

*Seek Wisdom,
Practice Kindness*

by

Mark James Wooding

Third Edition

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Foreword

The germ of this book began in 1990, give or take a year. At that time I read an article stating that scientists didn't really know what emotions were. That piqued my interest in the subject, and after considering it for some time I speculated that emotions were messages from the subconscious to influence behavior. I held that opinion for many years, but my thoughts on emotions have been modified during the last decade.

In 2003 I decided to put my views on various aspects of life into a format that I could see and edit. I also included in that work my theory of emotions. It only took a couple of weeks to compile, and I liked the results. I printed up a few copies of *Seek Wisdom, Practice Kindness* for myself and some friends, and I also tried to find a literary agent. The literary agency I dealt with charged fees for its services, and I didn't have enough money to continue with them for long. For the next few years I turned my attention to other things.

Having my thoughts in a tangible format made it easier for me to review and reevaluate them. In 2006 I updated *Seek Wisdom, Practice Kindness*, and I liked the new edition better. I self-published it, but I think that most of the sales were for copies that I

bought to give away.

Around June of 2009 I had finished the outline for a novel and I thought that I'd once again rewrite *Seek Wisdom, Practice Kindness*. My plan was to update it and then send it out to some publishers. I estimated that it would take no more than a weekend to redo. More than ten months later I've finally finished it.

There may be a fourth edition of this book someday, but I think I'll keep that on the back burner until 2020 or so. I'll have a few more gray hairs by then, and hopefully a little more knowledge, too. If any of my theories in the third edition turn out to be wrong (which is a possibility to which I always want to keep my mind open) then I can correct them at that time.

One difficulty with language is that the same word can have multiple connotations. The problem arises when the person speaking intends one meaning of a particular word, but the listener interprets that word using a different meaning. In this book I've defined many of the words that I've used in order to convey more specifically what I was trying to say. These definitions were not meant to include all of the connotations currently associated with those terms.

Special thanks to my mother, Mary Wooding, for offering suggestions on both the second and third editions of this book. Thanks also to my brother, John Wooding, for his thoughts on the second and third editions. I'm indebted to John Kricorian for criticism regarding my excessive use of the word "positive". I'm also grateful to those who read the book and had nothing but positive – I mean, favorable - things to say about it; and to the person who didn't read more than a third of this version because he really didn't like it.

Some people may find this book to be thought provoking. For others, it may be nap provoking. Either way, thank you for taking the time to attempt to read it.

-Mark James Wooding

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Motto

My motto is this:

Seek wisdom,
practice kindness.

Motto

Someone once asked me, “So, what's your motto?”

The question took me by surprise. I'd never thought about having a motto before and I wasn't sure what to say. I hesitated a moment, then answered with one of my favorite quotes:

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.**

I liked the phrase, but I wasn't quite satisfied with it. Sometime later the words “*seek wisdom, practice kindness,*” occurred to me. I knew then that I had found my motto.

**Paradise Lost*, Book I, by John Milton

Motto

The value of a motto is that it serves as a mental compass. It reminds me of the direction in which I want to steer my mind.

I don't always stay on course, but at least I know when I'm going the wrong way, and I know which way to go to resume my preferred path.

Wisdom

Wisdom is the knowledge of how to best live one's life.

When I was a child I went to a Catholic school for many years. There we sang a hymn about the gifts of “wisdom, understanding, counsel and fortitude, knowledge and piety, fear of the Lord”. One day the nun who was teaching us asked which of the gifts we wanted the most, and I said that I wanted wisdom. I thought that if I could get wisdom that it would lead to obtaining all of the other gifts, too.

In order to best live my life I think it's important to understand myself.

I want to know why I feel the things I feel, and why I do the things I do. My hope is that an understanding of my motivations will make it easier to guide myself into becoming the person that I want to be.

Kindness

Kindness is love in action.

It is caring about the well-being of others, and acting accordingly.

When someone seems to need a kind word, a thoughtful deed, or just someone to talk to, I want to have the presence of mind to perform that act of kindness.

I realize, though, that my ability to show kindness will always be limited by my other commitments, by the scope of my resources, and by my own fears and desires.

I can't save the world, and I don't feel the need to do so, but I do hope to make a positive difference on my journey through life.

When I was a child, my character flaws might have been due to genetic predisposition, my environment, parental mistakes, or to some other factor outside of my control; but now that I am an adult I accept the responsibility for all of my flaws.

Regardless of the origin of a particular character flaw, it is *my* choice whether or not to fix it; and if I don't fix it, then it is *my* fault, and no one else's.

Deciding which patterns of behavior are character flaws and which are not is something that one must do for oneself. It is important to keep in mind, however, that if those decisions run contrary to the prevalent opinions of the society in which one lives, then there may be negative consequences to actions based on those decisions.

Honesty

The truth will set you free.

In the oldest work in which I've found that phrase, Jesus is reported to have said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

Regardless of the intended meaning in that quote, to me the truth setting someone free means that when the truth is known, there is nothing left to hide. When I tell the truth then it's not necessary to try and remember what lies have been told to whom, or to worry that someone will catch me contradicting myself, or to feel guilty about deceiving someone. Honesty frees me from those unwelcome burdens.

**The Gospel According to John, Chapter 8, Verses 31-32*

Honesty

Although I may say something in error, people who talk with me seem to have confidence that I'm not trying to mislead them. I like that trust, and I don't want to lose it.

There have been instances when I have lied. Because of this, I know that I don't like it. I much prefer the way I feel when I tell the truth.

Perhaps there will once again be circumstances in which I'll decide that a lie is preferable to the truth, but I hope that those situations will be few and far between.

Honesty

There have been times when I made commitments that I didn't fulfill. When I made those promises I intended to carry them out, but through absentmindedness, laziness, or through some other fault of my own, I didn't perform them.

I may seem like a liar to the people I've let down through my failure to follow through on promises. I apologize to those people. There is no excuse for me not to have met my voluntary obligations, so I won't try to make any.

All I can say is that I'm sorry.

Honesty

There are times when honesty is not the best policy.

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, formal education was forbidden to girls. For someone teaching a girl how to read and write in Afghanistan during that time, it would almost always have been unwise to have told the truth about it to the authorities. No doubt there have been many similar times throughout history when lying would have been preferable to telling the truth.

Sometimes the lesser of two wrongs is the right thing to do.

Knowledge

There is an old saying that knowledge is power. If someone needs something done that he doesn't know how to do himself, and he's not interested in learning how, then he has to depend on someone else to do it for him.

It can also be said that money is power, since a person with money can hire a person with knowledge to perform a particular task. The limitation with money is that there are some things which one can't hire someone else to do.

If I want to master my own mind to a greater degree, then I have to learn to do that myself. Although someone could be paid to teach me, no one can learn it for me.

Knowledge

For me, the beginning of knowledge is the realization that I know nothing. Once I know that, then I am free to learn without being defensive about some truth to which I've become mentally attached.

This doesn't mean that I become suddenly unsure of whether two plus two equals four, or whether a heavy object released without support will fall. It only applies to knowledge of the specific subject. If I have doubts about the fundamentals of something, then I will begin to learn at the beginning, which is the point at which I know nothing about that topic.

The subject about which I first realized that I knew nothing was God. I had been taught that there was a god and that Jesus was his son; just as Moslem children are taught that there is only one god and that Mohammed was his greatest prophet; just as Hindu children are taught about their gods; but I had no actual knowledge of my own, and I had no source of information in which I had confidence. In order to free my mind from preconceived ideas and to keep it open for the truth, I had to begin with the realization that I knew nothing.

Knowledge

Information is either learned from one's own experience, or else it comes from another source.

It isn't practical, and it's often impossible, to verify all of the information that I receive indirectly. For instance, I can't verify through personal experience that Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence; nor can I check the accuracy of a census by going back and recounting all of the people in a given country.

When information comes from a source other than my personal experience, I feel that it's necessary to assess the credibility of that source.

Knowledge

The difference between second-hand knowledge and first-hand knowledge is the difference between intellectual understanding and really *knowing*.

Most people understand intellectually that it's difficult for an invalid to perform many tasks that healthy people take for granted, like getting dressed; but it's not until a person experiences that difficulty that that person can really know what it's like.

I generally give greater credibility to things that I've witnessed myself than I do to reports from others. However, many times I have thought that my memory was accurate only to be shown that I was wrong. As a consequence, often when I think of knowledge it is in terms of probability rather than of certainty.

Many statements that I make would be more accurate if I were to preface them by saying, “To the best of my knowledge,” or “My understanding, based on what I've read, is ...”

Speaking in that manner is cumbersome, so I usually assume, correctly or incorrectly, that the person with whom I'm communicating understands that those qualifications, or similar ones, apply.

One of the most important developments of the last few centuries has been the increasing usage of science. Science is a set of methods for adding to the sum of human knowledge, and for verifying that knowledge, in a reliable and systematic fashion.

One method is to start with a hypothesis, which is a fancy word for a guess, then seek data to support and data to disprove that hypothesis. Some scientists may not make any effort to disprove their own hypotheses, but they can be sure that someone else will.

Another method is to begin by gathering data, then seeing what conclusions can be derived from that data. This usually leads to more questions. To answer those questions, the data gathering process begins again.

Objectively gathering information is not always easy to do. Science is practiced by people, and there is a tendency for people to bring their biases with them in their search for knowledge. Sometimes a person is so convinced that he must be right that he ignores, or even tries to hide, data that conflict with his preferred conclusions.

Fortunately, there are enough people out there who are able to minimize or neutralize their biases that the truth will eventually be discovered.

Evolution is a process of change. It occurs in any phenomenon where new or modified forms arise, and where there is competition for survival. Examples of such dynamic phenomena are language, political and economic systems, and of course, life itself.

