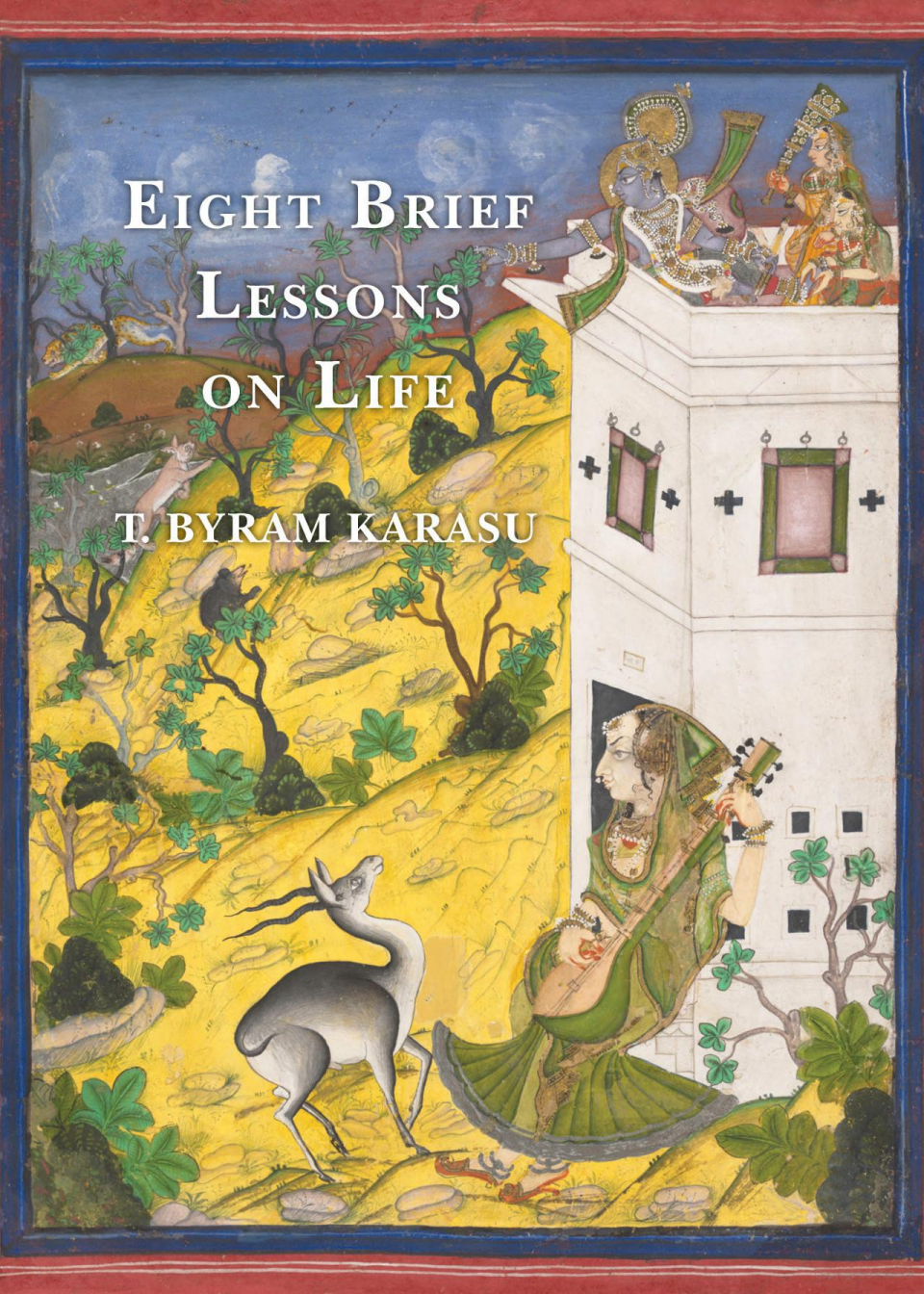
Eight Brief Lessons on Life

T. Byram Karasu



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Contents

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Introduction

Uncommon Common Sense

There was once an old country priest who had listened to his parishioners' confessions for many decades. This priest summed up what he had learned about human nature in two statements: "First of all, people are much more unhappy than one thinks. . . and second, there is no such thing as a grown-up person."[1] Poignantly, the priest never defined happiness nor did he explain what he meant by "grown-up," but the implication is that these two concepts are somehow related, if not the same: the path to happiness goes by way of being grown-up.

While unhappiness is easy to define, happiness is not definable *a priori*. We know that obsessively focusing on attaining happiness not only fails to bring it about but leads to people's missing their own presence. "Grown-up" is also not definable because it is not a fixed state; there are degrees of being grown-up. Growing-up is an improvisational process. In fact, we all "grow-up" or "not," while living. We make our way by going, but we should not be like Tristan, who travelled on the sea without oar or rudder, making his way by playing his harp. We must at least know our destination, i.e., adulthood, even though we may not know how to get there.

