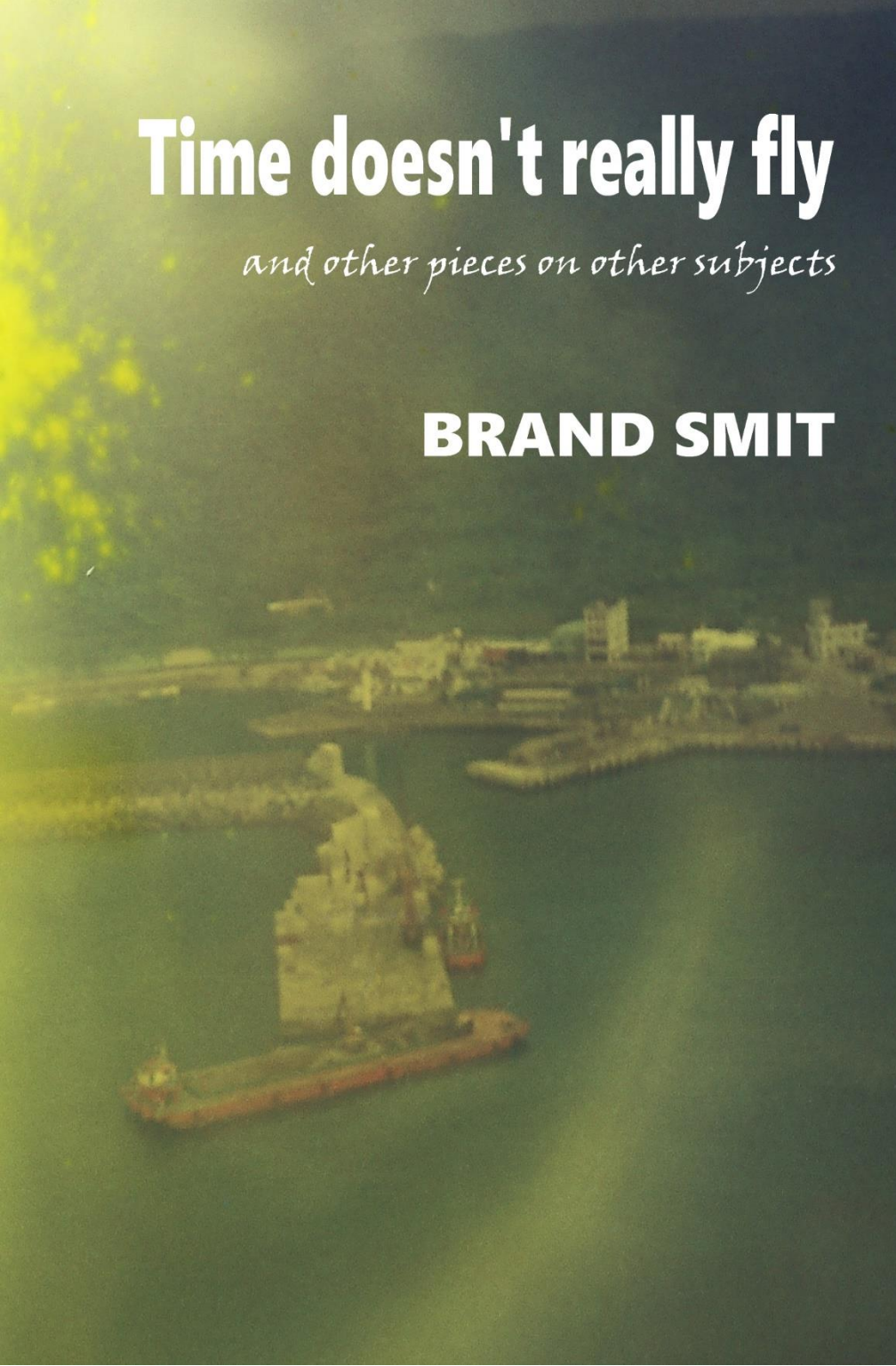


Time doesn't really fly

and other pieces on other subjects

BRAND SMIT



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About the writer

Born on 29 June 1971 in Pretoria, in the Republic of South Africa.

Went to South Korea in June 1996 to work as an English teacher.

Worked in Johannesburg for six months in 1998.

Departed for Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, in January 1999.

* * * * *

The pieces in this collection were written between 2001 and 2017.

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How the forces dance

Friday, 1 June 2001

That everything revolves around power is one of the most important things I've learned on my path to adulthood. This truth applies not only to the political and economic fields, it is just as valid in the arena of personal relationships.

Any person who has ever been lucky enough – or unlucky, as is sometimes the case – to have been in an intimate relationship could tell you that both parties always knew where they stood in the balance of power. In the ideal relationship both parties are of course equal, even if one is sometimes in a better emotional state than the other, and therefore better able to dictate matters for the moment. But the fact that the party in better mood changes every now and then confirms the basic equality of the two parties.

This principle also applies to friendships. There may be times when one friend is more in control of a situation, and more confident of him- or herself. In such cases, the other friend almost instinctively takes the submissive position. These roles may change as soon as the topic of discussion changes, or when a situation develops in which one person is more comfortable, or that he can approach with more confidence.

The same phenomenon also manifests in subtle ways in social intercourse between strangers. When two people meet for the first time, say at a barbecue or at a drinking and dancing event, the brain undertakes a speedy profiling process. Facts are sought and arranged in a preliminary understanding of the balance of power. Is the person friend or foe? Is he cool, or is he a loser? Is she someone whose name I should remember, or should I give her a limp handshake while I look over her shoulder for someone else who could pique my interest?

Depending on the initial answers to these questions, we decide where we stand with the stranger in question. If the person is considered a non-threatening potential friend who gives the impression that he or she knows what words to use in what context, then the next set of questions is sent to the Supreme Organ: Should I treat him/her as an equal, or as someone I wouldn't mind dragging along as a fan? Or, should I try my best to win this person's favour because, a) the person knows more than I do, b) has more experience than me, c) has something that I want, or d) I regard the person as my superior for all three reasons, and a few additional ones?

You might think that this whole thought process takes up most of a minute, but in many cases these questions have already been answered by the time the handshake is done, or the heads have stopped nodding. The factors that determine the answers include appearance, the intensity of a smile, the enthusiasm or lack thereof when the other person is greeted, people you or the other person are with when you are introduced to each other, or any information that the person knew about you before they met you, or information you had about them.

Sometimes it is possible that an initial weak view of you changes as soon as the other person become privy to certain information about you. If the person finds out, for example, that despite your eccentric appearance, you are, let's just say, financially very comfortable, you might just find an immediate change in attitude on your return from the bathroom.

Of course, the opposite can also happen. You may reckon you have left a lasting impression with the fine synchronisation between appearance and fantastic myths you have spread about yourself, but by the third time you see someone who initially fawned over you, you might find to your dismay that the person has since found a stronger figure to cosy up to. Or maybe you leaned too heavily on your anecdote about the time when you and a member of the dethroned Burmese royal family had fled through the jungle

of Vietnam, only to find you are in Thailand and that he held you responsible for the fact that he had malaria. “Since when does everyone have stories like these?” you’ll ask yourself as you search the room for a new group of people to impress.

It is, unfortunately, not only the untouchables of India who are struggling with a caste system. All communities have hierarchies and classes that crisscross each other. Everyone, from the richest to the poorest, from the hippest accountant to the most boring pop star have to cope with keeping up with what defines their place on the power hierarchy in the environments in which they display themselves.

Someone should invent a mist that can be sprayed over a social gathering that would reveal the true opinions and levels of respect that people have for those around them. A few secret admirers might be exposed, but the chances are much better that some bloated egos will be pricked into nothingness.

Almost the end

Thursday, 5 July 2001

I almost killed myself last night with a toy gun.

For the past three days, I've been camping out on my living room floor, with one eye on the TV and the other on my book on the history of the KGB. The whole purpose of this exercise was an attempt to make crucial decisions about my life, and a possible future. At one stage I stretched out to a small cabinet – conveniently accessible from a seated position – to get a packet of headache tablets. Searching for the tablets, my fingers touched the toy gun I had acquired a few months ago in a moment of boredom. The motivation behind the purchase was to amuse myself – to try and shoot small holes in a few items in my apartment, whenever my grey matter reached boiling point. The headache tablets were required for this very reason.

An hour or two after I had discovered the toy, my older sister telephoned from London. Within the first few seconds of the conversation I mentioned, to her annoyance, that I always think of her when I try to sort out what the next step in my life ought to be. She had no blotch of idle months on her professional reputation, I reminded her; she had made the right decisions at the right times, and her life in the last half decade had shown a steady upward curve. Compared with her relatively straight path to success, I have taken a more uncharted route.

Wise as she is, she advised me not to waste time brooding over the past, and to not concern myself too much about “bad decisions” I have taken over the years. I sensed a younger-brother-who-have-messed-up-and-older-sister-who-tries-to-show-him-the-way argument. The result was inevitable: I had to defend my seeming lack of direction.

And that's exactly what it is – apparent lack of direction. I'm convinced there has been a purpose behind everything in

my life to this point. I explained to her that I needed the last five years to sort out what life is about, what I wanted to do with my life, and perhaps most importantly, how to reconcile the latter with the necessity of a regular income.

Our conversation was cut short when she had to answer another call (she was calling from her office). I spent the next five minutes in deep contemplation about the middle class ideology that dictates that any person older than 24 who are not making money, must necessarily be classified as a “loser”.

But I know better than to underestimate the intelligence of middle class citizens, or their ability to tolerate divergent views on life. For example, they don't expect *everybody* to work in an office – they're not that narrow-minded! They do after all have their heroes who are rock stars and writers and actors. Of course, most of these people make money, and in some cases lots of it. So much more reason to idealise them.

When my sister phoned back, I wasted no time proceeding with the defence of my unique perspective on life. She confessed to being a little confused, but also demonstrated sincere sympathy. “Why don't you come to England?” she finally offered her standard advice of many years. I explained that I am currently working on a master plan, that I'm contemplating returning to South Africa at the end of the year, and that I need to make decisions on these issues before I can consider something like a holiday. Whether she realised that I was intentionally being vague and that I tried to create the impression of being someone who knows where he will be at his next birthday, I can't say.

The conversation started to wind down. We expressed the mutual hope that everything will go well with the other and said goodbye. I kept staring at the floor, with no particular thoughts to entertain or comfort myself.

The next moment light from the TV reflected on the toy pistol. To demonstrate displeasure about my eternal confusion, I picked up the toy, pressed the cold plastic barrel against my sweating forehead and pulled the trigger. Nothing, as I expected. I walked over to the cabinet and managed to

extract a few of the hard plastic pellets from the cluttered drawer, excited over the distraction a duel with the cereal box will provide. In an attempt to extricate the magazine, I accidentally pulled the trigger.