Our species is a product of evolution. Due to the differences between humans and other animals, some people think that we are something else entirely, but understanding that we are animals is critical to understanding our motivations. The similarities between humans and our closest animal relatives are far greater than the differences.

Humans are not something outside of nature. We are just as much a part of nature as any other species.

It is currently unknown how cells first came into being. It may never be known.

However it happened, cells did come into being. They lived, they reproduced, and once in a while random mutations occurred.

Some of those mutations probably resulted in harmful changes that kept them from reproducing, and therefore were not passed on to a new generation. Other changes may have made no difference.

Some changes, however, were advantageous. Those changes caused succeeding generations to have a better chance to flourish, either in their existing niche, in a new niche within their home environment, or in a different environment altogether.

According to scientists who study the history of life, there were microbes living on Earth over three billion years ago.

The life span of those microbes is unknown, but there are some bacteria today that have a life span of approximately twenty minutes. In a billion years, microbes with that lifespan could produce 26,280,000,000,000 generations. In that same length of time, microbes with a life span of two days could produce 182,500,000,000 generations.

Considering that a single cell can potentially produce a billion descendants in 30 generations, there has been a lot of opportunity for change.

Evolution

Over time, multicellular organisms evolved and their cells began to specialize.

Of the many changes that occurred, some of them affected the ways in which organisms perceived and reacted to their external environments.

At first these processes were purely automatic, and the organisms didn't make choices.

As time passed life became increasingly complex. Those animals that had a means of selecting from multiple impulses had an advantage over animals that did not. Thus evolved the conscious.

The conscious is the faculty for making choices. One or more impulses are generated in the subconscious, and the conscious chooses which course to take. I suspect that this applies to most vertebrates, and to some invertebrates as well.

The more highly intelligent animals have the option of rejecting the first set of impulses, and requesting of the subconscious other options.

Humans have the additional advantage of a greater mental capacity for understanding the reasons for given impulses, for gauging the consequences of the potential choices, and for seeking alternative options. We may not always take advantage of those greater resources, but they are there nevertheless.

The focus of one's conscious is one's attention. That attention can be divided among multiple objects at the same time, but there is usually a single item which receives most of the attention at any given moment.

The conscious is not only the part of the mind that makes choices. It is also that part of the mind of which we are aware.

When a person loses consciousness, that person loses all awareness of the world.

Sleep appears similar to, but is not the same as, loss of consciousness. When sleeping, mental activity that occurs above a certain threshold, such as dreaming, or detection of a loud noise, will cause a degree of attention to be focused on that activity. Sometimes it is sufficient to awaken one.

Interest is the desire to focus attention on a specific object. That object could be a person, a television show, a daydream, a news article, or any other thing on which one can focus one's attention.

To be entertained is to have the mind occupied with something that compels interest.

The list of phenomena that at least some people have found entertaining is as wide as the scope of life itself: gladiator matches, displays of emotion, children at play, cartoons, automobile accidents, starry skies, babies learning to walk, people having sex, sunsets, political debates, craftsmen at work, movies, beauty contests, predators chasing prey, burning buildings, battles, et cetera.

The subconscious is that part of the mind which operates automatically, and which carries out its processes outside the scope of the conscious. It can be influenced by the conscious, such as when the conscious directs it to recall a memory, or to perform a calculation; but the subconscious performs the vast majority of its functions without any direction from the conscious.

There seem to be some reflex reactions that bypass the conscious. An example of this is the way the body reacts to contact with extremely hot objects. The reaction seems to happen too quickly for conscious acquiescence to occur. Once the attention is focused, it may be that the conscious can overrule a reflex reaction, but it's possible that there are some basic reflexes that can't be overruled.

Far back in evolutionary history, if an organism felt nothing while it was being injured, then that organism would not have felt compelled to avoid the injury. If, on the other hand, the organism felt something strongly disagreeable when it was being damaged, then it would have been much more likely to move away from the source of harm, thereby surviving longer to reproduce. For this reason, pain was born into the world.

Pain is a negative feeling from some stimulus, physical or mental.

Agony and misery are extremes of pain.

Just as pain was a necessary evolutionary step to optimize an animal's chances of surviving to reproduce, so was rewarding certain activities or states when an animal acted in ways that were beneficial. As a result, pleasure.

Pleasure is a positive feeling from some stimulus, physical or mental.

Ecstasy and elation are extremes of pleasure.

The utmost extremes of pleasure and pain are usually associated with the body. This makes sense in regard to pain because a physical injury can be an immediate threat to one's life.

As for pleasure, the most intense pleasure, if not the greatest, seems to come from sexual intercourse, an essential act for the continuance of most animal species.

Impulses

An impulse is a signal from the subconscious influencing one to behave in a particular way. It is the result of a subconscious calculation of the expected pleasure to be received, or pain avoided, by taking a specific course of action.

A compulsion is an extremely powerful impulse.

Pain and pleasure are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some situations offer both, complicating some choices.

While human impulses may not be exactly the same as the impulses of members of other animal species, the function of impulses to direct behavior is a part of our common heritage (at least among animals with brains).

Instinct is genetically programmed behavior. It is the result of gene sequences in our DNA, and is a part of our makeup from the point of conception.

Different behaviors may manifest themselves at different points in life. Some may show up in the womb, and others may first appear in childhood. Some behaviors may not emerge until puberty, and still others may manifest themselves only in parenthood.

The subconscious originally generated impulses based only on instinct, but sometime in evolutionary history our ancestors developed the ability to learn. Consequently, some of one's impulses are based on instinct, and others on learned behavior.

Impulses

The prime impulses are desire and fear.

Desire is the impulse of attraction. It directs one to do, obtain, or move toward something.

Passion is extreme desire.

Fear is the impulse of repulsion. It directs one to avoid or move away from something, and in some circumstances it can even compel one to attack.

Terror is extreme fear.

Impulses

Desire and fear are the great motivators.

Without the desire to live, or the fear of pain or death, why would I bother to move from the path of oncoming vehicle?

As long as they are not followed indiscriminately, desire and fear are invaluable.

Impulses

Desire and fear arise in many different contexts.

Phobias are specific fears, such as vertigo (the fear of heights), or arachnophobia (the fear of spiders). There are hundreds of phobias.

There are also many different desires.

Impulses

Lust is the desire to have sex.

Gluttony is the desire to eat or drink
excessively.

Sloth is the desire to rest in excess of what the
body and mind require.

Acquisitiveness is the desire to get things
without necessarily placing importance on
keeping them.

Greed is the desire to get and keep more of a
particular thing than one needs, or than one is
ever likely to use.

Materialism is the desire to get and keep lots of
things, but not necessarily a lot of one specific
thing.

Two of the most important desires, particularly in the early stages of life, are curiosity (the desire for new stimulation), and mimicry (the desire to imitate).

Curiosity impels babies and toddlers to explore their world. They will get into any nook or cranny into which they can fit. They will taste test anything they find.

As they focus attention on sounds, gestures and actions, they try to imitate them. In so doing, they piece together the relationships between the causes and effects that their sounds and actions have on the world around them. In a few short years, children learn a language and a culture.

Curiosity and imitation don't end with
childhood.

Curiosity led me to ponder the topics in this
book.

I also occasionally find myself automatically
imitating mannerisms of people that I've seen
on television, or in person.

Two other desires of particular importance in the learning process are the desire to play, and the desire to be creative.

Fun is the enjoyment of a particular activity or idea.

Play is an activity in which one engages with no other thought than to have fun. The developmental benefit of play is that it tests and sharpens both physical and mental abilities. Play that challenges, but that doesn't challenge too much, tends to be the most satisfying.

When life isn't extremely harsh, the desire to play tends to continue into adulthood. When life is more difficult, and surviving becomes a full-time occupation, the desire to play diminishes or is overridden.

Creativity is the combination of two or more existing ideas to form a new one. It is the mental manipulation of ideas, sometimes confined to the mind, and at other times expressed, such as through inventions or art.

Our degree of creativity is one of the most significant differences between humans and other animals. It may be that any animal capable of play has a rudimentary creative capacity, but the creativity of humans far surpasses that of any other species.

Loneliness is the desire to interact with other people. Humans are social animals. We seem to have an instinctive desire to associate with, and to form attachments to, other people.

Personally, I find that time spent alone can be very relaxing, and it seems necessary for my mental well-being; but I can't deny that I also have a desire to be around other people.

It may be that people with more dominant personalities feel less need to be alone because they tend to get what they want when they're with others. People with less assertive personalities may have a greater need for time alone. That way they can do what they want without having to overcome the resistance of another person's will.

The counterweight to impulse is deliberation.

Deliberation is the directing of mental resources by the conscious in the search for an answer. That answer could be to the question of what is the best course of action to follow; or to how or why something works; or to anything else that can be pondered.

Although the subconscious may have prompted the original question to the conscious, the distinguishing factor with deliberation is that the conscious is driving the search for an answer, not impulse.

Deliberation

Two tools used in deliberation are reason and intuition.

Reason is the construction of a conclusion as a necessary result of other facts or beliefs.

If the reasoning is sound then the conclusion is said to be logical. However, just as a person can use tools poorly when making a piece of furniture, reason can also be used poorly when coming to a conclusion.

Intuition is the feeling that something is true without understanding why. Sometimes the mind picks up subtle clues that are not consciously noticed. The subconscious processes that information and its conclusions are often correct.

Status

Status is the relative rank one has in the opinions of other people, or in one's own mind.

In the eyes of the law everyone should be equal, but in our minds, as in nature, everyone is not equal. Those that one values or respects the most have the highest status in one's own mind.

Ambition is the desire for status.

Flattery is telling someone that a characteristic that he or she has is better than it actually appears to be. The result is that the person being flattered feels that he or she has a higher status than the actual condition merits.

Status

In any given group, the person perceived to be the most powerful usually has the highest status.

