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How proust can change your life not a novel

Page views 624068 To wonder too openly, or intensely, about the meaning of life sounds like a peculiar, ill-fated and unintentionally comedic pastime. It isn't anything an ordinary mortal should be doing – or would get very far by doing. A select few might be equipped to take on the task and discover the answer in their own lives, but such ambition isn't for most of us. Meaningful lives are for extraordinary people: great saints, artists, scholars, scientists, doctors, activists, explorers, national leaders…. If ever we did discover the meaning, it would – we suspect – in any case be incomprehensible, perhaps written in Latin or in computer code. It wouldn't be anything that could orient or illuminate our activities. Without always acknowledging it, we are – in the background – operating with a remarkably ungenerous perspective on the meaning of life. Yet, in truth, the subject is for everyone; it is for all of us to wonder about, and define, a meaningful existence. There need be nothing forbidding about the issue. A meaningful life can be simple in structure, personal, usable, attractive and familiar. This is a guidebook to it. A meaningful life is close to, but at points importantly different from, a happy life. Here are some of its ingredients: – A meaningful life draws upon, and exercises, a range of our higher capacities, for example, those bound up with tenderness, care, connection, self-understanding, sympathy, intelligence and creativity. – A meaningful life aims not so much at day-to-day contentment as fulfilment. We may be leading a meaningful life and yet, really rather often, be in a bad mood (just as we may be having frequent surface fun while living, for the most part, meaninglessly). – A meaningful life is bound up with the long-term. Projects, relationships, interests and commitments will build up cumulatively. Meaningful activities leave something behind, even when the emotions that once propelled us into them have passed. – Meaningful activities aren't necessarily those we do most often. They are those we most highly value and will, from the perspective of our deaths, regret most deeply. – The question of what makes life meaningful has to be answered personally (even if our conclusions are marked by no particular idiosyncrasy). Others cannot be relied upon to determine what will be meaningful to us. What we call 'crises of meaning' are generally moments when someone else's – perhaps very well intentioned – interpretation of what might be meaningful to us runs up against a growing realisation of our divergent tastes and interests. – We have to work out, by a process of experience and introspection, what counts as meaningful in our eyes. Whereas pleasure manifests itself immediately, our taste in meaning may be more elusive. We can be relatively far into our lives before we securely identify what lends them their meaning. This book considers a range of options for where meaning might lie for us. It is anchored around a discussion of eight centrally meaningful activities: love, family, work, friendship, culture, politics, nature and philosophy. Most are well-known; the point isn't to identify entirely new sources of meaning so much as to try to evoke and explain some familiar choices. The options should provide orientation, enabling us to find our own preferences or – when we dissent – to design alternatives. Along the way, we hope to underscore that our lives are more meaningful – and certainly more capable of meaning – than we might initially have supposed. Increasing the amount of meaning in our lives doesn't have to involve any radical outward moves. Our lives almost certainly already have some hugely meaningful sides to them, but we may well not be correctly valuing, understanding or appreciating these. It is time to turn the pursuit of a meaningful life from a comedically-complex impossibility to something we can all comprehend, aim for and succeed at. 2. Sources of Meaning LOVE – Care One way to get a sense of why love should so often be considered close to the meaning of life is to look at the challenges of loneliness. Frequently, we leave the topic of loneliness unmentioned: those without anyone to hold feel shame; those with someone (a background degree of) guilt. But the pains of loneliness are an unembarrassing and universal possibility. We shouldn't – on top of it all – feel lonely about being lonely. Unwittingly, loneliness gives us the most eloquent insights into why love matters so much. There are few greater experts on the importance of love than those who are bereft of anyone to love. It is hard to know quite what all the fuss around love might be about until and unless one has, somewhere along the way, spent some bitter unwanted passages in one's own company. When we are alone, people may well strive to show us kindness; there may be invitations and touching gestures, but it will be hard to escape from a lingering sense of the conditionality of the interest and care on offer. We are liable to detect the limits of the availability of even the best disposed companions and sense the restrictions of the demands we can make upon them. It is often too late – or too early – to call. In bleak moments, we may suspect we could disappear off the earth and no one would much notice or care. In ordinary company, we cannot simply share whatever is passing through our minds: too much of our inner monologue is overly petty or intense, random or anxiety-laden to be of interest. Our acquaintances have an understandable expectation, which it would be unwise to disabuse them of, that their friends should be normal. We must operate with a degree of politeness too. No one finds rage or obsession, peculiarity or bitterness especially charming. We can't act up or rant. A radical editing of our true selves is the price we must pay for conviviality. We have to accept too that much of who we are won't readily be understood. Some of our deepest concerns will be met with blank incomprehension, boredom or fear. Most people won't give a damn. Our deeper thoughts will be of scant interest. We will have to subsist as pleasant but radically abbreviated paragraphs in the minds of almost everyone. All these quietly soul-destroying aspects of single life, love promises to correct. In the company of a lover, there need be almost no limits to the depths of concern, care, attention and license we are granted. We will be accepted more or less as we are; we won't be under pressure to keep proving our status. It will be possible to reveal our extreme vulnerabilities and compulsions and survive. It will be OK to have tantrums, to sing badly and to cry. We will be tolerated if we are less than charming or simply vile for a time. We will be able to wake them up at odd hours to share sorrows or excitements. Our smallest scratches will be of interest. We will be able to raise topics of awe inspiring minuteness (it won't have been like this since early childhood, the last time kindly others expended serious energy discussing whether the top button on our cardigan should be done up or left open). In the presence of the lover, evaluation will no longer be so swift and cynical. They will lavish time. As we tentatively allude to something, they will get eager and excited. They will say 'go on' when we stumble and hesitate. They won't just say 'poor you' and turn away. They will search out relevant details; they will piece together an accurate picture that does justice to our inner lives. The fragile parts of ourselves will be in safe hands. We will feel immense gratitude to this person who does something that we had maybe come to suspect would be impossible: know us really well and still like us. We will have escaped from that otherwise dominant, and devastating sense that the only way to get people to like us is to keep most of who we are under wraps. We will start to feel like we exist. Our identity will be safe; we won't be the only guardians of our story. When the world's disinterest chills and erodes us, we will be able to return to the lover to be put back together again, reflected back to ourselves in terms that reassure and console us. Surrounded on all sides by lesser or greater varieties of coldness, we will at last know that, in the arms of one extraordinary, patient and kindly being worthy of infinite gratitude, we truly matter. – Admiration In Plato's dialogue, The Symposium, the playwright Aristophanes suggests that the origins of love lie in a desire to complete ourselves by finding a long lost 'other half'. At the beginning of time, he ventures in playful conjecture, all human beings were hermaphrodites with double backs and flanks, four hands and four legs and two faces turned in opposite directions on the same head. These hermaphrodites were so powerful and their pride so overweening that Zeus was forced to cut them in two, into a male and female half – and from that day, each one of us has nostalgically yearned to rejoin the part from which he or she was once severed. We don't need to buy into the literal story to recognise a symbolic truth: we fall in love with people who promise that they will in some way help to make us whole. At the centre of our ecstatic feelings in the early days of love, there is a gratitude at having found someone who seems to complement our qualities and dispositions. Unlike us, they have (perhaps) a remarkable patience with administrative detail or an invigorating habit of rebelling against officialdom. They may have an ability to keep things in proportion and to avoid hysteria. Or it might be that they have a particularly melancholy and sensitive nature and are in touch with deeper currents of thought and feeling. We do not all fall in love with the same people because we are not all missing the same things. The aspects we find desirable in our partners speak of what we admire but do not have secure possession of in ourselves. We may be powerfully drawn to the competent person because we know how our own lives are held up by tendencies to panic around bureaucratic complications. Or our love may zero in on the comedic sides of a partner because we're only too aware of our tendencies to sterile despair and cynicism. Or we may be drawn to an atmosphere of thoughtful concentration in a partner as a relief from our own skittish minds. We love at least in part in the hope of being helped and redeemed by our lovers. There is an underlying desire for education and growth. We hope to change a little in their presence, becoming – through their help – better versions of ourselves. Love contains just below the surface a hope for reparation and education. We usually think of education as something harsh imposed upon us against our will. Love promises to educate us in a gentler, more seductive way. Aware of our lovers' qualities, we may allow ourselves some moments of pure rapture and undiluted enthusiasm. The excitement of love stands in contrast with our normal disappointments and scepticism about others; spotting what is wrong with a person is a familiar, quickly completed and painfully unrewarding game. Love gives us the energy to construct and hold on to the very best story about someone. We are returned to a primal gratitude. We are thrilled by apparently minor details: that they have called us, that they are wearing a particular pullover, that they lean their head on their hand in a certain way, that they have a tiny scar over their left index finger or a habit of slightly mispronouncing a word… It isn't usual to take this kind of care over a fellow creature, to notice so many tiny touching, accomplished and poignant things in another. This is what parents, artists or a God might do. We can't necessarily continue in this vein forever, the rapture may not be entirely sane, but it is a hugely redemptive pastime – and a kind of art all of its own – to give ourselves over to appreciating properly for a time the real complexity, beauty and virtue of another human being. – Desire One of the more surprising and at one level perplexing aspects of love is that we don't merely wish to admire our partners; we are also powerfully drawn to want to possess them physically. But we can only start to understand the role of sexuality in love if we can accept that it is not just a physical experience we're after. Sex delivers a major psychological thrill. A lot of our delight has its