To my surprise and shock – considering that I had pressed the thing against my forehead just seconds before, a barrage of pellets exploded from the barrel. In a scene reminiscent of a Wild West shootout the pellets first hit the hot water geyser, a few metres from where I was standing, transfixed, and then they ricochet into the bathroom. After several bounces, the pellets came to rest in the bathtub.

“I could have killed myself,” I mumbled nervously at my reflection in the mirror.

A few moments later I came to my senses. What was really the possibility that a small, hard plastic pellet could go through my scalp and penetrate my skull to entrench itself in my confused brain? The reasonable conclusion was then made that I could have hurt myself, but that fatal consequences were unlikely.

It was only about an hour later that I thought of the short news story that might have appeared in a local newspaper, had I ended up in a hospital to have a small plastic pellet surgically removed from my forehead: *“A 30-year-old man unsuccessfully attempted suicide late last night with a toy pistol, after a telephone conversation with his career-oriented older sister. A small plastic pellet got stuck in his forehead because of the attempt, and the man was admitted to the emergency room shortly after to have it removed. A nurse said that while he was in a stable condition, the physical and emotional scars from the incident would probably be visible until he hit his midlife crisis in a decade or so.”*

Convinced that I had been given a second chance, I threw the toy gun back in the drawer, and there and then swore off violence as a way of finding my way in life. I collected the scattered remains of the almost cursed pellets, and while doing so I could swear I heard the cereal box moving out ever so slightly from behind the coffee bottle.

Scorching kebabs

Saturday, 30 August 2003

Everyone makes mistakes, no matter how hard we try to accommodate each other. Frustration was nevertheless to be expected when the lady at the deep-fried stall earlier this evening failed to grasp what the hell I meant when I asked her the price, in Chinese, of a tofu kebab.

My Chinese is far from fluent, but I manage to express myself adequately on a daily basis in diverse situations. I can converse about this and that with colleagues at work; I can discuss new schedules with a school principal, and I can make small talk and crack jokes with six-year-olds for half a period (in Chinese, when I'm actually paid to speak English). "How much does it cost?" is a phrase that foreigners usually master in their first week in Taiwan. To not be understood after a few *years* when you use a phrase that at least you had thought you had mastered is disturbing for the serious language student.

My pronunciation of "How much is this thing?" was, like most of my Chinese, probably not one hundred percent accurate. But what other information can one possibly be inquiring about from the woman when you pick up the skewer with little squares of tofu stuffed in a row and inquisitively utter "woof, woof" in her direction? To say an amount should, in my opinion, have been an immediate reaction to *any* sounds that flowed from the general direction of my face! But instead of replying with a price she declared that she did not understand me.

Figuring that she might not have expected any sounds from their regular and usually mute foreign customer, and that she was possibly overcome with anxiety because she had thought she had to speak English, I repeated myself, slower this time. Again she smiled as if I were an imbecile, and asked the older lady next to her who was throwing food into the

boiling oil, “Auntie, the foreign guy has never said a word, but now he’s speaking. What’s he saying?”

I tried again. And once again she could not figure out that I was not asking her for a lecture on the history of greasy food in Northeast Asia, but merely inquiring about the price of the damned tofu kebabs. When she looked at me for the third time with a well-intentioned but unhelpful smile, my own oil started getting hot enough to scorch the kebab there and then on the street.

I thought grabbing a coin out of my pocket might help, but I only managed to throw my keys in the bowl of amputated chicken feet.

Furious, and embarrassed at the same time, I triumphantly held out a coin, moments later. “*Qian qian! Duo shao qian?!*” I again pleaded in frustration.

The older lady turned away for a moment from another customer’s bacon-and-sausage kebab frying away in the boiling oil and translated my effort as “*Duo shao qian?*” in her native dialect, or “How much money?”.

“Thirty,” the younger woman indicated with three fingers in the air.

Red-faced, I retrieved my keys from amongst the chicken feet, and started filling my green plastic bowl with tofu kebabs. And because I was in a foul mood and certainly needed it, also a few bites of octopus.

“Haven’t you heard a foreigner speak Chinese before?” I fired off in English over bundles of beans and cauliflower.

But a glow had already started dancing over the woman’s cheeks, so I abandoned my little tirade. Maybe, I reckoned, she was lost in thought, and when I unexpectedly started mumbling strange words, she tried her best to understand what she probably thought was English.

The last laugh was hers, though. I prefer my deep-fried cauliflower and tofu with just a pinch of red pepper, and I was looking the other way when she heaped on the spices.

Storming ahead with a burning violin

Saturday, 11 October 2003

There's a popular saying that says we start dying the moment we're born. Our cells start ageing as they're growing, and even though damaged cells are, up to a point, nurtured back to full function, and destroyed cells replaced, the rate is never adequate to keep us alive forever. Then there's the fact that our lives could be terminated by unnatural causes as soon as we venture out of our cots. Can anyone be blamed for having severe existential anxieties every time they go outside?

A few years ago, in that glorious year right when I was supposed to join mainstream adult life, I was fortunate enough to watch a classic epic on my borrowed black-and-white TV. I had never been keen on cowboy or outlaw movies, but this movie gave me a particular perspective on life, and an attitude that has proven to be most useful.

The movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, tells the story of two outlaws in the Old West. After robbing their way into trouble, they make their way to South America. By the end, the two bandits are held up in a small town in rural Bolivia by what they assumed were just a number of local deputies, unaware of a platoon of soldiers who also happened to be in the neighbourhood. Butch and the Kid are sitting in a room, their backs against a wall, discussing the chances of them getting out alive. Surrounded by the local militia, oblivious of dozens of soldiers also taking position, they calculate their chances to be slim. They would try, nevertheless, they decide. Outside, on the walls of the town, surrounding them from every possible side and angle, dozens of loaded barrels are awaiting their attempt. They check their guns, exchange a few last words, and emerge dodging and ducking hundreds of bullets. Although it is merely suggested by skilful direction, everyone knows the only possible outcome: They went down, but – with all guns blazing.

As I was watching the credits, mesmerised by the profound implication for my own life, I recalled seeing a screenshot in the newspaper that advertised the movie on TV that night. I located the newspaper, cut the picture out with a pair of dull scissors, and decided to make it a permanent and prominent fixture of every place I would henceforth inhabit. It was stuck to the bathroom door in the council flat I shared with my younger sister, to a closet door in South Korea, and displayed on more than one wall after I had returned to South Africa. It was the first picture I pinned to my living room wall when I got to Taiwan, and at this very moment it is pasted next to the front door of my current apartment, lest I forget where I'm coming from, or where I'm heading.

It has become the closest to a personal dictum, a philosophy of life other than "live and let live" that I can be content with.

Entering my living room this afternoon after Chinese class, the picture once again drew my attention. I had been thinking of my recent plans of leaving this island – an important train of thought that usually takes precedence over any other truckload of ideas, but the picture distracted me. I thought about how the picture explained what I have been doing this past decade, and especially during my time in Taiwan. My ongoing attempts at keeping myself busy are my own valiant way of going down with all my guns blazing. It's not exactly heroic or brave, but it is my way of saying, "If we are going down no matter what, then I'd rather go down keeping myself busy to the final exhalation."

It did occur to me though that my version of this dictum, and my attitude to life on earth might be a tad defeatist, perhaps even a little morbid, and embarrassingly boring. "Is there no place for some mindless entertainment?" I asked myself. I stared out the kitchen window for a second, and then it came to me: Nero playing the violin while Rome was burning. He – or at least the mythical Nero – ignored the horrible facts on the ground, so to speak, and instead amused himself with some musical distraction.

A lot may be said about this attitude as well, but it does have a certain panache, a degree of defiant flamboyance. To indulge in casual entertainment in the current day and age is not dissimilar to Nero's drunken behaviour while flames were licking the marble pillars of his city. Watching a soap opera while people die of hunger may not qualify as flamboyant defiance in many people's minds, but that doesn't mean there is no justification for having fun.

We will all eventually die, our natural lives unavoidably reaching its conclusion. Going down with all guns blazing, whatever the substance of that for each person embracing this dictum, is one way of going. If you could have yourself some fun while you're at it, then so much better.

Butch and The Kid stormed into an avalanche of a thousand bullets, their own guns firing away until silence fell, until their lifeless fingers slipped from the triggers. Nero tried to silence the screams of burning citizens by plucking at his violin. I do my household chores, learn a few Chinese characters, write the odd line of poetry, fix my bicycle when necessary, paint my walls and doors different varieties of eggshell white, and plan my repatriation from exile. And I'm pretty sure if I look for it hard enough I'll be able to once again find that middle "C" on my cheap electronic keyboard.

All of us alive at this time

Wednesday, 3 December 2003

My morning yielded several faces: the first was my own in the haze of a blotchy bathroom mirror; the second was the young face of any of the children in Number Nine Crooked Village; the third was that of the old man that looks like Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Min, behind his desk at the school at Number Nine; the fourth face belonged to a baby boy on the train back to Fengshan. This collection of portraits got me thinking.

I myself am a child of the early seventies. While I too had my daily portion of food then, as now, and breathed, and from time to time had something to say, I can't remember much about that time. I need to consult history books and old newspapers to fill in the rest of the story of a time when most of what happened never infiltrated my consciousness (or that made little sense to my underdeveloped brain). Only later did I learn, for example, that BJ Vorster had been Prime Minister of South Africa during this period; Richard Nixon and then Gerald Ford the presidents of the United States; the pompous Leonid Brezhnev Comrade One in the Soviet Union; and Pol Pot Brother One in a country I would only discover two decades later on a world map. In other areas, as I would also only discover much later, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin had already left for the afterlife, Bruce Springsteen had jumped on a table and was the next day revered as the future of Rock & Roll, and the British Lions under one Willie John McBride had sown tears and sadness everywhere they touched a rugby ball.

I know all these things now because I read about them. It could just as well have been history of the Middle Ages if it weren't for the fact that I was also on the planet at the same time.

The seventies was my spectator decade – even though I didn't understand much of what was going on on the

proverbial playing field. I spent most of my days during that decade in sandpits, locked in an old wreck in our backyard (my own fault), and at or near kitchen tables eating my body strong enough for the next decade.

I was still unaware of most goings on outside of my immediate environment during the first part of the eighties. By the end of the decade though I was old and smart enough to understand concepts like “The Cold War”, “Apartheid”, “The Communist is Satan” and “Nelson Mandela will become the first black president of South Africa”. My reading and writing skills had developed enough by 1989 for me to leave school, and I tried to sound clever when people asked me what the next step of my life was going to be.

In the nineties, I became a more active member of the community, and remain so in my own way during this first decade of zero. I am now old and bald enough that it’s not unheard of for other adults to ask me, “What do you think?” I am also wise enough to marry and have children (or wise enough to not do it), and to throw my two cents in the purse of Polite Society.

Now, the above is useful as a short biography of myself, but it is somewhat limited as a larger view of the proverbial “us” that live out our existences during this time. Although I like to think of the last decade and the current one – the years of my late twenties and early thirties – as my time, that is just a fraction of the truth. This is also the time that the children in Crooked Village feel the same sun on their cheeks as I do on my half-bearded face. Same with the baby boy on the train, and the grandfather who owns the kindergarten. We all live in this time.