That power can be measured by many criteria, such as strength, willpower, rank, celebrity, money, sex appeal, possessions, knowledge, or ability.

The importance of status from an evolutionary standpoint is that the higher one's status, the greater one's chances of reproducing with a higher quality (more genetically fit) mate.

The desire for attention may be related to the desire for status. Receiving attention means that one has some positive status. Being ignored can signify that, at least in the mind of the person doing the ignoring, one is too low in status to merit attention.

I've often dreamed of becoming famous. I think the reason for this is that subconsciously I felt that becoming a celebrity would increase my status.

I don't consciously think that being a celebrity would make me a better person, or would make me more worthy of the attention of others; but I think that a subconscious desire for status evokes these dreams.

I have often imagined myself speaking with a celebrity. I think it's because instinctively I felt that associating with a person of higher status would raise my own status.

When I tell someone something that I think she doesn't know, it's often because I feel that revealing my knowledge will increase my status in her eyes.

Sometimes I like to show off certain of my possessions. I think the reason that I do this is because I feel that it will raise my status in the opinion of the person to whom I'm showing them, or in the opinion of someone else with whom that person will speak.

I never say to myself, "Hey, I'm going to do such and such in front of so and so to increase my status!"; but when I try to understand my behavior in retrospect, it often only makes sense when I take the desire for status into account.

Attachments

An attachment is importance placed on something, such as on the truth or falsehood of a certain idea, or on the satisfaction of a particular impulse.

A person can develop an attachment (become attached) to anything that can be conceived, including another attachment.

An attachment is essentially an investment of mental energy.

Obsession is an extreme level of attachment.

Attachments

An expectation is an attachment to a future event.

Hope is the expectation that a desire will be satisfied.

Anxiety is the expectation that a fear will be realized.

Expectations can be driven by subconscious processes, but also by the conscious.

Pride is an attachment to one's status.

Vanity is pride that is focused on a particular aspect of oneself.

Humility is the lack of attachment to one's own status.

One of the most profound feelings that I have ever experienced was what I imagined to be true humility. For a brief moment I felt totally unconcerned with what others thought of me, and I felt certain that I was no better and no worse than anyone else. It was only in a daydream, but it was a liberating state of mind that I have only attained a few times since then.

One of my primary goals is to make humility an integral part of my character.

Attachments

When some aspect of an experience is enjoyable, there is often a desire to repeat that experience.

A habit is an attachment to a particular action, sequence of actions, or to some stimulation therefrom.

An established habit is generally harder to break than a relatively new one.

The evolutionary advantage to forming attachments is they can influence behavior in ways that are beneficial to the species.

A parent that has an attachment to its offspring is more likely to defend them. A child that develops an attachment to its parents is more likely to stay near them, increasing that child's safety. An animal that develops a proprietary attachment to its feeding range is more likely to keep competitors out of that territory.

People today form attachments to a wide variety of phenomena, and in many instances those attachments may seem, or may even be, disadvantageous. However, the ability to form attachments has been critical to the success of our species, and to many other species as well.

An emotion is a reaction to an event which is perceived to affect an attachment.

If I'm attached to the idea that a particular object remains on my desk, it will bother me if that object falls off. If I'm not attached to the idea that it stays, then it won't bother me if it falls off (unless it breaks and I'm attached to the idea that it should stay intact).

If I'm attached to the idea that a particular team will win a sporting event, I will have an emotional reaction at the conclusion of that event. That reaction will either be pleasurable or painful depending on the results of the game. If I'm not attached to the idea that a particular team will win, I will have no reaction to the outcome.

If a man is attached to the idea that his wife is sexually faithful to him, and he learns that she isn't faithful (or believes that he's learned that she isn't), his emotional reaction will be proportional to the strength of the attachment.

If he isn't attached to the idea that she is sexually faithful to him, and he finds that she was with someone else, it won't bother him.

If he thinks he isn't attached to the idea of her fidelity, but he is actually bothered when he finds out that she was with someone else, then he is in fact attached to the idea of her being true to him.

An event that triggers an emotion might occur in the real world, or only in one's imagination.

The strength of the emotional reaction is directly related to both the strength of the attachment, and to the effect that the triggering event is perceived to have had on the object of that attachment.

Sometimes one doesn't know the strength of an attachment, or even that an attachment exists, until having an emotional reaction associated with that attachment.

Emotions

Happiness is the emotion
that results from a sense of gain.

Elation is extreme happiness.

Sadness is the emotion that
results from a sense of loss.

Grief is extreme sadness.

Embarrassment and humiliation are emotions
that occur in response to a perceived loss of
status.

Although a person usually feels only one
emotion at a time, it is possible to feel
simultaneous, and even conflicting, emotions.

Disappointment is the
emotion of unrealized hope.

The amount of disappointment is in direct
proportion to the strength of the hope.

Relief is the emotion of unrealized anxiety.

The amount of relief is in direct proportion to
the strength of the anxiety.

Disappointment and relief are types of sadness
and happiness, respectively.

Frustration is the emotion of unsatisfied desire.
To feel frustration, it is not enough that a desire
is unsatisfied, but there must also be an
attachment to that desire.

It is said that time heals all wounds. In my opinion, the truth underlying this adage is that the ability of a memory to elicit a fresh emotional response generally declines over time.

One reason for this change is that attachments to conditions which are no longer possible tend to gradually decrease in strength. We are attached to the idea that the people we love are alive and in our lives. When someone we love dies, it hurts proportionately to the strength of that attachment. Time passes, and while we may always wish that the person was alive and with us, the strength of our attachment to the idea of them actually being with us diminishes. As a consequence, the emotional reaction to the loss decreases commensurately.

Another reason that emotional reactions to past events usually diminish in strength is that as past events are repetitively remembered they gradually lose their ability to have an effect. The memories seem to become desensitized, possibly due to familiarity. There are exceptions, though.

My experience has been that the more I think about a past event the weaker my emotional reaction to that event seems to become. With events that elicit exceptionally strong emotions this process can take months or even years. The trick seems to be to continually replay the event in the mind until the memory of it ceases to cause an emotional reaction.

Resentment

Resentment is the emotion that results from the perceived opposition to an attachment.

A person who is attached to the idea that there should be no scratches on his vehicle will resent anyone who scratches that vehicle.

If a person is attached to the idea that she can't do a particular thing, she may even resent a person who tells her that she can.

Regret is a resentment caused by oneself.

If someone is attached to the idea that she shouldn't make a particular mistake but then she makes that mistake, she will feel regret.

If a man is married and has a strong attachment to that relationship, but also has a weaker attachment to a girlfriend, he may not feel any regret about being with that girlfriend as long as his wife doesn't find out. If he considers that his wife might find out, he will probably feel some regret at that moment. If she does find out about the girlfriend, in all likelihood he will strongly regret that he threatened his marriage.

Guilt is the regret that occurs when one knowingly acts against a principle to which one has an attachment.

Resentment

Sometimes I think it's good to feel a little regret. In doing so, I think that I'm less likely to forget some of the mistakes that I've made.

Perhaps that is the reason why we've evolved to feel regret: so that we are less likely to make the same painful mistakes again.

Resentment

Envy is the resentment of another person's possessions or attributes in excess of one's own.

Simply wishing to have something that someone else has isn't envy. It's only envy when one places importance on that inequality.

Resentment that another person has a possession or attribute which is similar or identical to one's own is jealousy, not envy.

Jealousy is the resentment that results from a perceived threat to one's status.

If a woman is attached to the idea that she is the only woman in which her man should be interested, and she sees him show interest in another woman, then she will feel jealousy. That other woman is perceived as a threat to the status she believes that she alone should have in her man's mind.

If one has an item or an attribute and resents that another person has the same or equivalent asset, then it is because one associates one's own status with that asset. The more people that share that same asset, the less status that having it can confer. The other person's possession is therefore perceived as a threat to one's status, resulting in jealousy.

Vengeance is retaliation against the perceived antagonist of an attachment.

If a man is attached to the idea that no one should show interest in his girlfriend, and another man casts a lingering glance at that girlfriend, he may desire to seek vengeance against that other man.

If an offense can be forgiven, it is optimal to do so. Vengeance never rights a wrong.

Retaliation may be necessary to prevent future offenses, but it can never undo past ones. Retaliation might also be necessary to change an unacceptable situation, such as when an intruder has invaded one's house.

Forgiveness is the removal of a resentment.

A resentment is removed by diminishing the strength of the attachment which was originally opposed, or by reducing the perceived opposition to that attachment.

Sometimes forgiveness occurs a little bit at a time, and sometimes it happens all at once.

One difficulty that is often encountered with forgiving old resentments, particularly those against people who have been in one's life for many years, is remembering the original offenses. People tend to have less patience with family and friends than they do with strangers. I think this is due to old resentments, but remembering the causes of those buried resentments can be a challenge.

Forgiveness

A person who doesn't forgive remains a prisoner of his pain. One can't have peace of mind and be resentful at the same time.

One of my primary goals is to forgive everything that I can. Harboring resentments against others is not to my advantage. It wastes energy that could be utilized for productive or enjoyable ends.

It is just as important to forgive oneself as it is to forgive others.

Be that as it may, since some regrets may help me to avoid repeating certain mistakes I may make no effort to forgive them until I feel confident that I won't make those same mistakes again.

One morning I had offended someone, and I remembered something that Jesus was reported to have said: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

I didn't actually remember the whole quote, only the gist of it. I felt that it might be good advice, so I decided to try it. I went back later and apologized to the person that I'd offended. He said that he was glad that I'd apologized, and that the offense was forgiven. His feelings appeared to change from resentment to friendliness. That was when I first realized the power of apology.