Our fundamental essence requires organizing our mind into a cohesive narrative of self. We learn by osmosis and by transmuted internalizations from our families, schools, and society that inundate us with information, but not necessarily with knowledge, and leave us often at certain stages of an adult developmental arrest. Life's maturational knowledge is gained through experiences, especially what we do with these experiences, and how we struggle to come up with answers to some basic questions: Who am I? Or even, am I? How best to live or even why to live? Am I well-grounded or even, half-glued? What is the essence of love, marriage, work, religion? What are the principles of living and dying? These are not merely esoteric questions that just generate a philosophical dysphoria. They are essential in finding remedies for an inner disquietude that we all experience and in searching to establish harmony within ourselves. "Aldous Huxley referred to this as the 'perennial philosophy,' that is, the philosophy that remains the same at all times, in all places under all circumstances and for all people."[2]

As human beings, we are unique and universal. In Broadway lingo, plays don't change; only actors do. Actors (people) are unique and plays (lives) are universal. We all experience immediate or time- released traumas; we all participate in real and subjective impasses; we all suffer from anxiety resulting from various forms of real or anticipatory disruptions; we all get depressed from actual and imaginary losses. All human activities, joys, sorrows, pain, pleasure, desires, fears, etc. mirror each other in their basic elements. In the Jungian sense, we humans have irreducible psychological templates. We are not always sure of what it is that we are really looking for, but we know all the time that we haven't

found it yet. Spira expressed this nameless, formless, barely discernible feeling, "There is a dissatisfaction in me, but I am not sure exactly what I am dissatisfied with. There is a longing in me, but I am not sure what I am longing for."[3] At other times, we feel we are almost there, but never there. Like the mythological Tantalus[4], we are condemned to reach yearningly for that so-near fruit that recedes anew with each fresh attendant grasp.

We all have indistinct outlines of our life's trajectory; we all kind of fiddle with life. As we grow up, we have to make sense of our lives. We need to attend to the business of getting a grip on life, and our place in it. We need to formulate a much clearer guiding principle of our existence and learn the art of living. These principles need not be expressed *via negativa*. "How much nonsense humans will suffer for the sake of making sense of their lives,"[5] says Benjamin Moser.

Like Jung, Rupert Spira asks the ultimate questions: "'Is there any element of subjective experience that is universal or shared by all?' or 'If the mind only ever knows its own contents, is there any element of the mind's knowledge or experience that is common to all minds?' That knowledge alone can qualify as absolute truth and, therefore that knowledge alone can serve as the basis of a unified humanity."[6]

Only in such an accumulated knowledge base, can we make sense of our lives and find positive guideposts. *Eight Brief Lessons* provides these guideposts. Its lessons evolve from a highly condensed distillation of thousands of years of wisdom—*uncommon common sense*. This is not just a means to virtue; it is also a means to joyfulness. It provides a template for the essence of being, becoming a grown-up, and living a joyful and successful life.

All advice-givers commit some form of fallacy and are not immune from inherently self-limiting conjectures. With full awareness of that, am I still presenting myself as a "know it all," a *man of wisdom*? Samuel Johnson reportedly once said that he was accused of being a wise man, 'All I can tell you, I have good judgment; how does one have good judgment? By having lots of experiences. And how does one get lots of experiences? By not having good judgment.'

Now, in my eighties, I have also had "lots of experiences," and, as told about graduates of French Haute Ecole, "I know everything and nothing else."

NOTES

1. André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 1.
2. Rupert Spira, *The Nature of Consciousness Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter* (Oxford: Sahaja Publications, 2017), 4.
3. Rupert Spira, *The Nature of Consciousness Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter*, 62.
4. Thomas Bulfinch, *Bullfinch's Mythology* (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 223.
5. Benjamin Moser, "Patriarch and Pariah," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 6, 2014: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/books/review/american-crucifixion-by-alex-beam.html.
6. Rupert Spira, *The Nature of Consciousness Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter*, 9.

Lesson One

Love

Live a "felt" life, and be alive

The first lesson is love: in fact, it could have been the only lesson. Without love, the rest of the lessons are irrelevant.

There are many forms of love and all of them are magical. There is loyalty-sustained and imprinted filial love for family members. There is affection-sustained friendship love that entails a fondness and appreciation of another. There is physical desire-sustained erotic love and its most exalted version, romantic love. These four forms of love are "differentiated object" loves; they target a person or a group; they are specific and object-driven. Then there is spiritual love—the love of all beings. Spiritual love is undifferentiated; it targets no one and everyone. It is just love. Buddha says that ultimate love is love with no object.[1]

Love in all its variations is a universal phenomenon; it is the primary organizer of mind and a marrow of life that anchors all relationships. Victor Frankl, in his chapter on logotherapy in *Man's Search for Meaning* speaks of finding meaning in life "by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth and beauty… (and) last but not least, by experiencing another human being in

his very uniqueness—by loving him."[2] Love is the only way to grasp the innermost core of another being; it is also the only way to grasp our own core of being.

Romantic love—that raucous ascension, is the most popular and celebrated in all languages, races, and ages. It is associated with beauty, youthfulness, and fueled by the most powerful emotion: aching longing. Passionate love brings about an ever escalating endowment of the beloved, with denial of the self. What the Zen master says about the divine is almost true in passionate love: "In the existence of your love, I became non-existent."

Love is the pain of being truly alive. This pain in love is compounded with an equally powerful and agonizing sentiment: "to be longed for."[3] This longing to be longed for, of course, is beyond a lover's ability to bring about. You can neither demand, nor buy it. Love is not a substance that you give or take; it is not a tradable commodity. It is a felt referent, rather than a conceptual referent. If forced, it is a kind of "felt cognition." The only currency for passionate romantic love is passionate love itself. Such passion cannot be faked. In contrast to love itself, both intercourse and orgasm can be faked and/or can be artificially generated.

This passionate love is intensely associated with the pleasure bond. It is a poetic condensation of libidinal urges, wrapped in romantic camouflage. Its recipients project an unequalled hedonistic gloss. Ironically, actual sexual intercourse of lovers is utterly selfish and exigent; lovers are hardly interested in each other's subjective experiences, and that is what makes their lovemaking so powerful and satisfying. Even in the movies, lovemaking scenes are presented with such a mutual selfish urgency. The heightened excitement of the partner is what excites the other. Lovers rarely talk while having sexual intercourse, and rightly so,

for language preempts the experience. The more we are concerned about anything objective, especially about another, the less exciting sex gets. The famous behaviorist Skinner reportedly told the following vignette to an audience: Two behaviorists are making love; afterwards one asks the other one: "It was very good for you; how was it for me?"