Five hundred years from now it won’t matter that I was 32 on this particular day, the children five or six, the grandfather 75, and the baby boy six months old. This time belongs to all of us, even though some of us can barely write our names, and others have signed their names so many times that they’d prefer if someone else does it on their behalf.

We tend to be very focused on our own age, and to classify ourselves according to a growing number of groups and labels. There are Toddlers, Pre-teens, Teens, Young People, Early Twenties, Late Twenties, Early Thirties, Middle Thirties, Late Thirties, Mid-forties, Fifties, Sixties, Seventies, Retired, Elderly, Really Old and Old Enough To Be In The Guinness Book of Records.

I myself fit in the early thirties compartment, and some days I'm relieved that I am not yet in my mid-thirties. I have friends in their mid-twenties (or as I like to point out to them, almost on the "wrong side" of 25). I also have friends in their late thirties, and some of my best friends are in their mid-forties (the so-called mid-life). I can honestly say that I am happy to be 32. I am glad that I am not a teenager now. I am also very grateful that I am not yet elderly.

The question is, what does it matter? Of course there's a difference between 15 and 75, and between 25 and 55. But let's look at everyone who is now, say, under 35. This includes myself, my two sisters, a few friends, the teens of today, but also the many snout noses at the nursery school. It even includes the 6-month-old baby on the train. Where will we stand in relation to each other in 30 years' time (or those of us who will make it that far)? I will be 62; not exactly young anymore, but not yet elderly. My one friend who is now 25 will be 55. My two sisters will be 56 and 64. The lot at the school will be between 34 and 36 years old, and the baby on the train would have just turned 30. Although this last group will be the youngest of those who felt the sun on their cheeks today, even they will not be children anymore. Some boys will have more hair on their faces than on their heads; some of the girls could have their own teenage sons and daughters.

Sixty-two, late fifties, mid-thirties ... we'll all be adults of the Time and World of 2033. It is possible that I will conceive children that will be younger than the children of the kids who had their little arms around my leg this morning. But at this moment we all have our feet in this time – here and now. If it

rains tonight, we'll all feel it. If there's an epidemic of some sort, it will affect all of us.

I am tempted to say I am only weaving this essay together to make myself feel better because my own years are relentlessly advancing. Or because I felt like Grandfather Ho Chi Min this morning when I looked at a two-year-old in a thick coat dancing on stumpy legs, his nodding head not much bigger than my knee. Or because I was reminded how far I've already gone down the road of average life expectancy when I noticed the baby on the train, sleeping blissfully, unaware of anything but the warm cosiness of his mother's chest. But none of these things will change the fact that a difference in age between two people blurs as the years advance for both of them. It also won't change the fact that institutions, conventions, and the external evidence of our existence will probably survive all of us.

The fact is that other people were here before us. Democracy, free markets, modern labour relations, cities that look as if they're about to burst out of their seams, and people who don't know what a cave or a patch of vegetables look like exist not only because of our own actions. We inherited this world. And it is our duty to do what we can to leave something to those who will reflect on the meaning of their existence two hundred, and five hundred years from now.

Not I, my two sisters, my almost-on-the-wrong-side-of-25-friend, my middle-aged and late-thirties friends, the toothless in the kindergarten and on the train, or any of the toothless old men with long white beards will still be here in two hundred years' time. This – this is what binds us all of this time together. None of us lived in the time of Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte or Beach Walker X (disregarding theories of reincarnation or time travel for the time being). Likewise, none of the people who lived during the time of the French Revolution or during the Golden Years of the Roman Empire made it to Tuesday, 2 December 2003. They all died. All of them. With no exception.

It will therefore not be inappropriate to end this piece – for the sake of illustration – by asking what it matters today that a particular woman was on the later side of 25 in December of the year 1541, or what it matters today that an old geezer was in his seventies. And does it still matter today that a three-year-old child danced on clumsy legs to a forgotten tune 462 years ago?

Historical footnote:

“And,” someone asks 462 years from now, “what does it matter today, Wednesday, 2 December 2465, that a 32-year-old man was brooding over the value of his own existence late one afternoon in December of the year 2003?”

Old heroes stand, some fall, and posters are changed

December 2003

Introduction

I don't watch TV anymore. I'd like to say it is because I think it's a waste of time and that I can use that hour or three more productively by playing FreeCell on the computer. But what happened was that I had not paid in advance for my cable TV when I went to South Africa in July, and the lady who always came by to collect the money had my cable disconnected. The reason I haven't had it turned on again is indeed political. I watched more CNN than any other channel and I couldn't listen to one more word from George W. Bush and his chief warlord Donald Rumsfeld.

What I do now to make my breakfast more entertaining is to read. I recently recovered a book by L. S. Stavrianos from a friend who had borrowed it two years ago, and I thought it would make for pleasant reading material on an empty stomach. The title of the book is *The World Since 1500 – A Global History*. It includes chapters on the Renaissance, Protestantism, the Ottoman Empire, and the discovery by Western seafarers of countries they did not know existed. There is also a chapter on Europe's scientific, industrial and political revolutions, and how they shaped the world we now call our own.

The *Philosophes*

A good history book sometimes leads to insights into your own life, how it came about that you live as you live, think like you think and believe what you believe. So it was the morning I came to the Enlightenment.

Along with my Australian oats, American muesli, and two other breakfast cereals I combined with the first two, I took in that the lead characters in the Enlightenment were the so-called *Philosophes*. This group, so I learned, should not be confused with academic philosophers. The *Philosophes* were not profound or systematic thinkers in any field. They were mainly literary figures, populists who had come from the journalistic rather than the academic fields.

The two main ideas of this group were Progress and Reason. They believed that human life slowly but surely improved as time went on, so that each generation lived better lives than the previous generation. How could this continual progress be maintained? By people using their reasoning ability.

These advocates of progress were generally opposed to the existing order. They wrote plays, novels, essays and versions of history to popularise their ideas, and to illustrate the need for change.

The *Philosophes* were strongly influenced by the findings of the English physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton. They believed, as Newton had demonstrated, that there were natural laws that not only regulated nature, but also human society. Based on this conviction, they applied reason to all areas of life in order to determine the natural laws that governed how things worked. People, institutions and traditions were subjected to the test of rationality.

This group of populists developed a set of revolutionary principles through which they proposed a complete reorganisation of society. In the field of economy their motto was “laissez-faire” – which meant that people should be allowed to undertake whatever economic activities they deemed good. The Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith argued in 1776 in his book *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* that individuals were motivated by self-interest when it came to economic activities, and that every man knew and understood his own interests better than any officer of the state.

In the field of religion, the *Philosophes* were strongly opposed to religious fanaticism and intolerance. Some became atheists, and felt that religion was nothing more than a tool in the hands of the state. Others were more agnostic in their belief, and reckoned they could not acknowledge or deny the existence of God. The majority were deists who acknowledged the existence of God, and that he was responsible for the creation of the universe. However, they insisted that after creation God allowed the world to operate according to certain natural laws, and that he does not interfere in the natural course of things.

The big idea in the field of politics was the Social Contract. One of the more famous *Philosophes*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believed that this contract is an agreement between equals, unlike the English philosopher John Locke who believed that government was a political contract between rulers and those over which they ruled. Rousseau, in his work of 1762, *The Social Contract*, described government as a “commission”. He furthermore believed that revolution was a justifiable action whereby people could reclaim their rightful power.

These ideas about economics, religion and politics were in conflict with the established institutions and practices of the day. In contrast to existing ideas, the *Philosophes* thought of themselves as members of the human race rather than Frenchmen or Europeans. Their focus was on the determination of social principles that could be applied universally, like Newton’s principles of the natural world.

That was my first big breakfast discovery. I hit my left palm with my right fist and yelled at the neighbour across the alley, “I always knew I was someone’s child!”

The *Philosophes* were populists. I consider myself not so much academically inclined as being focused on what is of practical value for the man and woman in the street.

The *Philosophes* opposed the traditional institutions and practices of their day. Of course! I’m an infant compared to

wig-wearing veterans like Rousseau, but I too make faint noises against the traditional institutions and practices of my time.

Even in terms of religion, I'd rather have tea with atheists, or go bowling with agnostics and deists than with suburban evangelicals – except for the odd suburban evangelical who would also rather hang out with dissidents.

I also believe that it is possible for every generation to have better prospects than the one that preceded them, if everyone uses their heads.

All the ideas I want to propagate so enthusiastically thus originated long before my time. That is what I've always suspected, and I knew this or that, but now I can add dates and names to the foundations of my own beliefs.

However, the economic principles of the Enlightened should have given me a foretaste of what would give my breakfast a sour taste on a morning soon to follow.

A nasty truth: Is who I *really* am, who I think I am *not*, and is who I *think* I am in direct contradiction with who I *really* am?

A few days later – and a few decades later in my history book, I was sitting with a bowl of breakfast mix and a cup of black coffee ready to start another day with a brief history lesson. The first great political revolutions of the Western world over for the time being, I came to the three major ideologies that would lead to more rebellion and change – nationalism, liberalism and socialism.

At this point it is important to mention that for the past decade I have been of the opinion that I am somewhat of a socialist. If it were just a game of opinion, I would have waved my flag for the Bolsheviks rather than the czar in 1917, for Mao Zedong and his Red Army rather than the nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese civil war, Fidel Castro rather than Batista in 1959, and definitely for Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels rather than for the exploiters of men, women

and children in amongst other places the factories of 19th-century England. (The reality that would sour people's lives within a few years in Bolshevik Russia, Red China under Mao, Cuba under Castro and many other so-called socialist republics is an entirely different story.)

I see myself as more liberal than conservative. But what do these labels of identity mean in historical context?

To call yourself a liberal means, according to definition, that you commit yourself to the idea of emancipation of the individual from limitations laid down by class, company or government. Okay, so far my breakfast tastes as good as any other day, and I am nodding my head as I once again see my own face in the text in front of me.

The next sentence, however, compelled me to reach for my bitter black coffee: “[The rise of liberalism] was intimately related to the *rise of the middle class* [and] it has remained essentially a *middle-class movement* in its theory and source of support.” (Own emphasis)

“What does this mean?” I cried out in panic. “Am I middle-class just because I consider myself a liberal rather than a conservative, and because I believe in the emancipation of the individual?”

The history of liberalism seemed increasingly bleak the further I read.

Liberalism in England in the 17th century served middle-class interests. The American constitution – a liberal document according to the measure of the time – was carefully drafted to protect and promote the interests of the class of property owners. Even the French Revolution, which was more radical in their liberal principles, was mainly focused on the interests of the French middle class!

The liberalism that took shape during the English, American and French Revolutions were focused on equal civil rights, and not necessarily equal political and social rights.

