in the right frame of mind to engage with other people. Or it might mean something else entirely. We must create the proper conditions. We must water and fertilize and find the right balance of sun and shade.

Pursuing meaning requires self-care – we need our mental and spiritual apparatus to be in good shape to cultivate meaning. Virginia Woolf famously said “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.” But ‘self-care’ only creates the *conditions for meaning*.

Cultivating meaning also means not overdoing it. Sometimes we overindulge in things we love until we dull our senses. We know when we have stayed too long at a party or spent too many hours working; we feel grouchy and the very activity we were so deeply engaged in a few hours ago has become a barren desert bereft of meaning.

Our frantic modern economy always wants us on our feet, eating at our desk, putting in more hours – but meaning wants the opposite. Meaning favours those who dawdle. Meaning favours those who sit and soak things in. Meaning favours those who savour.

Cultivating meaning requires us to be mindful, but it is more than that: it means planning your activities so that meaning will blossom.

There are two interlinked projects here. We must determine which meanings we value most and then begin to structure our daily lives around those things.

The first problem is hard, but it is the core of the human experience. The problem of evaluation is a fundamental philosophical problem and each person will likely have a different answer. We will try our hand at working through this problem in the final booklet, but for now, we'll work on intensifying those meaningful moments which we already sense germinating around us.

How do we structure our daily lives around meaningful experiences? One answer is rituals.

Rituals are an age-old human practice for cultivating meaning. But how do they work?

What is a ritual?

Rituals remind us to pay attention. They connect similar events, bundle together all their evocations and connotations, layering each new instance of that same event with old memories.

Some rituals are forged by ancient, collective traditions. Others are personal and idiosyncratic.

In both cases, a ritual sanctifies time.

For a moment, a ritual can focus the whole light of the cosmos onto a single activity.

Consider the practice of confession. People constantly ruminate on their shortcomings, but they do so half-heartedly, distracting themselves from those painful thoughts as soon as they arise. Confession is a ritual designed to set aside a time and space for confronting our failures. The penitent confronts what they have done and accepts it. They allow themselves to feel the fullness of their regret. And then they receive absolution.

By doing just one thing, by doing it with intention and a compelling rhythm, confession allows a person to take a mental activity that usually runs in the background and move it to centre stage where it can reach a meaningful conclusion.

Rituals remind us to pay attention.

What does it take to make a ritual? At a minimum, a ritual has a name and a familiar pattern of actions. A ritual takes an ordinary activity and elevates it above its surroundings. A ritual is like a habit, but it has been designed with meaning in mind.

Many people have family rituals such as a holiday meal or a weekly movie night. Some groups of friends develop shared rituals as well. My wife and her university friends created a holiday called First Nice Day. They go out for ice cream together to mark the first day when it warm enough to comfortably wear shorts. Sometimes, First Nice Day hits with certainty, but sometimes it requires careful augury and prognostication. Oh, how the masses rejoice when First Nice Day is declared! This one ritual manages to sanctify the seasons, their friendship and pleasant memories of youth all at once. And ice cream too!

Through repetition, the different instances of a ritual, be they daily or weekly or annual, echo and amplify one another, creating an activity that gets richer and richer with time. This is part of why holidays feel so special – they draw together memories from many different phases of our lives. As parents, our childhood memories of Halloween or Christmas are interwoven with our own children's excitement, creating a symphony of emotional tones. As individuals, we might also have simple private rituals like a daily walk. All of these rituals are important, though we should feel free to alter or adapt them when they lose their lustre. To live well, we must shape our rituals rather than being shaped by them.

When I was in the fourth grade, my parents got divorced. My father moved into a new house. My parents were calm and compassionate during the divorce, but going home from school to a new house, where all those familiar layers of emotion and memory were missing, was still strange and unsettling. One thing that helped me connect to this new world was a modest family ritual.

About once a week, my father, my younger brother and I would walk to a convenience store together, choose a treat and eat it on the walk back. There were two convenience stores to choose from, one was a little closer and one was a little farther. In general, we went to the closer one. So we started to call it the "usually store." I believe it was my younger brother – who still used language with the slapdash ingenuity of a novice – who coined the term, but my father and I adopted it intentionally, sanctifying it through repetition. The farther store soon became the 'unusually store.' Giving the two

stores nicknames made them special and that aura of significance carried over to the entire practice of walking and perusing, choosing and chewing. Because we did the same thing so often, and because it had a name, it felt comfortable and fulfilling.

Perhaps, after the other booklets, you are surprised to hear me speak about shopping in such reverent tones. Overconsumption is indeed a problem, but we all consume. So we should learn to do it mindfully. The problem arises when we believe we can satisfy ourselves by consuming *more*. How *much* we consume rarely correlates with how satisfied we feel.

Just like my startling sip of icy mint water, this modest act of consumption shared with my father and brother was so satisfying because it commanded my full attention.

Nobel-prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman will back me up here. In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* he asserts: "To get pleasure from eating, for example, you must notice it." As evidence, he discusses a study about eating habits. Kahneman "found that French and American women spent about the same amount of time eating, but for Frenchwomen, eating was twice as likely to be focal as it was for American women. The Americans were far more prone to combine eating with other activities, and their pleasure from eating was correspondingly diluted."

A 'family meal' – everyone at the table together, phones and TV off – is a simple sort of ritual, but it helps us notice our food and those we share it with.

When we are distracted, we can gobble up a whole chocolate bar without noticing – but if we make a ritual of it, we can be satisfied with a tiny sliver. Imagine yourself carefully unfolding the golden foil that protects a bar of fine chocolate. You break off a single piece, put it on your favourite plate and carry it over to an armchair. You sit down. You arrange yourself in your seat. You take a few deep breaths. Your favourite music is playing. You place the chocolate on your tongue, close your lips and allow it to slowly melt in the warm hollow of your mouth.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony, which emerged from Zen Buddhism, takes this ritualization of consumption to another level entirely, prescribing every detail down to the shape of the movements the host must use to wash the cups and implements before he or she serves the guests. There is much to be learned about living from this carefully crafted practice. The sequence of the ceremony gives each object and moment its due – both the host and the guests are expected to pay careful attention. The guests watch as the tea is prepared. The steps of the ritual remind them to engage all their senses and bring their entire selves to the cup of tea. Even the cups are carefully selected and guests are expected to examine them and perhaps comment on them at an appropriate moment.

But the tea ceremony tradition also allows for different levels of formality and adapts to the seasons and locations. Some moments call for just enough ritualization to bring our full attention to the flavour of our food.

To be satisfied, we must understand that consuming things doesn't produce satisfaction directly – there is an additional layer to this alchemical reaction. We must pay attention while we consume and we must be in the proper mental space to appreciate the sensations which sparkle within us.

The pleasures of consumption happen when we perceive things, when we caress them with our sensory apparatus. We don't always need to deplete the things we consume.

What location have you chosen as the destination for today's walk? What drew you to this site? Look at it now. Really soak it in. Is it something small or is it an expansive view? What palette of colours has the artist chosen? What is the rhythm of light and dark that is spread out before you?

What a strange miracle it is to have something beautiful filling our mind and yet still entirely outside of us. A magical, weightless kind of consumption takes place when we merely look at something.

Bird watching. People watching. Looking at the clouds. Listening to rain on the roof. Studying a painting in a museum. Solving a riddle. These are all acts of 'consumption' which leave their source material entirely untouched. This type of sensory pleasure is particularly fertile ground for ritual because we can return to it again and again without using up its fuel.