Passionate love has no rules or guide books. It is *id-ridden* and thus generates many excesses: triangulated jealousies, social transgressions, destructive and self-destructive behaviors. What seems to be all that unfair, if not insane, to innocent onlookers is totally fair to those participants lost in the inner lawlessness of love. Passionate love is a death-daring attachment, an unconscious trap that only a rare lover can escape.

> In his book *A Legacy of the Heart*, Wayne Muller speaks of a monkey trap in Asia:
>
> First, a coconut is hollowed out and attached by a rope to a tree. Then, a small hole is made at the bottom of the coconut and some sweet food is placed inside. The hole in the bottom is just big enough for the monkey to slide his open hand into the coconut, but not big enough for a closed fist to pass through. The monkey smells the sweets, reaches in with his hand to grab it, and then, with the food clenched tightly in his fist, he is unable to withdraw it. The clenched fist cannot pass through the opening. When the hunters come, the monkey becomes frantic, but it cannot get away. There is nothing keeping the monkey captive except the force of his own attachment. All he has to do is open his hand, let go, and he is free. Even so, it is a rare monkey that manages to escape.[4]

After all is said and done, human beings are incomprehensible: it is more so for lovers. They are at their best and at their worst when

in love. William Godwin is at his best in his declaration of his love to Mary Wollstonecraft: "When I make love, it shall be with the eloquent tones of my voice, with dying accents, with speaking glances (through the glass of my spectacles), with all the witching of that irresistible, universal passion…When I make love, it shall be in a storm, as Jupiter made love to Semele, and turned her at once to a cinder."[5]

Passionate love is a sort of febrile agitation of mind, an aching lust spewing out from the biological furnace of the body and ransacking its habitation. It has all elements of delusion and impractical preoccupation with the lover, including her/his past to the exclusion of all other concerns; it tends to be ruthless and paranoid; it has an obsessive desire to possess the other person's past. Such engrossment is not satisfied with the love of the lover; puzzlingly, it aims at appropriation of the lover, if not his/her annihilation. Love even confounds the Bible: "There are [many] things which are too amazing for me, four which I don't understand: The way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maiden."[6]

The lowest order of love, sex, can be just for physical pleasure, within or without emotional connections. In comparison to passionate love, its rudiments of illusions dissolve in immediacy. The indulgence in sex with multiple partners is an impersonal and pathological quest of the self in others, as portrayed by Don Juan. Trachtenberg, in his book *The Casanova Complex*, writes that 18th century Casanova "made a virtual career of seducing women."[7] "To Casanova, every woman was a potential paramour," says Trachtenberg, and in his *Memoirs*, Casanova wrote, "I am neither tender nor gallant nor pathetic. I am passionate."

Such excesses thin the soul, leading to sexual incontinence and to moral relativity.

Sex is a physiological act, similar to other physiological functions of the body. In all animals, sex serves procreation. It is the same in humans, especially at the subcortical level of our brain. The evolution of the brain in humans, that is, its cortical development, however has added many other dimensions to sex: entertainment, anxiety reduction, power play, expression of aggression, emotional control of partner, a displacement of obsession, and frequently an alternate or substitute addiction. Such sex interferes with the growth of love, so much that its roots remain weak and are easily torn up.

The pleasure aspect of sex is best experienced in passionate love wherein a mutual longing transforms lovers into an ecstatic state of abandon. Frequently such passionate love ends by its loss: either when one of the lovers loses the intensity and/or its inter-cognitive resonance of their love, or when one becomes too clingy with a disintegrating anxiety of losing the lover. That is one of the most serious mistakes in emotional life. You lose what you cling to, and not just in love. Everyone needs to study the art of letting go.

It is difficult to sustain passionate love partly because such an exaltation of another demands mystery of and a psychological unfamiliarity with the lover. Any shedding light on the lover will dissolve the mystery and will dissipate that boundless ecstasy. What is desired cannot be all and always so desirable. What we really love is how we feel when in love. That is, we love our desire and not what is desired.

Sex researchers identify the half-life of passion at the four-year mark.[8] "Love begins as a sonnet, but it eventually turns into a grocery list," says Joel Achenbach in "Homeward Bound."

"Therefore, you need someone with whom you can go to the supermarket."[9] In passionate love, lovers with uncanny erotic intelligence gaze at each other; for it to survive they need to look out and together in the same direction. They need to cultivate the same unforced, natural emotional intimacy to save the relationship from the decline of sexual attraction and passion. It may take about two years for such an emotional intimacy and affectionate love to develop between lovers, provided that the couple remains physically close and sexually reciprocative.[10]

While passionate love is also a power and control struggle (wherein who loves less is the more powerful), the opposite is true in affectionate love, wherein the stronger partner subordinates. Affectionate love translates poetry into prose. Affectionate love is primarily asexual; the deeper it gets, the more it desexualizes the relationship. That doesn't mean that affectionate couples don't have sex; they have "good-enough sex." But that sex is less a longing for ecstatic merging than for satisfying physical and psychological needs for self and/or for the partner—another expression of caring.

Affectionate love is a soft descent; it has a filial origin. It is where we all begin and end up in our relationships, if we are so fortunate. This is the love that is felt most deeply and enduringly when it is lost. Affectionate love is our emotional home, our anxiety-reducing sanctuary; in contrast to the *fortissimo* of passionate love, affectionate love is expressed *pianissimo*, noiselessly. It is with our mothers (or a maternal person) that we first experience that affectionate love. Obviously, the fetus is a part of the mother, who continues to experience the child as her extension even after the birth. The love of the mother for her child isn't the love of someone else; it is like the love of the self. A child, if so loved,

feels emotionally attuned to, without any need for reciprocation. A mother knows the inner life of the child intuitively and attends to its needs while often muting her own. A person's well-glued, coherent "sense of self" develops within such a context. In all our lives we carry a mix of highly pixelated memories of this early childhood feeling and try to bring them into focus in our contemporary relationships. In that sense, love is our relentless search for completion of our primordial selves—a healthy yearning, not like the pathological quest of the self in others.