Liberalism, however, could not remain unchanged. The working masses – those whose hands and faces were dirty at

the end of a long workday – increasingly flexed their muscles as a result of an increase in literacy, and also as a result of trade union organisation. Classical liberalism had to make way for a somewhat more democratic version over the course of a century or so. One result was that most men, at least, had the right at the end of the 19th century to draw a cross on a ballot paper.

The principle of *laissez-faire* – a central idea of the Enlightened of the 18th century that suited the middle class so well in the 19th century – also had to be adjusted. The policy of minimal interference from government in economic affairs did not look good in the face of the bitter daily reality of the working class. Civil rights and voting rights did not initially have much effect on poverty and social distress caused by low wages, long working days, unemployment, disease and old age. The workers therefore began to use their voting rights and trade union organisation to present their case for social reforms.

This process led to a new set of ideas called *democratic liberalism* – and leaders who preached that the state is responsible for all its citizens, not just the middle class. (The reforms of this time would eventually lead to the welfare state of the current era.)

Despite the new, more humanistic jacket liberalism started wearing since the late 19th century, it lost its lustre among the ideologies of the day. The main reason for this was that the advocates of the new movement had failed to win sufficient support amongst the growing working class.

Why on earth would the men and women of the dust-and-soot class not embrace democratic liberalism? Why would they not welcome it as the best policy they would ever get in their miserable lives? The reason was a new ideology, pleasant on their tongues like hot soup that would make a starving man hope for better days on a winter morning – and believe it, too! Workers increasingly gave their support and their votes to different *socialist* tendencies. This development

pushed the liberals in several countries in between the conservatives on the right and the socialists on the left.

* * *

What does this all have to do with me?

If you don't have a problem with the middle stratum of the industrialised world and the kind of life that is usually associated with it, all of this history might be nothing more than mildly interesting reading material. My dilemma is that I have carefully crafted an identity and put together an accompanying personal doctrine to the effect that I am opposed to many aspects of middle-class existence – or then my own sometimes one-dimensional portrait of it. At one time or another since my university days I also came to the conclusion that my anti-middle class sentiments made me a supporter of socialism. I have therefore increasingly associated myself with the “working class” – because of my own background and my personal lifestyle, and in terms of my personal politics.

I was always aware of the contradictions. The “workers” in my own family are primarily interested in a stable middle-class life, and they shift around uncomfortably – on couches they were only too happy to buy on credit – when I speak of a year or two in Taiwan and how much money they can save if they ever decided to try something along those lines. “Real” workers care more for a stable labour situation, and dream of perhaps a better car. I am willing to give up comfort and many pleasures of life as long as I can give free expression to my experience of reality and don't have to call anyone “Boss”. “Real” workers, or then at least the ones with whom I have personal contact, mostly accept the world as it is – which is not to say that they don't also want to be rich and free, and feel the need to mock the “Boss” behind his back every now and then.

The crux of the matter here is my own identity, how I think I fit in the polychrome landscape of socio-economic classes

and political and economic ideologies and associated labels, and how a combination of beliefs makes it possible to operate successfully in modern society.

The hammer shatters the mirror

As already mentioned, for the past few years I have increasingly thought of myself as “left-wing”, and as “working class” rather than “middle class”. To provide more clarity on how I see myself, a few years ago I started quoting with great enthusiasm what Noam Chomsky once said: “Classical liberal tradition in the eighteenth century [stated that] at the root of human nature is the need for free, creative work under one’s own control. That must be at the basis of any decent society.”¹

I definitely believe in the right of individuals to make their own case and to express themselves as they deem fit (as long as no one else suffers much damage). I also believe in the right of every person to strive for fulfilment of the inherent need for creative work under their own control.

Until recently, if I had to look at myself in the mirror to ask about my own name and place in the Greater Landscape, I could proudly recite: “I’m a classical liberal, with a strong affinity for socialist ideas.” (And then, seeing that I was staring into the mirror, I’d flex my biceps ever so slightly to ponder the possibility of joining other members of the working class in lifting a crate onto a truck.)

It was a great shock, therefore – and even more unpleasant than the first shock of the relationship between classical liberalism and the middle class – when I read this morning that socialism is the great antithesis of classical liberalism! How can my one set of beliefs be the exact opposite of my other set of beliefs?

According to Mr Stavrianos, liberalism emphasises the individual and his or her rights. Socialism places the emphasis

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Secrets, Lies and Democracy*

on the community, and on collective welfare. Liberals see society as the product of natural laws. Socialists believe that people can set up their own social system and associated relationships through the use of rational thought and action. They further believe that human nature is largely the product of the social system in which people are born, in which they grow up and in which they live and work as adults.

According to these principles, socialists believe that the evils of the world could be eliminated through the establishment of a society that is focused on promoting *collective welfare* rather than *personal gain*, and by encouraging *cooperation* among the population rather than *competition*.

The emphasis of socialism therefore lies in the larger community rather than the individual – and in comprehensive planning and management of social change rather than in allowing things to develop naturally.

Dazed and choking on my dry porridge and cold coffee, I also read about Plato who thought a dictatorship of philosophers could save the world, about Utopian Socialists who worked out comprehensive plans and principles for model communities, and, of course, about Karl Marx which differed from the Utopians in that he studied the historical evolution and functioning of the existing capitalist world, and came to the conclusion that capitalism would be smashed to pieces by the hammer of workers in a class struggle that would establish a socialist society.

The hammer had already smashed my identity to smithereens, and the sickle had ripped my careful planning of how I fit in the world to tatters. Am I, after all these years, after all the pieces I wrote in scorn and fear of the middle class, after the neat puzzle that I had cut and fit to explain how I fit into the larger reality, forced to admit what I have always feared? Am I *middle class*?

Epilogue

I don't read my history book anymore. Or, I've stopped reading it every morning with breakfast. I could certainly argue it is because detailed information about ideologies made me think twice about my place in society. What actually happened was that I had reached the end of a chapter, and I could no longer ignore the stack of unread newspapers beside my chair.

What do the details in this essay matter if a large percentage of the world population does not even receive sufficient education to understand the difference between the 18th and 19th centuries? Does it matter whether I have a poster of Karl Marx or Jean-Jacques Rousseau on my wall if more than half of the world population have not had a proper meal to eat today?

I feel a bit self-conscious about my obsession with identity and my place in the world, and as a result an interest in the development of the ideology of "free work under one's own control". Are these things important for anyone else? Does this so-called literary project of mine barely have half a chance of a place on anyone's bookshelf because the average reader can't read Tom Clancy or Stephen King every day? Does everyone know more or less where they fit in society? Will someone one day pause between meetings and business lunches to tap me on the shoulder and say, "We all think about these things, we just don't have time to brood about it constantly"?

Why does it matter how and where I fit in the Greater Whole? It matters because no one can operate above a primitive level if they do not know how and where they fit in.

I still don't know how and where I fit in. The reasons why I don't know ... well, that's what I've been trying to explain in the hundreds of pages that form part of this project.

(I can always confine myself to a reduced reality where it would be easier to make sense of things, and where my role and function would be better defined, or easier to define. The

thing is, my current world is already quite limited. If I reduce it even more, I can just as well become a member of a religious cult, or start one.)

One would like to say, “Even if you don’t know the correct academic formulation of your place in society, surely you know the difference between yourself and a poor man or woman who suffers in the slums of Kolkata, or Lagos, or even Johannesburg?”

Fair enough. But what exactly is the difference? I eat more, and more frequently. I sleep in a comfortable bed every night. If I get sick, I can go to a doctor. I don’t have a car, but I have a bicycle. I don’t own the property that I currently mark with my posters and which I have populated with my furniture and which I fill with my physical presence, but if I don’t live in this apartment, there are other apartments where I can close a door behind me in the evenings.

But it is also true that I do not write these words in the country where I have a natural right to live. I live in this country because I make a profit for businesses that sell English classes to parents of mainly primary school children. I have permission from the authorities to live here as long as I continue to meet the requirements on which they agreed to my presence on this island. If I no longer fulfil my prescribed labour role in this place, I have to leave.

Should I find myself back in the country where I do have a birthright to make myself at home, the answer to the question of the difference between me and a homeless person in any city in the world will *initially* be the same: I will eat every day, sleep comfortably, and so on. However, I would only be able to take these differences for granted if I were in a drunken stupor and not thinking beyond my bed in someone’s guest room.

“If it’s to a large extent a matter of a job and an income, you still have your qualifications,” someone will again venture an opinion. “Surely it wouldn’t be too difficult for you to get a job in any major city in your own country, right?”

It is as follows: It is certainly possible for me to find someone somewhere to whom I can sell my time. Just a pity that I have eaten of the fruit of creative freedom. Just a pity that I'm aware of the effect that the Industrial Revolution has had on contemporary labour relations, and of the value of the individual as a cog in corporate machinery. If only I could forget about all these things, and while I'm busy doing that, also misplace the memories of first-hand experience of how a middle-class life can go wrong, I'd be able to start from scratch; I might accept a much more modest fate that probably would befall me; I would probably even be grateful for the quality of life that I could call my own in the face of so many people who eat dust before they get comfortable in their storm drainage pipes for the night.

This brings us to a good point in this essay to ask one last question: Do I owe it to the beggars, the street children, and countless others who live less fortunate lives than me to stop writing unpublishable, self-centred material and instead get a job?

* * *

Thousands of words were tossed about in this piece, dates and names were piled together, and as part of the process many bowls of cereal were swallowed down with many cups of coffee, all with seemingly one goal in mind: to solve the question of what ideological label I, the author of this piece, can carry with credibility and conviction.

I almost lost my appetite the morning when I discovered what central role the classical liberals played in the conquest of the world by the middle class – a socio-economic grouping from which I have been running for years (even if I myself crack the whip behind me as I'm fleeing). So many of the classical liberal ideas are exactly the kind of thoughts with which I soothe myself to sleep at night! What to do with such a nasty contradiction?

On the other hand was the equally unpleasant discovery that I have been misidentifying myself as a “socialist”. In my defence I can state that this identification was probably motivated by nothing other than the fact that they were the biggest and strongest gang who also spit in the direction of the middle class. Just a pity that, in addition to this antagonism against the bourgeoisie, socialists also believe that individuals should be willing to sacrifice their own dreams and ambitions, their individuality, free creative expression of their experience of reality, and sometimes even their lives for the welfare of the community, and ultimately for the welfare of the state.

I respect the intellectual talents of people like Marx and Lenin, and I think that they really did have empathy for the common man, woman and child in dirty slums, soul-crushing factories and dusty villages. I also think – although many lives were destroyed in the process – that one can even have respect for the dedication and determination with which the Bolsheviks sought to transform the largest political unit in the world, on the basis of a set ideas that many of them truly believed would lead to a more equitable system for the majority of the population.

I cannot ignore the role of classical liberalism in the excesses of the Industrial Revolution and in the accompanying development of the contemporary middle class. Likewise, I cannot mutter something else during the Creed of Communists where they recite that “If the state wants you to work ten hours a day in a factory, you should do it because it would be good for the welfare of the community.” (“Plus, you’re only a meaningless piece of the bigger picture that won’t be missed if you should disappear in the middle of the night.”)