Renewing our Activities and Possessions with Ritual

I would like to share a modest ritual which vastly multiplies the pleasure my daughter and I receive from a little rubber toy which might otherwise have lain unnoticed in the bottom of her toy box.

Each night, before I go to sleep, I hide a little Where's Waldo figurine somewhere in our house.

Each morning, while I'm waiting for the coffee to percolate, my daughter goes hunting. Sometimes Waldo is on a bookshelf camouflaged by a red and white picture book. Sometimes he bravely ascends up into a light fixture. On other days, Waldo ventures into a potted plant or gets trapped in a jar of marbles. Sometimes he is completely out of sight, waiting to surprise my daughter when she unzips her backpack.

We try to shake up our lives by buying new things but using an old thing in a new way often does a better job of delivering the invigorating dose of novelty that we are seeking. Waldo is a chunk of plastic, an eminently forgettable commodity – but the way my daughter and I have chosen to use him makes him shiny and new every single morning. The small spark of creativity required to choose a different hiding place night after night also makes this ritual more personal than a string of store-bought toys could ever be.

We spend a lot of time thinking about what we will buy, how we will pay for it, whether we ought to get it delivered or not, but we spend relatively little time planning how we will use the things we already have. Which overlooked moments could you turn into enriching little rituals? A morning coffee? A walk with your dog? A weekly lunch? You may already have personal rituals which make your life more meaningful. Naming them and taking them seriously as rituals can make them even more fulfilling.

How to Make a Ritual From Everyday Experiences

First of all, you should name your rituals. The name can be vague or plain or playful or grandiose. *I'm sorry, I can't hear you, this is 'Mama's Moment of Chocolate.'* When we identify something as a ritual, it reminds us to pay attention.

Make sure that some aspect of your ritual is consistent and distinct from the rest of your daily rhythm. Maybe you have your morning coffee on the porch. Maybe you have a special hat for gardening. Maybe you always put your piece of chocolate on the same little saucer that you inherited from your grandmother. Using special objects and doing things in special places reminds your body that a certain activity is significant.

Be yourself. Examine how you feel while you are participating in your little moment and adjust the details until your ritual is as unusual as you are. I like whimsy and surprise – so hiding Waldo and imagining him peering out of his hiding spot with his little binoculars is enjoyable for me. If you enjoy the feeling of carpet under your feet, take your shoes off during your coffee break. This is your moment, design it in a way that *you* find fulfilling.

Use all your senses. Don't just drink your coffee: smell it, cradle the warm mug in the palm of your hand. Turn off the radio and the fan and enjoy the silence.

Micro-rituals

We can also create micro-rituals to remind us to be where we are. In the booklet on paying attention to sensations, I suggested that you ask yourself 'where are my feet' in order to re-engage with your body, but there are any number of possible techniques. When we go out to a restaurant, my wife closes her eyes and imagines herself eating different items on the menu before she places her order. When the food arrives at the table, she picks up her plate and smells her meal before she disturbs it with her cutlery. These little rituals help her appreciate dining out more thoroughly than I do with my unfortunate tendency to gobble up my food while worrying about politics or the environment.

Not everything can be a ritual – that would become exhausting in its own way – but building a few special moments into each day can turn a week that seems to rush past in a blur into a string of jewels.

A New Ritual for New Year's

Your homework is to begin a very simple household ritual.

First, get an empty jar and a few scraps of paper. Then, take a moment to think of a few enjoyable moments from the past week or month. Write them on the scraps of paper, fold them up and put them on the jar. Keep doing this every few days or weeks, collecting little pleasures for yourself.

On New Year's Eve or Day, open the jar and eat up all those pleasant memories like a box of chocolates.

It is important to be grateful for what pleasures we do encounter in our lives, but the world is full of very real problems as well and positive thinking won't solve everything.

The next booklet is about pain and suffering and what to make of it.

Sources and Further Reading

Kahneman, D.,. (2011). Thinking, fast and slow. Toronto : Doubleday Canada.

This book presents a very clear-eyed and detailed view of the quirks of human thought and it has been very helpful to me. More than anything, it serves as a useful reminder that information, in and of itself, rarely impacts people's behaviour. If we want to impact others, we have to move beyond listing facts and engage with the actual operations of the human brain – not some imagined ideal mind left over from the Enlightenment. On the lighter side, the book is also a fascinating compendium of hilarious glitches and predictable malfunctions in our information processing capacities.

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7: The Good Wound

Welcome back.

I need to share a painful truth.

It is not the only painful truth in our broken world – the good wound takes many forms for there are many painful truths – but it is the one that has cut me most deeply.

Climate change will be horrific even in the best-case scenarios. The world's corals, the source of all the gorgeous underwater visions you saw on TV as a child, are surely dead, destined to be wiped off the face of the earth forever, probably in the next twenty years. Arctic environments and the animals that depend on them likely face the same fate. Humans too, often the poorest and most vulnerable, will be battered by an unending sequence of droughts, fires, famines and floods. Our great forests will die off, leaving only little pockets of their former fertility. Within our lifetimes, our planet will be expunged of the impossibly filigreed and boisterous variation that has emerged from many millions of years of evolution. More species will go extinct than you can even name.

This booklet isn't about climate change in particular, but the climate crisis is a potent example of the good wound, because those who have thought long and hard about it find it almost unimaginably painful. For me, this knowledge is like being stabbed. But the blood that pours out is so fertile that a thousand flowers spring forth from every drop. The good wound is a deep gash bleeding molasses.

Remember, I'm not just talking about climate change here, but rather all the pains that come from being a living breathing human being capable of empathy and emotion.

If you don't turn away from the good wound, if you let yourself actually feel it, the world will be gentle with you, it will open up in all its delicacy and hold you tight.

Why? Because a cut that deep makes all the beauty of this fragile world achingly real. There really are squids that sparkle like jewellery and caterpillars dependent on a single species of flower and micro-organisms that make the ocean glow at night and birds that go months without landing even once, feeding on insects they pluck from the air. Trees really do stay rooted in place and grow through storms and wars and weddings and technological breakthroughs. Whales really do float alone in the depths of the ocean and sing to each other across impossible distances.

And all of that beauty really is at risk.

That is what the good wound is. Our world is broken in so many ways both systemic and horrifically personal – racism, colonialism, poverty, child abuse, mental illness, innumerable family tragedies, true loves who died too young – yet people carry on. Some people are in so much pain that they go weeks or even years without registering the beauty of this world. And yet, even for them, occasionally, the clouds

open and the sun shines and they taste a fresh strawberry or hear the freedom of their youth in a little scrap of melody.

I have read about parents whose children were diagnosed with a terminal illness. A truth that struck their world like a thunderbolt, splitting everything in half, leaving both scorched earth too painfully hot to touch and the immeasurable, bottomless beauty of those shared moments that still remained.

When Leonard Cohen sang:

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That is how the light gets in.*

– he was describing the good wound.

The people I have met who let themselves feel the pain of the world are so brave and kind and patient. Sometimes they are too exhausted to get out of bed, but they are waiting for you with words of sympathy and good humour. We will hold each other while the earth dies and we will fight for every inch of forest, every child, every extra moment of vitality – because so much is still alive, so much is still thriving. There are so many bells that still can ring.