Our self continues to be formed and cultivated in relational contexts, no matter how indifferent we may seem to be. Even the primitive disinterestedness of cats plays out within complex relationships. The original relational context—parental mirroring and shaping—eventually gives way to a peer relationship: lovers, spouses, and especially friends.

While all other relations are time-limited, real friendship with time gets only deeper and more meaningful. Epicurus considered friendship absolutely necessary provided that it has no utilitarian impositions. Friendship brings a state of lucidity, if it is among the self-sufficient who are reliant on each other but not dependent. Such a friend is an alternate self.

A good friend, a really good friend, is our first affectionate relationship outside the family. It is the second imprinting phase in our lives. We learn many things from friends that we cannot learn from our parents. Many other qualities such as virtue and loyalty get reinforced within good and healthy friendships. Rewording Primo Levi, each of us bears the imprint of friends we met along the way and carries their traces.[11]

The master of neoclassical English poetry, Alexander Pope, had these words around the time of his death, according to Samuel

Johnson's biography of Pope: "There is nothing that is meritorious but virtue and friendship; and indeed, friendship itself is only part of virtue."[12]

We all have a number of associates, colleagues, and acquaintances, but a few real friends.

A friend is someone with whom we can be totally transparent; we may be criticized, even laughed at, but never diminished or rejected. We are accepted as we are, even though certain changes may be wished for. Actually, the only way to bring about desired changes is to accept that person as is.

Acquaintances with various degrees of intimacy are the most common form of a relationship. Such relationships are maintained by mutual interests, such as through businesses, jobs, or by common interests in social life. These relationships tend to have a secondary agenda. We should not expect total loyalty or permanency from such agenda-based relationships. There is a French peasant saying: "Cow dies, partnership ends." Expecting fallibility from such relations is less likely to create disappointments. Genuine loyalty is like genuine love; it is not transactional.

In contrast to passionate love, affectionate love is less selective. Its needs being met are as important as who meets them. Affectionate love is not exclusive: if you can love one person, you can love many. Except if you choose one as your "soulmate." "Soulmateness" is a highly distilled form of affectionate love between two, commonly unrelated people. Soulmates cross their individual boundaries; they resonate with each other cognitively and emotionally in perfect harmony, as if they are extensions of each other. This is not a pathological symbiosis: it is the most exclusive club, difficult to find, and almost impossible to join. You may search but searching may not be the best way of finding

a soulmate. Cultivation of condensed empathy for others eventually finds its reciprocating target. Nietzsche says "From love of man one occasionally embraces someone in random,"[13] provided that these two highly empathetic beings spend a great deal of time being together and cheer each other through crises and adversities.

Affectionate love gently lifts our spirit, for it is not jealous, impatient, or intense; it is kind, optimistic, and non-judgmental. "Love is patient" says the Bible.[14] Affectionate love is healthy love. It is not obsessive, hysterical, or possessive; it respects privacy, and the space and separateness of the other person. Affectionate love is to say, "I am sorry."

Existence is inherently dissatisfying due to its non-permanency. Love in all its forms carries a sense of permanency, real or illusionary. As such, it makes life worth living and gives an overriding meaning to all life's lesser meanings. Only by giving and receiving love can we live a "felt life." Without love, we are lifeless.

> The mind has a thousand eyes. And the heart but one;
> Yet the light of a whole life dies.
> When love is done.[15]

In an ascending ladder, all love, from animalistic carnal lust, where tyranny of senses dictates, to divine madness of passionate love, from cognitive emotional love of friends and family members, to Plato's attainment of wisdom, (the seed of theological visions), makes life worth living. Lovelessness is radical aloneness. A lover partakes of the beloved. The more you love, the more you will be connected to others but more importantly to yourself. But first, you must love yourself—a benign healthy self-love—only then can you love others.

Socrates believed that the yearning for love is essentially about possession of goodness and beauty. Plato qualified that acquisition by saying that it must be permanent. Both philosophers were saying that we all are yearning and searching for immortality in the forms of goodness and in the beauty of love. In Plato's *Republic* (Book VI), Socrates and his companions discuss the importance of beauty, "Do you think that the possession of all other things is of any value if we do not possess the good? Or knowledge of all other things if we have no knowledge of beauty and goodness?"[16] They set the stage for the next concept, spiritual love. All love is good and beautiful, but it is only perfected when the loved object is perceived within an ever-enlarging context—spiritual love. Such love unfolds from loving a specific object towards loving an all-encompassing context itself.

Spiritual love is not *Agape*—God's love. The love of God is irreducible—axiomatic, belonging to an apodictic category of self-evidency. Love without an object, i.e., spiritual love, of course, partakes in love of God as well. It is a different kind of self-seeking from other loves, for it seeks equanimity in goodness, benevolence in goodwill. Objectless love is not divine love. It is not self-sacrificing concern for the fallen. It is selfless, but not sacrificial; it is a compassionate presence in the world but not actively engaged in its expressions. It demands neither obedience, compliance nor exaltation. It is as it is.

Both love with object and love without object are involuntary. But the love of object (person, thing) is self-affirming; it is utilitarian, particular and reluctantly accepts substitutes. Love without object is self-muting, non-utilitarian, non-particular and welcomes all substitutes as originals.