origin in an idea: that of being allowed to do a very private thing to and with another person. Another person's body is usually a highly protected and private zone. It would be deeply offensive to go up to a stranger and finger their cheeks or touch them between their legs. The mutual permission involved in sex is dramatic and at the core of our desire. We're implicitly saying to another person through our unclothing that they have been placed in a tiny, intensely policed category of people: that we have granted them an extraordinary privilege. Therefore, it's not so much what our bodies happen to be doing in sex that generates our excitement. It's what is happening in our brains: acceptance is at the centre of the kinds of experiences we collectively refer to as 'getting turned on.' It feels physical – the blood pumps faster, the metabolism shifts gear, the skin gets hot – but behind all this lies a very different kind of pleasure rooted in the mind: a sense of an end to our isolation. Family – Emotional Nepotism One of the things that makes families so important and so meaningful is that they are centres of unashamed nepotism. We're used to thinking very negatively of nepotism. We are taught that a good society is one in which people rise and fall according to their own merits or flaws – and do not gain any sort of unfair favour from their families. But, in a crucial emotional sense at least, most of us don't actually believe this. We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, emotional nepotists. Historically, the idea of nepotism in Europe was particularly associated with the Catholic Church during the Renaissance. The word nepotism was born when a series of Popes took to appointing their nephews (nipote in Italian), along with other family members, to top jobs irrespective of their talents, simply on the basis of their connections. Titian, Pope Paul III and His Grandsons (1545–46) In 1534, the already elderly Alessandro Farnese was elected Pope and took the name of Paul III. One of the first things he did was to elevate his young grandson (also called Alessandro) to the influential and lucrative position of Cardinal. He made another grandson the Duke of one of the small Italian states that was – at that time – directly under the control of the Pope. It was all appallingly unfair. In this regard, nepotism presents a deep affront to modern enlightened ideals of open competition, especially around work and careers. But we have to admit that the idea of bias towards relatives possesses – in the emotional as opposed to the professional sense – a deeply reassuring and attractive side as well. What is more, we have all already and ineluctably been the beneficiaries of the starkest, grossest nepotism. We wouldn't have got here without it. That's because when we were born, despite the millions of other children in the world, irrespective of our merits (we didn't really have any), our parents and wider family made the decision to take care of us: to devote huge amounts of time, love and money to our well being: not because we had done anything to deserve it – at that time, we were barely capable of holding a spoon let alone saying hello – but simply because we were related to them. Nepotism is what ensures that a series of tantrums will be forgiven; that unpleasant traits of character will be overlooked; that we'll be supported as we rant and rage in the small hours; that parents will forgive children who have not been especially good – and that children with somewhat disappointing parents will still, despite everything, show up for the holidays. Because of the existence of family, we all have an experience of belonging not based on our beliefs or accomplishments or efforts (all of which may change or fail) but on something far purer and more irrevocable: the fact of our birth. In a world in which our employment generally hangs by a thread, in which we are judged swiftly and definitively by almost everyone, in our families at least, we know that we can't be sacked, even if we don't make very special conversation at dinner and have failed dismally in our careers. Given how fragile our standing in the eyes of others generally is, this is a source of huge ongoing emotional relief. Within families, there's often a welcome disregard not just for demerit, but for merit as well. Within the family, it may not really matter not only how badly, but also how well, you're doing in the world of money and work outside. The daughter who becomes a high court judge is probably not going to be loved any more than the son who has a stall in the market selling origami dragons; the steely negotiator and demanding boss in charge of the livelihoods of thousands may be endlessly teased by their relatives for their poor taste in jumpers or tendency to belch at inopportune moments. Although nepotism is genuinely misplaced at work, some version of nepotism is extremely important in our emotional lives because, however competent and impressive we might be in some areas, there are inevitably going to be many points at which we're distinctly feeble – and where we urgently need at least a few people to be extremely patient with our failings and follies, to give us a second chance (and a third and a fourth) and to stay on our side even though (from a strict point of view) we don't really deserve it at all. Good families aren't blind to our faults; they just don't use these faults too harshly against us. – Knowledge Our family members are probably the only people in the world who ever deeply understand key bits of us. Perhaps we don't always get on better with them than with other people. They might not know the details of our current friendships or the precise state of our finances. But they have a knowledge of the underlying atmosphere of our lives that others will almost certainly lack. When we make new acquaintances in adult life, we are necessarily meeting relatively late on in our respective developments. We might learn the broad outline of their childhood, but we won't know what the holiday caravan or the beach house were really like, we won't understand the details of the jokes, the smells, the textures of the carpets or the favourite foods, the finer-grained aspects of the emotions in circulation. With family members, the knowledge tends to be the other way round. They might not know too much about our present and they weren't necessarily always ideally wise or intelligent witnesses, but they were there – which gives them a definitive edge in grasping a great share of who we might be. Relationships in adult life are so often complicated by a lack of intimate knowledge of the past. If we had been the brother or sister of the loud, domineering figure we meet for the first time over dinner, we would of course have understood that they were, still – at root – trying to get heard by their inattentive mother. And, as a result, we'd know the perfect response ('I'm listening now') that would instantly have calmed them down. Or if we had shared a bath with the tough exacting chief financial officer at work when we were three, we'd know that their highly rigorous, inquisitorial approach (which is so off-putting) was really nothing more than an attempt to stave off the chaos that surrounded him at home after his parents' messy divorce. The full facts would make us so much readier to be patient and generous. – Safe Strangeness One of the reliable horrors, but also profound advantages, of families is that they force us to spend time around people we would otherwise never have known about, thought we wanted to meet, or imagined we could get along with. Our friendships and professional networks are hugely, but harmfully efficient at keeping us closely tied to a particular age, income and ideological bracket. We subtly yet firmly expel all those who do not flatter our world view. Family life does the opposite. It's because of the unique structure of a family that an 82-year-old woman and 4-year-old boy can become friends or that a 56-year-old dentist and an 11-year-old schoolgirl can have an in-depth conversation about tire pressure or splash each other at the beach. The family creates an environment in which there is enough safety to allow for encounters with radical strangeness. A brother-in-law will bring us into contact with life in the Russian diamond market; in a family, the university researcher who has just published a paper on the carbon cycle in the Takayama forests of Japan gets to sit down for lunch with an accountant specialising in insolvency cases. And in family settings, points of connection end up being found despite all the obvious differences. We do the dishes with someone whose political views are pretty much the opposite of our own but discover we agree deeply about how to rinse glasses properly. We rescue the picnic from an unexpected downpour – with someone who earns 83 times more than us serving as our loyal assistant. Prompted by our nieces and nephews, we get into an adult vs. child water-gun fight, supported by a cousin whom our friends would dismiss as a long-haired loser but whom we realise is really rather lovely and great at spotting an opportunity for an ambush. Families, at their best, hold out against generational segregation: we get to hear the political views of a great-aunt and encounter convictions that were widespread in 1973. We receive an update on the dramas of the junior hockey league; a younger cousin is agonising over school exams and tentatively exploring what they might like to do after turning 21; an uncle has recently retired and is trying to come to terms with a life without work; at the funeral of a grandparent there's an eighteen-month-old niece crawling around – and we're temporarily connected with the world of changing nappies and messy spoon feeding. So often, otherness – that is, other stages of life, other attitudes, other outlooks – are presented to us in tricky guises that make it hard for us to engage confidently with them. It's not surprising, or intrinsically shameful, that we're often awkward around people who seem not to be at all like us, but our picture of them (and hence also of ourselves) thereby gets drastically impoverished and inaccurate. When family life goes well on the other hand, we are continually exposed – at first hand, and in a warm way – to ranges of human experience that might otherwise only ever be presented to us in caricatured and frightening styles in the course of our independent lives. – Parenthood Most of our lives are spent in situations of numbing sterility. There is usually no option but to conform and obey impersonal rules. We don't in our work generally create anything of particular wonder or interest. We don't know how to paint or play Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor. We can't personally manufacture an iPhone; we don't know how to extract oil from the ground. And yet, without being conscious of the specifics, we are at points capable of doing something properly miraculous: we can make another person. We can conjure up the limbs and organs of a fellow creature. We can create a liver, we can design someone else's brain, we can – by ingesting a mixed diet perhaps including bananas, cheese sandwiches and ginger biscuits – make fingers, we can connect neurones that will transmit thoughts about the history of the Ancient Persians or the workings of the dishwasher. We can choreograph the birth of an organic machine that will probably still be going close to a hundred years from now. We can be the master coordinator and chief designer of a product more advanced than any technology and more complex and interesting than the greatest work of art. Having a child definitively refutes any worry about our lack of creativity and dismantles (at least for while) the envy we might otherwise feel about the inventiveness of others. They may have written a stirring song, started and sold a bio-engineering company or plotted an engaging novel. But we will have created the oddest yet most inspiring work of art and science around: one that is alive; one that will develop its own centres of happiness and secrecy; that will one day do its homework, get a job, hate us, forgive us, end up being, despite itself, a bit like us and eventually, make humans of its own that can spawn themselves into perpetuity. However much they may resent one another, grow apart or be worn down by the humdrum nature of family life, parents and children