There is a risk that people will misinterpret what I have said here. They will misremember my words, focus on the fact that the world is doomed and cannot be saved. They will convince themselves that I am saying that pain and injustice are inevitable or necessary, that we should accept them and focus on what is pleasant.

But that is the very opposite of what I am saying.

What I am saying is that if you are not split in half by pain, you have hardened your heart so much that you may also be incapable of seeing real beauty. Pain is the price of opening your heart to the world and accepting that everyone and everything is just as real as you.

Living inside a false paradise is its own kind of oblivion.

Pain and injustice should be redressed wherever possible, but that begins with empathy. So many injustices would be so easy to prevent if more people – especially those with wealth and power – allowed themselves to feel pain.

This treasure map does not lead to a new age paradise populated with motivational speakers who preach the gospel of entrepreneurialism or energy crystals. This treasure map starts from the assumption that the world is impossibly cruel. We must be careful that we don't perform so much 'self-care' that we shut the world out, building ourselves idyllic little 'retreats' while other living, breathing, impossibly perfect human beings are starving just outside the gates.

If it weren't for the good wound, I could keep these little tips about mindfulness to myself, go to the park with my daughter, dig in our backyard container garden, try to polish each jewel of a moment so that it gleams as brightly as possible and completely ignore the rest of the cosmos. And it would be easy

to do, because I am relatively privileged. I could simply buy my groceries, pay my rent and turn off the news. But I haven't done that because remaining open to the world, even when it is painful, is at the core of truly living.

Children are locked in lightless basements for years on end because their parents are themselves so raw with pain that they cannot show kindness. And, worse still, there are more children like this than you could rescue in a lifetime even if that was all that you did.

You must choose which wounds you try to heal and which wounds you leave for others to mend.

When to Heal Yourself and When to Heal the World

These booklets began with breathing and beauty and bike rides, not because I am coaching you to arrange a perfect little tea party but because you must heal yourself and build your strength a little before you can help others. As with everything, your healing doesn't need to be perfect, it simply needs to be good enough. You do not ever need to be your 'best self,' you simply need to be strong enough to put in some work without further damaging your mental or physical well-being.

When I am resisting pain, when I am struggling against it and trying to protect myself, I am a distracted and irritable father, but when I have taken the time to really let myself feel it and pass through to the other side, I become so kind and gentle and loving.

When your pain is too much to bear, protect yourself and take time to recuperate. But, if your pain is bearable, you should sit with it.

My treasure map starts and ends in a broken world and promises only fleeting glimpses of peace and beauty. You can go searching for a more lasting harmony if you want, but you will not find it.

Accepting that there will always be pain for others and for yourself is the essence of the good wound. Once again, I want to assure you that this does not mean that we should not seek to prevent or alleviate pain. The good wound is not nihilism. With climate change, I only found my footing again, when I accepted that we had already lost. We can no longer preserve the world we were born into. But right alongside this realization stood the simple fact that every degree of warming we prevent still matters immensely. Each ton of carbon dioxide we keep in the ground still matters deeply. Any individual's personal efforts will keep a few animals alive, keep some ice from melting – perhaps even save a species from extinction.

When we abandon the all or nothing thinking of 'solving climate change' or 'saving the world,' our actions – giving up beef, convincing a friend to try a staycation, convincing our city councilor to put in a bike lane near our home – become victories instead of failures. And other wounds work the same way. You cannot fix the whole world, but each moment of peace that you do create or maintain is real and meaningful.

Forget your Perfect Offering

Some people respond to the good wound by seeking perfection. They want to heal everything.

But, as I tell my wife again and again, the perfect is the enemy of the good.

Abandoning – or at least curtailing – the search for perfection will prevent you from putting too much pressure on the small achievements in your life.

See them for what they are.

Let good things be good enough.

Your child's seventh birthday doesn't have to make up for all the pain they will face in the future, your garden doesn't have to be a picture-perfect retreat completely free of 'weeds', the card you send to a bereaved friend doesn't have to make up for their loss. Every human act can and will be insufficient, but they are all still beautiful. Enjoy beauty and restful moments, but don't expect them to heal you completely. Beauty will come and go and come again. So will pain.

Everything Dies

Sometimes I think our search for perfection is psychologically tied to our fear of death. We can never get enough because we know it will all be lost in the end. But the fact that you will die does not erase all the good things in your life. As the song says:

'They can't
take that
away
from us...'

When I was younger, I grappled time and time again with the idea of mortality, the idea that all of this could end. The idea of death was suffocating.

But then, in my early thirties, a high school friend was diagnosed with brain cancer. Still a young man himself, with a wife and child, he faced the very real prospect of death. He lived in another city and I had barely spoken to him in years, but the news still shook me up. We had been very close and shared many good moments in our teenage years. I attended a fundraiser organized by friends and family and followed his online updates closely.

Then, one day, while walking to the subway, I was struck by an actual epiphany. Though my friend seemed young, he had travelled, he had loved, he had read widely, he had cultivated a deep personal connection to the wilderness and spent long stretches of time soaking himself in the beauty of the natural world. In a few decades, he had lived more than most people in human history. And I had too. If I were struck down that day, I would have no complaints. I had not seen or done everything I wanted to, but I had seen and tasted many things, I had experienced love and mastered some skills and made the lives of those around me a little bit better.

After treatment, my friend's cancer went into remission. His supporters breathed a sigh of relief and went back to their regularly scheduled programming, but I had been changed by the experience. Although he never knew it, watching his tribulations had dissolved the looming terror I had always felt when I considered my own mortality.

I'm not trying to claim that I will face my own death fearlessly. I will writhe and beg and hope for a little more if I ever face a clear timeline. But death in the abstract, the mere fact of my finitude, no longer

frightens me. When I die, the tapestry of my life will be folded up end to end and all of it will be removed from this world, exactly as it was, to exist and not exist, with all its moments completely intact.

And that is enough for me.

Born Alone, Die Alone

But accepting one's own mortality only helps a tiny bit when someone we love dies. The death of a loved one is a different kind of wound.

We can see our loved ones and speak to them but we can never feel exactly what they feel or enter into their existence. That baffling, unbridgeable gap is another form of the good wound. Another kind of pain which somehow makes each person's existence even more achingly significant.

When people die, an entire universe disappears.

I often recall a memory my grandfather shared with me, mainly because I'm not sure if anyone else in the entire world is aware that it even happened. My grandfather told me about this moment when he was a child, riding in the backseat of a car, looking out the window at a pre-WWII Norway, still something of a backwater, only half-exposed to the 'development' and 'modernity' that had swept through much of Europe. At this one moment in time, up a very steep slope, my grandfather saw a farmhouse and outside that farmhouse was a child, even younger than himself, tied to a pole with a long rope so that he wouldn't tumble down the mountainside while his parents worked.

In all likelihood, that child is also dead now and that moment may exist only in mind – and now in yours. The full richness of that moment, the warmth of the sun, the tiny mountain flowers, all of it has been scoured down to the thinnest sliver, a memory of words spoken by my grandfather. What happened to the rest of that day? Where has that big, thick brushstroke of a moment gone? It gives me vertigo.

Each person is a world unto themselves. Each day of their life is completely overflowing with moods and colours and desires. So how can it be that all that can disappear? Where does it go? Why can I not travel there and experience it for myself?

Accepting that we are all born alone and will all die alone is frightening and painful. But oh how kind we can be when we remind ourselves that every single human being is facing this same horror. We are each trapped in our own world. Spoken words and shared beliefs and physical contact – even between lovers or parents and their children – can only ever partially bridge that gap. But the fact that the gap is unbridgeable makes those gestures more beautiful, not less. It makes them braver, kinder, more gut-wrenchingly honest.