In object love, love is expressed from the lover. In objectless love, love flows through the person, effortlessly. Object loves are dualistic: i.e. I love you or it. There is the loving subject and the loved object. Dualistic love is an important stage in the development of the self. Even the love of God is dualistic in the early stages of mind that conceptualizes God as a separate being rather than as its absoluteness. Objectless love is monistic: there is no separate I, you or it. We are all one—a transcending stage of spirituality wherein God and "you" are a single entity.

A logical mind would be hard pressed to accept all this objectless love—spiritual love. In fact any kind of love may not seem logical: a fantasy of platonic writers and poets. But it is real, and in fact, neuroscience has advanced to the level of pointing to a biological location of love—dopamine intoxication—in the brain's nucleus accumbens.

Object love is an epiphenomenal entity, defined by human interactions. Objectless love—spiritual love—is the hardest to define. It doesn't lend easily to descriptive, rational language. This love, the ultimate love, wants nothing for itself and rewording spiritual teacher Francis Lucille, it is benevolent indifference to itself. It is conceptually an irrational and epistemologically imprecise, if not null, proposition. But if you witness the sun shining and the rain descending upon all, you may consider the possibility of a serene existence where you may be infused within a seemingly infinite love. You'll be awakened, like Buddha, in a minor key. Incidentally Buddha means "one who is awake."

A sudden enlightenment rarely occurs in a quantum leap; it commonly arrives in drawn-out attenuated forms. You'll begin to see the hidden beauty and goodness in other beings and things and

experience, even if only flickering hints, a joyful resolve in your own benevolence.

In his book, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard tells the parable of two artists: one artist travels the world and cannot find any face with "such perfection of beauty" that he wanted to paint. The other artist, who stays within his "little circle of men," says, "…I have not found a face so insignificant or so full of faults that I still could not discern in it a more beautiful side and discover something glorious." How sad it would be, continues Kierkegaard, if the demands of love "make it evident that none of us is worth loving, (but) instead…(to be) able to find some lovableness in all of us…"[17]

It is said that love is blind because it has a better sight. Spiritual love has the ultimate sight: the love that permeates everything and for no reason. Spiritual love is a state of mind, a way of being. It negates all objective counterpoints.

NOTES

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14. 1 Corinthians 13:4.

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16. Plato, *Republic,* Book VI: 190–223, trans. Benjamin Jowett. With an Introduction and Notes by Elizabeth Watson Scharffenberger George Stade Editorial Director, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 214.

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Lesson Two

Work

Synchronize yourself with your work, and be successful

Our work is one of the defining characteristics of who we are, how we relate to the world, and how we relate to ourselves. "The love that goes to your work comes back as self-love"[1] says Thomas Moore. Work is one of our prisms. For Freud, at least as Erikson relates, happiness is reached simply by "*Arbeiten und Lieben*" ("to work and to love")[2]. The Sufis say work is faith—dip your bread in your sweat. Work is *liber mundi*, a "book of the world," say Catholic monks—work is life literacy. "*Laborare est orare* (Work is worship)."[3] But they all imply reasonably successful work. Occasional failures are fine, if not desirable, but they do not consider chronic failures as the source of happiness.

There may be a multiplicity of influences, but success at work primarily depends on whether you love what you are doing. The Bengali poet Rabinandrath Tagore says "I grew tired of the road when it took me here and there. I married the road in love when it took me Everywhere."[4] Furthermore, work must be suitable for your skills and knowledge—a kind of dwelling in your element. All work demands certain basic skills; there is really no such

thing as "unskilled labor." A young construction worker must know how to walk on steel beams. Computer literacy is expected in most jobs, even from a beginner. Of course, every expert was once a novice, and expertise for a specific skill may require on-the-job learning.

There is also the question of temperament. Unfortunately, people sometimes choose their careers for certain prestige, power, and money, and often independent of their suitability for those jobs. Whether your brain is lateralized to right or left and whether your corpus callosum is firing well in both directions are important to know. Do you have a digital mind that employs discrete bits or an analogue one that operates on continuous linearity?

Of course, you should cultivate aspirations, but you must know the basic rules of your aspired career. For example, in music, sound and structure require adherence to an exactness of 1/3 of a second (e.g. 16 notes with mm-60). Then, and only then you can hum. We cannot all be musicians or cannot be innately suitable for careers like nursing or sales. While certain empathy for suffering is desirable for nurses, facile encounters with strangers are necessary for salesmanship. You must know your skills and potentials and build on them. That is not to say you cannot be trained for those dispositions, but that will be like learning a second language—it is hard and rarely fluent.

We need to succeed somehow, to be competent at something, to be a master at even some minor skills in order to feel good about ourselves. Our self-esteem is highly dependent on feeling relevant, needed, valued and appreciated. That requires, of course, earning our merit without stagnation. All other compensations will follow once merit is earned. Any mastery is a lifelong ap-

neurotic or pseudo-neurotic people can even be self-destructive. It is that Medea phenomenon, i.e., a person can act against her better judgment. You need to recover from your imprinted conflicts and deficits, mute your negative noises from within and learn to sing positive, modest and benign, self-loving cheerful songs; but do not join a cult of self.

Independent of professional skills and dispositions, there are some generic and cultivatable psychosocial skills that contribute to any success. For example, listen, and listen attentively. In an old fable, a man spends days climbing to the top of a mountain where the Zen master lived. Finally, when he was allowed to be in the master's presence, the man asked: "Master, I have been on the road for weeks to see you and ask for some wisdoms of life." Master said: "Attention." The man, disappointed, asks, "Is that it? Can you say something more or just elaborate?" Master replied: "Attention, attention."