**The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 5, Verses 23 & 24*

The act of apologizing places oneself in a position where one wants something (forgiveness) that the other person has the power to grant. The effect is that at the moment of apology one appears to be lower in status than the other person. Although the act for which one is apologizing cannot be undone, the gesture of recognizing the other person as having a higher status, and demonstrating that one intends no threat, seem to alleviate the resentment. I suspect that these are the reasons for the power of apology.

It obviously doesn't work in all situations. Some transgressions are difficult to forgive, and there are some people who like to hold grudges. However, the majority of the time a simple, sincere apology can work wonders to improve relations.

Energy is the fundamental driving force behind all action: energy sets matter in motion.

The amount of energy in the mind normally fluctuates within an optimal range. When that level is exceeded then the excess energy must be expended.

I don't know if that energy is electrical or chemical, or both, or something else. However, I don't think it's necessary to know the actual physical mechanisms in order to understand the underlying principles.

There are many reasons why the mind generates excess energy. These include, but may not be limited to, responses to potential danger, emotional reactions related to strong attachments, and pleasure or pain.

If some aspect of the subconscious interprets a situation as being potentially dangerous, but doesn't create a strong enough impulse of fear to motivate the individual, it could be the difference between life and death. When the situation is resolved, in order for the mind to return to its pre-emergency balance any excess energy must be channelled out.

If something affects an object to which there is a strong attachment, the emotional energy released can be very powerful. That energy must be channelled away from the brain.

When a person is playfully stimulated, physically by tickling or mentally by humor, sometimes there is so much pleasure that it can't be held back, and bursts out via a smile, or laughter.

Releasing Energy

There are multiple outlets for excess energy. These include stress, vocalizations, and muscular activity.

There are also various degrees of excitement. Sometimes a facial expression, speech, or mild gestures are sufficient for consuming the excess energy. Sometimes a combination of outlets is used.

When the spike of energy is great enough, then shouting, laughing or crying may be needed.

Stress is usually the least optimal outlet, but it is used as a channel for a wide range of energy levels.

Stress is energy released through muscular tension. It takes longer to burn energy through tension than through motion or vocalization, so it takes longer for the body to relax again than if the energy was released through a more active channel.

Channeling energy into stress can help a person to mask his emotions, both from others and from himself. A person who is in denial about his emotions may even think that he doesn't have them since he's not showing them visibly. However, an attentive observer can usually feel the stress in himself, and see it in others, too.

Stress is generally unhealthy. It puts strain on the internal organs and on the immune system, and can lead to increased blood pressure as well.

Rather than allowing it to take a toll on the body, energy that has been channelled into stress can be released through a variety of means.

Massage and exercise are two popular activities through which stress is relieved.

Another means of releasing energy is through singing. People usually seem to feel more relaxed after singing, particularly after singing in environments in which they are comfortable.

It may be that any form of exertion will help relieve stress.

Vocalizations can be used to channel a wide range of energy levels. Near the lower end of that range, speech is commonly used.

When a person feels strongly about something, it is often helpful to talk to someone about it in order to vent those feelings. If there is no one else with whom one can speak, talking to oneself is an option sometimes exercised.

Most people are occasionally talkative, but some people can talk continuously for over an hour. This may be the result of memories linked to powerful attachments, the strength of which have diminished little over time. It may also be that they have an elevated level of mental energy for a different reason, with speech providing a welcome relief. It is possible that there are other causes as well.

Anger may have originated as a threat response triggered by fear. It would have allowed an organism to focus energy against a specific menace. As the ability to make attachments evolved, anger became a natural outlet for expressing strong resentments.

When the anger is sufficiently strong, loud vocalizing and striking at objects can help consume that excess energy.

Anger is usually a sign of weakness. Although a person may demonstrate physical strength when angry, that person also demonstrates that he is neither in control of the situation, nor of himself.

Crying, laughter and shouting are all channels for releasing high levels of excess energy.

Each of those channels can be used for multiple emotions. For example, sometimes people shout when they win, and sometimes they shout when they lose; sometimes people cry when they're sad, sometimes they cry when they're happy; sometimes people laugh when they're happy, and sometimes they laugh when they're nervous.

There may also be social pressures for utilizing or not utilizing particular methods of energy release. In some cultures it is acceptable for men to cry, while in others it is discouraged.

Although sex may have originated hundreds of millions of years ago as a purely reproductive act, for people (and for some other species) it has become more than that. There seems to have been a layering of different impulses that developed over time.

The most basic sexual impulse for a man appears to be to have sex with the most attractive woman or women available. A man can impregnate multiple women during a short time, and in this way he spreads his genes to the greatest extent. Very few men actually have sex with every woman that opportunity allows, but the impulse is there.

The most basic sexual impulse for a woman seems to be to have sex with the strongest or highest status man or men that she can attract. Since she can only give birth about once per year, and since she's the one who must bear and who usually takes care of the resulting baby, a woman's impulses tend to be more discriminating than a man's regarding choice of mates. This impulse increases her likelihood of having a stronger and healthier child.

In addition to these basic impulses, both men and women have a strong desire to pair bond. Pair bonding increases the care that offspring receive. This improves the odds that children will live to reproduce, and thus the desire gets passed on from generation to generation.

The basic sexual desires and the desire to pair bond are often in conflict, and this can contribute to making one's sex life quite complicated, particularly for a person who doesn't have much self-restraint.

Not all sexual decisions are based on reproductive impulses. Sex is often used as a medium of exchange to get something one wants. Women and men both do this, but it is done much more often by women than by men. The reason for this difference is that for a man sex itself is the thing that he most often wants from a woman, whereas for a woman there are more often other resources that she wants from a man; and since almost all men want sex it is a convenient exchange.

Whether these transactions are a good thing or not is a matter for debate, but that they occur is undeniable.

It is natural for a man to want to treat a woman's body as an object, because a woman's body *is* an object. However, that object is a part of a human being, a person with feelings, and dreams, and fears. If a man wants to live on a mental level higher than a caveman, he must never forget that fact.

Men's bodies are objects also, and doubtlessly there are some women who treat men as objects; but because women are usually not physically stronger than men there is much less potential for abuse.

The body will usually react with pleasure to sensual contact, even if that contact carries no possibility of reproduction or pair bonding. The body does not care whether the contact is with a member of the opposite sex, a member of the same sex, with oneself, with a member of another species, or with an inanimate object.

It simply responds to stimulation automatically.

It is important to remember that one's subconscious can betray oneself by reacting with pleasure to casual touches and a soothing voice. This creates strong impulses that can override the choice that one would make absent the sensual stimulation.

Failure to understand this weakness can render one particularly vulnerable to an otherwise unwelcome seduction.

Looking at nature, at human history, and at contemporary life, it is impossible to say that bisexuality or homosexuality are unnatural. They clearly occur naturally in our species as well as in other species.

The fact that something is natural, however, does not mean that it is necessarily good, or necessarily bad. Caring for one's children is natural, but so are incest, rape, and murder.

Among most animals that have evolved as social species, the behavior to group seems to be governed by an impulse to be in close association with members of that species, including individuals of the same sex. It may be that in a percentage of some populations that this desire facilitates the transference of sexual preference.

It may also be that in some species bisexual behavior can contribute to group cohesion, reduce jealousy, improve cooperation, and contribute to group prosperity. For these reasons it may be that bisexual behavior has had a selective advantage, and has therefore been passed on genetically to succeeding generations.

Exclusively homosexual behavior is unlikely to have a direct genetic advantage since it doesn't naturally produce offspring. However, it may have an indirect advantage by increasing the number of adult individuals who are likely to care for the smaller number of offspring of the group.

It may also be that there are some whose homosexual behavior is caused by psychological factors that lead to the denial of attraction to the opposite sex.

The fact that individuals of many species have been found to exhibit homosexual behavior indicates that a limited level of it is not fatal to the group. A higher frequency of homosexual individuals would be detrimental to the group, and even higher levels would eventually be fatal to it.

One popular strategy for managing the reproductive urge is masturbation. It lacks the ego gratification that sexual intercourse can provide, but it also doesn't run the risk of disease transmission, pregnancy or rejection.

If one has a sexual partner, masturbation reduces sexual opportunity for that partner. Whether that is positive or negative would depend on the dynamics of the relationship in question.

Celibacy is another sexual option, and is probably the most difficult (and least frequent) of all. The reproductive urge is one of the most powerful influences of animal behavior. Any species that could easily ignore the call for sex would reproduce in much smaller numbers and would be much more likely to go extinct.

Being celibate can be gratifying to the ego because it demonstrates control, but it's certainly not for everyone. There is also a difference between being celibate by choice and being celibate by circumstance. Most people go without sex for limited times, but to do so for years at a time is not a choice that many people would voluntarily make.

That's not to say that it's an unwise choice.

For societies that seek to increase population, discouraging same gender sexual activities is advantageous. Sexual activity which can result in an increase in the group gives the group a greater survival edge against competing groups, and societies that encourage heterosexual behavior have a greater chance of surviving than those societies which don't. In such societies, homosexual sex is a wasted opportunity, as are masturbation and celibacy.

Once a population reaches a size where there is no particular advantage to increasing in number, the reason to discourage non-heterosexual behavior diminishes or disappears.

It is even possible that in an overpopulated society there would be a reason to encourage non-heterosexual behavior, and this may have happened at various times in human history, such as in ancient Greece, and in industrialized societies today.

People who engage in sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are generally being guided by impulses from the subconscious. From a motivational viewpoint there is no difference. It is only in the potential outcome and its contribution to society that there is a difference.

Attraction exists in varying degrees between people. It is felt multiple times throughout the day, and for some people almost constantly. If people gave in to sexual urges whenever they were felt then we'd never get anything else done. Our society would be impossible to maintain. The question is how to manage that attraction: when to allow oneself to give in, and when to restrain oneself.

I don't think consensual sex is about right and wrong; I think it's about optimal and suboptimal, and about the life one wants to shape for oneself.