Our separation from one another is also what allows us to exist in the immense and vibrant way that we do. If we could actually reach across that border we would be washed away. Because each of our experiences is bottomless. Each of our worlds is already full. We can see and feel and love *because* our experience has limits. If we saw and felt *everything*, we would no longer feel anything in the way we understand it now, because the infinite is inhuman. It is a blinding white light with no shadows or nuance.

But what am I saying? Am I really claiming that our experiences are both 'bottomless' and fundamentally defined by their finitude? Isn't that incoherent?

Let me explain what I mean in terms of music.

For music to work there must be a variety of tones. And tones can only be distinct if they are finite. If there were some sort of perfect, infinite tone, we wouldn't be able to hear anything else. There couldn't be music. It's the same with people. We can only ever get a glimpse of who our loved ones are, we can only gain this slender, negligible foothold, because if we saw everything we wouldn't have space in which to be ourselves. Mortality is the cost of being finite and the finite is the only possible language of beauty. That is how the light gets in.

These insights about mortality have been helpful to me – they are mantras that I can recite when my mind is gnawing away obsessively at the bitter knot of life and death. Perhaps they will help you too, but, ultimately, they are just words, they are not your lived experience. They are philosophical sleight of hand, formulas that solve a challenging equation. The good wound – the actual feeling of loss – cuts even deeper.

There is something else about being finite that I didn't understand until I was ripped open by the good wound. And this is a truth that you have likely experienced before and will almost certainly experience again. The real beauty of mortality is knowing that you are finite and then tentatively reaching across the chasm of finitude and providing a welcome touch to some other finite being. The real beauty of mortality is reaching out to other people again and again even though it is impossible to connect with them with any certainty. The real heart-breaking music of life is that so many of us, humans and animals and trees alike, continuously reach across that gap and nourish each other so that another generation of imperfect, finite beauty can unfurl itself in time.

Reaching across that gap hurts. Doing it again and again and again hurts a lot. But the only alternative is to spend your life comforting yourself with whatever paper sculptures you are able to construct on your side of the gap. That is a thin and monotone existence. If that is all that you can bear, I understand, because the pain of the good wound is too much for me at times as well. But if you have the strength, I urge you to reach out through the thorns and pick another rose.

She's Too Sensitive

Some people are drawn to the gaps like moths to flames. For some people, the countless gaps between our own experience and other living beings shimmer constantly. These people have been cut deeply by the good wound. They spark and throb with empathy and want to shelter everyone and everything. We often say that these people are "too sensitive."

What a strange thing to say! We don't say 'his vision is too good' or 'her hearing is too precise.'

Empathy and emotion are a form of perception. Sensitivity means that you are capable of perceiving deeply. Being sensitive means that your world is deeper and more richly defined than the world of someone whose heart and mind have hardened.

Be Suspicious of 'Perfect' Worlds

Most ideologies propose some perfect order and then find a reason why that perfection has not yet been realized: 'original sin' or 'money' or 'interference in the market' or something else entirely.

Ideologies sever you from reality and leave you adrift in a flimsy lie that is only as deep as the paper it is printed on. On the other hand, accepting that the world is broken and that you are responsible for healing it even though this work will never be completed creates a wide, well-trafficked bridge between your life and the world in all its endless, fractured, bleeding beauty.

Cracks are a Home for Roots

Allowing yourself to feel the pain of the world will connect you to it in a way that other worldviews and emotional arrangements cannot.

You are as expansive as your perceptions.

The mind is an idea of the body.

Be where you are. Even if it hurts.

When you feel pain that is not your own, you become rooted in the world and you grow a little bit larger. The world becomes your body and your body becomes the world. If you live only for yourself, seeking out wealth and promotions and plastering your name on books and buildings to keep yourself alive, everything you own or build will be wiped away, but if you live for others, even non-human others, you will become part of a system bigger and more beautiful than yourself. You will not live forever, but the world that you love will.

When Old Men Plant Trees

*“A society grows great
when old men plant trees
whose shade they know
they will never sit in.”*

Though the origins of this expression are unclear, planting trees for the benefit of future generations has a long history in human culture both as a concept and as a practice. When you feel the good wound, you truly feel the pain of future generations or distant others and you will spend your life planting trees to shade them exactly as though you were soothing your own pain. In doing so, you will become part of the world in a way that you never would if you were constantly building empty palaces for yourself or simply keeping yourself entertained.

Trees provide shade and nourishment for other living things without question and without complaint. When they die, their bodies feed multitudes of tiny beings. Trees are more noble than any monarch. They are also very, very good at being where they are. The final booklet will be about trees, about bathing in the oceanic flickering of their leaves, but before we come to that lovely little grove, we will examine how the individual changes – like increased mindfulness and being where we are – might connect to broader social shifts which emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Your homework is to reach across the gap between yourself and others and try to soothe some pain or heal a wound. You don't have to succeed, you only have to try. Have a heart-to-heart with a friend or relative on the phone. Write a letter to a city councillor about one of the countless injustices in your city. The reason I asked you to read this booklet after visiting a broken place in your neighbourhood was to get you thinking about which wounds need healing and which wounds you are equipped to heal. You

may well choose to address something else. Perhaps, like me, you have already have a wound that burns constantly. If so, work on putting out the flames that are burning you.

The second part of your homework, after you try your hand at soothing one particular point of pain, is to let that be enough for now. You cannot heal all the pain in the world. You will feel pain again and you will have to soothe it and then you will feel more pain. But if you have performed one well-considered act of healing, then that is more than enough for one day. So let it be enough.

The perfect is the enemy of the good.

Sources and Further Reading

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BOOKLET 8
After
the
Pandemic

8: The Good Wound

This booklet was written during the first summer of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before the exhaustion and anger really set in, before all the political parties had done their polling and determined how to spin each new development, Covid-19 felt surreal and unsettling, as though huge changes, both good and bad, loomed on the horizon. You may be reading it in a different historical moment. Even now, as I edit this, things feel less open-ended. We are still debating whether we should 'build back better' or 'get back to normal,' but in practice it feels as though many things will simply go back to the way they were before. As you read this, I want you to remember that initial shock, when it felt as though any institution might suddenly collapse or turn on a dime. In some ways, this has always been true. Institutions and cultural patterns only exist because we uphold them with our day-to-day behaviour. If we all choose to walk away, they will dissolve like a cloud that has been abandoned by its water droplets.

So far, these booklets have discussed personal experiences and daily habits. But individual behaviours are constrained by broader social systems. In the same way that a self-help book which doesn't acknowledge suffering can only create a false paradise, a self-help book which doesn't acknowledge systemic forces makes success into a personal responsibility when it is obviously a shared project. The two-way relationship between daily habits and broader social systems is of particular interest right now because it has been turned upside down by the global pandemic. In my own little household, we have had to figure out a new way of getting groceries and learn to make do without public transit. My wife is giving piano lessons online. In some areas, we are struggling, in others we are finding pleasant surprises. Daily habits that seemed set in stone have been completely undone, leaving a mess of loose threads. Politicians and business leaders are looking closely at all those loose threads and wondering how to weave them back together.