Do I owe it to any Community of Classical Liberals to be a good Classic Liberal? Do I owe it to any contemporary Communist to be a good Socialist or Communist? If I wanted to hang these labels around my neck to be accepted as part of a group, it might be necessary for me to recite their creeds. If group membership is not my first priority, I can continue to

claim for myself what I deem fit from all these ideologies, and from the personal contributions of the leaders of the accompanying movements.

I still believe, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his peers, that natural laws make the world go round – so to speak; also that if people just use their common sense, we can create a better world for all of us and our descendants. I also believe in the right of the individual to give free, creative expression to his or her personal experience of reality, whether the community or the state likes it or not, as long as it does not inhibit the right of others to do the same. I will also continue to tip my hat for people like Marx and Lenin who earnestly and sincerely committed their lives to contemplating a better, more just world, and for taking action to bring about such a world – even if the results of their efforts did not turn out as they had hoped.

What “heroes” will I honour from now on if I want to hang a poster behind a door, in order to better illustrate my identity and place in the world? Here’s a suggestion: a coal sketch of myself, with a bushy beard, an 18th-century French wig with grey curls, and on top of the wig a Russian conductor’s cap, circa 1917.

Day in town

Friday, 20 August 2004

Afternoon, between four and five, under a tree; light-brown socks, old leather shoes, green shorts, yellow underwear and a red short-sleeved shirt with white speckles.

Just walked back from town to the smallholding, last stretch on a dirt road. In town, I purchased three books at the total cost of one R5 coin: *When White People Were Poor*, a Truman Capote book and the screenplay for an Italian play with the title, *Six Characters In Search Of An Author*. Paid a visit to some second-hand furniture stores, did my banking at Standard Bank and Postnet, and had lunch at the Spur Steak Ranch.

At the Spur, I sat in the smoker's section. An elderly woman was sitting alone at a table behind me. I don't know what she was drinking, but she yelled "One more!" in the direction of the nearest waiter soon after I had arrived. Also sitting alone was an attractive young woman at a table across from me. She was talking on her cell phone the entire time, drinking iced coffee and smoking one Paul Revere after another.

I ordered a Spur burger for R23.95, extra garlic sauce for R7.95 and a Black Label for R9.95. I read the *County News* (R1) and lit up two Nat Shermans with Lion matches.

In the middle of town, I read some interesting facts on a notice board: Pretoria is 50 kilometres from Bronkhorstspuit, Cape Town 1380 kilometres, Johannesburg a hundred kilometres, Taipei 11,620 kilometres and Hong Kong 10,800 kilometres. Then I walked back to the smallholding.

Now, I'm sitting under a tree, and I'm thinking: Life is ... pigeons cooing, cars driving past, the wind blowing through the leaves, something between my teeth, footsteps in the background, small birds and insects making a commotion in

the trees, the smell of vegetable soup from the kitchen, a radio playing lounge music from the sixties, a telephone ringing ...

About monkeys and (so-called) originality

Thursday, 7 October 2004

You are born with more or less no identity, except for maybe a name. Within a few months, or maybe a year or three, you start to emulate the behaviour and language of other people in your immediate environment – a simple case of monkey see, monkey do. As you get older, this emulation becomes intertwined with other measures – relevant to particular time and place – to ensure your personal safety.

When a person moves away far enough from what others imitate and regard as good enough for themselves, it happens that the label of “original” is hung around their necks. This label is of course never completely accurate, because even the so-called “original” gets their ideas from somewhere, dressed in a language that they did not invent.

The point here is degree. Some people emulate so slavishly that one can hardly detect a difference between the one who is being emulated and the monkey itself. And then of course, it is possible that even the model is a clone of someone else, who also initially slavishly emulated someone else, who, somewhere in the distant past, did something different to a significant degree from what others at that time and in that place had emulated as Models of Functional Adulthood.

Am I saying people are mechanised flesh-creatures programmed by the sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit instructions from others in the area? Hmm ... not exactly. Just because I am wearing jeans doesn't mean I call myself “Elvis”. Just because the neighbour teases her hair is not to say she knows who Dolly Parton is. My point is rather that someone – who for want of a better word we can call an “original” – decided one wonderful day to, for instance, get into the traditional workers attire of denim pants to go shopping or to go on any outing other than to the nearest factory, and the world was never the same again.

The New Human – toddler, teen or young adult – looks at others in the area for clues on how to act, what to wear, what to say when, and what sounds should be produced to achieve certain results. This is a natural process. Even that first rebel who decided to make an appearance in a pair of denims in an area other than where his hands would get dirty acted after other steps had first been taken – denim clothing had already been designed and manufactured long before that day. His adaptation of this phenomenon, on the other hand, was relatively original (that is to say, if such a mythological First Denim Rebel ever really existed).

A few other examples can be mentioned with which most readers will be familiar: the vocabulary and expressions that people use to bring themselves into other people's favour; the ways in which arms are swung about on a dance floor; the type of automobile people purchase; the labour that people choose to offer to generate an income; the jewellery that people buy to hang from their limbs; the beliefs that people hold about religion, politics, and what a person should do with his or her life.

Is it important to not do what the proverbial *everyone* is doing? To not look and sound like most of your peers? To not do with your life what most of the people you know are doing with their lives? My answers to these questions are intimately intertwined with my own view of things, with my background, my own insecurities and fears, and my view of a significant percentage of my peers.

I believe there are three possibilities: 1) to follow slavishly what is prescribed by your environment for the sake of acceptance by a specific community; by forming Who You Are around the anvil of what is presented to you as the norm of time, place and community; 2) to look at what is presented to you as the norm of time, place and community, to accept some of these things and to reject others in a **CRITICAL AND CREATIVE PROCESS**, and to then appear to the community as a distinctive version of what is generally acceptable, and to function as such; and 3) to look for examples and clues beyond

your immediate time, environment and community, and to define a model of appearance and functioning that differs to such an extent from what was originally presented to you, that you and your life will be seen as a primary example that others will consider in their search for clues and answers to questions that, shall we admit, keep everyone awake at one time or another.

Dream of salt, two women and an egg

Saturday, 2 April 2005

Last night I had a dream. Images of a staged battle from the Roman period flashed through my mind. There was also an oversized two-storey building with small apartments.

A woman discreetly entered one apartment to eat modern food. After this woman had left, I sneaked in, grabbed some raisins and nuts from the kitchen and stuffed it all in my pocket. Then, in the living room, I discovered a hard-boiled egg and took that as well – after I almost emptied a salt shaker on it. (The salt shaker was standing on a coffee table, with a lot of spilled salt around it.)

I walked down the vast, over-sized hallway where two women confronted me with the insinuation that I am not always the same person. They peppered me with questions like, “How is this name pronounced in that language?”

By the time we got to the ground floor, my initially polite answers to their questions had transformed into a more heated response. “I, myself was given a very ethnic-specific name,” I said, “but sometimes you need to express yourself in other ways than those you were given. And sometimes you choose to go beyond what you’ve been given, in order to transform yourself! And maybe you do so for no reason other than as a first step towards, and for the sake of, transforming ... the community ... in which you live.”

By the last sentence, the two women had become so terrified that one was hiding behind the other one. When I turned around and started walking away, the woman who had been hiding followed me, scratching my back with both hands – in a feline sort of self-defensive action.

Then I remembered the egg which I had taken from the apartment. I put my hand in my trouser pocket, crushed the egg, then turned slightly, reached over my shoulder and shoved the broken pieces into her face.

The last sentence of my short speech was measured. Up until that point I had been speaking in a loud, urgent tone, but then I softened my tone to emphasise the words – especially since they might have expected me to say, *transforming the world*.

Sparks and true love, in a nutshell

Monday, 10 November 2008

There is true love, and there is sexual attraction. There is love that lasts a lifetime, and there are sparks of sexual desire.

Sometimes you feel sexually attracted to a person, you take a chance, and you enjoy it for as long as it lasts. But if you end up staying together, the sexual attraction must eventually be augmented with something more substantial, namely love, the kind that can last a lifetime, until long after the sparks have cooled down and you occasionally catch yourself wondering what it would be like with someone else.

The other day I stumbled onto a story of a man madly in love with a woman. The woman regards the man a pleasant enough fellow: he is kind, he can have conversations about interesting things, but that's where it stops for her. She wonders if a person can force a heart that doesn't want to beat faster. She thinks about sexual desire, for example, that is after all an honest physical response to someone's presence.

The woman in the story seems to picture for herself a very specific life with the man, should she choose to be with him, a life where things would always be like they are now: he loves her, she pulls back. Five years later: he's still crazy about her, she's still distant. Twenty years later: he still loves her; she cares about him but she doesn't reciprocate his warmth, and occasionally she thinks back to an affair she had two decades earlier with a guy that looked like a movie star.

Reality looks slightly different in many cases, though: the man is currently at $X+20$, and the woman is at $X+2$; after two years, he is at $X+15$, and she is at $X+7$; after 10 years, she cannot imagine a life without him; he still loves her very much – he still brings her breakfast in bed on Sundays, but sparks from his side do not set the wallpaper on fire anymore. That is how life sometimes is, in a nutshell.

Of course, things could turn out completely different between the woman and the man who doesn't look like a movie star. His torch may start showing signs of dimming after a few years, and he may start looking at other women just as the women in his life increasingly wants to be closer to him. This is also how life sometimes works out, in a different nutshell.

At least three examples that prove that people are full of it

Saturday, 13 November 2010

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provide at least three examples that prove that people are full of crap, at least half of the time.

1. In 1642 the British Parliament deposed the king, and beheaded him a few years later to make sure he doesn't put the crown back on his head. Again, in 1688 they made it clear that they believed they had the right to choose their own monarch – John Locke's political theory had apparently summed it up nicely. However, when the American colonies wanted to overthrow the rule of the British Crown and Parliament almost a century later, and even used John Locke's arguments, the very same British political ruling class would have none of it. One can still to some extent understand the king's position, but the British Parliament refused to budge: the colonists had absolutely no right to demand independence.

2. As idealistic as the American rebels were in their revolution with "All men are created equal" and "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," they turned around and forced inequality on people of colour that they felt they had the right to own as personal property, and deprived these people not only of their personal liberty but also of any chance of a good life and some earthly happiness.

3. After their defeat against England in 1763, the French were itching for revenge. The French King Louis XVI and his advisers believed the American rebels' struggle against their colonial masters provided the perfect opportunity. "Let us support the rebels in their revolution against King and aristocracy!" decreed the king, and shoved another chocolate éclair into his mouth. However, little more than a decade later, French rebels were pulling on the gates of Versailles, and revolution was permeating the air in Paris. "How dare they?!"

muttered the king in the direction of his panicked advisors, and wondered what had happened to the cream cake.

And, now that I think about it, there is a fourth example.