are never entirely able to get past the supernatural sequence of events that connects creators and created. Because two people met fifteen years ago in a friend's kitchen, liked the look of one another, swapped phone numbers and went out for dinner, there is now – across the table – a being with a particular sort of nose, a distinctive emotional temperament and a way of smiling that (as everyone remarks) unnervingly echoes that of a dead maternal grandfather. Parenting ineluctably demands that one address the greatest, founding philosophical question: what is a good life? As we go about answering it live in our words and actions over long years, we will at least know that we have been spared the one great fear that otherwise haunts us and usually manifests itself around work: that of not being able to make a difference. There will not be the remotest danger of lacking impact, only of unwittingly exerting the wrong kind. We will be the biographers, coaches, teachers, chefs, photographers, masters and slaves of our new charges. Our parental work will lend us the opportunity to show our worst, but also our best selves in action: it is the particular words we will find, the touch of our hands, the encouraging look only we will be able to give, the swerve towards lenience or the brave defence of principles that will make a decisive difference to the sorrows and joys of another human being. Who we are every day, the specific individuals we will have matured into, will have an unparalleled power to exert a beneficial influence on somebody else's life. We will – in our role as parents – be terrified, exhausted, resentful, enchanted but forever spared the slightest doubt as to our significance or role on the earth. Work – Authenticity The goal of professional life is to do work which is deeply in line with our real selves, which isn't merely about earning our way; which – though it may sometimes be very hard and filled with frustrations – answers to the distinctive movements and character of our own souls, work that, as we put it, feels properly authentic. There can be no generalisations about what authentic work will actually require us to do. A job may, for instance, ask us to stick with a set of almost intractable mathematical problems for a long time. This would sound awful to some people; but we may powerfully enjoy the long, slow sense of nibbling away at a major task, trying out several options before landing on an especially good solution. But perhaps authentic work will involve making many urgent and decisive financial interventions in a fast-moving, somewhat chaotic environment. While this might induce panic in some, for others, calmer circumstances would be hellish. Or it could be that to feel authentic, we need our work to involve a subordinate, supportive role where we can be admiring of, and loyal to, someone else who is in command – a pleasure stemming back, possibly, to the satisfaction we had as a child around an older, quite bossy but very impressive sibling. What makes work authentic isn't a particular kind of task; it has nothing to do with making pots or being a carpenter (jobs often superficially associated with the idea of authenticity). What makes work authentic is the deeply individual fit between the nature of our role and our own aptitudes and sources of pleasure. One of the benefits of having identified authentic work is that we will substantially – at last – be freed from envy. There will always be someone doing a job that pays better, that has higher public status or more glamorous fringe benefits. But, we stand to realise, there is no point yearning for such a role, because it would not fit what we know of the distinctive timbre of our own character. The other benefit to having found work that feels authentic is that it changes our relationship to the modern ideal of achieving 'work-life' balance. There is a degree of pessimism about work within this fashionable concept, for it implies a need to shield life, the precious bit, from the demands of work, the onerous force. But work connected in quite profound ways to who we really are, is not the enemy of life: it's the place where we naturally find ourselves wanting to go in order to derive some of our deepest satisfactions. – Meaningful Work We are taught by economics to think of ourselves as primarily selfish creatures. It can seem as if what we primarily want from work is money. What is far more striking is the extent to which we require work to be – as we put it – 'meaningful'. A job can pay well and offer immense prestige, but unless it is meaningful, it will probably eventually stifle us and crush our spirits. What do we mean by 'meaningful work'? It is work that helps others, that has a role to play in making strangers happy. For all that we think of ourselves in darkly egoistic terms, we in fact long through our labours either to reduce the suffering or to increase the pleasure of an audience. We crave a sense that we have left a little corner of the world in slightly better shape as a result of our intelligence and strength. Some jobs fit this requirement with ease; the nurse and the cardiac surgeon are in no doubt as to the meaningful impact of their tasks. But there are less dramatic yet equally soul-warming forms of meaning to be found in a range of less obvious jobs: in sanding someone's floor, in making efficient toothpaste dispensers, in clearing up the accounts, in delivering letters, in teaching someone backhand. For most of our lives, we are helpless to change circumstances for the better. We are at the mercy of vast impersonal forces over which we have no say. We can't change the outcome of an election; we can't prevent a friend making an unfortunate marriage; we can't resolve the tensions of global politics. But at its best, work pushes against this. In a limited arena, we have agency. We can ensure that someone does receive a package on time, understands calculus, receives a well-grilled chicken or sleeps in crisply-ironed bedlinen. We can trace a connection between the things we have to do in the coming hours and an eventual modest but real contribution to the improvement of humankind. What separates a good day from a bad one is not necessarily that we have been without stress or have returned home early. It is that we have derived a tangible impression of having made some sort of difference to the lives of others. It turns out that it is – strangely, but beautifully – simply not enough to make only ourselves happy. – Teamwork We are, each one of us, severely limited creatures. We can only ever get good at a few things, we can only apply ourselves properly for a certain number of hours each day; we can keep just a select number of issues in view at any point. And while a working life can feel quite long, we only have three or four decades of high quality effort in us – which is the blink of an eye in the larger sweep of history. Ideally though, the structure within which we do our work moves the balance in an opposite direction: it radically expands upon individual strength and capacity. When we work alongside others (either as the director of combined labour or as a member of a team), our collective powers are extended way beyond anything that one fragile being could ever accomplish. The team is far stronger, wiser, more intelligent and more capable than the people involved within it can ever be, considered one by one. We massively exceed our own strength. In the ideal team, we grasp exactly what we contribute but also how much the project benefits from what others bring to it. However annoying our colleagues may be, our irritation with them is soothed by an awareness that it is precisely their differences that make them adept at particular moves we would be incapable of, and that therefore justifies the unusual efforts we have to make to get along with them. We accept that it is, after all, no particular surprise that we don't naturally like certain types at the office, yet it is via work that we can get to appreciate their merits in a way we never would in a purely social setting. Through team work, our egoism is submerged within a bigger loyalty: we are held together by a shared goal which everyone knows they could never accomplish in isolation. Our efforts aren't even constrained by the limitations of a single working-lifespan. In an important sense we cheat death, because our contribution lives on in the efforts and ambitions of our successor members. The best teams reverse the baneful fundamentals of the human condition: through collaboration, they replace the competitive war of all against all; they substitute collective strength for individual weakness; they turn the brevity of our lives into endeavours that outlast us. – Professionalism One of the most welcome aspects of work is that we do not, in its vicinity, need to be fully ourselves. Most work demands that those who participate in it behave 'professionally', which means that we are not asked to bring the entirety of our characters to the fore. Even though we may inside be tempted by all kinds of emotions, we know we must handle ourselves with calm and reserve – which is not the limitation it may sound. It can be the greatest freedom, sometimes, to have to repress some of what we are. A certain collective lack of honesty at work can be an intense relief after too long in a domestic atmosphere where everyone feels it their duty to be the frank and uncensored correspondent of their every passing whim. We have the chance to edit ourselves. Our work need not bear the imprint of too much of our human reality. Paul Cézanne Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine (1887) Paul Cézanne was, according to his closest companions, often extremely prickly, irritable and rude. Under the sway of depressed moods, he could grow tyrannical and mean. But none of this was obvious from his work. If we were to judge him from his labours alone, we'd see him as deeply patient, confident and mature, with a powerful sense of harmony and balance and a constant empathy for other humans and for nature itself. Cézanne's work was – in a sense – better than he was, which is perhaps a definition of what all work can be when it is going well: a more elevated version of the person who created it. This doesn't just hold true of artistic work. The legal documents sent around the office may bear none of the panic, emotional turmoil and questionable habits of the person who put them together. The shoe shop, with its hushed atmosphere and elegant logo, shows none of the unreasonableness and peculiarity of those who serve in and designed it. The dentist is, in her white jacket, no longer the tricky person she felt herself becoming over the weekend. Work gives us a chance, rare within the overall economy of our lives, to give precedence to our better natures. – Order The wider world will always be a mess. But around work, we can sometimes have a radically different kind of experience: we get on top of a problem and finally resolve it. We bring order to chaos in a way that we rarely can in any other area of life. The Zen Buddhist monks of medieval Japan had an intuitive understanding of this kind of benefit to work. They recommended that, in order to achieve peace of mind, members of a monastery regularly rake the gravel of their intricately plotted and bounded temple gardens around Kyoto. Within the confines of a large courtyard space, the monks could bring total coherence and beauty to fruition. It wasn't completely easy. The monks loved to make ambitious patterns of swirls and circles. The lines were often on a very small scale; they might inadvertently tread on a bit they'd already done. They might struggle to keep the rake going at just the right angle. It was sometimes maddening, especially when it was autumn and there were leaves everywhere. But it could – eventually – all be put right. With time, a bit of careful correction and a well-trained hand, they could get everything just as it should be. The problems were real, but they were bounded – and they could be solved. We are not wrong to love perfection, but it brings us a lot of pain. At its best, our work offers us a patch of gravel that we can rake, a bounded space we can make ideally tidy and via which we can fulfil our powerful inner need for order and control, so often thwarted in a wider world beset by defiant unruliness. Our lives have to be lived in appalling ignorance: we know nothing