If I could advise them on how to build back after the pandemic, I would tell them this: getting pleasure, meaning and satisfaction from our experience is a craft and it is one that we can get better at. Human beings are not only capable of getting more out of less, in many cases it is actually the optimal path to happiness. There are major gains to be made here with very little effort because we, as a society, have just continued making more and more instead of examining how best to use what we already have.

I once saw a tweet begging the universe for a monthly subscription service which would simply send an empty box each month to be filled with things that would be taken away without guilt or questions. Even while many of us struggle to access things that we need, most of us also have too much. Too many things. Too many options. Too many appointments. Too much information. Too much garbage.

For individuals, it might be beneficial to take a hiatus from consumer culture while you explore the things you already have or that are available to you for free.

But what does it mean for our broader economic and social systems? The message here for policy makers is this: We don't need more things. We must put the things we already have to better use.

Let's look, for a moment, at two of the primary values of modern society: wealth and choice.

Wealth and choice are valuable if you've been deprived of them, but they offer rapidly diminishing returns. By setting them up as primary values, by assuming that they are inherently good, we have created all sorts of problems for ourselves.

CHOICE – In *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz lays out the mental and emotional burden of our ever proliferating options. Choices tax our brain and spawn regrets. You want the freedom to make choices on important issues – but our society forces us to weigh the merits of a hundred types of breakfast cereal. To cope with this excess, we settle into routines, picking the same 'good enough' option again and again to avoid the mental cost of choosing. Under the circumstances, this is a wise choice, but when so many of us are using this strategy en masse it can lead to path dependencies which are dangerous to the system as a whole. As more people turn to these easy options, the system responds, reinforcing those choices and making them even easier and more accessible. This creates a world that is comfortable enough for individuals but which looks, from the outside, like a horrific plague of cookie-cutter families shopping in identical strip malls.

Paradoxically, endless choices create a world where everything is the same.

MONEY – Research shows that the connection between money and happiness breaks down when income exceeds \$75 000, give or take. Beyond that, a raise probably has no impact on your happiness. And, even more interesting, Daniel Kahneman – who I have mentioned before and who is definitely worth reading – argues that most of the emotional benefit of money derives from its capacity to shelter us from suffering – not from any ability to make us happy. Divorces, illnesses and disasters still reduce the happiness of wealthy people, but the impact is muted because they are able to get themselves back on their feet more quickly.

But why don't our systems respond properly if we live in a world of choice? Shouldn't people just choose, one by one, whatever is best for them? If wealth doesn't make us happy, why don't people stop hustling once they have enough and leave some wealth on the table for those who need it more?

Why can't we all just slow down and enjoy what we already have?

Relentless competition and a loud and flashy culture have disturbed the social soil and made it difficult for simplicity to take root.

The world is too noisy and we are all struggling to make ourselves heard. Wealthy Youtubers work themselves to emotional breakdowns because they are afraid the algorithm will hide their future content if they take a week off. In academia, where there is already too much to read, people are pressured to publish more and more. This is why I have recommended that you stop competing and

focus instead on discerning your own goals. But good god it's hard to find the time and space to taste subtle flavours in our bustling, cacophonous world. And what can I possibly say to make things quieter?

Nothing. I can only add to the din.

Social Disruption and Social Change

In a world of excessive options, most of us stick with existing habits because the mental cost of evaluating all the possible alternatives is too high. Only occasionally does a new possibility break through the din of marketing and rhetoric. Food marketers often focus on children – branding juice or bread with tie-ins to popular cartoons – because children are not locked into routines yet. But outside of these precisely targeted strategies, when are people likely to actually change their daily behaviours?

During a shock or a disruption.

Research into food consumption in Europe suggests that a 'shock' plus the existence of small-scale alternatives leads large numbers of people to change habits. Miele and Murdoch (2004) found that in both the organic food movement in the UK and the slow food movement in Italy, food scares were a key driver of broader adoption of 'alternative' food practices. Concerns about mad cow disease in beef and salmonella in tomatoes caused people to consider how their food was produced – leading them to change daily shopping habits which might never have been consciously re-evaluated otherwise.

Why does it take a shock? Because of 'path-dependency.' Basically, it takes effort to get out of the rut created by our customary behaviours. The better option has to be *much* better than the current option for us to switch and, when large systems are involved, it has to be *much better for most people*. There are keyboard layouts that allow us to type faster – but the cost of learning to type on a new keyboard is quite high when compared with the advantages so people buy computers with the key layout they're used to and new generations learn to type on inferior keyboards. Path dependency is a major stumbling block for positive change – whether it is in terms of life satisfaction, sustainability or social justice.

But a shock can disrupt path dependency. Salmonella scares made people re-evaluate the whole food system. When a transit strike shut down London's subway system, many people were forced to re-evaluate their commute. Afterwards, researchers discovered that many who tried new routes *stuck with the new routes even after the strike*. According to Larcom, Rauch & Willems (2015) many commuters "had failed to find their optimal journey before the strike."

Right now, most of us are facing an unprecedented disruption and re-evaluating our daily activities.

The shock and forced reflection of this pandemic are horrific. But we must be intentional about which industries and activities we restart and which we do not. This lull is an opportunity that we must not waste. We should be in no hurry to get back to 'normal.'

Our vast engines of wealth production must be reconsidered, especially when they are pumping out products which make us less, rather than more, happy. Why are we working so hard to make apps more addictive? Why are we constantly promoting foods which harm us instead of nourishing us?

But, the CEOs and politicians are quick to object, if we make less things, there won't be any jobs!

In part, we can simply work less – perhaps bolstered by a 4-day work week and/or a basic income – taking the extra time to be with our families or pursue hobbies, to craft personal pleasures. Beyond that, it is time to turn our productive capacity away from the desires of the wealthy to the *needs* of the average person. The guiding question should be: what do we actually need?

The value of such a shift becomes especially obvious when we recall that *wealth doesn't produce happiness beyond its ability to produce stability*. Happiness is something we craft for ourselves with patience and awareness once our basic needs are met. Happiness should be a personal project and our shared social project should focus on basic needs. Every unmet need is work to be done. Every child struggling in school. Every parent struggling with anger. Every block without shade. Every lonely elder. Every hungry mouth. Every tired caregiver. A stable climate is a basic need. Robust mental health services are a basic need. Freedom from racism is a basic need. These are big, challenging, collective projects. There is plenty of work to do.

This is a self-help book, not a political manifesto. I'm not going to make any policy recommendations here. But trying to increase our personal wellness without considering how our experiences fit into the larger system is problematic. The ideas I have shared in these booklets about mindfulness and meaning suggest that we, as a society, would see the best results if our economy focused not on maximizing pleasure but on minimizing suffering. After all, creativity makes us happier than consumption – we are likely to get a deeper, more lasting joy inventing a game with a friend than we can from a packaged product we consume alone. Maximizing meaning and pleasure should be a personal journey rather than a field of opportunity for mendacious marketers and shady salespeople.

Those who relied on noisy clubs or trips abroad for stimulation may be feeling a sort of withdrawal during the pandemic, but turning down the volume on our stimulation can increase our sensitivity and curiosity. Since the pandemic began, my daughter has finally found enough time to properly appreciate the toys she received for Christmas – toys which were completely excessive in a world where her schedule was always full and are *still* more than she needs even in a world of long afternoons.