Whatever the job, you must be fully immersed and absorbed in it. You need to remain in the present, live in the "no-time," when children are playing for leisure and artists are having singular concentration for work. You need to focus, filter, reflect, and be responsive to minimum cues and respond accordingly. Do not speak more clearly than you think, and when you speak remain relevant and within the context. Conversational postulates demand that what you say has to be understandable even if you are a poet, and what you say has to have a clear relation to what the other person has just said. Dialectical relations are not linear, but progressively and cumulatively spiral, mediated by both directions.

> Language is a tool of communication. In its highly elaborate forms, it tends to become the source of miscommunication. The

> first principle of communication is to respond to the other person's questions. Do not be self-referential. The Japanese proverb says, "You must send the message whether received or not." There is, however, another saying: "It is not enough to aim; you must also hit the target."[8]

Whatever we say is spoken representation of events, concepts, things, etc. It is easily misunderstood, at times preemptively and wrongly. Pick up minimum cues and calibrate a subtle latency of response. Some talk too much and say nothing just as some of our politicians, or worse, generate unnecessary predicaments. It is said that one can seldom listen his way into trouble. You can accomplish much just by being quiet, pleasant and agreeable. A man's *gravitas* emanates from the density of the unspoken. Be assertive but not aggressive and never transgressive. Taoism emphasizes strength in yielding. Sometimes you need to yield to overcome. Never complain or blame. The litany is an inner pollution. It is in the Bible: Do all things without murmurings and disputings.[9] Never accuse others. There is a Zen saying: When a man points a finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at himself. Try it, to help with your pre-reflective awareness.

Success comes by functioning as if everything depends on you; by having mini goals, by generating an energy of positive priming and leaning forward wholeheartedly. But do not become a zealot—a psychological disorder of the inexperienced. *Meden agan*—nothing in excess, is engraved on the Temple of Apollo.

You must patiently keep seeding even though nothing seems to be growing; suddenly those seeds will sprout. God didn't make the world in one day (the exact time lapse is seven!). You need to be steady, resilient, and patient. Drops also fill the pot. Says

Buddha: When you dig a well, there is no sign of water until you reach it, only rocks and dirt to move out of the way. Once you have removed enough of them, the water will start flowing.

You should not try to outdo others, but rather just outdo yourself. Do not seek an ego orgasm. Establish and present an inner stability; never generate crises. For some unfortunate people, the only sense of cohesiveness they attain is by identification with chaos. Be aware of such dysfunctional ways of relating.

Work in synchrony with others. You may hear a different drummer, but still keep the band in sight. You need to synchronize with the band (your job); the band will not synchronize with you. If there is no synchrony between the two, then you need to change either the job or yourself. There is an in old Jewish saying: if you cannot change the world, change yourself.

Realistic self-assessment is said to be a sellout, but commonly people tend to overestimate themselves and with a neurotic conviction and undervalue their assigned roles. We see that mostly in the offspring of wealthy parents who have Janusian grandiosity and low self-esteem. They are helicopter children, dropped at the mountaintop. They have to come down first and then learn how to walk up the mountain. Otherwise they'll end up being victims of their fortunes.

Do not expect work to meet all of your hopes and aspirations. As far as a job is concerned, there is no utopia. In fact, the word utopia is from ancient Greek *outopos*, meaning "no place."

You should not dismiss an assignment because it is below your skillset or because it is "meaningless" or "uninteresting." Very few things in life are inherently meaningful and interesting. Most things do become interesting once we get interested in them. The meaning of anything reveals itself only to those who are committed.

There is a story of a traveler who stops by a construction site and watches four workers in each corner breaking massive stones with enormous hammers. The traveler asks the first worker "What are you doing?" The man doesn't answer; he doesn't even lift his head to look up. The second man answers angrily "I prepare these damned mortars, a job suitable for hard labor prisoners!" The traveler approaches the third man with the same question. He looks content. "This is a really hard job" he says, "but it pays well, and I need to support my large family." The fourth man looks more serene; he dusts himself off, "Yes, sir, we are building a church." While all four men are doing the same job, their attitudes are so different. The first man who doesn't even bother to answer the traveler's question, is indifferent—a source of aloneness. The second man is breaking stones without any purpose or meaning—a source of anger and unhappiness. The third person has a limited purpose—a source of contentment. The fourth person is meaningfully engaged and identified with the project—a source of joyfulness.

Incidentally, the importance of even a humble "purpose" should not be underestimated. You cannot miss the inner glow of purposeful. They are the people who may not get up every morning with unbridled enthusiasm, but they get up.

The third man's explanation of why he has been doing that hard work is in some ways more functionally meaningful than an overendowed "abstract meaning in life." Looking for abstract meaning is an intellectual exercise that ends up in a meaningless and depressive impasse. The fruitlessness of such a search is best portrayed by Samuel Beckett's wife's question when he, looking full of despair, came home after a day's work: "No meaning again today, dear?"[10]

Purpose and meaning are byproducts of engagement in what one does—one's work, provided that the job is doable. No matter whether it is "meaning-endowed," the work must be doable by

some realistic judgment. You don't want to face the predicament of the Norse God Thor, who tried to drain a goblet only to discover that it was connected with the sea.

You should not be excessively cautious or worry about making mistakes. The Bible says "He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap."[11] Like in a chess game, in work, if not in life, mistakes are all there to be made, and you will make them. It is commonly recognized that errors and mistakes are the best teachers. But having too many teachers becomes boring! Most mistakes are related not to actions but to not anticipating the wake that they leave behind. They can be quite painful. Especially self-made calamities are difficult to survive. Independent and in spite of your best efforts, personal and professional failures may still occur. You need to be prepared to contain your losses, not to avoid painful feeling. Grief is a healing feeling. In fact, you may better by feeling worse.