Marriage

The notion that a pair bond should last a lifetime is a popular idea, and it's the theme of many romantic stories and songs. For the majority of people, however, there are several mating relationships of varying duration over the course of a lifetime.

A subset of the population does manage to bond with a single mate for life, but there are also others who mate with dozens of partners.

It is clear that when a couple is in a long term relationship that they don't magically stop being attracted to other people. The evolutionary advantage of mixing the gene pool is a strong one. I don't know whether we are evolving towards a greater degree of monogamy, or whether we have reached an optimal level.

Marriage

Before electricity was harnessed, making a living took almost all of one's waking hours; likewise with maintaining a household. For one person to do both and raise a family was extremely difficult, so men and women needed each other.

Times have changed. Modern appliances have taken most of the work out of housework. Public schools and daycare centers keep kids safe for most of the day. Technology has also made society richer, and it's possible for most people to make a decent living working only eight hours a day, five days a week. For one person to do both a man and a woman's traditional roles is difficult, but nowhere near as hard as it used to be. As a result, although the desire to pair bond still inclines people to marriage, it is more of a convenience than a necessity.

Marriage

In a society that frowns upon pre-marital cohabitation and divorce, there is an external pressure that helps keep mated pairs together.

In a society without those pressures, the chances of a particular pair bond enduring are significantly lower.

I suspect that it's better to live in a society where marriages can be ended. The notion that death is the only way out of a bad pairing doesn't seem healthy. However, in a society that discourages divorce perhaps there are advantages that compensate, such as greater stability for children.

Marriage

Marriage is not a commitment that a couple makes on just one day, securing the relationship for life. It is a commitment that must be made every single day of the relationship.

The dynamic of a relationship before marriage can be different from the dynamic afterwards. People seem more likely to compromise when they know that the other person can leave at any time with few complications. After marriage there is a greater tendency to take the other person for granted.

Two people contesting for control of the relationship is a recipe for unhappiness. Both parties should come to an agreement as to who is responsible for which decisions, and which ones should be made together.

Marriage

Finding a compatible mate with whom one can stay together for decades and still be satisfied is not an easy task. Although there are probably thousands, if not millions, of people with whom one could marry and be satisfied, finding one of those people is not automatic. If one man in five hundred would make a great husband for a given woman, in a country with millions of people there would be a lot of prospects; but she would still have to meet two hundred fifty men to have a fifty percent chance of encountering one acceptable mate.

I have no idea of the actual number of compatible matrimonial prospects that there are for a given person. However, I suspect that the number of excellent prospects is greater for some than for others.

Marriage

Some couples are perfect mates, each one complementing the other so that together they are stronger than both of them were separately. For others, the combination is like mixing glue and shampoo. Separately they are fine, but together they are useless. The only way for them to function well again is to separate.

Sometimes people are compatible when they get married, but over time at least one of them changes. Eventually they find that they are no longer compatible. It happens, and it's not any one person's fault.

In order for a marriage to last both people have to want it and be willing to work for it. One person can hold it together for only so long.

Marriage

One thing that is essential for a successful marriage is that both people have to have the same vision for it. If He thinks that Her role should include Her working a full-time job, taking care of the kids and cleaning house, while He remains unemployed, gets to hang out with the guys for as long as He sees fit, and has access to Her body whenever He wants, She needs to know that before the wedding. For another example, if She wants a career outside of the home, but He wants a woman whose full-time career is her family, learning that fact after the marriage ceremony would be a problem.

A marriage based only on love is unsound. A marriage based on compatibility, mutual goals and mutual respect has a much better chance of lasting. As such a marriage endures, love will usually grow within it.

Love has many shades of meaning, but in its most general sense it is a strong, positive feeling about someone or something.

Infatuation is an intense, obsessive form of love. The object of infatuation is seldom out of one's thoughts for long, and is valued much more highly than other potential mates, to a degree which is usually inconsistent with a more objective assessment.

Hate is a strong, negative feeling about something. It usually stems from a resentment or a prejudice, which may in turn be based on real or imagined events or conditions.

In my opinion, hate is a waste of time and energy.

At the highest level of it that I have experienced, love requires a sense of identification with the object of love. It is a feeling of oneness. I can only love, in the higher sense of which I'm speaking, to the degree that I can identify with the loved one. I can love my children to a higher degree than they can love me because I can identify with them more than they can identify with me. For the same reason, if there is a god then I could never love that god to the degree that that god could love me.

By the term “degree” I don't mean intensity. A four year old's love for a parent can be very intense, or strong, but the four year old's feelings are based on an attachment, not on an appreciation of the complex person that her parent is.

I believe it is possible that there is a level of love at which a person could love everyone and everything. It is in essence an understanding that the separation of people and things is an illusion; that we are in fact all parts of the same great whole.

I imagine that at that level many of the things in which I take pleasure now would cease to be attractive. The joy of that level of love would be so much greater than any pleasure that I enjoy now, including sex, that trying to enjoy those lesser things would be a letdown.

At this point in my life I'm seeking a higher level of love, but not the highest. The reason I'm not seeking that highest level is that I'm not ready to give up the importance I place on my current relationships.

Because no two objects can occupy the same place at the same time, no two people can look at the universe from the exact same viewpoint. Two people might trade locations to get a view from the other person's point in space, but they would each have been looking from that place at different points in time.

This is what makes people truly unique, and not our superficial differences. The various physical and mental characteristics of each person add to that uniqueness, but individuality is guaranteed because each person, even an identical twin, is the center of his own perceptual universe.

Self

Although I see myself as an individual with a unique point of view, I am also a part of a greater whole.

I didn't create myself. I couldn't have been born without my mother and my father. The cells of which my body is composed are made from molecules that were once a part of other organisms, both plant and animal. With each breath I am connected to the atmosphere. My body will eventually end up in the ground, there to become a part of still other organisms. The words I speak were invented by others, most of whom lived generations ago. The material goods that I enjoy are also the result of the work of many people over many generations.

I am unique, but I am not alone, and I am not independent.

Self

Self-image is the idea one has of oneself.

Self-esteem is how one feels about one's self-image. It is one's sense of one's own worth, or status.

Because everyone has worth, everyone should have a positive sense of self-esteem.

The less one allows one's self-esteem to be influenced by the opinions of others, the more stable the self-esteem.

Assuming that other's opinions are necessarily correct is a mistake, but automatically rejecting those opinions may not be wise either. I believe that the best course is to analyze what one hears and determine whether or not any criticisms are valid.

Self

Selfishness is placing one's own needs and feelings ahead of the needs or feelings of others.

Altruism is setting aside one's own needs and feelings, and caring only about the needs and feelings of others.

A balance between selfishness and altruism is the course that I seek to steer for my own well-being.

If I don't take care of myself then I won't be in a strong position to help others. If I don't expand my thoughts to consider the needs of others, then I limit myself to a narrow, lonely world.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to identify with the feelings of another individual.

Although each person is unique, the feelings we have are not.

Cultivating empathy is a valuable practice if one wishes to grow in kindness.

When I observe someone else, I sometimes find it interesting to imagine what it feels like to be that person. I try to imagine what that person is feeling, and how it feels to exist in that person's body. Our bodies determine to a large extent our experience of the world. Living in a skinny body is different from living in a body that is fifty percent fat. Every movement and breath feels different. A person's gender also has a great affect on one's daily experience.

Outlook

One's outlook is one's tendency to view the positive or negative aspects of people, things or situations.

Optimists tend to focus primarily on positive traits or possibilities, and pessimists tend to focus primarily on negative ones.

Regardless of their general outlook, most people seem to be predisposed to view with favor those individuals, groups or causes with which they sympathize, and seem predisposed to view with disfavor those of which they disapprove. They will sometimes even discount or ignore facts that are contrary to their chosen prejudices.

State of Mind

One's state of mind is the sum of the mental elements on which the conscious is focused.

Among those elements are impulses, attachments, emotions and outlook.

A person's state of mind can be left up to chance, or it can be the result of a conscious effort to cultivate a specific state of mind. It could also be a combination of the two.

There are two ways to cultivate a particular state of mind: manipulation of external influences, and internal direction.

Manipulation of external influences consists of avoiding or seeking factors that affect one's state of mind in a particular manner.

For example, if there are people or activities that cause unwanted feelings, those people and activities would be avoided. Other people and activities with a more desirable effect would be sought. Most people try to influence their state of mind in this way.

One difficulty with this approach is that people that one normally considers favorable to a welcome state of mind can temporarily have moods that have the opposite effect on oneself. Also, most people need to spend part of their time in a work or school environment where there are many circumstances outside of their control.

Cultivating a particular state of mind through internal manipulation requires paying attention to one's state of mind itself.

To learn how to control one's state of mind regardless of external events is to truly become the master of one's own mind.

The first step is to imagine the desired state of mind. The second step is to hold that thought as the primary object of attention.

It sounds simple, but it's difficult to do for an extended period of time (it is for me, at least; others may find it easier). One factor that makes it so difficult is that the attention has a tendency to wander, even when one is alone. Learning to overcome that wandering is what some Buddhists call “taming the monkey mind.”

While meditating, if there are no external distractions, one can try to focus on a single idea: the desired state of mind.

Frequently one is in an environment where it's necessary to pay at least some attention to other things. At those times it's necessary to develop the ability to focus on secondary levels of attention, all the while maintaining the primary focus on one's state of mind.

For example, keeping one's entire attention focused on one's state of mind, to the exclusion of all else, would probably be unwise when crossing a busy intersection, and would probably be a detrimental career move at work.

Focusing on one's state of mind is particularly useful for spotting attachments as they form.

One day I was listening to someone talk and I had an impulse to leave. I felt myself forming an attachment to that idea. This caused me to feel resentment because the object of my attachment was opposed by the other person's continued speech. By recognizing that I was forming an attachment I was able to let it go so that I could relax and listen, which was the act in which I consciously wanted to engage.