If there is any good to be found in the pandemic we have just passed through, it may be that we have all gone through something of sensory detox. Cutting down on salt will increase your tongue's perceptive capacities and the pandemic may have a similar impact. Certainly, this collective abstinence was excessive. We need to be around other people to be happy and healthy. But rather than immediately gorging ourselves on all the experiences we've been denied for so long, we should add them back in gradually, truly savouring each returning moment and gaining a better understanding of what we need to be satisfied and which things we only thought we wanted.

The skills and principles I have shared in these booklets – being where you are, appreciating small pleasures, crafting private rituals – are useful during lockdowns and quarantines, but they will also be useful when we try to rebuild our culture and society after the virus.

We can build a more meaningful and satisfying society if we turn our attention away from material goods and toward emotional and sensory skill. Sensory experiences have unexplored depth. There is a level of skill or craft in experiencing a food or landscape. Outside of small pockets of 'connoisseurship,' we almost never discuss this aspect of our experience.

Do remember the lightly-flavoured water from booklet four? I would like to touch on it again in order to reinforce it in your thoughts. It has become such a touchstone in my own approach to the world that I refer to it, only half-jokingly, as the Parable of Flavoured Water.

One day last summer, trying to stretch the bottled apple juice we had purchased for my daughter, I filled a jug with tap water, threw in a few mint leaves and some of the wild strawberries that have invaded our garden, then added ice and about an inch of apple juice.

What a sensation.

It was cool and pure and quenched my thirst, but there were also these tiny threads of flavour, little minuets dancing just outside of certainty. People go gaga over expensive wine for the very same reason — subtle scents and flavours that force you to pay attention. But we can achieve the same effect with less. Crushing a sprig of lavender between our thumb and forefinger. Taking a long look at the patchwork of luminous hues in the windows of an apartment building at night.

Competition pushed much of our society in the opposite direction. Packaged foods have more and more seasoning every year, as though it were an arms race. Have you ever tried Sweet Chili Heat Doritos? It's like being punched in the eye. Eating foods with too much salt and sugar can dull your senses, making it harder to appreciate the subtle flavours that really make food magical. Instead, take simple, humble tap water — a miracle in itself — and add a few slices of cucumber or a splash of juice and be amazed at how perceptive you really are.

This happens within you, weightlessly, without leaving any footprints. This intensification of experience is a magical kind of consumption: it increases satisfaction and pleasure from exactly the same resources.

You will notice that all this pleasure was derived by adding the slightest hint of flavor to tap water. A basic need which is still out of reach for many. Even in a wealthy country like Canada many people — especially Indigenous people — lack access to clean tap water.

Why are we busying ourselves designing and building smart TVs and artificial grass and luxury yachts when so many people don't even have tap water? So many people have to do this sort of toxic busy work because those are the career opportunities which have been presented to them by our larger social systems.

Let us use this involuntary detox from consumption to our advantage and teach people to appreciate simplicity again. When we rebuild, let us try to rebuild the richest, most meaningful world possible with less energy and less materials. This refocusing of both our individual practices and our broader systems has the potential not only to provide stability to billions of people who didn't have it before the pandemic, but also to make each and every one of us happier and more fulfilled.

This booklet can be summarized in two key points:

- 1) Getting pleasure from our experience is a craft and one that we can get better at.
- 2) As a society, instead of offering an endless and overwhelming palette of pre-packaged pleasures, we should focus on meeting basic needs and allow people to increase their own pleasure by practicing the craft of getting more out of less.

Your homework for this booklet is to help someone else meet their basic needs. That might mean volunteering in a food bank, it might mean reaching out to a friend or relative who has been socially isolated, it might mean donating to an organization that is working to provide clean water or writing to a politician demanding it. As usual, you know better than I do what will work for you.

Sources and Further Reading

Larcom, S., Rauch, F., & Willems, T. (2015). The upside of London Tube strikes (No. 455). Centre for Economic Performance, LSE.

Montgomery, C. (2013). Happy city: Transforming our lives through urban design. Macmillan.

This book that first alerted me to the impact of the London transit strike on commuting habits. It is absolutely crammed full of interesting tidbits about the intersections between social systems, daily life and happiness and is well worth reading in full.

Schwartz, B. (2004, January). The paradox of choice: Why more is less. New York: Ecco.

Kahneman, D.,. (2011). Thinking, fast and slow. Toronto : Doubleday Canada.

This is the second time I've cited this book and for good reason: Kahneman's book presents an extensive study of the predictable failures of human rationality fleshed out with descriptions hundreds of fascinating experiments into the quirks of the human brain. In fact, Kahneman's debunking of the 'rationality' of the human mind was influential in my thinking about the format of these booklets. I have asked you to do so many things because we all know how easy it is to read a convincing argument, accept it as true, and then do absolutely nothing as a result.

Miele, M. and Murdoch J. (2004). "A new aesthetic of food? Relational reflexivity in the 'alternative' food movement." In Qualities of food. Harvey M., McMeekin A. and Warde A. (Eds.), . New York: Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave.

Callon, M., Méadel, C., & Rabeharisoa, V. (2002). The economy of qualities. Economy and society, 31(2), 194-217.

This article is dense and academic, but brilliant. It develops the argument that the array of qualities we find in modern merchandise are developed socially by consumers, designers, marketers and product professionals such as wine reviewers. This article also brought to my attention just how clever it is to have promotions aimed at children (like free toys) on foods which are consumed by the whole family.

Freegrassy.net

Unfortunately, Freegrassy.net is just one of hundreds of places to start learning about communities that lack access to basic necessities. Grassy Narrows is an Indigenous community in Ontario which has been devastated by decades of mercury poisoning in its rivers and soils. The mercury was left by an old pulp

and paper facility and the Canadian government at all levels has fought hard to avoid providing proper compensation or remediation. Many other Indigenous communities across so-called Canada also lack access to clean water and many of them have been under boil water advisories for decades.

Environmental racism is such a pervasive problem that there are many possible starting points for your reading. You might begin by simply googling the Flint Water Crisis, The Bhopal Gas Tragedy or the Aamjiwnaang First Nation and informing yourself about what is going on around you.



Booklet 9: Trees

We began with breathing and we end way up in the branches of the trees.

Frenetic little primates that we are, we must remember to slow our breathing. But trees are the definition of slow and steady.

In many ways, trees mirror our lungs. While we take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, their alchemical miracle is inverted, absorbing carbon dioxide and expelling oxygen. Think, for a moment, about exactly what is happening in your lungs and in those green, green leaves. Molecules binding and releasing, exchanging places like gleaming coins in a continuous sleight of hand, these embroidered fringes between earth and sky, solid and gas, silently fluttering inside every living being.

There are also symmetries in their shapes. The windpipe like a trunk leading down into the branching chambers of the lungs, like two fleshy boughs. The lungs divide again and again, just like branches and twigs, ending in a full crown of alveoli, countless delicate leaves where the actual chemical work is done.

And finally, trees and lungs are mirror images in terms of space and solidity. A tree grows up out of the earth filling the empty air with solid mass while lungs are open spaces in the solid mass of our torso welcoming the intangibility of the atmosphere into the dense soil of our bodies.

Since I have asked you to read this section with trees in view, let's take some time to soak them.

If you can lie down on the grass, please do.

Just as we did in the booklet on perception, I will ask you to expand your attention all the way out to the fringes of your peripheral vision. Let the foliage fill your field of vision like a green ocean and then float on its fluttering waves for as long as you like.

Soothing isn't it?

Even if you forget or dismiss everything else I have written in these booklets, I hope you will remember the value of slowing your breathing and soaking in the undulating rhythms of foliage.