Failure's most damaging effect is demoralization. Even the previously most self-confident and intelligent person, all of a sudden will feel less so, in fact, inadequate and helpless. Demoralization lowers motivation and distorts the perceptions of the person who sees even ordinary tasks of life, never mind the larger goals, as utterly insurmountable.

Eventually distorted perceptions contort the cognitive and executive skills of a person and leads him/her to draw incorrect, if not self-destructive, conclusions. Common incorrect conclusions are:

1. Being the only one who failed.
2. I am done; I can never recover.
3. I'll keep failing.
4. I am suffering; I cannot think about recovery right now—psychological inertia.

not only incredible perseverance but also an almost religious belief in themselves and their engagements.

Almost all significant individuals in the Bible experience horrific failures prior to their successes. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers because of his ambitions, even though they were only expressed in his dreams. Long before Freud, it was known that dreams don't lie. In Egypt, Joseph offended the powerful husband of a beautiful lady, for being subjected to her interest, and he was jailed. Job's ordeal is well-known. He failed and suffered spectacularly. Failures of Joseph and Job, especially Job, seem to stem from without. In the Bible there are also failures from within which are associated with the transgressive behavior of the individuals. David is the best example; he sexually abused Bathsheba and had her husband killed; he ignored his son's Ammon's rape of his half-sister. Peter, Gideon, and many others all made mistakes; they all had their own failures, and they all recovered.

The Bible attributes their recovery and ultimate successes to their work ethics, their loyalty, steadfastness, and their perseverance. They believed in their causes and their own identity.

The Bible is a very good textbook of psychology. Even the solutions presented in the Bible as to how to recover from failings, i.e., even hitting rock bottom, is the essence of all contemporary advice. For example, "Shake off the dust that is under your feet."[12] Rock bottom is the most solid foundation. Apostle Paul tells how he copes without lingering too long on past failures or problems: "One thing I do: forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before."[13]

The 4th incorrect conclusion that the brain makes, is "I am suffering; I cannot think of recovery right now." Yes, mistakes

and failures are painful. Depending on their nature, they can be devastating. Some may come with public humiliations, others with personal guilt, regrets, and some others with private deprivation, or divorces, all of which inflict enormous damage. But this is the worst possible time for psychological inertia, or the worst time to throw in the proverbial towel. Boxing coaches urge boxers to keep fighting and not to pay attention to the audience. We tend to resonate with the reaction of others to our failure, more than we do from having failed.

So, what to do? First, set a time limit on self-pity and self-flagellation. Let's say a month, but not 24/7. You must take regular time off from wallowing. During this self-confrontation time, you must call it what it is and be totally self-transparent. No denial, no blaming others, no sugar-coating. You must look at the mistake squarely; what exactly happened, why it happened, what was my contribution, what was the contribution of others, and what contributions were indirectly my fault? Of course, there may be external contributions to failure that are totally out of our control, whereby we are simply a victim of circumstances.

At times, external contributions are related to mis-calibration on the trust/mistrust spectrum. There is a story of the Prophet Mohammed who was one day taking a stroll when he noticed that a Bedouin was leaving his camel untied, while heading towards the market. The Prophet asked him, "Why are you not concerned that your camel may just wander off while you are gone?' The Bedouin replied "I put my trust in Allah." The Prophet pulled the man toward him and whispered into his ear "Tie your camel first, then put your trust in Allah."[14] Although neither excessive suspicion, nor excessive trust is adaptive, and you may be better off to tie your camel.

The second step is setting down a plan to recovery. There is always a way out or a way through. You'll need to reframe the failure as an experience, like any other. A failure is rarely a life or death drama. Failure is supposed to be a teacher, not an undertaker. You must draw the line at your losses, whether physical, financial, or emotional. More importantly do not compound failure with another mistake in the process of trying to undo it. Casinos rely on gamblers' being primed to make even riskier bets to recover their losses, only to lose their shirts. The temptation to undo the mistake quickly without considering its potential consequences may compound the problem. Two wrongs don't make a right.

Rarely a single or a few mistakes may lead to major failures. In fact we usually fail in life at simply minor things. These mistakes usually have rigid boundaries, and they tend to be self-corrective. They become problematic if they are repetitive. It is curious that some people tend to repeat their mistakes. One would think that it should be enough to taste one drop of the sea to know that it is salty. It is in the Bible "As a dog that returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his folly."[15] Making an unwanted approach to a colleague can be an interpersonal mistake, but repeating it is a pattern of behavior, that reflects some self-defining psychological aberration. We are what we repeatedly do, says Aristotle. While incalcitrant transgressions invite punishment, isolated personal mistakes—like a gambler's fallacy—need psychological help. The punishment for such personal mistakes is included in the mistake itself.

Wisdom of learning from mistakes is inconvertible, yet people take painstaking efforts to remain loyal to their mistakes. This is called "letting failure go to one's head." They perversely enjoy *capitis diminutio*—with a negative exuberance—and, in fact, have a certain subversive glee of satisfaction; in failing, it is like:

"I am a failure, I don't have to fail anymore." Roger Darlington once told the story of the late Rev. John King, who apparently talked about his days in San Quentin penitentiary with a kind of relief and contentment. He no longer had to be a "Reverend," but simply a prisoner.

To fail is to be human. The Bible reads: "Man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble."[16] That means all of us. The only man who never made a mistake, says Theodore Roosevelt, is the man who never does anything.[17] That would be a meta-mistake.