4. The revolutionaries in France were fired up with idealism and zeal for liberty, equality and fraternity in 1789 and the years immediately following the revolution. But was this freedom intended for the ordinary worker in a tannery or the peasant in the countryside? “Don’t be ridiculous!” some of the leaders of the revolution would have thought in the safety of their private quarters (at one point it would have been risky to make such declarations on a street corner in Paris). Did the equality and fraternity parts stand a better chance? Could the ordinary man and woman who owned no business, professional title or property get excited about the revolution? They could certainly get excited in the beginning, but disappointment wasn’t far behind. Despite some noble declarations, the revolution, at the end of a long and bloody day, was aimed at broadening the aristocracy. “It’s our turn to live well!” a member of the newly empowered bourgeoisie would have hissed through his teeth at his servant, before commanding another glass of wine.

Time to give up

Wednesday, 22 February 2012

One of the few popular sayings I hold as a universal truth is that one should never give up. I've believed in this for many years, and I recite it to myself on such a regular basis that it could almost qualify as religious incantation. Everyone I respect who has anything to say about life confirms this: You do not give up. You should never, ever give up. If you give up, it's over. You put posters on your walls that remind you of this. You buy T-shirts with wording that confirms this. You forward links to videos with this message, and you share stories on Facebook so that friends and family never forget. If necessary, you write it with a black marker on the soles of your sneakers: "Never give up."

The giving up to which these sayings refer is the fatal type, the existential type. It refers to a decision to stop taking action; you're done with everything, done with trying.

Yet, despite the vital conviction you keep so close to your heart, occasionally you do come to a point where you don't have much of a choice. Difference, though, what you give up on is not life, and it doesn't mean you will never try again.

Sometimes you have to give up on things that do not work anymore, or things that have never really worked. Sometimes people give up on a relationship, or a marriage. Sometimes, after trying for years to hang on at a company because heaven knows you needed the money, you give up. You quit. You wipe your hands of something you gave your best to make work.

And sometimes you let go of the steering wheel of projects you have driven over a thousand rocky roads. You let go of the wheel, you unbuckle your seatbelt, and you jump out of the car before it comes to a crashing halt at the base of a wall, or before it shoots off the edge of a cliff.

Because sometimes you have to give up to survive.

Reflection of the woman with the hair roller on her forehead

Saturday, 25 February 2012

It's late afternoon, and I am heading home on the subway. In the window opposite me, I see the reflection of a young woman, two seats away from me. I notice that she has a giant pink roller stuck to her forehead, held in place by a lock of hair curled around it.

One possibility, it shoots through my mind, is that she's a fashion slave. A year ago, walking around with a gigantic pink roller stuck to your forehead was considered ridiculous by most of society, including fashion junkies. Then, out of the blue, an authority figure in the fashion world pitched up at a fashion show with one stuck to her forehead, and since then every disciple of the authority figure worth his or her salt has been slavishly following the trend.

If that is the case, if the young woman is indeed a slave to everything that is fashionable, my opinion of her cannot rise above zero because she is clearly not someone who thinks for herself.

(I also wonder who determines what is ridiculous and what is not. I squeeze a piece of cloth over my bare scalp every day and call it a cap. Is that not ridiculous?)

The second possibility, I imagine, is that she is the one who has started the fashion trend – or is in the process of doing so. This means she does not look at the arbitrary, ridiculous things other people do and then follow them to a tee because the person is seen as a figure of authority.

If so, my view of her would rise significantly. She would then clearly be manifesting that she is someone who thinks for herself and who makes her own decisions, and then appears in public in a way she believes in and that she finds good – even if others see it as ridiculous, for now.

As we are nearing Formosa station, I take one last look in the direction of my potentially interesting fellow passenger. I see the hair roller is gone. Apparently, it merely served a practical purpose.

Half a minute later, she moves closer to the door, and I get my first decent look at her – just for a moment, because when the doors open, she pushes slightly past another passenger. Within seconds, she has disappeared into the stream of people, with her fringe now cheekily arching away from her forehead.

Note to myself: Making assumptions about people before you know the whole story may not be terribly smart, but at least it's better than staring at your own reflection in the subway train's window.

Thank goodness children are not like (some) adults

Friday, 30 November 2012

As a child, you don't automatically know how to play chess. You don't know how to ride a bike, or how to do ballet or play football. You don't know how to use a computer. You don't even know how to read or write until you're taught how.

As a child, you almost never wavered when it came to something new you had to master. You just did what you were told. You kept trying, and after a few months or a few years you could play chess, ride a bike, play football, or do ballet. You learned to read and write, and eventually you learned how to use a computer.

Why then, as adults, do so many people doubt their ability to learn something new?

"I don't know how," the man or woman will mutter.

"I'm too old to learn something new," the 30 or 40 or 50-year-old man or woman will say.

"No, good grief! There's no chance that I'll be able to do that!" one person will opine, safe in the knowledge that at least a handful of other adults in the area will support them in their belief that they are unable to do something.

Can you imagine if children suffered from the same malady?

"Oh no, Daddy, that bicycle is so big. I'm going to fall off and hurt my toe," little Johnny might say, and then he'll walk away and go sit under a tree.

"Those dances look so difficult, Mommy! I can't do them!" little Joanna might say, and then refuse to get out of the car at the ballet class.

"Chess seems so complicated ..."

"I don't know how to draw those curls and lines like the other boys and girls in class ..."

“You know I’m afraid of mice, and the computer always makes such funny noises ...”

The end of civilisation as we know it. The beginning of Zombieland.

“If you think you can do something, or if you think you cannot do something, you’re right,” Henry Ford advised.

What I want to know is what kind of example do people think they set for the next generation if, at the age of 25 or 40 or 50, they stop believing they can master anything new.

Christmas is a bit like life

Tuesday, 25 December 2012

Christmas Day is a bit like life.

If a whole table full of food is prepared on the 25th day of the twelfth month of the year, a special tree is dragged into the living room and festooned with lights and small disco balls and dolls and stars, toys are bought and wrapped in colourful paper for the children, a few songs are sung, and all gathered together eat themselves into a new weight division, and laugh and joke around and chat, then it's "Christmas".

If you don't do these things, it's only the 25th day of what is coincidentally the twelfth month of the year.

So it is with life.

Time doesn't really fly

Saturday, 5 January 2013

I usually stand in the front row of the choir when a lament is being sung about how time flies. One year ... five years ... a decade! Twenty years ... As you're standing there in shock, wondering what you have done and what you still wanted to do, you see the images of ten and twenty years ago in your mind's eye – clear as crystal, as if it was yesterday.

It is therefore sometimes necessary to remind yourself of the actual numbers:

5 years: almost 2 000 days and nights

10 years: more than 3 500 days and nights

20 years: more than 7 000 days and nights; more than 7 000 times you ate breakfast, more than 7 000 dinners; more than 20 000 trips to the loo; if you worked full-time for a 20-year period, that means perhaps as much as 5 000 days ... more than 5 000 times stuck in traffic (maybe twice as much) ... thousands of times you talked to people you really wanted to avoid ... maybe more than a thousand barbecues in the backyard ... maybe as many as 10 000 programs watched on TV, or even more.

Time doesn't really fly.

In fact, if you look at it closely, over five or ten or twenty years, you have thousands of opportunities to do good, to fix what is wrong or what you have done wrong, and to produce something or to help create something that will eventually have value to other people.

Every day you get a chance to enjoy a little something of life, and every day you get a chance to mean something to someone else – someone who may remember you long after you have enjoyed the last of more than 25 000 breakfasts.

Being the people who annoy us

Thursday, 6 June 2013

Yesterday, I was “that person” on the Gautrain: the one on the platform at the airport who does not wait until *all* the passengers have disembarked before he enters the train with his huge pieces of luggage.

It’s not that I am rude as a rule. It is just the moment when the train came to a halt and the first few people had disembarked, I went into Kaohsiung MRT mode: when the outbound traffic start thinning out, you take a gap.

The moment I stepped into the train, I realised that the airport is the last stop: everyone had to disembark before the next group of passengers could enter.

It was inevitable that someone, red in the face from exasperation, would stop in his tracks to lecture me. “Wait for everyone to get off!” the man yelled at me. “The train isn’t going anywhere! You’ll all get a chance!”

My “whatever” response was unconvincing. I knew that I had committed an error of behaviour that made me that person who annoys everyone else on a train, especially one like the Gautrain when it makes its last stop at a busy station like the airport. I was the person for whom I myself have clicked my tongue and have given a dirty look.

The thought then popped into my head that in the opinion of the guy with the red face I am certainly a one-dimensional character. I am “The Jerk Who Does Not Wait”. If he really had to think about it, he would probably have acknowledged thinking of me as someone who spends his days annoying people. Or that I walk around the airport all day waiting for the train to arrive so that I can inflame the emotions of men with red faces even more by blocking their exit with my huge luggage. Either that, or I evaporate like condensation the moment I have performed my regular rude act.

At Sandton Station, I waited for a few people to disembark before getting off. Because I had to catch another train to Rosebank, I had one more chance to show that I knew how to enter a train like a civilised person.

When the train arrived a few minutes later at a different platform, I hung back. The train doors opened ... but before a single passenger had a chance to get out, a young woman stormed the open door.

“How rude,” I muttered. And as my cheeks flamed up with indignation, I wondered how long it would take for the woman to evaporate.

Encountering a savage

Tuesday, 22 October 2013

Just before I moved into one of only two open parking spaces (think of a space wide enough for bicycles, scooters and motorcycles) at the supermarket this evening, a woman and her son manoeuvred into the adjacent bay. But she parked at such an angle that half the bay where I was planning to leave my bike ended up being occupied by the front of her scooter. Walking away, she looked over her shoulder. She must have noticed how she had parked. She must have noticed that I had to enter the space where the front of her scooter protruded. Nevertheless, she turned away, and disappeared through the sliding doors of the supermarket.

My view of her is simple: She's a savage.

What else? She probably expects consideration from other people in a parking lot, yet she showed none. Also, if everybody did what she did, there would be chaos and conflict. Not only is she not a reasonable person, she also doesn't behave rationally.

I tried to give her a dirty look at the vegetable section, but she looked away.

What else could she do? (Or am I overthinking it?)

In other news, I had a narrow escape shortly before the skirmish with the barbarian woman. I was pedalling through the tunnel under the railway line near our apartment. In front of me was another cyclist. I usually stay on the right side of the narrow underpass so people on scooters can pass me, but in this case I could see I was going to have to pass the other cyclist. Just as I was squeezing past him, I heard a bang. When I looked back, I saw that the guy had hit something that ruptured his rear tyre.

If he were not there, it would have been me going over that sharp object. Which means I wouldn't have made it to the supermarket, and therefore I wouldn't have encountered the

savage woman. That, in turn, means I wouldn't have had reason to produce this short piece of text, and you would be reading something else right now.

Funny how things work out.

The man, the child, and a special sandwich

Friday, 24 October 2014

One morning when I was five years old, I sat in a tree in our front yard waiting for the kindergarten bus to pick me up. My mother was in the kitchen making me a sandwich. The next moment the bus stopped in front of our house. I jumped out of the tree, opened the garden gate, and got into the bus.