There is considerable scientific evidence that spending time in nature – even if that is just a small park in the middle of a city – has significant benefits for our mental health.

I am consistently surprised by just how rapidly this calming presence takes effect both on myself and on my daughter. My daughter is an active six-year-old and before that she was an active five-year-old and an active four-year-old. All the way back to her first day of life, she has been exploding with more ideas than her tiny body can handle, a frantic whirlwind of impulses. In her brief life, the phrase she has heard more than any other is probably "slow down!"

Amazingly, the moment we walk into a densely wooded area, she actually does slow down. She stops speaking, moves slowly and simply looks. Just like me, she soaks it in without words or specific thoughts, as a feeling of harmony and peace. After she gets her bearings, she still picks up sticks and throws rocks into streams, but with each action granted the time it deserves to be fully appreciated.

In Japan, this sylvan healing is called *shinrin-yoku* or 'forest bathing'. The term is new, but the roots of this cultural wisdom presumably run all the way back to Shinto, a religion in which trees could be gods.

Throughout my life, I have battled anxiety. At times, it has been crippling. But even when my inner world is roiling with panic and dark thoughts, lying flat on my back in the grass and watching leaves moving in the wind is immediately and immensely soothing.

Trees are very wise. They even perform some of the practices I have recommended in these booklets. Admittedly, I've never seen a tree riding a bicycle, and it's hard to know whether or not they taste subtle flavours, but they breathe deeply and they are the undisputed masters of being where they are. There is also evidence that they know when to stop competing. In addition to sharing nutrients through fungus filaments that connect their roots beneath the soil, they also share sunshine through the phenomenon of crown shyness. If you look up into a cluster of trees you can often see a thin sliver of sky between their crowns. The leaves of one tree rarely overlap the leaves of another because they inexplicably stop growing just before they would cut into another tree's sunshine. Scientists aren't certain of the mechanism or purpose of this behaviour, but many believe it is a natural outcome of each tree's tendency to avoid growing into shady areas.

Stop competing. Be where you are. Breathe deeply. Watch the foliage fluttering.

When I first started to actually imagine how bad climate change could be and the good wound cut me to my core, I found the pain unmanageable. I couldn't read the news, I couldn't sleep at night, I could hardly look my daughter in the eyes without writhing in pain knowing how horrific her future would be if we failed to slow global warming. Sometimes, when the pain was overwhelming, I tried to reimagine my passage through time as though I were a tree growing, a steady spreading of branches.

A tree doesn't pressure itself to do better, it just carries on with its efforts to make a new crop of nuts or seeds with whatever nutrients are within reach of its roots.

A tree never moves quickly, but its ponderous progress is reliable. A tree holds its ground in all weather, it doesn't cower or flee. When the wind blows ferociously, it bends, and, when the air turns frigid it drops its leaves and waits for spring, but it never gives up and it never moves. When I struggled to make sense of such an anguishing world, I reimagined my life as a growing tree, taking in what there is to take in and reprocessing it into myself, rearranging all of that pain into something slightly better.

The strong and steady trunk. The slow reach of the branches. I tried to let that be enough. Reminded myself that I didn't have to put out every fire or eliminate every source of pain, that it was enough to take what I was given and use it to create a little shade or bear some modest fruits. The storm won't break you or stop your growth if you bend a little when you need to.

Trees steadily produce botanical riches, laying down new rings every year. When the circumstances are bad, those rings might be thinner, but they are still there. That became my goal, to just take it all in,

good and bad, knowing that I would inevitably work that special human alchemy and turn it all into memories and hopes and knowledge.

Growth and Degrowth

Perhaps you sense a contradiction in my claims. Why have I warned against unbridled material growth only to praise the continuous unthinking growth of trees?

There are a few things about trees that makes their growth different – one of them is quite obvious and the other may surprise you.

First of all, trees grow slowly. As a result, most species are able to adapt to their growth and find ways to benefit from them. As anxious little mammals, our growth moves in time with the frantic beating of our hearts. A bird might leave its home in the morning and find only a parking lot when it returns in the evening.

What you might not know is that there was a time when trees actually could grow too much.

Hundred of millions of years ago, when the earth was an alien planet, there was not one bacteria in existence which could digest cellulose and lignin, the fundamental substances of arboreal life.

During the carboniferous period, trees grew very tall and when they were felled by the wind, they toppled over and just

stayed

there.

Forever.

Or at least until evolution invented the right chemicals to recycle them.

I'm not making this up. Trees just piled up one on top of each other cluttering the entire planet with dead and useless wood. Most of the coal we burn today is the compressed and blackened bodies of trees which fell in this period.

Even today, termites can only digest wood because they harbour those miraculous little lignin-eating bacteria inside their bellies.

So, yes, there was a time when the unthinking growth of trees threatened to cover everything in its rubble. Perhaps the world will learn to make use of our rubbish as well. Plastic-eating bacteria may eventually spread throughout the oceans turning the cast-off husks of consumer culture into new forms of life. But not in our lifetimes. If we can't slow down, we will kill everything that has adapted itself to this particular configuration of chemicals and temperatures.

Humanity needs a period of degrowth, at least until the rest of the biosphere can adapt to us.

The idea of degrowth seems absurd when you first hear it, because we have been told for so long that our material and emotional well-being is fed by economic growth. We have been told that a growing

economy lifts all boats. And that makes a certain sort of sense. Many people will benefit if there is more to go around, even if things aren't evenly distributed.

Degrowth sounds absurd because we all want to be safer, healthier and happier. Because there are areas of our lives and countries and cities which quite obviously need more resources, not less.

Those who propose degrowth as a social good do not dismiss these criticisms. Serge Latouche (2009) says "I am not recommending de-growth for the sake of de-growth. That would be absurd, but ... no more absurd than preaching the gospel of growth for growth's sake." (p.7) Degrowth means choosing which forms of production should grow and which should be pruned.

Latouche gives the example of a snail. A snail's shell gets exponentially larger as it coils outwards from its microscopic starting point. If snails didn't have a maximum size coded into their genetic blueprints, their shells would grow so heavy they would be unable to move them.

And every living thing is like this. If we kept growing forever our bones would break or our hearts would fail us. Growth is good, but we always have to ask: is this good enough?

Proponents of degrowth still hope for growth in health and knowledge and quality of life. The goal of degrowth is "to build a society in which we can build better lives whilst working less and consuming less." (Latouche, p.9)

Proponents of degrowth simply ask that we discuss where we are going before we slam the gas pedal into the floor. They also suggest we double-check the GPS of GDP by looking out the window at the actual landscape.

What exactly should grow and what should not? Who should decide what grows and what does not?

Those are not easy questions. But refusing to even consider them is reckless and irresponsible.

The Problem of Evaluation

There is another obvious and painful difference between humans and trees.

A tree just grows.

It doesn't have to choose.

If you have read Jean-Paul Sartre, this is one of his core insights.

For humans, 'existence precedes essence.'

Unlike a tree, we find ourselves here on this earth before we know what we are. And that initial disorientation makes our existence painful and difficult.

A tree can only do one thing and does it very well, but you are not a tree. A human being can be anything. This is Sartre's terrifying and exhilarating revelation.

The world is overflowing with possible sensations and experiences and we must choose what we will love from this muddled and endless flood.

Several times in these booklets, I have asked: why are we in such a hurry if we don't know where we're going?

I have also suggested that you stop competing and live by your own standards.