State of Mind

Peace of mind is attained when there are no compulsions; no conflicts between attachments and the path one consciously wants to pursue; and no pain, fearful impulses, or negative emotions.

Although desirable, peace of mind does not imply an elevated mental state. Any animal with a comfortably full stomach is likely to feel peace of mind for a while.

Confusion is a state of mind brought about by uncertainty.

Surprise is one form of confusion. It is a reaction to an unexpected event.

Everyone has an expectation of the likely eventualities of the next moment. When something happens that is noticeably outside of what one's expects, the result is surprise.

Seeing a stranger walking down the street would not normally be a surprise. Seeing a stranger walking through one's own house would be.

If the surprise is caused by a nearby sound or motion, or by physical contact, there seems to be a default reaction of fear.

Another cause of confusion is nervousness, which is the conflict between desire and fear.

Sometimes when faced with a beautiful woman, part of my mind sends an impulse to get closer, or to speak, while another part sends an impulse to remain silent, or to leave. As a result of this conflict, I often end up looking like a fool.

Confusion can also result from the attempt to understand a concept that seems difficult; from trying to reconcile seemingly conflicting concepts; or from the inability of the subconscious to recall a comparable experience, resulting in a lack of impulse and a consequent lack of direction.

Panic is urgency combined with confusion.

Detachment is the avoidance of, or distancing of oneself from, attachments. To manage emotions, manage attachments.

When one is mentally detached, one is no longer subject to emotional swings that result from external events or conditions.

Depending on the degree to which one is able to detach, it means that insults and slights won't be taken personally. It means no emotional reaction to what is passing around oneself. If one chooses to feel a given state of mind, such as peace, or joy, then one can do so by focusing on that feeling; but one won't feel joy or pain as the result of the words or deeds of others.

Detachment is not denial.

Detachment is not about suppressing emotions. It's about weakening or removing attachments so that the emotions do not occur.

In a state of mental detachment, praise and insults cause no change in self-image or self-esteem. Humility is actually a state of detachment from the desire for, or the preoccupation with, status.

Staying detached requires mental energy. When one is tired it is much harder to remain detached. It is also much easier to fall back into the condition where one's state of mind is largely a reaction to external circumstances.

Managing one's impulses is a different skill than managing one's attachments.

Impulses seem to be generated as the mind focuses its attention on certain objects or ideas.

Not all objects evoke impulses. The more of one's attention that is focused on an object that *does* evoke an impulse, the stronger that generated impulse seems to be. Also, when one's attention is focused primarily a single thing, impulses generated in response to items peripheral to one's attention seem to be weaker, or nonexistent. Therefore, the best way to manage impulses is to keep as much as possible of one's focus on something that elicits a desired response, or a desired lack of response, from the subconscious.

Most people have probably experienced situations in which they've encountered a person with a cheerful, energetic attitude, and felt more cheerful and energetic themselves afterward. In all likelihood, most people also have been in situations where they have encountered a person with a negative attitude, and felt less cheerful themselves as a result of the encounter.

Energy flows from molecules with higher kinetic energy to those with lower kinetic energy. Does energy also flow from one person to the next? Or could it be the power of suggestion? Or imitation? Or something else entirely?

I suspect it is a transfer of energy.

Transferring Energy

It has been my experience that if I concentrate on maintaining a cheerful attitude that I can have a beneficial effect on another person. I have been able for short periods to focus on feeling relaxed and happy, and I've seen the other person seem to cheer up without any other apparent cause.

I'm not able to do this all of the time because I have difficulty maintaining my focus, and because it requires a lot of effort.

Some people are able to dominate others through sheer willpower. This can occur even in cases where the dominant person is significantly smaller than the submissive person. It could be that people with greater willpower have a greater degree of energy, or a greater ability to focus their energy, or a combination of the two.

Varying degrees of energy, and varying degrees of the ability to focus that energy, could also help explain why people have different degrees of self-control.

It's possible that the ability of one person to dominate another person is based on something else, such as visual or olfactory clues. However, I suspect that energy is the key factor.

Religion

In most times and places throughout history, people have worshipped one or more of what they thought were superior, supernatural beings.

It may be that the reason for this is that people have felt that there was some level of existence higher than their own, and have sought to explain this in the best ways that they could.

It may also be that there is a continuing desire for a parent even in adulthood, which has led people to create a “super parent” to fill that need.

I suspect that the presence of religion in almost all (if not all) cultures, is due to a combination of these two factors.

The notion that there is some aspect of existence that is not detectable by the five primary senses cannot be ruled out.

Several scientific theories postulate more than four dimensions (time is the fourth dimension, in addition to length, width and depth). If other dimensions exist that we can't yet explore, how can anyone rule out the possibility that there is some aspect of us in at least some of those dimensions? If there is, then how can one say that that aspect does not continue when the body is dead?

To definitively claim that there is no life after death is a statement of blind faith; no less so than to say without evidence that an individual's life definitely continues after death.

Some people think that the fact that our species has evolved indicates that there are no souls and that there is no god, but that conclusion is not logical. If this universe is a place where souls learn, it may be that both life after death and supernatural beings are hidden to give the illusion that this life is all that there is, so that our focus stays here.

Agnosticism is the acknowledgment that one doesn't know whether or not there is a god, or whether or not there is life after death.

Atheism is the belief that gods and life after death do not exist.

Since the non-existence of gods can never be proven, agnosticism is more logical than atheism. Atheism requires faith, agnosticism does not.

It is conceivable that just as we grow in this world, our spiritual nature grows in other dimensions also.

It is also conceivable that we begin at conception and end at death, and that we have no spiritual nature separate from our bodies or minds.

I don't know what the truth is regarding these matters. A lot of people claim to know the truth, but I'm skeptical of those claims.

When most children are very young their parents seem to them to be omnipotent and omniscient, providing them with protection, nourishment and care. This condition no doubt creates a sense of security.

As children grow up they learn that their parents are neither all-powerful nor all-knowing, but are instead fallible human beings.

Consequently, that feeling of security diminishes or disappears. Does the desire for that former sense of security pass away also? If it doesn't, what factor might that have played in the presence of religion in most cultures throughout history?

Religions seem to me to be theological, and sometimes secular, belief systems regarding a super parent.

Religion as a mental phenomenon is not limited to theological belief systems. Non-theological belief systems seem very similar. Usually there is a sense of something greater than oneself, a call to serve or acknowledge that greater phenomenon, a belief that that greater phenomenon will also take care of its adherents, and an often unquestioning faith in a set of tenets. This seems to apply to traditional religions, like Christianity and Islam, and also to secular religions, such as Nationalism, Communism and Environmentalism. This is not to say that every adherent of a religion, theological or non-theological, believes everything unquestioningly. What seems to be the case is that there are usually one or more axioms that are accepted intuitively, and questions are usually directed at conclusions based on those axioms, but not toward the axioms.

There are many religions existing in the world today, and the details of those religions can't all be correct.

Hindus and Christians, to pick a pair for comparison, might both be wrong, but they can't both be right in their rival theological beliefs. Nevertheless, both groups take solace from the idea that there is one (or more) super parent taking care of them.

My informal observation is that a large percentage of people seem to accept the tenets of a given religion without a lot of introspection, and those people seem derive comfort from their beliefs. This leads me to conclude that the attraction to the idea of a super parent is a strong factor behind the near-universal acceptance of religion.

There is one interesting phenomenon that appears to be true in politics at this time: one side of the political spectrum has a greater tendency toward supporting theological religions, while the other tends to support secular ones.

An innate desire for a parent figure might explain this dichotomy. For some people the idea of a god (or gods) provides a super parent, and for other people the super parent is provided by the idea of a nurturing government that takes care of the needs of its people, and defends the environment.

There are individuals who want both, or neither, but there is a significant proportion of people who seem to prefer to place their faith in God or in Government, but not in both.

A person is not necessarily limited to just one religion. Just as Hindus worship more than one god, people can believe in more than one super parent. The catch is that if a person believes in more than one super parent, then that person is not likely to have complete faith in either of them.

There are some people who neither feel a strong pull toward religion nor the need for a government that takes care of them.

Some of those people may have a living parent or parent figure that is actually there for them when needed. Others may just feel more comfortable with the idea of facing life's difficulties without any prospect of help.

God

I don't know if there is a god, or if there are many gods, or if there are no gods at all.

When I consider the vast number of galaxies and stars that are out there, and the planets that must also be out there, it seems impossible that there are not some beings superior to us somewhere.

I don't know if there are any superior beings watching over us, but sometimes some very improbable things happen that make it seem like there are.

In my experience, if I have faith that everything will work out well, it usually does.

However, I can't say that everything seeming to work out well is because of good intuition, supernatural guidance, or coincidence.

It could also be that I choose to look at the positive side of things, and therefore have a biased interpretation of events.

If there were a being capable of managing the affairs of just this planet, that being would be far inferior in ability to a being capable of managing this galaxy. A being capable of managing just this galaxy would be far inferior to a supreme being over the entire universe. If I were to have reason to believe that a superior being was guiding my life, how would I know if it were a god of just this planet (who would be unimaginably superior to me), or if it were a higher non-supreme being, or the Supreme Being?

In all likelihood, I wouldn't know the difference. Whatever level of power that that god would have, it would be so much more powerful than I am that I would not be able to detect its limitations (if it had any). All I would feel is that it was much more powerful than I was.

God

If there is a god over the entire universe, and in whose mind the universe exists, then that god is in effect the greatest servant. He provides us with everything.

The reason that "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,"* may be that he who is voluntarily the greatest servant is on the highest spiritual level, and that he who receives the most service is on the lowest spiritual level; much as an adult, who is more capable, takes care of a baby, who is less capable.