of when and how we will die; the thoughts of others largely remain hidden from us; we often can't make sense of our own moods; we are driven by excitements and fears we barely make sense of. But in work, we can build up a very accurate and extensive field of understanding. We can amaze with the precision of our explanations. A wine maker might reveal that the slight taste of caramel comes from the fact that the grapes were left unusually long in the back of the truck just after they were harvested; a picture restorer will point out that a painting was relined, probably in France, in the 1850s; a dance instructor will be able to tell from the way you walk that you probably sleep on your left side. To the specialist, some small (but not insignificant) aspect of life has no mysteries; they understand why the boiler is leaking or how voice recognition really works or how an apparently profitable corporation can be on the verge of bankruptcy. The understanding we come to possess via work might not always sound especially thrilling in itself. But it speaks to a larger, more metaphysical, theme in human existence. In a small but real way, through our work, we are clearing and cultivating a tiny portion of a wild surrounding forest and turning it into a harmonious, comprehensible garden. – Money Obviously, making money is one of the most basic reasons why people work. But our culture has tended to emphasise the negative aspects of this. We've inherited a set of concepts which make it easy to formulate the case against personal or corporate economic drive: wage-slavery, profit-gouging, exploitation, greed, selling-out, commodification, materialism, cowboy capitalism… and this is just to open the list. Despite this, financial ambition can be intimately and properly connected to the most praiseworthy and honourable undertakings. Profit, ultimately, is based on insight: it requires identifying the genuine needs of others more clearly and sooner, and meeting them more effectively, than one's competitors. Profit is a sign that one's insights have been on track and the products and services one is offering are truly valued by clients and customers. It is a symptom of having understood the world slightly better than others. The desire to making money can, of course, be linked to greed or self-indulgence. But the connection is neither necessary nor inevitable. Money is simply a resource which extends the powers of its possessor. Wealth is what Aristotle called an 'executive' virtue: like physical strength or good looks, it increases an individual's sway in the world. Via money, our kindness can be amplified, our wisdom made more consequential; and our ambitions trained on the long-term. – Creativity 'Creativity' is one of the most prestigious ideas of modern times and as a result, we often want to feel creative while lamenting that our lives don't give us sufficient opportunities to be so. But this impression may come down to an unfairly inflated and unhelpfully skewed notion of what creativity actually involves. We are far too focused on creativity's dramatic high points within a narrow, clichéd band of activities, like the writing of a prize-winning novel or the making a film that receives accolades at Cannes or Berlin. By this standard, almost no one can be creative and creativity must remain an elite and even freakish anomaly entirely disconnected from ordinary life. Pablo Picasso, Bull's Head (1942) In 1942, Pablo Picasso dismantled an old bicycle and attached the handlebars to the seat to bring out the resemblance to the head of a bull. It's hard not to be a bit charmed. It is a move that helpfully gives us a more accurate idea of creativity. The items Picasso used were already very familiar to everyone. The key initiative was that he rearranged them to make each part more valuable than it had been in its previous role. This act of combination tends to be central to the creative act. And crucial to this combination was confidence. Many people would previously have noted the resemblance of handlebars to the horns or of a seat to a bull's face, but few would have taken their own perceptions seriously. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: 'In the minds of geniuses, we find – once more – our own neglected thoughts.' Creative people don't have thoughts fundamentally different from ours. They just don't neglect them as readily. There is very little that is entirely new under the sun, but to be creative is to learn to see how apparently unlikely elements might fit together in a fruitful new arrangement. One might borrow a way of organising information from the world of computers and apply it to the management of a gym. One might take an idea associated with the history of Ancient Greece and set it to work within the running of a modern school. One could take a way of speaking that is popular in Japan and collide it with contemporary English diction. Essentially, creativity means spotting an opportunity to improve things through recombination. The German philosopher Hegel put the idea in its grandest terms: we are creative, he wrote, when we 'strip the world of its stubborn foreignness and adapt it to our needs.' Usually, we just put up with matters that are frustrating or disappointing. But when we get creative, we adapt what is to hand – combining, reorganising, starting afresh – so that it better matches our interests and ideals. It is the opposite of feeling stuck and resigned, it is a refusal to accept the status quo. The creative person is someone particularly committed to the idea that there must be a better way of going about things. A lot of work – paid and unpaid – is more creative than we usually suppose: when we repaint the bathroom and choose a more pleasing colour that we noticed in a book about houses in India; when we cook a meal and arrange the asparagus on a serving plate in the way they did in a film; when we introduce a set of icons in a report so that the main points come across more clearly; when we put a pot of geraniums we found in the garden centre on the window sill to make a space more cheerful or introduce two friends to each other because we've realised how, despite some quite striking differences, they'll get on well. In every case, we are being creative because we are spotting an opportunity to make an improvement through an act of rearrangement and combination. Creativity isn't a rare and highly dramatic activity; it's not a side-show incidental to the core concerns of our lives. It's something that – ideally – we're always involved in. It's a refusal to accept the world as it is in all its facets, it's a commitment to doing better with what we have. As creative people, we don't need to write novels, we just need to be persistently on the lookout for ways (sometimes very small) of improving life. Friendship – Purpose Friendship should be an important centre of meaning, and yet it is also a routinely disappointing reality. The key to the problem of friendship is found in an odd-sounding place: we lack a sense of purpose. Our attempts at friendship tend to go adrift, because we collectively resist the task of developing a clear picture of what friendship should really be for. The problem is that we are unfairly uncomfortable with the idea of friendship having any declared purpose to begin with, because we associate purpose with the least attractive and most cynical of motives. Yet purpose doesn't have to ruin friendship and in fact, the more we define what a friendship might be for, the more we can focus in on what we should be doing with every person in our lives – or indeed, sometimes, the more we can helpfully conclude that we shouldn't be around someone at all. There are a range of goals we could be pursuing with the people we know. Grasping what the opportunities are is central to building a meaningful social existence. – Networking Networking has a bad name. It's associated with self-enrichment, egoism and snobbery. But it is, in its essence, just a search for help. It springs from a fundamentally modest awareness of how fragile and limited each of us is and therefore, how much we stand in need of the support and strength of others. Networking is only ever as good or bad as the ends to which it is put. There are, in history, some very impressive versions of the activity. The ancient Greek story of the Argonauts tells how the heroic captain Jason travelled around the countryside networking, so as to assemble a band of associates to help him in his search for the legendary Golden Fleece. Jesus of Nazareth networked extensively in order to put together a team of disciples that could help him to spread a message about love, redemption and sacrifice. To network means to filter intelligently, to recognise that one cannot – and indeed should not – try to get to know everyone. It involves aligning one's path through the world with a mission. It implies a wise acknowledgement that we do not have unlimited time. Ideally, our networks should be wide, diverse and utterly without snobbery – because we can see that useful information, valuable skills, perspectives, opportunities and guidance can be located in a host of very unexpected places. In espionage, this key point has been deeply understood: it might be as productive to make contact with the embassy cleaning staff as with the economic attaché; the bartender could be as rich a source of information as the general. We can take this refreshingly open-minded attitude into the world at large. We may learn as much about business from a bankrupt as from a successful CEO; the taxi driver may – amidst the chatter – have one or two key things to teach us about life; the person with the woolly hat standing by the bus-stop may provide the starting point for a crucial new entrepreneurial idea. With a conscious mission in mind, networking ceases to be a brutal, discriminatory activity. It's just a way of making sure that we are never far from harvesting insights and assistance. – Self-knowledge One of the oddest – and most unhelpful – things about being human is that we find it very difficult to know ourselves properly. Theoretically, nothing sounds simpler. We're around ourselves all the time and we have direct access to our own minds. But in fact we often struggle to form an accurate picture of our own character. We feel angry but are not sure why. Something is wrong with our job but we can't pin it down. We don't realise why we may be quite negative about someone. We don't see when we come across as arrogant or as rather fawning; we find it hard at times to work out what we really think or what's troubling us so much. The mind is skittish and squeamish. As a result, many issues lie confused within us. A true friend notices a lot about us – and has a strong enough hold on our affection and trust to raise issues in a way that we can take them on board. They can (if we let them) frame a point not as a devastating criticism but as a sympathetic and generous bit of encouragement to our own better nature. They help us to like ourselves and then to tolerate recognising some less than perfect things about who we are. They take our distress or excitement or anger seriously but ask gentle but probing questions that help us understand our own initially vague first thoughts and feelings. They listen carefully, they make it very clear that they are on our side; they help us stick with a tricky point and go into more detail; they make connections to something we said earlier; they note our facial expression or tone of voice; they don't jump to fill a pause but wait for us to say more. They act as a judicious, kindly mirror that helps us to know and befriend our own deeper selves. – Fun Despite talk of hedonism and immediate gratification, life gives us constant lessons in the need to be serious. We have to keep our heads down, avoid looking like a fool and pass as a mature adult. The pressure can become onerous, and in the end even dangerous. That is why we constantly need access to people we can trust enough to be silly with them. They might most of the time be training to be a neurosurgeon or advising middle sized companies about their tax liabilities but when we are together, we can be therapeutically daft with them. We can put on accents, share lewd fantasies or doodle on the newspaper: adding a huge nose and a missing front tooth to the president, or giving the fashion model distended ears and masses of curly hair. The fun