But how should we determine our standards? What is the good life? What makes something valuable?

This is the fundamental problem of philosophy and human life alike. I'm not foolish enough to think I have the answer to this question, but I can offer some advice about how to approach it.

I have found that value is always a miracle born somewhere between the heart and the world, perhaps in both places at once, justifying itself, shining with its own light. It is not exactly right to say that we must choose what we value, because the world chooses for us as well. But we should study things that seem valuable in depth.

All that glitters isn't gold.

Peel back the layers of the things that catch your eye, explore their origins and composition, to ensure that their value runs deep.

Drugs, gambling, social media and other similar activities can produce wondrous sensations, but they burn hot, often consuming more value than they produce in the long run. A pair of shoes may be beautiful to the eye, but investigate them carefully; have they been made with care and compassion? Don't fall in love with superficial beauties. Living is a process of evaluation, your heart is a jeweler's loupe, measuring radiance, studying edges, counting facets. Seek out good things – like trees – which are valuable in many different realms and detrimental in very few. Find the solutions – like cycling – that have 'co-benefits.'

But good comes in so many forms – how on earth can we choose between them? I appreciate cake and honesty in different ways with different parts of my being.

Intentionally choosing what to cultivate and what should be allowed to go fallow, instead of being led by our instincts, is an overwhelming challenge.

In his book about Nietzsche, Deleuze (2006) writes: "the problem of critique is that of the value of values, of the evaluation from which their value arises, thus the problem of their creation." (p.1).

Can something be good in and of itself? Do we make it good by choosing it? By comparing one thing to another? Are all things good from one perspective and bad from another?

Nietzsche's view is that we cannot answer this question with reason alone. The 'total critique' will find no stable ground. It will only discover that anything and everything can be criticized if you come at it from the right angle. The truth has no leg to stand on. If we pursue truth with total commitment, we will tear down all sciences, religions, customs and traditions, exposing them all as charlatans, promising a certainty they cannot deliver.

Everything is contingent.

Everything around us succumbs to doubt.

This is an awful discovery. We are left in a desert devoid of meaning. The will to truth alone cannot create value. Nietzsche sees however that one thing remains, the will that carried us out into this desert, our own commitment to truth, our own freedom/compulsion/power to evaluate.

For Nietzsche, it is this evaluation, this willful being in the world that makes value.

You have likely heard the term 'ubermensch.' For Nietzsche, this was the highest form of living. The 'ubermensch' would decide for himself what was good and beautiful. The ubermensch would find himself in the barren desert of nihilism and feel joy, not fear, because he was ready to rebuild the entire world from scratch.

Nietzsche's response to the contingency of truth was reasonable, but it is also utterly exhausting. And, worse still, it risks sending us down the rabbit hole of heroic individualism.

I am guessing you don't particularly want to redesign the world from the ground up. At least, not today.

Luckily, as with most things, there is a middle path here.

Life has room for both short bursts of fierce, willful value creation and long periods of patient listening as we try to hear the heartbeat of the world.

If the ubermensch's endless labour seems overwhelming, we can also wait, in the desert, and watch closely. Eventually flowers will bloom again. Our body will find its own joys if we simply relax our will a little and let the rhythm of the swaying leaves wash over us.

Nietzsche has some valuable lessons to teach us. Ultimately, we must not turn away from our responsibility to decide for ourselves what is good in this world. But we can take responsibility for our evaluations without feeling obliged to do it all by ourselves or all the time.

The world will continue producing beauty and goodness – much of it in the leaves and branches of trees – irrespective of our personal views on Nietzsche.

A tree creates value in many realms at once. It produces fruit and nuts and shade and shelter. It can be a meditation aid or a therapist. Forests build soil and biodiversity. While people busy themselves searching out new carbon removal technologies, trees are working steadily to draw carbon out of the atmosphere. Trees are a solar-powered carbon removal technology which reproduce themselves using nanotech in the form of seeds. Trees create shade and soothing sounds and offer us a place to hang a swing or a hammock. Trees are beautiful and they (mostly) smell good.

I haven't focused the last booklet on trees because they are the solution to every problem. They aren't. They are only one of many possible destinations for this treasure map.

I won't pretend to know what is good and what is not.

Even the things I am most sure of – the value of breathing slowly and watching foliage – may well turn out to be problematic given your particular set of circumstances.

What I can offer, however, is a useful rule of thumb for evaluating whether or not something is good.

Each truth must be measured against the total testimony of the rest of the world.

That is what it means to evaluate.

Don't put any one thing above all else. Not trees. Not family. Not pleasure. Not pride. Always be prepared to re-evaluate, to look at things from another angle, from someone else's perspective.

Compare and contrast and reconsider. Remain open to new evidence and expect to change your views. The world is complex enough to provide solid evidence for seemingly contradictory theories. Opening yourself to competing evidence won't completely invert your worldview. Instead, your understanding of the world and what is valuable will become more nuanced and precisely embellished.

Each truth must be measured against the total testimony of the rest of the world.

This slow, slow process of evaluation is how I have selected the insights in this book. Is this healthy? Is it just? Does it make me happy? Does the happiness last? How does it connect to politics or economics? What would philosophers say? What would a child say? Real treasure can sustain nearly endless scrutiny without losing its lustre. It just shines brighter and brighter.

Breathe deeply. Ride a bike. Be where you are. Enjoying life is a skill you can get better at. Looking up into the leaves of trees is soothing. A society grows great when old men plant trees. But there are many other priceless treasures. So keep extending your roots and reaching out with your branches, searching blindly for new luxuries. Keep forming new rings and new seeds and new fruits and new leaves. Let the seasons wash over you and let the weather shape you. And when you tire, lie back on the earth and watch all the other trees growing around you.

Your homework for this booklet is to grow something. I don't know if you have any experience caring for plants or what your home is like or what season you're reading these booklets in, so I won't make a specific recommendation but the options are endless. With a grow lamp you can grow herbs or salad greens indoors all year round. If you want something low maintenance, try a cactus or a succulent. Perhaps your homework could consist of searching online for seeds for next spring or buying potted hyacinths with the intention of putting the bulbs in the soil after the blossoms fade. You can also search for a community garden in your neighbourhood or offer to give a neighbour a hand with their weed and watering. Though it can be frustrating at times, caring for plants and digging in dirt are deeply enriching. That is one more truth that I have measured against the testimony of the world and found to be true at different stages of my life, in different moods and seasons and social circumstances.

So get out there and start burying treasure.

Sources and Further Reading

Sartre, J. P. (2007). Existentialism is a Humanism. Yale University Press.

Deleuze, G. (2006). Nietzsche and philosophy. Columbia University Press.

I have referred to Gilles Deleuze considerably more often than I had imagined I would in a book like this. Deleuze is not an easy read, but his work is valuable, mainly because he is so willing to accept uncertainty.

“From Tree to Shining Tree”. NPR RadioLab, 30 July 2016.

Radiolab is an excellent science podcast and the episode on tree’s underground communication systems is utterly fascinating.

Powers, R. (2019) The Overstory.

This is one of the best works of fiction I have read in recent years. It masterfully weaves together many distinct human narratives, which sometimes cross paths and sometimes do not, into a single ecosystem with trees at the center. It also makes the case, in the most persuasive terms I have ever encountered, that value is not a human invention, but something that plants have been propagating for millions of years. Plus its jam-packed with beautiful prose and fascinating tree facts.

Now that you’re done these booklets, go read The Overstory next.