**The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 19, Verse 30*

It may also be that the reason "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,"* is that most rich people don't tend to dedicate themselves to the service of others, but prefer to be served, in effect keeping themselves on a lower spiritual level.

It feels good to be served. Few people can resist the temptation of focusing primarily on what others can do for oneself, rather than on what one can do for others. Being rich means that there are many more opportunities for being served, making it that much harder to focus on serving.

I've never been rich, but I imagine that it is also difficult to maintain humility when others are continually being deferential.

**The Gospel According to Matthew*, Chapter 19, Verse 24

I believe that if there is a god-like being, that that being does not permit his state of mind to be a reaction to what passes around him; rather, that superior being chooses his state of mind. If he chooses to love us, nothing we can do can change that.

I also don't believe that it's possible that a loving god could require a blood sacrifice in order to forgive people for their sins. The concept of forgiveness is inapplicable to a loving god. Because of resentments, a fallible being like myself needs to learn to forgive. A being that doesn't resent has nothing to forgive.

If I saw a two year-old child walking toward me, and I noticed that he was not paying attention to where he was going, when he bumped into me I wouldn't be mad at him. I would have seen him coming, and I would have understood why he did what he did. Even if he had hit me with the intent to hurt me, I still wouldn't be mad at him because it wouldn't have hurt me. Forgiveness would be unnecessary because there would be no resentment, and without resentment there is nothing to forgive. To a god, we are on the level of toddlers (at best). A god would know in advance what we were doing and why. There would be no surprise. It seems highly unlikely that anything we can do can hurt a god, and it seems impossible that we can hurt the Supreme Being (if He exists).

There is no reason to fear punishment from a loving god. Punishment would not be given out of vengeance, and would not be given in anger. The purpose of the punishment would be to teach, and it would be for the benefit of the one being punished.

Death

I don't know whether or not there is life after death.

Without knowing what happens after death, it is impossible to say whether it is a fortunate turn of events in a person's existence, or an unfortunate one. However, since it will eventually come whether I like it or not, and since it seems to be permanent, I think it is generally better to put off experiencing it for as long as possible.

If there is no life after death, then the fact that injustices occur in this world is understandable. Beneficial events and misfortunes are random, and they aren't personal. There are disasters, accidents, and acts of maliciousness, and some people just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people also just happen to be born to incompetent or malicious parents. Others are more fortunate.

If our existence begins with this life and continues after death, and we are judged for all of eternity on the basis of this one life, then the injustices of this world don't make sense. How could a teenager who suffered from poor parenting and was led astray by bad examples, but who died young, have had a chance to learn a better way? The odds would have been against him from the start.

What about babies who die? Would they be judged? If so, would they be babies forever?

If there is an omnipotent, omniscient god, and if he is just, then a universe in which we live only one material life and are then judged for all of eternity seems highly unlikely.

If we are judged for all of eternity on the basis of this one short life, the notion of a just and loving god punishing souls in eternal hellfire is clearly absurd. To condemn a soul for untold millions of years to excruciating pain, in retribution for acts committed over a relatively small lifespan (small compared to eternity) would be an act of pure evil. A god that would do that would clearly be neither just, good, nor loving.

If there is a god who is not all-powerful, then a universe where we live only one life and are judged for salvation seems possible. If that god only had the power to preserve a limited number of people after they died, even if he was just and loving he would still have to make a choice as to which ones to save and which ones to allow to lose existence forever.

If there is life before conception and after death, and if the things that happen in this life are largely determined by how we behaved or what we learned in the last life, then the injustices of this world would make sense. Some people were malicious in a past life, so they suffer correspondingly in this one. Others may have been kind in a past life, so they prosper in this one. Some people may need to face difficulties in order to prove that they have advanced to a higher level of some virtue, so they are tested in this life. What is learned or merited from this lifetime is taken to the next.

Maybe reality is like Plato's cave, where our real selves are figuratively sitting on the cave floor while a campfire casts our silhouettes on the cave wall. Those silhouettes would be what we think of as the real world, but are in effect only shadows of our real selves. If so, then maybe there is no way that we can know what the true reality is.

I do not know which scenario for an afterlife is correct. The truth may even be something entirely different from those that I've mentioned.

If something can't be tested, then it can't become a part of the body of scientific knowledge. However, that doesn't mean that it can't be true.

Good and evil are measures of the intent to benefit others or to harm them.

Good is the deliberate wish to benefit others.

Evil is the deliberate wish to harm others.

A person who doesn't understand the consequences of his actions may do harm without intending it. This is the reason for the old adage about the road to Hell being paved with good intentions.

Without conscious volition there is neither good nor evil. A tornado can produce great harm, but since it has no will it can't intend anything. It is a blind force of nature.

Sometimes a person does intentional harm to some people to help others. If the ultimate goal is not evil, does that signify that the means are not evil? It does not. Sometimes people choose to use evil in the service of good. That choice is suboptimal, but may be necessary if one wants to protect people from others who seek to harm them.

It may be that the ultimate in good is to turn the other cheek when struck; to never intend to do harm, regardless of the consequences. That may be ideal, but I don't envision myself turning the other cheek in every instance. I think there are some things that are worth fighting for. However, if I knew that there were more to existence than just this life, and that we had souls that could not be harmed no matter what happened to our bodies, then I might change my mind.

Sometimes a person allows harm to come to another person when he might do something to help.

If the person doesn't help because he wants harm to come to those others, then the inaction is therefore evil.

If the person doesn't act because he is afraid, that is neither evil nor good. It's merely self-preservation.

If the bystander doesn't help because he is indifferent, that is also neither good nor evil.

The terms “good” and “evil” are commonly used to describe beneficial or harmful results, and not just intent. I have avoided those usages here for the sake of specificity, although I confess that I often use them that way in everyday speech.

Ideally, I would prefer not to judge people as being good or evil, only their intent. Most people have deliberately done both benefit and harm to some degree. However, there are some acts so heinous that it is difficult for me not to think of the perpetrators as evil; and most people do so little intentional harm that I tend to think of them as good people.

Beneficial and harmful actions can be mandated, but intent cannot.

When a person performs community service as a result of a judicial sentence, those actions may be beneficial to others, but the intent is usually no more than compliance. Similarly, a person can be forced to perform harmful acts on threat of harm done to his family, but that person's intent is not evil.

Some religions identify traits that they think pertain to a high spiritual level, such as charity, celibacy, or poverty; then mandate those actions with the mistaken idea that that will place the practitioners on a higher spiritual level. In order for a person to attain any higher level, I think that those actions must be freely chosen, otherwise they are only obedience.

The similarities between people are far greater than the differences. Everyone I know gets hungry, thirsty, and sleepy. They also want to be materially comfortable. How many adults don't have sexual desire? How many people don't want to protect their children, friends and families?

In my opinion, the single greatest problem in the history of mankind has been, and continues to be, the concept of Us versus Them. As long as people blur the similarities between themselves by focusing on some minor differences, it becomes easy for one group to view another group as something other than almost identical human beings. Once a group of people is identified as Them, it becomes a simple matter to justify treating Them inhumanely in the interests of Us.

The division between Us and Them can be based on anything, including physical traits, language, religious belief, or political opinions.

Unfavorable prejudice is the feeling one of Us has towards Them. Favorable prejudice is the feeling one of Us has towards others of Us.

Some people are dividers, and gain or maintain status by actively encouraging the concept of Us versus Them.

Once a label and a description of Them are created, then a divider can associate that label with anyone who disagrees with him. The people who put faith in that label will automatically discount anything a member of Them says because they assume that no one of Them can be believed.

It is much easier to label an opponent one of Them than to actually debate the truth or falsehood of what that opponent says.

The good news on the issue of Us versus Them is that as time has gone by the concept of Us has widened a great deal. In the past it seems to have been generally limited to smaller groups, such as the family, or tribe. Later it expanded to include the city-state, race, or nation. Now there seem to be an increasing number of people for whom Us includes everyone. As the concept of Us expands, the potential for violent conflict diminishes.

For some people Us includes other forms of life as well. I'm a vegetarian because it seems to me that other animals want to stay alive just as much as I do. If I don't need to take their lives in order to preserve my own life, then why not let them live? I don't see them as Them, but rather as beings that are in many ways very similar to myself.

Violence

The use of violence to resolve disagreements or to obtain or maintain status is natural. It is the standard method of conflict resolution in the animal kingdom.

Although violence is natural, it is usually not optimal. Avoiding it more often than not allows oneself to save energy that can be put to more constructive uses.

One problem with the use of force is that it can create resentments that can lead to a recurring cycle of conflict. Violence sometimes stops violence, and at other times it leads to more violence.

Many instances of violence are initiated in anger. When anger can be avoided, then violence can often be avoided also.

Not retaliating in kind to insults and aggression is usually ideal, but I can't say that it is always the best course of action.

When someone is determined to impose his will through the use of force, then the use of force, and sometimes deadly force, is sometimes the only way to stop him.

Practicing kindness doesn't mean automatically submitting to the will of others. There are times when, if one wants to protect oneself or a loved one from physical harm, it may be necessary to use force, or even to attack preemptively.

That being said, I think it's important to remember that although defending oneself is understandable, turning one's enemy into an ally is often the optimal strategy.

Some people deliberately injure themselves, often repetitively. This is especially pointless since the lack of injury to oneself is seldom, and probably never, the underlying problem. By not dealing with the underlying problem, the senseless impulse to injure oneself can linger for years.

Suicide is another choice that is usually unwise. Many people go through bad periods in their lives when it seems that the easiest end to oppressing problems would be to cease to live. I have felt that myself. However, change in life is a high probability event. Good fortune and bad fortune come and go. Unless a person is terminally ill and in constant agony, there is a high probability that things will eventually get better if one does one's best and doesn't give up.