friend solves the problem of shame around important but unprestigious sides of ourselves. They aren't ignoring, or dismissing, our more serious and solemn aspects. What they're doing is showing us that in their eyes, being silly isn't a disgrace, it's a serious need like any other. – Old Friends There are people we are friends with for one major but often maligned or overlooked reason: because we were friends with them some time back. At one stage, it might be decades ago now, we had a lot in common: we were both good at maths but bad at French at school; or we had adjacent rooms at college and used to help each other with assignments and commiserate in the bar about failed dates or maddening parents; or maybe we were interns in the same big firm with the same (as we thought at the time) bizarre and intemperate boss. But life has taken us on radically different tracks. Now they've got three young children; they moved to the Orkneys where they are managing a fish farm; they've gone into politics and have become a junior minister or they're working as a ski teacher in the Rocky Mountains. The daily realities of our lives may be miles apart; we may know little of their world and they of ours. If we were introduced today, we'd think each other pleasant enough but would never get close. Yet it can be hugely helpful and very redemptive to catch up with these people, with a one-on-one dinner, a walk in the woods or the occasional email. These friends function as conduits to earlier versions of ourselves that are inaccessible day-to-day but contain hugely important insights. In the company of an old friend, we can take stock of the journey we have travelled. We get to see how we have evolved, what was once painful, what mattered or what we had wholly forgotten we deeply enjoyed. The old friend is a guardian of memories on which we might otherwise have a damagingly tenuous hold. We need old friends because of a crucial complexity in human nature. We pass through stages of development and as we do so, discard previous concerns and develop a lack of empathy around past perspectives. At fourteen, we knew a lot about resenting our parents. Twenty years later, the whole idea sounds absurd and ungrateful. Yet the old friend reconnects us with a particular atmosphere and, like a novelist, makes us at home with a character – ourselves – who might otherwise have seemed impossibly alien to us. At twenty-two, we found single life extremely painful. We hung out a lot with a particular friend and shared a litany of wistful, alienated thoughts. At forty-five, with a young family around us, we might occasionally find ourselves very curious about the joys of single life and of casual hook-ups. The old friend has crucial news to impart. We experience life from a succession of very different vantage points over the decades, but tend – understandably – to be preoccupied only with the present vista, forgetting the particular, incomplete but still crucial wisdom contained in earlier phases. Every age possesses a superior kind of knowledge in some area – which it then, usually, forgets to hand on to succeeding selves. Remembering what it was like not to be who we are now is vital to our growth and integrity. The best professors rem

more obvious or whose virtues are more striking than would ever normally be the case. They – and their actions – provide us with simplified targets for our emotional lives. We can love or revile them, pity them or condemn them more neatly than we ever can the humans around us. We need simplification because our minds get checkmated by the complexity of our lives. The writer, on rare but hugely significant occasions, puts into words feelings that had long eluded us, they know us better than we know ourselves. They seem to be narrating our own stories, but with a clarity we could never achieve. Literature corrects our native inarticulacy. So often we feel lost for words; we're impressed by the sight of a bird wheeling in the dusk sky; we're aware of a particular atmosphere at dawn, we love someone's slightly wild but sympathetic manner. We struggle to verbalise our feelings; we may end up remarking: 'that's so nice'. Our feelings seem too complex, subtle, vague and elusive for us to be able to spell out. The ideal writer homes in on a few striking things: the angle of the wing; the slow movement of the largest branch of a tree; the angle of the mouth in a smile. Simplification doesn't betray the nuance of life, it renders life more visible. The great writers build bridges to people we might otherwise have dismissed as unfeasibly strange or unsympathetic. They cut through to the common core of experience. By selection and emphasis, they reveal the important things we share. They show us where to look. They also help us to feel. Often we want to be good, we want to care, we want to feel warmly and tenderly – but can't. It seems there is no suitable receptacle in our ordinary lives into which our emotions can vent themselves. Our relationships are too compromised and fraught. It can feel too risky to be very nice to someone who might not reciprocate. So we don't do much feeling; we freeze over. But then – in the pages of a story – we meet someone, perhaps she is very beautiful, tender, sensitive, young and dying; and we weep for her and all the cruelty and injustice of the world. And we come away, not devastated, but refreshed. Our emotional muscles are exercised and their strength rendered newly available for our lives. Not all books necessarily contain the simplifications we happen to need. We are often not in the right place to make use of the knowledge a book has to offer. The task of linking the right book to the right person at the right time hasn't yet received the attention it deserves: newspapers and friends recommend books to us because they work for them, without quite thinking through why they might also work for us. But when we happen to come across the ideal book for us, we are presented with an extraordinarily clearer, more lucid, better organised account of our own concerns and experiences: for a time at least our minds become less clouded and our hearts more accurately sensitive. Through books' benign simplification, we become a little better at being who we truly are. – Clothes Once, we were all dressed by someone else. Parents picked out a T-shirt; the school dictated what colour our trousers should be. But at some point, we were granted the opportunity to discover who we might be in the world of clothes. We had to decide for ourselves about collars and necklines, fit, colours, patterns, textures and what goes (or doesn't) with what. We learnt to speak about ourselves in the language of garments. Despite the potential silliness and exaggeration of sections of the fashion industry, assembling a wardrobe is a serious and meaningful exercise. Based on our looks, background, job or certain tendencies in our behaviour, others are always liable to come to quick and not very rounded decisions about who we are. Only too often, their judgment doesn't quite get us right. They might assume because of where we come from, we must be quite snobbish or rather resentful; based on our work we might get typecast as dour or superficial; the fact that we're very sporty might lead people to see us as not terribly cerebral; or an attachment to a particular political outlook might be associated with being unnervingly earnest or cruel. Clothes provide us with a major opportunity to correct some of these assumptions. When we get dressed, we are, in effect, operating as a tour guide, offering to show people around ourselves. We're highlighting interesting or attractive things about who we are – and in the process, we're clearing up misconceptions. We're acting like artists painting a self-portrait: deliberately guiding the viewer's perception of who they might be. Peter Blake, Self-Portrait (1961) In 1961, the English painter Peter Blake portrayed himself wearing a denim jacket, jeans and trainers. He was deliberately nuancing the view most of his contemporaries would have had of him: based on knowing that he was a successful and rather intellectual painter. He might have been thought of as slightly aloof and highly refined; detached from, and censorious of, ordinary life. But his clothes speak about very different aspects of his personality: they go out of their way to tell us that he's quite modest; he's interested in talking about pop music; he sees his art largely as a kind of manual labour. His clothes – like ours – give us a crucial introduction to the self. This explains the curious phenomenon whereby if we're staying with good friends, we can spend a lot less time thinking about our clothes, compared with the anxiety about what to wear that can grip us at other points. We might sit around in a dressing gown or just hastily slip on any old jumper. They know who we are already; they're not relying on our clothes for clues. It's a strange – but profound – fact that certain items of clothing can excite us. When we put them on or see others wearing them, we're turned on: a particular style of jacket, the right kind of shoes or the perfect shirt might prove so erotic, we could almost do without a person wearing them. It's tempting to see this kind of fetishism as simply deluded but it is alerting us in an exaggerated way to a much more general and very normal idea: that certain clothes make us really happy. They capture values that we're drawn and want to get closer to. The erotic component is just an extension of a more general and understandable sympathy. The French novelist Stendhal wrote: 'Beauty is the promise of happiness' and every item of clothing we're drawn to contains an allusion to a different sort of happiness. We might see a very desirable kind of competence and confidence in a particular pair of boots; we might meet generosity in a woollen coat or a touching kind of innocence in a hemline; a given watch strap may sum up dignity; the way a specific collar encases the neck could strike us as charmingly commanding and authoritative. The classic fetishist might be pushing their particular attachments to a maximum and be rather restricted in the choice of items they favour, but they are latching onto a general theme: clothes embody values that enchant and beguile us. By choosing particular sorts of clothes, we are shoring-up our more fragile or tentative characteristics. We're both communicating to others who we are and strategically reminding ourselves. Our wardrobes contain some of our most carefully-written lines of autobiography. – Travel Travel can – when approached in the right way – play a critical role in helping us to evolve; it can correct the imbalances and immaturities of our nature, open our eyes, restore perspective and function as the most meaningful agent of maturation. Yet in order to work its therapeutic effect, we may need to change how we travel, starting with how we go about choosing our destinations. We're usually badly served by the travel industry, which cuts the world up into material categories entirely unattuned to the needs of our inner selves or, to put it more grandly, our souls. The industry lays before us options like 'outdoor fun,' 'family adventure' 'culture weekends' or 'island hideaways' – but leaves it unexplored quite what the point of these destinations might be when considered from the point of view of our psyches. Without anything mystical being meant by this, all of us are involved in one way or another on what could be termed 'an inner journey': that is, we're trying to develop in particular ways. We might be searching for how to be calmer or how to find a way to rethink our goals, we might long for a greater sense of confidence or an escape from debilitating feelings of envy. Ideally, where we go should help us with our attempts at these longed-for pieces of psychological evolution. The outer journey should assist us with the inner one. This idea comes from an unusual source: the history of religious pilgrimage. Religions have traditionally shown a surprising degree of sympathy for our impulse to travel. They have accepted that we cannot develop our souls just by staying at home. They have insisted – with what can now seem like an alien intensity – on the gravity of going on a trip and have channelled the raw impulse to take off into a myriad of traditions and rituals, whose examination could prompt us to reflect on our own habits. In the