As the bus was pulling away, I saw my mother standing in the front door with my sandwich in her hands.

It broke my heart. Years later I told her how deeply it affected me.

I am now 43. This morning I made myself a sandwich, kissed my wife goodbye, and cycled to the subway station.

While waiting for the train, I put the plastic bag with my sandwich on a bench. I reminded myself not to forget the bag (I easily get lost in conversation with myself).

That's when I remembered the incident with my mother and the sandwich when I was five.

I wondered how I would have felt if my wife had made me the sandwich and I forgot the sandwich on the bench.

To my great pleasure, I realised it would have been deeply upsetting.

Crisis averted

Thursday, 6 November 2014

Keys on the keyboard don't hit themselves. The mouse clicks, but only when I press one of two fingers down on its flanks. Words clot on paper, but get stuck when I'm talking to myself out loud ... which, to be precise, is only half a truth, because words also get stuck in my throat or hide behind my teeth when I want to explain something to someone, or when I want to bore them with an anecdote about the European middle ages, or with one of my famed opinions.

Not that I'm implying I know so much about the European middle ages that I can entertain just about anyone on a street corner or on the subway with stories about it, but I have read a few articles on Wikipedia, watched a few documentaries, and, as a matter of fact, read a number of books on the subject.

This can, in theory, make one appear smarter to other people, but it definitely doesn't make you a better banana chooser. I mean, three of my last three bananas had bruises! Were these bruises already present under their golden skin in the supermarket, or did I crush the fruit when I put my half-litre cup of green tea on top of them in the basket mounted in the front of my bicycle?

That very same half-litre cup of green tea arrived leaking beverage onto the road by the time I made it to the hauntingly deserted area where I've turned two empty rooms in an old house into my "office". When I took the bag with the tea and the golden yellow bananas from the basket, tea spilt all over my shoes and my trousers. "What the ...?!" I wanted to scream. Then I realised the bag was leaking. Did the cup break? Did the woman at the tea shop not close the lid properly? After the bag had dripped tea on my shoes and my neat trousers for approximately 12 seconds while obscenities flowed unarrested from my mouth, I ran into the street, took the cup out of the bag, and threw the tea in the bag in the drain.

Crisis averted.

Which has absolutely nothing to do with the European middle ages or anything in which anyone, myself included, is even remotely interested.

You're happily building your house of cards ...

Friday, 19 December 2014

You're happily building a house for yourself – with playing cards. Someone comes along, observes what you're doing, and pushes the house over. The cards flutter down to earth. You're furious. “What the fuck ...” you scream. “How dare you? I was building a house – a home! Does that mean nothing to you? Does it mean nothing to you that I've been working on this house for the past several months?!”

“I've just done you a favour,” the guy starts explaining. “I understand that you were doing something you attach a lot of value to, but my goodness buddy, your home was built with cards! With playing cards! What do you think would have happened if you and your family had moved in there and a storm broke out?”

You walk away in anger, yelling filthy insults every now and then over your shoulder.

The next day you see the man again. You shake his hand. You say, thank you, I understand now. “I was so focused on my plan,” you continue, “the idea of a home, a house of my own, that I overlooked the reality of what I was doing.”

That very same day you again start from scratch.

The years are bugging me

Thursday, 5 February 2015

What does 2015 mean? What does it mean that I was born in 1971? And no one except scientists even talks about 2045 or 2055!

It's been bothering me for some time that these numbered years keep floating in my mind yet I don't quite know how they fit together. And before I know, the numbers have changed again.

Here is one explanation:

I was born in 1871. It is now 1915, the second calendar year of the Great War. If I can avoid serious misfortune and disease and maintain a fairly healthy lifestyle, I can expect to live until roughly the mid-1940s.

That means I was born in the year when Otto von Bismarck led Prussia and allied German states to victory over France and the unification of Germany. As a South African I can talk of my contemporaries Jan Smuts, Louis Botha and Sol Plaatje. On the international scene my contemporaries include Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin and Vladimir Lenin.

My last days may arrive when I am in my seventies, about the time the Allies defeat the fascists in World War II, or soon after. Should I survive another decade and live until my mid-eighties, I would see in a colour magazine or possibly on black-and-white TV how a young upstart called Elvis Presley shakes his leg like no decent man would have done in my day.

The real or not real purpose of our existence

Tuesday, 15 December 2015

Stir up the topic of the possibility of a purpose to human existence, and you necessarily bring up the origin of the human being.

I reckon there are three possibilities: humans were created by a deity; humans were slowly evolving from earlier life forms, then beings from outer space arrived and injected their DNA in an earlier incarnation of what would eventually become modern humans; humans evolved slowly over millions of years from earlier life forms into the organisms we see today, with no interference from cosmic deities or aliens from outer space.

Each of these possible origins has unique implications for the possibility of a purpose to our existence.

If a deity created humans, it makes sense that we should start our search for the purpose of our existence with this deity: Who is this deity? What does this deity want from us? Why did the deity create us? What will happen if we do not do what we ought to do, or if we fail for various reasons to figure out what we ought to do?

If what we are today is the result of interference from beings from outer space, the questions are similar: Who are they? Where did they come from? Why did they come all this way to interfere with our biological ancestors? What are we supposed to do? What will happen if we fail to do what we have to do, or if we can't figure out what they want us to do?

If we have developed slowly over millions of years, and if perhaps as many as hundreds but probably at least dozens of different incarnations passed before we came to be the organism we call *Homo sapiens* today, we cannot reasonably look for something beyond ourselves that had a plan or purpose in mind for us a long time ago.

If we owe our existence to the latter process – a highly probable yet strangely enough highly controversial possibility, we can make a reasonable conclusion. It would mean “purpose of existence”, like identity, is something we came up with to help us get through the proverbial day. In other words, it isn’t really *real*.

Important to note that something does not have to be actually real to have practical value. Identity is one example: I am not really “Brand Smit”. Or, “Brand Smit” is not a real thing like a dog or an elephant or a pencil. It is something that was originally devised by my parents, and then I contributed a little, and others lent a hand, and when I became older I got a little more creative with it, and nowadays other people sometimes play along with what I say, and sometimes they don’t. But “Brand Smit” does have practical value. Not only does it help the author of this text to get through his day and get along fairly well with other organisms and creatures in his environment, it may even motivate him to sacrifice some of his time and money to assist other people and animals.

Most of the people who will benefit from his selfless actions won’t care too much how he thinks about the purpose of his existence. For example, he can start a soup kitchen to feed hungry people sleeping at the train station, and I reckon they won’t grumble too much if the helper declares that he is doing so because he sees it as the purpose of his existence as revealed by beings from outer space.

* * *

There is a good chance that both identity and belief that our existence serves a purpose are things we invented ourselves. It is also true that some of us view these things as if they are holy truth that cannot be altered to any significant extent.

Is it good to think your existence serves a purpose?

I have mentioned the example of someone providing hot soup and bread to hungry people without compensation and at no cost to the person who gets the soup and bread, possibly

because he or she believes it expresses the purpose of their existence.

Then there is the guy who does not believe his existence serves any purpose; that he was born and that he will eventually die, and in between he will do his best to get along with his neighbours, stay out of trouble most of the time, and make his life as much worth the effort as he can manage, since he can easily enough end his own life.

Personally, I have no problem with someone who doesn't believe their existence serves a purpose. And if the person at the soup kitchen says she is a creature of extraterrestrial origin who is simply doing what she was commanded to do, I won't have a problem with her either – as long as the soup and bread are of a quality that can sustain ordinary earthlings throughout the day.

On the other end of the spectrum I will certainly mind if someone wants to cut off my head because they say ancient writings instruct them to do so, that it is indeed part of the purpose of their existence as revealed by this ancient text.

The belief that your existence serves a purpose is, like identity, not inherently good or bad. Both can help you get through the day in one piece and in reasonably good shape, and not end up in prison or a mental institution. Both can also make your path to the prison or mental institution remarkably short and straight. And both can enable you to live in relative peace with most members of the community, or it can set you on a warpath with them or with members of other communities.

Who are you, at the end of the day? And do you believe your existence serves a purpose? If you do, what is this purpose, and from where did you get the idea that this ought to be the purpose of your life?

A desperate plea

Sunday, 15 May 2016

I have mentioned this before, but I am doing it again today, solemnly, in public: I am asking myself, pretty please, to not become a fuddy-duddy, a cranky old geezer.

As a matter of course it is mostly men who will understand this plea, particularly if they have reached their so-called middle years.

Middle-aged and older men are known for their conservative attitudes, and in many cases seem to have a permanent bee in their bonnets and a chip on their shoulders. They regularly feel as if their manhood is being challenged. One of the younger generation of men just has to think of doing something wrong, like parking in the wrong place, talking too loudly on his phone, or cutting in line in the queue at IKEA's restaurant in Kaohsiung (while actually only re-joining his friend), and the old geezer pushes up in a man who a few moments before was just a normal human being. He gets red in the face, his hair turns a greyer shade from pure outrage, he wants to read someone the riot act, and he says things like, "Please! For the love of god, just *wake up!*"

That everyone shakes their heads and his wife distances herself from him one small step at a time matter little to him.

Even though there are places where old geezers still rule – Saudi Arabia being a fine example, it seems like fuddy-duddies are an endangered species – red in the face from almost permanent consternation because someone dared to do something with which he disagrees, and with a feeling that if the world had ever belonged to him, it is certainly no longer the case.

Now I just need to build up some resistance to my inner old geezer who wants to show his puffed-up face every now and then and wag his finger at perfect strangers.

A good and successful day is built layer by layer

Wednesday, 28 December 2016

Who begins their day with a manifesto on their lips, and a finely worked-out blueprint in their heads?

The fact is, most people's days start with necessity: you get up because you need to go to the bathroom, because you are hungry, and because you have made arrangements with people and businesses, and if you do not show up, you're going to be in trouble.

And so begins your day. Eventually, you shower and you brush your teeth, you get dressed, and you go somewhere to earn your bread and butter, or to otherwise be of value to the community.

Layer upon layer your day is built up. Here and there you make a mistake. Here and there you say something or you do something that embarrasses you, but after a few minutes or an hour or so you are in full swing again.

By the time the day is over, you will perhaps look back on a good and relatively successful day. Did you start with slogans rolling over your lips, and a neatly printed plan waiting next to your bed for you to follow like an obedient robot? Most likely not, although you may have had a good idea of how you would like your day to progress.

So it is with other endeavours and projects that you undertake. You have a good idea of what you need to do to achieve reasonably good results. You have a good idea what you should do to stay out of trouble. You still make the occasional mistake, and every so often you slide on a banana peel. But successful results, like a good and successful day, is built up layer by layer – ten, twenty, a hundred big and small actions and steps following after another to produce a good result.

Slogans are good. Manifestoes have their place. Surely you have to know what you must do. But success is more often than not the result of layer upon layer of small, seemingly insignificant actions. Just like a good and successful day.