Location is the biggest difference between a baby just before it is born and the same baby just after it is born. There are other differences too, including breathing air after birth, and no longer being connected to the mother via the umbilical cord. Other than that it is the same person, with the same capacity to feel and to learn, and the same growth potential. It is just as much a human being regardless of which side of the birth canal the baby is situated.

Looking back in time during the gestational period, there is no day in which the fetus or embryo exists and at the same time is not a human being.

There are many words describing the different phases of a person's life: embryo, fetus, infant, toddler, child, teenager, adult, senior citizen. The one thing that is common to all of these phases is that in each one the person is a human being at that particular stage of her life.

The only one logical point at which one can say, "Here is a new person at the beginning of development," is at the moment of conception. When the egg is fertilized there is a new life that, if conditions remain favorable, will one day become a baby, later a teenager, and later still a senior citizen.

The origin of identical twins is more complex.

It seems to me that just as a single-celled organism divides to become two new organisms, an embryo that divides into two embryos ends its life, and two new human lives begin.

With regard to clones, the new life begins at the point when a living cell exists which can, if conditions remain favorable, develop into an adult.

Some people believe that the mother's right of control over her body is more important than the life of that other person within. To people who believe this, the taking of the life of a person is therefore justified when that person is still in the embryonic or fetal stage. The person growing inside of a pregnant woman can't protest, and that person is disregarded. Abortion decides not the fate of one person, but of two.

Others believe that as soon as a new person is created that that person has a right to the protection of her life. I share that opinion.

The disagreement regarding abortion is not about whether a woman has the right to choose, but whether that choice should be made before or after having sexual intercourse, before or after a life is potentially created.

When genital heterosexual relations have a chance to result in a baby, I think that the best choice is to only engage in those relations when one is willing to accept the responsibility for any children that may result therefrom.

In the case where a pregnancy is the result of a rape it is clear that the woman's rights were violated. She should have been able to choose whether or not to have sex. However, even though the newly created person would not have been created had the woman had her choice, is it ethical that the developing person be killed? In my opinion, it is not ethical.

There are situations when the mother's life may be physically endangered by a pregnancy, such as with some forms of connective tissue disease. In such a situation I think that the baby should be allowed to develop in the mother as long as the mother is willing to bear the risk, after which the doctors should do everything they can to save the baby, regardless of its gestational stage.

If more effort were made to save babies instead of discarding them, then the knowledge of how to preserve those lives would increase much more rapidly.

One day the technology will exist to care for gestational life at any stage, and then hopefully the debate over abortion will cease, and no one's life will be prematurely and deliberately terminated.

Money

Like everything else, money has a value, and money has a price. The value is what one gets out of it, and the price is what one has to do to get it.

The pertinent question is: Is the value of the money worth the price one is paying to get it? Some people undergo so much stress at work that they actually diminish the quality of their lives for the sake of accumulating material possessions.

Some people have all the money that their desired standard of living, financial security, and non-financial goals require; yet they continue to make more money. The value received for that money is no longer the same. Past a certain point, additional money has the same personal value as points in a video game.

Money itself is neither good nor bad. Just as it can be used to facilitate the production of goods and services, or to help people, it can also be used to fund harmful activities.

One thing that the possession of money can do is to rescue an individual from mere subsistence. It can also test the depth of that individual's values. It's not so hard to resist temptation when temptation is scarce, but resisting temptation when it is plentiful is a different matter altogether.

I don't think that the possession of money will make a person a better person, nor a worse person. What it may do is to bring out the generosity or selfishness that was already there, but which previously did not have the means for expression.

Gambling

Gambling, like money, is neither inherently good nor inherently bad.

Any time one takes a risk on anything one can be said to be gambling.

Whether it is wise or unwise depends on the circumstances, and on the consequences of a loss. Risking a small sum of one's own money can be a reasonable form of entertainment, no more unethical than going to a movie, or eating at a restaurant. However, gambling the rent money is clearly unwise.

The unauthorized gambling of money or possessions that one is keeping safe for another person is not only unwise, it is a betrayal of trust. Even if one were to win the gamble, one could lose the trust.

I learn more when I listen than I do when I speak.

I have definitely regretted making derogatory comments to and about other people; but I have no regrets about refraining to make such comments.

My personal goals for casual conversation:
Greet each person, when practical, unless there is a sign that the person does not want to be greeted. Commence small talk with none unless there is a sign that it would be welcome.

I've noticed that I have a tendency to make comments that somehow relate the subject of a conversation to myself. I want to break this habit. Not every conversation is about me, nor is there any reason that it should be.

I'm not a believer in the philosophy that one should try everything to see if one likes it.

While I do seek pleasure, I don't do so indiscriminately.

The human body is an object. It responds with pleasure to certain stimuli, and with pain to others. There are many ways in which a body can feel pleasure, and countless individuals with whom one can seek it. Pursuing pleasure from any substance, or with any available person, no doubt holds some rewards; but in my opinion, placing limitations on where I seek pleasure gives me greater pleasure in the long run.

Water that is dammed up and channeled can be put to great use. Its flow can be controlled, and it can serve many purposes, and many people. Water that is allowed to flow whenever and wherever it can go may do some good, but it can also cause great destruction, and its full potential as a productive force cannot be realized.

Boundaries set me free. Without boundaries I might be led this way and that in pursuit of whatever pleasant feeling that I could find. By establishing boundaries, such as limiting myself to a romantic relationship with just one woman, and not using recreational drugs, I am free to direct greater energy to projects that have more value than just momentary gratification.

A reflection space is an area set up with one or more items to help its owner, or others, focus the mind on a certain subject.

Some religions use reflection spaces called shrines to instill religious feelings in the people viewing the shrine. In Islam, the call to prayer five times a day serves the same purpose.

Some parents set up reflection spaces with photos of their children and their grandchildren. Some people set them up to remind them of loved ones who have passed away. Some fans set up reflection spaces for the person or group that they follow.

A reflection space can be set up for anything on which one wants to focus.

A reflection space can be set up anywhere that its creator has a right to put things.

They can be set up in public places, in private residences, on walls, on mantel pieces, on tables, in closets, behind automobile sun visors, in lockers, in desk drawers, or just about anywhere else.

Small areas with no alternative views are generally the ideal places. Uncovered windows and open doors invite the attention to wander.

Sometimes I use the desktop of my computer screen for a reflection space.

To remind myself to seek wisdom and to practice kindness, at one time I had links to the Prayer of Francis of Assisi, the Tao Te Ching, the Analects of Confucius, the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Sermon on the Mount*, the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and the Dhammapada.

Another time I only had the text of the Prayer of Francis of Assisi on the desktop.

On my computer desktop at work I have a photo of my children because that's what I like to remember between tasks, and at the beginning and at the end of each day.

**The Gospel According to Matthew*, Chapters 5 through 7, inclusive

If wisdom is the knowledge of how to live my life to my best advantage, what is to my best advantage?

Based on what I have seen so far, and always subject to future reevaluation, I believe that it is to my best advantage to be patient and humble; to learn to consciously choose my state of mind; to use violence only as a last resort; to expand my capacity for love; to always be honest with myself, and to be honest with others without being rude.

My interpretation of my experience also reinforces my belief that I need to continue seeking wisdom, and practicing kindness.

Actions have consequences. Those consequences are not always known, especially when the actions involve other people. The one thing that is known is that once something is done, it can't be undone. Sometimes the effect of an action can be undone, but never the action.

In order to minimize my mistakes I want to develop a greater tendency to stop and think before acting, at least to the degree that prudence allows. Some decisions have to be made immediately due to the nature of the circumstances, such as when driving a vehicle, or in an emergency. When there is time to reflect on the possible consequences of an action, then I want to form the habit of taking the necessary time to think before acting.

Human beings are animals. I believe it is impossible to understand ourselves and our place in this world without taking into account this key fact.

Understanding that I am an animal does not take away from my enjoyment of life. Although I seem to be the result of natural processes, the pleasure I receive from the things I enjoy is no less pleasant.

We are not purely rational creatures. We are largely impulse driven, although we are also capable of moments of logic and creativity. Over time a lot of small advances have resulted in us being where we are today. It was only a few thousand years ago that most people were either nomads following animal herds, or were gatherers subsisting on what nature provided without human cultivation. There was no indication that any of us would one day be able to travel through outer space, or create beautiful symphonies.

Some would say that we are all sinners, but I would say that we have all allowed selfish impulses to govern us at various times. We have often chosen not to find the strength to resist, even when we felt that we should have restrained ourselves.

I am not yet the person that I want to be. I am a work in progress, and I may never be finished. Death will one day put an end to my work (if not forever, then at least for this life), but I expect to keep sculpting my character until I can do so no longer.

Although I want to shape my character in ways that I feel are improvements, I don't anticipate reaching the highest levels of mental mastery, or of love. If a lifetime were a thousand years and I could do everything I wanted to do and then reach those levels, then maybe I would.

However, I have more attachments than I anticipate ever releasing.

There are things that I believe are possible but that I have not yet achieved. The fact that I have not yet achieved them in no way indicates that they can't be done. A toddler has to have the dream to walk, and the determination to fulfill that dream, before he can walk.

It may be that I won't succeed, but even that won't mean that I couldn't have succeeded if I'd had a little more determination.

Until I have a good reason to believe that I can't do something, I'm going to believe that I can.

I don't claim that the way that I want to shape my life is the way that everyone else should shape theirs. Each person must make that decision for him or her self.

My belief is that neither my philosophy, nor anyone else's, should be accepted on faith. I think that everyone should thoughtfully examine the points of view that they encounter, and decide for themselves what seems to be right. I do not recommend surrendering the right to think for oneself.

To anyone who reads this:

If you are fortunate, then your passage through life will be one of continued discovery, and you will find answers beyond every horizon, along with a whole new set of questions.

I wish you well.