Middle Ages, Catholicism had the odd-sounding idea that every ailment of the mind or body could be cured by going off on a long journey to touch a part of the body of a long-dead saint. The church had to hand a dictionary of pilgrimage destinations, which in every case matched problems with solutions. For example, if you were having trouble breast-feeding, France alone offered mothers a choice of 46 pilgrimages to sanctuaries of Mary's Holy Breast Milk ('Had the Virgin been a cow,' observed the 16th-century Protestant John Calvin unkindly, 'she scarcely could not have produced such a quantity'). Believers with a painful molar were advised to travel to Rome to the Basilica of San Lorenzo, where they would touch the arm bones of St. Apollonia, the patron saint of teeth or, if such a trip were awkward, they might go and find pieces of her jaw in the Jesuit church at Antwerp, some of her hair at St. Augustine's in Brussels or her toes at disparate sites around Cologne. Unhappily-married women were directed to travel to Umbria to touch the shrine of Saint Rita of Cascia, patron saint of marital problems (and lost causes). Soldiers looking to embolden themselves before a battle could commune with the bones of Sainte Foy in a gold-plated reliquary in the abbey-church in Conques in south western France – while people who worried excessively about lightning could gain relief by travelling to the Jesuit Church in Bad Muenstereifel in Germany and laying hands on the relics of Saint Donatus, believed to offer help against fires and explosions of all kinds. Though most of us no longer believe in the divine power of journeys to cure toothache or gall stones, though most of the problems motivating pilgrimages are now more appropriately addressed by a visit to a clinic, we can still hang on to the idea that certain parts of the world possess a power to address complaints of our psyches and bring about some sort of change in us in a way that wouldn't be possible if we just remained in our bedrooms. There are places that, by virtue of their remoteness, vastness, climate, chaotic energy, haunting melancholy or sheer difference from our homelands can exert a capacity to salve the wounded parts of us. These sites, valuable rather than holy, help us to recover perspective, reorder our ambitions, quell our paranoias and remind us of the interest and obliging unexpectedness of life. Though we might agree with this at a general level, we still lack a tradition of approaching travel from a properly therapeutic perspective and so of analysing landscapes according to their inner benefits. We lack atlases of destinations with which to treat ourselves. There are as yet no psychotherapeutic travel agencies, no experts in both neurotic disorders and tourism, in the psyche and in the nature trails, museums, hot springs and bird sanctuaries of six continents. For this to happen, we need to be clearer in our minds both about what we're searching for inside and what the outer world could conceivably deliver for us. In part, this requires us to look at the globe in a new way. Every destination we might alight upon contains within it qualities, virtues one might say, that could conceivably support some move or other on an inner journey. There are places that could help with shyness and others with anxiety. Some places might be good at reducing egoism and others might be good for helping us think more clearly about our careers. In a meaningful life, we would ideally be more conscious travellers – aware that we were on a search for places that can deliver psychological virtues like 'calm' or 'perspective,' 'sensuality' or 'rigour'. A visitor to Monument Valley wouldn't just be there for the sake of undefined 'adventure', something to enjoy and then gradually forget about; travelling to the place would be an occasion fundamentally to reorient their personality. It would be the call-to-arms to become a different person; a secular pilgrimage properly anchored around a stage of character development. Travel should not be allowed to escape the underlying seriousness of the area of life with which it deals. We should aim for locations in the outer world that can push us towards where we need to go within. Politics We live in societies in which it is hard to count as a good and intelligent adult without seeming to take a deep and fairly constant interest in politics. We have to hand, at minimal cost, a stream of reliable and penetrating bulletins about the latest events in parliament, law courts, bureaucracies, battlefields and markets. It is not really a viable option to fail to know, or to care, 'what is happening'. And yet, in the privacy of our hearts, some of us don't quite. Or not as much as we should. We may follow the constant political fights closely enough. We understand the characters, we have some feelings about the key players, we know the tussles between left and right – and yet, for a great part of the time at least, it may all feel rather remote and far from anything we'd authentically recognise as meaningful. We suppose (perhaps a touch guiltily) that, for whatever reason, the political gene has passed us by. This may be an extremely unfair conclusion. Almost all of us are intensely political, we often just don't recognise ourselves as such, because we have been equipped with the wrong definition of politics. We've been taught that 'being political' means having a position on the left-right axis and a daily fascination for those events defined as political by the news industry. But this captures only a very small part of what truly constitutes the political, properly understood. Being political doesn't only or principally mean caring what party wins the next election; to be political is to care about the happiness of strangers. Of course, supporters of a given party or economic doctrine will count as political under this title (they want to win or to push forward tax changes for the good of others, though this motive can get lost in the noise), but there are plenty of other ways in which one may be intimately involved in the task of promoting the happiness of strangers – and therefore immersed in politics as the field should be properly understood. At a sombre moment in the Peloponnesian war, the ancient Athenian statesman Pericles made a speech (known as the Funeral Oration) in which he attempted to define what made Athenian society so admirable and so worth fighting and dying for. He covered territory that might sound unfamiliar today. He praised his fellow citizens for their attitudes to beauty, for the way they approached exercise, for the manner in which they entertained each other at home, for their sensitivity to their natural surroundings and for the open, polite manner they had in public places. In Pericles's eyes, all of these were profoundly political topics because they helped define the character of collective life: a political cause might not sound political and yet still be hugely worthy of the name. With a more Periclean definition of politics in mind, we can see that it could be possible to count as a political person while principally interested in woodland flowers, psychotherapy, street lamp design, self-knowledge, correct punctuation, politeness, dental hygiene, self-understanding, hiking, humour, architecture, meditation, birdsong, cycle helmets, local history and a good many topic besides. We should not let politics be kidnapped by people with an impoverished sense of what the collective good might be. Part of the reason why being interested in politics has traditionally had high prestige is that it seems a selfless act, a noble prioritising of communal over personal interests. But this too may be a rather unhelpful starting point, because it privileges a sacrificial impulse which few of us reliably experience. In reality, being political need have nothing to do with self-renunciation. Making strangers happy is deeply enjoyable, and indeed a great deal easier than trying to make oneself or one's immediate loved ones content. Living in our own minds, we have a constant experience of impotence and failure. Much the same may hold true of our relationships with those close to us. We know how often our initiatives go nowhere, our plans are rebuffed, our intentions ground down. Politics is a refuge from the problems of trying to make oneself and one's loved ones smile. It is the best possible kind of selfishness. Acting politically, we can bring our most competent, purposeful selves to bear on a relatively limited set of issues in the lives of strangers – and therefore have a chance of succeeding. Blessedly, we're not trying to solve all the problems of others; we're merely working on one or two targeted areas and so are granted a precious encounter with ourselves as people with the will, imagination and intelligence to get things done. We're taken out of the morass of our own minds. We have the joy of trying to change the world, rather than wrestling always with the far thornier task of wondering how to be happy. Nature – Otherness We are back from work unusually late. It's been a tricky day: a threatened resignation, an enraged supplier, a lost document, two delayed trains… But none of the mayhem is of any concern to one friend waiting by the door uncomplicatedly pleased to see us: Pippi, a two-year-old Border Terrier with a continuous appetite for catching a deflated football in her jaws. She wants to play in the usual way, even if it's past nine o'clock now, with us in the chair and her sliding around the kitchen, and, unexpectedly, so do we. We're not offended by her lack of overall interest in us. It's at the root of our delight. Here, at last, is someone wholly indifferent to almost everything about us except for our dexterity at ball-throwing, someone who doesn't care about the Brussels meeting, who will forgive us for not warning the finance department in time about the tax rebates and for whom the Singapore conference is beyond imagining. One of the most consoling aspects of natural phenomena – it might be a dog, a sheep, a tree or a valley – is that their meanings have nothing whatsoever to do with our own perilous and tortured priorities. They are redemptively unconcerned with everything we are and want. They implicitly mock our self-importance and absorption and so return us to a fairer, more modest sense of our role on the planet. A sheep doesn't know about our feelings of jealousy, it has no interest in our humiliation and bitterness around a colleague; it has never emailed. On a walk in the hills, it simply ambles towards the path we're on and looks curiously at us, then takes a lazy mouthful of grass, chewing from the side of his mouth as though it were gum. One of its companions approaches and sits next to him, wool to wool, and for a second, they exchange what appears to be a knowing, mildly amused glance. Beyond the sheep are a couple of oak trees. They are of especially noble bearing, they gather their lower branches tightly under themselves while their upper branches grow in small orderly steps, producing a rich green foliage in an almost perfect circle. It doesn't matter if there's an election or what happens to the stock market or in the final exams. The same things would have been going on when Napoleon was leading his armies across Europe or when the first nomads made their way toward the Appalachian hills. Our encounter with nature calms us because none of our troubles, disappointments or hopes have any relevance to it. Everything that happens to us, or that we do, is of no consequence whatever from the point of view of the dog, the sheep, the trees, the clouds or the stars; they are deeply important representatives of an entirely different perspective within which our own concerns are mercifully irrelevant. – Sport For long stretches of our lives, our bodies steadfastly refuse to obey our commands. As babies, the spoon drops straight out of our hand. We can't get the milk into our mouths. Our legs can't hold us up. Our head can't support itself. A little later, as small children, we can't get the scissors to cut around the crocodile's head, it's pretty hard to do our shoelaces and we feel like we're drowning on our first length down the pool. Then, with age, new failures of coordination begin to dog us: we can't touch our own toenails. There's a permanent pain in our backs. We can't open a jam jar; we start falling over in the shower. But in the middle years, we can – in specific contexts – achieve an awe-inspiring degree of mastery over our physical selves. In relation to some closely-regulated challenges, we can train our bodies to follow our will entirely. Sport embodies a grand metaphysical struggle of the human spirit against the unruly and entropic forces of the material world. It is the most sophisticated and impressive form of revenge against the humiliations of having a body. All sports, however outwardly different, have as their goal the masterful subjugation of the body to the will. The discobolus – or discus thrower – fashioned by the Greek sculptor Myron in the fifth century BC shows a man in total command of his body: his thighs, shoulders, turn of the neck, ankles and fingers are all harmonised in the service of getting the discus as far as possible to the other end of a field. We see a similar underlying idea of perfect coordination and control in all athletic poses: the runner at the starting blocks, the swimmer in mid-stroke or the golfer at the end of a swing. It's a strange and poignant moment to experience ourselves in this masterful way. In an act of scarcely believable precision, on a golf course, a tiny white ball that might have gone pretty much anywhere – into the pond, onto the trees, towards a salesman in the clubhouse – can be made to fly four hundred yards through the air to come cleanly to rest inside a small, barely visible hole on a highly manicured lawn on the opposite side of a hill. So often we're clumsy and weak: our own legs won't obey us, our fingers drop glasses, we slip on patches of black ice. But at the high points of our sporting lives, we have the opposite experience: the tennis smash does land exactly in the backhand corner as we'd intended. In mid stride, we take instantaneous aim and the long kick does float beautifully – as we'd planned – past the goalkeeper and into the top of the net. Being a spectator of sport also offers us correctives to some of the entrenched, powerful problems of our lives. For example, it compresses action so as to give us a result within a timeframe in tune with our native impatience and need for resolutions. So often, beyond sport, events move in irritatingly diffuse, chaotic and multiple ways. We lose the thread – and therefore the capacity to care. A project may come right in three years time. If we're lucky, our business may take a decision next April. There are 2,000 people on our team in five time zones. But sport speeds up and edits drama: the results appear precisely on schedule: after 10 seconds in the hundred meters, after 90 minutes in a game of football. Sport also gives us a corrective to the normal pressure to be emotionally guarded, empathetic and intelligently ambivalent. In ordinary life, we're not meant to take sides too strongly. We're always supposed to imagine what bit of the truth may lie with the opposition. But at least briefly, around sport, we can be wholly and wildly partisan. We can innocently long to eradicate the enemy. We don't need to worry about causing offence or about missing a nuance to the argument. We have – at last – found something pure, good and mercifully simple to believe in. Mostly, we're at odds with practically everyone over lots of things from the proper direction for the economy to what we should do with the holidays. There is no end to conflict and divergent convictions. But in sport, a devotion to our side brings with it a powerful experience of agreement with large numbers of people we don't know. We're no longer fighting our individual corners: we all agree. We're excited at the same moment; when a questionable decision is made by the judges or umpire, we're outraged by the same injustice. We love some very unlikely strangers. In our excitement, differences in status are erased. We're all spectators and supporters of the same team. Our job description (always a painfully skewed reflection of who we really are) can be forgotten. The rest of life is suspended; the CFO is cheering alongside the stay-at-home father; the timid individual's favourite midfielder makes a glorious, fearless comeback; the corporate chieftain's beloved team is crushed. The whole temper of modern life suggests that there's only one person who truly counts: you. Your career, your appearance, your spending power, your house, your car, perhaps your kids and your partner too. Then suddenly – around a big sporting event – you may find you care with extraordinary intensity about the fate of a group of your muscular country folk on a pitch or track far away, jumping remarkably high or passing a ball between one another with maniacal dexterity. It takes the pressure off us. It lightens the oppressive responsibility we otherwise feel to ensure that our own lives are stellar. We can find greatness in a mighty cause. We can be proud to belong in a very minor way to an inspiring collective enterprise. Through sport, we have the chance to transcend the clumsier, more mean-spirited, tentative and segregated aspects of our lives. Philosophy There are some of us who regularly feel a powerful need to go away and think rather more than is typically allowed or taken to be normal. This business of thinking can seem to us like one of the most meaningful things we ever do. After too long in company, we crave (the word may not be too strong) to be alone with our own minds. Raw experience proves too overwhelming, dense, messy, confused or exciting – and, on a regular basis, we long to sort through it. We stay up late, ruminate in the bath, wake up early, write a book, go for a walk – and feel perceptibly lightened and refreshed by the process of mastering emotions and the alchemy of converting feelings into ideas. Without anything grandiose being meant by the word, we are driven to philosophise, implicitly siding with Socrates's dictum that the unanalysed life is not quite worth living or – at least – is rather uncomfortable. We need to remove ourselves and think because, on certain days, we are sad, and yet can't identify the cause of an upset that lingers powerfully somewhere in our minds, just out of reach of consciousness. The more we leave the sadness unattended, the more it starts to colour everything we are involved with. Our experiences become tasteless, a mute fog descends over consciousness. Or else we feel confusedly anxious. Our thoughts refuse to settle. We try to find relief by escaping from ourselves with our phone or a game. Our eyelid starts to twitch, we gnaw at a patch of hard skin on a finger; our mind knows there are matters we should be focusing on but they elude understanding and spread their nervous electricity across the range of our thoughts. Or we may feel irritable; we snap and fly into sudden rage, knowing it cannot truly be the socks on the floor or the unexpectedly squeaky front door that justify our fury, while hampered by pride or defensive denial from understanding more. Or, in a positive vein, we may feel a mysterious excitement because we hear of a highly original project masterminded by a friend or read of a new kind of enterprise or see a thought-provoking documentary. Something is calling out to us from within our excitement, we are being sensibly, but inarticulately, summoned in a new direction. The excitement doesn't leave us alone, but nor does it say in plain terms what it wants. In such contexts, we retreat to think. We have a pen and paper handy on an armchair at home or we are in a train with an expansive view and two hours to talk with ourselves. We return to the contents of our minds and patiently attend to the garbled signals which we patiently submit to the beam of reason. Of our anxious feelings, we ask what steps we need to take, what others have to do, what needs to happen and when. Of our hurt, sad and angry feelings, we dare to dwell on our constant, surprising vulnerability. Perhaps it was a face we briefly saw in the line at the airport that seemed kindly and understanding and evoked some tender, vital things missing from our current relationship. Perhaps it was a quietly ungenerous message we received from a friend, in which we sensed a bitter and wounding rivalry. Or maybe it was a regret, on seeing a sunny landscape from a window, at how constrained and routine our lives have become. As we reflect, we throw off our customary and dangerous bravery – and let our sadness take its natural, due shape. We dwell at length on the wounds. We give space to our nostalgia. There may not be an immediate solution to the sorrows, but it helps immeasurably to know their contours and give ourselves a chance to square up to them. Our pains need a hearing. Then we give similar attention to our excitements: we stoop down to listen to their animated call. We imagine reforming our lives under their guidance. We take on board the positive, necessary anxiety that arises from admitting how many opportunities still remain to us and how much the status quo can and must be changed. The more we think, the more our fears, resentments and hopes become easier to name. We grow less scared of the contents of our minds. We feel calmer, less resentful and clearer about our direction. We recognise how much we depend – perhaps without quite knowing it – on the practice of philosophy, that is, on the pursuit of accurate, clear and manageable knowledge. 3. Obstacles to Meaning We want our lives to be strongly meaningful. But there is too often a gap between our intentions and our realities. Some of the obstacles to meaning are external (wars, financial turmoil etc.). But there are several issues in our own minds that block access to a more meaningful existence. Vague Self-Understanding We may be aware of having meaningful experiences but then lack the investigative rigour to identify their origins and make-up – and therefore fail to know how to recreate them and integrate them more reliably in our lives. We may, for example, have a particularly interesting evening with a friend. We're amazed by the conversation, wish it could happen more often and yet are at a loss as to how to engineer a more regularly satisfying social life. Or we may go on a holiday with our family which, for once, works well, but we don't drill into the experience and the next time around, end up on a break marred by the usual litany of arguments and dissatisfactions. At work, a specific project may play to our strengths, but we're unable to decode quite why and are later moved to another department where we never again exert ourselves with comparable creativity. At home, once in awhile, we find that we have a tender, playful and cathartic conversation with our partner, but can't understand in detail what might lie behind the heart-warming interlude. Our meaningful moments threaten to be like beautiful squares in a foreign city that we stumble into at night – but can never find our way back to in the light of day. We recognise their value without knowing how to rediscover them. We do not interpret them as the threads of a tapestry of meaning we need to discover and hold on to across the labyrinth of our lives. We continue to encounter meaning a little too much by chance. We forage rather than systematically harvest. Provincialism Another reason why we hold back from the things that yield meaning is that they can seem very abnormal. We know they are valuable; we're just afraid of seeming painfully weird by pursuing them. We may really like getting up at 3am, having a long bath in the dark and thinking for hours about our childhoods. In our social lives, our real preference might be to see people for one-on-one conversations where the agenda would be abstract and announced beforehand. With our work, we know we do our best thinking in railway station cafes rather than in the cubicle where people expect us to be. On holiday, we have a yearning to visit the local sewage works and electricity plant rather than the beach or museum. But, haunted by the fear of being abnormal, we can end up following few of our authentic inclinations. The pity is that we are probably taking our cue about what is normal from a specific, and in the end not at all representative, group of people: those who just happen to be in the vicinity. The oppressive impact of a local clan is what used to make school especially dispiriting. Fourteen year olds have very emphatic ideas about what counts as 'normal'. In the provincial micro-society of school, it might have been normal to think that if someone had unfashionable