Not exactly on the same topic, but in the same spirit: Scott Adams wrote the following in a blog post at Dilbert.COM: “The idea of a talent stack is that you can combine ordinary skills until you have enough of the right kind to be extraordinary. You don’t have to be the best in the world at any one thing. All you need to succeed is to be good at a number of skills that fit well together.”

The Russian Revolution, and my attempts at living a relatively normal life

Saturday, 4 February 2017

The last few weeks I have once again been editing and translating material that I had written in the mid to late nineties and early noughts. As I was riding back from work this afternoon, I thought about some of the themes that had repeatedly popped up in the material. I also thought that I am still a little embarrassed about the fact that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life in my twenties, and even my early thirties. I did not have a proper plan of action, I didn't know what kind of success I was supposed to pursue, and my understanding of life wasn't comprehensive enough to guide me through the decisions I needed to make.

As I continued on my way home, one thought made room for the next. I pondered my solemn intention from yesterday about taking a nap this afternoon after finishing my usual tasks on the computer, and then after the nap to start on the new book that I had bought recently for my Kindle (about the unsolved murder of a 20-year-old British woman in Peking in 1937). That reminded me of the long article that I'm still working through on my reading device, and I wondered for a moment if I would finish that article first before I start with the new book. It's mostly theory, I thought to myself, and it's both difficult to read and a bit boring.

The article – actually a lecture given years ago at a conference – deals with Leon Trotsky – revolutionary, writer and political theorist of the early twentieth century. I thought how Trotsky, Lenin and other Bolsheviks like Nikolai Bukharin were “next level” smart. In between planning and attending conferences and hiding from police and arguing the fine points of ideology they also found time to write articles long enough to fill an entire notebook on the theory of political revolution. And because there was significant competition in

the field of political revolution theory in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, you couldn't get away with flimsy arguments. Once someone had published a new piece, it was carefully studied for historical errors, inconsistencies and poorly formulated arguments. Only the writings of party leaders and political activists who were intellectually gifted and who had some degree of writing talent were taken seriously when decisions on policies and plans of action were made.

Boom! it hit me: Those revolutionaries who had wanted to take over political control of the old Russian Empire, who had actually managed to do so by November 1917, and then were left holding the bag, so to speak, did not know what they were doing! Not only did their plans of action change as circumstances required, there were also serious disagreements amongst the leadership on which theory should be followed when deciding on political, economic, and social policy. The world view and understanding of how human life was supposed to be conducted that had applied for centuries were also unceremoniously cast aside. The new leaders in the Kremlin paid homage to a radically different idea according to which they believed people's lives ought to be managed. To determine policy, make decisions, and formulate and implement plans of action they needed more than a radical idea, though – they needed theories that merged understanding of human nature and politics and economic principles and a few other things into a coherent whole.

An overview of political theory in the time before, during and after the 1917 revolution is enough to either make your head spin or lull you to sleep. The old Social Revolutionary Party, for example, believed in the socialisation of land – that farmland should be distributed among the peasants, while Lenin and the Social Democratic Labour Party (from whose ranks the Bolsheviks came) believed in the collectivization of farmland – that is, to put it under state control. The SDLP defined class membership in terms of ownership of means of

production, while the Social Revolutionaries defined class membership according to the surplus value that could be extracted from labour. According to the first definition, small farmers who practised subsistence farming, did not make use of any wage labour and owned the land which they tilled, were members of the petite bourgeoisie. According to the second definition, they could be grouped together with others who *supplied* labour rather than with people who *purchased* labour, and could therefore be seen with industrial workers as part of the working class. (This difference might seem like a mere academic point to some people today, but especially in the 1920s and 1930s it was a matter of life and death.) The rift that developed in the Social Democratic Labour Party in 1903 was also largely due to a difference of opinion regarding principles and theory. One of the main points on which the two factions differed was the definition of party member. Lenin and his supporters (who later became the Bolsheviks) insisted that candidates had to be a member of one of the party's organisations, while their opponents reckoned it was good enough if the person only worked under the guidance of a party organisation. Finally, there was the difference between Leon Trotsky and his supporters in the 1920s who believed that the revolution should at all costs be exported to other countries, and their arch rival in the party, Joseph Stalin, who was of the opinion that socialism had to be established in one country first. (Again, it may look like a debate between nerds today, but Stalin felt strong enough about the matter to send an assassin who smashed an ice pick into Trotsky's skull to end the argument.) Trotsky also subscribed to the idea of Permanent Revolution, which according to Wikipedia, is "the theory that the bourgeois democratic tasks in countries with delayed bourgeois democratic development can only be accomplished through the establishment of a workers' state, and that the creation of a workers' state would inevitably involve inroads against capitalist property. Thus, the accomplishment of bourgeois democratic tasks passes over

into proletarian tasks.” (So much for the idea that a revolution is simply a matter of which side is better armed.)

Back to my own modest struggles of my twenties and early thirties. I did not have a country that fell into my lap like a ripe peach, but I did have my own life that stretched out before me. Like the Bolsheviks who had to work out in the 1920s (and of course the decades after, but that’s another story) how they would go about forming a government, set policies, and manage infrastructure and services that would affect millions of lives, so I had to decide how I would go about sending my life in a particular direction, and maybe do a few things that I could later look back on with more pride than shame. And just like the Bolsheviks rejected the ways of thinking and doing things of what had been the established political, economic and social order in Russia up to 1917, so I realised that I had to work out why I had to do one thing and not another, why I couldn’t simply follow in the footsteps of other people, and why what worked well for many of my contemporaries wouldn’t necessarily work for me. I couldn’t just set off and start “ruling” my own life. I had to work out why things were the way they were. I had to work out plans of action that would be consistent with what I had worked out, and with the “policies” that I had decided on.

Anyone who has some knowledge of twentieth-century history would know the Bolsheviks’ experiment ultimately failed. Smart people can explain where the theory that had been developed by Marx, Trotsky, Lenin and others was wrong, and where it might have worked had it not been for the destructive policies and senseless violence perpetrated by bloodthirsty thugs like Joseph Stalin.

After spending all that time trying to figure out how I wanted to live my life and why in such a way, where I had come from in the broader sense than just looking at my father and mother, and how I fit into the mass of stimuli outside my skin, I can say in all honesty that my life is working out quite well. I know what changes I can still make to make it better. And if I have to, I can explain everything to someone who

asks the right questions. Which, if I think about it, is not too bad, considering that I am very far from “next level” smart.

Beat the drum with conviction, or hang your head in shame

Monday, 13 February 2017

This morning I watched a program titled *Heart of Taiko*, about the traditional Japanese drum. The program follows three Malay-Japanese teenage girls who had established a taiko group in Penang. They are invited to attend a workshop at a legendary manufacturer of taiko drums in Japan. They meet three of the country's top female players, who will teach them technique and correct conduct. At the end of the few days it is expected of the group of teenagers to perform with the Japanese professionals in front of a select audience.

The younger of the three Japanese drummers take the lead in the young students' training. She is critical from the start. The girls don't play together. They show a lack of commitment. She gives them packs of magazines wrapped in paper to practice on, and she wonders the next day why the packs are not in shreds. She looks at their hands. Why are they not bruised? Why are there no blisters? She takes them to a windy beach where they have to stand with their legs apart while holding heavy drumsticks above their heads as they scream something. This while a strong wind is blowing at them. They do okay, but still leave their instructor unimpressed.

The next day they go to a monastery to meditate – they sit quietly on pillows, staring at a white wall. After the session, one girl describes it as a very helpful experience. She says she learned that you have to be fully present in the moment.

They go back to the training centre. They train harder.

The following day they again play their drums for their teacher – the young, professional taiko master. This time she smiles. They still make a lot of mistakes, she says. There's a lot they still have to learn. But, and this she says with great satisfaction – she could see more dedication in their eyes. She

also sees it in their arm movements, the arms being lifted high and brought down hard on the drum skin. And their screams were loud and full of energy.

And they learn: Technical mistakes are one thing; we work on them. Everybody makes mistakes at the beginning. Mistakes can be forgiven. What is unforgivable, what is in fact a great embarrassment to all concerned, is lack of dedication.

House cats are not necessarily insane

Friday, 7 April 2017

Any sharp observer of a domestic cat's daily existence will get the impression that the animal lives under a delusion. He clearly believes he is the master of the house, and that all the beds, the couch, the carpet in the living room and the kitchen sink are all his personal belongings. He also reckons it is perfectly acceptable for him to pierce the silence at three o'clock in the morning with a spine-chilling lament simply because he is bored and not a single one of his personal slaves has offered to drag his string across the floor for a mock hunt.

People, on the other hand, have this odd belief that it is good to have an honest view of reality. We believe we must acknowledge our shortcomings. We believe we must recognise if we think something is not reasonable or possible. Since that is our view, we act accordingly. We don't risk doing certain things. We know our place. We don't like to talk out of turn.

If domestic cats were more similar to many people, they would be in deep trouble. They would have to recognise the fact that they are extremely vulnerable animals between a quarter and one-twenty-fifth the size of most animals around them – namely humans and other animals like dogs. This more honest view of their reality would lead to cats having significantly diminished egos, sitting quietly in a corner lest someone scold them, and waiting patiently until someone is so gracious to put food out for them.

Cats definitely do not see reality as it really is – they see it as it suits them, and they act accordingly.

If anyone ever tries to make them aware of their delusion, the cat will first yawn with bored contempt, and if he thinks you still don't get the point he will proceed to rip your new bedding to shreds. You can just imagine how the idea takes

shape in the cat's head: "Honest view of reality? Are you insane? What do you think I am – human?"

The scientist Donald Hoffman said evolution does not favour people with a good understanding of objective reality, but rather those who perceive reality in a way that enables them to survive in a most efficient way.

Clearly, this works very well for at least our cats.

Time marches on and headline news fade

Sunday, 9 April 2017

Fifty years from now only some history teachers, historians and people who are truly interested in the subject will be able to speak for more than 60 seconds about the Second World War. For most people it will simply have been too long ago, and too many things would have happened in this century that would fill people's heads.

I mean, how many people today can still converse intelligently for more than 30 seconds about the First World War? How many people during the First World War could talk intelligently for as long as a minute about the Napoleonic wars? And remember: the events of the first two decades of the 1800s were front page news in at least major cities at the time they occurred, and hot topics of discussion around dinner tables and in the streets!

The same question can be asked about the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, or the Protestant Revolution and the religious wars of the sixteenth century. A hundred years after these events, how many people could still have a factual discussion about these events?

Fact is, time moves on. Old history makes way for new history. Veterans of the greatest war for a generation or more die one after another until there is no one left who has experienced that war first-hand. And people's interests change.

History of which you will only be ignorant today if you are uneducated or living in a cave will in many cases be so obscure in several decades' time that people will look at you funny if you can indeed have a conversation for more than a minute about it – or, depending on the subject and the decade, a monologue.

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