No matter what field you are in, you must prepare yourself for potential failures. In fact, you can practice failing in small doses to gain some psychological immunity against larger and real ones. Very rarely is one's failure fatal. Short of that, a relative, if not full recovery, is the norm, ranging from adaptation to the new reality to even greater successes. Your real worth will remain unchanged even after a failure of public consequences. Once, when a motivational speaker, holding up a $100 bill, asked the audience who would like to have it, all hands went up. Then, he threw the bill on the floor and stomped on it with his dirty shoes. The speaker picked up the crumpled and soiled bill and asked the audience: "Now who would like to have this?" Again, all hands went up!

Young pilots are told at their first class that there are 16 ways to fall from the sky. As in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* wherein the culprit turns out to be the detective, all except for one relate to human errors. If you failed no matter what field you are in, it is 1/16 times as likely that it is related to your own mistake. There is a spectrum of personal mistakes. Common ones are operational i.e. risky deviation from the norm, careless inattention—auto-piloting—not knowing the subject well, and not considering

consequences of your actions. Then, there are failures associated with the darker and deeper flaws of a person: a pathological sense of invincibility, invulnerability, infallibility and a sense of immunity. There is a difference between a semi-delusional belief in a cause and self-delusion.

Failures related to personal flaws are abject failures. We see those "falling heroes" in financial, sexual, and political arenas. They are tragic events. Such individuals would be better not to be isolated solo players. They would be better off to buttress themselves by working with a team. Team work, besides being a protective device, is a source of great successes. Short of poets, writers, and other creative people who are in fact in need of isolation, most will benefit in many ways from working with a team, especially if one is the leader—the lead goose. On his website, Roger Darlington relates the following story:

> Next autumn, when you see geese heading south for the winter, flying in a "V" formation, you might consider what science has discovered as to why they fly that way. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.
>
> When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front. [18]

Concrete recovery from failure must start independently from any psychological reactions by preparing a massive action plan. Think of a scenario where you fell from a paddleboat into a lake. Now, there is nothing else to feel, to think or to do except to get back to the boat, or swim to a shore. Real failure is not having failed, but how you react to it—not getting back to the boat.

Luxembourg), where dancers advance 3 steps forward and 2 steps backward in their processions.[20] We all move forward stumbling and occasionally tripping and falling. If so, do not be afraid of hitting the bottom hard with optimistic toughness. That is the fastest way to come back to the surface. Ultimate success is recovering from a failure, and taking life on, again.

NOTES

1. Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper-Perennial), 187.
2. Sigmund Freud, quoted in Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), 96.
3. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (Boston: Standard Publishing Company, 1898), 198.
4. Rabindranath Tagor as quoted by Deepak Chopra in Rupert Spira, *The Nature of Consciousness: Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter* (Oxford: Sahaja Publications, 2017), xi.
5. Genesis 1:31.
6. 2 Corinthians 12:9.
7. Anthony de Mello, *Heart of the Enlightened: A Book of Story Meditations* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 75.
8. Sylvia R. Karasu and T. Byram Karasu, *The Art of Marriage Maintenance* (New York: Jason Aronson, 2005), 89.
9. Philippians 2:14.
10. John Gardner, *Conversations with John Gardner* ed. Allan Chavkin (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990), 168.
11. Ecclesiastes 11:4.
12. Mark 6:11.
13. Philippians 3:13.

The old monk said, "Because it is there." The reason we belong is because we are here, and we belong to religion because it is also here.

We all need moorings in a communal matrix, outside of our families. Jobs, associations, clubs and other organizations provide variant matrixes for present-time engagements. We should wholeheartedly engage in what is here and now—social relations with others to generate fun, laughter and a sense of lightness. Even the Bible notes, "Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens his friend's countenance."[3]

But our longing to belong is not only for the present, but also for the past and for the future. The orchestra score drives its value from the fact that it is anchored, read both vertically and horizontally at the same time. Such anchoring is only provided by a congregation, however real or illusionary. Ego psychology, developed by Erik Erikson, considers religion as a means by which people maintain a basic hope or trust in life in order to move from one stage of life to the next.[4] Belonging generates oxytocin, the hormone that fosters trust and interpersonal bonds. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes, "One goes to a religious service, one recites the traditional prayers, not in order to find God (there are plenty of places where He can be found), but to find a congregation."[5] Ministers hope that the congregation may lead them to God. The longtime director of a monastery once asked for what reason do people come to your monastery? He replied that everyone comes here for the wrong reasons but stays for the right one.

Congregation abets a dis-appropriation of individual subjectivity. We bring our cognitive and emotional biases into all our interactions. There is no "assumption-free" understanding, without interpreting it a priori, regardless of one's "objective" experiences.


image
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> 'I must have offered too little' he thought, and, doubling the money, he made his offering again.
>
> The monk looked at the banknotes for a long moment. Then he shrugged and reached into a box and brought out an ancient scroll, which he presented to the visitor. And he walked away, down the road.
>
> When translated, the mysterious document proved to be–the title–deeds to the shrine itself.[15]

An individual needs to cultivate an attitude of harmony within and without by belonging to the spiritual matrix of his/her religion and undifferentiate the self from the whole, large and small, real or imaginary.

Such outer communion means genuine engagement in an enlarging concentric dimension. Including others is a form of self-expansion. It is knitting yourself into your community. It is actually caring about all of its institutions and its people, being informed about their problems, actively participating in their solutions, as well as zestfully enjoying its celebrations. Outer communion is believing in and defending the values and principles of the community and never transgressing them. This should be easy if the personal self is aligned with the communal self and the personal philosophy within a collective framework.

Belonging takes the focusing away from yourself—a healthy decentering—and makes the congregation and its members the point of reference. A student laments to his Zen master: "I am very discouraged Master, what shall I do, what shall I do." The master replies: "Encourage others!"

Selfishness in all of its forms is an enormous breach of human etiquette, if not a serious offense. Belonging is a context in which to exercise unselfishness—true empathy; it is getting out of your