shoes, they should be insulted at break time; that an enthusiasm for study was contemptible or that being a footballer represented the summit of existence. As soon as we left school, we realised that what counted as normal there wasn't of course normal at all. We learnt that our old classmates were, in fact, highly provincial, that is, cockily sure – but utterly wrong in thinking – that their narrow beliefs were universal markers of truth and value. The problem with this susceptibility to provincial patterns of thinking is that it may pursue us beyond the school gates. At work, people may take it for granted that a holiday must be taken somewhere sunny: if we were to announce that we were going to spend a week in the Netherlands to admire the grey cloud banks, we might be mocked and patronised. Or there might be a powerful consensus in our social circle that on Sundays, it is a sign of virtue to have a long lunch in company and that anyone who prefers to spend time alone writing up their journal must be distinctly odd and suspect. But, in truth, many ideas of normality are neither actually universal nor incontestable. It would be wholly possible to assemble large groups of impressive people who would take quite contrary views. In the company of 17th-century Dutch landscape painters, admiring grey clouds would be a prime virtue. If we lived around Balzac, Baudelaire or Proust, our apparently eccentric preferences for lying in bed thinking on weekends would be taken for granted. Our pursuit of a meaningful life can get fatally derailed by ideas of what is normal that are not actually normal. We should not so much abandon the notion of fitting in as imaginatively reconfigure who we want to fit in with; and it might not be those in our immediate vicinity. We should dare to create our own imaginative communities to liberate us from the more inhibiting and subtly asphyxiating assumptions of our neighbours. Selflessness We're highly attuned to the notion that being selfish is one of the worst character traits we might possess, a way of behaving associated with greed, entitlement and cruelty. And yet some of the reason we fail to have the lives we should springs from an excess of the very opposite trait: from an over-weaning modesty, an over-hasty deference to the wishes of others, a dangerous and counter-productive lack of selfishness. We are at risk because we fail to distinguish between good and bad versions of selfishness. The good, desirable kind involves the courage to give priority to ourselves and our concerns at particular points; the confidence to be forthright about our needs, not in order to harm or conclusively reject other people, but in order to serve them in a deeper, more sustained and committed way over the long term. Bad selfishness, on the other hand, operates with no greater end in view and with no higher motive in mind. We're not declining to help so as to marshal our resources to offer others a greater gift down the line; we just can't be bothered. Unfortunately, afflicted by confusion about this distinction, we frequently fail to state our needs as clearly as we should, with disastrous results precisely for those we're meant to serve. In order to be a good parent, we may need to have an hour to ourselves every day. We may need to take a long time in a hot shower so as to mull over events. We may need to do something that seems a bit indulgent, like taking a life-drawing or clarinet lesson. But because we sense how contrary to expectations these desires can seem, we opt to stay quiet about our requirements – and so grow increasingly ragged, angry and bitter with those who rely on us. A lack of selfishness can turn us, slowly, into highly disagreeable as well as ineffective people. To take another example, we may find that our mind is at its best immediately after dinner and yet know the family tradition of spending twenty minutes tidying up the kitchen together following a meal. We accept that it would look extremely selfish to the others to slip out at this point, we'd be mocked and cast aside, and so we mop the floor and scrub the potato dish and don't work out how to rearrange the cash flow in the company or practice a speech for the conference – initiatives which would, in the long-term, have been of far greater use to those we love than our resentful and agitated domestic efforts. Good selfishness grows out of an accurate understanding of what we need to do in order to maximise our utility for others. It stems from an unembarrassed sense of how we should develop our abilities, get our minds into the right frame, summon up our most useful powers and organise our thoughts and feelings so that they can be eventually helpful to the world. We recognise that we will at select moments have to back out of doing things that people would like us to – and have no compunction about politely explaining this in good time; unlike the selfless who will dutifully smile, then one day explode in vindictive exhausted rage. We know, as kind egoists, that we may be confused with the mean-spirited, but our innate conviction of our sincerity lends us the calm to pursue our aims in our own way. The trick is to become better ambassadors of our intentions, learning persuasively to convey to those around us that we're not lazy or callous but will simply better serve their needs by not doing the expected things for a while. We avoid becoming a nuisance to those around us by what is only ever superficially a good idea: always putting other people first. Immorality We rightly think that fear is the enemy of the well-lived life. But there's a powerful way in which fear can play an opposite and more constructive role: it can be the psychological force that positively propels us towards a more meaningful existence. One of the big obstacles to meaning is the feeling that we have time to get around to the important things. We recognise where the sources of meaning lie, but lack urgency in focusing on them, because we will address them tomorrow, at the end of the month or next year. We have a hazy supposition that time is, in reality, unlimited. The horrific, but inevitable fact of our own mortality is kept at bay for the most sympathetic of reasons: we can't bear the brevity of our own existence. But in so doing, we fail to give our lives the meaningful direction they deserve. We give in to localised, small-scale obstructions: the worry that something is a touch dull; the fear of looking a bit of a fool; the pain of being rejected; the awkwardness of not fitting in; the annoyance of having to make yet another effort in the same old direction. We don't persist with worthwhile things through the suffering they involve, and in the process, end up slowly ruining the time we have left. A decisive barrier to the more meaningful lives we seek is the half-formed, secret and deeply dangerous suspicion that we may be immortal. The Art of Storytelling At moments of sorrow and exhaustion, it is only too easy to look back over the years and feel that our lives have, in essence, been meaningless. We take stock of just how much has gone wrong: how many errors there have been; how many unfulfilled plans and frustrated dreams we've had. We may feel like the distraught, damned Macbeth who, on learning of his wife's death, exclaims at a pitch of agony that man is a cursed creature who: …struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. [Life] is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing. Shakespeare, Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5 No life can avoid an intermittently high degree of 'sound and fury.' The question is whether it must also, ultimately, signify nothing. As Macbeth's lines hint, this will depend on who is telling it. In the hands of Shakespeare's (bracingly termed) 'idiot', the story of a life may well turn into unintelligible and dispiriting gibberish. But with sufficient compassion and insight, we may equally be able to make something different and a great deal more meaningful and redemptive out of the same material. Only a small number of people ever self-consciously write their autobiographies. It is a task we associate with celebrities and the very old – but it is, in the background, a universal activity. We may not be publishing our stories, but we are writing them in our minds nevertheless. Every day finds us weaving a story about who we are, where we are going and why events happened as they did. Many of us are strikingly harsh narrators of these life stories. We declare our achievements puny, we berate ourselves for our faults, we perceive only the negative sides of our characters. We constantly give the advantage to the other side. We may feel we're being objective, but it seems we're really rehearsing the case for an especially vicious imaginary prosecution. Yet there is nothing necessary about our methods or our verdicts. There could be ways of telling very different, far kinder, and more balanced stories from the very same sets of facts. Good – by which is meant fair-minded and judicious – narrators know how to display a range of narrative skills that keep unfair, partisan and confidence-destroying lines of attack at bay. For a start, these good narrators accept that lives can be meaningful even when they involve a lot of failure and humiliation. Mistakes are not dead-ends, they are sources of information that can be exploited and put to work as guides to more effective subsequent action. The sound and fury can be made to yield hugely significant insights. The good storyteller appreciates that a life can remain meaningful even when it contains long passages that might appear, at first glance, to be merely a waste of time. We may spend a decade not quite knowing what we want to do with ourselves professionally, trying out a number of different jobs and never settling in any of them, testing our parents and enduring the scepticism of our friends. We may go through a succession of failed relationships that leave us confused and hurt. But these experiences don't have to be dismissed as merely meaningless. The wandering and the exploration may be intimately connected to our eventual development and growth. We needed the career crisis to understand our working identities; we had to fail at love to fathom our hearts. We cannot get anywhere important in one go. We must forgive ourselves the horrors of our first drafts. The good storyteller recognises too – contrary to certain impressions – that there will always be a number of players responsible for negative events in a person's life. We are never the sole authors of either our triumphs or of our defeats. It is therefore as unwarranted (and as egocentric) to take all the blame as to assume all the credit. Sometimes, it really will be the fault of something or somebody else: the economy, our parents, the government, our enemies or sheer bad luck. We should not take the entire burden of our difficulties upon our own shoulders. Good narrators are compassionate. At many points, we simply could not have known. We were not exceptionally stupid, we were – like all humans – operating with limited information, trying to interpret the world with flawed and blinkered minds under the constant sway of emotion, damaged by our pasts and only selectively capable of reason and calm. Finally, good narrators appreciate that events can count as meaningful even when they aren't recognised as such by powerful authorities in the world at large. We may be holidaying in a tent rather than the Presidential suite, hanging out with our grandmother rather than a pop group, teaching children to read rather than buying and selling companies – and nevertheless lay claim to a legitimately meaningful life. We should not let false notions of prestige interfere with our attempts to focus on the bits of our life stories that actually satisfy us. At our death beds, we will inevitably know that much didn't work out, that there were dreams that didn't come to pass and loves that were rejected, friendships that could never be repaired, and catastrophes and hurts we never overcame. But we will also know that there were threads of value that sustained us, that there was a higher logic we sometimes followed, that despite the agonies, our lives were not mere sound and fury; that in our own way, at select moments at least, we did properly draw benefit from, and understand, the meaning of life.

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